

BUILDING A POLITICAL HOME: BANGLADESHI MIGRANTS AND LOCAL SOLIDARITIES **IN ROME'S "BANGLATOWN"**

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Declaration

I solemnly declare that I, Punny Kabir, prepared the dissertation I am presenting independently and without undue assistance; that I have completely stated the sources and aids used; and that, in each case, I have identified the passages in the dissertation, including tables, maps, and images, that are quoted from other works literally or in spirit as a borrowing. I further declare that this dissertation has not been presented to any other faculty or university for examination; that it has not yet been published, apart possibly from partial publication approved by the chairperson of the doctoral committee after consultation with the supervising professor; and that I will not undertake any such publication before completing the doctorate. I am aware of the provisions of Sections 20 and 21 of the doctoral regulations of the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Cologne.

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Contents

Abstract.....	7
Introduction.....	8
0.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions.....	8
0.2 Methodology.....	10
0.2.i An Ethnographic Approach.....	10
0.2.ii Interviews and Conversations: From Casual Encounters to Semi-Structured Dialogues	12
0.2.iii Participant Observation in Everyday Activism.....	14
0.2.iv Fieldnotes, Political Materials, and Documentation	16
0.2.v Positionality and Field Relations	17
0.2.vi Ethics, Consent, and Risk	19
0.2.vii Data Analysis and Interpretation.....	21
0.3 Theoretical Framework: Political Subjectivity, Solidarity, Translation, and Participation	23
0.3.i Political subjectivity.....	23
0.3.ii Political Solidarity	27
0.3.iii Translation, Friction, Untranslatables, and the Common	32
0.3.iv Contested Participation: Urban Citizenship, Belonging, and Political Home.....	35
0.4 Analytical Arc of the Thesis.....	39
Chapter 1.....	41
A Heterogeneous “Banglatown”: Torpignattara’s Migrant Political Field.....	41
1.1 Migration, Islam, and Political Polarization in Europe and Italy	42
1.2 Bangladeshi Migration to Italy: Routes, Regularizations, Settlement	46
1.3 Torpignattara: The Unofficial “Banglatown” of Rome	51
1.4 Contested Multiculturalism: Multifaith Visibility and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism.....	61
1.5 Staying, Moving On, and the Work of Settlement	70
1.6 Everyday Orientations to Politics	76
1.7 Conclusion: Making a Heterogeneous Migrant Political Field.....	80
Chapter 2.....	82
Settlement Conditions and Political Subjectivities	82
2.1 Negotiating Minority Status.....	84
2.2 Legal Liminality and the Politics of Waiting in the Documentation Regime	89
2.3 Internal Hierarchies: Brokerage, Class, and Exploitation.....	95
2.4 Islam in the Grey Zone: Visibility and Suspicion	101
2.5 Navigating Everyday Racism.....	106
2.6 Conclusion: From Settlement Pressures to Uneven Pathways into Political Action.....	110
Chapter 3.....	113
Forging Political Solidarity in Torpignattara	113

3.1 Torpignattara's Political Heritage and New Migrant Proletarians	114
3.2 Dhumcatu Between Services, Religion, and Political Brokerage	119
3.3 The Extra-Parliamentary Left in the Neighbourhood Solidarity Network.....	124
3.3.i Communist Actors and Infrastructures	125
3.3.ii Squatted Spaces as Resistance and Contact Zones	131
3.3.iii Anarchist and Autonomist Actors	137
3.4 Transversal Solidarity	141
3.5 Conclusion: From Political Memory to Street Alliance	145
Chapter 4.....	146
Friction and Translation: Making and Unmaking Solidarity in "Banglatown"	146
4.1 Leadership, Brokerage, and Trust	148
4.2 Public Performance of Islam as a Protest Language.....	155
4.3 Gendered Limits of Participation.....	163
4.4 Queer Politics and the Limits of Reciprocity.....	171
4.5 Uneven Risks, Uneven Voice.....	175
4.6 Conflicting Political Horizons	179
4.6.i When a Slogan Does Not Translate	180
4.6.ii Beyond the Alliance: New Political Horizons	183
4.6.iii Onward Mobility and the Shifting Grounds of Solidarity	185
4.7 Conclusion: A Fragile Commonality.....	187
Chapter 5.....	190
From Alliance to Participation: Political Home-Making and Its Limits	190
5.1 Public Space, Visibility, and Contested Citizenship	191
5.2 Everyday Participation and Contested Belonging.....	195
5.3 Beyond the Neighbourhood: Spatial Limits of Participation.....	204
5.4 Intergenerational Reach and Limits of Participation.....	211
5.5 Conclusion: From Participation to Political Home-Making	220
Chapter 6.....	221
Conclusion: Rethinking Solidarity and Migrants' Political Participation.....	221
6.1 Main Findings and Conceptual Contributions	221
6.2 Relevance and Limitations.....	223
6.3 Directions for Future Research and Final Remarks	226
Bibliography	228

Abstract

*Building on ethnographic fieldwork in Torpignattara, Rome, often referred to as “Banglatown,” I examine how Bangladeshi Muslim migrants seek a social and political foothold in alliance with local extra-parliamentary left actors, including radical-left militants, self-managed social centres, and anarchist and autonomist collectives. I analyse how conditions of settlement shape migrants’ political subjectivities, how neighbourhood alliances are formed across differences of religion, ideology, class, gender, legal status, and political commitment, and how these alliances make particular grievances publicly actionable. Central to the analysis is the process through which everyday problems are articulated and translated into collective demands, as well as the frictions, inequalities, and unresolved differences that this process generates. I treat political participation not primarily as electoral voice, but as the uneven capacity to organise, make claims, act upon public space, negotiate with institutions, and sustain collective action. I argue that these alliances create limited but consequential avenues of participation through which migrants build what I call a **political home**: a locally grounded foothold of voice, recognition, and political agency without full political membership. This political home is neither stable nor complete. It is continuously made and remade through alliance work, remains spatially bounded, and is only partially transmitted across generations.*

Introduction

0.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions

Across Europe, migration and Islam have become central axes of political conflict, reshaping electoral landscapes and recasting policy debate. Immigration has become a central agenda issue through which wider anxieties about security, identity, and integration are articulated, prompting party systems to recalibrate their positions in response (Schain 2018, 1, 15–18). Research has also shown that debates around Muslim minorities are often structured through sharp distinctions between majority and minority ways of life, with Muslim practices becoming a particularly charged site of controversy and boundary-making (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2009, 17, 36–37). These dynamics form the wider political stage on which the problem of migrant political participation is posed.

Bangladeshi migrants are especially relevant to this discourse because they are deeply embedded in Italy's urban and labouring life while remaining unevenly recognised as political actors. Bangladeshi migrants in Italy enter and remain for the long term as workers, tenants, consumers, and small entrepreneurs, and their labour is widely relied upon in low-wage sectors and neighbourhood economies. Yet their capacity to shape the conditions under which they live and work remains limited. This limitation is legal, bureaucratic, and social at once. Electoral voice is tied to citizenship, and for many “third-country nationals,”¹ the path to citizenship is long: ordinary naturalisation requires at least ten years of legal residence for non-EU foreign nationals, a residence threshold that sits at the upper end of the European Union range for ordinary naturalisation (Italy 1992, art. 9, letter f; Dumbrava 2025, 3; Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale n.d.). But political marginality is not reducible to voting. It is also produced through precarious documentation, exploitative labour relations, racialisation, language barriers, and the everyday power of offices, employers, landlords, and police.

