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Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR): A Multi-Sited Study
of Mobilities between Bangladesh and London



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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY:

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

SUMMARY

The thesis examines the bilateral transnational visiting mobilities of British Bangladeshis and their non-migrant relatives and friends. Theoretically, it draws from the interdisciplinary research fields of Mobilities, Transnationalism and Diaspora Studies. Geographically, it focuses on the VFR practices, processes, experiences of 'to and fro' visits between Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi London diaspora, and the social, cultural and political implications of the mobilities and immobilities that unfold.

The research is designed as a multi-sited study. Data was collected over a thirteen-month period through participant observation and semi-structured interviews in London and Bangladesh. Analysis of the empirical evidence is divided into three key trajectories. In the first trajectory, I interpret and compare the context and experiences of VFR mobilities from Britain to Bangladesh, i.e. visits to the migrant and diasporic 'homeland'. Deploying the notion of 'memoryscape', I analyse British-Bangladeshis' often nostalgic and idealised recollections of places, landscapes and people remembered from the distant past of childhood and early adulthood, or from more recent experiences of visits, and with a particular focus on cross-generational and gendered comparisons. Secondly, I look into the VFR mobilities from a different perspective by reversing the transnational optic. I explore and analyse the diverse experiences and interactions of non-migrant Bangladeshis' visits to London with the host community, and the significance of the events that unfold. Their VFR mobilities are in many ways quite different from the existing examples of 'hosting practices', particularly in the European context, that have been studied. Inherent power imbalances, lack of access to 'network capital', the generational gap and the hidden tensions of hosting relatives and friends from the home country in a diasporic space are the key contrasts. Finally, I look into the concomitants of VFR mobilities, including issues of identity, home-making and materialities that are embedded in the bilateral VFR trajectories, and associated tensions and perspectives for the future.

The thesis contributes new theoretical and empirical insights into the phenomenon and epistemology of VFR mobilities. Such mobilities, and their correlate of immobilities, unfold in a highly unequal transnational geopolitical and economic context, and add a much-needed novel perspective to a field dominated by western-centric research among relatively free-moving tourists, lifestyle and professional migrants, and members of diasporas.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Almost a decade ago, on my first travel to the UK, I landed at Heathrow Airport several hours beyond the scheduled arrival time via a British Airways flight. It was a late Autumn afternoon. Physically, I was exhausted by the long-haul journey. Emotionally, it was a mixed experience. I was dazzled by newly experienced space of London Airport on the one hand, but I felt a sense of insecurity on the other. My worriedness was not since I had to speak the language of the land or face the border barriers of a geographically distant and culturally different country for the first time, but because I was due to be received and hosted by a distant relative, a paternal cousin, whom I did not know well. In addition, I left him stranded several hours at the arrivals exit, where I had to find him holding a placard with my name written on it in capital letters. Pleasantly enough, my excessively delayed arrival did not diminish the smile on my cousin's face as he extended welcoming hands. He emigrated to London roughly two decades ago. He is a first-generation British-Bangladeshi individual, a settled member of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain and is married to a second-generation female with British-born children of different ages.

The warmth and hospitality of the host family, from my cousin and his wife, that I received on my first arrival, will always be in my memory. I remember my first experience of being a non-migrant (at that time) guest and the way I was hosted by my diasporic relatives. My arrival also evoked my cousin's nostalgic memory of 'homeland'. On our journey back by car to his North-East London house, he enquired a lot about Bangladesh, its politico-economic situation, and above all, about the health and well-being of our mutual relatives and friends there. He talked in great length about his story of migration and settlement including how different were his daughters and wife than him, how was the British way of life, what London was about, with frequent back and forth reference to his home country and birth city. My journey to my cousin's house was simultaneously a trip down his memory lane constitutive of stories of 'mobilities and moorings' (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006). I found my interactions with his wife and children to be awkwardly interesting. I still remember the conversation in undertone among my newly met sister-in-law and her kids on the first day. She was asking her

daughters to come and say hello to me. The elder daughter said, 'no, he's come from Bangladesh and can't speak English and I don't know what to say'. Her mum could not confirm whether her assumption was true. She herself spoke to me in (broken) Bengali. Even though she was very welcoming and went a long way to prove her genuine hospitality, her discomfort in communicating with me in Bengali was noticeable. Her second child hid herself upstairs. The youngest kid could not contain her curiosity with my arrival and came to see me, while it took much longer for her elder siblings. Many years later, I embark on this research on the very same phenomenon, of receiving and hosting visitors from 'homeland', that I describe above as well as the occasional visits to 'home country' Bangladesh by families and individuals similar to my cousin and his family.

This research is about visiting and hosting. This experience of receiving or being received as a guest by a relative and/or friend in either country is not a rare moment in diasporic life. In fact, many British Bangladeshis attend to the same duties of hosting visitors from their ancestral country on many occasions, just like my cousin did for me. These visits are also reciprocated, and the roles of host and guest are changed as both parties visit each other in both directions, even if British Bangladeshis travel back and forth to their country of origin much more frequently than their non-migrant¹ relatives and friends visit London. In this thesis, I examine these bilateral transnational visits between London and Bangladesh that are performed by the diasporic British Bangladeshis and their non-migrant relatives and friends. This category of visits was formerly branded as Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism/travel (Jackson, 1990). The emergent notion of VFR has since been developed further through interdisciplinary scholarly contributions and is increasingly being defined as a discrete form of mobility (Palovic et al., 2014; Janta, Cohen and Williams, 2015; Munoz, Griffin and Humbracht, 2017). The VFR mobilities in their British-Bangladeshi transnational/diasporic context, the spatial-temporal trajectories and the embedded experiences of men and women of different generations and ages are the central elements of this thesis.

¹ The term 'non-migrant', in this thesis, refers to someone who has not migrated to the UK, not necessarily people who have never migrated anywhere.

1.2 Geography of VFR Mobilities

Mobilities are no longer considered as ‘scientific anomalies’ or ‘simply irrational’ by geographers (Cresswell and Merriman, 2011, p.3). Recent conceptual turns in Geography towards ‘mobilities’ (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2017) are thought to have been beneficial in understanding ‘the mobile dimensions of existence’ (Adey, 2010a, p.7), including by questioning ‘static versions of place and space’ (Edensor, 2011, p.189). In fact, geography and spatial science ‘always had mobility at their heart’ (Adey et al., 2014a, p.2). Transport geographers are increasingly recognising the importance of enhancing their perspectives on ‘the experiences or the representation of mobility’ (Shaw and Docherty, 2014, p.33). The notions of ‘space’ and ‘time’ are now increasingly being mobilised by spatial social scientists.

If movement is the dynamic equivalent of location, then mobility is the dynamic equivalent of place [...] Mobility is just as spatial — as geographical — and just as central to the human experience of the world, as place [...] Movement is made up of time and space. It is the spatialization of time and temporalization of space [...] Mobility, as a social product, does not exist in an abstract world of absolute time and space, but is a meaningful world of social space and social time. Mobility is also part of the process of the social production of time and space (Cresswell, 2006, pp.3–5).

Similar mobilisations of spaces can also be found in the narratives of other geographers. Adey (2006, p.90) argues that ‘space is never still, it can never just be – because mobilities compose material processes and becomings. They constitute new apprehensions of space’. In his geography textbook, *Mobility*, Adey (2010b) extends his thorough analysis of spatial fixities in relation to mobilities including how, when and where mobilities become ‘meaningful, political, practised and mediated’ (p.14) in space and time. Constructing and reconstructing spaces and places as ‘progressive’ or ‘global’ through their fluid interactions with the world beyond has also been addressed by Massey (1994, 2014).

The geography of mobilities is further understood through the notion of ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey, 1989) and ‘geographies of social networks’ (Larsen, Axhausen and Urry, 2006; Larsen, Urry and Axhausen, 2006). Larsen, Axhausen and Urry acknowledge Harvey’s arguments that modern societies are characterised by ‘time-

space compression'. However, they add that this also coincides with the spatial stretching of social networks.

'time-space compression' ironically has not compressed but enlarged social network geographies [...] Despite the proliferation of communication technologies, corporeal travel and co-present meetings are of increasing importance because only they produce thick, embodied socialities of corporeal proximity where people are uniquely accessible, available and subject to one another (Larsen, Axhausen and Urry, 2006, p.280).

Evidently, the geography of mobilities including its meanings, practices, politics, networking and representation is currently being well scrutinised by spatial scientists and indeed by scholars of other social sciences, which I contextualise further in chapter two of this thesis. However, the intrinsic geography of VFR mobilities, with a handful of exceptions, has hardly been picked up by human geographers. Whilst Oeppen (2013) terms home country-bound migrant mobilities as 'return visits', King and his colleagues (King, Lulle, Mueller and Vathi, 2013; King and Lulle, 2015; Mueller, 2015) address VFR explicitly as a form of 'space-time' mobilities for the first time. Here, I expand briefly on how the interdisciplinary notion of VFR mobilities can be better understood through the prism of space and time.

The notion as well as the practices of VFR falls at the intersection of geography's subdisciplines of Tourism and Migration. Geographers 'have played a substantial part' in the development of tourism as an academic study (Hall, 2005, p.127). Tourism is also often defined by its spatial-temporal characteristics by many scholars. For example, Crang (2011, p.211) points out that tourism in many ways is about 'producing destinations' as it creates itineraries of places to travel and provides travel links, infrastructure and facilities; and offers skills and knowledge that are also 'inscribed into the place'. Migration, on the other hand, is also 'clearly a space-time phenomenon, defined by thresholds of distance and time' (King, 2012a, p.136). Pioneering contributions to the study of migration by geographers from Ravenstein, Zelinsky, Mabogunje and Hägerstrand, to quantitatively skilled population geographers, and to the post-positivist, post-structuralist social, cultural, and feminist geographers are also well documented by King in his 'state of the art' paper. None the less, both migrants and tourists are required to cross a certain spatial distance, generally away from home, by

their respective definitions. Spatial boundaries also determine types of tourism as well as migration; these boundaries are national, regional or international. The main difference between tourism and migration lies in the degree of temporality. Tourism is relatively more temporary than the phenomenon of migration. But the key point here is, they are both defined as well as linked by space and time, and both represent a sense of mobility. In VFR, the interconnection and overlapping occurs as both migrants and tourists are visited and hosted by each other. Whilst the members of the diaspora become visitors/tourists in their homeland on their temporary visits and stays; they are also understood to attract, influence and facilitate VFR mobilities from the homeland.

The inherent interdisciplinary nature of VFR is clear from the discussions above. It is worth clarifying here that I duly acknowledge and address, where possible, this overlap and contributions of tourism scholarship; however, the deliberate emphasis in this thesis is given to the geography of migration perspective and the trans-migration/diasporic context. Scholarly contributions to the epistemology of VFR are far less in volume from migration studies compared to their tourism counterpart. This is reflected in detail in the next chapter where I provide a broader theoretical overview of VFR along with the framework for the analysis of empirical evidence. For now, I turn to the subject area of my research, as indicated in the introductory remarks – Bangladesh and its British diaspora.

1.3 History and Geography of the British-Bangladeshi Diaspora

Diaspora formation is a complex process and migrant communities have 'specific geographies and histories' (Coles and Timothy, 2004, p.7). It is therefore necessary to provide a descriptive background of the Bangladeshi diaspora formation in the UK. In this section, I look briefly into the spatio-temporal context of Bangladeshi migration and settlement in Britain and the formation of the diasporic British-Bangladeshi community.

British Bangladeshis have not featured greatly within the academic literatures on migration, transnationalism, diasporas and mobilities until the late 1990s. Their presence can be traced within the broader South Asian/Indian literature. Literatures

concerning South Asians (cf. Fisher, 2004; Fisher, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007; Fisher, 2007; Visram, 1993, 2015) provide a historical background of the British-Bangladeshi diaspora including the evidence of arrivals and departures to and from the British Isles for several centuries. However, it can be critiqued that it is not easy to distinguish the Bangladeshis and their stories from those broader South Asian accounts. The first notable literature on Bangladeshis in the UK or, more specifically, on Sylhetis in London, was Caroline Adams' 1987 book, which shed light on the life stories of some of the pioneering Sylheti migrants for the first time, including narratives of journeys, struggles and settlement of some of the first-generation British Bangladeshis. Scholarly interest in British Bangladeshis has since been followed by others, including further research on the history of Bangladeshis in Britain (Choudhury, 1993; Murshid, 2008), the stories of different generations of British Bangladeshis (see Eade *et al.*, 2006) and their ways of resisting racism and their political mobilisation (see Glynn, 2014).

The arrivals of people from the Bay of Bengal in Britain predate British colonialism in India, centuries before the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation state. The earliest recorded arrivals of Bangladeshis can be traced back to the early 17th century (Fisher, 2004). Back then, they were known as Indian. The term 'Indian' has been interchangeably used with the term 'Asian' (e.g. Visram, 2015) and 'South Asian' (e.g. Fisher, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007; Chatterji and Washbrook, 2013) in the literatures, and it refers in various combinations to the people of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and settlers in India with European lineage. The entries of baptism and burial records in some parish registers in London also suggest a similar time of Bengali² arrivals in London (Tower Hamlets, n.d.). Bengali *Ayabs* (servants) were thought to be the earliest migrants who were followed by the *Lascars* (seamen), aristocrats and students. In 1616, a Bengali servant was baptised in London who arrived in 1614 (Eade, 2013). Some of the earlier Bengali names were 'Anglicized' (Fisher, 2004, p.182) while others lost their originality in English spelling, which made it complicated to know the complete story of earlier Bengalis in Britain.

² The term Bengali refers to the Bengali speaking people of Bangladesh, some Indian areas and beyond. It also refers to the language that they speak.

However, the greater inflows of Bengali migrants coincided with increasingly intensified British colonialism in India. Fisher (2004) termed those flows as 'counterflows to colonialism'. Flows and counterflows of both Britons and Indians were mediated by European ships. Most of the Bengalis who settled in Britain and formed the diaspora, arrived in Britain during the colonial era as *lascars* (seamen) and lived mostly in distinct areas of East London including Docklands, Shadwell, Spitalfields, Whitechapel and other British port cities (Merriman and Visram, 1993; Gardner, 2002; Gardner and Mand, 2012). The present-day Bangladeshi-heritage population in Britain traces its main origins to those *lascars*. Although the common explanation is that most of them 'jumped ship', historical reality is more complex, and many were involuntarily stranded by labour brokers and ships' captains who were unable or unwilling to offer them return-trip contracts (Adams, 1987; Ahuja, 2006). There was inequality in wages and working conditions too. Indian seamen did not jump ship in great numbers until 1850. Ahuja (2006, p.112) pointed out that, 'by the mid-nineteenth century, lascars received as little as between one-fifth and one-third of the pay of European able-bodied seamen – a ratio that remained unchanged up to the 1980s'.

Indian *lascars*, 'poorly paid and legally inferior colonial labour' (Ahuja, 2006, p.115), had to wait a long time in British harbours, particularly in twentieth century, before they were lucky enough to get hired by India-bound ships. British navigation acts required ships to have at least three quarters of their crews British in order to maintain their tax-free status, which meant they could bring a lot of Indian *lascars* from Indian ports but had to abandon many of them in British ports before the voyage back to India (Fisher, 2014; Eade, 2013). As lascars were recruited unofficially through *ghat sarangs* (labour broker) and did not have proper job contracts under European regulations, they were forced off their jobs at ports whenever the captain wanted. Lascars faced hardships on and off the dock. The terrible plight of lascars, their stories of death and survival on board the ships and also off the ship, jobless, penniless and homeless in East London, was well portrayed by Adams (1987). By the late eighteenth century, the number of *lascars* in London, who jumped ships or found themselves involuntarily stranded, was significant enough to become a 'publicly noted phenomenon' (Gardner, 1995, p.36). The response of the British state was very racist towards *lascars*. They were considered, at

the time, as an alien threat to British society. Discriminatory laws were passed in the British parliament to restrict *lascar* settlement. *Lasars*, however, were able to organise themselves together and transgressed all state restrictions to eventually establish their permanent presence in Britain (Eade, 2013).

Bangladeshi *lasars* came from the Chittagong, Noakhali and above all the Sylhet areas of the country. These areas of Bangladesh were well connected to Calcutta, one of the main ports where most of the Bangladeshi *lasars* were recruited by the merchant ships. However, seamen from Sylhet, the north-eastern region of Bangladesh (which before 1947 was part of British India and then, until 1971, part of Pakistan), slowly 'monopolised' (Gardner and Shukur, 1996, p.146) this sector of employment. Sylhet has a long-established tradition of emigration, driven by rural poverty, political instability, and internal migration links to Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai), key port cities where there was a rising demand for seamen by British, and other, shipping companies (Carey and Shukur, 1985). Bangladeshi *lasars* mainly worked for the East India Company and the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, doing the most unpleasant jobs on board ship.

A second wave of immigration to London and the wider United Kingdom took place in the decades following the Second World War, when Britain recruited labour from Commonwealth countries to rebuild infrastructure and to work in factories (Tower Hamlets, n.d.). During the early twentieth century, Bangladeshi *lasars* had established their settlement in British port cities, mostly in East London. The foundation of Bangladeshi settlement was predominantly laid by Sylheti *lasars*. They were thus considered the pioneers of Bangladeshi diaspora establishment in London (Adams, 1987). Though there were no restrictions on the number of arrivals at that time, limited numbers of Sylhetis were able to join the *lasars* in London as it was difficult to get a passport due to the official opposition of the Pakistani government. Bangladesh became part of Pakistan following the end of British colonial role in India; and for the first time, they needed a passport to travel to Britain. However, Sylheti *lasars* were already well organised in London by that time. The Indian Seamen's Welfare league was established

in 1943, led by Sylhetis. That organisation played a major role in negotiating a limited number of passports with the Pakistani government.

The 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act introduced a highly selective process of migration through the 'voucher system' (Carey and Shukur, 1985) and was designed to restrict migration to Britain from its former colonies. However, the result was the opposite. It was the job voucher that allowed a greater inflow of Bangladeshi workers to Britain during that time and, unsurprisingly, most of the workers were recruited from Sylhet (Adams, 1987), overwhelmingly 'kinsmen and fellow villagers' (Carey and Shukur, 1985, p.407) of already settled migrants. The established Sylheti presence ensured that, via chain migration, the majority of this post-war migration was also sourced from this region. As subsequent British immigration laws became ever more rigorous, further settlement and hurried family reunifications were pursued. Immigration was restricted to family members only, during the last quarter of the twentieth century. That period of time was also marked by the rise of far-right anti-immigrant groups, who campaigned and lobbied for tougher immigration control in Britain.

The 1980s and 1990s were family reunion time, when most Sylheti migrant families were reunited in Britain (Eade, 2013). They made their investments in houses and business, the new generation was born and 'the myth of return' in Britain (Anwar, 1979) became a psychological reality for most, as they paid more attention towards settling their lives in Britain. Family reunions amongst Bangladeshis were relatively slow and late compared to other South Asian immigrant communities, as they were concerned about the growing racial harassment on the one hand and the fear of exposure of their wives to Western culture on the other (Carey and Shukur, 1985). The Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971 also contributed to the further inflow of Bengalis who were escaping from the associated chaos and atrocities (Eade et al., 2006). Even after independence, as the newly emerged country went through a series of economic hardships, political instability, killings of subsequent presidents/leaders, imposition of military rule etc., the desire for migration was strongly alive amongst Sylhetis (Carey and Shukur, 1985). That desire for migration to *bidesh* (the diaspora abroad) has been a continuous phenomenon (Gardner, 1995). Migration through marriage continued and

attracted further immigration restrictions and occasionally, acts of shaming by the authorities (Alexander, 2013b). It is also worth noting that migration to the UK for study and for other professional reasons, particularly by non-Sylhetis, has always happened and continues to happen even today, though much less in proportion. And it is well evident that the tougher immigration rules of the present time offer very limited scope for settlement.

There are now several generations of Bangladeshi-origin people living in the UK. The census record shows that Bangladeshis are one of the fastest growing migrant communities in London. By the late 1980s, according to Gardner (1995, p.2), 95 per cent of the estimated 200,000 Bangladeshis in Britain were from Sylhet. While in 2001 there were 283,063 Bangladeshi-origin people in Britain, the 2011 Census, the most recent count, recorded almost half a million British Bangladeshis³ (ONS, 2011). Although post-war labour migration took Bangladeshis to other British cities, such as Birmingham and the industrial towns in the North of England, London remained the major concentration and the principal point of reference for the evolving diaspora in the UK. The historic clustering around the Docklands area of Tower Hamlets, including iconic Brick Lane, remains, alongside an eastward drift of the distribution to other areas of working-class East London.

Beyond the initial link with the Docklands and the shipping industry, Bangladeshis in London developed two subsequent occupational specialisations: clothing manufacturing (the 'rag trade'), mostly working in poor conditions in 'sweatshops', and the restaurant business. Whilst the East End clothing industry was already in decline in the 1980s (Carey and Shukur, 1985), due to cheaper imports from low-wage economies like (ironically) Bangladesh, the restaurant trade has been in continuous evolution. Many of the original Sylheti seamen had been employed as cooks on British ships, and food-preparation skills were redeployed in the small catering establishments that sprouted in the Docklands to serve the local Bangladeshi and Asian communities. From

³ In the 2011 Census, both UK-born and non-UK-born population of Bangladeshi origin were categorised as 'Asian/Asian British-Bangladeshi'. Contemporary researchers have frequently used the term 'British Bangladeshi' in its wider sense regardless of birth-place, immigration or citizenship status.

the 1960s, these cafés and eating-houses expanded in size, number and geographical distribution and the 'Indian' restaurants (mostly owned and staffed by Bangladeshis from Sylhet) 'crossed over' to market their food to predominantly 'white' clienteles. At the same time, the second and subsequent generations, through education and upwardly-mobile aspirations, looked not to low-wage labour in factories and restaurants, but to better jobs in professionalised sectors of non-manual employment.

1.4 Tracing British-Bangladeshi VFR Mobilities

There is now a growing body of literature on the socio-economic and political history of British Bangladeshis. However, it hardly acknowledges VFR mobilities. The mention of British-Bangladeshi VFR mobilities is rare beyond some brief and scattered references to migrants' visits to their home country. Nevertheless, there is an increasing number of scholarly works that recognise the transnational nature of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain, and the vibrant link between spatially distant 'home' and 'host' societies, and the mobilities of people, goods and ideas. They provide an important backdrop and help to understand the British-Bangladeshi VFR phenomenon.

Caroline Adams drew brief attention to the opening of Bangladeshi travel agencies by migrants in both Sylhet and London (Adams, 1987, p.63). Though she did not address the visits in her book, it can be assumed that these travel agencies mediated migrants' mobilities, including visiting home and returning back between the two countries. Limited mention of visits can also be traced in Choudhury's account (1993, p.210). Migrants' 'return home' (Gardner, 1995, pp.54–56), 'returning after a visit' (Gardner, 1995, p.125) or 'long visit back to Bangladesh' (Glynn, 2014, p.23) are some other traces of the visits that have been noted elsewhere. However, British-Bangladeshi transnationalism, and the maintenance of transnational relationships by migrants with kinship networks in the homeland in different ways, has been increasingly recognised (Gardner, 1995, 2002; Gardner and Mand, 2012). The only study concerning British Bangladeshis that addresses the visits with a relatively greater degree of depth is the research accomplished by Zeitlyn (2010, 2012, 2015). The central focus of Zeitlyn's research is children and transnationalism. He examines British-Bangladeshi children's

occasional visits during school holidays to their ancestral country, Bangladesh. The role of those visiting experiences in constructing children's (transnational) identity and (ambivalent) sense of belonging is well-documented by Zeitlyn. In his words, 'Visits play a crucial role in the socialisation of children into the British Bangladeshi habitus through exposure to Bangladeshi dispositions, attitudes and ways of behaving. These are important processes in the reproduction of the British Bangladeshi social field' (Zeitlyn, 2015, p.44).

Apart from these references cited above, current scholarship on Bangladeshi migration and diaspora does not address reciprocal VFR mobilities. Much of the existing literature (Eade, 1990; Glynn, 2002; Eade and Garbin, 2002, 2006; Gilliat-ray, 2004; Garbin, 2005; Hussain, 2007; Kibria, 2008; Griffith, 2010; Alexander, 2013; De Hanas, 2013) concentrates on other issues, such as integration, identity, belonging, social mobility, race relations and the social, cultural, political and religious activities of British Bangladeshis within the UK. A partial exception is the more in-depth research of Gardner (1995, 2002), who provides an ethnographic insight into transnational British-Bangladeshi migration, with a special focus on the older population and ageing.

While most of the literature focuses on the host country, in her earlier research Gardner investigated the origin/local context of Sylhet through an ethnographic depiction of *ghar* (household), *bari* (homestead), *ghusti* (the extended family) and *samaj* (the society); the social-cultural practices that encourage and enable migrant journeys; and how kinship networks played the central role in the ongoing migration from Sylhet to Britain (Gardner, 1995). Gardner deployed the Bengali terms *desh–bidesh* (respectively the 'homeland' and the 'away' of the diasporic host country) to narrate the cultural concomitants of migration and the cultural negotiations between the local and global. She addressed how *desh–bidesh* were (re-)imagined and (re-)constructed before, during and after the migration. Rather than being separated by the physical distance of thousands of miles, according to Gardner (1995) the sacred *desh* and affluent *bidesh* – as perceived by Sylhetis – are connected both emotionally and materially. Migrants stay connected with their village, maintain kinship, build houses and buy land there.

However, the understanding of *desh–bidesh* is not always straightforward; often it is complex and ambivalent. In more recent research, Zeitlyn has argued that the discourses of *desh–bidesh* have become less significant as ‘British Bangladeshis are embedded into many transnational, local and national social fields and lead multiply orientated rather than binary lives’ (Zeitlyn, 2013, p.253).

Gardner’s research also enlightens us about gender relations in Bangladesh. She observes that ‘Bangladeshi society is patrilineal. Descent is through men and ancestry is traced back through the male line ... this usually includes up to four generations... Households, homesteads and lineages are structurally based around men’ (Gardner, 1995, p.29). The division of labour is also highly gender-based. While women are expected to stay in the house and do all the household work, men are responsible for outside work; though it varies by class and social hierarchy, and rather than being separate, gender-based labours are inter-dependent. However, it is evident in Gardner’s analysis that overseas migration has affected existing gender relations in Sylhet. In *Londoni* villages in Sylhet (places where migration to London has been very important), weddings are becoming more expensive than before. Marriages are, in Gardner’s opinion, mixed blessings for women, in cases where they do not migrate with their husband. It may bring them comparative wealth and a certain level of independence; but it does not diminish the gender inequalities. Even though migration connects the local with the global, Western contact has not increased secularisation in Sylhet; women have embraced a sense of pure Islam and religion, in general, has revived in local life (Gardner, 1995).

Later ethnographic work by Gardner (2002) demonstrates that, even after the migration, gender plays a significant role in the life-cycle of Sylheti migrants in London. Through individual narratives and life histories of eleven elderly Bengali males and sixteen elderly women, Gardner provides an account of the history, experience, gender roles, emotional connections, and conflict of *desh–bidesh* in migrants’ life course and identity construction. She has also highlighted the fact that Bangladeshi men construct a strong sense of masculinity while narrating their migratory experience, work and retired life in the UK. On the other hand, women’s narratives are constitutive of family

relationships such as motherhood (in many cases transnational), care, household work and community life. According to Gardner, many Bengali women went beyond the traditional gender role as home-makers and worked in the garments industry, earning wages (in some cases, they were the principal wage earner in their family); but this work aspect did not feature as a dominant theme in their narratives and life stories (Gardner, 2002). Although Gardner's research depicts gender relations in the context of first-generation migrants, there remains a significant literature gap in understanding the gender roles and gendered experiences of later generations of Bangladeshi men and women, who were born in the diaspora or *bidesh*.

In his research on transnational childhood, as mentioned earlier, Zeitlyn (2015) offers an intriguing ethnographic account of transnational British-Bangladeshi childhood. His research addresses the transnational spaces and places where children learn, play and socialise. Whilst growing up in a social field that transcends national borders and incorporates multiple global and local social cultural orientations, how children create their sense of belonging and construct identity is well portrayed in Zeitlyn's research. He argues that British-Bangladeshi children live a fundamentally transnational life. Transnational visits are one of the most important and symbolic elements of their life as they introduce children to a transnational way of being both in London and Sylhet (Zeitlyn, 2015). But these visits also bring mixed reactions. Although the children enjoy the break from school, the large *bari* and its open spacious yards and gardens in Bangladesh, they also hate the smell of fish and lack of hygiene. Children's experience also makes them aware of the unequal power relations between London and Sylhet.

1.5 Hyphenated British-Bangladeshi Identities

Diasporic communities are also known as 'hyphenated communities' (Coles and Timothy, 2004) due to their multiple identity references. According to Cole and Timothy, the hyphen is the all-important starting point in understanding diasporic identities. The hyphen, that combines migrants' ancestral origin with their present space, such as British-Indian or Mexican-American, establishes them as a separate social group,

different from the societies of both home and host countries³. The British-Bangladeshi hyphenated identity and its inherent hybrid and ambivalent facets have been explored by many scholars (Chatterji, 1996; Kibria, 2011, 2013; Riaz, 2013; Glynn, 2002, 2014; Zeitlyn, 2010, 2012; Shams, 2017). In this section, I map briefly these identity discourses in their temporal/historical and spatial emergence. In so doing, I argue that the notion of 'British-Bangladeshi' does not refer to a singular essentialised identity. There are multiple and often competing British-Bangladeshi identities that are not limited to or addressed within existing notions of 'cultural hybridity' or 'ambivalent identity'. In the empirical analysis, I look further into these issues of identities in the context of the VFR mobilities, and draw a comparison and contrast with the current discourses.

The question of identity – whether Bengali, Muslim or both – goes back centuries if not longer. It also lies at the heart of the evolution and emergence of Bangladesh. During this process, both Bengali and Muslim elements of the identity, or their protagonists claimed victory over one another in different periods of time. The Bangladeshi war of independence and the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation state is often marked as the final triumph of a secular Bengali identity that synchronises its past traditions from all beliefs and influences including Hindu and Muslim traditions (see Kabeer, 1991; Chatterji, 1996). And yet, recent political developments and global influences indicate that the question of identity in Bangladesh is far from being settled (see Samuel and Rozario, 2010; Rozario, 2011). However, neither 'Bengali' nor 'Muslim' identity can be essentialised as homogenous. The 'Bengali Muslim' identity, according to Chatterji (1996, pp.22-23), is a 'porous' and 'overlapping' concept and constitutive of multiple identities. The point here is, recognising the development of identity in its spatio-temporal context as well as the heterogeneity, porosity and fluidity of Bengali Muslimness is important.

These identity discourses exist among Bangladeshis wherever they are geographically located. In the British-Bangladeshi diasporic/transnational context, we can see the

³ The issue of hyphenated identities raises the grammatical question of whether the hyphen should actually be used. In this thesis, I follow the 'correct' grammatical format: no hyphen when it is a noun, hyphen when it is an adjective. Hence 'the British Bangladeshis' but 'British-Bangladeshi identity'.

continuation, extension and diversification of these discourses. The spatio-temporal context of the establishment of the British-Bangladeshi community in London needs to be at the heart of understanding their identity discourses. We cannot skip through it or rush to the conclusion and define what it is now; rather, we must look into the historical process of its development and the agency of the various actors both nationally and transnationally. As I discussed earlier, for a long period of time Bangladeshis were identified within Asian, South Asian and Black identities in Britain. Only later was this followed by recognition of their ethnically Bengali/Bangladeshi identity. During the Bangladeshi liberation war – based on Bengali nationalism and a syncretic/inclusive Bengali identity – independence was overwhelmingly supported by British Bangladeshis (Garbin, 2008, p.150). Diasporic Bengalis led a large-scale international campaign in support of the independence of Bangladesh which included raising funds, donating valuable personal belongings, protesting, confronting Pakistanis in London, helping political refugees, resignations of Pakistani government officials/diplomats of Bengali heritage in London, and lobbying British and other Western governments. The key point that I want to stress is that Bangladeshi settlers in Britain were predominantly Muslims but their Muslim-ness has not been brought into the forefront of their identity discourses until recently. Diasporic Bangladeshi Muslim identity or becoming a part of the British Muslim identity and/or the emergence of the ‘*halal*’ food phenomenon are much more recent developments compared to the history of Bangladeshi migration and settlement in the UK (see Murshid, 2008; Garbin, 2008).

Zeitlyn (2015) also addresses the role of religion, the construction of the British Muslim identity and the ‘misleading discourse’ of *Muslim Umma*, a concept that refers to an imagined worldwide Islamic community regardless of country, culture or ethnicity. While contextualising the religious elements of identity construction, Zeitlyn observes that ‘as British Muslims, their identities are informed by an official and unofficial Islamophobia, fuelled by the disastrous war on terror and debates over the relationship between liberal Western states and Islam’ (Zeitlyn, 2015, pp.3–4). The presence of the discourse of *Muslim Umma* is closely associated with the political manoeuvrings of Islam and promoted by Islamic institutions and organisations that have endeavoured to

establish Islam as an 'alternative modernity' for British-Bangladeshis and others in London (Eade and Garbin, 2002, 2006; Husain, 2007; Hussain, 2007).

The development of a Muslim identity in the context of widespread racial discrimination, racial struggle, rejection by the British state and society and Bangladesh's relatively inferior status in the global hierarchy of states, on the one hand, and a pan-Islamic identity politics that exploited this discontent to disenfranchise ethnic identities of both Bangladeshis and 'hyphenated' British on the other, have been widely examined by Zeitlyn and other scholars. Within these broader scholarly reflections, whilst it can be evidenced that Muslim or Islamic identity may have been dominant in recent years, this is also being contested by others within the Bangladeshi community. There are competing visions for British-Bangladeshi identity (Eade and Garbin, 2006). There are secular as well as religious groups who compete with each other in the course of community representation. Zeitlyn's (2010) observation that Islam is one of many aspects of the British-Bangladeshi way of life, also indicates that there are many aspects of British-Bangladeshi identity. How heterogeneous Bangladeshi Muslim identities come into play in the spatio-temporal context of the bilateral British-Bangladeshi VFR mobilities will be further explored and analysed empirically in chapter six.

1.6 Research Questions

The research is guided by the following research questions:

- Why are VFR mobilities significant in studies of transmigration and diaspora?
- How do (British) Bangladeshis negotiate the places, spaces and cultures of Bangladesh and London on their visits?
- How does class, inequality and citizenship status affect the process of VFR between the two countries, and what impact does this have on British Bangladeshis and their friends and relatives?
- What are the likely future trends of VFR for British Bangladeshis?

The first question I ask is very simple. Why are VFR mobilities significant in studies of transmigration and diaspora? As evident from the above, the central theme of my research is VFR mobilities, a phenomenon which has been attracting the interest of academic researchers only recently. As VFR falls at the intersection of studies on migration and diaspora as well as on tourism, scholarly interests are inevitably multidisciplinary. Having said that, the volume of scholarly works on VFR by tourism scholars is much bigger than that of migration researchers. It is, therefore, not surprising that a tourism point of view dominates the debate in some way, often with an emphasis on the market value of VFR mobilities, which I explain more broadly in the theoretical chapter. However, I insist that the full spectrum of the VFR mobilities or the wider and deeper understanding of the phenomenon is incomplete without the contribution of migration research. The dominant conceptual framework within recent migration research, which privileges studies of diaspora and transnationalism, has also recognised that need and VFR research in the context of transmigration and diaspora is becoming more evident. Migration scholars are arguing that VFR mobilities cannot be overlooked as they constitute one of the most significant aspect of migrants' experience, and therefore, it has to be central to the phenomenology of migration. One of the first notable works on VFR by migration scholars was the multi-authored working paper by King, Lulle, Mueller and Vathi (2013), followed by a couple of journal articles by King and Lulle (2015) and Mueller (2015), where such arguments have been initiated. And there remain a lot of opportunities to extend these arguments further into broader understanding of VFR in the context of migration research in several ways. For example, current studies of VFR by migration scholars, which are limited in number, have drawn overwhelmingly from European examples. The freedom of mobilities, geographical proximity and power imbalances within Europe are significantly smaller compared to a distant, less powerful, less industrialised Bangladesh. So, by looking into the Bangladesh example, this thesis sheds new light on the VFR mobilities and/or immobilities and their social and cultural implications.

There are a growing number of works available on Bengali migration to the UK. Hence, the question of originality arises: how is recent research different from what has already been written (and cited above) on Bangladeshi diaspora and British-Bangladeshi

transnationalism, particularly by Adams (1987), Gardner (1995, 2002), Eade (2013), and Zeitlyn (2015)? Plausibly, all these works help us to understand the various and changing aspects of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain and the British-Bangladeshi transnational way of life, which provide a useful backdrop for the analysis of my findings on the importance of visits. Such visits are, as Gardner and Mand (2012, p.971) point out, vital in the maintenance of transnational connections:

An important practice in the maintenance of these connections are the regular trips that British Bangladeshis make to Sylhet in order to see their relatives, manage their 'deshi' (homeland) affairs and have a break from life in the UK. Some parents talk explicitly about such visits as a way of reinforcing family bonds for their children and exposing them to 'Bangladeshi' ways of doing things.

Gardner and Mand go on to look into the British-Bangladeshi children's visits to Sylhet. Similarly, Zeitlyn (2012, 2015) also has also investigated to these visits in order to understand the ways in which such occasional visits to Sylhet with families influence the identity and belonging of children and how they become part a transnational British-Bangladeshi social field.

My research takes these initial investigations by Gardner, Mand and Zeitlyn much further. Above all, there is no research that addresses the bilateral visiting mobilities by both migrants and their non-migrant friends and relatives between Britain and Bangladesh. Non-migrants' mobilities are overlooked within the growing body of scholarship on the Bangladeshi diaspora and indeed within studies of diaspora and transnationalism in general. The discourses around British-Bangladeshi migration resonate with the criticisms by some scholars, most notably Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) and Waldinger (2015a, 2015b), that transnationalism addresses the transnational mobilities of immigrants too often in a celebratory way, while it falls short in emphasising the mobility and/or immobility of the people who are left behind. I will argue, particularly in chapter five of this thesis, drawing from my fieldwork data, that non-migrants' visiting mobilities are also an important and integral part of the British-Bangladeshi migration experience, helping us to further understand the 'totality' of VFR phenomena in a migratory context.

In so doing, I also ask, how does class, inequality and citizenship status affect the process of VFR between the two countries, and what impact does this have on British Bangladeshis and their friends and relatives? There is an inherent power imbalance between Bangladeshi migrants and their non-migrant friends and relatives that is also widely acknowledged in current scholarship. As migrants acquire the citizenship of the host country, they enjoy a greater freedom of international mobilities, including access to 'network capital', compared to their counterparts in Bangladesh. However, even in the context of these imbalances, non-migrants do visit their diasporic relatives and friends in the UK, often supported financially and psychologically by their migrant relatives and friends. And as I will argue later in the thesis, there are examples of mixed experiences that have impacts on both parties that need to be understood and contextualised.

Another one of my principle questions is how do Bangladeshis negotiate the places, spaces and cultures of the host country while visiting their friends and relatives in London, and vice-versa? Bangladesh is considered as the home country (the '*desh*') for the Bangladeshis who left a long time ago and have established a family life in the UK. But for members of their family, particularly those born in Britain, Bangladesh is a new place beyond their usual habitat. When they visit there, they often find that there are different social-cultural expectations on the part of their hosts that vary in accordance with age and gender. So, it is important to have a nuanced understanding of how those expectations and experiences are negotiated by visitors of different ages and by gender. The context and frequency of their visits can also extend our existing understanding of transnational visits, which is that they are often thought of purely as occasional family visits. In my empirical case, as I will demonstrate later, the visits are more frequent than commonly thought. Individual visits take place more frequently than family visits and are not always carefully planned in advance. On the other hand, for non-migrants, London is uncharted territory, particularly culturally; a very different place with lots of possibilities as well as worries. Their experiences and negotiations are also important to understand. In addition to these reciprocal visits by migrants to Bangladesh and non-migrants to London, I will also shed light on the future trajectories of their relationships and VFR mobilities. In particular, I will reveal how disputes around land and property

inheritance issues threaten to disentangle the relationships of the British Bangladeshis, that have previously been termed by Gardner and Mand (2012, p.971) as a '*transnational community par excellence*', with the home country, Bangladesh. This in turn, also involves questions of identity and belonging in the changing nature of the migrants' relationship with their ancestral country.

1.7 Outline of the chapters

Following on from the introductory remarks in chapter one above, it is also important to describe to the reader how the thesis is structured.

Chapter two is the literature review, where I provide a critical overview of the broader theoretical context of VFR mobilities. I explore the interdisciplinary contributions – from tourism and migration – to the development of VFR knowledge and scholarship. The theoretical orientation, alignment and emphasis of my research are illustrated further. I will argue how this research is framed in relation to existing theoretical frameworks around mobilities, diaspora, and transnationalism, and aims to contribute new knowledge through a cross-disciplinary, intergenerational and gendered analysis of the empirical evidence presented in later chapters.

