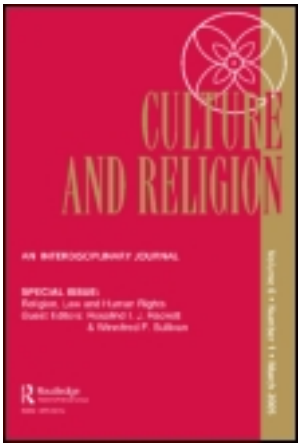


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# Transnational marriage and the Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora in Britain and the United States

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# Transnational marriage and the Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora in Britain and the United States

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Transnational marriage is a practice by which members of diasporas are united in matrimony with persons in the homeland. In this paper, I explore the history and development of transnational marriage in the Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora, specifically among British Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi Americans. A distinct history of migration and settlement has resulted in the particular prominence of transnational marriage in the British Bangladeshi community. In the British national context as well, unlike in the USA, the issue of transnational marriage has been politicised by concerns about forced marriage and the state regulations that have arisen in response to it. These differences of national context are reflected in the greater levels of general acceptance of the idea of transnational marriage among British Bangladeshis. At the same time, across both national settings, second- and third-generation Bangladeshi Muslims are actively engaged in constructing notions of the 'new' transnational marriage in which the partner selection process gives considerable autonomy to those involved.

**Keywords:** transnational; marriage; diaspora; Bangladeshi; Muslim; migration



## Introduction

Transnational marriage, a practice by which members of diasporas[1] are united in matrimony with persons in the homeland, is a part of many histories of immigration and settlement around the globe (see Akiba 2006; Ballard 1994; Hooghiemstra 2001; Thai 2008). In this paper, I explore the history of transnational marriage practices within Bangladeshi Muslim communities in Britain and the USA. Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of these communities, I also look at emerging understandings and experiences of transnational marriage today, focusing on the 'later generation' or those who have grown up in Britain or the USA.

Transnational marriage is often portrayed, within the popular discourse of North America and Europe, as a homogeneous and unchanging practice that is rooted in Muslim culture and its pre-modern inclinations. But the analysis that I offer here of transnational marriage in the Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora

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challenges these notions in a number of ways. As we will see, divergent histories of immigration and settlement have resulted in important differences in the character and place of transnational marriage practices in American and British-based Bangladeshi Muslim communities. The fluid and contingent character of transnational marriage practices is also highlighted by the accounts of later-generation British Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi Americans.[2] They emphasised the evolving character of transnational marriage practices.



## Transnational marriage and Muslim migrants

Transnational marriages are embedded in social fields[3] – the cross-cutting institutions, networks and flows that organise diaspora communities and their ties to the homeland. In ways that reflect the dynamism of these underlying conditions, transnational marriages are also emergent and diverse in their organisation and character. Specific forms of transnational marriage include those in which married workers go abroad to work without their spouse for temporary but extended periods of time. These transnational unions of prolonged international distance are widespread within a global economy in which prosperous nations seek expendable, temporary low-wage labour from abroad. Under these conditions, the marriage itself becomes a transnational node and conduit, organising movements of money and goods as well as honour and emotions between the diaspora community and the homeland.

Besides these partnerships of distance, transnational marriages may also be organised around the dynamics of settlement and reunification abroad. In these situations, members of the diaspora community 'go home' to marry and then return with their new spouse to the receiving society. Such transnational marriages of settlement have been a core strategy of survival and community-building for many diaspora groups, especially when faced with hostile and difficult conditions in the receiving society. For example, in the early twentieth century, the largely male Japanese American community faced intense hostility and racism in the USA, including anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited unions between whites and minority groups. Responding to these conditions, some entered into marriage with 'picture brides' or women in Japan who had been selected by relatives and whom the Japanese American men had only seen in photographs. After a wedding with a stand-in groom in Japan, the new brides travelled to the USA to join their husbands (Akiba 2006).

Transnational marriages of settlement are also a feature of other contemporary diaspora communities. For example, in his study of Vietnamese American international marriages, Thai (2008) finds low-waged first-generation migrant men returning on visits to Vietnam to find marriage partners to bring back with them. The men felt themselves disadvantaged in the marriage market in the USA, especially in comparison to Vietnam where they had greater options. The transnational marriages were for them a strategy by which

to effectively deploy and maximise their resources across transnational social fields.