For Bangladeshi Muslim economic migrants, this marginality is multifold. They are positioned as non-white and non-Western in a European racial order, as Muslims in a public climate where Islam is often politicised through global security narratives and cultural boundary making, and in Italy within a public culture where the Catholic Church continues to

¹ “Third country national” is a legal category used in European Union migration law. In the Return Directive, it is defined as “any person who is not a citizen of the Union” and who is not a person enjoying the Union right of free movement (European Parliament and Council 2008, art. 3(1)).

wield considerable symbolic and institutional power, and as working-class migrants with limited economic capital in a city like Rome marked by housing scarcity and segmented labour markets. These dimensions overlap rather than simply add up: the same person can be read simultaneously as a disposable worker, a racialised outsider, and a religiously marked subject, with each reading shaping what kinds of visibility feel possible, risky, or necessary. The puzzle, then, is not only whether migrants are “represented,” but how grievances become publicly and politically actionable when people are structurally positioned as necessary workers yet uncertain political subjects. In some European debates, the political significance of such alignments is polemically condensed into labels such as “Islamism,” which I treat not as an analytic category but as part of the contested public vocabulary surrounding Muslim and left political convergences.

I address this puzzle through a case study of Torpignattara in eastern Rome, where long-term Bangladeshi settlement and sustained organisational life intersect with a durable extra-parliamentary political milieu, making political organisation, brokerage, and alliance formation traceable as recurring practices rather than isolated events. Rather than presuming that participation must culminate in formal citizenship, I ask whether and how neighbourhood-scale alliances can widen the conditions of voice and recognition. I use the term political home to name this locally grounded foothold, while treating its making, limits, and durability as empirical questions rather than settled outcomes.

On this ground, the main research question of the thesis is: **How do Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara and the local extra-parliamentary left build and sustain alliances that make migrants’ grievances politically actionable, and what kind of political foothold do these alliances enable migrants to build in the neighbourhood?**

This overarching question is broken down into the following sub-questions:

- a. How did Torpignattara become an unofficial “Banglatown,” and how does this setting shape migrants’ everyday struggles and internal differences?
- b. How do conditions of settlement shape Bangladeshi migrants’ political subjectivities and their uneven pathways into political action?
- c. How do they build and sustain alliances with the local extra-parliamentary left across differences?

- d. How do migrants' everyday grievances become shared political demands through these alliances?
- e. What kind of political foothold do these alliances enable migrants to build in the neighbourhood, and how far does it extend beyond the local scale?

0.2 Methodology

I conducted an ethnography to examine the research questions. My fieldwork unfolded between late 2021 and 2025 in multiple phases: an initial exploratory visit in October–November 2021, a year-long immersion from February 2023 to February 2024, and two short follow-up trips in autumn 2024 and spring 2025 to sustain relationships and observe new developments as the community navigated emerging challenges. This longitudinal and iterative design reflects anthropology's commitment to what Clifford Geertz called “deep hanging out,” meaning long-term, close-in engagement in everyday local life (Geertz 1998).

0.2.i An Ethnographic Approach

I adopted an ethnographic approach to study a migrant political field that was heterogeneous, layered, and internally uneven. My concern was not simply whether migrants participated in politics, but how different forms of participation acquired meaning within the neighbourhood's everyday life. In this field, even a seemingly straightforward question such as whether someone joined demonstrations, could not be reduced to a simple yes or no answer. Some interlocutors mobilised mainly around documents and residence permits, others around religious concerns, and others around racism, neighbourhood security, or civic equality. These differences were not secondary. They were constitutive of the field itself. What I encountered, in Geertz's terms, was “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures,” superimposed and entangled, which had to be interpreted in their density rather than flattened into categories (Geertz 1973, 10).

This density was also distinctly urban. Torpignattara was not a bounded or internally coherent migrant “community,” but a shifting terrain of relations, encounters, and alignments distributed across the neighbourhood's everyday spaces. Political meanings emerged not only in explicitly political settings, but through the broader social life of the area. Different actors,

concerns, and forms of engagement overlapped and recombined across everyday neighbourhood life, resembling what Hannerz describes as a mosaic that “turns into a kaleidoscope, where the multitude of parts again and again take on new configurations” (Hannerz 1980, 15). This field could not be understood as a stable collectivity with clear internal boundaries; it had to be approached as an urban formation whose social and political composition was continuously being made and remade.

This was equally important for the study of solidarity. The solidarities I followed did not reside only in formal organisations, demonstrations, or public speeches. They took shape through repeated, low-intensity encounters in which trust, recognition, obligation, and familiarity were gradually produced. What later appeared as political alliance was often rooted in ordinary forms of sociality that would have remained invisible in a thinner research design. Here, Rozakou’s formulation is particularly apt: “the political formation of sociality was grounded on the level of human interaction” (Rozakou 2016, 190). In my field, political relations did not stand apart from everyday life; they emerged through it. This made qualitative inquiry indispensable, since only close and sustained attention to mundane interaction could reveal how sociality itself acquired political force (see also Rozakou 2016, 188).

At the same time, Torpignattara could not be understood in isolation from the bureaucratic and institutional relations running through it. Migrants’ everyday lives were shaped not only by kinship, commerce, and neighbourhood sociability, but also by permits, waiting, legal uncertainty, advice networks, and repeated dealings with landlords, employers, the questura, and other offices. For that reason, the field could not be treated as a self-contained locality. It had to be followed across interconnected sites and processes. Tuckett captures this logic when she describes tracing migrants’ trajectories across the city and observing documentation at its different stages and sites, focusing on how these practices “played out in the city itself” (Tuckett 2018, 21). My own approach was guided by a similar premise: the political life of Torpignattara could only be understood in relation to the wider bureaucratic circuits through which migrant lives were organised and constrained.

Finally, this qualitative design had to remain inductive because the field itself was evolving. Some activities that initially appeared to be soft forms of cultural exchange later revealed much sharper political stakes. The Pohela Boishakh programme, for example, first appeared to me as a neighbourhood cultural event, but gradually became a contested political issue

when the police arrived and seized the area and event materials. Likewise, toward the end of fieldwork, the arrest of a key activist abruptly reshaped local conversations, alliances, and perceptions. These developments made clear that the field could not be approached through pre-set hypotheses. It had to be followed as meanings, alignments, and conflicts shifted over time. In this respect, Però's insistence on the "empirical interrogation of a specific historical situation" and his tracking of a multidimensional field across space and time closely match the logic of my own approach (Però 2007, 11–12).

An ethnographic approach allowed me to grasp the density, heterogeneity, relationality, and changing character of Torpignattara's migrant political field.

0.2.ii Interviews and Conversations: From Casual Encounters to Semi-Structured Dialogues

Interviewing was a core method in my fieldwork, and it evolved from informal conversations in the early phase to more formal semi-structured interviews later. Rather than treating interviews as one-off data collection events, I approached them as an extension of ongoing dialogue that developed alongside field relations. As Spradley notes, ethnographic interviewing often takes the form of "casual conversation" in which questions emerge in a context-sensitive way, adapted to the flow of interaction rather than imposed as a rigid script (Spradley 1979, 55). This flexibility was essential in "Banglatown", where trust, uncertainty, and everyday rhythms shaped what could be discussed, when, and with what level of detail.

