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# Transnational land and property disputes: the British-Bangladeshi experience

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the issue of ongoing transnational tensions and disputes around land and property ownership that the members of the British-Bangladeshi diaspora are encountering in rural Sylhet, their origin region in their home country. While the existing literature on transnational communities documents migrants' land-purchasing and house-building practices in their country of origin, too often in a celebratory way, the material disputes and tensions that arise from these investments, and their effect on transnational personal, familial and social relationships, have yet to be exposed. For British Bangladeshis, these disputes are rife and in some cases are being articulated through intimidation and even violence. My research suggests that these evolving phenomena of land and property disputes threaten to disrupt the transnational relationships that were established and maintained by one generation after another.

## KEYWORDS

British Bangladeshis; transnationalism; land and property disputes; materiality; migrant house-building

## Introduction

Many studies of transnational socio-economic processes have looked into migrant house-building in their country of origin. This practice has both material and symbolic significance, and is often undertaken in order to exhibit a 'proxy presence' (Dalakoglou 2010) or as a simple act of maintaining 'connections' (Freeman 2013) with relatives, friends and, more broadly, the land of the migrants' birth, a place of memories and roots. For British Bangladeshis, however, building houses and buying land have also become potent sources of conflict accompanied by bureaucratic entanglements, intimidation and even physical assaults. These evolving rural property disputes, which have yet to be recorded in the literature on transmigration and diasporas, threaten to disrupt the very notion of a cohesive transnational relationship that was established and maintained through frequent visits, sending remittances and digitally transpired communications by one generation after another. The disputes are a relatively recent development and yet they emerged constantly during my recently completed research in London and Sylhet. In this article, I examine these disputes and tensions concerning land and properties, and their effects. My findings suggest that issues surrounding land and other property can affect the future trajectories of migrants' ongoing transnational mobilities and threaten to disrupt the maintenance of familial and/or personal connections over time and space.

## Literature review: migration, development, and house-building

There is substantial literature on migration and development of the countries of origin, nowadays often codified under the 'migration-development nexus' (for comprehensive overviews see Bastia

and Skeldon 2020; Castles and Delgado Wise 2008; de Haas 2010; Faist 2008; Lucas 2005; Van Hear and Sørensen 2003). Remittances have generally been regarded as the key component of this nexus (Carling 2014): they are not only regarded as economically vital for the survival of rural communities in the home country, but are often considered as tangible evidence of the strength of transnational migrants' social and economic ties to their home countries (Vertovec 2009, 103). Whether remittances portend a subsequent return is an ambiguous question. On the one hand they can only continue as an economic support for left-behind families and households as long as the migrant remains abroad; on the other, they are an indication of the material and emotional commitment to the family and community of origin and of an intention to return. A similar dilemma seems to surround the investment of some of these remittances in land purchase and house building in the place of origin. The new or renovated house is a symbolic statement of a return intention, but this is countered by the well-known 'myth of return', first studied in-depth by Anwar (1979) with reference to the British-Pakistani transnational migrant community. Anwar found that the rhetorical intention to return was in practice rarely realised since migrants, and their children, were better off in terms of their material wellbeing and future careers in England.

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

The migrants' distance is simultaneously linked with these house construction projects, [...] dislocation is exactly what 'supplies' the money [...] 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.

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, 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. [...] Although these houses make individual statements, they [...] 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, which could be multiplied many times over in different parts of the world, of comparable relevance to my study. In fact, building status-enhancing houses in home villages is a common practice amongst labour migrants throughout history. In their review articles 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. Similar examples of investments in land and property by diasporic Indians can be evidenced in the Doaba region of Panjab (Walton-Roberts 2004; 2014). Likewise, the southern Indian region of Kerala has seen the building of large villas with 'landscaped gardens' (Osella and Osella 2000, 150) and many other 'quality (or luxurious) houses' (Sunny, Parida, and Azurudeen 2020, 19). Some limited evidence of property disputes and social and familial decoupling can be traced in the Indian diasporic accounts (Walton-Roberts 2004; Taylor, Singh, and Booth 2007). Although inheriting or investing in land and property in the home country is a common practice among transnational migrants, with the limited exception of the Indian experience, material disputes and tensions around them have barely been recorded in the empirical literature on migrant transnationalism.