In some immigrant-receiving societies today, most notably in Europe, transnational marriage has emerged as a public issue and focus of controversy. Transnational marriage is widely understood here to be a part of Muslim migrant life – a practice that is in fact emblematic of Muslim culture and its pre-modern qualities. Indeed, informed by larger currents of anti-Muslim sentiment, the issue of transnational marriage has at times been a lightning rod for the expression of popular anxieties about Muslims and their ability, or lack thereof, to assimilate into western societies. At the heart of these dynamics of stigmatisation and stereotyping of transnational marriage is a notion of essential cultural difference. From this perspective, the practice of transnational marriage is in fundamental opposition to the prevailing norms and values of marriage and partner selection in contemporary western culture. In this framework, transnational marriages are arranged by family members, and thus contrary to western values of individual autonomy and free choice in marriage. And especially given the geographic distance involved, they are also seen to be driven in their formation by instrumental considerations rather than the dictates of romantic love and emotional self-fulfilment.

Because of these assumed cultural contradictions, transnational marriages are also often seen in popular discourse as a site of cultural dissonance for migrants and, concurrently, a focus of intergenerational family conflicts. This is particularly so when the marriages involve the later generation – those of the diaspora who have been born and raised abroad. In fact, many transnational marriages of settlement involve first-generation migrants who have come from the homeland to the receiving society as adults. But as highlighted by studies of Muslim diaspora communities in Europe, the later generation – those of the diaspora who are born and raised abroad – may also participate in transnational marriages (Ballard 1994; Hooghiemstra 2001; Kibria 2011). The assumption has been that for them, more so than for first-generation migrants who have not had the same deep-seated exposure to western culture and values, the practice is highly conflict-ridden. The later-generation members of Muslim diaspora communities are not only drawn to the values of individual choice and love in partner selection, but also tied to the Muslim culture of transnational marriage that is part of their families and communities.

With its emphasis on an essential cultural opposition, the popular western trope of later-generation transnational marriage is one that does not take into account the role of economic and political conditions in shaping transnational marriage. In what follows I explore the historical development of transnational marriage in the Bangladeshi Muslim communities of Britain and the USA. As we will see, despite shared national origins and a common religious affiliation, transnational marriage has not played the same role in these communities due to divergent histories of migration and settlement.

## Comparing transnational marriage and Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain and the USA

Both Britain and the USA are home to growing Bangladeshi Muslim[4] diaspora communities.[5] Transnational marriages are evident in both settings, but it is also the case that they have been far more visible in the British landscape than in the American one. At the heart of this difference is the longer history of the Bengali/Bangladeshi[6] presence in Britain and the important role that transnational marriage has played within that history.

The origins of the Bangladeshi community in Britain can be traced to the early twentieth century when small numbers of seamen from the Sylhet region of East Bengal entered into Britain. These settlers formed the initial nucleus of the flows from the region that were to occur after the 1948 Nationality Act that allowed unrestricted entry into Britain for the citizens of former colonies. The Bengalis, who came in through the provisions of this Act, tended to be young men from rural backgrounds in Sylhet and with relatively low levels of education. In Britain, many found employment in heavy industry, in the factories of Birmingham and Oldham, while others took up jobs as pressers and tailors in the garment trades of London.

The post-Second World War period of Bengali migration is often described as the sojourner era. This is a reference both to the widespread expectation of a temporary stay as well as the overwhelming dominance of men, without women and children, among the migrants. Akin to the classic labour migrant, the men aimed to work in Britain for a while and then return home to enjoy the fruits of their labour. The sojourner orientation was strengthened by the intense racism and conditions of segregation that they faced in Britain. All these conditions supported transnational marriage, a practice that affirmed the ties of kinship and community of origin for the migrant men. Thus, many of the men maintained long-distance unions in which wives were expected to remain at home in Sylhet to care for children and elderly relatives at home and await the return of their husbands. As Gardner (2006) has observed, the carework of wives played a critical role for the sojourner men, enabling them to fulfil their familial obligations and maintain belonging and honour in the kin group and village, even while absent.