In the early period of fieldwork, many of the most informative exchanges were impromptu conversations in ordinary settings: on a park bench, over tea in a café, at bus stops, in grocery stores, after community meetings, or while spending time with acquaintances during slow hours in shops. In these encounters, interlocutors often set the pace and topics, while I listened closely and asked follow-up questions as themes emerged. These conversations helped me learn how people framed their own experiences, what they treated as urgent or ordinary, and how they positioned themselves in relation to neighbourhood life, work, and political activity. When such exchanges became analytically relevant, I documented them soon after in expanded fieldnotes, noting the setting and the contours of the discussion so that later interpretation remained grounded in context.

As relationships deepened through repeated presence, I shifted to semi-structured interviews. This format offered a balance between comparability across interviews and openness to

interlocutors' narrative trajectories. Following Bernard, I used an interview guide to ensure that key topics were covered while retaining enough flexibility to follow leads that emerged during the conversation and to generate more reliable, comparable qualitative data (Bernard 2006, 212–13). Semi-structured interviews also allowed for spontaneous probing when important points surfaced unexpectedly, rather than confining the conversation to pre-set questions (Rubin and Rubin 2012, 137). Across interviews, I returned to themes such as migration trajectories, everyday settlement and work, experiences with local institutions, community relations, and political engagement, while remaining attentive to how each person emphasised, reframed, or contested these topics.

In total, my material draws on approximately fifty semi-structured interviews. Roughly two-thirds were with Bangladeshi interlocutors and the remainder with Italian residents, activists, and other local actors. The Bangladeshi interviewees included both documented and undocumented migrants and spanned a range of positions within “Banglatown”'s social world, including community leaders and organisers, mosque committee members, housewives, restaurant owners and workers, shop owners, tailors, laundry workers, cricket players, and second-generation young people. These interviews were embedded within a wider ecology of repeated informal conversations that continued throughout fieldwork and often provided the relational and contextual basis through which semi-structured interviews could be arranged, interpreted, and revisited over time.

Recording practices were pragmatic and context-dependent. When the setting was appropriate, and interlocutors agreed, I audio-recorded interviews and later transcribed them. When recording was not used, I relied on brief contemporaneous notes and expanded write-ups produced soon after the conversation, aiming to preserve key phrasing, the sequence of themes, and the situational context in which accounts were offered. Many interviews were lengthy and detailed, yielding narratives of migration and labour, encounters with bureaucracy and uncertainty, internal differentiations and tensions within the community, and evaluations of neighbourhood politics and local institutions.

Interviewing developed cumulatively across the fieldwork. Early conversations informed later interview prompts, while semi-structured interviews raised questions that I could revisit through subsequent encounters and observation. I strengthened interpretive reliability by moving back and forth between interviews and participant observation, using each to illuminate the other and checking interview accounts against what I observed across the field

(Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 102). This interplay between elicitation and observation supported an analysis attentive to variation and disagreement rather than presuming a single, coherent community narrative.

0.2.iii Participant Observation in Everyday Activism

Participant observation formed the core of my fieldwork. Rather than limiting the research to scheduled interviews or major political events, I entered the everyday political life of Torpignattara through sustained presence in the neighbourhood. I rented an apartment there and spent extended periods of time in the spaces where Bangladeshi migrants and Italian activists encountered one another: corner shops, public squares, parks, language schools, social-centre meetings, neighbourhood events, demonstrations, and more informal gatherings. This allowed me to observe not only formal political positions, but also the everyday interactions through which trust, obligation, conflict, and recognition gradually took shape. Much of what later appeared as political alliance was first assembled in low-intensity moments: preparing events, waiting together outside offices, exchanging practical advice, discussing documents, or simply spending time together through repeated encounters. Participant observation was therefore not an additional technique alongside other methods, but the primary way I came to understand how solidarity was lived, tested, and negotiated in practice.

This method required moving continuously between participation and reflection. I attended meetings, joined public demonstrations, took part in cultural programmes, and remained present in neighbourhood spaces where political meanings were often produced outside formal organisations. As Spradley argues, participant observation depends on learning through involvement while maintaining enough analytic distance to make that involvement meaningful as research (Spradley 1980, 53–54). That balance was crucial in my fieldwork. Political life in Torpignattara could not be grasped through speeches, manifestos, or interviews alone. It also rested on tacit expectations, embodied habits, moral judgements, and uneven forms of familiarity that often surfaced only in practice. In this sense, participant observation made it possible to grasp dimensions of political life that remained only partially verbalized, yet shaped how people interpreted situations, responded to one another, and acted within the neighbourhood's political world.

Participant observation in my fieldwork included informal conversations, in-depth interviews, attendance at meetings, demonstrations, social gatherings, and cultural events. This follows a well-established ethnographic practice; Hansen's study of radical-left solidarity in Malmö offers one useful example of how participant observation, interviews, meetings, demonstrations, and cultural events can be combined to study activism as a lived and relational field (Hansen 2020, 5–6). A similar approach was necessary in Torpignattara. The field could not be reduced to “migrants” on one side and “activists” on the other, nor could political commitment be inferred from public language alone. Sustained participation across multiple settings allowed me to see how alliances were built unevenly, how some relations deepened while others remained strategic or fragile, and how ideals of solidarity often coexisted with hesitation, mistrust, or practical limitation. It also helped me notice tensions between people's stated commitments and their actual practices, rather than taking political self-description at face value.

Participant observation was especially important because neighbourhood politics unfolded unevenly and often unpredictably. Relevant developments could not always be anticipated or scheduled, and a rigid design would have missed how alignments and tensions formed in real time. Some events seemed minor when first encountered, but later revealed broader political significance; others emerged suddenly and redirected local priorities. Participant observation allowed me to remain responsive to this eventful temporality by following developments as they unfolded and adjusting my attention when new events became politically central. In this respect, my fieldwork also reflects Marcus's argument for ethnographic practice that remains open to movement, connection, and reorientation rather than assuming a fixed and stable unit of observation (Marcus 1995, 111).

Participant observation thus provided more than access to people or events. It generated situated and relational knowledge about how everyday activism in Torpignattara was enacted across repeated encounters, uneven commitments, and shifting neighbourhood contexts. By remaining present in the ordinary settings where political relations were formed, strained, and renewed, I was able to observe solidarity not only as an expressed ideal, but as a practical and often fragile accomplishment of everyday life.

0.2.iv Fieldnotes, Political Materials, and Documentation

Fieldnotes and documentation were integral to my data collection. As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw note, ethnography combines “firsthand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world” with “the production of written accounts of that world” (1995, 1). This was especially important in Torpignattara, where much of the relevant political life unfolded in motion, during demonstrations, crowded meetings, or in the intervals between events. In such settings, I relied on several forms of documentation. I carried a small notebook for immediate jottings, recording keywords, fragments of dialogue, brief descriptions of spatial arrangements, and short sequences of action that I feared I might otherwise forget. When I could not sit down and write, for example while walking from one site to another, riding the tram, or leaving a fast-moving event, I made brief voice recordings for myself. These were not interviews or recorded conversations with interlocutors, but spoken fieldnotes used to preserve impressions, wording, sequences, and observations before they faded.