Chapter three addresses methodology. I explain and justify the adoption of a multi-sited research approach as well as the methods of data collection: semi-structured in-depth interviews, supplemented by participant observation. I describe the spatial-temporal context and experiences of my field work in multiple sites of the transnational British-Bangladeshi community: the 'home' site in London and the 'host' site in Bangladesh for visitors going to Bangladesh, and the 'host' site of London and the 'home' site in Bangladesh for visits going in the other direction. I clarify also my reflexive positionality as insider/outsider, followed by the demonstration of my analytical techniques.

Chapter four is the first and the longest empirical chapter, where I look into the VFR mobilities from London to Bangladesh with a series of headings and subheadings that cover the context and the nature of British-Bangladeshi VFR as well as the pattern,

materialities, frequency of visits and the diverse experiences and negotiations by different generations and genders. My findings extend existing knowledge and understanding of migrants' 'return visits', their pattern, nature, embedded material practices and associated experiences of excitement as well as discontent.

In chapter five, I introduce the 'reverse' VFR mobilities of non-migrant relatives and friends from Bangladesh to London. This is a ground-breaking chapter considering there are no existing accounts of Bangladeshis' visits to the UK. Also, in the broader sense, literatures concerning transnationalism and diaspora have hardly addressed this important aspect of spatial-temporal mobilities. This chapter consists of the experiences of both mobilities and immobilities of the visitors. I analyse those experiences in the context of an unequal power relation, which is also characterised by different terms such as 'network capital', 'politics of mobility' and 'involuntary immobility' as well as the social and cultural implications of the unequal access to transnational mobility.

In chapter six, I examine several concomitants of VFR including issues of land/property disputes, 'hyphenated identities' and future trajectories of visiting mobilities. These issues are interrelated and embedded in the practices of VFR mobilities between two very different countries. The land/property inheritance practices, in particular, are seemingly emerging as a thorny issue posing a threat to the ongoing harmonious relationship of a community that has been thought previously as a 'classic' transnational example.

Chapter seven is the final chapter, where I conclude the thesis by summarising the key findings, and where I interpret my findings in relation to the broader context of both VFR mobilities and transmigration/diasporic experiences. The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, and some suggestions for further research.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Overview of VFR

2.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter by clarifying further the notion of 'Visiting Friends and Relatives' (VFR) as a specific form of mobility. The emergence of this phenomenon, and its multidimensional definitions and multidisciplinary connections, needs to be deciphered as well as positioned within a broader theoretical context. As VFR stands at the forefront of the migration–tourism nexus, both tourism and migration scholars continue their respective endeavours in developing the epistemology of VFR. Theoretically, VFR scholarship has inherently been multiply orientated. From a migration studies perspective, the three prevailing theoretical frameworks that are the most relevant to the study of VFR are: the *new mobilities paradigm*, *transnationalism* and *diaspora studies*. These conceptual frameworks have been highly influential in social-scientific research on migration over the last few decades and have produced voluminous literatures that inform and shape our knowledge on various issues, including some attention given to VFR. In what follows, I acknowledge, analyse and compare their respective contributions and arguments, and demonstrate how these theories underpin my research.

2.2 Understanding the Notion of VFR

Visiting Friends and Relatives is a notion that interconnects studies of mobilities, migration and tourism, and demonstrates the 'intricate relationship' between them (Palovic *et al.*, 2014). Scholarly arguments within tourism studies, following the seminal article by Jackson (1990), have portrayed VFR as a form of tourism that is somehow influenced by international migration. Transnational migration has enforced 'the geographical extension of friendship and kinship networks' (Williams and Hall, 2000). This new spatial arrangement, created by migration, enhanced by intensified social relationships via social media and assisted by cheap air travel, has facilitated VFR tourism flows between countries and places. It is argued that

travelling, visiting and hosting are necessary to much social life conducted at-a-distance. Much travel demand seems to stem from a powerful 'compulsion to proximity', to feel the need to be physically co-present and to fulfil social obligations with significant others (Larsen, Axhausen and Urry, 2006, p.266).

Important here also is the issue of intimacy. Virtually transpired communications might help sustain social relationship at distance, such as with friends (Cronin, 2015), but it cannot replace the more intimate experiences – both corporeal and emotional – that can be achieved only through co-present interaction. According to Boden and Molotch (1994), co-presence provides a far better context than any alternative form of communication for the production of ‘thick socialities’ through words and bodily expression in numerous ways. As they argue:

Body talk adds a visual vocabulary and social grammar that enables speakers to add nuance to language and even transform verbal meanings. The cues of physical movement, eye contact, facial expression, and body orientation relay substantive meaning in themselves – punctuating, elaborating and orchestrating the meaning of spoken words as part of a ‘dance of life’ (Boden and Molotch, 1994, p.260).

The importance as well as the irreplaceability of corporeal travel to meet spatially distant relatives and friends face-to-face in order to realise intimate experience is illustrated further by Urry (2002) in his work on ‘mobility and proximity’. It is now increasingly being proved that digital communications with distant relatives do not replace the necessity of face-to-face interaction and maintaining an intimate relationship. Recent scholarly works on Italians in Australia (Baldassar, 2008), British migrants in Dubai (Walsh, 2009), Americans in Western Europe (Klekowski von Koppenfels, Mulholland and Ryan, 2015) and highly skilled professional migrant women in Switzerland (Janta and Christou, 2019) only strengthen this argument.

While relatives and friends visit migrants in their country of settlement, it is generally more common that migrants visit their country of origin and take part in touristic activities there. These reciprocal visits also make them change their roles as ‘guest’ and ‘host’. Jackson’s argument that international travel influenced by transnational migrants is a significant segment of the tourism industry has increasingly been accepted and adopted by tourism scholars and, as a result, the quantity of research on VFR tourism has recently seen a sharp increase.

However, if there is a limitation of tourism researchers it is that they have overwhelmingly adopted a marketing research approach. Key themes in contemporary

VFR tourism research include the size of the VFR tourism market (Hu and Morrison, 2002; Jang, Yu and Pearson, 2003; Young, Corsun and Baloglu, 2007; Scott and Turco, 2007), its economic significance or revenue generating potential (Yuan *et al.*, 1995; Cohen and Harris, 1998; Lehto, Morrison and O’Leary, 2001; Pennington-Gray, 2003; Lee, 2005; Backer, 2007; Asiedu, 2008; Dwyer *et al.*, 2014), profiling of travellers’ motivations and types of accommodation (Braunlich and Nadkarni, 1995; Moscardo *et al.*, 2000; Backer, 2007, 2010, 2012; Hagmann *et al.*, 2010; Backer and King, 2015). Physical health and the well-being of VFR travellers (Angell and Behrens, 2005; Kozarsky and Keystone, 2010; Hendel-Paterson and Swanson, 2011; Matteelli, Carvalho and Bigoni, 2012; LaRocque *et al.*, 2013; Gurgle *et al.*, 2013; Monge-Maillo *et al.*, 2014) have also been addressed in many cases or examples. Some VFR research has also looked at the guest and host interactions and experiences (Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Shani, 2011; Shani and Uriely, 2012; Griffin, 2017).

Though tourism literature acknowledges the role of migrants in attracting and hosting VFR travellers, their emphasis remains mainly on friends and relatives visiting a destination country – usually the migrants’ country of settlement/residence – as tourists. As they are driven at least partly by a market research approach, most of these studies also depend on substantive statistical data or quantitative surveys – for example, the Dutch VFR travel market (Yuan *et al.*, 1995), a VFR tourism survey in the UK (Seaton and Palmer, 1997), a VFR travel behaviour survey in Shanghai (Ying-xue, Bing and Lin-bo, 2013) and a quantitative study of VFR tourism in Australia (Dwyer *et al.*, 2014) – that measure the volume, relative scale and value of VFR tourism. They generally do not pay heed to the underlying power imbalances and the degree of access (or lack of it) to ‘network capital’ (Urry, 2007) that, in turn, affects the mobility and immobility of (prospective) visitors and associated social-cultural implications.

VFR is constitutive of a set of activities that are variously connected to tourism/travel, mobilities and migration. Therefore, any definition of VFR requires us to transcend conventional disciplinary boundaries. Munoz, Griffin and Humbracht (2017, p.481) have recently advanced the argument that VFR needs to be addressed above all as a form of mobility. The term ‘VFR mobility’, they argue, is inclusive and addresses the

interdisciplinary overlap while examining multiple forms of mobility produced in relation to place, control and forms of fixity. VFR experiences are distinguishable from other forms of mobility because of the embedded social elements. Pre-existing social and familial relationships as friends and/or relatives are the key motivator that facilitates VFR mobilities.

VFR mobility then is a specific type of MIH (mobility influenced by a host) that includes a prior personal relationship between host and visitor and some face-to-face interaction, or co-presence, between them during the act of mobility. Within VFR mobility, there are a variety of experiences that range from those that in many ways would be considered a tourist experience, but this definition can also include incidents of migration, acts of social obligation, side trips to destinations that are part of a multi-destination trip that is influenced at some point by a resident in one of the stops, among others (Munoz, Griffin and Humbracht, 2017, p.483).

It is apparent that migration and VFR are two different forms of ‘human spatial mobility’ but they are linked in many ways: one could say that one (VFR) is enfolded within the other (migration). Although the above-cited definition acknowledges and points to the interlinkages between transnational migration and VFR mobilities, the contribution of migration scholarship is fundamental in unpacking the complexity of the VFR phenomenon including evolving transnational social relationships as well as the economic, power and cultural dynamics which underpin the differentiated mobilities (Palovic *et al.*, 2014). However, migration scholars have rarely considered the ‘functional interlinkages’ and relationships between these two ‘space-time mobilities’ (King *et al.*, 2013). Migration has traditionally been conceptualised as a long-term, one-way journey from home to destination country and migration theory ‘lacked a vocabulary’ and ‘framework’ to address the transnational ‘to-and-fro’ mobilities of migrants and their kin (King *et al.*, 2013; King and Lulle, 2015). Following the *transnational turn*, and then the *mobilities turn*, the conceptualisation of migration has loosened to accommodate more short-term, circular and sequential types of human spatial movements.

VFR is not an ephemeral aspect of migrant life; in fact, it is a ‘fundamental part of the migrant experience’ (King and Lulle, 2015). VFR mobilities enable migrants to overcome the spatial fragmentation of family and friendship through physical co-presence that can

hardly be replaced by virtual or imagined presence. Globalisation, cheap air and coach travel, mobile phones and social media have intensified social networks and different forms of mobility over the last few decades (Larsen, Urry and Axhausen, 2006; Urry, 2007, 2012a). Transnational workers, migrants and individuals are increasingly living a geographically dispersed and mobile life although, having said that, one should not overlook the barriers to mobility created by visa regimes, poverty and other forms of 'control' over migration and international movement. Increased mobility has been transforming the pattern and meaning of VFR. It is now important to understand how transnational migrant workers, diaspora communities and mobile individuals are maintaining their relationships with relatives, friends and loved ones both 'at a distance' and 'through VFR mobilities' (Palovic *et al.*, 2014).

The 'new mobilities turn' is bringing the notion of VFR to a wider social science framework. The 'think-tank' on VFR held at Surrey University in 2013 brought together scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds including geography, sociology, migration and tourism, representing universities from North America, Europe and the Middle East in an effort to reconceptualise VFR mobilities. The deliberations of the workshop emphasised the intricate relationships of VFR with transnational migration and diaspora, highlighting the importance of unpacking the complex social, cultural and networking implications that are embedded in VFR. VFR mobilities are constitutive of diverse practices; the following five most important practices were identified in the think-tank (Janta, Cohen and Williams, 2015):

- Social and family connections (maintenance of social and love relationships)
- The provision of care (discharging of care obligations, especially to children and elderly or sick parents)
- Affirmations of identity and roots (confirmation and reshaping of ethno-national identity)
- Maintenance of territorial rights (asserting various forms of citizenship and territorial rights – voting, renewing passports, getting health checks, etc.)
- Leisure and tourism (engaging in place-bound consumption and touristic practices)

VFR is a two-way movement and, in many cases, its circular nature is also evident. VFR mobilities are challenging the dichotomy of 'mobile migrant' vs 'static non-migrant'. It is argued that the non-migrants are also future migrants and, through VFR, can be persuaded and pulled towards a new country (White and Ryan, 2008). Some research (Conway, Potter and Bernard, 2009; White, 2014) shows that VFR is used as a prior strategy for both migration and return migration, where the individuals and families visit their friends and relatives before deciding to migrate to another place or country, or to return to their homeland. But VFR can also be seen as a substitute for migration, and especially for return migration (King and Lulle, 2015).

Free movement across the borderless space of the Schengen area, as well as increasingly improved rail and road communications and cheap flights, have intensified VFR mobilities within and between EU member-states. There has been some research on the VFR mobilities between EU countries. VFR mobilities of Latvian migrants in Guernsey (King and Lulle, 2015), young Germans in England (Mueller, 2015), Kosovans in London (King *et al.*, 2013), Polish migrants in Scotland (Moskal, 2015) and Italian migrants in London (Humbracht, 2017) are some examples. Mueller's (2015) analysis of empirical evidence further strengthens the earlier arguments that VFR is neither a marginal nor incidental aspect of migration. It is a central aspect of the phenomenology of migration. The young German migrants in Mueller's research have chosen England as their destination (as opposed to the United States, for instance) precisely for the geographical proximity that enables them to maintain transnational friendship and family connections through VFR mobilities in both directions.

It can be summarised that our current understanding of the notion of VFR mobilities has subtle disciplinary distinctions. While tourism scholarship accentuates more the VFR mobilities of individuals and families that are influenced as well as facilitated by migrants who have moved abroad, transnational migration studies stresses more the VFR journeys that are undertaken by migrants themselves to their country of origin where they have left behind their networks of friends and relatives. The reciprocal or bi-directional VFR mobilities and/or immobilities between a diasporic community and their country of origin, with the exception of one European example (Humbracht, 2017), are

rarely addressed in a single framework. In this research, I attempt to fill this epistemological gap as I am addressing both Bangladeshi migrants and their non-migrant friends and relatives' two-way mobilities across the transnational spaces that link the two populations together. Also, as I have mentioned above, most accounts of VFR mobilities draw from relatively developed-country examples. Therefore, the complexity of VFR mobilities and their social-cultural implications in a highly unequal transnational context, such as between the global north and south, where there exists a stark power imbalance, or limited access to network capital, remains to be investigated. For example, the nature of the Bangladeshi migration to the UK, as it was seen in the previous chapter, is different from migration from one EU country to another or from one developed nation-state to another. The historical connections, colonial legacies, physical distance, power relations, bordering policies, social structures and cultural practices between Bangladesh and its London diaspora are some of the key dimensions and sources of this difference. In the three empirical chapters of the thesis, I unpack the underlying complexities and their social-cultural implications. I seek to establish an in-depth understanding of what happens when people from 'home' visit the diaspora in their 'host' countries and *vice versa*; what types of gifts or materials are used or exchanged; what sorts of conversation transpire when the two parties meet; how are the social-cultural spaces negotiated; whether there are sources of tension or misunderstanding; what are the moments of excitement and/or disappointment; and what are the temporalities and spatialities involved in this case of VFR movements between Bangladesh and London.

2.3 Theories

In this section of the chapter I examine in turn the three main conceptual fields that are the most helpful in framing and helping to understand, at a more theoretical level, the VFR phenomenon. Each of these frameworks – mobilities, transnationalism and diaspora – has its own potential to conceptually enrich our understanding of VFR so that, taken together, they provide a convincing theoretical scaffold for investigating the phenomenon in the particular geographic context of Bangladesh and Britain.

2.3.1 Mobilities

Mobility is popularly referred to as the movement of people, objects, information, ideas and images and their 'complex relational dynamics' (Urry, 2007, 2012c; Sheller, 2011). From an anthropological point of view, the movement of people can be traced back as early as the beginning of human evolution. Human species survived as their ancestors 'roamed the face of the earth' (Silva, 2015). However, the emergence of mobility as a thriving academic discourse is a much more recent phenomenon. The journal *Mobilities* was established in 2006. The movements of people, objects, information, and ideas have gained dramatic speed in modern and postmodern times and have influenced, and even come to define, contemporary human lives and societies, at least in the 'West' (Urry, 2000). According to the protagonists of the 'mobilities turn', increased mobilities and their impacts on individuals, groups, communities, institutions, nations and governments needed better understanding and a new perspective. In his 2000 book, sociologist John Urry presented mobilities as the new 'manifesto agenda' for social research into the new century. He argued that societies are no longer static within their traditional territories or bounded within national borders; various global networks and flows are criss-crossing their porous borders, transforming the structure of societies and disrupting the concept of a self-reproducing 'national' society. Mobilities of people and objects, often supported by rapidly developing technologies, are also challenging the power structure of societies. Urry (2007) observed that twentieth-century social researchers had heavily focused on the upward and downward mobility of individuals or groups within the hierarchy of socio-economic classes and across the generations. However, the diverse flow of people, objects and ideas across borders, beyond the territory of each society and at the geographical intersections of regions, cities and places, did not get the necessary research attention.

Mobilities, therefore, are also intrinsically geographical. The journal *Progress in Human Geography* has recognised mobilities as a 'leading' and influential concept and has published several progress reports on it (Cresswell, 2011, 2012, 2014; Merriman, 2015a; 2015b). In the first progress report, Cresswell (2011, p.551) observed that mobility is significant because 'it focuses on, and holds centre stage, a fundamental geographical

fact of life – moving’. According to Cresswell (2014), the different sub-disciplines of geography, such as transport geography, tourism, migration research and geographical studies of transnationalism and diaspora, have focused on particular forms of movement. They all ‘have informed’ and ‘been informed’ by the new mobilities turn in social research. In fact, geographers, as Cresswell has argued, have been at the forefront of taking forward the mobilities agenda and they have also been instrumental in establishing the journal *Mobilities*. Although geographers have contributed significantly to mobilities research, the study of mobilities is highly multidisciplinary, with significant contributions coming also from sociology (cf. Urry, 2002, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2011, 2014a) and anthropology (cf. Salazar and Smart, 2011; Salazar, 2013, 2014, 2017; Fortier, 2014). It is now being increasingly recognised that mobilities have become a fundamental part of modernity and postmodernity, and the importance of this discourse can hardly be overstated (Adey *et al.*, 2014).

Mobilities are movements which are meaningful and patterned, rather than random and incidental (Adey, 2010b). Mobility is an embodied experience of being on the move and the physical, virtual and productive activities that take place while we are on the move (Urry, 2007). Cresswell (2011) noted that mobilities are much more than transport geography’s mapping and routeing of movement from point A to B or from one geographical location to another. Mobility is the way of communicating meaning and significance, engaging with the modern world, addressing people, objects and places (Adey, 2010). Therefore, the production of mobility refers to the process whereby movement achieves meaning and significance. The meaning is not pre-existing and is not necessarily good or bad; it is attributed in the context of when, where and how movement happens. Adey added that mobility is a notion without any boundary, and it is better understood by reference to different material, social, political, economic and cultural processes in the contemporary world. The discourse of mobility helps us to understand better the processes of globalisation, migration, tourism, homelessness, terrorism, security and transport, differentiating them from the wider international context to the micro-motions of individual acts. The degree of mobility and levels of movement, their types and their timing, are central to many people’s lives and are

significant for public and private, governmental and non-governmental operations in an interconnected and networked world (Urry, 2012b).

2.3.1.1 Immobility, moorings and the politics of mobility

Common criticisms against the new mobilities paradigm are that it works off an essentialised, sedentary ontology and thereby privileges fluidity over fixity. Although people, objects and information of various kinds are on the move, mobility scholars have not abandoned fixity or immobility altogether. They recognise that there are fixity and immobility at both an 'experiential' and a 'political' level (Cresswell, 2014). Immobility, fixity and 'moorings' are incorporated within the mobilities paradigm. Mobilities produce a networked pattern of social and economic life for even those who do not move. There is an interactive system between mobilities and the immobile material world. Immobile spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings, places and technologies are necessary as they 'configure and enable' mobilities (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2012c).

Mobilities also address the issue of unequal power relations. Being able to move from one place to another, physically or virtually, can represent status or power. While the proliferation of technologies can increase the mobilities of some, it can reinforce the immobilities of others. Freedom or rights to movement are highly unequal too. Therefore, mobilities neither privilege flows and speed nor project a 'cosmopolitan', 'nomadic' or 'mobile' subjectivity; rather, the mobilities approach tracks and traces the power, politics and practices that create and affect 'both movement and stasis' (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2014b).

2.3.1.2 The 'mobilities turn'

A 'striking number' of journal issues in last two decades confirm 'the relentless rise of mobility' as an academic discourse (Cresswell, 2011). It is now increasingly recognised that mobility has emerged as a 'new' research framework (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2012b; Cresswell, 2014; Sheller, 2014) for social sciences. The protagonists of the mobilities school acknowledge that mobility is historically significant, too. Therefore, the

‘mobilities turn’ neither asserts the novelty of the concept of mobility nor suggests a ‘totalising description’ of the world (Sheller, 2014b). However, the mobilities turn is new in the sense that it encompasses ‘humans, non-humans and objects’ and it creatively recombines existing theoretical traditions, methodological approaches and epistemologies, and advocates an ontology of a world constituted by ‘relations rather than entities’; it is a ‘realist relational ontology’ which comfortably bridges the disciplinary gaps and boundaries noted above (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2014b). Sheller argues that the transdisciplinary field of mobilities research brings together a *sociological* concern for inequalities, power and hierarchy, with *geography’s* concepts of territory, border and scale, and *anthropology’s* concern for discourses, representation and schemas, while transforming them through a relational ontology of the co-constitution of ‘subjects, spaces and meanings’ (Sheller, 2014, p.791). Cresswell (2011) has argued that the mobility turn has ‘wider theoretical purchase’ for its ‘centrality’ and for being able to hold together different segments of research fields that have ‘often been held apart’.

The mobilities turn has challenged ‘an ontological, epistemological and methodological sedentarism’ (Cresswell, 2014, p.719) that often depicts societies and social relationships as static or bounded in a spatial location, such as a single place or a nation-state. However, it does not aim to establish mobility as a ‘value’ or ‘contemporary state’ or ‘desired status’; therefore, it should not be confused with metaphors of flow or liquidity (Sheller, 2014b). In fact, the mobilities narrative delineates itself from both sedentary and nomadic accounts of the social world. It goes beyond globalisation, nomadism and flows; and questions and examines the context and the process of how people, materials, information, ideas and images are mobilised or performed through current ‘socio-technical’ and ‘cultural practices’ (Urry, 2012c).

2.3.1.3 Migration and mobility

Migration is a form of geographical movement, from one region, country or continent to another, and it depicts a horizontal sense of being on the move (Urry, 2007). Throughout history, different trade and travel routes interconnected people across the

world and enabled them to migrate over many centuries. Migration has been fundamental to human existence and experience; natural instincts drive the human desire to search, travel, explore, conquer and possess; and population movement carried innovation from one place to another (King, 2012b). However, international migration accelerated in the post-colonial world. It is argued that we are now living in an 'Age of Migration', where international migration has become globalised, diversified and increasingly politicised (Castles, de Haas and Miller, 2014). Contemporary complex mobilities of diasporas and transnational migrants and more fluid and multiple citizenships are challenging the bounded and static depictions of nation, ethnicity, community and state that are still present in much social science (Urry, 2007). Mobilities are also entwined with the key notions of borders and bordering practices. Therefore, migration or cross-border movement of people cannot be fully understood without 'confronting' the ways in which mobilities are restricted and regulated by the border, bordering policies and practices (Richardson, 2013). Restricting the freedom to move or migrate can disqualify the age of migration, rebranding it as the 'age of involuntary immobility' (Carling, 2002). Transdisciplinary mobilities research can highlight the relation between local and global power geometries, voluntary and forced immobility, forced migration, and unequal and disrupted movement (Sheller, 2014b).

Although the multiple spatialities of migration and movement are 'self-evident', adoption of the mobilities paradigm has been largely absent in mainstream studies of migration and migrant transnationalism (King, 2012a). However, the importance of the mobility turn is being recognised by some scholars. For instance, Rogaly (2015, p.528) argues 'that the notions of mobility and fixity and their interrelationship make the 'new mobilities paradigm' a conceptually more agile container for studies of the migration of people than currently prevalent framings in migration studies'. Faist (2013) has also recognised that the mobility turn has reached migration studies, arguing that future studies of migration need to go beyond the binaries of labour migrants vs. highly skilled people and look into the structures and process of how people move or stay. During a recent symposium on the landmark migration textbook *The Age of Migration*, migration scholars (King, 2015; Skeldon, 2015) have also addressed the necessity of accepting and adopting the new mobilities turn in migration studies. The authors of *The Age of*

Migration (Castles, de Haas and Miller, 2015) have acknowledged this point in their response and asserted that any future addition of the book will include a chapter on the mobilities turn. In the symposium, contributors also reaffirmed that the study of migration is multi-disciplinary. There are many areas of migration research where the disciplinary boundary has become blurred. Lifestyle migration (cf. O'Reilly and Benson, 2009; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014) and VFR mobilities are some of those areas.

2.3.1.4 Network capital

The role of networking, especially personal networks stretching beyond the traditional social milieu, can create distinct financial and emotional benefits. The theoretical underpinning of such arguments can be evidenced in many scholarly works (cf. Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988). Similarly, Sik (1994) analysed the scope and role of network capital in communist, capitalist and post-communist societies. According to Wellman and Frank (2001), network capital is a form of social capital that is accumulated through interpersonal ties; it is unevenly distributed and can provide networked members with emotional support, material aid, information, companionship, and a sense of belonging. Urry (2007) has recently conceptualised and extended the notion of network capital further in the mobilities context.

Network capital is the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit (Urry, 2007, p.197).

Within the discourse of mobilities, Urry (2007, 2012a) advances arguments for the identification of this emergent form of capital, network capital. He argues that network capital is an extra form of capital in addition to the forms of economic and cultural capital set out by Bourdieu (1986). The diversity of mobility systems beyond national societies and the interconnection of physical movement and communication are not covered in Bourdieu's notion of 'capital'. Mobilities are complex and many people are, one might say, forced to exercise choice and are not necessarily determined by prevailing social structures such as class, family, age and career. In so arguing, Urry also notes that emphasising the means of mobilities does not mean the 'fetishism of movement' either. Social groups with relatively higher access to network capital are

better equipped to make and remake their social connections across space-time and the emotional, financial and practical benefits that derive from such connections are over and above and non-reducible to the advantages of economic and cultural capital. In the context of the social relations of circulation, network capital is significant as it provides the means to move. Maintaining a social relationship with a geographically dispersed network of friends and relatives requires access to substantive network capital. Within 'the emerging global stratification system' (Urry, 2007, p.152), possession of network capital is more valuable than 'economic or cultural capital' (Urry, 2012a, p.24). There are inherent inequalities and power imbalances that are better addressed through the notion of network capital. The global or 'kinetic' elite, according to Urry, can move effortlessly, make and remake social connections, as they are high in network capital. On the other hand, not having sufficient access to network capital is indicative of 'global inferiority' and people will suffer 'social exclusion since many social networks are more far-flung' (Urry, 2007 p.179).

According to Urry (2007, pp.197–198; 2012a, p.27) there are eight elements of network capital:

1. *The array of appropriate documents, visas, money and qualifications* that enable safe movement
2. *Others (workmates, friends and family members) at-a-distance*, who offer invitations, hospitality and meetings
3. *Movement capacities*
4. *Location-free information and contact points*
5. *Communication devices*
6. *Appropriate, safe and secure meeting places*; both en route and at the destination
7. *Access to transport and communication tools and technologies*
8. *Time and other resources to manage and co-ordinate points 1–7 above*, especially when there is a system failure

Such network capital, as argued by Urry, should not be considered as an attribute of individual subjects. It is produced in a relational context of individuals, others and the environment. Collectively, they constitute a relational package, a network that is utilised on the occasion of co-present meetings in a particular space for a specific moment in

time. This framework will be re-visited in my empirical analysis, especially chapter five which deals with the challenges of accessing mobility between Bangladesh and the UK.

2.3.2 Transnationalism

‘Transnationalism refers to social, cultural, economic and political relations between, above or beyond nation-states, inter-connecting, transcending, perhaps superseding... Transnational migrants, transmigrants, are those who, in the simplest formula, live lives across borders’ (Grillo, 2007, p.200). The notion of transnationalism emerged in the 1990s as a result of growing discontent with the traditional way of perceiving migration as a one-way and once-for-all journey from one country to another. Transnational migration scholars argue that ‘Migration has never been a one-way process of assimilation into a melting pot or a multicultural salad bowl but one in which migrants, to varying degrees, are simultaneously embedded in the multiple sites and layers of the transnational social fields in which they live’ (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, p.130). In transnationalism, according to Bruneau (2010, pp.43–44), there is no question of ‘uprooting’ or a ‘strong desire to return’, as transmigrants maintain a ‘double affiliation’ and dual identity as their transnational way of life. Although transmigrants maintain dual or even multiple homes, belonging and identity, Levitt (2004) argued that these ‘double allegiances’ are not antithetical to each other. However, this view changes in the context of second/third generation transnationalism, where identity and sense of belonging can become ambivalent and contradictions arise (cf. Carling, 2008; Gardner, 2012; Zeitlyn, 2015).

2.3.2.1 *From methodological nationalism to methodological transnationalism*

Studies of transnationalism and transnational communities epistemologically shifted the academic study of migrants away from ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), a concept that refers to ‘an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation states’ (Glick Schiller, 2010, p.110). Glick Schiller (2010) emphasised that methodological nationalism is a closed approach that dehumanises studies of migration, projects migrants as undesirable others, creates a migrants/natives division

and promotes a political and public policy of exclusion that results in communal cultural identities attributed to migrants without understanding the norms and values both migrants and natives share and experience within and across nation-state borders. Such criticisms of methodological nationalism have seen increasing acceptance in migration studies (Amelina and Faist, 2012).

2.3.2.2 Transnational spaces

Studies of transnationalism have also emphasised that the multiple positioning, affiliations and rights of migrants lead to the establishment of a transnational social space/field (Faist, 2000, 2006; Glick Schiller, 2010). Transnational social spaces are multi-sited and multi-layered. Transmigration, therefore, is 'not just a trajectory, but a multiplicity of potential trajectories' (Grillo, 2007, p.200). In a transnational social field, 'migrants and their descendants participate in familial, social, economic, religious, political, and cultural processes that extend across borders while they become part of the places where they settle' (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, p.130). Transnational scholars, in Levitt and Jaworsky's (2007) opinion, delineate themselves from the assimilation/integration debate and place emphasis on the different aspects of life that are transformed when they are enacted transnationally.

2.3.2.3 Social Remittances

Transnational migrants have been shown to be bringing and sending 'social remittances' (Levitt, 2001) – the ideas and behaviours learned through the process of migration – back to the home societies when they return or are circulating to and from origin and destination societies. Non-migrants can also accumulate social remittances through virtual communications, exchanges and above all, visiting migrants in their country of settlement and then transferring or using these new ideas and practices when they return to their own country (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

2.3.2.4 Transnational visits

Migrants' occasional, regular and temporary visits to their country of origin are also addressed within the framework and discourses of transnationalism (i.e. Olwig, 2002;

Baldassar, 2008; Zeitlyn, 2012; Bolognani, 2014). Important family occasions, such as weddings and funerals, are typical reasons for which migrants travel to their origin or ancestral country for a short period of time. These visits are also analysed in the context of identity and belonging discourses in a transnational context. Transnationally oriented literature on visits and return visits by migrants contributes greatly to the understandings of some aspects of the VFR mobilities that are not available elsewhere.

2.3.2.5 Limits of transnationalism

Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004), perhaps the most outspoken critics of transnationalism, questioned the innovativeness of transnationalism and the notion of 'transnational community'. They argue that 'connectivity between source and destination points is an inherent aspect of the migration phenomenon – no surprise given the social networks that channel the process' (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004, p.1178). Transnationalism, in Waldinger and Fitzgerald's opinion, is misleading as a theoretical perspective: it does not transcend from existing practices of nation-states but rather remains focused on particular places and groups. Even though studies of migrant transnationalism denounce methodological nationalism, some critique that it still adheres to the discourses and laws produced by nation-states. There is criticism that 'transnationalism remains captive to the nation-state framework, for it often fails to adequately address the problematic nature and implications of the binary division between receiving and sending societies...the nation-state continues to maintain its ability to designate which migrants are considered legitimate and which are not' (Söderström *et al.*, 2013, pp.xiii–xiv). Fortier (2014) argues that, in transnationalism, migrants are embedded in a networked social field that is still regulated by nation-states. It remains to be explored, therefore, 'how ... one's place of residence on the planet frame[s] one's capacity to leave or travel, if she so desires' (Fortier, 2014, p.66).

2.3.3 Diaspora

The classical notion of diaspora refers to the forced dispersal of the Jews from their homeland and their experience of exile, suffering and loss (Cohen, 2008). However, the meaning of the term has changed over time. Safran (1991; 2005a; 2005b) expanded the

use of the term to include other groups who moved from a homeland to one or more countries both forcefully and voluntarily. Newer notions of diaspora include religious, ethnic or migrant minority groups living outside their homeland (Faist, 2010). There are now many different types of diaspora. Cohen's (2008, p.18) updated typology of diaspora includes victim (Jews, Armenians, Palestinians), labour (Indians, Chinese, Turks), imperial (British, Russians and other colonial powers), trade (Lebanese, Chinese, Indians) and de-territorialised (Caribbean peoples, Parsis, Roma) diasporas. Cohen also acknowledged that there are overlaps between these types. The literature on Bangladeshi migration suggests that it is a *labour diaspora*. Establishment of the British Bangladeshi diaspora in London is connected to British capitalism and colonialism in South Asia, which 'replayed in the form of men working on British ships, and then British factories' (Gardner, 1995, p.39).

Over the last few decades, the application of the term diaspora has proliferated and been widely used in media, public and policy debates. In many cases, it has become highly politicised. According to Kleist (2008, pp.1139-1140), diaspora is a political framework in which the minorities, on the one hand, struggle for recognition and equality in their host countries while, on the other hand, they act as a potential transnational political entity that can influence their homeland in many ways. The term diaspora has become so popular that some have started to question its academic salience. Brubaker (2005, p.1) argued that 'its meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted. This has resulted in what one might call a "diaspora" diaspora – a dispersion of the meaning of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space'. In response, diaspora scholars have asserted that diaspora is not necessarily a synonym for all migrants. They have identified some common features to classify or 'discipline' the definition of diasporas.

Cohen (2008) added that nation-states have always sought to integrate and assimilate diasporas into their structure and identity. Nevertheless, multiple affiliations or allegiances of diaspora beyond the nation-state are becoming more acceptable in a contemporary globalised world. Multiple or hybrid identities are now being welcomed

and celebrated in some countries. It is also argued that diasporas now play a vital social role. 'They bridge the gap between the individual and society, between the local and the global, between cosmopolitan and particular... diasporas can act as an agent of benign development in their home countries' (Cohen, 2008, p.174).

While the notion of diaspora has become very popular, it has attracted some criticism from social constructionists. Brah (1996) and Anthias (1998) criticised the over-simplification and generalisation of the diaspora groups and their origin. Brah (1996) contested the notion of 'homeland' that is dominant in diaspora studies. She asks, 'Where is home? On the one hand, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin". On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality' (Brah, 1996, p.192).

Anthias extended the criticism further and argued that the concept of diaspora 'privileges the point of origin in constructing identity and solidarity... It also fails to examine trans-ethnic commonalities and relations and does not adequately pay attention to differences of gender and class' (1998, p.558). Alexander (2010, pp.113–116) added that the origin and collective sense of belonging and solidarity makes the notion of diaspora 'ambivalent and problematic' and ignores the 'historical and cultural specificities of diaspora experiences'. In response to these criticisms, Cohen has acknowledged that 'Diaspora theorists made no claim to explain the full spectrum of immigrant experiences... the concept of diaspora is not a magic bullet and cannot be used to slay all enemies' (Cohen, 2008, p.11).

2.3.3.1 Memoryscapes, diasporic space and visits to the homeland

In their edited text *Global Memoryscapes*, Phillips and Reyes (2011, p.2) explore the practices of memory as they relate to globalisation – the movement of people, ideas, technologies and discourses across national boundaries and the consequent emergence of new transnational social structures that are not bound by national borders or identities. These authors envision memoryscape as 'a complex landscape upon which memories and memory practices move, come into contact with, and are contested by,

other forms of remembrance' (2011, p.13). Whilst Phillips and Reyes' book is mainly about public memory, the memories of my participants are personal, private (albeit often shared) and spatially localised.

The notion of memoryscapes in this thesis introduces a material, spatio-temporal and aesthetic dimension in which experiences of earlier life-stages or recent visits sited in the diasporic homeland are narrated, often with warm nostalgia, but sometimes laced with tension or disappointment (cf. Christou and King, 2010, p.645). In this way, memory is seen as part of the litany of 'scapes' – ethnoscape, ideoscape, technoscape, financescape and mediascape – specified by Appadurai (1990, 1996) as demonstrative of how media, ideas and travel (to which memory is hereby added) fuel individual and collective imagination in the practice of everyday lives. Representing multiple realities, Appadurai's scapes are fluid and constantly shifting, and complexly intertwined with each other, especially when connected to important global processes like international migration. Here the key 'scape' is ethnoscape, which is the result (also in the imagination) of the movement of people across borders and cultures, reshaping those cultures along the way. Appadurai claims that his scapes

are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather... they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors... [including] intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighbourhoods and families (1990, p.296).

Migration – especially in the minds of migrants – leaves behind a trail of memories of times and places in the past. Often these memoryscapes are idealised, but for the migrants themselves they are also real and tangible, and refer to the minutiae of places and landscapes, and to the social contexts and relations that inhabit these landscapes of memory. Memory, meanwhile, can be regarded as an act of remembering which creates new understandings of both the past and the present (Agnew, 2005, p.8). Here Bangladesh is constructed as a geographic and psychic space of 'home', or perhaps better, 'homeland', in which that diasporic hearth, especially its landscape and people, is remembered or imagined by many diasporans as a space of familiarity and safety, but by others as a locus of unfamiliarity and disillusionment.

In her classic text *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah writes that the concept of 'diaspora space' represents 'the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location', as well as 'a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes' (1996, p.181). Brah's argument is that diaspora space as a conceptual category is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are represented as indigenous, as sedentary non-migrants. Brah concludes (1996, p.181, her emphasis), 'the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put'.

The interwoven notions of diaspora, home and homeland are intricately connected with, and contingent upon, 'memory work'. The diasporic landscape of the homeland and the people 'left behind' hold a particular attraction to migrants and their descendants, and this is what goads them to make repeated return visits, which in turn reshape those memories. As Marschall points out (2017, p.6):

The revisit can be a vehicle for the systematic pursuit of memories; an extension of the process of remembering itself; an opportunity for reconstructing one's own past and affirming or reshaping one's identity. As the traveller encounters the old home, memories are recaptured, refreshed and verified; distorted memories are exposed and adjusted; embodied memories are relived through bodily experiences; long-forgotten memories can suddenly resurface and cause deeply emotional reactions; memories may be spontaneously shared with companions. After the journey, memories are re-evaluated, consolidated, synthesized and narrated; in the process, they may be compared and partly merged with other people's memories and perhaps one's own memories from previous journeys.

According to Brah (1996, p.182), 'the image of a journey' is 'at the heart of the notion of diaspora'. But then she goes on to more narrowly specify that 'diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots elsewhere'. Two important critiques of this statement can be made. The first is the implication that the diasporic journey is inevitably a journey of migration, of settlement, and (reflecting the origin of the term 'diaspora') of scattering. This assumption can be questioned in two ways: one, that the journey is only one-way; and two, that the journey ineluctably leads to permanent settlement. There is now a substantial body of recent research which documents the fluidity of diaspora as a social and geographic formation, with evidence

of onward migration or ‘rediasporisation’, and ‘counter-diaspora’ or return to the diasporic homeland (see, *inter alia*, Christou and King, 2014; King and Olsson, 2014; Tsuda, 2009; Wessendorf, 2013).

The second critique of Brah’s formulation is to point out that ‘diasporic journeys’ can be both multi-directional and multi-temporal, including short-term visits. Indeed, visits ‘home’ are considered a fundamental constitutive element of the Bangladeshi diasporic experience – of being a migrant, or a migrant descendant, long-term settled in a foreign land. In terms of the temporal rhythms of movement, visits to see relatives and friends in the homeland are enfolded within the longer rhythms of lifetime migration and diaspora formation (cf. King and Lulle, 2015; Williams, Chaban and Holland, 2011). Indeed, the practice of making regular homeland visits may facilitate the continuance of long-term settlement abroad and abrogate the necessity to confront both the existential dilemma of the migrant (‘where do I belong?’) and the binary decision of whether to return-migrate or not.