By the 1980s, the British Bangladeshi community had expanded and the sojourner era had given way to one of family reunification. The face of the British Bangladeshi community changed drastically during this time, from largely 'bachelors' to one composed of settled families. Many transnational marriages of distance became marriages of reunification as wives and children came to join their husbands in Britain. In other cases, men who had come to Britain to work as singles now went back to tie the knot and bring their new brides back with them.

Accompanying the shift, from transnational marriages of distance to transnational marriages of settlement, were increasingly stringent British immigration laws. These legal shifts curbed the influx of migrants from Commonwealth countries, and eventually limited entry to the immediate family members of

British nationals. These restrictions only enhanced the significance of transnational marriage as a migration and settlement strategy for British Bangladeshis. In other words, as previously available paths to Britain that were alternatives to entry through marriage to a British national were removed, the importance of transnational marriage for community-building actually grew.

Since the 1990s, the ranks of British Bangladeshis who have been born and raised in Britain – the later generation – have grown in relation to the foreign-born as a segment of the British Bangladesh population.[7] Despite these demographic shifts, transnational marriages of settlement have continued to be an important feature of British Bangladeshi life (Dale and Ahmed 2011). Its ongoing significance has been supported by the high levels of segregation and continued economic disadvantages faced by the community. British-born Bangladeshis continue to be heavily reliant on the low-paid and unskilled service sectors in which their parents held jobs; intergenerational upward mobility has been limited (Eade and Garbin 2002; Gardner 1995). According to Office for National Statistics (2006), 60% of Bangladeshi-origin men are employed in the distribution, hotel and restaurant industry. A study in Oldham reports unemployment rates for young Bangladeshi-origin men (ages 16–24) to be as high as 25%, almost double the rate (13%) experienced by their white counterparts (Dale et al. 2002). These conditions have supported transnational marriage as a cultural code – a set of norms and expectations about the process of finding partners and entering into marriage. According to this code, family elders arrange and negotiate nuptials for later-generation British Bangladeshis when they reach marriageable age. They find them partners from the homeland, specifically from the kin group or community of origin.

But along with its continued significance, the cultural code of transnational marriage in British Bangladeshi life has remained significant, it is also marked by increasingly visible contests. Since the 1990s, transnational marriages of settlement, especially those involving later-generation members of diaspora communities, have come under considerable social and political scrutiny in Britain and other European countries. They have been seen as potential instances of human rights violations, suspected cases of 'forced marriage' in which persons are married under duress, against their will. The Department of Children, Schools and Families in Britain has estimated 5000–8000 cases of forced marriage to occur in the country each year, with most involving victims of South Asian origin (Jones 2009). Reported cases of forced marriage typically involve later-generation South Asian Muslims, usually women, who are taken to the homeland for a visit and then forced to get married. To provide assistance to victims, the British government has set up a Forced Marriages Unit (administered through the Foreign and Home Offices) to provide assistance to victims. In 2007, the Forced Marriages Act was passed, under which judges in Britain are able to issue protection orders for British citizens and residents either to prevent forced marriage or to rescue victims married under these circumstances. The British state has also moved to make the criteria for marriage visas more stringent. In 2008, a law was passed to

raise the minimum age for approval of marriage visas from 18 to 21, with the specific goal of deterring forced marriages in which the victims are often in their teens. And in 2010, the British government announced that all those coming from outside the European Union to marry or join their British spouse would have to pass an English-language test.

Among British Bangladeshis, the efforts of the state to regulate transnational marriages of settlement have generated considerable resentment (Samad and Eade 2002). As I have described earlier, transnational marriage has been a core strategy of survival and community-building for British Bangladeshis. Thus, the regulatory efforts of the British state have often been seen by them as an attack, an expression of the fundamental antipathy of British society towards them and, more generally, towards the presence of Muslims in their midst.