### ***The British Bangladeshis and their land and home ownerships in Bangladesh***

The British-Bangladeshi diaspora is concentrated mostly in London and other urban areas of the United Kingdom. In Bangladesh, the common term for those who have emigrated to Britain is *Londoni*, even for those who have settled in other places away from London. An overwhelming majority of the diasporic community, an estimated 95% of them, are of Sylheti heritage (Gardner 1995, 2), tracing their roots to the rural, peripheral region of Sylhet in north-eastern Bangladesh. Their arrival dates back to the early twentieth century, when they were employed as *lascars* (seamen), subsequently worked in the garment and other industries, and eventually settled long-term in British cities and towns, often in 'disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods' (Kibria 2011, 91). The size of their community substantially increased during the post-war phase of labour recruitment from former colonies by the British Government. A chain migration of relatives, friends and fellow villagers was facilitated by the existing migrants (Carey and Shukur 1985; Gardner and Shukur 1996). This was followed by hurried family reunification in the context of the severe tightening of immigration laws, such as the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, in Britain (cf. Adams 1987; Choudhury 1993; Eade 2013). The diasporic British-Bangladeshi community is now well-established and consists of several generations. They maintain strong transnational ties with their origin region in Bangladesh. Their continued material and emotional connections with rural Sylhet have attracted the scholarly attention of many, most notably Gardner (1995) and Zeitlyn (2015). The nostalgic memories of childhood and growing up in the villages are still fondly remembered by first-generation British-Bangladeshis (Miah and King 2018). These memories are often re-visited and re-constructed through homecoming visits. Most British-Bangladeshis own houses in both countries. British-born children of Bangladeshi heritage are also taken to visit their parental places and spaces in Sylhet. These visits introduce children to the rural landscape and strengthen their extended-family transnational ties (Mand 2010; Zeitlyn 2012a, 2012b).

The Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK continues to be one of the leading sources of remittances for Bangladesh. As pointed out earlier, these remittances are also invested in land and properties in Bangladesh. One study suggests that 70% of these remittances are deployed for the 'purchase of land' and 'home construction and repair' in Bangladesh (de Bruyn and Kuddus 2005, 35). It is also argued in the same report that the purchase of land is considered as a safe investment by the migrants. While land will increase in value, the house built on it will be used as a retirement home or as a second residence. British-Bangladeshis have invested considerable amounts of remittances in Sylhet, transforming the rural landscape in many respects. They have bought land and built large, status-enhancing houses in the villages (Gardner and Mand 2012, 977). In fact, 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) quoted her participants' typical response: 'I've got two houses, one in Bangladesh, one in London'.

British-Bangladeshis have many reasons for investing in land and houses in Sylhet. Land and property ownership attribute social status to their owner, particularly in rural Bangladesh. The

social hierarchy in the village is measured 'by access to land' (Gardner 1995, 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 enhancing social status within the village hierarchies of the home society (Eade and Garbin 2006, 183). This can be compared with the *izzat* (honour) that is attributed to the non-resident migrant owners of land and properties in Punjab during their lengthy and often lavish return visits and stays in India (Walton-Roberts 2004; Taylor, Singh, and Booth 2007). Beyond its social and economic value, the land of Sylhet is also considered as the domain of the spiritual saints, locally known as *pir* (Gardner 1995, 75). For the British Bangladeshis, ancestral land has an after-life value too, as this is a place where many aspire to be buried (Gardner 2002).