Political materials formed another distinct stream of field evidence. I collected leaflets distributed at meetings and demonstrations and kept them in dated folders. I photographed posters, banners, graffiti, placards, and other public inscriptions when they were openly displayed in the neighbourhood or at political events. These photographs were part of my data collection, not merely visual reminders, because they preserved slogans, symbols, dates, group presence, and the spatial arrangement of claims in public space. I also wrote down slogans and chants as they were spoken in the street. These materials were valuable not only because they helped me reconstruct events later, but also because they were analytically meaningful in their own right. They showed how migrants and activists named themselves and others, condensed grievances into concise public language, and marked urban space through visible claims. As Hammersley and Atkinson observe, ethnographers can draw on documents “generated independently of the research” as well as materials elicited during it (2007, 123).

After each event, I expanded my jottings and spoken notes into fuller fieldnotes as soon as feasible, often on the same day. In fast-moving situations, especially when sustained note-taking would have interrupted observation, such provisional forms of capture were essential. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw describe jottings as a way to “jog the memory” and support fuller later description (1995, 9). That was also the function of my voice recordings. I kept a personal field diary alongside these fieldnotes throughout the research. In writing them up, I tried to distinguish descriptive observation from emerging interpretation and self-reflection,

so that early impressions did not harden too quickly into conclusions. I treated note-writing not as a purely documentary step, but as part of the analysis itself. Together, fieldnotes, spoken notes, photographs, diaries, and political materials allowed me to reconstruct events, trace shifts in neighbourhood politics over time, and reflect on how my own understanding developed across different phases of fieldwork.

0.2.v Positionality and Field Relations

I first came to Rome in 2018 as a traveller, carrying a childhood romanticisation of the city as a monumental centre of what I had learned to call “Western civilisation.” Yet alongside ruins and grand public architecture, I kept hearing Bangla in everyday spaces and seeing Bangla on shop signs and storefronts. What struck me was the ordinary co-presence of these worlds: the city’s celebrated historical landscape alongside routine spaces of work, migration, and settlement. Seeing my own countrymen as 21st century economic migrants within that urban world raised questions about how belonging is negotiated in a place so shaped by inherited civilisational narratives, and how migrants become visible, legible, and contested in contemporary Europe. Those questions, first encountered as a traveller, later became the starting point of this doctoral project.

My positionality in the field was shaped by a shifting combination of proximity and distance. As a Bangladeshi woman from a Muslim background conducting research in Italy, I was often read through familiar cultural expectations while also being marked by institutional affiliation, education, and class. These overlapping positions shaped access, the forms of trust that became possible, and the limits of what I could safely observe.

Some of the sharpest challenges emerged early and were structured by gender, marital status, and my living arrangements. As an unmarried woman living alone in Rome, I was repeatedly asked why I was not married or did not have children, and conversations were sometimes redirected toward matchmaking. In a few cases, men made sexualised insinuations while I was trying to gather information. These encounters required clear boundary setting and practical adjustments in how I arranged meetings. They also shaped the field directly, influencing where I could meet people, how long I could remain in certain settings, and which relationships could deepen without compromising safety or dignity.

At the same time, shared language and cultural familiarity gave me access to forms of talk that might have remained opaque to a non-Bangladeshi researcher. Interlocutors often treated

me less as a distant researcher than as someone who could immediately grasp social codes. One telling example was the nickname *Kutta Park* for Sangalli Park. *Kutta* means dog in Bangla, but it is also a derogatory term. Bangladeshis used the label mockingly because Italians frequently walked their dogs there. After all, the park was often dirty with dog excrement, and pet culture itself was viewed with scepticism. In Bangladesh, keeping dogs as pets is uncommon outside affluent circles, and for working-class migrants shaped by contexts where many struggle to provide even for family members, visible care and spending on dogs could appear excessive or absurd. The point here is not the label itself, but my ability to understand the tone, judgement, and social comparison condensed in it, without needing any further explanation. In this sense, partial insiderhood opened access to those forms of rueful recognition, irony, and everyday judgement that Herzfeld locates within cultural intimacy, the very space to which ethnographers are admitted only through trust and familiarity (Herzfeld 2016, 7–8).

Yet I was also an outsider in consequential ways. I was affiliated with Western academic institutions and carried forms of educational capital that differentiated me from many working-class migrants in “Banglatown.” This class gap shaped everyday encounters, including the kinds of questions people asked me. As Pietro Vereni observes in reflecting on unequal ethnographic encounters, the interlocutor may occupy “a very different position of power compared to an anthropologist, whose willingness to listen may be predicated on a position of authority or dependency in the local context and whose attitude may also be influenced by professional ethics” (Vereni 2024, 15). In my case, this asymmetry was also shaped by legal security: I was in Italy with a stable visa for higher education, whereas many of my interlocutors lived with varying degrees of documentary precarity, including irregular status. Interlocutors often approached me as a possible source of information about mobility, work, or life in other European settings, and these exchanges sometimes risked positioning me as a mediator. I responded by clarifying what I could and could not answer and by making clear that my own trajectory was not readily transferable. This was part of a broader effort to reduce these asymmetries without taking up roles that would distort field relations.

My positionality with Italian activists followed a different rhythm. Entering extra-parliamentary political milieus required time, presence, and gradual social recognition. As relationships developed, I was occasionally folded into local idioms of camaraderie and political affinity. One moment that stayed with me was a Christmas dinner invitation at a radical left social centre, where a senior figure, after hearing about my family’s political

history, jokingly announced that they had “found a new communist member.” I mention this not as proof of belonging, but to show that political affinity could facilitate warmth and access while also creating the risk of interpretive comfort. I therefore treated such moments as reminders to attend carefully to disagreement, contradiction, and asymmetry rather than allowing familiarity to overdetermine analysis.

Reflexivity was essential to handling these dynamics as methodological conditions rather than personal anecdotes. I scrutinised not only those I studied but also myself, examining how sympathy, discomfort, identification, or irritation shaped what I noticed, what I overlooked, and how I interpreted what I heard. Rather than claiming neutrality, I treated my perspective as situated and partial, and I tried to keep that partiality visible and analytically accountable (Haraway 1988, 583).

0.2.vi Ethics, Consent, and Risk

Research in a contentious political environment raised ethical questions that could not be resolved through the fiction of complete detachment. I was influenced by Scheper-Hughes’ argument for a “politically committed and morally engaged anthropology” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 409), but I treated engagement as something that required restraint, clear boundaries, and continual attention to risk. The ethical question, for me, was not whether to be involved at all, but how to remain present and responsive without turning research into activism by other means and without increasing vulnerability for interlocutors.

In practice, this meant keeping my participation limited to modest, situational forms of help when explicitly asked, such as translating in bureaucratic encounters, sharing practical information, or connecting someone to a legal support network. At the same time, I avoided assuming leadership roles, avoided speaking on behalf of others, and did not use my academic affiliation as an authority within local dynamics. These boundaries mattered because the stakes were uneven: my institutional position and documentation status provided protections that many interlocutors did not have. I therefore treated hesitation, refusal, or withdrawal as ethically decisive rather than as an obstacle to be negotiated away.