In comparison to that in Britain, the Bangladeshi-origin population in the USA is more recent as well as diverse in background. The 2008 estimates suggest over two hundred thousand persons of Bangladeshi origin to be living in the USA, many of whom are first-generation migrants who were born and raised in Bangladesh (Kibria 2011). According to the US census, in 1980 there were 5880 foreign-born Bangladeshis in the USA. The numbers rose rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, from 21,749 in 1990 to 92,237 by 2000. The growth trend continued in the 2000s, when 93,000 migrated to the USA. The family reunification provisions of US immigration laws clearly played an important role in this expansion. For example, a review of 1996–2001 admissions data from the US Immigration and Naturalisation Services showed family sponsorship to account for 57.4%, the Diversity Program for 30.5% and employment provisions for 10% of Bangladeshi admissions during this period (see Kibria 2007). The provisions of family reunification allow for the entry of not only spouses but several other categories of 'immediate' family members such as children, parents and siblings. But spouses are certainly part of the category, thus suggesting that in the USA as in Britain, transnational marriages of settlement have also played a role in the expansion of the Bangladeshi American population. Given the high proportions of the foreign-born, these marriages are, however, more likely in the USA to involve first-generation migrants rather than later-generation members of the diaspora.

Besides a shorter history of settlement, the Bangladeshi American community is also more diverse in background in comparison to that in Britain. If Sylhetis have dominated the Bangladeshi diaspora landscape in Britain, the US population is more diverse in its Bangladeshi regional origins. There are also important differences in class background. Census data from 2000 shows 46.5% of the foreign-born Bangladeshi population in the USA to be college graduates, with Bachelor's degree or higher (Kibria 2007). In contrast to the British community then, many foreign-born Bangladeshis in the USA are from urban middle-class backgrounds. Reflecting this difference, the socio-economic profile of the US community in comparison to the British one is also a more favourable one. The 2000 census shows the foreign-born Bangladeshi origin population to contain significant proportions of both professionals and low-income workers

(Kibria 2007). Just over 19% were employed in the service sector and another 15.5% held jobs in production and transportation. In addition, about one-third of Bangladeshis worked in managerial and professional occupations and another 29.6% were in white-collar jobs in sales and office work. In conjunction with findings on median household income and rates of poverty (Kibria 2011), this information suggests that the high rates of segregation and poverty that have marked the British community are less applicable to the American one.

Informed by these general differences between the Bangladeshi-origin British and US communities as I have described, transnational marriage has also been far more visible in the British context. In the British Bangladeshi community, transnational marriage practices have constituted a cultural code – a set of community norms and prescriptions about the expected conduct of members with respect to matrimony. The visibility that the presence of this code has brought to transnational marriage has only been enhanced by its politicisation. As described earlier, transnational marriage has been a growing focus of scrutiny and interventions by the British state. In comparison, the situation in the USA has been somewhat different. Concerns about marriage visa fraud coupled with more stringent regulations to guard against it have been part of the larger environment in which transnational marriages of settlement have occurred. However, with respect to immigration control, the dominant focus of public rhetoric and policy has been on other issues, such as policing territorial borders and on the location and removal of undocumented immigrants from the country. The Patriot Act, signed into approval in 2001, a month after the terrorist attacks of September 11, has allowed for immigrants who are not citizens to be arrested on alleged suspicion, to be secretly and indefinitely detained, and also to be forcibly deported (Cainkar 2004; Hagan, Eschbach, and Rodriguez 2008).

To summarise, transnational marriage practices are a part of the landscape of Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora life in both Britain and the USA. They are, however, more prominent in Britain, where chronic, long-term poverty have given meaning and relevance to the practice, not only for first-generation migrants but for the later generations as well. In Britain as well, the issue of transnational marriage has drawn public attention in a manner that it has not for the USA.

In what follows I turn to explore the transnational marriage understandings of British Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi Americans. I focus in particular on the 'later-generation' segment of these populations – those who are expected to be at the epicentre of the cultural conflicts posed by transnational marriage. How do they negotiate and make sense of transnational marriage in light of these contradictions?