However, the tensions and disputes which arise around migrants' 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 contexts, to my knowledge. The extent of these tensions and disputes seems to be considerable 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 and intervention from the British authorities 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)

## Methods

This research is founded on multi-sited fieldwork, carried out in London and Sylhet, the primary sites of the British-Bangladeshi diaspora. As a part of a broader empirical study on bidirectional transnational visits between these locations, I spent 12 months interviewing members of the diasporic community and their visiting relatives and friends, male and female, of different generations, in both locations. The principal method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, complemented by informal participation observation with the research population. Prospective interviewees were initially contacted through my personal network in East London. This was followed by my participation at various familial, social, cultural and community events. Initial contacts and preparatory meetings have led to a trustworthy relationship with my participants and helped me to set the boundaries and expectations for taking part in the research. Standard ethical procedures were followed, and informed written consent forms were collected prior to the formal interviews. Altogether, I interviewed 57 participants, some of them twice. The interviews were more or less evenly divided between London and Sylhet: 29 in each, including one participant interviewed in both locations. Participants varied by age, generation and gender. Of the 27 non-migrants, there were 23 males and 4 females, and of 30 migrant participants, 23 were male and 7 were female – ratios which reflect both the community's gender dynamics and the interviewer's gender positionality as a first-generation male resident of East London. Most migrants were first-generation (25), the remainder second- and third-generation. The average length of the interviews was 45 min. Most of the interviews were conducted at the participant's residence, the rest were taken at other venues that had been agreed mutually by prior arrangement. I started interviewing in London, then visited Bangladesh before returning to London to continue. All interviews were fully transcribed; those conducted in

Bengali were transcribed in English. Both transcription and translation were done by the author; likewise, all the interviews and informal conversations reported on.

## Findings

The empirical analyses that I present in the following sub-sections are constructed through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and ethnographic material. As the interviews were semi-structured and questions were related to the principal subject of this research, themes and patterns of response were identified relatively easily and it was not necessary to employ any data analysis software. Subsequent follow-up, open-ended, and context-specific questions led to more complex, comprehensive and hidden stories or new stories on the disputes around land and properties.

### *Ownership, use and management of property*

Long-settled British-Bangladeshis in Britain have, through their hard work in often-menial jobs, 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 passed on as an inheritance for the second generation to maintain their ties to the homeland, and for their children in turn. These houses in rural Sylhet also have an intergenerational bridging role in the British-Bangladeshi transnational community. Many members of the diaspora, particularly the Bangladesh-born first generation, consider that these houses will attract and encourage their children and grandchildren to maintain ties with their ancestral place of origin and their relatives and friends there. Take, Tapu, a first-generation British-Bangladeshi, for example:

I have a son and two daughters. I took them to Bangladesh when they were kids. Now they don't feel like going there. They would say, oh, it's too far and too expensive. You know that's why I have recently built a very nice house there with all the modern facilities in it. I hope this can enthruse them to go there. I can at least tell them, look, you will have free five-star accommodation if you go there. I think you need to give them something like that, otherwise they will never go.

Most British-Bangladeshis like Tapu take their children to Sylhet. For those who can afford it and can take the time off from work, the visits might be regular, every year or so; for others, the visits are only occasional, or even ‘once in a lifetime’. Whilst children enjoy the spacious houses and surrounding green spaces in the rural landscape, they also complain about lack of hygiene and other things (Gardner and Mand 2012; Mand 2010; Zeitlyn 2012b). Similar grievances can also be seen in the Kerala example (Osella and Osella 2000, 152), cited earlier. British-born children of Indian heritage were very critical of the boredom, the food and hot and humid weather that they experienced during their stays in their ancestral country. Once the children are grown up, they construct a somewhat critical view of their ancestral home. Many young-adult British-Bangladeshis are disillusioned by these relatively large investments in Bangladesh by their parents, not least because many families struggle to meet their children's demands in the UK. To give an example, Nijam, a second-generation British Bangladeshi, thinks that the investment in properties by his parents' generation in Bangladesh is not 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 that nobody lives there. The families don't, their 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. 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, referred to earlier, 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.