I used pseudonyms as the default for interlocutors who were not already publicly visible or who might be exposed to risk if identified, including people with whom I had only casual conversations. I retain this practice not only to protect privacy in the immediate research context but also to reduce the possibility of recognition if the thesis circulates beyond strictly

academic circles. In this, I follow Herzfeld's decision to keep pseudonyms for his village interlocutors for "both a practical and an ethical" reason (Herzfeld 1987, x). Where I use real names, it is because those individuals explicitly consented to being identified and were already publicly visible figures in local political life.

Consent itself was handled as an ongoing, contextual process rather than a one-time formality. Before any recorded interview, I explained the project's aims in plain terms, clarified that participation was voluntary, and emphasised the right to refuse any question or stop the interview at any time. I also described how confidentiality would be protected through anonymisation. When an interview was audio-recorded, I obtained oral consent at the beginning of the file, noted the date, and reminded interlocutors of the naming practice described above. When interlocutors preferred not to be recorded, I covered the same points verbally and documented consent in my field diary. I avoided written signatures because, in my experience, signing forms can inhibit candour in informal settings and can raise concerns about traceability, especially for undocumented participants. As Herzfeld observes, "trust is not something that can be built through bureaucratic process" (Herzfeld 2025, 166). At the same time, this approach follows disciplinary guidance that treats informed consent as adaptable to context rather than tied to a single written format (American Anthropological Association 2012, 5). Yet I did not assume that formal ethics procedures are equally appropriate in every setting. Following Herzfeld's warning that ethics governance can reflect a culturally specific way of thinking even as it presents itself as universal (Herzfeld 2025, 164), I treated consent as an ongoing process shaped by context, explanation, agreement, and trust.

Ethical practice also required attention to the unequal histories and suspicions that often attach to "research" in marginalised contexts. Smith's formulation that "the word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" is rooted in Indigenous critique, but its warning travels to other settings where institutional vulnerability makes extraction a realistic fear (Smith 1999, 1). In response, I tried to practice reciprocity in ordinary and bounded ways, such as remaining reachable beyond the immediate moment of data collection and offering practical help when appropriate, while being careful not to create expectations I could not ethically or practically meet.

Risk management was continuous. I treated confidentiality not only as a principle of anonymisation in writing, but also as a form of harm minimisation in a setting where legal

precarity and public visibility can quickly become entangled. This included limiting the collection and retention of identifying details in sensitive contexts and anonymizing or altering potentially identifying combinations of attributes when writing up material. During public demonstrations and other volatile events, I also took basic precautions for my own safety and avoided practices that could unintentionally expose others.

Finally, I treated reflexivity as an ethical and methodological discipline rather than a confessional stance. Following Harding's formulation, I treated "strong reflexivity" as a condition of "strong objectivity," meaning that the circumstances under which knowledge is produced, including my position within unequal relations, must be scrutinised alongside the social processes under study (Harding 1993, 69). In practical terms, this meant staying attentive to how sympathy, proximity, and political alignment could shape what I noticed or overlooked, and maintaining an analytic commitment to complexity, internal disagreement, and unevenness rather than smoothing the field into a coherent moral narrative.

0.2.vii Data Analysis and Interpretation

My analysis developed through an iterative movement between writing, rereading, and comparison across the interviews, fieldnotes, and political materials I collected during fieldwork. I approached analysis as a thematic reading practice in a broad sense: identifying and interpreting recurring patterns across the material while moving beyond description toward analytical interpretation. As Braun and Clarke note, thematic analysis can organise and describe material in rich detail, but it can also extend to interpretation of the research topic (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). I worked with this flexibility without adopting a formal, software-driven coding procedure. Instead, I returned repeatedly to my material, marking recurring topics, formulations, and tensions in my notes, and gradually consolidating them into a smaller set of analytic categories that could travel across episodes and interlocutors without flattening disagreement.

To keep the analysis grounded in the unevenness of field relations, I relied on constant comparison across settings and moments. I read interview accounts alongside expanded fieldnotes to trace how themes emerged differently depending on context, who was speaking, and what risks were attached to speaking. I also wrote analytic memos in ordinary prose to track how interpretations developed, where tensions or inconsistencies remained, and how details that did not initially fit emerging patterns might point to different dynamics or new

lines of inquiry. This memo practice helped me distinguish more clearly between what I observed and recorded and what I was beginning to infer, while also making the development of categories visible rather than implicit.

Finally, I strengthened interpretations through triangulation across sources. Rather than treating interviews, observation, and archived political materials as interchangeable, I treated them as differently positioned forms of knowledge and examined where they converged, diverged, or revealed distinct stakes. This follows standard qualitative understandings of triangulation as the use of multiple methods or sources to develop a fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study (Carter et al. 2014, 545). Where accounts did not align, I treated the mismatch not as a problem to be resolved but as analytically consequential, asking what it revealed about hierarchy, strategic framing, contradiction, or the constraints of public and semi-public speech.



Figure 1: A banner in Rome's Torpignattara reads "Ci fanno la guerra e la chiamano legalità, noi vogliamo uno spazio di solidarietà," which translates in English as "They make the war and call it legal, we only want a space with solidarity." Photo by Punny Kabir, 16/03/2023.

0.3 Theoretical Framework: Political Subjectivity, Solidarity, Translation, and Participation

I approach my interlocutors not simply as “migrants” or objects of integration policy, but as actors whose political capacities take shape within unequal conditions of settlement and through relationships with others. The theoretical framework follows the analytical movement of the thesis. Political subjectivity helps me examine how legal, economic, racialised, and religious conditions shape migrants’ understandings of injustice, risk, and possible action. Political solidarity addresses how alliances are formed and sustained across unequal positions and social and ideological differences. Translation and friction illuminate how everyday grievances become sufficiently legible to others to be carried as shared political demands, while some differences remain partial, contested, or unresolved. Finally, theories of participation, citizenship, and belonging provide the basis for analysing what these alliances enable migrants to build in neighbourhood political life and where the limits of that participation appear. Together, these concepts allow me to move from the conditions under which political dispositions take shape, through the practical making of collective action, to the locally grounded political foothold that I conceptualise as political home.

0.3.i Political subjectivity

At the core of this thesis is political subjectivity: the process through which people come to appear, to themselves and to others, as political actors capable of making claims. I use this concept to avoid treating “migrants” as a self-evident social type whose political capacities are either assumed in advance or denied altogether. By political subjectivity, I do not mean an inner disposition or a fixed identity, but a relational process through which people position themselves vis-à-vis governance and authority. It directs attention to how agency is shaped within concrete configurations of power: legal classifications, border controls, labour regimes, racialised hierarchies, and uneven distributions of visibility and voice. In this sense, becoming political is not the unfolding of an already existing political essence. It is a conflictual process shaped by how recognition is granted, withheld, negotiated, or refused (Krause and Schramm 2011, 116, 127–28, 131).