## Sample and methods

In what follows I explore views and experiences of transnational marriage among later-generation British Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi Americans. In doing so, I draw on materials from a larger study of the Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora,

focusing in particular on findings from Britain and the USA (...). More specifically, I draw here on my findings from Britain and the USA. From 2001 to 2007, I conducted 72 in-depth interviews with Bangladeshi American Muslims: 40 involved first-generation migrants and 32 were carried out with second-generation persons whom I defined to include persons who were either born or raised in the USA from the age of 12 or earlier. In the British sample, 19 of the 44 informants were first-generation migrants and 25 were either second- or third-generation British Bangladeshis. The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours and were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

The analysis of Bangladeshi Muslim perspectives on transnational marriage that follows draws most directly on interviews with 57 later-generation Bangladeshi Muslims – 25 in Britain and 32 in the USA. This sub-sample included 28 women and 29 men who ranged in age from 18 to 45 with a large cluster in their 20s. Reflecting a more recent history of settlement, the US informants tended on average to be younger and also less likely to be married. At the time that I interviewed them, a total of 12 of the later-generation informants were married, 8 of whom were based in Britain. Thus, most of the informants were unmarried, although many expected to get married over the next few years.

## Later-generation Bangladeshi Muslims and the making of the new transnational marriage

In both Britain and the USA, the later-generation members of the Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora were familiar with the practice of transnational marriages of settlement, if not in their own lives than in that of family and community members. I found a wide range of perspectives on the value and legitimacy of the practice of transnational marriage. Reflecting the status of transnational marriage as a cultural code in the community, British Bangladeshis were generally more accepting of the idea of transnational marriage than their American counterparts. But across these broad cross-national differences as well as the great range of individual attitudes and experiences that they encompassed, I found a widespread theme of change – of the emergence of the 'new' transnational marriage. That is, in both Britain and the USA, the later-generation informants often spoke of transnational marriage practices as in transformation. As I have described, popular notions of transnational marriage in western societies evoke a static and homogeneous practice that is both devoid of romantic love and contrary to freedom of choice. These stereotypes formed an oppositional framework for later-generation understandings of transnational marriage. I was often told that there certainly were transnational marriages among Bangladeshis abroad in which coercion and instrumentality prevailed; however, these instances did not convey the whole picture.

Scholars of middle-class life in contemporary South Asia have noted the changing character of marriage selection practices and the emergence of hybrid cultural forms that integrate traditional and modern impulses (Netting 2010;

Osella 2012, this issue; Uberoi 2006). In the traditional template, marriages are arranged by family members along with little to no consultation with the couple who essentially marry each other 'sight unseen'. But for middle-class South Asians, the process is moving towards 'arranged meetings' in which family elders select a set of potential partners for the child and set up supervised meetings. These meetings vary in many respects, such as in the number of times they occur with each candidate, their duration and location, as well as the degree of direct supervision by family members. They may involve, for example, one or two closely supervised meetings before engagement as well as situations in which the prospective couple is allowed to meet and talk in restaurants and other public spaces over an extended period of time and without direct supervision.

Several informants described the process of transnational marriages, either in their own personal experience or in that of other Bangladeshi-origin Muslims whom they knew, to have occurred through arranged meetings. They spoke of how the unions that resulted from these meetings were often quite different from the popular stereotypes, challenging the idea that these marriages are only about coercion and constraint. Indeed, for Ferdousi, a Bangladeshi American Muslim in her 20s, arranged meetings had been central to the process of her own transnational marriage in which she had selected a partner of her choice. Ferdousi, who had grown up in the USA, had initially been uncomfortable and resistant when her parents had first declared their plans that she marry a boy chosen by them from their village in Madharipur, Bangladesh. They were planning to go back for a long visit, with Ferdousi in tow, to finalise the plans, have a wedding and then start the visa paperwork to bring their new son-in-law to America. Ferdousi eventually agreed to the plan on the condition that not one but several candidates be presented to her in Madharipur, and that she would be given a chance to extensively interview them before making the final decision herself. After arriving in Madharipur, Ferdousi was in fact given the opportunity under closely supervised conditions to meet a number of suitors who had been selected for her by family members. She eventually settled on the son of a family friend.