### ***Tension and disputes: the context and concomitants***

The generally positive transnational relationship of that British Bangladeshis have with the homeland, a view ingrained in existing scholarship (e.g., Gardner 1995, 2002; Zeitlyn 2015), is now being threatened by disputes around property ownership. 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 Bangladesh and its diaspora in Britain is at a crossroads as a result of these property conflicts. The migrants' long absence has made it difficult to adapt to the home country's fundamental political, social and economic transition. They find that the country they once knew and loved, with its family solidarity, kinship ties and social attachments, has now changed. Below is an extended extract from my conversation with Jahura in London, where she describes her and other British-Bangladeshi families' property disputes:

Interviewer: 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. 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 ... We don't have access to that because our cousins have, you know, taken it over ... 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 it up because their own family members have taken it over ... 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 there is this inequality in wealth, and it's manifested in this way with properties, you know, conflict over property. And the price of the land has exaggerated exponentially in Sylhet ... And it's the worst thing that could have happened. People thought they were doing a good thing by buying property, but really it was a poisoned chalice. It was the worst thing people could have done.

Interviewer: So, it was a bad idea?

Jahura: I personally think, because I am not interested in property, it was a bad mistake for my father ... 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. Perhaps he would not have died as early as he did, because he was working so hard.

Interviewer: 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 these property rights. My advice to my brother has been, just let it go ... People are living there. Let them live there.

Interviewer: What does your brother think?

Jahura: I think, because he has children, he feels that his children should have, you know, a 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.

Interviewer: Why not?

Jahura: Because the people in Bangladesh see us as those who have left, you know. We don't have rights there anymore. We have left. What are we doing, trying to grasp bits of Bangladesh? That's their point. 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. Some of 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.

Most of the well-established Bangladeshi migrants in London have sent money to a Bangladeshi relative – typically a brother – to purchase land for them. When the migrant returns to check, they find that the relative they gave the responsibility to make the purchase has added their name on the official registration documents too. Some relatives have gone 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 and 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 our interview in London, Kabir related his experience of a property dispute with his brother in Bangladesh:

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. I asked him: 'Why did you put your name there too?' He does not answer me, he just stays quiet. Then he tells others in my absence: 'We are still a joint family, so why should it be in his name only?'. We have separated a long time ago now. He pretends to other people that we are still together in a joint family and that 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. 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.

Conflicts over property often involve migrants' family members or a member of their joint family – a tradition of living together in a household that consists of multiple generations. In patriarchal South Asian social settings, it is often a brother, or another male member of the family, who is implicated in these disputes. The British Bangladeshi account above also resonates with instances in other South Asian contexts. Walton-Roberts (2004, 64) pointed to similar material conflicts that often originate within the family network of diasporic Indians, which weakened or even sundered migrants' family ties in their home country.

Jasim, another British Bangladeshi, who was taken to Britain as a child, has decided to stay back in Sylhet for as long as it takes to resolve his land disputes. In the following quote from our interview in Sylhet, he describes how he 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.

Practically all of the Bangladeshis in London, wherever you meet them ... 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. There are a lot of families I know who could not meet their children's demands; nevertheless, they invested money in buying land in Bangladesh. Now they are in trouble ... And so 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, a man's 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 ... and 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? ... 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.

[...]



They attacked me physically on multiple occasions. Once, I was shot at, but luckily survived. They have been occupying my land for decades. Now that I am here and asserting my ownership, they come to shoot me, they want 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 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. They wanted to physically harm me so that my family would force me to go back to London.

From my fieldwork experience in Sylhet, migrants' relatives and friends in Bangladesh do not want to talk about the migrants' property issues. For them, the migrants have made their life in the UK and should not worry so much about what they have in Bangladesh. From the local residents' point of view, the migrants are not being grateful to their country of birth and to 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 of their affairs. This is also the case in the Indian Panjabi example cited earlier. Only a few non-migrants agreed to talk about the issues. Kishore is not involved in any property disputes. He told me the following that reflects more or less the view of the local residents:

What do you expect to happen? People were absent for ten, fifteen, twenty years. You can't expect their land to be vacant. This is Bangladesh, a country of 180 million people. It's highly competitive. If you are not here, someone else will occupy your land, legally or illegally, it might be by a relative or anybody. The migrants 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.