Krause and Schramm provide the clearest starting point for this approach because they define political subjectivity through the processes by which actors are brought into a position to “stake claims,” “have a voice,” and become “recognizable by authorities” (Krause and

Schramm 2011, 116). They explicitly argue that citizenship should be thought through political subjectivity rather than simply presumed as its endpoint, shifting attention from fixed categories to the struggles through which those categories become stakes in the first place (Krause and Schramm 2011, 127–28). This is especially useful for my case because Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara do not confront only the nation-state in the abstract. They move through a dense field of authorities: immigration offices, police, employers, brokers, advisers, community leaders, and neighbourhood organisations. Political subjectivity therefore emerges not from a singular encounter with “the state” but through repeated negotiations across several overlapping regimes of power and recognition (Krause and Schramm 2011, 128–29, 131).

Rancière sharpens this perspective by distinguishing politics from the settled distribution of places and functions that he calls policy. Policy, in his sense, organises community through the allocation of shares, roles, and capacities; politics begins when that order is interrupted through the verification of equality (Rancière 1992, 58–59). Political subjectivization is therefore not a simple assertion of identity but a process of disidentification. It occurs in the interval between identities, when actors refuse the names and places assigned to them and make visible a wrong that the existing order had rendered uncountable (Rancière 1992, 61–62). This is crucial for migration research because it prevents us from inferring political subjectivity from formal status. Migrants may lack institutional recognition and yet become political precisely when they cease to appear only as objects of management and instead make themselves present as interlocutors. In this sense, politics does not begin when they are finally admitted into an already legitimate order, but when they challenge the terms on which that order distributes voice and invisibility (Rancière 1992, 59, 61–62).

To specify how such exclusions are institutionally produced, I draw on De Genova’s theorization of migrant “illegality” and deportability. His central point is that migrant “illegality” is not a natural fact but an effect of the law itself. He insists that it is insufficient to examine undocumented migration only through its consequences and that attention must also be given to the historically situated socio-legal production of migrant “illegality” (De Genova 2002, 419, 431–32). He further argues that deportability, rather than deportation alone, has historically rendered undocumented migrant labour especially disposable and exploitable (De Genova 2002, 431). This is highly relevant to Bangladeshi migrants in Rome, whose labour is woven into neighbourhood economies and ordinary urban life while their legal presence remains conditional and precarious. They are not simply excluded from the

social order; they are included under imposed conditions of vulnerability. That is why political subjectivity in migratory settings so often forms under pressure: through repeated calibrations of risk, visibility, and endurance rather than through a smooth path to stable incorporation (De Genova 2002, 428, 431–33).

Yet this structural condition is lived through ordinary encounters, not only through legal abstraction. Here Tuckett’s ethnography of immigration bureaucracy in Italy is indispensable. Her work shows that migrants’ encounters with the documentation regime are marked by long waits, contradictory rules, uneven implementation, and chronic uncertainty. The regime is a shifting terrain in which requirements frequently change and low-level officials exercise considerable discretion (Tuckett 2018, 14–15, 52). For migrants, this means that legal status is not a secure achievement but an ongoing struggle. In one especially revealing moment, an interlocutor says that when she is at the questura, her position “as just a poor foreigner is made real to me” (Tuckett 2018, 70–71). Elsewhere Tuckett shows how even people who feel socially settled can slip into what she describes as a “limbo of illegality” through opaque administrative procedures and the failure to meet shifting documentary requirements (Tuckett 2018, 125). This matters for my framework because political subjectivity is not formed only in moments of public protest. It is also formed in repeated bureaucratic encounters that make one’s conditional place palpable, forcing a practical understanding of how one is seen, sorted, and governed.

If De Genova explains how precarious legality is produced and Tuckett shows how it is lived, Ghassan Hage helps conceptualise its temporal and existential effects. In “Waiting out the Crisis,” Hage argues that migration is often driven by the search for a space where one feels one is “going somewhere as opposed to nowhere,” and that what is called voluntary migration often reflects an inability or unwillingness to “wait out” a crisis of existential mobility (Hage 2009, 98–99). He develops the concept of “stuckedness” to describe a form of existential immobility that does not necessarily coincide with lack of movement in a literal sense. One can still work, move, climb, and endure while nevertheless feeling unable to move forward in any meaningful way (Hage 2009, 99–100). This is useful for my case because many Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara are not immobile in a simple sense: they work, renew documents, change jobs, move between rooms and flats, and navigate institutions. Yet they are often existentially stuck, unable to stabilize status, convert labour into durable security, or plan beyond the next bureaucratic threshold. Hage is also helpful because he links stuckedness to governmentality. When waiting “works” as orderly endurance, it becomes

self-governed; when it breaks down, crisis can turn passive seriality into a more collective questioning of the conditions being endured (Hage 2009, 104–05). This helps illuminate how prolonged uncertainty can, under some conditions, give rise not only to resignation but also to politicization.

More broadly, as Bandak and Janeja note, waiting has been analysed as a technology of governance in which power is exercised over other people's time and in how they are made to wait, "thereby generating particular forms of subjectivities" (2018, 4–5). This is useful here because it shows that waiting is not only an existential condition but also a political technique through which migrant lives are governed. Jacobsen and Karlsen similarly argue that waiting is not simply a by-product of bureaucratic inefficiency but part of the temporal organisation of irregular migration itself. Explicitly building on De Genova's account of the socio-legal production of migrant illegality, they show that time must be understood not only as a consequence of irregularity but also as one of the means through which it is produced (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021, 1–3). Khosravi's afterword sharpens this argument further. He describes border waiting as "forced waiting, imposed by bordering practices," extended through institutionalized delays and permit regimes that shape the lives not only of non-citizens but also, at times, of racialised citizens (Khosravi 2021, 202–03). Such waiting, he argues, "engenders wakefulness and vigilance" and becomes "a state of consciousness," as migrants continually monitor legislation, legal openings, documents, networks, deportability, and deadlines (Khosravi 2021, 205–06). Waiting, in this sense, is not merely suspension but one of the terrains on which political subjectivity is formed: through it, migrants learn to read institutions, assess risk, and orient themselves toward unstable possibilities of recognition and participation. Khosravi also insists that waiting is racialized and unevenly distributed, and that institutionalized delay can serve regimes that extract labour while deferring belonging (Khosravi 2021, 204). At the same time, waiting is not only a condition imposed on precarious groups but also a daily practice through which they endure exclusion and claim the right to take part (Khosravi 2021, 206–07).

Mezzadra and Neilson help situate these processes within a broader argument about borders, labour, and subject formation. They show that juridical status is one of the key factors in the production of labouring subjects and that contemporary multiplication of labour can produce political subjects who do not fit established categories of political belonging such as citizenship, parties, unions, or even activism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 22). Later in the book, they describe subjectivity itself as a battleground where devices of subjection confront

practices of subjectivation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 252). This is useful in my case because Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara do not easily map onto pre-given political forms. Their political subjectivity emerges at the intersection of labour exploitation, bureaucratic precariousness, community obligations, racialised suspicion, and the practical search for footholds of action. They are neither outside politics nor comfortably inside inherited modes of political belonging; their subject positions are shaped in the unstable space where these forces meet.

Finally, following Bhambra, I situate these dynamics within Europe's postcolonial present. As she puts it, "Europe's past is an imperial and colonial past," and Europe's political and economic formations were materially buttressed by colonial expansion, extraction, and dispossession (Bhambra 2022, 229–30). She further argues that the European state was not simply a nation-state but an imperial state, and that this wider history is routinely disavowed in contemporary understandings of European politics and society (Bhambra 2022, 233–34). This matters because the precarious and conditional recognition extended to migrants in contemporary Europe is not merely a policy anomaly. It belongs to a longer order in which mobility, labour, sovereignty, and belonging have been differentially organised through empire and racial hierarchy. Read in this light, migrant political subjectivity is shaped not only by immediate bureaucratic vulnerability but also by the historical production of European membership itself.