Ignored in the transnational migration and diaspora literatures until relatively recently, visits made by migrants to their countries and communities of origin have now become the focus of a substantial body of empirical research: see Baldassar (2001) for a pioneering ethnographic study of Italo-Australians and Janta, Cohen and Williams (2015) for a comprehensive literature review. As argued before, travel within the diasporic space created by the history and geography of Bangladeshi migration can be classified as part of VFR mobilities. Theoretically, these diaspora-defined visits happen in both directions: migrants and their descendants visiting the homeland – the ‘*desh*’; and non-migrants from the homeland visiting their relatives abroad in the diaspora – the ‘*bidesh*’. I examine homeland visits by the British Bangladeshis in chapter four and counter visits by non-migrant relatives and friends in chapter five of this thesis.

2.4 The framework of analysis

While current studies of diaspora acknowledge that migrants maintain multiple connections and affiliations across borders, studies of transnationalism extend this

approach further and deeper. Transnational migration studies address the familial, economic, social, cultural and political activities of both migrants and non-migrants that take place in transnational spaces. However, the existing literatures on transnationalism and diaspora convey the impression that the non-migrants are immobile (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Glick Schiller, 2010; Faist, 2015). As we have noticed in our prior discussion, the concept of VFR mobilities departs from this assumption. The emergent scholarship on VFR argues that *non-migrants also move transnationally*. VFR research asserts that both the migrants and their non-migrant friends and relatives visit each other in both homeland and hostland; and switch roles as guest and host while they co-create the experience (Humbracht, 2015; King and Lulle, 2015; Wagner, 2015).

In this research, I adopt as my primary conceptual platform the analytical strategy of the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2014b). A mobilities perspective transcends 'methodological nationalism' (Glick Schiller, 2010) as well as 'methodological transnationalism' (Amelina and Faist, 2012; Fortier, 2014, p.65) and avoids state-fostered discourses such as 'wanted vs unwanted' (Söderström *et al.*, 2013) and 'labour migrants vs highly skilled expats' (Faist, 2013). Through analysing the forms of network capital, I will also address transnational inequality and examine how this affects human mobility and/or fixity across nation-states' borders.

My research draws from all three conceptual frameworks described above: diaspora, transnationalism and mobilities. They all deal with different aspects of the migration process and its associated phenomena, including transnational visits. These frameworks also help to contextualise other relevant issues that I deal with, including identity reconstruction, cultural hybridity, sense of belonging, home-making, materialities, gender and generations, which are, in turn, debated within their own discursive frameworks. Overall, however, I privilege the *mobilities framework* as being the most relevant and flexible for framing my study. But the others are useful too.

The concept of diaspora has been deconstructed and diversified to establish a better understanding of long-term migration. Brah (1996) used diaspora as an emergent space

and a framework of interpretation and confronted the necessarily complex and contradictory specificities of differentiated subjectivities in the diasporic frame. She deconstructed the notion of home, coining the term 'homing desire', and addressed the issues of social inequality and ethnically and gendered labour markets in what Stuart Hall (2012) terms her 'diasporic reasoning'.

Both diaspora and transnationalism have moved away from essentialist notions of cultural identity to cultural hybridity, 'double consciousness' and multiple belonging. 'Cultural hybridity became a central trope of critical studies in the 1990s, celebrated as powerfully transgressive and interruptive of class, national cultural homogeneity and essentialist definitions of race, culture and imperial domination, and as a way of understanding the consequences of migration and diaspora' (Scott, 2006, p.83). Bhabha (1994) argues that diasporic voices from the margins disturb national cultural homogeneity, creating an ambivalent, liminal, third space that disrupts national grand narratives. Similarly, Hall and others (Hall, Morley and Chen, 1996; Hall and Du Gay, 1996) argued that diasporas are always in formation and are inherently hybrid, reflecting both origins and place of settlement. They see hybridity as involving a reflexive self-critical distancing from singular identities as the question of differences will always be present in a diasporic community and their way of thinking. Following the unsettling of the notion of identity, particularly by Bhabha and Hall, some mobilities literature is now arguing for the notions of mobile belonging and mobile identities in a globalised world (Easthope, 2009; Arp Fallov, Jørgensen and Knudsen, 2013).

Discursive frameworks of diaspora, transnationalism and mobilities also address the materialities that are embedded in migratory processes that draw on the everyday life of transmigrants. Mobilities literatures explore the process of how 'migrant worlds' and 'material cultures' converge and how such convergences enable a rethinking of both material culture and migration. The term materiality, therefore, refers to 'physical objects and worlds, as well as evoking more varied – multiple – forms of experience and sensation that are both embodied and constituted through the interactions of subjects and objects' (Basu and Coleman, 2008, pp.313–317). In her research on Polish migrants' mobilities, Burrell (2008) argued that the physical practices of journeying and border

crossings are not empty acts, but constitute a highly materialised and emotional practice. Mobilities intersect both the political and the personal border. Border spaces and journey times can be familiar, frightening, unsettling or exciting for migrants with the promise of a new life, or remindful of the loss of an old one. When migrants and non-migrants travel to visit each other, a similar set of emotions may be enjoyed or endured: fear, familiarity, excitement, anticipation, disappointment etc. The material environment of travel and objects accompanying migrants is significant in both framing and reflecting the experience. In Burrell's example, 'travelling suitcases full of gifts and apparently mundane products are just as important as emails, telephone calls and Skype for keeping the migrants feeling connected to Poland' (Burrell, 2008, p.370).

Ethnographic research on transnational material practices has gone beyond the purely economic dimension and argued that practices such as house-building, remittance-sending and gift-giving are also deeply entwined with moral, social, cultural, emotional and relational implications (Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Dalakoglou, 2010; Cohen, 2011; Levitt, Lucken and Barnett, 2011; Carling, 2014). In her ethnographic research on British transmigrants in Dubai, Walsh (2006) has also addressed the mobile forms of home, home-making and belonging through the analysis of materialities.

While transnationalism often includes analysis of the unequal power relation between migrant host and origin society, the mobilities literature, as we have seen, also introduces the concept of 'network capital'. More specifically, it looks at how network capital and the various elements of it produce inequalities across nation-states' borders and how state policies privilege the mobility of some while enforcing immobility on others (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2013; Fortier, 2014). According to Burrell, 'Who is mobile, and who is not, and how mobility and immobility are managed, ordered and experienced are becoming ever more significant questions in a simultaneously increasingly globalised yet stratified world' (Burrell, 2008, p.354).

While my research, on the one hand, draws more broadly from different academic discourses, it does, on the other hand, deploy as its major epistemology the various analytical lenses of the transdisciplinary mobilities paradigm when presenting and

analysing the different aspects of VFR mobilities between Bangladesh and London. When addressing the issues of identity, cultural hybridity, spatialities, material exchanges, gender and generations, I compare and contrast existing discourses and construct my argument and understanding in a non-essentialised and non-reductive way and, crucially, include both migrants' and non-migrants' mobilities.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Following on from the theoretical context of my research in the previous chapter, I now move on to the methodological part, together with associated epistemological and ontological questions. In this chapter, I describe and justify the methods that I adopt: participant observation and my main research instrument, the semi-structured interview. As the fieldwork of this multi-sited VFR research is premised on them, the effectiveness of these methods in the broader methodological context of post-positivist knowledge production, as well as their concrete relevance to my study, are rationalised in the discussion that follows. I also explain here the process of recruiting participants, their location, the timing of the field research in two main sites, ethical implications and my own positionality. In so doing, I draw from discourses on critical reflexivity and situated knowledge. It is worth clarifying immediately that I have only used pseudonyms for all key informants, interviewees and other research interlocutors throughout my thesis.

3.2 A Multi-Sited Ethnographic Approach

Ethnography has a long history and is well-recognised for its key approaches of in-depth field immersion, participant observation and ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). It is often seen as a specific form of contextually rich and nuanced qualitative inquiry, frequently used in the discipline of anthropology, but also increasingly in social, cultural, educational and human-geography research (Hammersley, 2006; Falzon, 2009). According to Sanjek (2014), ethnography is a product as well as a process of ethnographic field work. It is important for an ethnographer to contextualise their study by defining and drawing the spatial and temporal boundaries of what is being researched, also in order to understand the perspectives of the people being studied (Hammersley, 2006). Traditional ethnographic research required a lengthy stay in a single field site (typically one year or more) in order to build trust and develop a close interaction that would result in rich and intensive data. However, the spatial dimensions of ethnography have evolved in recent years in a way that challenges the convention of single-sitedness as the only valid way of producing ethnographic knowledge. ‘Multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus, 1995), mobile ethnography (Buscher and Urry, 2009; Büscher,

Urry and Witchger, 2011; Nóvoa, 2014), online/virtual ethnography (Shumar and Madison, 2013), and ethnography of 'third places' (Murchison and Coats, 2015) are some of the alternative forms of ethnographic approach that are being deployed in the production of post-positivist social-scientific knowledge. It is worth noting that they all have their critiques. The dialectical discussion of what constitutes an ethnography is ongoing. This epistemological dilemma can arguably be resolved by concentrating on the context. Rather than accepting or privileging one stance over the other, we should contemplate the effectiveness of any form of ethnographic approach – whether single, multi-sited or any other – in the 'spatial and temporal' context of what is being researched (King, 2018).

The context of my research, as defined in the previous chapter, is inherently transnational and involves reciprocal mobilities between multiple sites/spaces. Within the 'mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007), different forms of mobile methods have also been developed to understand the mobile subjectivities. The adaptation of mobile methods including *mobile ethnography* has also been argued (see Buscher and Urry, 2009; Büscher, Urry and Witchger, 2011) as an appropriate strategy for a subject that is 'on the move'. Mobile ethnography advocates a process of going beyond spatial fixation by observing and experiencing people on the move, by bus, train, car, plane or at bus/train stations and ports/airports; and thereby understand the process and meaning of mobility and immobility in their spatial-temporal context. Though mobile methods are being adopted in some cases (i.e Blok, 2010; Hine, 2011; Nóvoa, 2014), it is also argued by mobilities scholars, for example Merriman (2014), that mobilities research is not about privileging/celebrating moving subjects and objects; 'participative and ethnographic techniques' or other perspectives are also effective (Fincham, McGuinness and Murray, 2010; Büscher, Urry and Witchger, 2011; DeLyser and Sui, 2012). VFR mobilities are neither just a mere process of moving back and forth, nor are the migrants and non-migrants always on the move. My research is designed as an ethnography of mobilities rather than as a mobile ethnography.

My research design is strongly influenced by the notion of 'multi-sited ethnography' that Marcus (1995, 1998) first coined in his seminal journal article and then followed in his

later book. Marcus (1995) famously argued in his landmark paper that social phenomena have now become embedded in a new and changing world order where intensive single-sited ethnography is often inadequate due to the dynamism, fluidity and interconnectedness of the local/global system. The spatial fragmentation and mobile nature of contemporary societies, in an increasingly networked and globalised world, require ethnographers and other field-workers to surpass the conventional ways of conducting research. Marcus proclaimed that it was necessary to go beyond a single-sited research design and adopt a multi-sited method 'to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (Marcus, 1995, p.96).

Multi-sitedness is neither just the extension of the fieldwork to different sites nor necessarily a holistic process. The scope of the research must be well defined and there has to be close connection between the sites. There is a need

to posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among these sites... The object of study is ultimately mobile and multiply situated, so any ethnography of such an object will have a comparative dimension that is integral to it, in the form of juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) 'worlds apart' (Marcus, 1995, p.102).

Marcus (1995, p.105) also noted that

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography.

Within the notion of multi-sited ethnographic approach, Marcus (1995, p.106) has also advanced 'several different modes or techniques' that can be deployed to understand '(pre-planned or opportunistic) movement' as well as the 'settings of a complex cultural phenomenon'. Among the various techniques, I draw from two: a) following the people (following and staying with the subjects), and b) following the thing (such as the circulation of commodities and gifts).

It is also worth noting that multi-sited ethnography has received mixed reactions from many (traditional) ethnographers. Most concerns turn around the question of 'depth'

(Horst, 2009). However, where people are on the move, as they self-evidently are in my research, both as migrants and as visitors, the issue of depth cannot be really linked to a defence of the single-sited in-depth approach. Human mobility, according to Boccagni and Schrooten (2018, p.220), 'is irreducible to the scope of a closed, territorially based and fully controllable ethnographic field, as it involves multiple physical, social and symbolic locations, whether simultaneously or over time'. The underlying argument here is multi-sited ethnography is crucial in understanding transnational mobile practices, the circulation of materials, 'and the interaction between physically proximate, present or visible life environments and their remote, absent or invisible counterparts' (Boccagni and Schrooten, 2018, p.221).

My research, therefore, is designed as a *multi-sited ethnographic study*. The subject of my research self-evidently goes beyond the border of a single nation-state. In chapters 1 and 2, I argued that VFR is a process of two-way mobilities that transcend national borders, and I am looking into the social and cultural interactions, personal negotiations and material exchanges in both directions. In her earlier and classic research, Gardner (1995) observed a local-global connection between Bangladesh and Britain. Hence, the 'British-Bangladeshi social field', according to Zeitlyn (2015), is 'glocal' in nature, combining a global span with localised processes and effects. Clearly, the participants of my research and their VFR activities are located and practised transnationally. Their experiences are not contained in one particular place or at a single moment in time. A multi-sited approach, with due attention paid to the timing and temporalities of 'moves' and 'stays', is the most appropriate way to capture the space-time dimension of my participants' VFR mobilities and helps to address better the diverse experiences and negotiations that are evident.

3.3 A Reflexive Positionality

The relationship between the researcher and the researched has generated lively epistemological debates. The process of valid and ethical knowledge production needs to reflect on this relationship, particularly in the context of the 'asymmetrical and potentially exploitative' power relations between the researcher and his/her research

participants (England, 1994, p.81). A more flexible or reflexive approach is considered to be essential in that context.

Reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher. Certainly, a more reflexive geography must require careful consideration of the consequences of the interactions with those being investigated. And the reflexive 'I' of the researcher dismisses the observational distance of neo-positivism and subverts the idea of the observer as an impersonal machine (England, 1994, p.82).

Similarly, Rose argues that the production of knowledge is highly subjective and often influenced by its makers.

All knowledge is produced in specific circumstances and that those circumstances shape it in some way... Reflexivity in general is... a strategy for situating knowledges: that is, as a means of avoiding the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge (Rose, 1997, pp.305–306).

Reflexivity, however, is not merely a 'confessional writing' (Feighery, 2006) or analysis of empirical evidence. It is about carefully balancing or being aware of when and where does the researcher's own subjective interpretation prevail over the subjective understanding of the participants themselves. This can be achieved by awarding greater voice to the others without forgetting about our own. A reflexive approach 'provide[s] qualitative researchers [with] the ability to produce more transparent and trustworthy knowledge... [and] richer texts' (Cohen, 2013, p.336).

I adopt a reflexive view of my positionality. Different forms of stratification exist within the British-Bangladeshi diaspora, whose members differ in terms of their political orientation, religious beliefs, class, gender and generation. There are ontological differences not only with me, but also among different groups of Bangladeshi migrant and non-migrant males and females themselves. Hence, determining my positionality as a researcher, whether I am an insider or an outsider, or a combination of the two, is inherently complex. I can never fit myself in a single category. Nevertheless, it is important to understand my position in relation to my participants, since this potentially can influence data collection as well as interpretation of the findings.

There is now a considerable amount of literature on the positionality of the researcher in the field. One of the key debates concerns the insider/outsider role and how this methodological binary affects access to and interaction with informants (Ganga and Scott, 2006; Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2013; Nowicka and Cieslik, 2013). None of the debates actually leads to a definitive solution. As Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2013, p.36) noted, 'In migration research, the insider–outsider divide typically assumes a specific form: an insider researcher is a member of the migrant group under study, whereas an outsider researcher is a member of the majority population in the country of settlement. This divide is a discursive reality that we, as migration researchers, must relate to, regardless of its analytical merits'. This, it has to be said, is a rather simplistic scoping of the issue, for two reasons: first, it assumes a binary divide, whereas reality is more complex; and secondly, by providing a 'country of settlement' perspective, it overlooks the shifts in positionality which are inherent in transnational mobility, both of the research subjects and the researcher him/herself. To be fair, the authors do answer these critiques in their paper.

In my case, the first impression would probably be that I am self-evidently an insider. I am a Bangladeshi, and I grew up in Bangladesh in a region not far from Sylhet. Moreover, I have been a long-term migrant in the UK. My physical presence through my residence has mostly been limited to addresses within the East London boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham for many years. I also have British-Bangladeshi relatives, friends and acquaintances. To add more, my 'Bengali appearance' as well as my history of spatial co-location, have provided me with the privilege of making rather easy contacts with many of the very people who are the participants of this study. When all these facts are considered, it can give the impression of an insider. However, is it that simple to qualify or to be considered as an insider? Boccagni and Schrooten (2018) suggest otherwise. They argue that

There is nothing obvious in the conditions under which an ethnographer acts and is perceived like an insider or an outsider to field members. Most notably, the increasing number of ethnographers with an immigrant background, or with the same ethnic background as their counterparts, is a desirable development in itself. However, it need not result in automatically better or deeper ethnographic engagement. The very

divide between insiders and outsiders is more blurred and context-specific (Boccagni and Schrooten, 2018, p.217).

While it may seem that an insider status provides easy access to knowledge about the researched group, whilst outsiders face potentially an extra risk and cost to acquire that knowledge for themselves, in reality it is far more complex than this binary understanding. In the context of my research, an overwhelming majority of British Bangladeshis have their ancestry in Sylhet, the north-eastern region of Bangladesh, and speaks in the Sylheti dialect. I am, on the other hand, from a neighbouring south-eastern region of the same country, where a different dialect of the Bengali language is spoken. Although I understand Sylheti and can converse in the dialect to some extent, a Sylheti individual would easily recognise the difference, which actually is not so subtle. To clarify further, when a Sylheti speaks or tries to speak in a different dialect, a non-Sylheti is highly likely to recognise them, as the Sylheti accent and dialect differ greatly from other regional styles in Bangladesh. Essentially, a conversation in Sylheti is always appreciated, or even expected, when you are in Sylhet. While I was in Sylhet, one of my key informants, a non-Sylheti professional, repeatedly stressed the significance and the necessity of speaking in Sylheti. During my field work in Sylhet, therefore, I spoke in Sylheti to everyone including shopkeepers, taxi drivers, rickshawalas etc. Many of them could easily realise that I am not a Sylheti. Indeed, some conversed with me in standard Bengali instead, as they too were from other parts of the country. I was often told by local people in Sylhet, ‘brother, you are still not fully there, you speak wrong Sylheti sometime, you need more practice’. However, I have understood that speaking in Sylheti, even with some errors, is nevertheless appreciated when you are in Sylhet. Paraphrasing my informants’ words, ‘if you want to socialise with them, want to get their interviews or want to be their guest, you better speak in Sylheti.’ Most of the non-Sylheti workers, business-owners and professionals in Sylhet also do the same.

In London, it becomes more complicated than that. The ‘*Londoni*’, as they are called by the non-migrants, speak an archaic version of Sylheti. Their vocabulary and the inflexions and connotations are much rougher than the modern-day Sylheti dialect that is spoken in Bangladesh. This is because of the absence from as well as distance to their

homeland. They left Bangladesh decades ago. During their long absence, for those Bangladeshis who have got more educated, they have adopted a more modernised and hybrid version. While in London, Sylheti has long been practised only in its spoken form and this is transferred from one generation to another. Speaking of generation, English is the first language for the second and third generations; while some can speak Sylheti, many struggle or feel uncomfortable to speak it outside their family. One of my participants regretted that their children do not want to speak in Sylheti/Bengali in front of a guest because they lack confidence and do not want to get embarrassed. While the first generation can understand non-Sylheti dialects too, the second generation hardly can. Besides, the second generation consider all first-generation Bangladeshis as '*freshee*' (meaning freshly arrived from Bangladesh), whom they assume do not speak or understand English or the way of life here in London. By that criterion, I might also be a *freshee*. Although I speak English as my second language, I do not have a British accent; and when speaking English, I still carry a Bengali accent.

Besides that, I have a very different background and upbringing, and a different context of migration, compared to most other British Bangladeshis. Most British Bangladeshis came to Britain either to work or to join their family in a different period of time, often many years, even decades, before my own arrival. Even though I was born in a small town in the Bengali countryside, I have spent most of my youth time in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital city. Moreover, I graduated from the University of Dhaka before coming to Britain to pursue further higher education and research. It is important, when considering my personal experiences or my positionality as a researcher, to take note of my age, education and 'habitus' as well.

Having said all that, I cannot deny that there have been many moments during my fieldwork when I have felt like an insider or the advantage of being so. On many occasions, I realised that I am being welcomed by the participants most probably because of my Bangladeshi identity. While in Sylhet, some participants offered very generous hospitality by inviting me to their family lunch or dinner, often with never-ending selections of home-cooked foods. They have not only attended interviews, but also connected me to others. In one case, I was given the service of their personal car

with a driver for a week for free so that I could travel to different areas of Sylhet. More or less similar things can be said in regards to my field work experience in London. During the interviews, in many cases, I would have a common answer from the participants, for example, when I have asked, 'do you take gifts for your relatives or what sort of gifts?' The common reaction was usually: 'well, you know this, we all do'. These were the moments when they would give me the feeling that I am also just like one of them and should have already known the answer. To overcome that, I often had to change the nature of the question and the context to get the appropriate information.

On the other hand, there have been moments of unease too. As soon as people know that I am a Bangladeshi, they would instantly try to 'check me out' in detail by asking which part of Bangladesh I am from, what is my family's status and connections, what have I done in Bangladesh in the past, and what is my belief about politics and other things. Bangladeshis are highly political. They support one or the other of the two dominant political parties. So, they would also ask me or try to figure out where my political allegiance lies. Me and/or my status within Bangladesh as well as in the diaspora would thus be juxtaposed or judged against their own. Similar issues have been identified by Ganga and Scott (2006), who have argued that an insider may derive privilege from a certain level of social proximity while speaking or interviewing his/her fellow community member, but paradoxically, it also increases awareness amongst both researcher and participant of the social divisions that underpin their interactions. Thus, on the other hand, an outsider might bring in a more 'objective' understanding and fresh insight into certain phenomena. For me, these were the moments when I felt that it might have been better being an outsider instead. That sense of awareness, particularly when you belong to the opposite side of the political or class line, can put you in an uneasy situation and interviewees can become extra-careful in answering your questions. Sometimes, there is also a general sense of cognisance or a sort of hidden agenda or understanding of what is being asked and how it is answered, which can carry both advantages and disadvantages.

As a field researcher and interviewer, one's positionality is also unavoidably gendered. My gendered positionality as a young(ish) male generally afforded me easier access to

male participants of all ages, in both field-work locations. This was the case both with getting agreement of men to be interviewed, and in terms of joining male groups and friendship circles. There are sharp gendered divisions of labour, household roles and authority within the generally patriarchal and patrilineal Bangladeshi society, both in the homeland and preserved in the diaspora. Nevertheless, it was not too difficult to interview and interact with Bangladeshi women, and easiest amongst second-generation British Bangladeshis in London. So, the 'female voice' is reasonably well represented in the narratives that I present extracts from in the following three empirical chapters, even if such voices are not as frequent or 'loud' as the male ones.

So, determining one's positionality can become problematic. There is, however, a growing consensus that a researcher's positionality is relational, situational and processual. On the one hand it varies from one socio-spatial context to another; on the other hand, a researcher can also develop further self-understanding in the research process that can transform their positioning (Nowicka and Cieslik, 2013). Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2013) suggested many 'third' categories of positionality including explicit third party, honorary insider, insider by proxy, hybrid insider/outsider, apparent insider etc., that do not fit the traditional binary division. Whilst these hybrid forms are theoretically and methodologically interesting, they do not really correspond to my particular situation.

Moreover, my view is that identifying oneself as an insider or outsider implies an essentialist reading of race, ethnicity and culture. Considering the existing stratifications within the British-Bangladeshi social field, together with my field work experiences, I feel that my own positionality is a relational and situational one which is also going through a process of further self-realisation and development. There have been moments when it has given me a sense of being an insider, as well as other moments that have kept that feeling away. This reflexivity about my own positionality and 'performance' in the field, with my various participants and in different situations, will echo through the remainder of this thesis.

3.4 Locating my Field-Work Sites

I conducted my fieldwork in London and Sylhet. As noted earlier, according to the 2011 census, London (222,127) is host to around half of the British Bangladeshis in Britain (451,529). My initial aim was to conduct semi-structured interviews and participant observation in two boroughs – Tower Hamlets and Newham – as the highest number of Bangladeshis live in those areas. Besides, I know these boroughs well through my own residence in this part of London.

However, as I soon found out, it is challenging to set a rigid boundary of field-sites, and this is indeed one of the principles of flexible and multi-sited field research. The practicality of fixed boundaries can raise questions. Tower Hamlets is considered as the heart of the Bangladeshi presence in London, and indeed for the whole UK. However, many Bangladeshi residents there have also a background of living in other parts of London and of the country. At the same time, many residents are moving out of the borough. Nevertheless, the majority of the Bengali community events still take place in Tower Hamlets and British Bangladeshis from across the country come to attend them. Some of my participants whom I met at events in Tower Hamlets are actually resident in other London boroughs. Bengali social, cultural, and (Bangladesh-oriented) political events, celebrations, commemorations, contestations and protests mostly take place in different areas of Tower Hamlets. The places and spaces within Tower Hamlets thus have a symbolic significance. One of the most important examples is the Altab Ali (a victim of a racist killing) Park and the Shaheed Minar memorial (for the martyrs of the 1952 Language movement in Bangladesh). Both of them are the points of gathering on the key dates and events that coincide with these important events in Bangladesh or for any other important happening in either country. To give another example, during the early days of my field work, I attended a Bengali music festival. The main organisers came from Leeds; performers travelled from various parts of the UK as well as from Bangladesh; the event was inaugurated in the House of Commons and performances took place in various parts of Tower Hamlets. Similar patterns of events, though less frequently, happen in Newham.

My point here is: setting a physical boundary of the field-sites, particularly in London, for the Bangladeshi participants is challenging. Therefore, it was necessary to negotiate my initial aim and adjust it in a reasonable way. Although I met most of my British Bangladeshi participants in Tower Hamlets and Newham, some of them were/are resident in different areas of London, including Ilford, Redbridge, Dagenham, Hackney and Westminster. In my research, the boundaries of the field-sites are thus rather more emblematic than physical.

In Sylhet my field work took place in Sylhet city and some areas of Sunamganj and Moulvibazar. And again, the participants were not physically bounded within those areas. However, as this research is about the mobility and immobility of people across space and time, inevitably it involves multiple sites. The multi-sited nature and the reciprocity of VFR mobilities also means that the participants are not always bounded by physical borders or landscapes. Therefore, the participants and/or interviewees are not all local residents of the field-work sites. Nonetheless, they all are connected to those places. In Sylhet, my participants include the non-migrant relatives of diasporic citizens who have visited London, managers of travel agencies and visiting British Bangladeshis. It is also worth clarifying, like in the case of my London field-work sites, that neither are all visitors Londoners, nor do all locals have relatives only in London. In Sylhet however, all British Bangladeshis are called *Londoni* or Londoners regardless of where they actually live in the UK. This is not to say that I have deployed the same meaning of the term. I have rather tried here to demonstrate briefly some of the complexities and practicalities of defining the field-sites of my research.

3.4.1 Recruitment and sampling strategies

My field-work spanned twelve months. I started my field-work in Autumn 2016 in London, initially contacting people within my personal network. Most of these primary contacts were not from Sylhet. However, together with them, we co-attended many community events in the East End, as an initial exercise in participant observation. Some of the events that I went to, including the month-long Bengali Music Festival and another extended event, A Season of Bangla Drama, which takes place every year in

Tower Hamlets, were attended by both groups, i.e. Sylhetis and non-Sylhetis. By attending many events in Tower Hamlets as well as in Newham, I managed to get to know more people originating from Sylhet.

My first formally interviewed participant, Masud, who is in his 40s, was not known to me before. Our coincidental meeting took place due to our geographical proximity. We live in the same neighbourhood in Newham. Our meeting happened in my local leisure centre in the early days of my field-work. On that day, he was speaking to someone on the phone in the Sylheti dialect about his recent visit to Bangladesh in a break from the running machine. Soon after he finished his mobile conversation, I approached him with a big smile on my face. We could not remember meeting each other before but he was very friendly. Masud is a first-generation British Bangladeshi who has been living in Manor Park, Newham for many years, not far from where I lived. Following our brief introductory conversation, we exchanged our mobile numbers. I got in contact with him a few days later. I invited him to have a cup of coffee at my house and we discussed my study and the field-work. I found out that he admires academics and he himself was doing some evening courses for a professional qualification to further his career. He shared his experience of this and sought some advice from me. Later, he agreed to be interviewed for my study. He also helped me to connect to a few other people.

I met other key informants and participants through my personal network of relatives, friends and acquaintances. The depth of my relationship with some of these individuals and their families has developed further during and after my field-work. Rather than describing the context of meeting every participant, I introduce a few of my main key informants in London. Some initial and key informants have gone a long way to help me in making further connections, collecting more information and arranging further interviews.

Another first-generation British Bangladeshi, Ranak, is also one of my key informants. I initially only knew him distantly via other friends. He is one of the examples of developing my relationship more in-depth during the course of my field-work. The event that persuaded me to make a personal call to his mobile is also interesting. Apparently,

it followed a post by Ranak on Facebook. In that post, he has a picture of receiving his parents at Heathrow airport and he asked for good wishes for the newly-arrived visitors. I wished them well in the comment section, like many others. A few days later, I obtained his mobile phone number from a mutual friend and made the call. I was then invited to one of his house events along with others, where I got the opportunity to improvise my personal relationship with him, his wife and his visiting parents while enjoying food, drink and music. Although I have interviewed Ranak and his family members formally, a closer informal personal relationship has been developed and maintained by us ever since. Pleasingly, it has been valuable for my continued field-work.

Jahura is a second-generation female of Bangladeshi heritage. I came to know her through another participant. She is what I might call a community 'personality'. We attended many community events together and we have been in frequent contact on numerous other occasions. Surprisingly for me, Jahura had to visit Sylhet while I was there for my field-work, which created an opportunity to socialise as well as observe her VFR experience directly. The nature of our meetings has been truly transnational. Though informal meetings and conversations have taken place on various occasions, I formally interviewed her at her London residence once we had both returned from Bangladesh. She created opportunities for me to meet other people of her generation and beyond.

The most important of all my key informants is Kabir. He is a first-generation British Bangladeshi in his late 50s, who has been living in London for more than twenty years. His family is well-established with four grown-up children. Unlike numerous other British Bangladeshis of his age and generation, Kabir is well-educated with a passion for modern technologies. His desire to be a more competent user of the internet, social media sites, smartphones, tablets, laptops and digital cameras is endless. I took the opportunity to help him understand better some of those things. Though he lives in an area in Newham, we met each other initially in Tower Hamlets. He visits Bangladesh regularly by himself, and occasionally with his wife and children. Kabir connected me with many other participants of this study, has arranged interviews with some of them and has even driven me in his car to other peoples' houses including his close relatives and friends.

His helpfulness at times has given me the feeling of being an additional member or a close relative of his family. Meeting him opened up a lot more opportunities to observe and understand the dynamics of familial relationships within British-Bangladeshi households, including generational and gendered differences. In short, the nature, experience and implications of British-Bangladeshi VFR mobilities that I unfold later in my empirical analysis, would have not been complete without Kabir and the people I have met through him.

3.4.2 Field visit to Bangladesh

Even though my field work sites are located in two distant, and very different, continents, it has never felt that way. Both field sites complement each other: they are part of the British-Bangladeshi, or more precisely London-Sylhet, transnational family and social space. My journey to Sylhet began only after I had gained significant in-depth information and insight from the London end. My timing was also carefully planned to maximise the outcome of my field stay in Bangladesh. The planning of the Bangladesh part of the field-work took shape during my field-work in London. Most importantly, it is closely associated with and has been helped greatly by my key participants in London.

Just now, I mentioned the role of the key informant, Kabir. He not only connected me with others in London, but also helped materially with my fieldwork in Sylhet. As he lives a transnational way of life, he owns properties in Sylhet city alongside his inherited properties in the village. Kabir was extremely generous in offering me his house in the city to stay in during my fieldwork. Besides providing accommodation, he also contacted key people in Sylhet to help make my living arrangements as well as the field-work as smooth as possible. Kabir's help has been complemented further by the assistance of other key participants; to name a few, Alim, Subol and Imrul (to remind the reader, all are pseudonyms). Their help during my fieldwork in London meant that I had already gathered enough contact details, and a list of prospective participants, as well as other key informants, in advance of my actual visit to field-sites in Sylhet.

The field trip to Sylhet was deliberately coincided with the spring school holidays of 2017 in England, which gave me the opportunity to meet as many visiting *Londoni* as possible. It has already been established by the transnational studies on British Bangladeshis (notably Zeitlyn, 2015) as well as in other cases that migrants' family visits to their ancestral country often take place during the school holidays. And in my case, there were several examples of that. I met and interviewed many visiting British Bangladeshis in Sylhet, some of whom were there with families. Another surprising addition to my field-work in Sylhet was the sudden visit by Kabir himself. Due to a family emergency, which I explain in detail later, he had to visit Bangladesh at very short notice. It was a pleasant surprise for me as I got the opportunity to get more in-depth insight of a typical *Londoni* village.

As a part of my fieldwork in Sylhet, I stayed at the village home of Kabir for four weeks. It reminded me of the connection between the local and the global that Gardner (1995) demonstrated in her pioneering work on British-Bangladeshi migration to the UK. Through Kabir's amazing generosity, I got a further understanding of the transnational way of life and the significance of VFR mobilities through the closer observation of the households in that village, including of course Kabir's own family. I spent a lot of time, often accompanied by Kabir, in different parts of the village, meeting *Londoni* visitors as well as the non-migrant relatives, some of whom have also visited London. This experience was also, to some extent, a personal break for me from the city life of both countries. Unlike many villages in other parts of Bangladesh, Sylheti villages have a close link with the global city of London, which results in, or even requires, transnational visits and counter-visits.

3.5 Methods

Within this multi-sited study, I have conducted semi-structured interviews and engaged in participant observation. The latter is perhaps the definitive technique of the broader ethnographic method, so I deal with that first.

3.5.1 Participant observation

It is argued that participant observation is ‘the most effective way of understanding in depth the ways in which other people see the world and interact with it, and often provides a check on our own preconceptions and beliefs’ (Monaghan and Just, 2000, p.14). In this research, participant observation was conducted in multiple locations during informal meetings and conversations, as well as my participation in, and observation of, several community events. It has enriched the formal interviews by informing the context, background and individual circumstances.

I begin here with the London part of my field-work. In London, Bangladeshi life revolves around a strict timetable. Personal, familial and social life is finely balanced with the busy work schedule. Therefore, the way in which participant observation was accomplished in London was slightly different from how it happened in Sylhet. Spending a lot of time with the participants in London was not easy. Though I had the opportunity or access to some family events at their houses, my meetings with participants generally commenced at various events or gatherings during the evenings and weekends. Almost all events within the Bangladeshi community are carefully timed in that way to maximise their participation. Besides that, I also occasionally met participants individually, depending on their availability. However, those public events as well as the personal and familial meetings provided me with sufficient chances to have a lot of informal conversations with them, some of which also led to further meetings and formal interview arrangements. Hence, the formal, recorded interview almost never resulted from an initial contact but was rather the culmination of a series of planned or chance meetings and prior negotiations.

On the other hand, my participation during the Sylhet part of my field work had a different space-time dimension. Generally, people are more relaxed in Bangladesh. For *Londoni* visitors, it comes in the form of a break away from their routine life and so they have an abundance of extra time to talk and/or reflect on other things. Of course, during their visits, they have to attend their household duties as well as meeting and greeting all relatives and friends; nevertheless, the scheduling is much more flexible. This allowed

me to meet them with short notice and more frequently. The peaceful and quiet environment, particularly in the village, provides a better space for both formal and informal conversations. In Sylhet, British Bangladeshis, as well as their relatives and friends, both in the city and in the village, were a lot more welcoming and moreover were highly generous in offering hospitality. To give an example, during my village stay, Kabir and his relatives took me on a boat tour in an afternoon over the wetlands. It was the monsoon season, when the weather in Bangladesh is generally very unpredictable with sudden heavy rainfall, strong wind and thunder claps. We were hit by one of those uncalled-for storms. The sky became very dark within a moment, at a time when our location was far away from his end of the village. Our boat had to be pulled over in a part of the village where Kabir had no relatives or friends. Nevertheless, we had to run to one house to take shelter. We were surprised by the warmth and hospitality of that household. Despite being an unexpected and unfamiliar group of guests, we were served with tea, snacks and food. They even insisted that we stay the night and leave in the morning. Invitations to visit participants' houses were more frequent, indeed the norm, in Sylhet compared to London.

Besides that, I socialised often with some of the male participants in outdoor places and spaces. As a male-dominant society, it is a common practice that a group of male friends gather every afternoon in a local café or a snack shop where they spend hours in doing *adda* (an informal exchange/debate). I often attended those joyful and chatty sessions, where the scope for informal conversation on literally anything and everything is endless. Those *addas* were often supplemented by a tour around local places of interest, such as hillocks, tea gardens, riversides, borderlands, gas fields etc. One of my key informants in Sylhet, Bijoy, was extremely helpful in connecting me to some of the would-be participants through his network of *adda* friends in Sylhet city. I got to know him through another British Bangladeshi in London. Bijoy often accompanied or guided me to many places and to link up with people familiar to me.

During my stay in Sylhet, both in the city and in the village, I spent time with my participants in many places, including Sylhet Airport, local bazars, shopping malls etc. I have learned from some of my participants about how to get to the airport area by

overcoming the strict armed security checks. Apparently, I was told, if they stop me on the access road to the airport, I can get through by just telling them that I am here for the lost baggage. I never tried that in reality and in fact never intended to do so. However, I did visit the airport to receive Kabir on his unexpected home visit, which was an opportunity to talk to the relatives awaiting to receive their *Londoni* counterparts. I have also had conversations with private hire car and taxi drivers in order to have a better understanding of the experiences and arrangements that are in place for the visitors as well as the visited.

I kept a personal diary to record all events that I participated in and took detailed observations and notes following the events and meetings, reflecting on the experiences and interactions among the participants, their friends and relatives and myself. These observations and notes from my personal diary have informed my understanding and interpretation of the narratives of my participants collected through formal consented and recorded accounts. I have deployed some of my observations and notes throughout the thesis. For example, the boat trip in the village, or participating in the *adda* during my fieldtrip that I have discussed above, are examples of utilising observation and notes from my personal diary. In the empirical chapters, I have also occasionally quoted directly from my diary or referred back to diary notes.

3.5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative interviews persist as one of the dominant forms of social research methods. Interviews – structured, un-structured or semi-structured – are used in understanding interpretations, experiences and spatialities of social life. However, the interview is often used with other types of research instrument and technique (Dowling, Lloyd and Suchet-Pearson, 2016). In my research, I have conducted semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews precondition a more open interview outline, which is often guided by the research interest or a particular topic of enquiry. Here, the interviewer ensures that respondents remain close to the topic, but often leaves enough space for the interviewee to open up the discussion and introduce connected topics, thus making it more exploratory in nature and cooperative in terms of knowledge production (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018, p.173).

An interview involves a conversation, often personal, where the interviewee shares their experiences, opinions, memories, and knowledge with the researcher. Although the researcher mainly listens to what their participants say, there is nearly always an underlying power dynamic that raises ethical implications. The multiple relations between the researcher and research participants, reflexivity and positionality are of great importance. It can influence the quality and process of data collection and how the findings are being interpreted and presented. Migration researchers, as Iosifides (2018, p.101) argues, are intensely involved with the lives of people who, in most cases, find themselves in more disadvantaged positions in social hierarchies. A reflexive positionality is essential to overcome these complexities.

Amelina and Faist (2012) have also argued for a multilocality approach that encourages researching in multiple locations with a multiplicity of perspectives and belongings (religious, political, and/or social), which can guide situational activities and representations when interviewing both migrants and non-migrants. I have already reflected on my positionality as a researcher in this multi-sited research, in the earlier sections of this chapter.