Similar views of relatives and friends in the home country about the properties of their migrant counterparts can be witnessed in other geographical settings too. For example, in the Italian-Australian diasporic context, migrants are often expected to transfer their inheritance to siblings in the home country (Baldassar 2001, 43). In the Vietnamese-American case, migrants feel obliged to send remittances to their relatives in Vietnam despite their financial hardship in the USA. Their financial contribution is seen as the 'currency of care' (Thai 2014, 43) and an indication that they take care of their left-behind family even after long-term migration. These complex and uneasy relationships between migrants and their relatives and their correspondingly uneven expectations are what Carling (2008, 1453) termed 'the moral dimensions of migration and transnationalism'. While investments in land and properties may have significant emotional and material implications for the migrants; for their home-country relatives and friends, these are considered as repayment for 'the debt of communality' (Carling 2008, 1458). Migrants' long absence and lack of financial contribution to the home country means their relatives feel morally entitled for the left-behind land and properties. Migrants' reclaiming efforts are often faced with strong resistance and considered as ingratitude and lack of care by the relatives and the home society at large.

### ***Being a 'Moo-Aloo' and paying 'speed-money'***

British-Bangladeshis 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 (Miah and King 2018). Local people are very much aware that the British Bangladeshis who visit Sylhet – the *Londoni* – have acquired considerable wealth, at least by the standards of non-migrants. Whilst the first-generation migrants, who are mostly poorly educated, struggle 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. Below is an example of Salman's struggle to deal with these complexities.

Salman, like Jasmin, quoted earlier, had to come to Britain as a child and so was classed as a 1.5 generation, intermediate between the first and second generation.

The complex bureaucracy means a lot of different offices, and many 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 ... So, a lot of *Londoni* like me don't understand which official is responsible for what duty ...

In a further interview with Kabir, this time in Bangladesh during his visit there, he related how, although he is relatively more experienced than many other *Londoni* dealing with land and property documents, even for him, it was 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 ... When they described the location and surroundings of a plot of land, it was very vague and used difficult old Bengali jargon that is 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.

The inevitable question arises: why not follow the proper legal process for all property disputes? 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 to subvert the legal procedures. Migrants do not generally have the time or resources to be physically present to sort things out. Salman, interviewed in Sylhet, has been resident in London for many decades, and is now thinking to retire in Bangladesh. In the process, he is struggling to recover his own as well as his parental properties:

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, come to me saying: 'How dare you?' They say, 'We understand, you bought them, but we are the ones 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 locations here: 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 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.

Other British Bangladeshis like Salman are experiencing similar challenges. Many are not familiar with the corrupt system. Neither do they understand, or want to engage in, the techniques of bribery or paying the 'speed-money' often required to 'get things done'. Jasim, whom I have cited earlier, explains how the 'speed-money' system works:

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 ... 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 the 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'.

### ***The end of the transnational relationship?***

One can argue that, despite all the tensions and disputes around land, properties and inheritances, frequent back and forth visits to Bangladesh are still happening. In this sense, British-Bangladeshi transnationalism is still vibrant. However, this is primarily being led by the first-generation British-Bangladeshi 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. For second-generation Nazrul, property issues have turned into unpleasant stories that potentially lead to a 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. People have land and people have *bashas* [houses], people have put those buildings up [in Bangladesh]. So, you must go [and visit]. 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 grew 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 have passed away and their property, land and houses [in Bangladesh] are now being inherited by them. But in the process of being transferred over to them, it's now been taken from them by everyone and anyone, who were wonderful to them at one time.

Nazrul's perception is widely shared by most British Bangladeshis, particularly of his generation and the generations after him. Kassem, another second-generation young adult, 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.