For Ferdousi then, the arranged meetings had provided a vehicle by which to assert agency in the selection of marriage partner. What made this especially important to her was the fact that the criteria by which she assessed potential partners were somewhat different from her parents. For Ferdousi herself, the choice of whom to marry had been largely about finding someone who shared her deep-seated commitment to Islam. In her late teen years, Ferdousi had become active in Islamic youth organisations and developed a strong commitment to Islam and the cultivation of an Islamic way of life. Reflecting what has been widely noted to be a general trend among young Muslims, she saw her primary social identity in religious rather than ethnonational terms (Abdo 2006; Cainkar 2004; Glynn 2002; Rozario 2012, this issue). Unlike her parents, she gave little importance to marrying a fellow Bangali or Madharipur native. Ultimately, the transnational marriage into which Ferdousi entered was one that fulfilled her sense of family

obligation, particularly to obey her parents. But it was also clear that she had actively shaped the selection process to fulfil her own goals:

> For my mother and father, it was all about raising children in the traditions of Madharipur, it was about … like Bangali culture. Religion was part of their way of life, but it was not a priority. For us, my husband and I have agreed, it's about Islam; we are not so concerned about Bangla culture. I mean, it's nice if they know the language and stuff, but it's not a big thing for us. You know, Islam is the same everywhere. There are no roots and branches. Islam is one God, one Prophet and one Book.

The arranged meetings system of marriage was often described by the later-generation Bangladeshi Muslims to have great liberating potential for those involved, giving them agency and choice over the selection process. If Ferdousi emphasised commitment to Islam, others mentioned different criteria that were important to them, ranging from a particular height, weight and taste in music to ideologies of gender, on such matters as whether women should have careers. Besides allowing for the infusion of personal choice into the selection process, the arranged meeting system was also seen to offer opportunities for the development of romantic love. As I have discussed, the stigmatisation of transnational marriage has stemmed, at least in part, from its seeming violation of the notion that love precedes marriage; one marries for the sake of love. Arranged meetings, however, by incorporating opportunities for interactions between the couple before marriage, also allow for the prospect of falling in love before marrying. Or at the very least, as Asif, a third-generation British Bangladeshi noted, the meetings allowed for an assessment of whether or not there was the 'right chemistry' – that special spark of attraction between the two. Asif, who was in his late teens, did not think he would be getting married anytime soon. But when he did, he expected it to be a transnational marriage, following others in his family, including his parents, cousins and, most recently, his sister. His sister had married a man from 'back home' a few years ago and he knew they were very happy together. From what he had seen then, these transnational marriages could work out quite well:

> When it's time that I get married, I reckon that my mother and uncles will play a big part and make a lot of the decisions. They like for us to marry back home, into a family they know. My sister went to Sylhet and got introduced to a few blokes. She said 'no way' to most of them. And then she met Saka [her current husband] and she knew after talking to him for two seconds that he was Mr Right. The chemistry was there and she knew it was going to work.

As I have described thus far, arranged meetings were valued by the later-generation Bangladeshi Muslims for the opportunities that they offered – to directly evaluate the candidates through face-to-face encounters. By spending time with the candidate, one could see if there were similar attitudes, not to mention a special, magical spark. But even as they spoke of the importance of these face-to-face meetings, the informants also spoke of the role of communications technologies in extending and facilitating them. That is, the phone, internet and Skype had all created enhanced possibilities for meetings that were unconstrained

not only by the cultural norms of segregation between women and men. Thus, Priya, a British Bangladeshi informant, spoke of how the internet had facilitated her efforts to extend and deepen a romantic relationship that had started with an arranged meeting in Sylhet. Priya had been sent by her parents for an extended visit to Sylhet. The plan was that she would get married during the visit; her father had several specific persons in mind as possible spouses for his daughter. Following an arranged meeting, Priya felt attracted to one particular candidate, a distant relative on her mother's side. The families entered into discussions for a marriage between the two, but the negotiations eventually broke down. Priya returned to Britain, stubbornly refusing to marry any of the other candidates, despite enormous pressures on her to do so. She began to communicate with the young man that she liked, through phone and email. As Priya put it, they 'fell for each other' as they came to know each other better through these communications. Eventually they married, but only after several months of family turmoil during which her parents tried to move her away from the relationship. For Priya then, a brief face-to-face encounter in Sylhet had resulted in a love story, replete with drama and obstacles overcome.