As indicated earlier, interviews generally followed a series of informal meetings and conversations. I carefully assessed the individual circumstances of all interviewees before conducting the formal interviews. In many cases, I interviewed the participant several weeks after our first meeting. That gave me more time and scope to build the necessary trust with my participants. I always stressed that their conversation is very important for me, but that I would like a 'natural' friendly chat, nothing extraordinary. Nevertheless, I usually moved towards the situation whereby I carefully guided the conversation in order to keep the participants on the topics of my interest. Each interviewee was provided with a participant information sheet and had its brief contents explained verbally. Having secured the participant's permission, all interviews were recorded by a digital voice recorder, which has only been used for recording interviews for this research and has been kept strictly confidential. Written consent (see Appendix-1) in the form of a signed consent paper has been obtained for every interview and recording. It was repeatedly explained to the participants that their participation is

voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time. In my case, there has not been any withdrawal request and every participant happily consented for it. A few even asked me to supply them with my questionnaire schedule in advance so that they could prepare themselves!

My research concerns British Bangladeshis as well as their non-migrant relatives and friends. Therefore, the criteria for choosing participants are very simple and straight forward: a) they have to be a British Bangladeshi, or b) they are non-migrant Bangladeshis who have relatives and/or friends in the UK. All British-Bangladeshi participants of this research have visited Bangladesh to a varying degree and most of the non-migrant participants have visited London. The term 'British Bangladeshi' is used widely, for example in 2011 census, to refer to the people of Bangladeshi heritage residing in the UK regardless of their immigration status or time and place of birth. Nevertheless, all British-Bangladeshi participants in my research have settled status and/or a British passport. Except two individuals, all participants are of Sylheti origin. I sought carefully to include participants of different ages, generations and gender. My participants include all generations of male and female British Bangladeshis, first-, second-, and in-between generations. Both male and female non-migrant visitors to London have also been included. Though I interviewed both migrant and non-migrant members of the same family in both countries in some cases, it is worth clarifying that this has not been the case for all participants. It is almost impossible in practice to do that. One of the most important reasons would be that the proportion of visits by both parties are extremely unequal. Therefore, finding enough people of the same family in both countries who visited each other is not achievable. This is also why my thesis additionally aims to establish further understanding of VFR mobilities in the context of unequal power relationships and differentiated access to network capitals. Besides, not all families are willing to allow interviewing its members on both sides of the transnational divide. Nevertheless, the bilateral visits by both parties are the main dual focus of this research, and not being members of the same family does not limit the scope for a better understanding of the linked phenomena. Indeed, my preference for the 'non-matched' strategy allows the participants to speak their mind freely without the concern of what their family members in the other country might think.

All interviews were conducted with a semi-structured questions format. These are not necessarily all the questions that were the focus of discussion. I had some pre-determined topics and questions as a guidance in order to keep the discussions relevant for my research. I did not intend to impede the free flowing of the speech by the interviewees. As my participants vary in terms above all of migrant/non-migrant status, location of interview, and also in terms of generation, gender and age, I partly customised my topics and questions in each case based on the information I gathered during our informal conversations prior to the formal interview. The main focus has always been the VFR mobilities, which was often followed by other open-ended questions that are relevant in each circumstance. The questions that were most commonly asked include the following. Who do you have in Bangladesh/London in terms of family/relative/friends? How is your current relationship with them? How do you maintain your relationship or communicate with them? How often do you visit Bangladesh/London? When was the last time you visited? What was the reason or occasion of your visit/s? Why was the visit planned / how important was it for you? Did you go with family/friends/alone? How was the visit planned, how far ahead, how much time did you get to prepare for the journey? Did you buy any gifts for your relatives/friend? What sort of gifts and for whom? How was the reaction of the recipients of the gifts? How long did you/do you stay during your visit? Can you please tell me about your experiences during your visits/stays in Bangladesh/London? Do you also host the visitors? Why is it necessary or important to also host them? Other questions were more specific to individuals depending on their circumstances, whether they are migrants or non-migrants, currently visiting or have visited; or for example, to capture the experiences of the second generation, or of the female participants, in which cases the questions have to be asked differently.

Altogether, I interviewed 57 participants, some of them twice. The average length of the interviews was forty-five minutes. In one case, they were interviewed jointly as a family. Most of the interviews were conducted at the participant's residence, whilst others were taken at other venues that had been agreed mutually by prior arrangement. I started interviewing in London, then visited Bangladesh before returning back to London

to continue. Of all participants, 26 interviews (29 participants) were conducted in London, and 29 (one follow-up interview) in Bangladesh. All interviews were fully transcribed. The interviews that were conducted in Bengali were transcribed In English. Both transcription and translation were done by me; likewise, all the interviews and informal conversations reported on. In order to give a clear sense of the research sample covered by my research, in Figure 3.1 below, I provide a very brief demographic depiction of my participants with careful consideration given to the privacy, safety and anonymity of the participants.

| Research Participants | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------------|--------------|
| | Number | Gender | | Generations | |
| | | Male | Female | First | Second/Third |
| Migrant | 30 | 23 | 7 | 25 | 5 |
| Non-Migrant | 27 | 23 | 4 | N/A | N/A |
| Total | 57 | 46 | 11 | 25 | 5 |

3. 1 Basic demographics of the participants

3.5.3 Language

Interviews were conducted either in English or Bengali/Sylheti. All second-generation participants conversed in English with a few occasional Bengali words or terms. In the cases of the first generation as well as non-migrant visitors, except one participant, all interviews were conducted in Bengali, mostly in the Sylheti dialect. I soon realised that first-generation British Bangladeshis felt much more comfortable speaking Sylheti/Bengali with me. This also reduced the distance between us and curtailed any sense of concealed unease. For example, when a first-generation participant asked me, 'shall I do it in Bengali or in English?', I always replied, 'just do as you feel'. He or she then started in Bengali. However, every interview has been transcribed and quoted in English throughout this thesis.

3.6 Thematic Analysis

I have analysed the findings of this research thematically. In the thematic analysis technique, emphasis is placed on the identifiable themes and patterns that emerge and recur in the accounts of the research participants (Aronson, 1994). Common ideas from the transcribed conversations are listed and the specific pattern is identified and clustered together with the corresponding pattern. Emergent themes from the accounts of the participants are then pieced together to depict a comprehensive picture. Theoretical emphasis, research objectives and interview questions can also guide the researcher to identify themes. Although thematic analysis provide a flexible approach in analysing rich and detailed information, complexity can arise as analysis often involves a constant moving back and forward between the data set and comparing original information that is collected with the analysis that is being produced. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82) argue that *'there needs to be an ongoing reflexive dialogue on the part of the researcher... throughout the analytic process'*, which can also mitigate the key critiques around thematic analysis – credibility and transferability. These issues can also be avoided by disclosing the precise detail of the research methods and techniques of sampling, collecting and analysing data and by being consistent throughout the research (Nowell et al., 2017).

The methods of this research – semi-structured interviews and participant observation – have already been addressed earlier in this chapter along with their applications, implications and limitations during my fieldwork in multiple research sites. As the interviews were semi-structured and questions were related to the principal subject of this research, namely VFR, themes and patterns of response were identified relatively easily in my case and I did not employ any data analysis software. Subsequent follow-up, open-ended, and context-specific questions led to complex, comprehensive and hidden stories or new stories, such as the disputes around land and properties that I present and analyse in chapter six. The empirical analyses that I present in the following three chapters are constructed through thematic analysis that are manually accomplished by myself. All sections and subsections of these chapters are organised in a thematic order and presented with evidence gathered from transcribed data, field notes, and subsequent analysis.

3.7 Ethics and Other Issues

At the beginning of my field-work, it was tough to get people to agree to take part. When they found out that they had to agree on paper and sign the consent form, some became sceptical and a few of them then avoided me. The participant information sheet and consent form appeared to them as a very official thing. Even when these hurdles were overcome, some people were not comfortable speaking in the presence of a digital recorder; albeit less so than signing a paper. However, as time passed, my relations with my participants improved, and with additional explanation, further efforts as well as support from other key informants, I managed to convince most of them. All participants have been strongly reassured that the information will not be used as 'evidence against them' in any way. I also explained in detail the academic nature of this research, the anonymity of the information collected, the uses of a pseudonym instead of actual names, the strict privacy policy and the significance of their participation. In the end, most of my initial contacts were persuaded to participate and hence gave their written consent. All participants of this research are adults and have been well informed about my research prior to their participation. Every interviewee has been given an information sheet which I have also explained to them before collecting their signature on the consent papers.

Another ethical challenge that I have faced was the process of anonymising participants' identities. Though I have not sought extremely personal information, many of my participants described their physical location, including naming places, streets, the schools that they have attended, places of work or names of the organisations that they have been involved in. I have taken extra care wherever it is applicable to disguise any such information that can identify the individual whom it relates to.

Along with the issues of privacy and wellbeing of the participants, it was also important to consider my own safety. My university enquired about my safety issues in the case of my field-visits to Bangladesh. Understandably, they had a valid reason to be concerned as my field-work period in Sylhet was scheduled to take place at a time when there was

a recent terrorist attack in Dhaka. Following that attack, anti-terror drives by specialised security forces were launched, some of which reached parts of the greater Sylhet area. Those events were covered in detail by the BBC and other mainstream media. However, my specific field-sites were not affected. Besides that, I checked the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) advice on their website. They have been cautious but have not been advising against travel to Bangladesh or the areas of Bangladesh where I was working and travelling. In addition, I obtained positive advice and reassurance from my relatives and friends in Bangladesh and I already knew where to stay, who to contact and so on. So, I went ahead with my plan and returned back safe!

Apart from these considerations sketched out above, I had one awkward issue with one of my participants. While I was interviewing this individual, he suddenly became very angry. This happened when I asked him a general question in relation to the property inheritance issues that the *Londonis* are facing in Bangladesh. I did not realise that he could have something personal to do with this issue – which I did come to know later from a key informant. However, the situation did not go beyond control, as it was further explained to him both by me and the key informant that I did not mean anything personal or anything that could cause offence. He then understood that and apologised to us. I asked whether he would like to withdraw his consent. He said no. Except these issues that are described above, there were no other points of concern. It is also worth emphasising that I have obtained formal ethical approval from the University of Sussex, via a highly regulated administrative review process, and have followed the official code of practice for research throughout this empirical study (University of Sussex, 2019a and 2019b).

To conclude: I have provided in this chapter a personalised account of the methodology and methods that underpin this research. I have described my own strategy of sampling, recruiting and data-collection during my fieldwork in multiple transnational sites through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. My fieldwork experiences, including my positionality as a researcher in the field and associated complexities, boundaries and limitations, was also addressed above. The application of the technique of thematic analysis that I have briefly addressed also in this chapter can

be evidenced further in the following three chapters, where I present the empirical findings and critical analysis thematically. In the next chapter, which is the first empirical chapter, I present my analysis of the first trajectories of the British Bangladeshi VFR mobilities, visits from London to Bangladesh. The succeeding chapter will then look into 'reverse VFR', from Bangladesh to London.

Chapter Four:
Of Memories and Visits – VFR Mobilities to Bangladesh

4.1 Introduction

In this first empirical chapter, I interpret and compare the context, experiences and trajectories of VFR mobilities from Britain to Bangladesh. In the process, I also evaluate the research participants' gendered experiences and generational contrasts. The notion of 'memoryscapes' (Phillips and Reyes, 2011; subsequently developed in a migratory context by Miah and King, 2018), as discussed in chapter two, is deployed here to trace the hidden connections that lead British Bangladeshis to undertake their journeys through 'memory lane' to the places and spaces of Bangladesh that are meaningful for them. As already pointed out, the British-Bangladeshi community, according to Gardner and Mand (2012, p.971), is a 'transnational community *par excellence*', notable for the vibrancy of the links which are maintained with Bangladesh, despite the long distance. Such links include continuous exchanges of goods, gifts, ideas and, above all, visits. The notion of 'memoryscapes' connotes the real and tangible, but often nostalgic and idealised, recollections of places, landscapes and people remembered from the distant past of childhood and early adulthood, or from more recent experiences of visits. Beyond the addition of memoryscape to Appadurai's (1990, 1996) exploration of the various 'scapes' which he posits to represent contemporary global cultural exchange, the emphasis here is on remembered experiences and landscapes, with particular focus on cross-generational and gendered comparisons, based on my multi-sited fieldwork in London and Bangladesh.

Baldassar (2001, p.323) characterises the visit home as a 'secular pilgrimage' of enormous importance to migrants, not only for the first generation, for whom the return travel is to their place or district of birth, but also for the second generation, for whom the journey has a different resonance – a connection to their family's geographical and cultural origins. In both cases, first and second generation, as well as mixtures of the two, the visit uncovers a memoryscape, adds to it, and retextures it. For the first-generation British Bangladeshis, visits are mainly about reinforcing their Bangladeshi, or more precisely Sylheti, identity, keeping in touch with kin and community, demonstrating their success abroad, checking up on land and property, and perhaps investing in new acquisitions. For the second generation, the homeland visit can be (but

is not always) a 'transformatory rite of passage' (Baldassar, 2001, p.323) which unveils the ethnoscape of their ancestral past, but also poses soul-searching questions about the exact nature of their hybrid British-Bangladeshi identity.

In the analysis that follows, I examine the VFR mobilities of British Bangladeshis towards Bangladesh as two 'memoryscapes'. The first, mostly for first generation, is about memories of their early lives in the homeland. For most, this entails nostalgic recollections of childhood in rural Sylhet, but also, for some, more harrowing memories of political struggle and economic hardship which led to the decision to leave. The second memoryscape refers to visits to Bangladesh, both of the first and the second generation. Based on my analysis of British-Bangladeshi VFR experiences and associated phenomena, I evaluate the social and cultural implications of these visits, and speculate on the future trajectories of British-Bangladeshi transnationalism. It is worth clarifying immediately that parts of this chapter are drawn from an already published book chapter (see Miah and King, 2018), in which, as lead author, I contributed the empirical material and some of the analysis.

4.2 Memoryscapes of Childhood

The most evocative remembrances of the physical and social landscape of the home country were narrated by older first-generation Bangladeshis thinking back to their childhood and early-adult lives in Sylhet. The strong significance of these memories, beyond their purely nostalgic role, is that they are instrumental in stimulating the desire to 'reconnect' via adult-age visits. The memories were undoubtedly sharpened by the contrast between what they recalled, often vividly, of their youthful rural milieu, and their subsequent working lives on British merchant ships or later in industries and low-status service jobs in England. These memoryscapes covered several interlinked themes: the love and care they received from their family and kin; the air and its smells; the fresh food and fruits that they savoured; the friends they played with in and out of school; the teachers they were taught by; the paddy fields, gardens and open yards around their modest houses; the ponds they bathed and swam in; playing in the rain and mud; and

many other things. Each of these themes and topics was contained in several nostalgic narrative accounts.

Take for example Alim who, like most first-generation older migrants, had been living in England for many decades. In the following extract from his long interview, conducted in London, he first gives a good description of the homestead that he remembers, and then moves on to highlight some more specific memories of his Sylheti childhood.

There used to be ponds, both in front and behind most of the houses in our village, but many have disappeared now. We used to bathe in those ponds, and sometimes we would start with one pond and then move to swim in another until we finished swimming in all the ponds. And when the ponds were running out of water in the dry season, we'd run to catch the fishes there... some of them we put in water tanks at home and fed them too. [...] I had a cycle, an Indian one, and my cousin had one too, a British-made one, so we used to do cycle racing with each other on our way to school. After school, we played in the late afternoon, chasing one another, playing hide and seek.

Maya, interviewed in London, a British-Bangladeshi woman who spent her childhood in Sylhet before migrating to London, portrayed a similarly detailed picture of her colourful childhood:

I had fabulous childhood. That's what I still hold on to, and when I have a hard day, I smile remembering those days. I grew up in a big family with lots of cousins. We were living nearby to each other. So, every gathering, every little thing, we were always going out together, having lots of fun... My grandparents had a tea garden. We used to go and picnic in the garden literally every week, if we did not have exams... Every morning, after the prayers, we used to go walking, there were big fields, gardens behind our house; there are tall buildings there now. We used to go walking, picking nuts from the trees and my mum used to collect *Sheuli ful* (Jasmine flowers). And I remember, we had Hindu families living next door to our house. And my mum used to have so many flowers in the garden, they would come in the morning and they would take flowers for Puja (Hindu religious prayer/ritual). Sometimes they used to break the branches. I remember those times... Me talking to you about this is making me emotional. Honestly, it's making me emotional. My uncle used to run the tea gardens. And they have big lakes there. So, our focus was to go to that tea garden. Because the garden was in the town, we did not have to go miles away... Sometime I went with my uncle, fishing with him in the lakes... life was so flexible then... and we used to play cricket in the field... My father had five brothers. My eldest uncle was a university graduate. He eventually got a job with the British Railway in the 1960s and came here via ship. He was working for the British government here. This is the first time our immediate family member step foot in Britain. This is how we all came in slowly, my uncle built everything here... In winter, we were like running through the fields, in the rainy season, we had boat trips... I used to write diaries, every single thing in my diary

like, how I woke up, stamp collection and every single thing. Yes, it was quite colourful up until the time when I had to come over here.

For Siddik, interviewed in Sylhet, a first-generation British-Bangladeshi man, below, the physical landscape of the village and its rural economy are palpable, as is his memory of the warmth and humour of the older villagers.

I remember hosting people at home, helping the labourers during the harvest in the Bengali new year, processing the paddies in our yard... watching people travel to and from the market. Touring the entire village is unforgettable, entering from one end and then walking past one house after another. People were more caring then, old people were very funny – there was this old grandmother, she used to joke with us all the time. We had mangos, berries and many other fruits, whatever was in season, from different households, and so many other things we did, and came back home before sunset.

According to Renu, a first-generation British-Bangladeshi woman, interviewed in London, the memories of the homeland, including specific micro-details of the local landscape, are felt if anything more strongly as time passes; and she spoke of these memories not so much in a tone of nostalgic regret, but almost as an expression of rejoicing:

I hear from other people that one's country is one's motherland, but I feel this in real terms... I miss my country and my mother... The air, the water, and even the trees are still dear to me... I miss my home country every single day. Whether we live here in England for ten years or fifty, we will always miss our country because that's where our roots are. Obviously, I have become used to living here and being a resident here – so this is now my country too. Nevertheless, my motherland will always remain as such.

Many interviewees drew an explicit contrast between daily life in Bangladesh and that in London, but of course this difference is not strictly comparable because of the different time-frames, generally several decades apart, and the fact that they were also comparing very different life-stages – childhood versus mature adulthood or older age. This should be borne in mind when reading the following extract from Ranak's reflections on his childhood in his home country, even if he, as a somewhat younger first-generation participant, had only been in London for 15 years.

I remember almost everything I did in my country, honestly, from my school life to playing with my childhood friends... we used to play in the fields in my village, sometimes in the rain, in the mud – that was a very distinctive feeling. Sometimes, when it was raining heavily, like cats and dogs raining, we were swimming in the pond, it was a very unique feeling, which I cannot express in words. I remember all the moments... wandering around various places, visiting relatives, spending time with them, eating out in the open... Actually, the lifestyle in the UK is very different from Bangladesh. For instance, a fundamental difference is that, over here, after work I mostly stay at home. If I wish to meet with a friend, I cannot, because perhaps he is busy or perhaps, he lives in a distant part of this mega-city, where I don't feel like going. But in Bangladesh, almost every afternoon, we used to get together, eat outside and gossip; it was good, great memories!

However, these sylvan, peaceful memories of what is constructed as an idyllic childhood are not the whole story. Memory is also tied to important historical, political and personal struggles (Agnew, 2005). Whilst the earlier-arrived post-war migrants were settling in the UK; their homeland was experiencing massive political changes. Independence from Britain first placed Bangladesh as East Pakistan, but then a bloody war of renewed independence followed in 1971 to create the state of Bangladesh. Many of the older British Bangladeshis had powerful memories of those troubled years of violence and further partition. This is a small part of Kabir's – interviewed in London and Sylhet – long recollection about his early life:

I went to my village school and spent all my school years in Bangladesh. During the liberation war of 1971, I was a year 10 student and was preparing for the matriculation exam, similar to your GCSE exam here. When the war started, we witnessed the barbaric atrocities, me and my classmates. Friends were being chased by the Pakistani army and their Bangladeshi collaborators, and as we were relatively young males, we were eventually rounded up and captured, and tortured too. They looted and burned our village as well. Me and some of my friends managed to escape and cross the border; we had some training and went back to fight against them. I remember the terrifying death of one of my close friends.

4.3 Visits to Bangladesh

Whatever profound political and socio-economic changes have happened over the past several decades, the British Bangladeshis still recite these memories, pleasant or otherwise, and are thereby encouraged to maintain strong transnational ties to their homeland. The ties are affective and symbolic, but also material, comprising remittances sent to support non-migrant family members, as well as physical visits to the key places

of their remembered pasts. Indeed, the journeys are a reification of those memories. Especially when they are made on a regular basis, the visits are also being re-lived and re-made through the experiences of the present. In this section, I explore the various ways in which British Bangladeshis maintain their transnational relationship, the context and importance of their VFR mobilities, the material practices that are embedded in making and experiencing these visits, and the gender and generation contrasts in the way such visits are perceived and experienced.

4.3.1 Virtual exchanges versus physical 'co-presence'

British Bangladeshis, the first generation in particular, have a strong sense of personal, familial and social relationship with their relatives and friends in Bangladesh. Some of this is reflected in the earlier accounts of their memoryscapes. That relationship has always been maintained through thick and thin. In the earlier years, as we know from Adams (1987) and Choudhury's (1993) accounts, sending a letter was the dominant way of communicating with family, relatives and friends in Bangladesh. Educated Bengalis helped in writing and reading them on behalf of their less-literate countryfolk. The letter has emotional as well as material significance. During my fieldwork in London, while watching a Bengali drama performed in Tower Hamlets, I observed the actors' portrayal of the deep connection generated through receiving and sending letters by the first-generation British Bangladeshis and their family, relatives and friends in Bangladesh: the wait for the postman and finding a private moment to read, or finding someone trustworthy to have it read for them, touched the heart of the audience. Though the letters were meant to convey written messages to the receivers, they had both an additional material and symbolic significance in many cases. One of the participants, Rafiq, interviewed in his London residence, a first-generation male in his fifties, described the importance of the letter for him:

My father was in London. He left me and my mother in Sylhet. He told me, study well over there and then you can think of coming to London later. Unfortunately, my father died when I was in the third year of my college degree. His body was sent over to Bangladesh for burying. About ten years later – by the time I finished my study, got married and had a job – one of my uncles, my father's distant cousin, who lives here, told me that my father had a British passport even before I was born, so why don't you come and live in London. You have the right to citizenship by descent. I was not very

much aware of these rules. Then I started thinking and eventually applied to come here. Unfortunate thing was, I was the only child of my father and my father was only child of my grandfather, and it was too late. The British High Commission in Bangladesh could not accept my claim as I did not have any evidence to prove it to them. They said, we believe you are your fathers' son; however, by law, you need to prove it with some sort of documentary evidence. I did not have any. Though there was another way. It was a DNA test. But that was not possible either as he did not have anyone else carrying the same DNA. He did not have any siblings. He only had a step-brother from a different father but they said, it doesn't work with a step-brother in that case. I gave up hope... Much later, I was visiting my maternal grandfather's house; he used to keep every document very safely in his special locker. My grandmother was still alive. So, I went to see her. She was sharing her memories of the past with me and showing all the documents that were in the safe. There were a lot of bundled documents, on one of the bundles, I noticed my father's hand-writing, and guess what, a bundle of letters my father wrote to his father-in-law, my mum and other relatives. I was sort of speechless and I cried when I saw them, the postage-stamps, the aerogrammes dating from the 1950s, I have never seen such things... I went to the High Commission to show these letters, there was a young lady whom I handed them to, even she was stunned and smiled at me and without any further question, they granted my right of abode in a matter of minutes.

The age of letters was soon to be replaced with the new tools advanced by new technologies. Here, I present the narrative of a second-generation female, Jahura, interviewed in London and also one of my key participants, about the changing nature of the transnational connection:

In my parents' time, when they first arrived, they would only have letters, airmail letters that were written and sent. And if you could not read and write, you would have to find someone to read and write on your behalf and then find them [again] to read when they [the reply] arrived. My mum never went to school. So, she never really learned to read and write. My dad did not finish his primary school but he could read and write to that level. So, these were, in my parents' time, the ways that people communicated. And not many people had telephones. Then we got a telephone and we were able to call. Even then, it was expensive and not easy to connect because not everybody has a phone over there [in Bangladesh], you know, they might have a phone in the shop or post office or something or someone's house, you know, like, making sure that they could be there to make a call. So, telecommunication has improved exponentially in the time since my parents arrived to nowadays. Whereas now, you can have immediate contact with your family. And in fact, you can exchange news between countries faster than you can with the people who live in your own community. So, you might hear [that] something happened in Bangladesh before you even hear what happens to your neighbour in your own country.

Almost all of the British Bangladeshis whom I have interviewed, or spoken to informally, do not write letters anymore. Instant messaging, texting, speaking over the mobile phone, video chatting on Skype, Facebook messenger, imo, Viber and WhatsApp are the

dominant ways of communication, exchange and interaction with the relatives and friends who are geographically distant. Regular, easy and cheap ways of communication also mean the conversations that transpire via online cover a much broader range of enquiries about health and wellbeing and everyday life of the families and friends along with other subtle and nuanced topics. For the second-generation British Bangladeshis, who visit less often than their parents, social media provides a way to keep updated about their relatives if they wish to do so. For Nazrul, interviewed in East London, it is easier to follow their updates on social media than speaking to their relatives in Bengali:

Facebook and things like that opened up a whole new, you know, way of doing things. You don't have to talk but you know what is happening in their lives and they know what's happening in your life. I think it's a good thing... people that I would never speak to, or know what's happening in Bangladesh, when you switch on your mobile phone and you look at things on social media and you get an update on what's happening in their life and vice-versa, depending on what you post... recently, my *mamato boin* (maternal cousin sister) got married. She recently qualified as a lawyer in Sylhet, kind of things.

However, although these instant cheap communications may have kept them connected or even intensified British Bangladeshis' relationship with their non-migrant geographically distant relatives and friends, they have hardly been an alternative to physical visits. None of my participants considers it as an alternative. I asked this question frequently to my participants: why is travelling the long distance important for them? I begin with Gaur, interviewed in London, a first-generation Bangladeshi:

In brief, I go there out of love for that land; we maintain a connection by going there to visit. Besides, it gives me good feelings. I like to go there and meet my relatives and spend time with them.

Likewise, Renu has a similar view:

Going there physically is the most important thing, I think. Over the phone, you cannot say many things. If you ask someone, how are you, they will of course say, we are fine. You need to spend time with them to have a real feeling.

There are other reasons for which a mere digital form of communication is deemed inadequate. For Rana, interviewed in London, it is more than just visiting family and friends:

I came here when I was 20, so I did not have time to explore Bangladesh. Whenever I go back, I try to get some time to explore the country, like, this time I visited Cox's Bazar.

For Masud, interviewed in London, it is also about transmitting memory and skills to the next generation, making them familiar with the people, places and spaces of their ancestral land in a way that cannot be achieved without being there physically:

During my last visit, I took my children to the primary and secondary school that I went to as a kid, I also showed them my college. I explained to them, like you go to your school now, I went there when I was at your age. When they will be a little older, they will understand these things better, understand that this is where our root is... My mum eats a lot of betelnuts. My younger son learned to eat them a little bit from his granny during our last visit. He always asked her for this. My son does not understand what it really is, nevertheless he took a piece from his granny and liked it... I took them [his children] out sometimes. They liked travelling by Rickshaw, going around, eating ice-cream. They are confined in a small space over here [in London]. So, they enjoyed it... now, if they see a plane, they say words like, granny, Bangladesh.

Similarly, Ranak, another first-generation man, explains his reasons for visiting Bangladesh:

It is like, out of sight, out of mind. If you don't go there regularly, you will lose the depth and breadth of your relationship with your relatives, your circle of friends. So, you need to go there regularly. On top of that, with the new generation, you don't know how much interest will they have to visit Bangladesh once they will be grown-ups. So, till then, it should be our duty to take them there. So that they have some sort of connection with their roots. They will have some opportunity to get to know their relatives. Though we have seen that many kids don't want to visit Bangladesh once they are grown-up, or they become so busy with things here that they forget about Bangladesh, but it's up to them. As long as we have the opportunity to do so, we should take our children to visit Bangladesh. Our society, our ancestry, our rituals, how we treat each other, particularly friends and relatives, how we treat our elders, they need to see that, understand that. At least, if they go to Bangladesh, the kids will feel that there are others are just like them, a lot of people who look alike. That can bring a change in their feelings. No one wants to think that I am alone.

Perhaps the most striking argument for paying visits comes from Jahura:

I am not very good with social media or any of this kind of thing. I don't have Facebook. I don't really do Skype. I don't do any of this WhatsApp stuff anymore. I find it all a bit intrusive. My relationships are based on face-to-face contact. I prefer to see people

when I visit. If they come and visit, for example, my sister-in-law's aunty has just arrived, so, we saw her here too. You know, having face-to-face contact, for me, is much more interesting and fulfilling than this sort of virtual sort of relationship with people.

The accounts of Jahura and other participants above indicate both negative and positive aspects of the proliferation of digital communication technology in the life of geographically dispersed families and networks of friends and relatives. While online communication and networking tools provide an opportunity to stay informed about the general happenings and wellbeing of relatives and friends, as argued by Cronin (2015) and evidenced in the case of Nazrul above, they can also be intrusive in the private life of many, like Jahura, or inaccessible for those who cannot afford or understand their functioning. However, although digitally transpired communications or connections may work as an additional way of maintaining or strengthening transnational connections, they cannot provide the intimate experience that physical proximity (Boden and Molotch, 1994) or 'face-to-face meetings' (Urry, 2002) can bring. The emotional connection with the landscape of homeland, as mentioned by many participants, familiarising the younger generation with their parents' places of memory and culture, as seen in the account of Masud, or spending intimate time with family, for example Renu, or friends as in the case of Ranak, can only be accomplished through physical visits.

4.3.2 Timing and frequency of visits

Existing studies of transnational and diasporic communities acknowledge that migrants and their descendants maintain multiple connections, affiliations and relationships across borders, binding together and giving meaningful life to these diasporic spaces and transnational social fields (eg. Brah, 1996; Glick Schiller, 2010; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Among the familial, social, economic, political and cultural activities that migrants engage in across their transnational spaces, home trips are often mentioned, but rarely is systematic attention paid to their multiple nature, timing and frequency. The general impression, derived from studies in various global contexts, is that migrants visit their homelands, mainly their villages and towns of origin, around once a year for holidays (often coinciding with school holidays for family visits), and for special occasions such as

weddings and religious festivals (Stephenson, 2002; Mason, 2004; Ali and Holden, 2006; Levitt, 2009; Vathi and King, 2011; King and Christou, 2014). Distance is obviously a key variable controlling the frequency of visits, along with the financial cost of the trip: expensive for Bangladesh, much less so for European migrants living in Britain. Nevertheless, what is missing from these and other studies of visits is systematic detail on the temporalities and varied purposes of such visits.

What we know of the role of home journeys in sustaining the British-Bangladeshi transnational community is accurately summed up by (Zeitlyn, 2015, p.51):

The visit is a big event in the lives of most British Bangladeshi families; they are the source of careful preparation, planning and imagining for many months to raise the considerable amounts of money necessary to pay for the flights, gifts for relatives and expenses of the visit [...] Visits to Bangladesh are a crucial meeting place for families... 'Being there' and 'being seen there', reconnecting with the people and places of their ancestral villages and bringing relatives and neighbours up to date with developments in the family are crucial elements of the visit [...] Visits can also be about being there at key moments. Weddings, deaths, funerals and religious celebrations are all occasions where a visit might occur. Visits are arranged, where possible, to coincide with these events and in some cases the events are arranged with visits.

Whilst my findings support every aspect of Zeitlyn's account, I also find that the Bangladeshi transnational social field is more intense and interactive than is commonly understood. I found that migrants visit their home country surprisingly frequently and for a whole variety of reasons, some planned, others, by force of circumstance, unplanned and arranged at short notice. Naturally, the nature and motivation of the visits vary from one individual and family to another. Generally, family trips with children are more planned and relatively infrequent, but individuals, couples and groups of friends travel more frequently and even spontaneously. The flight schedules between London and Bangladesh are virtually fully booked all year round, and my informants in Sylhet told me how their friends, relatives, co-villagers and hired drivers are frequently heading off to the airports to collect '*Londonis*', British-Bangladeshi visitors. The following interview exchange with Habib, a Sylhet-residing relative of a British-Bangladeshi migrant family, interviewed in Sylhet, provides typical insights:

Farid: On what occasions do they [migrants] visit Bangladesh? Is it just for special occasions?

Habib: Not always. Sometimes they come just for a visit, to meet their relatives, look after their houses, because sometimes they leave their houses locked up... and they come to check their condition... and to look after the things they have here and to solve any outstanding issues that arise in their absence.

Farid: Do they visit at any particular time of year?

Habib: What I have observed is that those who have kids going to school or college, they come during the school holiday time. But those who do not have these kinds of commitment come anytime. Sometimes, someone comes alone, depending on their need and the weather conditions here. For example, if they want to come just for a holiday, they try to avoid the rainy season and choose the winter time instead.

The weather, then, is a common criterion to consider for these visits. In other migration contexts, for example where migrants originate from Mediterranean countries, return visits take place in a warm, sunny, dry atmosphere of happy holiday relaxation, when the locals, too, are in festive mood. Examples include the cases of Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and Albania (King, Christou and Teerling, 2011; King and Kilinc, 2014; Kilinc and King, 2018; Vathi and King, 2011). Unfortunately, the main British school holidays coincide with the uncomfortably hot and rainy period in Bangladesh. Whilst some second-generation children seemed oblivious to this, others were not. Zeitlyn (2012, 2015, pp.52–57) , who interviewed young British Bangladeshi children about their homeland visits, found many complaining about the heat, flies, mosquitoes and smells. I did not interview young children, but I did ask the adult second generation to recall their travel to Bangladesh when they were children. And some first-generation interviewees spoke of their offspring's reactions to summer family trips. Falguni, a first-generation middle-aged mother interviewed in Sylhet whilst visiting with her teenage children, recalled their reactions on this and other visits over the years:

My children don't like it here very much because... they get bitten by mosquitoes... they really suffer here, you can't imagine. If we could have the summer holiday in December instead... My children can't go out in this extreme weather to meet the relatives.

By contrast, second-generation Nazrul had fond and mischievous memories of his own childhood visits. Here he recalls with affection two particular incidents:

Some of my best memories when growing up [were visits to] Bangladesh. You know, I remember, as a kid, I was smoking and my *mama* [maternal uncle] caught me and smacked the shit out of me [laughs]... I don't smoke now but, you know, some of my fondest memories.

[...]

When it's the monsoon season you have big *haors* [wetlands]... and I remember, once, we were going somewhere *noukay* [by boat] and it was raining and *eto batash* [very windy] so, what we did, we had an umbrella and turned it into a sail [laughter]... and the *nouka* [boat] was flying [laughs].

Although most visits are carefully planned, it is not uncommon for them to be arranged very quickly in response to an unexpected necessity, such as sickness, land/property matters, or the need to accompany another person who cannot travel alone. For example, second-generation Johura had to squeeze time out from her busy work schedule in London to take her elderly mother to Sylhet for an emergency visit:

My mother, she is 70 now... she has difficulties, she is not able to travel independently... She needed a wheelchair at the airport, she also needed support on the journey, because she gets confused. It's a long journey and it can be quite exhausting for someone who is elderly. It's also quite an emotional experience [for her].

Likewise, Nazrul had to immediately board a plane for two successive trips in order to visit his father who had retired back to Bangladesh, suffered a stroke and then died.

First, he had a stroke, so as soon as he had the stroke I went there to visit him and then I came back... and then a couple of days later he passed away, and so I went back again.

Nazrul's father illustrates an emerging migration pattern – the 'retirement return' of the first generation – which, although not very widespread, affects the ongoing transnational family dynamics of care and visiting. Naturally, as retirees are of mature or advanced age, they require regular care and perhaps also medication, and this can imply regular visits to Sylhet for the adult second generation. Motin, interviewed in Sylhet, a second-generation British Bangladeshi, said this to me in Bangladesh during his Bangladesh visit:

You see, my parents are stubborn, they decided to retire in Bangladesh. I am here mainly for them. I cannot always rely on the caretaker and servants, so, I come to check whether they are doing fine. We are worried about their health and wellbeing. I can come often over here, being a businessman gives me that flexibility, though it's not always easy to do so.

Like Motin's parents, I also interviewed Siddik, whom I have already quoted earlier, a first-generation British Bangladeshi who went to England at the age of 19 and spent his entire working life there. He is now paying lengthy visits to his childhood home with an intention to retire there, in much the same way that Caribbean migrants often visit home in order to prepare the ground for a definitive return (Duval, 2004). He is not finding it easy:

I stay a few months here and few months there. In my heart, I want to come back here [Bangladesh] permanently. This time, it has already been two months and my wife, children and grandchildren are calling me and begging to go back to London. It is not easy. My body cannot bear these journeys either. It is also hard to be here by myself. I need to bring tons of medicines with me. I brought medications that would last for four months. Food is also a problem. My brother's family is cooking for me. It is not easy. But I want to be here, I feel at ease here, this is the land where I was born and spent my memorable childhood; how can I not be here?

It is clear from this quote that there are conflicting emotional and corporeal constraints on Siddik's difficult choice to be 'here' [Bangladesh] or 'there' [London]. He has powerful 'memoriscapes' pulling him to retire in Bangladesh; yet his health and his family are pulling him to stay in England. Ultimately, for the time being, it seems that the emotional pull factor of 'the land where I was born' draws him to his homeland. But Siddik's tenacity on retiring in his childhood country means his family members will also have to visit him more often, and depending on his health condition, they might need to pay visits on an emergency basis.

A final reason why visits are often made with virtually instantaneous timing is to resolve legal issues which have suddenly arisen. First-generation Kabir was interviewed initially in London, and I quoted from this narrative above. Then, several months later, he popped up in Sylhet during the second stage of the fieldwork. He had to return at a day's notice to sign papers relating to a land donation. Here is the full story:

During our previous interview in London, I told you [speaking to me] that I had no plan to visit again this year. I had no wish to come. I even saw you off when you left for Bangladesh [to go on fieldwork there]. But, suddenly, some land issues arose. I had a shared piece of land not far from here, next to the road, which me and my cousin

inherited from our grandparents... When the village elders were looking for land to build a new mosque, my cousin agreed to donate this piece of land. But he is not the sole owner; he only owns one-third of it. Yet he promised to donate it without seeking my permission. He then called me to inform me of this. I said to him: 'It's my land too. However, as you promised to donate it, I cannot insult you in front of them [the village elders]. So, how do you want to resolve this?' He said he would transfer his part-ownership of another piece of shared land to me in exchange, and I agreed to this. However, there is an urgent documentation process for all of this, and that is why I am here.

Conflicts over property ownership and inheritance were a recurrent theme in my interviews with British Bangladeshis. Such conflicts constitute arguably the greatest threat to the maintenance of harmonious transnational relations between members of the diaspora in different locations, and across generations. I pick up this theme for more detailed examination in chapter six.

4.3.3 Planning and preparing for the visits: gifts and other material practices

I begin this section with a picture (see Figure 4.1) and a note from my fieldwork diary.



4. 1 Restaurant near Sylhet Airport

A picture of local restaurant in front of Sylhet airport. The name of the restaurant written in Bengali is 'London Restaurant'

I went to Sylhet Osmani International Airport earlier today to receive one of my key informants, Kabir. It is a fairly small airport. Soon after passing through the security posts, I saw some shops in front of the airport across the car park area. They were selling/serving snacks, juices, fruit bars, food and other utensils. What caught my eye was this eatery located at the centre of the shopping area. It was named London Restaurant. No other country's name was visible in the area.

The arrival and departure boards displayed outside the airport recorded many international flights, mainly from the Middle East and India, along with other domestic flights. However, the centre of people's attention was directed towards the scheduled arrival of Bangladesh Airline's flight from London. An overwhelming majority of the crowd was awaiting to receive their *Londoni* guests. Among the crowd were relatives and friends as well as a few privately hired car drivers who were arranged/paid in advance by the visiting British Bangladeshis. From speaking to a few relatives and the drivers, I learnt that visitors who were to travel to their villages or their houses in the distant part of the greater Sylhet region, hire the car in advance from London. In some cases, where there is an absence of a relative, only the driver receives the visitors. Cars were not only hired for the pick-ups/drop-offs from the airport, but also people who were coming with family and kids, hired a driver and car for their whole duration of the visit as it was convenient and comfortable to meet relatives and friends in different places and going on leisure trips whenever necessary. I was told that a month's car and driver hire would cost around 75,000 takas (roughly £700).

Kabir's car rental was only for going to his village home from the airport, a distance of 35 miles. As soon as the plane landed, Kabir activated his Bangladeshi mobile sim card purchased in London and called us to inform of his arrival. On his way out to the car, a porter carried Kabir's luggage apparently against his will. While Kabir was telling him, 'I don't need you, my luggage has wheels', the porter said, 'please don't deprive us from giving this service sir, this is our work, we live on this'.