From Kassem's account, it can also be evidenced that property disputes are not the only issues for his generation. Bangladesh for them has other socio-political and economic problems that does not really encourage them to go there to visit or settle longer-term. Jahura believes that the intimate personalised relationships transnationally experienced across generations and between cousins etc. will decrease generation after generation. She compares the British-Bangladeshi 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] and 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.

However, drawing a generalisation is far from being easy. Some of the second-generation British Bangladeshis are cautiously optimistic about the continuation of their relationship with Bangladesh. They have optimism as well as concerns and the experience vary from one individual and family to another. For example, Maya, second-generation, explains her perception of the future of the transnational British-Bangladeshi way of life:

You know, my 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. It's not going to die down; I hope not.

Many of the first-generation migrants, even those who are dealing with property disputes in Bangladesh, have also not run out of hope all together. Jasim, as quoted before, is staying in Bangladesh to resolve his property issues; he expressed both frustration towards the Bangladeshi government and optimism from his experiences with the warm and hospitable people.

Bangladesh offers nothing to people. We come here because we have sympathy [for the homeland]. 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 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 punctured tyre, 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 *Londoni* will continue to come.

Salman, whom we have heard before, possesses a similar view; if anything, 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. 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 an 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 [...] 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. However, it is easier said than done. There has to be interactions, dialogues and exchanges between countries. The Bangladeshi government sooner or later must take that initiative. I believe, sooner or later, it will happen.

## Conclusion

Along with remittances, émigré house building in the home country is by far the most prevalent aspect of transnational material practices amongst British Bangladeshis. These houses are further transformed by bringing in furniture and other household goods from the migrants' host country. They are generally functioning as a primary place of residence during their visits. However, they have also become a source of tensions and conflicts, which problematise the vibrant transnationalism between Bangladesh and its London diaspora. This situation questions in particular the continuation of second-generation transnationalism and the nature of the transnational relationship that the British-born Bangladeshis will continue to have with ancestral homeland and the people and institutions there.

The first generation, who came to Britain to work hard, save hard, and build their family life project, were the ones caught in the dilemma of whether to return to Bangladesh or not, and part of the origin of the problem of property disputes resides in their protracted indecision and prolonged absence. The purchase of land was designed to elevate their social status, since land ownership conveyed prestige and power in homeland rural communities. The large, new, multi-storey house was a potent visual symbol of *Londoni* success, yet it was also an ambiguous symbol of an undecided return, and remained empty except for occasional visits. Perhaps it was no surprise that non-migrant relatives, tasked with administering the purchase of property and then keeping

an eye on it, took matters well beyond that for their own benefit. The second generation occupy a different positionality in these property-buying enterprises, often criticising their parents for wasting capital on houses that will never be occupied by the migrants, unless the first generation does eventually return. The second-generation inheritors of these houses are very unlikely to return, as rural Bangladesh offers them no future economically, socially or culturally.

My fieldwork evidence has shown how disputes around property act to weaken, and in the worst-case scenarios, even destroy the intense personal and familial relationships that have been built up over decades and generations. That does not necessarily mean the end of all connections with Bangladesh. Both parties continue to visit each other in both directions (Miah and King 2018, 2020). There is ongoing willingness, particularly among the second generation, for exploring and knowing Bangladesh. There is a sense of belief among most British Bangladeshis, of all generations and genders,<sup>1</sup> that their relationship with Bangladesh will continue to some extent. 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.

## Note

1. Inheritance laws in Bangladesh are inherently unequal as these are based on Islamic principles. Male members of a family inherit lawfully more properties than their female counterparts. This was beyond the scope of this introductory article. However, there remains the opportunity to conduct further research in order to understand the nuanced ways in which these male-biased Islamic inheritance laws and resulting unequal distribution of wealth play out during these transnational disputes around land and property inheritance. Further research can also look into the differing views of both the first-generation British Bangladeshi women who were born in Bangladesh and their second generation British-born daughters on these disputes.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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