But if the internet, along with other communication technologies, extended the scope and significance of arranged meetings, it had other impacts on transnational practices as well. Informants spoke of how internet marriage sites, reflecting broad cultural developments, were becoming increasingly popular among Bangladeshis of the diaspora as a way of seeking and selecting partners. Some families turned to these sites as a way of creating a field of eligible partners for their son or daughter. This was the case for Selina, a Bangladeshi American in her early 20s. Against her protests, Selina's parents wanted her marry someone from back home. They eventually reached a compromise. They would use an internet marriage site that was specifically geared towards making matches between men and women from their area of origin. The plan was that once a list of eligibles had been generated through this process, the family would travel back to Bangladesh to further investigate them. Selina agreed to this proposal. Several Bangladeshi American acquaintances had gone through a similar process with good outcomes. Selina also felt that the use of the sites would give her a great deal of control over the process. She had participated in creating her own profile on the site and she also evaluated responses and candidates, exercising veto power if necessary. All in all, Selina felt a certain sense of ease with the process. At the bank where she worked, many of her co-employees used internet dating sites and in at least one case it had resulted in a marriage. All of this ultimately made the prospect of a transnational marriage, especially one that was mediated through internet sites, quite palatable to Selina:

> My father wants me to marry someone from our village or at least from around there. We found a couple of matchmaking websites and one of them was even specifically geared towards people from Chittagong. Both my father and I look through them and I can be very picky about it – 'no, he looks like a jerk' – that kind of thing. Or this one says he wants six children – no way. If you think about it, it's

not so different from what a lot of Americans do now. They go on the websites and they post on them, browse them. What I'm doing is not so different.

## Conclusions

Transnational marriages, especially later-generation transnational marriages of settlement, are often seen to be among the practices that culturally distinguish Muslim migrants from the larger western landscapes they inhabit. Their persistence over time, even among those raised in western societies, has been seen as symptomatic of the monolithic and unchanging character of Muslim culture. The analysis that I have offered here of transnational marriage across two different nodes of the Bangladeshi diaspora is one that highlights how transnational marriage can develop differently, depending on the history of migration and settlement. A community history of transnational marriage in Britain, coupled with ongoing poverty and segregation, has ensured the continuity of the practice over time.

Across both national contexts, I found later-generation Bangladeshi Muslims to be engaged in defining the 'new transnational marriage'. Drawing on a variety of experiences, either their own or that of others whom they knew, they spoke of transnational marriages that were quite different from they are often portrayed in popular culture. The new transnational marriages were marked by arranged meetings between the potential partners coupled with their ability to make the choice of whom, among those selected by their family, they wished to marry. Long-distance communication technology had also expanded the ability of the potential partners to communicate privately among themselves and so to make an informed selection. These modernising trends reflect larger global developments in the culture of partner selection, including middle-class South Asians. But if the later-generation Bangladeshi Americans tended to see transnational marriage as evolving away from the oppressive models of the past, they did not necessarily see it as an option that they wished to take themselves. The fundamental logic of transnational marriage is that it is somehow preferable and advantageous to marry in the homeland. Many questioned this logic, even as they perhaps acquiesced to a transnational marriage out of a sense of obligation to their family.

## Notes

1. As Morawska has noted, diasporas are defined by 'a sense of membership in their group of origin and a collective representation and concern for the wellbeing of their homeland' (2011, 1030).
2. My usage of these terms reflects the ways in which the communities have generally been discussed and named in the scholarly literature.
3. As discussed by Levitt and Glick Schiller, the concept of 'social field' refers to the 'multiple inter-locking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organised and transformed' (2008, 286).
4. While Bangladeshis from a variety of religious backgrounds (Christian, Buddhist and Hindu) have been part of these migratory movements, Muslims have been a numerically dominant presence.

5. According to available estimates, there are 350,000 persons of Bangladeshi origin in Britain and 200,000 in the USA (Kibria 2011; Office for National Statistics 2006).
6. Reflecting popular usage, I use both the terms 'Bengali' and 'Bangladeshi' in this article to refer to those of Bangladeshi origin in Britain. However, for purposes of clarity, I have tried to limit my use of the term 'Bengali' to refer to the community in the pre-1971 years, reserving the designation of 'Bangladeshi' for after 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh.
7. In 2001, 46% of Bangladeshi-origin persons living in the UK had been born in the UK (Connolly and White 2006).



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