This vignette above demonstrates firstly, the special connection between London/British Bangladeshis and their Sylhet/relatives and friends. The way this is manifested in this transnational British-Bangladeshi space is not seen in other major cities or airports in Bangladesh, including Dhaka. I know this from direct experience as I have frequently flown from in and out of Dhaka Airport. Similar manifestations are visible in Bangladeshi-residing British cities particularly in the East End of London: the street/park names in Bengali, Bangladeshi shops with Bengali names, and Bangladeshi memorials are some of the examples. The observation note that I took also indicates, secondly, some aspects of the plans and preparation that are required or undertaken by both the visitors and the visited. Unless there is an emergency, the visits are well-planned in advance, with much attention to detail. Thirdly, the economic imbalances and the differentiated services/exchanges in distant parts of transnational spaces are also expressed here, as with the incident involving the porter. In fact, the suitcases of the visitors are full of gifts, just like the Polish example (Burrell, 2008, p.370) discussed earlier in chapter two, that are carefully chosen and brought from London for their Bangladeshi recipients. The things that are taken as gifts for relatives and friends vary a lot, from essential items like torch lights for dark village nights to toys/tablets for

children. However, the most common items that British Bangladeshis take nowadays include mobiles, tablets, laptops, cloth, make-up, perfumes, wrist-watches and medical equipment such as blood pressure measurement devices, medicines and massaging belts for elderly parents. Bangladesh Airline allows 40 kg luggage allowance in addition to their carry-on hand bag. That is often not enough. I have seen some of my participants sending additional boxes of items by air cargo prior to their visit.

Buying gifts is an important part of the preparation that all British Bangladeshis have to go through. Below is the part of my conversation with Maya:

Farid: Why do you think it is important to take gifts?

Maya: It's just our culture, I suppose. As a Bengali, we take gifts. It's the way our mindset works. You take a token of love with you. It's nothing mandatory that you have to do. We feel from our heart. We take little things. Because we are using a lot of good stuff and everything and in our mind, maybe they are not using all that, so, I take as a token and that gives me satisfaction.

Farid: What type of gifts do you take?

Maya: I remember, before, I used to go, there was my brothers there, umm, most of the people are away now from Bangladesh. So, winter time, I would take warm clothing, socks and the main thing is medication and sweets. Also, good lotions and stuff which you could not buy there, I mean in the past. Still, I take similar things now-a-days but there are not many people left who would use lots of these. Now, I do take a lot of medication for my dad.

Farid: Do you also receive gifts?

Maya: Yes, every time we go there, they will make that gesture of going out of their way to give us or buy us Shari or ornaments or showpieces from good quality deshi brands, like Arong, you know what kind of shop is this, traditional handicraft shop, just as a token from Bangladesh. So, it's a give and take culture in Bengali culture, you know. We can't get out of it [laugh]. Although it's stressful, it's a good feeling.

For Jahura, exchanging gifts has even deeper meaning. She received a handcrafted winter cloth that she thought was too beautiful to use. She fixed it on the wall of her living room. As she says:

It's a way of maintaining relationships. It is. It's a symbol of people's feelings, affection and also a way of compensating for the lack of not having enough face-to-face meetings really.

Although it is undoubtedly a cultural practice and a positive gesture for each other to give and receive gifts, there is also a hidden tension of choosing gifts. The expectations of non-migrant relatives and friends are often very high. This is mostly because of the

visible socio-economic differences between London and Bangladesh, but also partly because of the fact that Bangladeshis are knowingly or unintentionally asserting that they are somehow better-off in London than their counterparts in Bangladesh. As Jahura explains:

We are responsible for maintaining a notion that it's always better here. You know, we also maintain that thing and this desire to leave Bangladesh for *Bidesh* you know, a country overseas. There is this, from a young age, most young people, you know, specially men, are encouraged to think, you know, you should go outside. You know, your own country is never going to provide for you. You are never going to get what you need. So, there is this sort of, umm, expectation. It's not realistic and it's also detrimental to those young people and it's creating expectations that cannot be realised for everyone. Because not everyone will have the means to do that... It's a dream people have, you know, like a Hollywood dream or the American dream, once you arrive somewhere and you will be successful, and everything will be alright [laugh]. [...]

They have high expectation. Because they have an unrealistic idea of our life here. Because they haven't seen it, they haven't lived it. They think, it's better than we live. They are not familiar with the struggles or the challenges of trying to maintain yourself financially, economically or socially. You know, there are lots of difficulties and they also have those difficulties in their own country, don't get me wrong. Because they are not aware of them, they think because it's a first-world country, that things should be easy. Obviously, it is not.

[...]

It's like, the thing is, people are never satisfied with what you give them. And also, you always feel like, you never give them enough. You know, because there is a huge inequality between people. And whatever you do, you can never manage that inequality as individuals. Because you are not going to change people's life with gifts. So, there is always dissatisfaction on both sides that people from London can never do enough for their families in Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshis are like, well, is this it, is this all?... That is an unfortunate reality of the relationship, you know, not just the family members but you know, the relationship between different countries really.

Finally, here is a brief extract from my conversation with another British Bangladeshi, Rana, who gives his personal experience of exchanging gifts, and an indication of where and how the tension arose:

My mum and dad were very happy. My younger brother, he was a little bit upset. Because I gave him a pair of headphones, but he was expecting it to be wireless. I gave him the plug-in one. So, he was a little bit upset. Other than that, everyone was happy.

The empirical evidence presented in this section demonstrates that visits are carefully planned with detailed preparations. A substantial part of that preparation is selecting gifts for the relatives and friends. Though subtle tensions or moments

of unhappiness can occur among the recipients, both the guests and their gifts are well received by the hosts.

4.3.4 Visiting experiences: generation and gender contrasts

The visit home is a diasporic journey of short-term duration which creates its own memoryscapes of places, events, kinship relations, social customs and cultural impressions. These can, however, vary significantly among different generations. In her study of Afghan migrants in the USA and their return visits to Afghanistan, Oeppen (2013, pp.267-272) noted the differences between younger and older generations. In her account, younger American-born individuals travelled to Afghanistan often inspired by the past memories of their parents that were evoked so fondly to them. The experiences of corporeal visits to their parental country however offered them a feeling of being a 'stranger at home' or a swift realisation of their 'western' self as they were born and brought up in California, a place so very different from Afghanistan. As Brah (1996, pp.183–184) points out, the experience of these homeland trips varies intersectionally: here my focus especially is on the generational and gendered aspects, given that amongst my research participants there is less variation across the other intersectional modalities of 'race', class and religion.

The central themes connected to most migrants' journeys to their homeland are articulated through the memories accumulated from such visits, which in turn reveal various admixtures of nostalgia, shared histories, and reinforced or changed identities (Marschall, 2017, p.4). On the whole, as one might expect, the first-generation migrants feel more strongly about their country and maintain firmer connections to it than the second generation. For the first generation, migration to the UK was the most significant event in their lives; hence, as we saw in a previous section, they preserve vivid memories of the land, people and environment where they spent their formative years. Meanwhile, the first generation actively transmits these images and memories of the homeland to their British-born children, encouraging them to visit the country of their grandparents, receive the hospitality always on offer, enjoy the food and warmth, and experience the homeland's 'way of life'. Through this continual process of forwarding

the memories of the homeland from one generation to another, the second generation is 'trained' to think about their ancestors and to remember how to behave on visits to the homeland.

The generational stratification can also be more complex and ambiguous than is currently understood. It is widely recognised that migrants who were born elsewhere and settled in a new country are the first generation and their children born in the host country are the second generation who will in turn be the parents of the third generation. There are also examples of 1.5 and 2.5 generation to address the children born to a family of intergenerational marriage. Typically, the 1.5 generation are seen as the children born in the 'home' country who are then taken abroad by their parents as part of family reunification, whereas the 2.5 generation are the offspring of one first-generation parent and his/her second-generation spouse (see King, Thomson, Fielding and Warnes, 2006). However, this classification is somehow different from how the British-Bangladeshi community perceives the notion of generation. Their understanding is based on the phases of arrival rather than the place of birth. According to their narratives, the first generation are those who migrated to Britain in the early years and the second generation are their children who were born in Bangladesh and reunited with the first generation later on. Many of them were adult by the time the reunification happened. And the children of the reunited generation are considered as third generation. According to the emic perspective of the British Bangladeshis themselves, there are also other complications which further blur the distinctions between the migrant generations. Firstly, there are no cut-off dates of arrival phases and their family reunion time was also varied, as we know from the long historical background of Bangladeshi migration and settlement. Some first-generation British Bangladeshis may have their grandchildren born in London by the time other families were being reunited. However, for clarity of understanding, by the first generation I mean all Bangladeshis who migrated as adults. And second-generation individuals are children born to the first generation in London as well as Bangladesh but who are schooled in Britain.

The first generation has naturally stronger ties to the homeland than the subsequent generations. The first generation's visits to their country of origin are all about re-

experiencing the 'place' of home, catching up with their relatives and friends, and maintaining their properties and inheritance in a changing environment. Figure 4.2 is a picture of Kabir's local village market in Bangladesh.



4. 2: A village market in Sylhet

I took the picture while visiting this village along with Kabir during my fieldwork in Bangladesh. For Kabir and other first-generation British Bangladeshis, the birth village, and its market, is a place of familiarity, memory and a sense of connection that they have with their homeland. While visiting friends and relatives in Bangladesh, they would visit public spaces like these. Many of the vegetables that are shown in the picture are also imported and sold by Bangladeshi groceries in London, mostly in their frozen form. However, homeland visits have a different spatio-temporal meaning for Kabir and others that they can personally relate themselves to.

For the first generation, visits are more focused on their parental homes, but here too, the nature of visiting is changing. Some of the longer-established first generation now have two homes in Bangladesh, one in the ancestral village in the family compound, and

another in Sylhet city or another big town. Visiting the village house and paying their respects to their relatives and the ancestors' graves becomes important for those who choose to mainly stay in their city home.

For the second generation, Bangladesh and its places and spaces rarely have such a close personal affection. For some British-born Bangladeshis, Bangladesh is just another distant land or a destination for holiday. The only difference with other destinations is that they have a familial connection. Therefore, the home trips have a somewhat different set of meanings, and often different itineraries too. First, they consider travel to Bangladesh more as a holiday destination – but one they are semi-obliged to choose because of the strength of family connections there. This means that, whilst they make the obligatory visit to the ancestral village or town, they are also more likely to take in other sites on their holiday itinerary. Below is an example of how Nijam, a second-generation British Bangladeshi man, interviewed in London, expresses his view on Bangladesh and compares his experience of visiting Bangladesh:

Bangladesh is a great country and I think, umm, sort of, everyone has a different view on it, umm, because of their experience. I think the problem with Bangladesh, it's rich in resources, you know, we have got, sort of, the land, the gas and this sort of resources. But I think, the biggest problem is, it's politically and morally bankrupt. And I personally think that, until there is a revolution, I would say, by the younger people, then it will not change. So basically, we want to see a radical, radical change in Bangladesh.

[...]

I think, a lot of money has been wasted back home, for example, building palaces, where, it's not gone into, sort of, economic entrepreneurial opportunity to build Bangladesh, and nobody lives there. The sad thing is, nobody lives there; the families don't, kids don't want to live there. So, it's empty, you can't get the value out because of the money that you spent building it. And again, people will argue rightly or wrongly with that. When our people migrated here, they were working hard, saving and then basically, investing that money back home, because the idea was that they would go back. So, I think, everyone will have their different views. My views are, to give you an example, it's a world of difference.

[...]

I think, when we go on holidays, we don't really experience Bangladesh, because, we are only going to Sylhet, where most of us are from, and to sort of, family and home and relatives. And we are not sort of going out there to visit the whole of Bangladesh.

[...]

I think, the problem is, Bangladesh isn't a holiday destination, and also, to get time off here is very difficult. And during the six weeks of summer holiday, you know, the prices are high. So, Bangladesh doesn't really work as a holiday place, like, you can go away in Europe for a weekend. You can get value for money and you can see sun, sea and

sand, and it's a proper holiday. You are sort of, it's your time off, you are enjoying yourself. Whereas back home it's a lot to do with, if you are gone back home, you have to visit your relatives, you have to do this, that and the other. And I think obviously for those reasons, we may say it's a holiday, but it really is not a holiday. Which is why we don't sort of go as often as we would like. You know, timing, costs and various other things, it's not really a holiday.

[...]

Obviously, it's hard, because most families go, because of the relatives and there are complications. If you go generally to travel around, then, what Bangladesh offers, it's amazing, the open space, the greenery, the fresh air, the history, the tea gardens, the sea-side, the ponds, the fishery, the animals, amazing things, you will see milking a cow, you have got fresh chicken, there is so much that I think, one can enjoy. But it's not developed as a holiday destination... They don't promote, Bangladesh doesn't promote tourism. If it promoted tourism... we have museums, we have universities, we have green spaces, we have for tourists, for British Bangladeshis or for anybody else, like another country does, then, I think, a lot more people would go. And I think, if you made it affordable as well. But for some reason, it doesn't.

Whilst the people, places and spaces are structured with personal connections and meanings for the first generation, for the second generation it can become uncomfortable. Below is another part of my conversation with Nijam, which details his frustration of a failed bargain with a cow-seller in a Bangladeshi village market during his earlier visits with his parents:

For British Bangladeshis to go there, they can smell you, they can tell you a mile off. Sometimes you get treated specially, sometime you get treated like, you know, 'they are just Londoners, what can I get out of them'. They would know, I am a Londoner and would treat me differently, whereas with my father, they would think twice before saying anything... Look, I will give you an example, may not be a great example. I went to Sylhet, and we went to this cow-market, I liked this cow and I wanted to buy it and my dad said, ok, that's fine. It was not any special occasion. We just thought, we have gone, it's nice, it's the experience, you know, I don't know how else to sum it up. Anyway, my dad is like, let's do it. And I wanted to buy this thing with my uncle and dad. Straightway, they could tell, I am a Londoner, and my uncle said, that's it, you are not going to buy this and it was true. Basically, I think, the cow price was, I can't remember the price, but basically there was extra and he would not sell it to me for a reasonable price. Because he knew, if I wanted it, I will pay extra. So, we had to decide, do we want to pay him extra to get it or not. And in the end, we didn't. We said, look this isn't right, it's not fair. You know, just because I like something and I want to buy it, he would not sell it to me for a fair price... And my uncle said next day, it got sold for something else. And that's the thing... let me put it to you this way, it's fine that they want to make a little bit of extra, that's fine. But it's not fair when it's, sort of, there is too much of a difference. Because of the currency difference, you sort of wanted to pay a bit extra and they are happy as well, a foreigner of his kind has come and given them a bit extra. Which is ok. But when it's, sort of crazy, it's not nice.

Yet, wherever they go, the second and the other migrant-descendant generations experience a new socio-cultural environment and a new way of life, a contrast to the one they were brought up in. They experience – as they relate in their interviews – a new culture, the generous hospitality of local people, authentic food and refreshments, and what they regard as genuine human warmth. This contrast in traditions of hospitality between Bangladesh and Britain (and even amongst British Bangladeshis in Britain) was something that struck many second-generation participants. British-born Abul, interviewed in London, recounted his impression of this contrast:

To be honest, I love Bengali culture... especially the hospitality. For example, if you come to my home [in London] right now, I can offer you a cuppa, like a cup of tea and a biscuit, nothing else. Maybe I can offer you lunch, maybe; but it's not from my heart. I am not going to offer you to stay at my home overnight... But if you go to Bengali society, the houses there, they are going to offer you food, tea, staying overnight... like they care about you from the heart.

How the second-generation experience Bangladesh varies according to their upbringing in their family. Some parents more actively and positively portray Bangladesh as a place to visit to their children than others. One such example is Rafiq, a first-generation British Bangladeshi who had an innovative way of encouraging his British-born sons to learn about and experience Bangladesh:

Me and my wife, we did something very different. We sent our sons on visits to Bangladesh and their relatives alone. We encouraged them to go on their own, as if it was an adventure. They were a little bit scared, but they went there and came back extremely happy. To this day, they talk about the hospitality they received, the places they went to etc. Now they go whenever they can and they love visiting Bangladesh.

Experiences and memories of visiting the (ancestral) home country vary considerably not only by generation but also by gender, even when these visits are with the family. Some of these differences are documented in the existing literature on British Bangladeshis. Gardner and Mand (2012) and Zeitlyn (2012, and 2015, pp.52–61) provide insightful ethnographic observations on these family visits to Sylhet, focusing in their case especially on the children's perspective. We know from these and earlier studies by Gardner (1995) and others that Bangladeshi society is very patriarchal and composed of patrilineal families. Compared to females, especially young females, males enjoy the relative freedom to go anywhere and do as they wish. Whilst most British-Bangladeshi

women travel to the homeland in the company of male relatives – husbands, fathers, family groups etc. – male migrants of any generation travel in the ways that they want or are deemed necessary – on their own, with family, siblings, cousins or in a male group. British Bangladeshis with children tend to think carefully about when to take them, depending on the children's age and adaptability to the Bangladeshi 'home' environment. Too young, they do not appreciate it and might get sick; much older, when they are teenagers, they are likely to get bored and become rebellious.

Some aspects of the gendered experiences of young children visiting Sylhet are nicely captured in the fieldwork accounts of Zeitlyn (2012, and 2015), although his participant observation evidence does not allow systematic, robust comparison. In one fieldwork vignette, described in both of his key publications, Zeitlyn (2012, pp.959–963; 2015, pp.58–61) observes the behaviour of two sisters, Nazrin (aged 6) and Shirin (11) as they visit the family farm with their parents and brothers, Rafique (9) and Tanvir (3). Whilst Rafique was able to join the local boys of the *bari* (the family homestead) and run around, play football, chase cows, climb trees and get muddy, Nasrin, who desperately wanted to join in (after all, she played football in England), was repeatedly hauled back by her 'minder' (her 16-year-old uncle) and consigned to the care of the *apa* (elder female relative) who comforted her and oiled her hair. Shirin, on the threshold of adolescence, was even more carefully controlled, and not allowed to talk to men, only to the *apa* who were teaching her how to behave as a 'good' Bangladeshi girl. Meanwhile Tanvir, the youngest, was being spoilt by all the attention thrown at him and his behaviour deteriorated during the course of the visit.

As a 'model' of gendered sibling behaviour, this account of one family's visit to rural Sylhet is probably fairly accurate, and no doubt was chosen by Zeitlyn precisely because of this. Yet the same author also gives other examples which subvert, or at least nuance, the above vignette. Such as Ishrat (a girl, aged 11) who particularly enjoyed the fun and games at her cousin's wedding ('It was fantastic... we had a cake fight') and the freedom of 'playing outside 24/7'. Zeitlyn also noted the behaviour of Saiful (boy, age not given) who refused to play with the local boys his age and who complained bitterly about everything – the hard beds, the food, the toilets, the lack of TV, and so on.

The gendered nature of adult visits reveals similarly mixed reactions in my research. On the one hand, women migrants are grateful for the relief from the heavy burden of family and household chores and paid work that the holiday visit brings. They are able to relax in the sisterly company of the local women. On the other hand, visiting women, like the local women, are subject to limitations on their spatial movements. Nazrul reported the following interaction with his wife about their visits to Bangladesh, sparked off by the media attention given to Nadia Hussain, the British-Bangladeshi winner of the popular British TV cookery competition 'Bake Off':

You know, I look at my wife's experience. Most Bangladeshi women that you talk to, about their experiences of visiting Bangladesh, they say it's never been good, for a number of reasons. You know, I was watching this, hmm... this Bangladeshi girl Nadia Hussain, the Great British Bake Off; my wife made me watch that programme the other night. And the one thing that she [Nadia Hussain] said that really stuck out, on the TV programme, was that, since she was very young, 'our father brought us kids to Bangladesh, every two years... But the only thing we ever saw was the village, we were never allowed out of our village'. And my wife said: 'there, you know, that's true, I had similar experiences'.

Similar patterns of gendered, but also highly variable, reactions are evidenced from parallel studies carried out on family visits to Pakistan by Bolognani (2007), Cressey (2006) and Mason (2004). Meanwhile, Rytter (2010) describes a play, 'A Sunbeam of Hope', written and performed by a Pakistani community group in Copenhagen, which is a satirical account of a family visit to Pakistan. The play employs exaggerated stereotypes of the different generations and genders, to the great amusement of the audience, made up of Pakistani migrants.

In a patrilineal society, the spaces in and around home and beyond are evident and mentally clearly delineated. In her ethnography, Gardner (1995) portrayed this gendered space in rural Sylhet. Similarly Janeja (2010), in her ethnography of Bengali food, described the sacredness of the kitchen in the Bangladeshi households where women and female helpers are in charge of cooking. During my stay in the village home of Kabir, I noted the following observations in my field note-book:

Kabir came to Bangladesh alone. He does all his household shopping including vegetables, spices, fish, and meat with the help of his male servant. However, his meals are cooked by a female maid and his brother's or cousin's wives. They cook for him in turn. Kabir's wife regularly communicates with them over the phone from London. Although the food is cooked on time in turn by the female members of the extended family, they are hardly visible. The sisters-in-law would often communicate with Kabir via their children, like, what would he prefer for the next breakfast, lunch or dinner?

These manifestations of gendered spaces were also extended with the cultural practices associated with Bengali food consumption at home and outside in public spaces both in the diaspora and home country. According to Janeja (2010, pp.103–104):

An ethnography of food in Bengal is incomplete without a depiction of the clusters of relations that tea, as an element of the normal foodscape, and its frequent companion, *adda* ('idle' or 'care-less' talk) create and encapsulate... Predominantly middle-class Bengalis in urban Bengal assemble their everyday and hospitality relations through the polemic practice of *adda*... their sensuous anxious engagement with their relational worlds, making, unmaking, and remaking them through sound, smell, touch, taste, and vision, and thereby evoking their perceptions of relatedness as Bengaliness in variegated ways.

Adda is one of the dominant ways how British-Bangladeshi male visitors enjoy and maintain an affective relation with their friends during visits. First-generation British Bangladeshi men miss this polemical practice of *adda* with their friends to a great extent. Personally, my research benefitted a lot from having afternoon *addas* with my participants and informants in London and Sylhet. This is an easier way to spend time with male friends without inviting them to your family residence. They gave me the endless opportunity to obtain and debate a lot of information about the experiences of bilateral VFR mobilities in both directions. My point here, though, is that *adda*, particularly in public spaces in Bangladesh, is overwhelmingly a male-dominant event, where a group of male friends would get together, often in the late afternoon after work over tea and snacks, and discuss anything and everything from the personal to the global. Even in a familial *adda*, as I experienced in one of my participant's house in London, the talk was led/dominated by male participants. While tea, snacks, food and music were consumed by all, the 'ladies' were in charge of preparing them in the kitchen. During visits, British Bangladeshis who still have friends over there would do these *addas* in tea/snacks outlets, restaurants, hotels or in other public spaces or even on tour to the attractions.

Therefore, the male visitors enjoy in Bangladesh the relative freedom of sole sojourning, enjoying public places, doing *adda* and roaming around wherever and whenever they wish. This does not translate into a similar freedom for female visitors. It also depends on age and family status too. The prevailing atmosphere for female visitors is well captured in Jahura's account:

There is a very different expectation I think; women still are not expected to go out by themselves. If you are from a certain class, obviously if you are from a poorer class, or whatever you know, it's much easier to work and go out. But if you are from a particular, sort of, lower middle-class family, the social restrictions are much more constraining for females. If you are not married, or even if you are married, you know, you need to have escorts, you need to hmm... people need to know where you are going; yes, it's much more sort of controlled, the movement, you know, outside the home, I would say.

[...]

They [female visitors] conform to the expectation of family there. You know, people end up covering up or behaving in a much more conservative way. And to be honest, because I am visiting for such a short time, you know, I am quite happy to go along with it. But I still maintain my own, if I am there, I have friends there, I visit my friends in their own houses or I go and visit people. And I don't feel obliged to the kind of standard that the Bangladeshi women conform to, because, I am, at the end of the day, a foreigner, you know, I am a *bideshi*. I am only there for a short time. Obviously, I am not there to insult or offend anyone. But as long as I am discreet and I don't go around parading myself in a way that reflects badly on my family, I feel that I can do pretty much as I like. I will visit friends and meet them or visit their families. I don't feel I am not able to do that. Because my family know me and they understand that I have lived abroad, I have worked abroad, I have a freedom of movement that other people of my family don't really have or other women that I know, don't really have. Because I am my own person. I don't have a husband or a father that I need to answer to, or my brothers don't expect that kind of behaviour.

Maya, a first-generation female, came to London decades ago at a very young age and maintains a strong relationship through frequently visiting relatives as well as spaces and places beyond her family locus. Visiting Bangladesh provides, in her words, 'a moral boost, a serotonin release in [her] brain'. She also has more or less the similar view on her gendered experience of visits:

I did not feel threatened. But it's a thing, it's not inconvenient, I won't say it like that. I am fine, I can do most of the things. The country changes, their internal things change. So, I would not go somewhere I don't know at all, they might con me or take me to dangerous places. Those things, I am a little bit concerned about because law and order are not totally in place. There is in some places, like, excellent law and order in Cox's Bazar. However, I am not threatened. I go on my own. It used to be very

patriarchal. It is changing. It is now how you want to be. If you are a female, if you allow the man to dominate you, I am not suggesting to be disrespectful, be respectful but be solid women so that nobody can tease you. Just go everywhere, be safe and be assertive. I do things on my own. I am not going out of the boundary, not being obscene or anything like that. I stay within my respectable zone. When I go to Bangladesh, I restrict myself and not showing so much of the feminist side of me out of respect, not out of threat. Because every country has got its cultural boundaries. I try to stay within.

4.4 VFR as a Side-Trip

VFR can also be used as a side-trip. In the context of Bangladesh visits, earlier examples of Siddik's lengthy stay clearly demonstrate that VFR is also used as a pre-retirement strategy, where British Bangladeshis negotiate their long absence by familiarising with the people, places and space they have left behind long ago. Below is Jahura's rather unique experience:

I lived for two years overseas in Nepal, I went, at least, three times to Bangladesh while I was volunteering in between '96-'98. So, during those two years – it was like a 90 minutes flight to Dhaka from Kathmandu – so, it was very easy. I could go within a couple of hours, you know. So, that was great. I could turn up, I would take a rickshaw from Sylhet Airport and turn up at my auntie's house or whoever's house. And they would be like, Oh! How did you get here? I said, I just arrived! [laugh].

Whilst geographical proximity enables frequent VFR mobilities within European countries, Jahura's example of visiting relatives and friends occasionally in Bangladesh is rare amongst the British Bangladeshis. Nevertheless, attending a wedding or an important family event in Bangladesh can bring an opportunity to visit relatives and friends in other parts of the region or the country.

On the other hand, there are plenty of side trips to touristic attractions within and beyond Sylhet that can happen during the visits. Having done everything else, visitors take the opportunity to travel around to various tourist attractions. Two of these stand out in the narratives. One is going to Jafong, a mountain resort area where the highlight is a boat trip to the waterfall. The other is Cox's Bazar, a southern coastal town close to the border with Myanmar, where they enjoy the long sandy beach, staying in nice hotels, fresh seafood, shopping, and boat trips to the offshore islands. First-generation Rana describes her recent visit to Cox's Bazar, where she recorded contrasting impressions:

In Cox's Bazar, because it's a coastal area, there are many sea-fishes to eat, and they are really cheap compared to the city, so you can have your own barbecue party, with salmon, tuna and sardines... And the problem I faced, there is a coral island called St. Martin, we went there, and there was no electricity, you have to carry a candle or a torch. Because the hotel, they have their own generator and they provide only from 6 to 10 in the evening, and after that you have to carry a candle basically – if you want to go to the toilet, or go outside, you have to take a candle or torch.

As can be assumed from the previous examples, the British-born generation or the Bangladeshis who have migrated at a very young age are more interested in side-tripping or exploring what Bangladesh has to offer as a tourism destination country, rather than spending time in the ancestral village. However, it is not always convenient if you are female. Female visitors spend more time in local familial spaces than their male counterparts, unless they are accompanied/escorted by their immediate male relatives. In cases where female visitors are able to visit or explore other parts of Bangladesh, they get a broader comprehensive experience of their country and society beyond their familial milieu. Here is the experience of Maya:

We have got lovely places to go. Of course, our own family gardens, there is always a party there, swimming, fishing, fresh fish would be cooked and fun all day. We would invite lot of friends that we could not visit. So, everybody comes together, so, we have a big day out together. Sometime I go to Dhaka. I haven't been to very many places in Bangladesh myself. Only this year, I went to Chittagong with my husband for the first time in my life... It's very nice. I have seen lots of attractive beaches around the world but when I went there, the feeling was, the sandy beach is really nice; it has got its character. Maybe it's not modernised like Western countries, it's naturally built and it's adapted to my country's way of life. It's a character to me. And people are inviting, people are helpful and hard-working. I am intrigued watching the fishermen going to sea at midnight for fishing. What a lavish life we have in England. They don't even know whether they would come back in the morning or not. But for their daily rice and curry or bread and butter, they are going out to sea at midnight not knowing what lies ahead. This is what touched me so much. Still they are laughing and joking next morning like nothing is happening, again 12 o'clock at night they would have to do the same thing. And we dread waking up in the morning here [in London], going to work in our luxury car, we dread that. If you don't see it for yourself, you can't differentiate anything. People should meet each other more to see different things, different aspects of life and you know, get out of the luxury life.

In addition, the retail and leisure landscape of Sylhet has been transformed on the basis of the tourism market fuelled by visiting British Bangladeshis. Figure 4.3 is a picture of a shopping mall that I took on my mobile during my field visit in Sylhet: note the

prominent exhibit of 'London time' as a symbolic statement of the importance of London and its time-space 'distance' from Sylhet.



4. 3: One of the largest shopping-malls in Sylhet City

At the front entrance display, the current time in London is shown.

New shopping malls in Sylhet city and in tourist resorts cater to the cash-rich visitors, and hardly at all to the locals, with their tiny disposable incomes. Gardner and Mand (2012, p.980) write that these malls are a reassuring sign of modernity for visiting migrant families, who in other spaces are disturbed by the squalor of rural life. A particular location mentioned by many of my participants, especially those visiting with children, is 'Dreamland', an amusement park on the outskirts of Sylhet city, again created mainly for the *Londoni* market. This funfair is part of the migrant-tourist-visitor experience for many families. For the convenience of the visitors not only is the time synchronised but also all major banks and/or forex trading offices have established their presence in Sylhet. Many British Bangladeshis have a bank account in Bangladesh where they sent/save some of their money for spending during their visits. Many multinationals including British clothing and food brands have their outlets in Sylhet.

Tailoring British-Bangladeshi women's cloth constitutes a major part of the shopping experiences. Most diasporan women buy the raw cloth in London but send them with

the male visitors to have it tailored in Sylhet. Tailoring female dresses in London offers neither value for money nor the finest quality for Bangladeshi women. During my fieldwork I was able to observe this transnational tailoring practices. One very experienced master tailor, whom I visited with Kabir, said to me that he has plenty of *Londoni* customers. In his client book, he kept records of the size/measurements of his *Londoni* customers' dresses. Making an order is just one call away for British Bangladeshis.

4.5 Conclusion

Migration and visits 'home' are examples of the 'time-placeness' of mobility, infused with deep layers of meaning associated above all with memories of past times, places and experiences. The trajectories of the migrants' memories are both very long and very wide, encompassing many things, places, people and events. The depth and strength of the relationship with the homeland varies significantly between the generations studied here, and indeed within the generations across different time-frames. Hence, for the first generation, memories of their childhood in Sylhet are very distant in time, if not in place, from their experiences of the homeland on recent visits. Likewise, for the second generation living in London, memories of childhood visits are different from those they make as adults, perhaps taking their own children, the third generation, with them.

Across a wider conceptual plane, this chapter has brought together notions of migration, mobility, notably visiting friend and relatives, tourism and memory in an innovative analysis of past and present times and social landscapes. The migratory system created by the particular history of Bangladeshi migration, in this case to East London, can be regarded as an 'ethnoscape' defined by ethnic ties between origin and destination (cf. Appadurai, 1996); as a 'transnational social field' characterised by more or less intense social and kinship relations stretched over this long-distance migration (Glick Schiller, 2005); and as a 'diasporic space' (Brah, 1996) in which a sense of diasporic identity is maintained both by the condition of absence and exile from the homeland and by regular visits back and forth.

A first key finding was that those home-country visits are not confined to summer holiday trips or special occasions such as family weddings, but take place more frequently, more spontaneously, at any time of the year, and for a wider variety of reasons depending on the family's financial circumstances, the strength of their transnational ties and the geographical distribution of kin. Beyond this kinship and social network function, visits have a touristic expression, since the journeys are seen as holidays and may involve visiting other parts of Bangladesh in addition to the place of origin. Moreover, some of these trips have an economic dimension, as opportunities are taken to check on investments in land and housing, and to resolve matters of inheritance.

The second issue regards the possibility of permanent return migration. Thus far, rather few migrants have moved back to the home country to retire; and even fewer second-generation Bangladeshis would consider a 'counter-diasporic' move to the parental homeland for good. This is largely because the homeland offers far fewer employment and income opportunities, and has an inferior health and welfare system, when compared to the UK. It seems that Bangladesh is not yet at a stage where it is ready to follow the lead of other post-colonial migration countries such as India or the ex-British colonies in the Caribbean where return migration, including the second generation, has been noted and documented (see, *inter alia*, Duval, 2004; Jain, 2013; Levitt and Waters, 2002; Potter, 2005; Potter, Conway and Phillips, 2005).

To be more systematic, drawing from the fieldwork and interview evidence, four memoryscapes of migration and visiting can be documented, each relating to a different time, age, gender and migration. These are:

- the first generation's memoryscapes of their early lives in rural Sylhet – these are bucolic images filled with positive nostalgia about school, playing in an amphibian landscape of ponds and fields, and friendly socialisation with other children and older villagers;
- the first generation's memories of more recent visits to their homeland – these are shaped by reconnections with family and friends, generating a positive image of

being a 'successful' migrant, but also evolving tensions over land and property ownership;

- VFR mobilities to Bangladesh and the associated experiences are highly gendered – male diasporans visit Bangladesh more often and more independently than their female counterparts, meaning they also enjoy the relative freedom of individual sojourning including in the public arena; while female visitors, with a few exceptions, are often escorted, bounded or self-censored in the various familial, social and cultural places and spaces;
- the second generation is relatively more interested to explore Bangladesh by travelling beyond their ancestral locus than the first generation and they tend to have more geographically diverse memoryscapes of such visits, which comprise not only the ancestral family home but also more touristic locations and experiences in Bangladesh – on the whole these are positive impressions of connecting to the Bengali culture of family hospitality and warmth, although they visit less frequently than the first generation.

Finally, it can be summarised that the experiences and practices of VFR mobilities demonstrate that the transnational social field linking London and Bangladesh is highly interactive and performative. Memories are on balance positive, fuelled by nostalgia, the reinforcement of kinship and family solidarity, and a strong sense of connection to the 'homeland'. However, some of my findings also suggest that the transnational bond between Bangladesh and its London diaspora is approaching a critical juncture. In particular, disputes around land and properties are threatening the continuation of the British-Bangladeshi transnational way of life, and the depth of the relationship between host and home country is in danger of being diluted. I return to this particular issue in chapter six. Meantime, in the next chapter, I reverse the lens of analysis and look at transnational visits 'the other way around' – from Bangladesh to London. The next chapter is based on the fact that, within the transnational family and social space of an established migrant diaspora, VFR mobilities are bi-directional. The very notion of VFR implies a reciprocity of the visits, so that both migrants and their non-migrant relatives and friends visit each other in both the homeland and the host country, switching roles as host and guest as they co-create the transnational VFR experience. Although the

British-Bangladeshi transnational social field is inherently unequal, particularly in respect of financial resources and access to tourist visas, visits in the 'other direction' are still happening, creating new and different memoryscapes, and these are the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Five:
Reverse Transnationalism – VFR Mobilities to London

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I look into the VFR mobilities from a different perspective by reversing the transnational optic. As introduced at the end of the previous chapter, VFR mobilities are bilateral and bipartisan. Social relations, even in their transnational form, are neither one-way nor maintained by one party. Maintaining a relationship is also about ‘returning calls’, ‘visiting back’ and having a ‘face-to-face’ meeting with each other (Urry, 2002, 2007; Larsen, Urry and Axhausen, 2006; Urry, 2012b). Fulfilling the reciprocal obligation of visiting back can be very challenging, particularly in a highly unequal transnational diasporic context such as between Bangladesh and its British diaspora. The imbalanced power and wealth relationship between British Bangladeshis and their non-migrant relatives and friends in Bangladesh is well portrayed in the dominant literature (cf. Gardner, 1995, 2002; Zeitlyn, 2015) in this field. The inherent inequality and power imbalance also means that Bangladeshi non-migrants have far less access to ‘the network capital’ (Urry, 2007, p.197) – as explained earlier in chapter two – than their British counterparts. Nevertheless, counter-visits, significantly smaller in proportion, from Bangladesh to Britain still happen. These ‘reverse VFR’ mobilities have rarely been considered in the transnationally oriented or diasporic literature, so that, in this respect, this chapter breaks new ground. Existing scholarship on British-Bangladeshi transnational social ties has never shed light on this either. However, such counter-visits are addressed broadly as a form of revenue-generating touristic enterprise in the tourism literature. Even there, the majority attention is generally given to the experiences of migrants themselves rather than to their visiting non-migrant relatives and friends (Humbracht, 2015, p.641). In what follows, based on the accounts of mostly non-migrant participants who have visited London, I explore and analyse the context of these counter-VFR mobilities, the diverse experiences and interactions with the host community, and the significance of the events that unfold.

5.2 The Backdrop of the Visits

In the context of VFR mobilities between European countries, leisure or holiday activity is arguably the dominant purpose of the visits. Geographical proximity (Mueller, 2015), having a second home (Williams and Hall, 2000) or taking retirement in touristic

locations such as those in southern Europe (Williams, King and Warnes, 1997; King, Warnes and Williams, 1998; Williams, King, Warnes, and Patterson, 2000) may attract or work as an additional incentive, assisted by cheap flights and free movement rights. In these European cases, VFR flows to and from the destination and home countries are undertaken by both migrants and non-migrants; touristic consumption being in most cases the main purpose of the visits. Porous borders, free movement and 'shallow economic, cultural and linguistic boundaries' (Mueller, 2015, p.626) within the EU leads to frequent back and forth visits, and in some cases, it becomes a part of their everyday life. This can also blur the distinctions between migrants and visitors, guests and hosts, as visitors can find work while 'on tour' and can visit a third place within or beyond their destination country along with their hosts, relatives and friends. VFR trips can also become purposeful and lead subsequently to economic migration (Lulle, 2014) or to retirement migration (King, Warnes and Williams, 2000).

The situation is very different in the context of Bangladesh and its diaspora. Non-migrant Bangladeshis' VFR trips to London are relatively 'special' in nature; in many cases, such visits are considered as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that coincides mostly with important social and familial occasions. In the rather complex patterns and practices of visiting and working in the case of Latvian migrants in Guernsey (Lulle, 2014; King and Lulle, 2015), and indeed in most cases, the prior connection or the presence of a relative or close friend in the destination is a definitional prerequisite for VFR mobilities. The phenomenon of British-Bangladeshi VFR to the UK also rests on such prior connections between host and guest. For the British-Bangladeshi hosts, bringing relatives and friends over to London from Bangladesh is always in the mind of those who can afford it. Special occasions such as childbirth, a wedding or a serious illness of a diasporic member of the family; all of these may arise as an occasion for a visit. In order to immediately illustrate some of these circumstances, and the different perspectives of the various family members involved, I give below an extended introductory example from my London fieldwork. Here, I met, both informally and formally, a visiting parent couple and their host son and daughter-in-law. This is how each of them framed the context of the visit:

Ranak (the son): Their visit was long overdue. Nevertheless, to have them here on this special occasion [childbirth] was a source of mental strength for us. On top of that, we have the chance to get together again.

Renu (daughter-in-law): We have always in our mind, whenever we get the chance, that we will [have the parents visit us]. Besides, my son's birth was also an occasion. Someone new is coming to our family, that is a very a happy moment. We thought that if mum and dad [mother and father-in-law] could be with us at this joyous moment, it would be great. We would have more courage and our happiness would be multiplied, if they were here on this occasion. That's how it happened. The timing has been great.

Kiran (the father): We used to wonder how is their life here. We converse in the phone every week, at least once a week. If a week went by without contact, we became worried about their health and wellbeing. We used to think, are they ok? Perhaps, they were not living a very comfortable life but were managing ok. Besides, they visited us there sometimes, we have never done that before [to visit them here]. We have now experienced it in person. And I am satisfied about my son's arrangement and about their circumstances here, whatever they have managed to achieve so far.