Taken together, these perspectives allow me to conceptualise political subjectivity not as a prior ideological commitment, but as a situated and shifting capacity formed within unequal fields of inclusion, precarity, and partial recognition. In Torpignattara, conditions of settlement shape how migrants interpret their circumstances, what they recognise as unjust or claimable, what risks they associate with public action, and when they judge collective engagement possible or worthwhile. Political subjectivity therefore does not lead uniformly to activism. It helps explain the uneven pathways through which grievances may remain privately navigated, become episodically public, or develop into more sustained forms of political action.

0.3.ii Political Solidarity

In this thesis, I treat political solidarity as a key analytic for understanding how Bangladeshi migrants and Italian leftist and anarchist actors come to act together across uneven positions,

without assuming that “solidarity” is either a natural moral sentiment or a stable cultural value. I use the term to name a field of practices in which people commit themselves to others’ struggles in ways that are publicly consequential, organisationally demanding, and shaped by power. This matters in Torpignattara because the relations I trace are not adequately captured by the softer vocabulary of “support,” “help,” or “integration.” They involve alignment in the face of conflict, risk, and institutional constraint, and they generate disagreements about legitimacy, representation, and the terms of acting together.

To build a conceptual baseline, I draw on Sally Scholz’s *Political Solidarity* (2008), a work of political philosophy that clarifies solidarity as a distinct political relation rather than a synonym for empathy or social cohesion. Scholz’s first move is definitional: she distinguishes between different forms of solidarity and shows why “political” solidarity has a specific orientation toward confronting injustice, not merely maintaining social bonds or expressing civic attachment (Scholz 2008, 11–14). This typological approach is useful for my purposes because it helps keep separate things that are often rhetorically blended in migration debates: humanitarian concern, civic duty, neighbourhood conviviality, and explicitly political alignment. It also offers a way to write about solidarity without romanticizing it. Scholz emphasises that solidarity can be invoked for emancipatory ends but can also be exclusionary or self-serving, a reminder that the term needs to be treated as contested rather than automatically virtuous (Scholz 2008, 11–14). Scholz is also central here because she forces the problem of asymmetry into the theory itself. Political solidarity, in her account, routinely involves actors who do not share the same exposure to harm and whose ability to exit a struggle is uneven. Her discussion of the “paradox” faced by more privileged allies is especially relevant for an ethnography of cross-status alliance, because it frames solidarity as a relation that must constantly manage the risk of speaking for others, setting agendas, or converting support into moral self-confirmation (Scholz 2008, 159–63). I treat this insight both as a methodological and an interpretive guardrail: I approach solidarity not as a resolved unity but as a practical achievement that is repeatedly tested by unequal resources, unequal vulnerabilities, and unequal recognition.

I borrow Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen’s term **transversal solidarity** to *name* the specific form of solidarity I analyse in Torpignattara, because it offers a deliberately plural, practice-oriented way to theorise solidarity in contexts shaped by migration politics. Their 2021 article is a conceptual intervention that proposes an analytic framework organised around three dimensions, identity, space, and organisation, and then uses illustrative referents

to demonstrate how the framework travels across different solidarity formations. In the article they explicitly stage the empirical referents as “different examples,” rather than as fieldwork cases, and they name the key examples up front: City Plaza Refugee Accommodation Center (Athens) and Reclaim the Power (UK) to illustrate autonomous solidarity; Venligboerne, the “welcome refugees” movement (Denmark) for civic solidarity; and institutional solidarity illustrated through municipal solidarity, including Barcelona-style municipalism (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 857, 863, 867, 870).

What makes this lens especially useful for my thesis is how it defines transversal solidarity precisely to “avoid dichotomies between in-group/out-group, national/international or society/institutions” and to keep solidarity analytically open to heterogeneity rather than moralising it as simply “good” or “bad” (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 859).

Additionally, they take “a spatial approach” to solidarity’s making, and state directly that “solidarities are spatially produced” (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 863). Space, in their framework, is about how solidarities materialise in concrete urban sites and in the infrastructures, routines, and boundaries through which actors relate to the state, reshape community, and scale their claims across geographies, rather than treating “the local” and “the transnational” as separate containers (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 860, 863). This is directly relevant to Torpignattara, where the alliance I analyse is grounded in a tangible neighbourhood ecology: specific streets and meeting points, social centres and party spaces, demonstrations, occupied or negotiated public sites, and recurring organisational labour that makes joint presence possible.

In their typology, the three forms of solidarity (autonomous, civic, institutional) are not fixed ideals but analytic handles for identifying different organisational logics and their tensions, and they emphasise that transversal solidarity remains “rooted locally” while promoting “a form of progressive localism,” with different ways of connecting other geographies and articulating politics of scale (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 870). In my case, this makes it possible to treat the Torpignattara alliance as a multi-modal formation that is empirically anchored in neighbourhood space yet constantly negotiating identity boundaries, organisational styles, and the shifting line between civic action and engagement with institutions.

Teresa Cappiali’s *Reframing Immigrant Resistance: Alliances, Conflicts and Racialization in Italy* (2022) provides an empirically grounded Italian point of reference for my analysis,

offering a detailed account of how pro-migrant alliances are forged and contested within Italy's specific political histories, organisational fields, and racialising dynamics, which closely resonates with the stakes and frictions I trace in Torpignattara. Cappiali's contribution is not a purely philosophical discussion; it is a political-sociological study built from extensive qualitative research, including interviews and participant observation across multiple Italian cities and mobilisations (Cappiali 2022, 1–2). What makes Cappiali especially relevant for this thesis is her insistence that alliances are not only sites of support but also sites where racialisation can be reproduced, where leadership and representation are disputed, and where “pro-immigrant” politics is internally heterogeneous and historically shifting (Cappiali 2022, 2–4). This historical and conjunctural approach matters for my analysis because it prevents treating “the Italian left” as a single actor with stable commitments. Instead, it foregrounds how solidarity in Italy is shaped by political conjunctures, organisational fields, and conflicts over meaning. Cappiali thus provides a way to situate the Torpignattara alliance within a wider Italian terrain of migrant struggles and their uneasy relationship to institutional politics, civic anti-racism, and radical left traditions (Cappiali 2022, 4–6).

While Cappiali sharpens the politics of alliance, Katerina Rozakou's ethnography of “socialities of solidarity” sharpens the micro-politics of relating. Rozakou writes from long-term ethnographic engagement with solidarity initiatives in Greece, including earlier fieldwork with voluntary groups and later research during the 2015 “refugee crisis,” combining participant observation, interviews, and analysis of texts and social media (Rozakou 2016, 186–88). Her work is relevant here not because Torpignattara repeats the Greek case, but because she shows how “solidarity” is made through forms of sociality that carry strong egalitarian aspirations while remaining vulnerable to hierarchy, moral discomfort, and the slippery boundary between solidarity and charity (Rozakou 2016, 185–87). By tracing debates about giving, obligation, and the risk of turning others into recipients, Rozakou offers a vocabulary for analysing when solidarity practices become uneasy precisely because they aim at horizontality but operate amid material need and unequal power (Rozakou 2016, 185–87). This helps my analysis stay attentive to the everyday labour of sustaining egalitarian relations in contexts where the temptation, or necessity, of one-way assistance is always present.