Kamala (the mother): The main occasion is that my new man [grandson] is coming to our family. Besides, we thought that if we could come, it would be helpful for them. We also felt that our granddaughter will have our company while her mother is giving birth... She [daughter-in-law] was in hospital for four days; how would she [granddaughter] have managed? We are very happy to see that our son's family is in good order. It's a big thing... And above everything else, we have managed to spend time together. Loneliness is very pathetic, we are getting old, so, we spend most of our time at home while all of our children live abroad.

The quotes above demonstrate some patterns that are common in most of the narrated experiences of visits to Britain that I have collected. This will be further evidenced in subsequent sections of this chapter. Firstly, it is always desired that visits to London should happen. Once the migrants are settled in their host country, they intend, or at least wish, that their relatives would visit them some day. It is an idea that is always in the making. For non-migrants, the current means of communicating over mobile phones and internet apps hardly replace their reciprocal duty to visit their migrant relatives and friends physically and meet them face-to-face. This is also an opportunity to experience in person what they know from the digitally transpired conversations. Secondly, the London visit also comes as a way of giving or receiving approval for the sacrifices and achievements of migration and settlement from the perspective of non-migrant parents or other senior members of the family. In the above example, the visiting parents were clearly content with their son's achievement, as it matched with what they have always expected. A third point here is that the majority of the non-migrant visitors are relatively elderly, retired or nearly retired. On the one hand, migrants go through a lot of hardship over a lengthy period of time before they can finally settle. On the other hand, non-

migrants who fulfil the eligibility criteria to be allowed to visit the United Kingdom are often people who have had a well-recognised job and savings. The fourth point is that, whatever the occasion is, the most important thing is to be able to 'visit them back', in their country of settlement and spend intimate family moments with them. The fifth and final issue arising from the quoted extract above is the subtle way gender and generational dynamics are embedded in the conversation. The parents are visiting their son, reflecting his importance in the Bangladeshi patrilineal society. Notice, too, how Kiran (the father) expresses patrilineal satisfaction that Ranak (the son) has managed his life in Britain well so far. And in Kamala's remark about how her granddaughter would have managed whilst her mother was in hospital giving birth to 'my new man' (the grandson), the idea that Ranak would have stepped in to help does not seem to count.

Whilst family occasions or emergencies such as childbirth, a wedding, or illness are the dominant reasons for visits, on other relatively rare occasions visiting can also happen for organisational purposes. Sometimes, even in the Bangladeshi context, VFR in the diaspora destination of London arises as a side-trip to other purpose, such as a business visit or other purposes (cf. Griffin, 2017). As an illustration of this, I interviewed Habib, a retired banker, in Sylhet. Though he stayed in his relative's house in London and spent most of his time visiting relatives and friends, the actual trigger for his visit was different. Here is how he described it:

My father was one of the founders of the local [in Sylhet] primary school that I attended. Many of its students, even some teachers are now *Londoni* and some of them are well established in London. In 2005, prior to the celebration the 50th year of the school, we sent those *Londonis* who attended or taught at that school a message that we are going to celebrate the golden jubilee of our school, and that we want to raise a fund for further extension/development of the school including modernising the library and laboratory. So, we collected their phone numbers and contacted them. The response was overwhelming. They felt that it's their school. Even the most hard-working Bengali restaurant workers contributed to the fund. They even asked us, just tell us what you need, we will do it. We then proposed that if anyone pays 50,000 Taka (roughly £500), their name will be registered at the school for their life-time as a donor member of the school. That's what we could ask lawfully. A lot of past students and teachers have donated. Even the *Londonis* from other areas of greater Sylhet region contributed. The school in the end managed to raise about one core Taka (£100,000). On top of that, we raised about thirty Lakhs (£30,000) in Bangladesh too. It helped the development of the school to a great extent. We bought more land for the school, raised a new academic building from scratch and started the higher secondary section. We can never underestimate the contribution of the overseas Bangladeshis... There

are now different trusts that raise funds from *Londonis* and work for the development of educational institutions at various levels, including schools and colleges, giving scholarships for students, funding poorer students etc. Overseas Bangladeshis continue to help. Many of the *Londonis* are members of these trusts. They should encourage their children to do the same. Some people do... They [the donors in the diaspora] wanted us to go to London to receive the money that was raised. They also wanted to organise a celebratory event for that. So, they invited two members of the school governing body. I was one of them and I went there for the occasion. We went over there very late and couldn't attend the programme, because it took very long to get our visa.

Habib's example also indicates another relatively less dominant pattern. Sometimes, non-migrant Bangladeshis visit London to attend events that are arranged by the diasporic community. During my fieldwork, I witnessed many events such as the Bengali New Year celebration, music or drama festivals, as well as religious events which are attended by visitors who are invited and sponsored by various diasporic British Bangladeshi organisations. However, those visitors, like Habib, also have relatives and friends in London, who accommodate them, and spend a great deal of time with them. But note also the 'sting in the tail' at the end of the quoted extract; Habib was not able to make it in time because of visa delays. This illustrates the important trope of imbalance and inequality that exist between two sectors of the diaspora – 'home' (non-migrants whose mobility is obstructed) and 'away' (migrants legally settled abroad, many with British Nationality).

5.3 Preparation and Mediation

The preparation for visits is a mutual process for the hosts and the guests. These trips are planned and prepared jointly by the host family and their visitors, meaning there is an active agency of both migrant host and their non-migrant guests. For Debu, a retired college teacher, interviewed in Sylhet, it was very easy:

My preparation was very easy. Because my son was already there. Besides I have a rough idea about life and weather in London. From my conversations with my London residing students over many years, I knew what it would be like. Besides, my son was at the airport to receive me. He had done his preparation for me. I did not have any problem. We got warm clothes from him as soon as we got there.

Although Bangladeshis know that Britain is a cold country weather-wise compared to Bangladesh, there are other mental and physical preparations to make before the actual visit commences. In the extracts below are some further examples drawn from my conversation with the family of Ranak and Renu regarding the types of preparation required before the visit of their parents(-in-law):

We started planning six/seven months ago. Because of the immigration requirement, you have to start planning well ahead. You need to provide six month's bank statements. You know, not just six months, probably I started planning even earlier, eight/nine months ago that I would like them to visit this year... To bring them here for a visit, we have gone through a long process. There are requirements set by the Home Office, certain immigration requirements, which we fulfilled according to their need both here and in Bangladesh. Apart from that, we had to work out mentally too about their arrival. How they would cope with the weather, obviously cold weather, compared to Bangladesh. First two months after their arrival, the weather was steady, not that bad. We knew that winter will come, so we prepared ourselves so that they would not have to face any problem. My parents are getting older, so their health was our priority, they brought all of their regular medications with them, we asked them to bring those. Because getting NHS service [for non-residents] is highly complex unless it is an emergency. I also gathered all the information for private treatment, in case of any problems, for the unexpected. In Bangladesh as well, there were different kinds of preparations, who will take care of our home in their absence, who could be a responsible person, we had to discuss those matters. And what type of clothes they would need, air tickets and many more things we had to go through.

Weather and health are the common aspects that are carefully considered by the visitors. Despite careful preparation, some visitors fell sick. Some of these experiences are evident in the subsequent narratives by other visitors.

Unlike VFR travel to the homeland, where most of the initiative is taken by those who make the trip, for 'reverse' VFR it is not so much the responsibility of the travellers but involves above all the migrant family members and other mediators, including travel agencies. Adams (1987) mentioned in her book that pioneering Bangladeshi/Sylheti seamen established small travel agencies as early as the 1960s, both in London and in Sylhet and Dhaka, to facilitate travels to and from Bangladesh. Today, non-migrants' mobilities in the form of visits and/or family reunification are still mediated by families as well as by the travel agencies. Meantime, the travel agencies have evolved in their work and many are now working as full-blown travel consultancies, meaning they provide a one-stop service that includes helping with the visa application process,

language training and arranging air tickets. In the heart of Sylhet city in Bangladesh, there are many such consultancy/travel agency offices. While walking through the corridors of such offices, I saw a lot of copy visa stickers displayed publicly on notice-boards outside the offices. This is also a form of advertisement of their success aimed at any would-be applicants. Even the British Bangladeshis struggle with the complexity of British immigration rules, which have been and still are changed on a regular basis. British Bangladeshis often encourage their non-migrant relatives and friends to take advice from these consultancies. I interviewed Jagat, a lawyer and head consultant in one of the leading agencies in Sylhet city.

We work like a consultancy. Our services include helping with the application by the spouses of *Londonis*. Now, to go to London on a spouse visa, there is an English language proficiency requirement, such as ESOL or IELTS Life Skills. We provide courses for those qualifications... Family visits to England are the most popular of our services. Compared to other countries, visiting London is more frequent. Even though immigration rules have been tightened significantly over recent years and months, visits to London still happen, however, in smaller number. These prospective visitors are our main clients. They come to us when they intend to make an application. I mean, not just to me or my firm, to other firms who also provide a similar service...

[...]

There are two main aspects of the service. First, we need to gather the documents of the applicant in one file. Second, it is very important to get the necessary documents from the host, their son or daughter or whoever they are: evidence of the relationship, proof of accommodation arrangements, proof of their financial ability to host the visitor/s by providing payslips, bank statements etc. We tell our client here that you need to ask for these documents/evidence from your relative. So, both parties do their part. Our job is to simplify the difficult process of making a visa application. For example, someone may have their assets or business but not all relevant documents are up to date or organised in the way that is required by the consulate. We advise when, where and what is needed to make a successful application. Once they get visa, they are helped by their family in London. They pick them up from the Airport and take it from there. Our job finishes with the purchase of plane tickets.

There are a lot of travel agencies/consultancies in Sylhet, which boomed in proportion with the large number of migrants who went abroad from this region of Bangladesh. Some travel agencies in Sylhet have been helping British Bangladeshis and their non-migrant relatives and friends for many decades. One such travel agency owner, Rabbi, interviewed in Sylhet, said the following about their activities, which reflect the services provided to migrants by one generation after another:

This is our family business. It has been 45 years since our family started it. I have been running it since 2005. Our main service is ticketing. I heard from my father and grandfather that *Londonis* were the main customers of our travel agency, back then. Still now, I get a few very old people come here, once in a while, and look for this travel agency. The other day, a very old guy, a *Londoni*, came in and asked me about my business and our family. He used to buy tickets from us many decades ago... Because the ticketing system is now online worldwide, they can buy tickets from anywhere. Some relatives and people in London who know me, I purchase their return tickets from here and email to them. Most people nowadays come with a return ticket. Sometimes they need to change the dates or need help with seat allocation. We help them with these issues. In the past, many years ago, people used to come with a one-way ticket and bought the return ticket from us. Now it has changed. Only people who are travelling from Bangladesh to visit London or join their family, they purchase plane tickets from us.

[...]

Sometime visiting *Londonis* need 'No Visa Required' approval on their British passport. This is mainly a kind of visa that people need to apply and get in the Bangladesh High Commission in England. However, some people may have to come urgently or did not have enough time to do all this, they are given time-limited entry at the port of arrival on their British Passport. They then need to get their 'No Visa Required' in Bangladesh. You can get these at the passport office, we do this on their behalf or give advice on how to get it done.

Rabbi's account above clarifies further the historical role as well as the changing landscape of travel between the diaspora and home country. Although agents' current services to the visitors have significantly reduced, their historical role of booking airline ticket and providing a personalised service constitute an important part of the nostalgic memoryscapes of the first-generation British Bangladeshis, as discussed in the previous chapter.

5.4 Limited 'Network Capital' and 'Involuntary Immobilities'

The starkest contrast with the European examples of VFR mobilities cited earlier is perhaps the lack of freedom of movement for the non-migrant British Bangladeshis. While globalisation, fast communication and cheap air travel may have made it easier to move for some people, it is not the case for many others. Mobilities do not flow evenly in an apparently frictionless world. There is an inherent 'politics of mobility' (Cresswell, 2006, 2010, 2013) that determine who can move and who cannot. According to Cresswell, there are hierarchies within mobilities. Those at the top can move from place to place with relative ease, comfort and higher frequency; on the other hand, there is a kinetic underclass at the bottom, who are sometimes forced to move when

they do not want to or are prevented when they do want to, so their travel is highly regulated. It is relatively much harder to overcome the friction of distance by the kinetic underclass. The attribution of frictions is highly political. Borders and bordering policies do not apply equally to all in all places. Access to 'network capital', particularly the visa, is crucial to overcome frictions. In an unequal transnational context, such as Bangladesh, the politics of mobility are highly at play, where many non-migrant members of the kinetic underclass do not have access to network capital. Even for those who have enough financial ability, a highly supportive network of relatives and friends and good reasons for visits, most of them are denied a visa by the increasingly hostile British immigration system. This inability can also be termed as 'involuntary immobility' (Carling, 2002). The corporeal movement of non-migrant Bangladeshi relatives and friends, unlike the 'global kinetic elite' (Urry, 2007), is highly restricted. This can exclude them in most cases from taking part in co-present social and cultural activity with their relatives and friends who live in a distant country. Below is the example of one elderly mother, Banu whom I interviewed at her home in Sylhet:

My daughter is in London. She lives there for 16 years. She has a daughter. They both visited me a long time ago. She could not come to visit me ever since she gave birth to a son, my grandchild, because he is disabled. She cannot travel long distances with the boy. So, she wanted me to go and visit her in London instead. We very much wanted this to happen. She tried wholeheartedly for me. It was back in 2006. I was refused. Because, they were not earning enough money to officially prove that they can afford to host me. I am a widow. I have my assets, but I don't have salary or bank statements. I felt really sad. I still feel bad remembering it. She hoped very much to have me over there. She was heartbroken too. We still continue to talk, Skype and WhatsApp each other. Nevertheless, it was one of the saddest moments of our relationship [crying].

British Bangladeshis get equally upset when their relatives are denied a visa. Maya, a British-Bangladeshi woman whom I quoted in the previous chapter, wanted her Bangladeshi father to be present at her brother's wedding in London. He was denied the visa. Her account below reflects a common feeling of shared grief among migrants and non-migrants:

When my brother got married here, I wanted my father as a guardian to be here. And we applied for the visa and got refused because they thought he would never go back. My father had his whole life made up over there. At that stage, if he came out of his community, he would not survive in this country's environment, he will be like a fish out of the water, you know... We feel gutted, absolutely gutted and helpless. I myself

am an amateur, I am not saying I am not an adult, but getting someone married off is a big thing in my culture. I organised everything halfway through, and then my brother picked up the rest. My brother is not old either. We needed somebody to guide us. And in our culture, we need a *murobbi* or guardian, which we did not have. That's a big, big gap. All three of us siblings feel it to this day. They point their finger that we did not have any guardian. So, it was sort of disrespectful to the bride's party, the in-laws, that they have to deal with us, kids. Whereas the in-laws, they had everybody there. Maybe, it does not make any difference in Western culture, but it does in our culture. We cannot eliminate it, just like that. My mum never wanted to come. My dad wanted to come and explore the country that he heard so much about. And it's very disappointing, especially when it's a family occasion and he got refused. My dad even made his suits, tailor-made suits to wear at his youngest son's wedding. He couldn't do that. He was heart-broken. It's just a human thing really to go and visit each other like everybody does. In Western culture, they go and visit wherever they want; it's easy for them, and it's not easy for us. We really want to do that. It's also good to know a different country and culture, so you take good things back with you.

Who meets the immigration requirements and who does not is not always easy to understand. Anowar, interviewed in Sylhet, is a non-migrant Bangladeshi, retired recently from his political and business career. His in-laws live in Britain, and he has visited twice before. However, he and his wife were then refused for a third time even though they had a pressing reason for wanting to visit London. He said this: a long quotation which I give in full in order to give full voice to his hurt and angry feelings:

I visited London in 2006 and in 2008. I applied to visit again last year [in 2016]. They did not approve my visa. This is the wrong thing that they are doing. They preach us about Human Rights. I think this is against Human Rights. If you don't let us visit our relatives, you clearly deny our fundamental rights. I was very upset. They developed an inhumane system, where they would not even see you in person. They would always talk about human rights violation in our country. In reality, they don't give a shit about human rights. My mother-in-law was about to die. She was on her death-bed. The doctors in London provided a letter to explain that. And yet my wife was denied a visa to go and see her for the last time. This is a really mean, pathetic, inhumane and highly condemnable act by the British High Commission. If I had the right, I would have taken them to court. We then applied only for my wife's visit visa; her brother has sent his bank statements from London that show that he has £72,000 in cash to support her stay. She was that much desperate to go and see her dying mother in London for the last time. Yet again, they did not allow her to go. My brother-in-law is a rich businessman. He owns multiple houses in London. There is no doubt about his financial ability to host his sister in London. And her visa was denied in a second attempt. Now you tell me, how is that humane, where is her human rights?
[...]

Generally speaking, Britain is a nice country. They have better law and order than us. Everything is disciplined and works in an orderly fashion. Nobody would disagree with that. They are a lot better country than us for most of the things. But they should not be so inhumane. Particularly, they should understand a patient's condition better before denying their relative's visa. It's a digital age now. It doesn't take time to

enquire or verify things. It needs a few clicks. Genuine applicants should be considered more carefully.

[...]

There is a common thing that they say on every refusal. It reads, 'I am not satisfied'. It's an insulting sentence. It means to me, who cares, or we don't give a damn about you! Humane reasons must be considered. If someone wants to visit your country just for the sake of a visit, it's up to you to decide. However, if someone has a serious reason like we had, you must consider that. The doctors in your own country would not fake it! The banks in your own country wouldn't fake it! Who else would you trust then? In my opinion, it is a criminal offence. A woman's mother is dying, the doctor has confirmed in writing, yet you don't allow her in. That's a crime. Besides, we are nearly retired. Why would someone at our age risk everything that we have here just to stay in the UK? Also, regardless of how rich I am, we have certain social respect and expectation of us. No one would expect me to stay there unlawfully and work in a restaurant. But I don't think they understand these things very well.

[...]

If they are so concerned about the visitors' return, they can strengthen the regulations even further that makes sure that everyone is returned. But don't stop people going there indiscriminately. I know there used to be dodgy marriages and arrangements. It's very rare nowadays. It's a shameful thing, even by Bangladeshi standards. Now the marriages with a *Londoni* bride or groom do not happen in great number, and however many happen, they take place on a fair basis. Yet, most of them get refused and spend a lot of time appealing it before reuniting with their *Londoni* husband or wife. I mean, before refusing a visa, do a fair investigation. Don't just say, 'I am not satisfied'. They have ruled us for two centuries. They should understand our society and culture. British Bangladeshis are not a bunch of thieves. They are not stealing anything or begging on the streets of Britain. They are working hard, doing business and contributing to the country's economic growth. They and their relatives deserve to be treated with some decency. The family members, except the spouse, can no longer immigrate to the UK. They have stopped that long ago. Now don't deprive them of visiting them. There should be easier provision that allow people to visit their family members and relatives back and forth without so much hassle... the documentary evidences they ask for are worthless. Even if you do provide all the documents that are listed, that will not necessarily satisfy them. Then can simply say, 'I am not satisfied'. What's the point of asking for all these? I think, they should throw away all this nonsense and instead, make it easier to visit but do whatever it takes to ensure the return. People must come back, I agree 100%.

Anowar was so frustrated that I did not know what to say; he just continued with this, to my mind, completely justified diatribe of complaint. His frustration is also shared by other visitors who, despite meeting all the requirements, even the wealthiest people are randomly denied a visit visa to London regardless of their affordability or previous visiting record. This also reaffirms the importance of network capital in addition to economic and cultural capital, as Urry (2007) argued, in maintaining social relationships that are fur-flung, particularly when these relationships transcend societal/national boundaries. Being unable to access or having their access to network capital blocked by

the state acts and actors, leads to the very form of social exclusion, in the Bangladeshi case, that Urry described. Kishore, interviewed in Sylhet, a well-known businessman in Sylhet, who visited Britain on multiple occasions, said:

People should be allowed to visit their friends and relatives in London. But the immigration rules are a big concern for us. I know a lot of people who are rich and can easily afford to visit. They are not getting their visa approved... It is important for my relationship with my sisters and friends. We care for each other a lot. Visits make it easy for us to maintain a good relationship.

The travel agents/consultants have the first-hand experience of dealing with the prospective visitors who are refused a visa. For them too, this pattern of indiscriminate refusals is beyond their understanding. These immigration decisions to not issue a visitor's visa by the British High Commission in Bangladesh are neither logical nor legal in most cases, meaning most of those decisions were later overturned by the British judges. The travel consultancies commonly mentioned that they used to appeal against these refusals in the British Court by submitting a paper hearing or appointing a partner lawyer in London to represent their clients from Bangladesh. The majority of the cases refused by the immigration officials in the British High Commission in Bangladesh were overturned in the Court of Appeal in the UK. But, to make matters worse, the right to legal challenge has been removed by the recent changes in the immigration rules, leaving the non-migrant relatives and friends helpless and at the mercy of the immigration officials. Jagat, whom I quoted before, explains his experience of dealing with such cases:

It is not easy to get the visitor's visa now-a-days. To be honest, you get one shot at this. Their decision is final. And if you are unfortunate and have been refused once, it is very unlikely that you will succeed again anytime soon. Sometimes, they will just hold your application and kill the moment. I mean, you might get the visa but by the time you get it, your nephew's wedding or grandson's ritual is over. From my experience of more than a decade of handling these cases, I have seen about 80% of the refused applicants were able to win their case in a court of appeal and get the visa in the end. It means a great proportion of the immigration decisions that were made by the immigration officials of the British High Commission were proven wrong at court. Now they have withdrawn your right to go to court in the first place. It's like a one-stop control system. Obviously, you can apply again, but it is very expensive to make one application, the fees have seen dramatic increases in recent years. Also, they are the very people who refused your application before, so the chances are very slim that you get an approval from them again.

Jagat's account summarises the immigration rule changes over the last few years and the creation of a hostile environment. The term as well as the policy of 'Hostile Environment' was introduced by Theresa May in 2012, who was the British Home Secretary back then and it means that, 'in theory, denying basic rights and services to irregular migrants is supposed to force the issue of return' (Price, 2014). Hostile environment is a form of extreme immigration control system that disproportionately targets 'suspect populations' (Bowling and Westenra, 2018) both domestically and transnationally through different institutions. The central focus of the policy is 'return'. Domestically, it is designed to force irregular migrants to return home. Transnationally, it is designed to prevent anyone from coming in who is suspected that they will not go back if he/she is given an entry visa. It gives immigration officials an immense amount of power that can be used and abused. The above accounts of different Bangladeshi visitors, their British relatives and friends as well as the mediators demonstrate how a hostile environment policy affects individuals, families and minority diasporic communities transnationally. It is widely acknowledged by British Bangladeshis and their relatives and friends that the visa refusal ratio has significantly increased recently. Those who manage to get the visa often express their gratitude and praise God for using an invisible power to make that happen. Hence, some visits still indeed happen, though in a much smaller number compared to other transnational contexts. Now, I look into the experiences of those who visited in greater detail.

5.5 Accommodation

Accommodation occupies a large part of the tourism literature, which basically addresses VFR as a form of touristic activity. Commercial accommodation use by visitors is one of the important issues considered by tourism scholars. Cheap or free accommodation attracts or encourages relatives and friends to visit their counterparts. This can be evidenced widely in the existing VFR studies in the EU context. As we saw in the previous chapter, British Bangladeshis occasionally stayed in hotels and or in resorts in rented accommodation while visiting remote or non-local parts of Bangladesh. However, the case of relatives and friends visiting London and staying in commercial accommodation is very rare. Even when the visitors travel to a different town or city

during their stay in the UK, they often match that with a relative or friend who lives there or nearby. In the absence of such arrangements, they are always accompanied by their host in touring such distant sites or attractions. This is to say that commercial accommodation is not a significant issue at play when it comes to non-migrant Bangladeshi relatives' and friends' visits to Britain. For example, Selim, interviewed in Sylhet, a Bangladeshi who visited his relatives and friends in London responds:

There is no way you can stay in a hotel in London. Because during my visit there was a competition among my relatives to host me at their house.

Another participant, Anowar, whom I quoted in the previous section, thinks:

In our Bengali culture, however poor someone is, however difficult it is, he or she will always be hosting their relatives at their home. They shouldn't need to show thousands of pounds in their bank account to prove it. No British Bangladeshi has ever put a visiting relative or friend in a hotel. If you don't believe me, then prove me wrong!

The quotations above reflect the reciprocal hospitality and warmth that British Bangladeshis receive when they visit Bangladesh. This is, however, more applicable to the first-generation British Bangladeshis who are more or less aligned culturally with the heritage of their home country and society. In other respects, fulfilling the reciprocal obligation of hosting relatives and friends at home and showing care is not as easy within the diaspora as it is in Bangladesh.

We know from the rather different geographical context of hosting friends, children and grandchildren by the retired British migrants in Southern Europe that visits can sometime be stressful, particularly when the guests stay for longer periods, and can cause a strain on the household resources and amenities (Williams, King, Warnes and Patterson, 2000). Though this issue was never explicitly spoken about by my participants, the strain on household spaces and everyday routines for the British-Bangladeshi hosts was sometimes implicitly evident. Taking care of the guest, balancing family and work life, is not without difficulties. In cases where the host family has not been able to manage time off from work, they have to find other relatives and friends who are available to take care of the guests. I have seen examples of many families and individuals hosting and accompanying the visitors by taking turns. Besides, the socio-

economic capability and the inherent power imbalances within and beyond the transnational family, are always at play behind the scenes. On the one hand, the British Bangladeshis are considered by their Bangladeshi visitors economically better-off than them, at least by the Bangladeshi standard. On the other hand, the hosts sometimes find it difficult to accommodate additional people within their limited housing arrangements, and hosting relatives stretches their financial resources. In addition to that, the host families often have children, who often are not very comfortable with the interruption and encroachment of their everyday living spaces by visiting relatives whom they do not necessarily feel very close to. As can be observed in the subsequent sections as well as throughout this thesis, both visiting non-migrants and their British-born relatives do not have intimate personal connections with each other. It is the first generations who work as the guide and guardian for the visitors. From my fieldwork experience, the second or third-generation individuals whom I interviewed and had conversations with, very rarely have experience of close interaction or guiding experience with the visitors. Although the prevailing moral and cultural obligation requires the British-Bangladeshi hosts to accommodate, accompany and guide their guests throughout their stay, it is not without familial tensions and financial stress. This is often noted by the relatives and friends who visited more than once. A few of my participants explained that their first visits were much warmer and cordial, and supported socially and financially by the hosts. However, they saw a reduction of that intimate care, support and hospitality during their second and/or third visits.

5.6 Experience of the Visitors

Socialising, connecting and reconnecting, and spending intimate time with relatives and friends are central in VFR experience in almost all cases. Besides, there are other place-specific experiences too. As can be seen in Mueller's (2015, pp.626–627) study, German visitors to their friends in London were attracted and excited by the cosmopolitan environment, especially that offered by London as a global, vibrant multicultural city. Taking visitors to iconic touristic spaces and places by their hosts is a common practice in London. Bangladeshi visitors in London are also mesmerised by many aspects of the city life, though their impressions are somewhat different from those of German or

other European visitors due to geographical as well as cultural differences. This can be evidenced in their narratives. In the case of Bangladeshis, visiting relatives and friends in Britain is a very rich and fulfilling experience for the protagonists. In this longer section, I address some of the examples from my participants who have visited Britain. I begin with the experiences of visiting parents, retired school teachers Kiran and Kamala, who featured earlier as the visitors to Ranak and Renu.

Kiran: Well, we have visited the special sites, such as the bridge [Tower Bridge], the palace [Tower of London], Thames River and walked through the tunnel there, even the bridge road was lifted while we were there. Then, we visited Brahma Mondir [temple], the queen's house [Buckingham Palace], Parliament, the Mayor's office and many parks... we might visit the British Museum too, if the weather is in our favour... Besides, I was given a special reception jointly in a restaurant in the Dockland. It was published in the local newspapers too.

Kamala: It was great. We never thought of getting something like that. That our former students can prepare something like that over here, was beyond our imaginations.

Ranak: You have seen it on Facebook, my dad and mum got a reception by their former students, about 200 of them, they gave them a lot of gifts.

Kiran: When I was sitting there among them, I felt like I am at home. I forgot for that moment that I am in London. I felt like, I am in my own environment, surrounded by students... My teaching life has become fruitful, I have never thought that my students would still remember me in that way. Students from the '60s, '70s or '80s have come to see me, these are all my old students.

For Kiran and Kamala, visiting London was much more than just spending intimate family time with their son's family or visiting places. They managed to connect with their past students far away from their country. They even felt at home while on their visit in London. The distant place and space of London became a space of familiarity that gave them a sense of close connection and comfort. Their sense of feeling 'wanted' and 'loved' is common among other visiting teachers. Debu, another retired teacher, has also seen many of his past students who have migrated to London.

An important part of my London experience was also meeting my students. I have been a teacher in a Sylhet college, a lot of my students are in London now. In 2015, when I went to visit London, they gave me a huge official reception. They have talked about their past as my student, flooded me with praise, though I am not sure if I really would qualify for all this. However, I was overwhelmed... All these things were very joyful for me. I enjoyed every moment over there.

Most of the non-migrants have a generally positive view of their experience of London visits, especially noting the natural landscapes, parks, the tourist sites and attractions most frequently visited. Debu continued with his experience of visits:

My visiting experience is very positive. They [Britain] are well ahead of us in various ways. I have visited so many sites. I can't name all of them now. I have been to most of the well-known attractions. I was overwhelmed by the hospitality I have received in London. I knew that Bangladeshis in London work very hard and are very busy with their life. Nevertheless, they managed to give me so much time that I could not believe. They used to do that in turn. For example, someone would accompany me over the weekends, someone else would do on Monday and Tuesday, another person would do another two days of the week. In that way, I was never alone. They were with me every day of the week, every week. As I am a teacher, the most important thing for me was to visit Cambridge and Oxford Universities. My teaching life would have been incomplete if I had not visited those universities.

Whilst the teachers' recollections emphasise the warmth of the reception and almost a sense of feeling 'at home' during their London sojourns, for other participants the most striking things were the differences in society, culture, class and lifestyle. Here, Sriti, interviewed in Sylhet, reflects on her impressions after visiting her married sister in London:

Everything is different over there. Their food and culture are very different from ours. I liked everything except one thing. The way we maintain intimate relationship with our relatives, like uncles, cousins, grandparents etc.; they [British people] do not do that. They are more into themselves, the relatives don't matter very much for them. They live a very personal life. But everything else was very enjoyable. I liked all the sightseeing, museums, parks and beaches. Their transport system, safety and everything are amazing. I especially like the fact that ordinary working-class people or even poor people can afford to buy branded things like clothes, cosmetics, mobile phones etc. For example, everyone can afford a dress from Next but in our country, poor people cannot afford brand names. I mean, their society is more equal compared to us. In our country, you can identify the rich people by their smell, outlook, attitude and arrogance. It is a lot less in Britain, I think. Everyone can own a car over there. In our country, only rich people own a car. Also, no work is disrespectful over there. No one can insult you or undermine you depending on where you work or what kind of work you do for a living. People have more respect and dignity regardless of their class. We don't have that in Bangladesh.

From Sriti and most others' narratives, it can be generalised that there is a pattern of comparing and contrasting their experiences during their visits to Britain. Her experience also is reflective of not only the physical aspects of the city but also the

differences in social-cultural practices between Western and less-developed countries. Whilst, in this case, it is mostly positive, this not always the case.

The occurrence of weddings in diasporic families is one of the most common occasions when both migrants and non-migrants feel the utmost necessity to be physically present. The visit visas are sought frequently for attending these weddings. Diasporic British Bangladeshis' weddings have distinctive characteristics that are different from both those of the host and home society. This has not escaped notice by the visiting relatives and friends. Aziz, interviewed in Sylhet, had the following observations about Bangladeshi weddings in London, where he draws broader comparisons in terms of social, economic and cultural practices in Bangladesh and in the diaspora:

Bengali weddings in London have a subtle difference for us. They combine both English and Bengali elements. For example, in a wedding in Bangladesh, both bride and groom act very shy and keep quiet all the time. Even when they sit together on the stage, they don't look at each other. In London, it's different. They both enjoy the occasion, sometimes even dance. There are white guests too. They seem to like Bengali weddings a lot. In Bangladesh, marriages are still arranged sometimes by the families with their consent. In the Bangladeshi community in London, bride and groom choose each other. They have a prior relationship or understanding before their respective families jump in. Also, the bride and groom often do the planning of the wedding ceremony themselves like choosing the dates and venues. In Bangladesh, it is still done by the senior members of the family. However, the presence of the guardians and their blessings, hosting people and other rituals are similar. Food is also similar. Nevertheless, I enjoyed it. It is very organised and done in a timely fashion. In Bangladesh, a wedding ceremony can drag on till midnight. The guests are often late. From this point, a Bengali wedding in London is much better. People are on time. All formalities are completed as planned... It felt like it is a lot more expensive to organise a wedding in London. For example, an average-quality wedding in Bangladesh would cost you about £15,000. In London, you need about £50,000 to do a similar event. It is much more expensive.

Lipu visited England between 2008 and 2010. He went on a working-holiday visa [not offered any longer] that allowed him to work for one year and do holidaying for another year. Back in Sylhet, he runs his own small business. He has a very different experience to share. As he says:

I spent a year holidaying. I have a lot of relatives and childhood friends who are now settled in cities across Britain. So, I spent a month in one city and another in a different city. I visited almost all parts of the country, London, Kent, Brighton, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Liverpool, you name it. Though, I spent the highest

amount of time in Scotland. I liked the night outs in Edinburgh. I made some new friends over there and we used to go to night clubs together. I enjoy my drinks. I had a bit of that habit from Bangladesh. But you cannot drink publicly in Bangladesh. In England, I was free to drink openly whenever I wanted. I had a lot more freedom... Night life in Britain was the most amazing thing for me. Going out, drinking in the pub, trying out different food, spending time in night clubs was memorable for me. I know, we are Bengali and like to eat curry, rice and fish etc., but I liked eating donner kebab, hot-dogs, rolls, pastries over there. I miss the croissants in the morning. These things are not common in Bangladesh. Let's say, during the day, I would grab something from McDonalds or fish-and-chips, things like that. I liked Turkish restaurants too.

For Lipu, the experiences of lengthy visits constitute a nostalgic memory of travelling and enjoying life in a distant country with a very different culture: an experience that he still vividly remembers. His 'memoriscapes' of travelling round to different parts of the UK are so very different from British Bangladeshis' memories of their homeland, redolent with sylvan images of rural life and nature-dominated environments, which were evocatively recounted by participants in the previous chapter. For Lipu, his memoriscapes of Britain ten years earlier are an urban landscape of pubs and clubs, and 'foodscapes' of fish-and-chips and donner kebabs. But these are not the only contrasts. Like many other Bangladeshi visitors, he goes on to compare his experience of making lengthy visits to Britain with life in his home country, Bangladesh:

If you spend time in a country for a couple of years, you start to realise what are the differences with your country. In Britain, it's a lot more peaceful and quiet life. You do your job, go home and relax. You don't have to hear the cars beeping on the street constantly. In England, people don't beep their car unnecessarily. I find it very disturbing in Bangladesh that all drivers are pressing the horn indiscriminately. Vehicles on the streets here in Bangladesh do not follow any rules, no lanes, no signals, nothing. In Bangladesh, no one wears seatbelts in their car, including the driver. These are the huge differences. In the UK, you can take your children to school without being worried about the danger on the street from reckless drivers. Here in Bangladesh, when my wife goes to drop or pick up my daughter from school, I worry about their safety.

In the admittedly very different geographical case of Latvian migrants in Guernsey, Lulle (2014, p.166) explained how listening to the native language of the migrants in the streets of the host country can create a sense of home away from home. Earlier, I have explained how visiting Bangladeshi teachers can feel at 'home' in London with the overwhelming welcome from their former students. This can be evidenced further with the experiences of familiarity and connection within diasporic city spaces, such as the

streets of Tower Hamlets, the curry houses, corner shops, Bengali groceries and elsewhere. British Bangladeshis do not just host their guests, they also work as tourist guides for the visitors. Having the company of relatives and friends while sight-seeing in a far-away country provides an additional incentive and a sense of security for the Bangladeshi visitors. Selim, interviewed in Sylhet, visited England twice and had the following to say:

I visited England in 1991 and 1993 to visit my relatives and to see the country. I went to many places in London. Also, I visited Oxford, Cambridge and Bath. To me, London looked like an old city with narrow roads compared to New York. Bath was very nice and with better natural views than London. I felt most importantly that during my visits, my relatives were very caring. They would worry about everything. Having continuous company and assistance when visiting your relatives in a far-away country is very important.

As explained earlier, a lot of visitors are in their later stages of life, either retired or about to retire, or an established businessman in late adulthood. In many cases, the visitor has almost all of their childhood friends migrated to London. For example, for Kishore, a well-known businessman whom I quoted before, visiting London is not just about spending time with relatives, this brings also a rare opportunity for him to get together with his long-lost school friends, connecting and reconnecting with them:

My two sisters live in London. I went to see them. You know the term *Jamai-ador* [the way a groom is hosted by brides' parents]; visiting London for me is similar to that special treatment. I have some friends whom I have not seen in the last 15 years or so. I got to see them. They all want to host me. I have visited USA, Canada and many other countries. However, London is a special place. It means a lot to me, it's a place where I can meet my siblings, uncles, aunts and numerous childhood friends. When I went in 2012, it was Boisakhi Mela [Bengali new year celebration] time in London. My cousin was with me. I spent all day at the Mela. Because I kept meeting a lot of old friends, some of them were school friends. It seemed to me that I went back to my childhood for a day. It is a surprise that I love. This is the thing I go there for, to meet those long-lost friends... My visits to London also reunite other friends. It brings them all together. I do this by WhatsApp. I am very good at this. I communicate with a lot of them regularly and ask them for a get together when I am in London.

Beyond the physical attractions, architecture and people, London also offer distinctive tastes and flavours. The curry houses in London offer certain dishes that are not always available in Bangladesh. As Kishore explains:

The food is special in London. I go there to eat lamb dishes. I love them. We don't have lamb dishes [in Bangladesh]. They are very rare over here and not comparable quality-wise. Whenever I go to London, I eat a lot of lamb/mutton. I just love eating lamb...

Gony, interviewed in Sylhet, explains his sense of place while in London based on his experiences of visiting the UK on multiple occasions, including the spaces of Brick Lane and other shopping places. Through his experience of distinctive cultural spectacles like New Year's fireworks on the river bank in Westminster, Gony also highlights important differences in the perceptions of gender relations and gendered roles between his host and home countries:

The most interesting thing for me was Brick Lane. It doesn't seem like London. You see a lot of Bangladeshis. You can hear people speaking in Bangali. People are eating *paan* [chewing leaves] like they do over here. They have Bangladeshi and Pakistani *paan* shops. I had some *paan*. It was very nice... I visited a lot of places in London, Birmingham and Manchester. During my nephew's wedding, I went to Newcastle with him. I also went to see one of my relatives in Leicester. I liked the London Eye very much. You can see the city from above. It's amazing. I also went for sauna and swimming. I did not know what sauna was. It was a great experience! Mostly, one of my relatives would drive to places. But we used National Rail too. The train journey was great. It is much faster and more enjoyable than ours in Bangladesh. You can see the actual difference and why are they called a developed country.

[...]

When I went with my family, enjoyed a special day, you call it 31st night. My wife and kids were mesmerised on that day. We went to the bank of the River Thames and stayed there for a long time. The fireworks were spectacular. We have never seen anything like that in our entire life. It was so huge and went on for so long, we will never forget that. My kids were literally jumping for joy in the crowd. Before we went to the fireworks, we spent all day touring around the city, eating out. It was a very special day... I like the fact that everyone is busy with themselves. For example, one couple is standing over there and busy chatting with each other. Other people are walking past them. One party is not looking at the other. They are doing their own things and not bothered about what others are doing. It's nice. In our country, if someone stands on the street and talks to another person, especially if it is between a girl and boy or between a man and woman, all others will stop and look at them in a wierd way. They don't have that in London. Everyone is free to do as they wish without others staring at them. They mind their own business. That's impressive...

The historical transition and development of cities and places was also captured in the experiences of Bangladeshi visitors. Hakim, an elderly man in a Sylhet village, said:

I visited London twice. Once my sister invited me. Second time, it was my nephew who asked me to go. I went in 1992. London was a lot less crowded then, a lot of free spaces. I don't know how it is now, I have not been there recently. I know only from what I hear from my relatives. The difference with Bangladesh was huge back then. Our

country was very poor, roads were not paved in the villages, transportation was rare. Here, in the village, people mostly walked from one place to another. Now it has all changed. Bangladesh has developed significantly in the last 20 years. Back then, you could not even compare Britain with Bangladesh. It would have been irrelevant. Now you can compare; how bad we are and in what ways [laugh].

In the previous chapter, we saw how age and generation played a role in visits to Bangladesh. Taking children on visits to their ancestral country at a 'right age' is important to their parents. The retired individuals who get to visit Britain also have regrets about not being able to make the trip earlier when their body would have coped with the extended visits much better. After all, most visitors from Sylhet have a lot of relatives and friends to meet, numerous invitations to accept, which becomes difficult because of their age and health. Habib has also visited London twice, waiting until he was retired. He says:

I wish, I could have taken a leave and visited London earlier. Numerous people from my area live in London. Even if I meet one person for ten minutes, still, two or three months would not be enough to meet them all. I had the list. My brother said to me on the first day in London, there are so many invitations and people to meet. You cannot do it without making a list. You need to visit at least eight houses in a day, if you want to accept all invitations and finish them all in two months. I managed to go to 60 houses in the end. You know, it was impossible to have a meal in every house I visited. In many houses, I just had a tea. In between visiting the families, I also visited Brighton, Surrey, Coventry and Birmingham too. I could not manage to go other cities. So, to do all this and at the same time visiting all the people, was very hard.

As his first visit was somewhat unfulfilling or unfinished, Habib visited London a second time. During his second visit, he chose to go for a longer period of time and be more independent and adventurous in order to have, in his view, a more authentic experience of London and its way of life:

During my first visit, I travelled mostly in my relative's car from house to house and place to place. Second time, I chose to use public transport instead and went anywhere I wished. I wanted to go around independently to learn and experience things by myself. Using the underground trains was a good experience. I was there for four months. I learned the difference in service with Bangladesh. It's like day and night, very different. Trains and buses are coming every few minutes. The arrival times are displayed and updated on the electronic board. So, nothing to worry about. You know when it is coming. The buses run all night regardless of the passenger numbers. I bought a day travel card and spent all day wandering around, eating out, sight-seeing and returned to my brother's house before midnight. I did all this independently and learned how the commuting works in London. I noted all the basic information in my diary, like which train goes to where, which bus number to take etc. I went to some of

my relatives' houses by train/bus alone. It was really the best way to experience London. If you are always in a car with your relative, you can't enjoy the real London experience, you cannot go to as many places as you like by car. For anyone who can read and speak English, it should not be difficult at all. Everything is clearly written, instructed and well-directed by sign-posts. Besides, there is the map, no reason to get lost.

Amongst my participants, a few visiting Bangladeshis fell sick while in London. It is hardly surprising due to the fact that most of them are in their older age, and there is an abrupt change in climatic conditions. This happened to Habib during his second visit. His account of his hospital experience also highlights the differences in treatment and care for the people of his generation and others between the two countries; there is a stark contrast with the experiences of the first generation British Bangladeshis who visit Sylhet in their old ages:

I ran out of some of my medication. And I had problems in my stomach and started to bleed seriously. My nephew then called an ambulance. I was in hospital for five days. I can never forget the level of service I received. The hospital was extremely clean, it did not seem to me that I was in a hospital. I was very lucky to have survived. What a great system and service they have. We can only dream of it in Bangladesh. It is not that we don't have all the things that are needed to provide this kind of service. But it is just a broken system and our mentality is to blame. The funny thing is, visiting time and visitor numbers in hospitals over there [in London] are strictly restricted. I went from Bangladesh to visit London, so, all the people I knew became worried and a lot of them came to see me in hospital. But very few of them were allowed to come and see me. I updated everyone by text message. Anyway, my point is, other patients in my ward were really surprised and wondered who I am and why so many people come to see me! It was very different for me. They follow the rules strictly. In our country, people don't follow the rules. They would have come in whenever they wanted...I was very touched by the warmth and help that I received from my relatives and friends.

Some Bangladeshi visitors also narrated their experiences of how their cultural practices have been mirrored in the diaspora by their relatives and friends, and their British-born children there. The similarities, as well as distinctions in cultural practices, including religious rituals, were very noticeable to them. Kishore makes following observation on British Bangladeshis' religiosity:

Bangladeshis and their children seem more religious in London, they do their prayers more regularly than we do in Bangladesh. It's a good thing. They are going to mosques more regularly than us.

While Bangladeshis are impressed with level of religiosity, including regular prayers, in the everyday life of their diasporic relatives and friends, they also expressed their disappointments with the lack of festivity during key religious and cultural occasions like Eid. Gony explains how this was experienced during one of his visits in the UK:

I visited Britain three times, in 2007, 2009 and 2014. The country is beautiful. When I went there for the first time in 2007, I spent the Ramadan and Eid there. The celebration of Eid was very different. People did the morning prayer for the Eid and then went back to their respective job. I was left alone. And I have never felt so lonely before. It did not feel like Eid. In our country, Eid is very special event, a holiday, an occasion when family and friends get together, wear new dresses and eat good food all day long. It's a very happy day. But it did not feel anywhere near like that in London.

While VFR brings the opportunity to maintain a close relationship with one's network of friends and relatives transnationally, this can create hidden tensions between parties and bring stress on them too. Elsewhere in the literature, there are examples of grandchildren visiting their grandparents too frequently (King, Warnes and Williams, 2000), or cases where visiting friends and relatives are almost completely occupying the hosts' weekends and not receiving expected reciprocal hospitality (Mueller, 2015). In some cases, visits can be an 'encounter of unhappiness and emotional congestion' (Lulle, 2014, p.166), or the hosts bemoan 'the loss of privacy and the need to share private home spaces with their guest' (Shani and Uriely, 2012, p.428). These outcomes can occasionally happen in the British-Bangladeshi context too. Meeting the expectations of the guests is not always achievable. During my fieldwork, I noticed that the visitors are getting bored at home because their hosts had to work and therefore were not able to take them to places. Also, in the absence of much active agency on the part of the visitors, their hosts often have to choose what type of food to serve, which places to take them to, what time is more suitable, and so on. In so doing, there is a hidden tension of 'are we doing it right' or whether they are proving to be hospitable enough. For example, Anowar was not happy with the lack of English foods being offered:

I did not have English food. I regret that. I was always with my Bangladeshi relatives and friends. That means, I always had Bengali food. I was always accompanied and guided by my relatives. I travelled mostly in their car, stayed in their houses and had Bengali food.

Aziz is another Bangladeshi who visited his London-residing daughters and son. He is also one of the non-migrants who visited London on multiple occasions, three times. He made the following remarks, where he expresses a mixture of disappointments, admiration as well as the cultural differences:

I did not get to see the actual British food. But I have noticed that in London, people like eating out in restaurants. They do that a lot more than us. Also, I noticed that people in London keep their house tidy. They love cleanliness. That is a good thing. Not cooking at home regularly also contributes to that, I guess.

[...]

The main difference I found is that they are a Christian country and we are a Muslim country. Apart from that, I can't say anything bad about them. They are very developed in all aspects of life. I would say, their society is also more liberal than ours. They are more accepting or willing to accept difference. I am saying this because, if this was not the case, then hundreds of thousands of Bengalis would not have been able to live there. From my experience, Bangladeshi people in London are living a good peaceful life without trouble. That's why I think, British people must be good people.

Cultural contrast is significant and rather obvious between British and Bangladeshi societies and readily identified by visiting Bangladeshis like Aziz above. These perceived cultural differences, both positive and negative, evidenced throughout the accounts of the Bangladeshi visitors in the UK, are rather different from the narratives or the experiences of intra-European VFR mobilities and the associated experiences of the visitors.

5.7 Gifts and materialities

In the previous chapter, I discussed the purchase of gifts as a part of the preparation for visiting Bangladesh, where it was observed that British Bangladeshis always take suitcases full of gifts. This has always been a common practice. Non-migrant Bangladeshis who visit their relatives and friends in London also bring gifts with them. Exchanging gifts is a reciprocal process during visiting as well as hosting, both in Bangladesh and London. While British Bangladeshis tend to take perfumes, cosmetics and electronic things including laptops and mobile phones; non-migrants take mostly traditional Bangladeshi items, such as handicrafts, traditional dresses and foods that are not always available or expensive to buy in Britain. Debu, a visitor, explains his experience of exchanging gifts:

We mostly gift them food items from Bangladesh. There are some favourite local items, like *Satkora* [a special flavoured citrus], *Naga Morich* [extremely hot chillies] and dried fish. They like to have them. Personally, the best gift is to be able to see them after a long time. Seeing them face-to-face and spending time together is the best gift for me. I am not really interested in what they would give to me. Nevertheless, I do get a lot of gifts too... The best thing to bring back from England for me was the winter clothes. So, I bought some from London. They are very good quality and well-designed. Winter clothes are not as good in Bangladesh.

Satkora, various other limes, dried fish and certain types of chillies, such as *Naga Morich* (hot with an intense flavour), are among the most popular things that the non-migrants take for their migrant hosts. Tropical fruits and vegetables, home-grown and hand-picked, and home-made chutneys and sweets are also commonly brought over as gifts for the British Bangladeshis. The migrants also love to receive those. This is not because of their economic worth; after all, these are not the most expensive gifts of all. These particular food items are the speciality of the Sylhet region and rather scarce in London, particularly produce of good quality and in their fresh form. They bring in not just the distinct flavours, but most importantly the nostalgic sense and smell of homeland with them. Figure 5.1 is an example of some common varieties of limes and chillies that are popular among the diasporans and their visitors.



5.1: Limes and chillies

Different types of limes and Naga Morich (on a bowl at the bottom in red and green colour) are displayed and sold in the local market. I took this picture during my field-work in Sylhet

One notable difference within this material practice of exchanging gifts is that visiting Bangladeshis receive a lot of cash as gifts from relatives and friends during their visits; most of this money is then spent by the visitors on shopping in London. Sriti had the following experience regarding gifts when I asked what she brought back from London:

Well, ask me what did I not bring back [laughs]? I brought so many things including bags, dresses, ornaments, cosmetics, food, a lot of things. I spent every penny that I had with me and whatever I got from my relatives as gifts. I like shopping too much [laughs].

5.8 Social Remittances

In chapter two of this thesis, I briefly discussed the notion of ‘social remittances’ that both migrants and non-migrants can accumulate and transfer (Levitt, 2001; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). To some extent, this can be seen in the case of non-migrant Bangladeshi visitors to London. They do not just bring materials that they buy and get as gifts from London, but also they bring a lot of ‘good practices’ or ‘social remittances’ back to Bangladesh. They compare and contrast the different ideas and behaviours, just as the migrants do in their transnational way of living life here and there. This is what Debu said:

We hear a lot about London. Visits bring us the opportunity to experience the reality and so we can compare to what we have heard so far. I have learned a lot throughout the whole journey from leaving my Sylhet home to taking the plane, visiting places in London, seeing relatives and students, accepting their reception party invitations, eating together at home and out; to do all that in a different country is a whole new experience. That’s one of the ways of learning new things by going beyond the book. We share our experience of visiting England with the people in my society over here in Bangladesh. It might not bring a visible change to our country’s system. But we can share what we have experienced, how things are better organised and run in their country than ours. We can at least talk about it, and perhaps expect it to happen in our country in the future. I think visits to and from London should happen more often for that reason.

Many visiting Bangladeshis talked about the service they received at different points during their stay in England. The quality of customer service in Britain and the stark contrast with Bangladeshi service is one of the most common issues that the visitors talked about. Some of them have also learned how to transfer those ideas in

Bangladesh. Lipu has his own ways of transferring the ‘best practices’ that he learned from his visits to Britain:

In terms of my experience in the UK, I have to tell you about service. The doctor’s service in England was exceptional. You cannot even imagine it here. Here, if you go to a doctor, they will finish seeing you in two/three minutes, they would start writing prescriptions without even listening to your problem in full, they don’t even look at you eye-to-eye. British doctors would come and greet you personally. They would walk you down the corridor and guide you to their desk. They will listen to you and examine you in detail. They would record everything you say or feel. They will explain medical terms to you in simple words and prescribe medications that are only necessary for you. ... If you go to a shop to buy something, they would receive you with a smile. In restaurants, people would politely request the food or drink they want to have. Over here, they will give you direct orders, sometimes they will call your name out loud. I felt it as soon as I landed back at Dhaka airport. The grumpy face of the rude immigration desk official would promptly remind you of the stark differences immediately... It’s about how we teach our children at home and in school. In the UK, if you give something to a child, their parents would ask them, what do you say? The child will then say, thank you. We don’t see that very much in Bangladesh. They would teach their children how to use the bin and not dump rubbish anywhere on the street. I did not see anyone spitting in public places over there. Here, you see how people spit on the streets... I am teaching my daughter all those good things. You have to start from your home.

Likewise, the British education system, particularly among the visitors who are teachers or involved in working in educational institutions, was also a theme for discussing the difference between two countries’ systems. It has encouraged some of them, such as Habib, who is a member of his local school governing committee, to try similar things in Bangladesh:

I visited a few schools in London. Their curriculum and the way in which these are implemented, how the teachers are teaching to different age groups, how they deal with trouble-making students, I got to experience that directly. We would like to try and introduce these methods over here. But it is not easy. Our teachers are not in that mental set-up. There will have to be a lot of changes in approach to implement what we have learned in London. It will happen but slowly and gradually. Also, the classroom system that they have, where there will be eye-to-eye contact with all pupils regardless of whether they sit on the front bench or the back bench, our government also wants to implement that. It is not happening here yet. I have discussed this in the management committee. But it has its costs. Replacing all the benches and furniture will be very expensive.

5.9 Importance of Visits

However limited the scope the non-migrants have to visit their *Londoni* counterparts, be present and play their role in their social and cultural events, they consider these visits to be highly significant. In this section of the chapter, I present some the explanations from the visitors themselves. In the words of Sriti:

Visiting each other, this is what we do in Bangladesh. If you are absent for very long or don't see each other, it is not good. The bond, the colour of our relationship starts to fade away. Like my cousins in London, they don't have a working relationship with us. They would not even recognise me in London. We have the same heritage, same blood, and yet we don't know each other. Even though I did not know them, I had a feeling for them. They don't seem to have any. In our culture, that's not normal. Or to be honest, it's unacceptable and disrespectful. I am sorry, I don't mean to be rude but you know what I mean. You need both hands for a clap. They need to visit us and we need to visit them. We all have to do our part.

Whilst Anowar goes further than Sriti; he thinks the reciprocal visits and exchanges are the very essence of being a Bangladeshi. This also differentiates the nature of the social and cultural relationship that the Bengalis inherit and practice. Drawing from his experience both of visiting London and hosting his British-Bangladeshi relatives, he says:

We are Bengalis, that's what we do. It's our tradition to get together with our relatives, have fun and eating together. It's not like we have family time only at Christmas. We do it more frequently than you do in England... A paternal cousin seems a distant relative for them. This is very different from how the familial and social relationship is understood and valued over here in Bangladesh.

Selim, another non-migrant, whom I quoted from previously, thinks that the geographical distance should not become an obstacle to maintaining intimate relationship with his relatives and friends in London. From his experience, in today's world a trip to London should not be considered as a very difficult thing. He thinks:

We need each other's presence, help and guidance in any family or social events in our society. You cannot have a wedding ceremony, birthdays, death anniversary of family head or our ancestors or Eid without your close relatives and friends being present. Or in bad moments, like in an accident or financial breakdown or any other important event, you cannot succeed without the presence, comfort and assistance from your relatives. That's what the relatives are for.

Gony, another non-migrant, had visited Britain on multiple occasions and as a result managed to have an in-depth understanding of the hectic diasporic life through intimate interactions. He explains in detail his sense of the necessity of visits to London by non-migrant Bangladeshis.

They cannot always manage time off their work or business to come to Bangladesh. Sometimes they get their holidays from work at a time when their children can't be absent from school, so visiting Bangladesh is not always easy for them. It takes a lot of time, money, planning and organising. It means that sometimes a long period of absence can happen. It also means, Bangladeshis don't see their *Londoni* relatives for a long time. Elderly parents' wait to see their London-residing son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren gets longer and longer. This can be reduced if Bangladeshis can also visit them in London. It's only fair that Bangladeshis do get this chance if they wish to, they should be allowed to do that... In terms of London, it is an opportunity not just to see their cousins, uncles or grandparents, it is also an opportunity to see the country. It's a valuable additional experience that comes with it... Let me give you an example from my experience. My nephew was getting married in London. Both my nephew and the bride were born there, so it's only practical for them to arrange the wedding in the UK. And, it is expected that I will be present at my nephew's wedding. What is the meaning of the relationship if you can't do this? It's a moral obligation and a cultural norm that your relatives not only should be present at your wedding but also pro-actively help organising it. Uncles, aunts and grandparents are the guardians who host the bride's relatives and give their blessings for the newlyweds.

5.10 Conclusion

From the evidence presented in this chapter, it can be seen that non-migrant Bangladeshis also visit their diasporic relatives and friends in London. The context and process of their VFR mobilities are in many ways quite different from the existing instances, particularly in the European context, that have been studied (eg. King and Lulle, 2015; Mueller, 2015). Although there is some overlapping of the experiences, there are other unique examples and narratives beyond those. Inherent power imbalances, the generational gap and the hidden tensions of hosting relatives and friends from the home country in a diasporic space are the key contrasts. Also, stressing the visitors' points of view rather than the more frequently quoted and the dominant views of the migrants is another key difference. These experiences of non-migrants' visits also allow us to look beyond the Western-centric narratives of the mobilities of people, goods and ideas (cf. Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007).

Despite the often blocked access to network capital in the form of visa/entry refusals, non-migrant Bangladeshis, albeit in reduced number, continue to visit and attend the social and familial events of their diasporic counterparts. It is also notable that, unlike the developed countries' example, there are active agencies and multiple mediations of actors, such as migrants, non-migrants and the travel agencies, who combine together as the necessary preconditions for the 'counter' VFR mobilities. The visitors' experience is generally positive, especially about the natural landscapes, touristic sights, along with the safety, security and relatively egalitarian British social settings. A bond of re-connection with childhood friends, and a sense of being at 'home' while 'away' in Britain can also be evidenced in some cases. Familiarity with diasporic ethnic spaces in London and elsewhere, as well as the disjuncture with younger generations and some perceived negative aspects of British culture, such as lack of kinship solidarity, are also noticeable within the narratives of the non-migrants.

Finally, these counter VFR mobilities are practised in a highly unequal context, whereby differences in wealth are exacerbated by unequal rights to travel abroad. This aside, reciprocal visits and changes of roles as guest and host lead to the maintenance of a complex but vibrant transnational way of life. Understanding the VFR phenomenon is incomplete without considering these reverse transnational visits and the complex and diverse experiences and interactions they reveal. These visits have significant ramifications for the ongoing bilateral functioning of British-Bangladesh relationships, an issue explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter Six:
Of Tensions, Property Disputes and Identities

6.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter by contextualising British Bangladeshis' land-purchasing and house-building practices in Sylhet and how this can turn into the fundamental issue of ongoing transnational tensions and disputes. Many studies of transnational socio-economic processes have looked into migrant house-building in their country of origin, where such material practices are often undertaken in order to exhibit a 'proxy presence' (Dalakoglou, 2010) or as simple acts of maintaining 'connections' (Freeman, 2013) with relatives, friends and more importantly, the land of their birth, a place of memories and roots. For British Bangladeshis, this has also become a potent source of conflict that in some cases is being articulated through delay, intimidation and even physical assaults. These evolving phenomena of material disputes, which have yet to be recorded in the literature on Bangladeshi migration and transnationalism, threaten to disrupt the very notion of transnational relationship that was established and maintained through frequent visits by one generation after another. The disputes are a relatively recent development and yet they emerged constantly during the course of my research in London and Sylhet. In what follows, I examine these disputes and tensions concerning land and properties, and their effects. I then move on to the complex issue of identities among British Bangladeshis and the extent of their discursive significance for bilateral VFR mobilities. Drawing from the examples and experiences of visits and the associated tensions and disputes, in the final section of the chapter I attempt to apprehend the future trajectories of VFR mobilities between Bangladesh and its British diaspora. Whilst the two previous chapters cover VFR experiences either in Bangladesh or in the diaspora, this chapter explores dynamically the experiences of both migrants and non-migrants in both spaces. The issues surrounding land/property and identity are interrelated, and co-constituted and influenced by both parties in either location and can jointly affect the future trajectories of their ongoing transnational mobilities and the maintenance of familial and/or personal connections over time and space.

6.2 The Context and Concomitants of Land-Buying and House-Building

The material practices of maintaining the ancestral property inheritance as well as buying new land, building a house on inherited property and/or on newly bought land

constitute an important part of transmigrants' life, particularly for the first generation of Bangladeshi migrants. The context is varied in space and time. First and foremost, these houses are the primary place of accommodation during their home-country visit. In the case of Albanian migrants in Greece, as Dalakoglou (2010) argued, it was much more than just a place of occasional holiday residence. They did not just build houses, they build 'homes', by investing emotional and physical resources. Building a house somehow mitigates the geographical distance and physical absence for Greek-Albanians. According to Dalakoglou (2010, p.773):

The migrants' distance is simultaneously linked with these house construction projects, because that dislocation is exactly what 'supplies' the money – and even the materials – for the long building process that eventually becomes a loud, proxy presence for people who otherwise would be simply absent. The 'absent-present' migrant is the protagonist in the making of the house, with which he or she is ensuring a new type of presence in both places. In Albania it is a materialized kind of presence, and in Greece it is a kind of double presence, since the material domestic point of reference for migrants' daily transnational life is located in Albania. This situation seems to involve a paradox characteristic of transnationalism: on the one hand, it allows people to live at larger geographical distances; but, on the other, it allows them to create novel practices in order to maintain their associations across those distances. In the case of Albania, houses seem to be ideal for these novel practices.

Migrants' ambivalent and contradictory relationship with the land and properties in their ancestral homeland and the typical tension of absence and presence, as well as connection and separation, can also be evidenced in the account of Freeman (2013) of the large, yet often empty houses that were built in remote rural highland villages in Madagascar by the emigrants. Freeman (2013, pp.105–106) notes:

Thus, houses, particularly big houses built and neglected by successful migrants, make excellent biographical objects because they tell without speaking. The size and style of an émigré house indicate the wealth of the owner and the cultural influences on his taste. The degree of dilapidation recounts the length of time spent away from the village... Although these houses make individual statements they nevertheless also tell a collective story, for they mark out whole villages, indeed the whole region, as a place of exceptional achievement.

The Albanian and Madagascar examples quoted above are just two examples of direct comparable relevance to my study. In fact, building status-enhancing houses in home villages is a common practice amongst labour migrants around the world and

throughout history. In their review articles on return migration Gmelch (1980) and King (1986, 2000) note cases in many countries – the Caribbean, Latin America, Southern Europe, South and Southeast Asia. Examples include the ‘swell-fronts’ built by Italian migrants in the USA in their South Italian hometowns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the ‘*casas brasileiras*’ (Brazilian houses) built by Portuguese migrants in Brazil in their Portuguese home villages, the ‘*pakka*’ houses built back home by Pakistani migrants to Britain, and the ‘sterling houses’ created in Hong Kong with ‘sterling’ remittances from the UK.

Similarly, big houses built by the Bangladeshi emigrants are common in Sylhet. They have bought land and built large, status-enhancing houses in the villages (Gardner and Mand, 2012, p.977). Most British-Bangladeshi families have inherited or built houses in their ancestral country. In her study of British-Bangladeshi children’s home-making process in a transnational context, Mand (2010) also referred to such houses. Figure 6.1 is an example of the modern house-building in a remote village in Sylhet.



6. 1: A House in the Village

I took this picture during my field work in Sylhet. This house was built by a Londoni family, none of whose members lives there. This unoccupied residential house is surrounded by open agricultural land and the road leading to the house is muddy. To clarify, it does not belong to any of my participants.

Gardner (1995) also addressed how land and properties attribute social status to their owner in a *Sylheti* village in Bangladesh. The social hierarchy in the village, even today, is measured ‘by access to land’ (Gardner, 1995, p.39). The more the better. While

migration enhances the economic power of migrants in their home country, this is often portrayed in Bangladesh through the accumulation of land and building big houses. These land plots and properties were also deployed for claiming or re-claiming old/new status within the hierarchies of the home society (Eade and Garbin, 2006, p.183). Beyond this social and economic value, there are also additional values of the land too, for Sylhet is also considered as the land of the spiritual saints, locally known as *pir* (Gardner, 1995, p.75). The spiritual values of the land and houses are well narrated by Gardner. For the British Bangladeshis, ancestral land has an after-life value too, meaning this is a place where many aspire to be buried (see Gardner, 2002).

However, the tensions and disputes which arise around those properties and land have not been so far addressed in the literature concerning British-Bangladeshi transnationalism; nor, indeed, have they been reflected in studies of migrant house-building in other transnational context, to my knowledge. The extent of these tensions and disputes seems to be large and growing. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the British High Commission in Bangladesh are aware of these issues. They have made the following statements publicly available, which indicate that British Bangladeshis are actively seeking help/intervention from Britain in mitigating their property disputes in Bangladesh:

Disputes over property ownership are common in Bangladesh. However, these are civil matters and the British High Commission Dhaka cannot intervene in these matters. Consular staffs are not legally trained and cannot, therefore, offer legal advice. If you are unable to reach an amicable solution to the situation, you may wish to consider taking legal advice and engaging a local lawyer to act on your behalf. It may be necessary to take legal action through the courts in order to achieve a lasting resolution to the disagreement (FCO, 2019).

The British High Commission has no authority to intervene on behalf of British nationals of Bangladeshi origin with regard to land or property problems. The High Commission can provide a list of local lawyers (British High Commission, 2019).

6.3 Tensions, Disputes, 'Speed-Money' and Being a 'Moo-Aloo'

The generally positive relationship of the British Bangladeshis with the homeland and visits there is now being threatened by disputes around property ownership. In chapter four, it was evident how Kabir got annoyed when his cousin donated some of their jointly-owned land for a new mosque to be built on it – a conflict that was quickly settled by trading some other shared-ownership land. But in other respects, these property disputes represent deeper structural processes in the long-term evolution of the Bangladeshi diasporic community in Britain. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the relationship between Bangladeshi and its diaspora in Britain is at a crossroads as a result of these property conflicts. On the one hand, long-settled migrants in Britain have accumulated capital to invest in the home country, and in addition may have been bequeathed land by deceased relatives there. Many migrants, especially the first generation, have invested in businesses, purchased extra land and built spacious houses as a visible symbol of their material success. These houses are like 'anchors' in the homeland, used as a place to stay when visiting, and to be used as an inheritance for the second generation to maintain their ties to the homeland, and to pass them on to their children in turn. On the other hand, the home country has been through a fundamental political, social and economic transition, during which time the migrants have mostly been absent. They find that the country they once knew and loved, with its family solidarity, kinship ties and social attachments, has now changed. Below is part of my conversation with Jahura, where she explains her and other British Bangladeshi families' property disputes:

Farid: I have noticed that some British Bangladeshis are having disputes around their properties; have you or your family experienced anything like that?

Jahura: Every single family I know has this kind of dispute and we are still in an ongoing dispute with our own family. I think, my dad left his ancestral home, gave it up to his brothers because of the dispute over land and inheritance and he bought his own land with some savings. And then, he split up with his brother over that. The land that he bought, my father, he built a house and some property. We don't have access to that because our cousins have, you know, taken it over. So, you know, that's always going to be there. And that is for me. I know many families in London from Bangladesh who have had to give up their rights to land, family land, property, even land that they bought themselves. They have had to give up because their own family members have taken it over and obviously, you know, they are in it for their own needs. And it's very difficult to resolve these conflicts. And I think it's the thing that has been most detrimental in the relationship between British Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi

Bangladeshis. The fact that the people have this inequality in wealth and it's manifested in this way with properties, you know, conflict over property. And it's exaggerated, the price of the land has exaggerated exponentially in Sylhet. There are imbalances in Sylhet compared to the rest of the country in terms of property prices and it created artificial situations based purely on this sort of inequality between people. And it's the worst thing that could have happened. People thought they were doing a good thing by buying property and this and that but really it was a poisoned chalice. It was the worst thing people could have done. In fact, it would have been better just to let people have whatever it is and just maintain the familial relationship, forget about trying to have property in Bangladesh [laugh].

Farid: So, it was a bad idea?

Jahura: I personally think, because I am not interested in property, I thought it was a bad mistake for my father to even to think about that. Because for me, it's a waste of money, you know. He could have invested that money here, had a better quality of life here, better quality of health, you know, he would not have died as early as he did, because he was working so hard. You know, who knows, I mean, what's done is done now. But he spent a lot of his time investing in Bangladesh when he could have invested in his life here.

Farid: So, do you think in the long run, it is going to affect the relationship between people?

Jahura: I think this only if people insist on maintaining or insist on these property rights. My advice to my brother or brothers, has been, just let it go. You know, what can you do! People are living there. Let them live there.

Farid: What does your brother think?

Jahura: I think, because he has children, he feels that his children should have, you know, right to their grandfathers' property, which I understand, don't get me wrong. I understand that. But realistically, are they going to get anything? I don't think so.

Farid: Why not?

Jahura: Because the people in Bangladesh see us as those who have left, you know. We don't have rights anymore there. We have left. What are we doing, trying to grasp bits of Bangladesh? You know, that's their point. From what I understand, why do you want anything in Bangladesh? What's the reason? You only come for two/three weeks a year, what's the point. It's very difficult. It's human nature that we want to own things. And unfortunately, that's going to carry on [laugh].

The problems become manifest when migrants return to claim their inherited assets, when they want to sell property, or when they want to purchase land and build new property. Others – the first generation – come back to Bangladesh to retire and so need to take back the care of their properties. Or the second generation wants to reclaim their inheritance after the death of their parents. For Nijam, another second-generation British Bangladeshi, his parents' investment in properties in Bangladesh does not appear to be sensible:

I think, a lot of money has been wasted back home, for example, building palaces, where it's not gone into, sort of, economic entrepreneurial opportunity... The sad thing is, nobody lives there. The families don't, kids don't want to live there. So, it's empty,

you can't get the value out because of the money that you spent building it. And again, people will argue rightly or wrongly with that. When people migrated here, they were working hard, saving and then basically, investing that money back home, because the idea was that they would go back.

The quote above illustrates another very important point, about changed aspirations to return, which in fact constitute a fundamental dilemma in studies of migration – to return or not? Houses are built and property in the home area is invested in, with the expectation of a return at some future date. But then the return is postponed, put on hold, and eventually never materialises, so it becomes a myth (Anwar, 1979). Hence the houses remain in the landscape rather like tombstones to their owners' absence and failed project of return.

For Nazrul, property issues have turned into unpleasant stories that potentially lead to the disconnection of the transnational British-Bangladeshi ties, particularly for his generation:

I think, now that we have got much older, you know, you hear more stories of people not having a good time because of wealth, and this, and that. And you know, people have land and people have *bashas* (houses), and people have put those buildings up. So, you have to go. And because the people from this country that go, are not used to how things operate in Bangladesh, it is much more difficult. Because for those of us who were grown up over here, there is a certain expectation in terms of how things work. In Bangladesh, it's not necessarily the same... And I hear lots of my friends, where their fathers are passed away and their property, land and houses (in Bangladesh) are being now transferred over to them, and in the process of being transferred over to them, it's now been taken from them by everyone and anyone, who was wonderful to them at one time. That's not lots of stories, but for me, when you hear one story, it's one too many.

Most of the well-established Bangladeshi migrants in London have sent money to a Bangladeshi relative – typically a brother – to purchase land and properties for them. When the migrant returns to check, they find that the relative they gave the responsibility to make the purchase has put their name on the official registration documents too. Some relatives have gone even further, and substituted their name on the record of land owned by migrants, taking advantage of the latter's absence as well as the lax nature of updating the municipal records. In other cases, relatives as well as corrupt local individuals or groups with political connections have simply occupied the

land/property of the absentee migrants and used them for their own benefit, or have even sold them on illegally to a third party. These are some of the problems that British Bangladeshis face when it comes to affirming or reclaiming the ownership of their assets. In addition to the earlier property issue, for which Kabir had to visit Bangladesh on short notice, he also had the following experience of property disputes and tension with his relatives:

You know, I sent money to my brother to buy some land for me, I asked categorically to do it in my name, but he put his name too on the documents. These things are common. When I asked him, I wrote to you to purchase it in my name, why did you put your name in there too? He does not answer me back. He just stays quiet. Then he tells to others in my absence: *'we are still a joint family, so why should it be in his name only?'*. We have separated long before. He pretends to other people that we are still together in a joint family and our earnings should be divided equally. But this is my money, he should not have done this to me. However, it could have been worse. I know other British Bangladeshis' stories, their relatives have taken it all in their name. In pure Bengali, it means, you don't live here, so, I am the owner now. It is a criminal act. Their explanation is: *'The official process of documentation was difficult and involved lots of bureaucracy and you were not present here, so, I did it in my name instead'*. Sometimes, it leads to arguments and physical confrontations. And then, the village elders gather to help resolve the issue amicably... and they will tell you: *'well, he did a wrong thing but after all, he is your younger brother, show some kindness, let him go this time, forgive him'*. Besides, if you take your brother to court, people will mock you, they will laugh at you. Once, I went to court too, because of my cousin, my own blood. It is a matter of shame but since I am talking about these things, I will share this too, to let other people know this kind of thing. She is a daughter of my father's step-brother. She sued me allegedly for robbing her wrist-watch worth taka 150 (£1.50) and a mobile phone worth taka 500 (£5), it actually was worth taka 300. The local police was telling her: *'How could you accuse him for such things! Look what is in his hand, pointing to my smart phone, look at the shirt he is wearing, how much they are worth, why would he need to rob such small things from you?'* She could not answer anything back. I said, I will file a case against her for making false accusations and damaging my reputation. She realised what she did. Her lawyer also explained things to her. Then she tried to settle the issue outside the court. She gathered the village elders to stop me from taking the court action and then she begged for mercy. She brought some respectable people whom I cannot refuse to listen to... She did all that out of jealousy, just to harass me. She could not accept the facts that I am very solvent, living a good life and buying the biggest fish from the market while she cannot match that for herself...

The inevitable question arises: why not follow the proper legal process for all property disputes too? There is no easy answer to that. The local people have better knowledge of the legal rules and how they can be manipulated and bent to their advantage in an overall system that is to some extent corrupt. They take advantage of the migrants'

absence and use delaying tactics in subverting the legal procedures. Migrants do not generally have the time or resources to be physically present to sort things out. Salman, interviewed in Sylhet, a 1.5 generation British Bangladeshi, resident in London for many decades, who is trying to retire in Bangladesh and, in the process, is struggling to recover his own as well as his parental properties, stated the following experience:

My father and me, we invested a lot of our hard-earned money in buying land and building houses. Now, I thought, since I am struggling with my finances in London, I want to sell some of these properties and balance my finances. That is when the problems start for me. These very properties, sort of my life-time savings, are becoming life-threatening. Cousins and relatives, whoever is here in occupation of my properties, comes asking me: *'How dare you? They say, 'we understand, you bought them but we are the one who looked after them for ages. How do you expect us to let you sell them off and take the money to London?'* Some of them have their name on the deeds, others don't. Even if they are not the owner on paper, they are in possession of the properties and are not willing to give up... I own five houses in three different areas: one from my grandfather, one from my father and the others are mine. Can you believe that I own five properties and cannot have even one room for my living? They are afraid to let me into any of the properties permanently. I even offered them that I will write four of my houses to their name and sell one for me. They are not even willing to do that. I was thinking that if I can sell at least one house then I can invest it in a business and live my life on it. They did not agree... They are very good in delaying tactics. Their delaying tactic is like a classic example of, you know, justice delayed is justice denied. Whether six weeks or six months, they wait for that time to pass. I am fighting my case in court. But it's not easy and no sign of a resolution anytime soon... The laws are in place to protect our rights. However, the administrations and law enforcement agencies and their officials take bribes and sit idle on their chairs. Our disputes are a source of extra income for them.

Unlike Salman and many others, Jasim, another British Bangladeshi who went to Britain as a child, has decided to stay back in Sylhet for as long as it takes to resolve his land and properties disputes. In so doing, Jasim, interviewed in Sylhet, has been physically attacked under cover of darkness during the night, even shot at, causing both emotional and physical strain for him and, transnationally, for his wife and kids in London. Here is how he narrates his experience:

Ninety-eight percent of the Bangladeshi in London, wherever you meet them, be it in a swimming pool or at any other place, it is a common topic for discussion. They all worked hard at the beginning. They had planned to settle back in Bangladesh. So, they bought land with their hard-earned money. Even there are a lot of families I know, could not meet their children's demands, nevertheless, invested money in buying lands in Bangladesh. Now they are in trouble... Now, I am staying here and trying to resolve my issues. I do possess quite a lot of assets here. I want to organise them.

Though organising things is far from easy over here, it's a blood-sucking system... I can show you some evidence of my land disputes, you are going to die laughing. In one case, his grandfather sold it to us but he does not accept this fact. In another case, their parents sold the land to another person from whom we bought it but they want it back from us. Another example, we bought a share of the land that was jointly owned by the seller and another individual in 1967, but the local leaders of the ruling Awami League party were occupying it. The price of one decimal of that land now is 600,000 taka and it's 56 decimals of land. So, they have become crazy ever since I am here... I am the rightful owner and in possession of the original documentation. I even have court rulings from the past that settled the ownership disputes. Even with all that, the illegal occupiers do not want to vacate my land. They offered me some token money so that I go away. I said, why would I take your money? If you are the rightful owner, why would I claim it? I said, no, this is my land. If necessary, I will take this to the court again. I did not come from London to claim someone else's stuff. I own eleven other assets, I don't need to claim someone else's.

[...]

They attacked me physically on multiple occasions. Once, I was shot at, but luckily survived. They have been occupying my lands for decades. Now that I am here and asserting my ownership, they come to shoot me in the head, they wanted to kill me. They hired other people to sue me in court for false reasons to keep me busy with those while they can do away with my assets. For example, one of the occupiers sold one of my properties to another party using fake deeds with the help of others while I was busy dealing with the bogus court cases.... They have this idea that if they can frighten me and make me leave Bangladesh, there are no more issues. So, they tried every possible way by threatening or physically attacking me. Also, they wanted to physically harm me so that my family would force me to go back to London...

The bureaucracy, the public administration is corrupt. The other day, I went to the land office to update my name as owner of my land officially on their record. And the administrator was telling me: *'Sir, these properties are worth millions, would you not give us some money to do this job for you?'* I said, my father bought it for me, why do you have to know what it's worth? He was asking for a bribe publicly, not ashamed at all... They call it speed-money. The other day, I was talking to a senior government official, he was a highly educated and friendly man. He explained how this works. He said: *'You need to pay the speed money to get your job done promptly. If you don't pay, your job will still be done but you will get old by the time your file goes through all desks. However, if you pay the speed money, we will do it in a matter of days.'* He gave an example: *'If you pay for my air travel to Dhaka, it will be the fastest, if you pay for the train fare, it will take much longer to reach Dhaka office, and if you don't pay anything, I will be on foot. So, you need to decide which service you would like to pay for.'*

Migrant participants are aware of their disadvantaged status in dealing with the Bangladeshi bureaucracy, and that they are considered as *'Moo-Aloos'*, a local term which literally means 'sweet potato' but whose hidden meaning is that they are too simple and disconnected to understand how business is done in Bangladesh. The cultural construction of the *Moo-Aloo* is based on a combination of jealousy and admiration. Local people are very much aware that the British Bangladeshis who visit

Sylhet – the *Londonis* – have acquired considerable wealth, at least by the standards of non-migrants. Whilst the first generation, mostly poorly educated, struggles to understand the complicated land laws and legal procedures and the Bengali jargon that is used to conduct business, the second generation, although better educated, are even further removed from the Bangladeshi reality and may even lack much knowledge of the Bengali language. Neither do they understand, or want to engage in, the techniques of bribery or paying the ‘speed-money’ often required to ‘get things done’. Below is an example of Salman’s struggle to deal with these complexities:

The complex bureaucracy means a lot of different offices, avenues and people need to sign things off and then this needs to be enforced by the police. Which is highly exhausting, costly and can take exceptionally lengthy periods of time... Understanding their terms and vocabulary is also challenging and I struggle to grasp who is responsible for what, they also use English words as their job titles but they don’t mean anything like we understand in England. For example, they use the word ‘commissioner’ to actually mean a ‘counsellor’. So, a lot of *Londonis* like me don’t understand which official is responsible for what duty...



6. 2: Deed-writing

I captured this moment, with permission, of the intense and complex deed-writing process at a land registrar’s office in the Sylhet area on my mobile during my field visits with Kabir. The deed writers have also talked about common property disputes that the Londonis come to deal with.

Kabir is relatively better experienced than many other *Londonis* and has experiences of dealing with land and property documents in Bangladesh. Even for him, it is far too difficult to decipher the documents:

When they write deeds here in Bangladesh, they don't consider the future implications. You know, 50 years ago, during my grandfather's era or even 20/30 years ago, the way the deed writers wrote it, it should have been much clearer. Our old language, that the deeds are written in, was very Sanskrit lenient. When they described the location and surroundings of a land, it was very vague and used difficult old Bengali jargons that are not easy to understand... deciphering the old land map and records requires a lot of expertise too... For example, they describe on the deed that on the north is Mr X's land, on the south is Mr Y's land... but those persons do not exist anymore. Those lands might have been sold many times to different people over the years... I don't understand many technical points. The deed writers and public officials do not want to speak clearly, they intentionally complicate things. They will try to squeeze some money out of you. The less you understand, the more you pay. The land registrar's office is one of the most corrupted of the public offices.

Non-migrants, from my fieldwork experience in Sylhet, do not want to talk about the migrants' property issues. For them, migrants have made their life in the UK already and should not worry so much about what they have in Bangladesh. From their point of view, they are not being grateful to the country of birth and the relatives there by claiming the properties. According to non-migrants, it is the migrants who are at fault for being absent for so long and not taking care for their things. A very few non-migrants agreed to talk about the issues. Kishore, a non-migrant whom I quoted before, is not involved in any property disputes. He told me the following that reflects more or less the similar view of the local residents:

What do you expect to happen? People were absent for 10/15/20 years. You can't expect their land to not have occupancy. It's Bangladesh, a country of 180 million people. It's highly competitive. If you are not here, someone else would occupy it, legally or illegally, might be by a relative or anybody. They are absent for a long time. And when they come back their documents are not up to date. A lot has changed in between. That's why it's a problem.

6.4 Re-Visiting British-Bangladeshi Identities

In chapter one, I demonstrated the fluidity of British-Bangladeshi identities and their shifting trajectories. Here, I argue, based on the findings, that the heterogeneity of British-Bangladeshi identity sees further justification for the recognition of Bangladesh and Britain as both the origin and host places and their change over time. In the discussion that follows, I also examine the re-affirmation and mobilisation of these identities in the context of bilateral visits to and from Bangladesh by both the different

generations of migrants and their non-migrant relatives and friends, and the way these identities are under stress by the escalating tensions referred to in the previous section.

Salman, interviewed in Sylhet, a British Bangladeshi whom I quoted extensively from before, explains below some of the ways in which British-Bangladeshi identity is being extended to include other forms of social hierarchy beyond the ethnic and religious domains:

Not all Bangladeshis in Britain are the same. Are all white British the same? No, they are not. There are Tory supporters, Labour supporters, BNP supporters; there are liberals, racists, sexists; then there also Scottish, Irish, Northern, Southern; and they belong to many different groups and possess different sort of ideas. Similarly, there are many views and beliefs amongst Bangladeshis in Britain... Whatever our social status was in Bangladesh, we were in the same class in London with similar jobs. All Bangladeshis were almost equal. I am talking about 60s, 70s and 80s. We were on the same side and fought against racism shoulder to shoulder. Now, it has changed a lot with the new generations, the British-born generations. You know, now, you can see different classes and hierarchies within the Bangladeshi community in London. Now different classes, such as working-class, semi-middleclass, middle-class, upper-class, these stratifications have entered into the British-Bangladeshi community. The middle-class is established, Bangladeshis are now competing for the upper-class and will get there someday... Especially, those who are well educated with good jobs, are now building their own status, buying houses, moving out of their parental neighbourhoods. So, there are rich Bengali businessmen, lawyers, professionals, who will not necessarily socialise with all sort of Bangladeshis, you know, they will go with their similar counterparts... It also problematises the community leadership. In the past we respected a couple of leaders, but now a lot of people are the contenders, they consider themselves to be better qualified or better suited and demand respect.

Salman's account indicates that the nature of the British-Bangladeshi community has been evolving to the extent that there are now different emergent classes within this diasporic community. It also re-affirms that the identities are not fixed. This is to say that the British-Bangladeshi identity needs to be understood in the context of their heterogeneous and shifting trajectories. This can also lead to an uneasy dialect between generations within the community or within families back in the 'home' country. Nizam, interviewed in London, a second-generation British Bangladeshi describes his family experience:

Whenever England and Bangladesh are playing, obviously not football but cricket, you know, for the people who are grown up here, it's difficult for us to choose, which side should we support! The situation is, like you would support England, your parents will

be supporting Bangladesh and it's a really good mixture and fun at home... We have friends and we get asked by them, like, who are you supporting? They ask because they know it's difficult... Personally, I think, whichever side has won, we would be happy, because we got to play each other and that engaged everyone, and that got people talking and it made us think.

Which aspects of their sense of identity are to be asserted can vary in space and time. What can most notably be evidenced is the generational difference. The second generations of the British Bangladeshis commonly expressed their views on their identity and belonging that fundamentally differ from their first-generation parents. For example, a first-generation migrant, like Kabir, would always stress the Bangladeshi identity without any hesitation. They consider themselves Bangladeshi first. One of my participants even corrected me during an informal conversation by telling me, *no, I am not a 'British Bangladeshi', I am 'Bangladeshi British'*. Migration to Britain may have been the most significant event in the life of the first-generation migrants, which they have a lot to talk about. Bangladeshi heritage constitutes the core part of their identity. However, when it comes to their children, they recognise the fundamental differences. Both first and second-generation British Bangladeshis accept these differences. For example, Lenin, interviewed in London, a first-generation migrant, explains below the heterogenous British Bangladeshi identity that is at play within his family:

Listen, I know that I am a Bangladeshi. I came here almost twenty years ago and I have a British citizenship and passport. But everyone can tell by looking at me or from my accent that I came from somewhere else. And I do get discriminated or differentiated treatment occasionally. Sometime, I just accept it, I got used to it because I know that I am from Bangladesh. But my children do not think that way. They can't tolerate even a single act of discrimination or racism. They become really upset and angry. Because they think this is their country, this is where they were born and schooled. Why would they be treated differently? Let me explain to you. My eldest daughter is well educated and she has a very good job with decent pay. I asked her if she would like me to look for an educated man from a reputable family in Bangladesh to marry. She said, no. Because she thinks they will have a different worldview. I have to accept that. My children think differently than me. This is how they are brought up over here.

Anowar, a non-migrant relative whom I spoke to in Sylhet and whom I quoted previously, explains his experience of the identity difference between generations from his experience of both visiting and hosting:

Those who were born British, they don't feel comfortable talking to us. The British-born generation does not value the relationship with us at the same level as their parents. I feel like that. For example, we consider our paternal or maternal cousins to be a close relative. They would not feel that way. For them, a paternal cousin seems a distant relative. They are more like native British. They are more individualistic in nature... Some British Bangladeshis have properties and houses here, but their children don't know about them or could not care less. My relatives in London, I have seen during my visits there, they are somehow aligned with Bangladeshi culture. However, their children and grandchildren are culturally further away. They have different style, hip-hop and bro style [laugh].

Second-generation British Bangladeshis also acknowledge these differences. Bangladesh, for them, is a country that their parents are from; their relationship is only through their parents. It means their sense of Bangladeshi identity depends on how it is transmitted by their parents. Which means it can vary a lot depending on family and the nature of familial ties with Bangladesh. Jahura, a second-generation British Bangladeshi, who considers herself to have a good understanding of Bangladesh and Bangladeshi culture, explains how her sense of Bangladeshi identity differs from her parents' generation:

My relationship with Bangladesh is through my parents... We are much more, because we are grown up in a country where we are a minority and we have grown up without the same sort of family ties and networks as Bangladeshis in Bangladesh; we are much more independent and more self-sufficient in many ways. We are used to make our own decisions. You know how it is. Before you decide, you ask 10 different people in Bangladesh... Usually, people don't do things on their own. Whereas here, we are much more individualistic, much more self-sufficient, much more used to our own independence. Even my parents, you know, have found it difficult to assimilate to Bangladeshi culture when they visit. Because they spend the majority of their lives here, and are used to making their own decisions. So, I think, there is that sort of difference.

Many of Jahura's generation and indeed all the British-born informants whom I interviewed share more or less similar views. Kashem, another second-generation British-born Bangladeshi, interviewed in London, explains below his sense of identity difference:

I know Bangladesh and their culture. But I can't live my life there... I like being in multicultural London. I am more used to it than Bangladesh. In London, nobody is thinking about another people's problem. Everyone deals with their own issues, they have their things to themselves. You know, your next-door neighbour is not going to interfere in your life. But in Bangladesh, they leave their own problem and jump into yours. So, I don't need that. It's like, you do something and it becomes everyone's problem. It's not for the likes of me. I like to keep my affairs private to myself.

The heterogeneous British Bangladeshi identity and the consequent generational differences are played out in an interesting way during their Bangladesh visits and also while hosting Bangladeshis in London. As seen in the previous chapter, the non-migrant visitors have explained the cultural contrast including the differences in how familial and social relations are understood in London by the people there, including their British-born relatives. This also reflects to some extent the sense of individuality and personal freedom that the second-generation participants have cited above. Meanwhile, during their Bangladesh visits, non-migrants see their *Londoni* relatives as guests, who come to visit occasionally. This can sometimes create tensions, particularly amongst the first generation. I have heard stories from many first-generation British Bangladeshis that, during their Bangladesh visits, their locally-resident nephews or nieces sometime introduce a British Bangladeshi relative to others as a 'guest' rather than as an uncle, and how that frustrates the visitor. While the first generation are considered as absentees and guests, the second generation in the eyes of their non-migrant relatives are fully 'British'. Bangladeshis welcome their second-generation relatives with warmth and generous hospitality. However, they actually do not consider them as Bangladeshis. Most second-generation individuals also realise this. Second-generation participants in my research – Nazrul for example – have often said:

You know, however much we call ourselves Bangladeshis, in Bangladesh, they don't consider us as Bangladeshi.

As was seen in the American-Afghan case (Oeppen, 2013), for the second generation British-Bangladeshis, visits to Bangladesh re-affirm their British Identity. This is partly because of their fluent native-speaking English, but clumsy Bengali/Sylheti language proficiency, and their way of dressing and behaving, which a non-migrant Bangladeshi can easily distinguish. Nijam's failed attempt of purchasing a cow, which I discussed in chapter four, explains how this is played out. This also happens partly because of the manner in which the second generation themselves assert their British-ness while encountering their non-migrant Bangladeshi relatives, both in Bangladesh and London. Tamim, interviewed in London, a first-generation British Bangladeshi from Sylhet,

explains his first experience of encountering the second-generation individuals of Bangladeshi heritage:

When I first arrived in London, I lived near Mile End for some time. While I was out and about, I could hear young people conversing in mixed languages. You know, they are speaking to each other in English accent and then using *Sylheti* words or lines in between. I thought, they were Bangladeshis. Once, I approached them and asked, are you Bengali? Because I needed help to find a direction to my uncle's house. They did not seem very happy with my question. They said, '*No, we are not Bangladeshis, our parents are from there*'. When I visited my uncle and his family, I heard the children, my cousins were whispering, '*he is a freshee, I don't think he speaks 'English'*'. Later I came to know that British-born children often call their Bangladeshi parents *freshee* too.

The term *freshee* literally means freshly arrived from Bangladesh and often refers to a first-generation British Bangladeshi. The second or third generation deploy the term in ways that assert their identity difference from the first generation. It asserts their British-ness or British aspects of their identities including their competency of the language and understanding of the British way of life. These manifestations of their 'British-ness' or the difference with both migrants and non-migrant Bangladeshis, including parents, relatives and others, are common practices during visiting or hosting. Banu, whom I quoted in the previous chapter, explains how she thinks about her British-born grandchildren:

They are not Bangladeshi. They come here to visit us because their parents bring them here. They were born over there. Everyone has a special bond to the country where they were born and brought up. They don't have that with our country, they just don't feel that Bangladesh is their country.

Similarly, Selim has following observation from his experience of visiting England and hosting his British-Bangladeshi relatives:

The younger generation needs a guide with them when they come to visit Bangladesh. They are not good in communicating in Bengali. Some of them cannot converse even in *Sylheti* dialect. Their only language is English and they are very British. We can't blame them, they have a British upbringing.

6.5 The Future Trajectories of the Phenomenon of British-Bangladeshi VFR

Following on from the disputes and tensions around properties and the evolving discourses concerning British Bangladeshi identity, I move on finally now to analyse the likely ongoing British-Bangladeshi VFR trajectories, based on the mutually interactive perceptions of the British Bangladeshis and their non-migrant relatives and friends. By now, at this stage of my account, it is clear that VFR mobilities between Bangladesh and the United Kingdom constitute a central aspect of British-Bangladeshi transnationalism; this is the very *raison d'être* of my thesis. Despite all the tensions and disputes around land, properties and inheritances, frequent back and forth visits to Bangladesh are still happening. However, this is primarily being led by the first-generation British-Bangladeshis men, a few of whom are also returning to or retiring in their home country. Other generations of men and women, and also children, are visiting, but they are mostly accompanied or pulled by their first-generation visiting or retired parents and grandparents. Whatever their material disputes and generational differences are, they are in many ways positive about the continuation of visits to Bangladesh, even if the frequency of the visits and the level of personal and intimate relationships may well be shifting in the years and decades to come. This however cannot be generalised or applicable for all families, generations and genders. Maya explains her perception of the future of the transnational British Bangladeshi way of life:

You know, my eldest uncle's children, they don't speak Bengali. They might go once or twice in their lifetime and stay for a brief period. In contrast, there are families who take their children to Bangladesh regularly and teach them, so those people make a kind of bond and might go more often. It's a mix and match. It depends on how they are groomed. A few of my other cousins, sort of speak Bengali and they visit sometimes. Two of my cousins married a white British person, one married a mixed-race person. So, it is not same for all; like I said, it's a mix and match. I think, it [visits to Bangladesh] will continue for a good while yet. It's not going to die down; I hope not. And it's a good thing because interchange is a good thing between countries otherwise everyone will be secluded in their own little corner and suddenly they see each other and they think, oh, it's alien. I think, interaction should continue.

Jahura believes the intimate personalised relationship transnationally across generations and between cousins etc. will decrease generation after generation. She compares the British case with the example of Bengalis in India:

Nobody cares really after a few generations. They will have a romantic idea of their ancestral home, just like West Bengalis (ethnically Bengalis in the Indian Province of Bengal) do about Bangladesh, you know, *amar bari Faridpur* [my home was in Faridpur, a southern district in Bangladesh] this and that but they live in Calcutta, you know. It's nice. But they have become Indians. It happens and it's going to happen to us... We will always be British Bangladeshis. But the tie with Bangladesh will be much more intangible. It will be much more in the imagination rather than the actual.

The second-generation British Bangladeshis are cautiously optimistic about the continuation of Bangladesh visits. Nijam's account below explains his optimism as well as his concerns about maintaining a relationship with Bangladesh through visits:

I think, as long as Bangladesh is politically stable, as long as there is safety and security, then, I can see British Bangladeshis visiting more often, even doing business, and I think, that can be a benefit overall for both countries. But only on the basis that people feel comfortable, not just if you are sort of rich and influential but for the masses, where anybody and everybody can feel like they can go there and do stuff and be comfortable. I think there's a long way to go. I wouldn't say that's the case now but I don't think it's impossible. But if that happens, I think, I would go. I personally, would go and visit Bangladesh a lot more.

Nijam's perception is widely shared by most British Bangladeshis, particularly of his generation and the generations after him. To give another example, Kashem, whom I quoted earlier in this chapter, said the following:

There are too many issues, with politics, pollution and all that. As soon as you start to think about the country and the justice and injustice, I don't like it. Too much injustice in front of me. How many times am I going to fight? How many times am I going to stick up? I have relatives and properties but I can't live there, no way... Having said that, I like visiting Bangladesh, I have visited many places in Dhaka, next time I want to go to Chittagong. I like visiting. I go once in a few years. I will continue to do that. But I can't see me living there for good.

Non-migrants think that it is the responsibility of the first generation to transfer to the next the cultural practices of visiting Bangladesh and relatives there. Debu, who visited London during my fieldwork, summarises his view of the generational responsibilities:

It is the older generation or the parents' duty to give their children a clear idea of their ancestral roots. Younger generations have curiosity, we need to know how to respond to their curiosity in a way that interests them in visiting Bangladesh. There is a huge cultural difference between societies in Britain and Bangladesh... Bangladesh plays in the third division league compare to the UK. So, asking them to go to Bangladesh is like sending them from the Premier League to the Third Division. Although Bangladesh is trying to catching up fast, it is still not there. However, social relationships do not work

out in the same way. Perhaps, they do not visit as often as their parents, they do possess, sort of, a sense of a relationship with Bangladesh somewhere in their mind. So, it is the duty of the older generation to understand and exploit that.

Habib, another non-migrant, is also hopeful about the future of the visits. He thinks it is not just the older generation's duty to lead the way; Bangladeshis and the Bangladesh state also have to play their role:

I don't think the relationship will be diminished completely. They might not be in the same number or at the same level... Bangladeshis also have a responsibility to attract British-born Bangladeshis to Bangladesh. We have to create that environment, that space where they can feel comfortable, more familiar to come to. The world is now globalised. They visit other countries often. Bangladesh can also become a destination for them. The new generation of British Bangladeshis are very talented and skilled. They are well educated, some of them are teachers too. We can invite them to attend some training sessions or workshop in Bangladesh where they can train our teachers and share their experiences with them.

The Bangladesh state's lack of initiative in attracting British Bangladeshis to visit was mentioned by most of my participants. Jasim, as cited before, is staying in Bangladesh to resolve his property issues; he expressed both frustration towards the Bangladeshi government and optimism that he sees in the warm and hospitable people.

Bangladesh is offering nothing to people. We come here because we have sympathy. We have an emotional connection. We learned to survive anywhere... My younger son wants to come more often, the elder one says, no, it's a strange nation, it's a chaotic country, life is much better in London. The younger son has a different opinion... To be honest with you, one positive thing in Bangladesh is, people are friendlier and more hospitable, you will always get help from people. For example, if my car has a tyre punctured, people will come forward and ask, what happened, let us help you fix this. I have experienced that. This attitude of the ordinary people is commendable. The problem is only with the public administration, the ordinary people are really good people, and I am hopeful that it will improve at some point and *Londonis* will continue to come.

Likewise, Salman, whom we have heard quite a lot from in this chapter, possesses a similar view, but he is a bit more optimistic than Jasim. From his experience of living most of his life in London, Salman thinks that Bangladesh has come a long way and has seen an economic improvement that can have a positive impact on the current and future British-Bangladeshi generations. He explains below how he thinks this can lead to the continuation of the bilateral relationship:

The younger generations do not hate Bangladesh or visiting Bangladesh, but they have their concerns. Because they have learned at school and from media that Bangladesh is bad. Besides, the Islamists, those who use Islam for their interest, infiltrated that idea among the children that Islam is a rich culture and it's much better than Bengali heritage and culture. But, you know, I am hopeful, I can see that they are increasingly being proud of their ancestral country. Let me give you an example. Bangladesh has become a great cricketing nation recently, they have earned international reputation by beating all major sides including England. Now, the younger generation, who likes cricket, knows that Bangladesh is more than just a country of poverty and flooding, that they are a respectable sporting nation too. This is an improvement. I also remember, you now, during the 1999 cricket world cup, when Bangladesh had beaten Pakistan, a strong contender at the time, was hugely celebrated in Brick Lane, Bangladeshis of all generations chanted 'Bangladesh, Bangladesh' for a couple of hours, road traffic in the area came to a standstill. So, the perception of Bangladesh is changing... Economically, Bangladesh has seen a lot of developments. There is an opportunity to invest in Bangladesh. China, India, Japan, EU countries including Britain are increasingly investing in Bangladesh. The British Bangladeshis have that opportunity to do business in Bangladesh. If they can realise that it will be a great step forward for both parties... However, it is easier said than done... There has to be interactions, dialogues and exchanges between countries. The Bangladeshi government sooner or later has to take that initiative. I believe, sooner or later, it will happen.

6.6 Conclusion

Émigré house building in their home country is by far the most prevalent aspect of transnational material practices. These houses in many cases are transformed by bringing in goods from host country. They are also in most cases functioning as a primary place of residence during their visits. In the context of Bangladesh, however, they have also become a source of tensions and conflicts, which problematise the vibrant transnationalism between Bangladesh and its London diaspora. This also questions the continuation of second-generation transnationalism or the nature of the transnational relationship that the British Bangladeshis will continue to have with Bangladesh and the people there.

These disputes, among other things, can influence the ongoing and future identity discourses of the British Bangladeshis. But it is important to appreciate that there is not one single 'British-Bangladeshi' identity. There are multiple identities that are at play. In the context of visits, the second generation often sees such visits as a reaffirmation of their British, rather than their Bangladeshi, identities. The multiplicity of their identity

references and the ability to switch between different identities is an integral part of being a British Bangladeshi. Rather than being ambivalent, they mobilise different aspects of their identities in different spaces and times. To a non-migrant Bangladeshi, they are a British national, a British passport holder; yet to white British people they are Bangladeshis and Muslim. This process is far from being complete, meaning this needs to be situated in the context of changing social, cultural, political and economic landscapes both in Britain and Bangladesh, as well as the agency and influence of different transnational actors.

Finally, disputes around property may act to weaken, and in the worst-case scenarios, even destroy the intense personal and familial relationships, that has been built up over decades and generations. That does not necessarily mean the end of all connections with Bangladesh. There are concerns as well as a general thrust, particularly among the second generation, for exploring and knowing Bangladesh. There is a sense of optimism among most British Bangladeshis, of all generations and genders, that their relationship with Bangladesh will continue to some extent. Which means, the visits will continue to happen. However, it may well become less about maintaining intimate personal relationships and more about leisure and business trips. Having said that, the generalisation cannot be applied to all cases, as results will vary, especially in the future, from one family, and individual within a family, to another.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

I started off chapter one of this thesis with an account of my first arrival at Heathrow Airport nearly eleven years ago. I begin my conclusion with another personal anecdote which is of direct relevance to the central theme of my study. During the final month of my PhD registration, my sister got married in Bangladesh. I told my supervisors that I was willing to forego this important family occasion if it risked the final run-in on completing my thesis on time, by the end of September 2019. Their response was unequivocal: ‘you must go’. I have already given examples of the importance of family weddings in earlier chapters, and of the emotional pain that can result if close relatives cannot travel. My supervisors persuaded me that I had to be true to the ethos of my thesis and of my family and culture, and just go. So, I took ten days out in the middle of September in order to respect this important family duty, which of course was also my fervent wish, to be there, as well. And I still got my thesis submitted on time, before the end of the month!

Towards the end of chapter one, in section 1.6, I set out in a somewhat discursive fashion the main research questions that this thesis aspired to address. These were as follows. Firstly, why are VFR mobilities significant in studies of migration, transnationalism and diaspora? Second, how do British Bangladeshis and their non-migrant relatives in the home country negotiate the places, spaces, encounters and cultures in Bangladesh in London, respectively the *desh* and the *bidesh*. Third, how does inequality (in terms of wealth, citizenship and ‘network capital’) affect the bilateral processes of VFR between the two countries? Finally, what of the future? Will these long-distance family visits continue unchanged, or will they change, or are they under threat for various reasons? In what follows in the next part of this chapter, I evaluate the extent of my answers to these questions, based both on the empirical evidence I have gathered and which is presented in chapters four to six, and on some wider theoretical and literature-based discussions which develop out of chapters one and two. In the final part of this chapter, I look back at my thesis through a more critical lens, and highlight what I see are its strengths and weakness, as well as the potential for further research.

7.2 Evaluating the Research Questions

7.2.1 Why are VFR mobilities important?

Thus far, researches across the cognate interdisciplinary fields of migration, transnationalism and diaspora have rather rarely addressed the visiting behaviours of migrants and their relatives and friends in different countries. VFR mobilities are important because they enable the continual binding together of kinship networks and friendship groups: this linking function was found to be particularly important in the British-Bangladeshi cultural context, despite the long distances and considerable financial expenses involved. As Anowar neatly summed it up in chapter five, visits are the very essence of being Bangladeshi: ‘that is what we do’, he said. Geographical distance is no obstacle to the visits in principle, although of course in practice barriers are imposed by finance and by visa restrictions, as well as by the health conditions of those travelling. As Larsen, Urry and Axhausen (2006) assert, the longer the distance, the lower the frequency of the trips and the lengthier the duration of the visits. This would seem to be a logical axiom: contrast the Bangladeshi case with that of young German residents in London interviewed by Mueller (2015), whose visits were very frequent and short-term, almost every weekend in some cases. For British Bangladeshis, and even more so for their Bangladeshi relatives at ‘home’ coming to London, the visits may be a once-in-a-lifetime event lasting several weeks, or even months, with enormous practical, psychological and emotional significance for all concerned.

Geographers in particular, but also other social scientists including sociologists and anthropologists, have long been concerned with different forms of human spatial mobility. Common topics for study range from internal and international migration, to tourism, and the ubiquitous journey to work. Somehow, I feel, ‘visiting’ has been left aside as too mundane, too ‘matter-of-fact’. Which is also, in my view, why it is important. Of course, the ‘mobilities turn’, discussed at length in the thesis, especially in chapter two, and associated with the well-known texts of Cresswell (2006), Urry (2007) and Adey (2010b), does provide a more fertile theoretical terrain for VFR; but even here ‘the visit’ is arguably not given the treatment it deserves, and the really

thorough, in-depth studies on VFR in a migratory or diaspora context are few indeed (Baldassar, 2001; Cressey, 2006).

So, to sum up my answers to the first research question, VFR is important for two main reasons: it is a fundamental constitutive element of the migratory experience, especially when migration has evolved into a transnational stage linking homeland and diaspora; and it is an under-researched aspect of human mobility which deserves more attention from human geographers and other social scientists.

7.2.2 How do (British) Bangladeshis negotiate the spaces and cultures of Bangladesh and London on their visits?

This is the key question that the empirical evidence presented in the previous three chapters has been directed to answer. The fine detail is in the chapters, so here I just summarise key findings. The first key aspect to stress is that visits are not just to the diasporic homeland but take place in the other direction too, albeit with a lower frequency. Although these reciprocal visits have a common function – to reinforce family, community and ethnic bonds, and simply to keep in touch – they also have different purposes. For the homeland visits, for the first-generation migrants, it is all about re-embedding oneself in the place of origin, seeing old friends and above all relatives, and keeping alive the ‘memoryscape’ of home, childhood and early life. For the second generation, the homeland visits are more symbolic – about rediscovering their ‘roots’ and coming to terms with the ‘true’ Bangladeshi culture of their parents and older-generation relatives. For the ‘reverse’ visits to London, the prime purpose, apart from the overriding general function of keeping in touch and perhaps meeting up with new-born family members, is to be reassured that the migrants in London are ‘doing well’, and that the collective sacrifice of all concerned has been worth it.

The British- Bangladeshi VFR experience is highly gendered. Firstly, the pattern of VFR towards Bangladesh demonstrates a number of highly gendered characteristics. The first-generation male British Bangladeshis visit Bangladesh more frequently than their female counterparts. Their visits take place all year round and sometimes at short notice, for example in a family emergency. The first-generation women on the other

hand visit Bangladesh only occasionally, generally with kids on a family trip during school holidays. But even family holidays are also usually led by the male head of the family. While in Bangladesh, female visitors are escorted by the male members of the family or other close relatives. Bangladesh is a patrilineal country, where places and spaces are also highly gendered. Male visitors enjoy the freedom to go anywhere they like. They can have the experience of sole sojourning, of travelling to and around Bangladesh on their own. However, there are limitations on what women can do, particularly in the public arena. For female visitors, there are boundaries to maintain and expectations/norms to adopt. Second-generation British-Bangladeshi girls and young women may have to compromise their dress and behaviour in the homeland, but most do so acceptingly, sensitive to the different cultural environment they are in. Bangladeshi female visitors in London have a very different experience. They enjoy the relative freedom in public spaces in the UK, including places of shopping, sight-seeing and going to the cinema. Their experience of visiting London, as seen in chapter five, reaffirms the stark cultural contrast between two countries.

For visits in both directions, there is a certain rituality involved, with programmed visits to relatives who 'must be visited', and the formalities of gift exchanges and warm, often lavish hospitality. Given the choreographed nature of much of the time spent on visits, there is often little room left for negotiation, which may weigh heavily on the second generation girls and boys on their visits to Bangladesh with their parents. For all second-generation visitors, part of the attraction of visiting the homeland is the chance to go on 'side-trips' to see other places beyond the ancestral village or home-town. These more multi-local visits enable visitors to enjoy tourist sites and a greater variety of natural and leisure landscapes, making the entire excursion more enjoyable. For all visitors, in both directions, part of the essence of the visits is the diverse social and cultural experiences which are, on the whole, very much enjoyed: from the fresh food and spontaneous hospitality of village-dwelling relatives and friends in Sylhet to the relation of Gony and his family to the New Year's Eve fireworks in London.

All of which is not to say that tensions do not arise which have to be either endured, negotiated or adapted to. Those connected to the reactions of the second-generation

on homeland visits have already been hinted at above, and are reinforced by Zeitlyn's (2012) participant observation of the different tensions surrounding younger children's behaviour on visits to rural Sylhet. Other tensions in the homeland revolve around questions of property inheritance, as noted in chapter six. I come back to this issue again later. In the case of 'VFR reversed' to London and the UK, other tensions are embedded within the daily experiences of these visits, which were spelled out in chapter five. These included the pressure for the hosts of combining ongoing work commitments and finding time to host and guide the visitors around London, and of finding space to accommodate them in single-family dwellings. Difficulties of communication arose between the second-generation children, with their limited fluency in Bengali/Sylheti, and the much older visitors (often their grandparents) with their limited and heavily-accented English. On the side of the visitors, whilst most were enormously grateful for the care and attention lavished on them, and were full of wonderment at the places they were taken to visit, there was a hidden tension for a few of them at the lack of opportunity to be more independent, even to enjoy 'English' food. In the case of Habib, this greater freedom could only be enjoyed on his second visit, which was his way of negotiating this disappointment.

7.2.3 What are the inequalities involved in two-way VFR?

The key finding under this question has been that the British-Bangladeshi transnational social space is far from a level playing-field, especially when it comes to the experience of travel and VFR. Two main inequalities were exposed in the course of the empirical research: financial and legal.

The first inequality is the function of the geographical distance between the two countries and the consequent expense of long-haul flights, especially in the peak holiday season when ticket prices are much higher. For some, this makes the trip simply unaffordable, especially if several family members are needing or wanting to travel. Many of the non-migrants in Bangladesh generally do not have access to this level of cash to travel. Consequently, those who do travel are either (retired) professionals or business entrepreneurs, or have their trips paid for them by their *Londoni* relatives. The

cost of the trips is also often prohibitive for the migrants in London, especially those doing low-income jobs. They have difficulty finding both the time and resources to make visits, with the result that they are saved up for and take place only occasionally. This also explains why family holiday visits to Bangladesh are much less frequent than individual visits, which can take place all year round.

The financial burden is escalated by the need to take gifts for the many relatives and friends who will be met. Here again, we can note the asymmetry of the gift exchange: expensive perfumes and hi-tech gifts are taken to Bangladesh; inexpensive food products are brought over by visitors to London, who then often receive, in many cases, gift of cash to spend on shopping in return.

The most marked source of inequality regards the highly unequal, and unfair, access to the 'right to travel', which reveals in turn the deeply unequal 'politics of mobility' (Cresswell, 2010) and ownership of 'network capital' (Larsen, Axhausen and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). This was described in detail in chapter five, most eloquently and passionately in the extended interview quotes from Banu, Anowar and lawyer Jagat. It is clear that, in the British-Bangladeshi case, VFR mobilities, and their correlate of immobilities, unfold in a highly unequal transnational geopolitical space, and their exposure through the participants' testimonies also adds a much-needed corrective perspective to the western-centric research on free-moving tourists, lifestyle and professional migrants, and members of established and privileged diasporas. For Bangladeshis wishing to make the journey to London for a family wedding, or to see a new grandchild, or to say a last goodbye to a dying relative, the reality is often 'involuntary immobility' (Carling, 2002). Their legitimate aspirations to travel are blocked by the heavy-handed bureaucratic apparatus of the British High Commission, which in turn reflects the extreme rules of immigration control implemented over many years by successive British governments. This revealed a peak of repression under recent Conservative governments and their manifesto pledge to get annual net migration down to the 'tens of thousands' when it was running at over 300, 000, largely due to an influx of EU migrants. As a result of this obstacle, repeatedly and justifiably portrayed by participant Anowar as 'inhumane', only a shrinking minority of would-be visitors have

been able to mobilise the 'network capital' to acquire visas and the right to travel, often with the concerted help of their relatives and mediation by travel agents and lawyers. This introduces another layer of inequality into the landscapes of VFR, since the successful applicants are likely to be (retired) professionals and entrepreneurs with both financial and network capital.

7.2.4 What are the likely future trends of VFR for British Bangladeshis?

Future trends of VFR between Britain and Bangladesh need to be disaggregated by age, generation, length of stay in the UK, and direction of travel. So far, VFR trips to Bangladesh have been pioneered by the first-generation migrants, for whom homeland visits have been central to maintaining intimate, personal and nostalgic relationships with their relatives and friends there, and with homeland culture, albeit this culture has been changing and modernising in their absence. But, as Gardner (2002) pointed out in her sensitive portrayal of Bangladeshi elders in London, the first generation of the early post-war decades are now very old and dying out, which is one threat to the continuing pro-active role of the initial migrants.

The ongoing ageing of the first generation who migrated in the early post-war decades prompts two questions. First, have there been continuing inflows of first-generation migrants since the 1980s? Yes, there have, but at a reduced level due to the narrowing of legitimate access channels, mainly limited to family reunion including marriage, student visas, and professional and highly skilled migration, for instance of doctors, for whom there has long been a UK supply shortage. Whilst some of these younger-age migrants have arrived via chain-migration networks from Sylhet, others are from different parts of Bangladesh, to which their homeland visits will naturally be directed.

The second question concerns the future VFR behaviour of the second and third generations. No doubt family ties and emotional connection to their cultural roots will continue to trigger some of these post-migration generations to undertake visits to Bangladesh, but these trips will be seen partly or even mainly as holidays to a destination with some sort of ancestral connection. However, the fact that Bangladesh is not yet a

mainstream global tourist destination, and lacks tourism infrastructures except in a very few places, means that second-generation 'ethnic tourism' is unlikely to become a mass phenomenon, also because of the distance and the cost.

Meantime, counter-visits by non-migrants to the London diaspora are being controlled by the UK's 'hostile immigration environment' as was noted above and in more detail in chapter five.

The final element in the constellation of future trends for VFR is the growing swell of tensions and disputes over land and property inheritance which were demonstrated in detail in chapter six. These disputes are working to disrupt the mainly harmonious relationships between transnationally separated family members. In some cases, they seem to involve the outright illegal appropriation and occupation of property, and in a few instances can turn into violence. It is difficult to apprehend how will these disputes evolve or be mitigated in years to come. They can also trigger urgent visits to attempt to sort things out. Ultimately, disputes over property are another indication of the wealth and power imbalances generated by decades of transnational migration.

7.3 A Critical Perspective on the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Research

Looking back over the thesis, its main claims to strength, and especially originality, are the following. Some of these are fairly self-evident and have already been hinted at in the foregoing sections of this chapter, but I re-emphasise them in a more systematic way here.

First, this is an original, all-too-rare and detailed study of a specific form of spatio-temporal mobility, visiting friends and relatives. In this case, visiting relatives is more important than visiting friends, for the overall purpose of the visits is to reinforce bonds of kinship. The mobility form is enfolded within the longer time-spaces of migration and diaspora formation and is a crucial element of transnational community life. Theoretically, VFR lies within the mobilities paradigm. VFR sits at the intersection of migration, diaspora, transnationalism and tourism. In touristic studies of VFR, which

arguably have been the most prolific, it has been stated that the mobilities approach 'offers a powerful corrective to Eurocentrism' and 'decentres modernist tourist discourses that position tourism as a modern western phenomena' (Cohen and Cohen, 2015, p.164).

The latter point leads to my study's second claim to originality. As a study of the Bangladeshi context of VFR, it extends the phenomenon beyond its western or Eurocentric understanding in the literature. The British-Bangladeshi transnational social field has provided a fertile ground for researching in-depth the experiences of VFR across the generations. Despite a growing and now quite extensive literature on Bangladeshi migration, especially to the UK, and much of it written from a transnational perspective, this thesis is the first detailed study of the mechanics of transnational visiting within this ethnic community.

Thirdly, one of the most important claims to originality of the thesis is its dual examination of VFR in both directions: towards the homeland in Sylhet and towards the diaspora in London, comparing the experiences, materialities, and power and wealth inequalities in these bi-directional movements. The incorporation of the less common (and less commonly studied) 'reverse' VFR mobilities to the London-based diaspora was a particularly innovative feature of the research presented here. This has been achieved via a multi-sited plan of field research in both Bangladesh/Sylhet and the UK/London.

Fourthly and finally, I think I can claim a measure of methodological originality. As mentioned above, my study has been multi-sited. Following Marcus (1995), the 'sites' have been tied together by the spatial logic of 'following the people' and highlighting the temporal patterning of the visits of the participants. As well as the 57 participants whose narratives I collected, recorded, transcribed and analysed, I engaged in participant observation of the visits taking place and attended many family and community events in both field-work locations. Although resisting too much of an auto-ethnographer stance, I mentioned my own experience of travel and visiting at the opening and conclusion of this account. In sum, I feel that my multi-sited and multi-

method approach has enabled me to investigate the ‘totality’ of the VFR phenomenon in this British-Bangladeshi case.

Now for the weaknesses. I continue with some further methodological considerations. There is always scope for thinking that more fieldwork should have been done. Nevertheless, I spent the best part of a full year collecting my qualitative data. Whilst collecting 57 narrative interviews more than satisfied the criterion of ‘saturation’ of key findings, I mention two critical perspectives here. First, I focused only on adult interviewees and did not interview children about their experiences, largely because young British-Bangladeshi children, including some insights into their experience of visiting Bangladesh, have already been the subject of Benjamin Zeitlyn’s Sussex DPhil thesis (2010), which has also led to several publications based on this thesis (2012, 2015). The second critical perspective derives from my positionality as a male researcher, and this is the constrained insight I was able to achieve into VFR as a gendered process, a topic I briefly discussed in chapter three on methodology. I was certainly able to interview several women, but I was not really able to enter the purely female social spaces of my informants and their family and friendship groups. Somewhat by the same line of critique, my participant observation of the visits actually taking place was limited by the bounds of ethical principles and not my wanting in any way to be ‘invasive’ into a personal, family-based series of events.

A further possible limitation is that I have framed the research entirely within the transnational social geography of East London and Sylhet. About half of all British Bangladeshis live outside London, and this more widespread diaspora has largely escaped my attention, except when visitors from Bangladesh make side-trips to see relatives elsewhere in Britain. Likewise, in Bangladesh, I did field-work only in selected locations in Sylhet. Both the UK and Bangladesh are large, populous and regionally diverse countries and the British-Bangladeshi diaspora is more diffuse than the two areas where I did my field-work. Given the time and resource constraints of doing a PhD, I feel justified in limiting my investigation geographically in the way that I did.

Potential weaknesses lead logically to suggestions for further research. The first one is obvious. Given that VFR is such an under-researched field outside of the tourism literature, the scope for further investigations in so many geographical locations around the world where migration has taken place, is enormous. This is the case especially where the transnational social field spans significant geopolitical, wealth and power divides.

A second suggestion concerns other 'VFR geographies' that can be explored in a migratory context. The first involves applying the VFR research design to internal migration, especially in less-developed countries where considerable social and economic differences exist between, for example, the main cities and the rural, peripheral hinterlands. This recommendation takes inspiration from King and Skeldon's (2010) manifesto for 'integrating' studies of internal and international migration. The next suggestion reflects the inherently 'scattered' nature of any diaspora, distributed across several countries. To what extent do members of a diaspora travel to visit each other in different diasporic locations? As far as I am aware, no studies exist on this 'lateral' aspect of VFR within a diasporic context, whereby the 'homeland' is not a reference point.

And finally, coming back to the British-Bangladeshi case, future research could usefully document the ongoing dynamics of VFR which, as I have indicated, are at a critical juncture given the ageing of the first generation and the mushrooming of potentially destructive disputes over property and inheritances.

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Appendix 1:

Consent Form for Participant

Project Title: *Visiting Friends and Relatives: A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Mobilities between Bangladesh and London*

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, please circle the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please do not hesitate to ask.

- I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project; I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and/or written form by the researcher. YES / NO
- I understand that the research will involve interviews, follow-up interviews, dialogues, participation and observation by researchers. YES / NO
- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation. YES / NO
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. A pseudonym will be used instead of my name and, wherever necessary, the name of the organisation or place will also be changed to prevent my identity from being made public. YES / NO
- I understand that any image, written or audiotape/videotape material of or about me will be used solely for research purposes and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. YES / NO
- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research with your supervisors and other academics at the University of Sussex. YES / NO

I freely consent to participate in this research study. I also consent to the information I give being used by the researcher as part of a PhD thesis or other academic writing – including conference papers, journal articles, academic blogs and further research.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____