A further context for contemporary migrant solidarity is the tightening political environment in which it operates. Della Porta and Steinhilper's edited volume *Contentious Migrant*

Solidarity (2022) is not a single-site ethnography but a comparative social movement intervention that maps how solidarities with migrants become contentious under “shrinking spaces,” including heightened surveillance, legal restriction, and public hostility (Della Porta and Steinhilper 2022, 1–4). The volume is relevant to this thesis because it frames solidarity as a practice that is increasingly governed through criminalization and administrative constraints, which in turn shape its organisational forms and public strategies (Della Porta and Steinhilper 2022, 2–4). For my case, this supports an analysis that treats solidarity not only as an interpersonal relation but as an activity carried out under changing regimes of legitimacy, where helping, organising, and protesting can all become targets of suspicion or regulation.

Finally, I keep the concept of solidarity anchored in political economy and class. Gill and Kasimir’s intervention on solidarity (2009), written from within anthropological debates on labour and collective action, is useful because it insists that solidarity is historically produced through struggle against fragmentation and inequality, not simply declared as a value (Gill and Kasimir 2009, 175). Their emphasis helps prevent a purely moral reading of solidarity by tying it to the conditions under which people can actually act together, including the pressures that divide them and the material work required to maintain collective projects (Gill and Kasimir 2009, 175). This lens is especially important for an ethnography centred on working-class migration and left politics, where the promise of solidarity is continually haunted by the realities of precarious labour, legal vulnerability, and internal differentiation.

As a comparative point that links these conceptual debates back to an urban European setting of radical left activism, I also draw on Hansen’s Malmö study, based on qualitative fieldwork among radical left activists and migrants, which examines how solidarity is practiced in situations marked by unequal status and contested legitimacy (Hansen 2020, 69–70).

Hansen’s ethnographic framing is helpful because it treats solidarity as something built through everyday cooperative work, conflict, and organisational experimentation, rather than as an abstract ideological position (Hansen 2020, 70–71). This supports my own approach: in the chapters that follow, I analyse solidarity as a contingent and negotiated political relation and practice, sustained through repeated negotiations over asymmetry, representation, and risk, and producing political effects precisely through these negotiations. To keep the analytic levels distinct, I use alliance to refer to the organisational alignment through which Bangladeshi organisers and Italian leftist/anarchist actors coordinate action, and network to

refer to the wider constellation of groups, ties, and infrastructures in the neighbourhood that make such coordination possible and reproducible across events.

In sum, these theoretical resources let me treat “political solidarity” as an empirical question rather than an evaluative label. Scholz provides a normative and analytical grammar for political solidarity and its dilemmas (especially privilege). García Agustín and Jørgensen, in dialogue with Yuval-Davis, offer the concept of transversal solidarity for alliances across difference and scale. Cappiali situates solidarity in Italy as historically contested and internally conflictual. Rozakou shows how egalitarian aspirations are made and strained in the socialities of solidarity. Della Porta and Steinhilper foreground the increasingly hostile governance contexts in which migrant solidarity operates. Gill and Kasmir keep solidarity connected to class struggle and the material conditions of collective action. These are the major theoretical supports I use to justify the solidarity lens in this thesis, without treating solidarity as either pure ethics or pure strategy, but as a practice that is repeatedly made, tested, and reworked in concrete political life.

0.3.iii Translation, Friction, Untranslatables, and the Common

To analyse how heterogeneous actors can act together without presuming shared ideology, shared language, or shared moral grammar, I treat translation and friction as core analytic tools. This move is methodological rather than celebratory: it resists reading cross-difference alliances either as evidence of a stable consensus or as a story of inevitable failure. Instead, it foregrounds the practical work through which political claims, categories, and relationships become partially intelligible across asymmetries of position, experience, and worldview.

A central reference here is Mezzadra and Neilson’s *Border as Method*, which is not an ethnography of a single site but a work of critical theory that moves across cases, concepts, and struggles to rethink borders as productive social technologies of contemporary capitalism and politics. Within that broader project, translation is developed as an indispensable optic for grasping how struggles and subjects come into relation across difference. In their discussion of Iveković, Mezzadra and Neilson emphasise that translation is not simply a linguistic transfer. It is a politically consequential practice through which meanings and demands are made to travel, and through which “the common” is not assumed but brought into being through situated encounters (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 24–25)

This matters for my thesis because the political scene I study cannot be adequately conceptualised through models that assume pre-given shared horizons, whether “integration,” “community,” or a unified movement identity. Translation offers a way to conceptualise collaboration as something assembled through work, and therefore also vulnerable to breakdown, dispute, and reconfiguration. Mezzadra and Neilson’s key conceptual contribution for this subsection is their insistence on translation as labour. They trace a lineage through Gramsci to underline that translation is not a neutral mediation standing above conflict, but a practice embedded in social relations and strategic projects. They also widen the frame by showing how translation is entangled with modern political economy: it can involve the conversion of lived experience into bureaucratic categories, but also resonates with historical processes through which contracts, commodities, and money mediate between heterogeneous social worlds (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 270–72)

This is relevant for my study because migrant politics in European cities is repeatedly organised through such conversions, not only between spoken languages but between registers of legitimacy: moral claims, legal categories, institutional scripts, activist repertoires, and religious vocabularies. Translation, understood in this expanded sense, becomes a way to track how political action is shaped by the effort to render things commensurable that are not naturally commensurable.

A second, closely linked resource in Mezzadra and Neilson is their engagement with Naoki Sakai’s theorization of translation and “address.” Sakai’s intervention, as taken up by Mezzadra and Neilson, is crucial because it warns that translation can quietly reproduce the fiction of internally homogeneous communities, as if speakers and political subjects were naturally anchored in bounded linguistic or cultural units. Mezzadra and Neilson discuss Sakai’s contrast between “homolingual” and “heterolingual” orientations to communication to show how translation is implicated in the production of civilizational partitions, including the familiar binaries through which Europe and its “others” are narrated (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 281–82)

For my purposes, this matters because alliances across differences are never only about “understanding” in a benign sense. They are also shaped by the background assumptions through which actors imagine who belongs to a political “we,” whose speech counts as legible, and which vocabularies appear as universal versus particular. From this angle, what Mezzadra and Neilson call a “heterolingual” orientation becomes analytically valuable: it

treats interaction as an ongoing negotiation among interlocutors who cannot be presumed to share a stable common language, whether literally or politically. In their framing, translation is not an external bridge that resolves difference; it is the medium in which difference is encountered and provisionally organised (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 283–84). This is precisely the kind of conceptual equipment required for analysing political collaboration between actors whose commitments may intersect at certain points while remaining divergent at others. Rather than interpreting mismatch as a mere obstacle, the translation lens makes it possible to ask what kinds of partial agreements become workable, what kinds of disagreements persist without necessarily dissolving collaboration, and what kinds of political subject positions are produced through this very process.

This leads directly to the question of untranslatables and the common. In Mezzadra and Neilson's account, translation does not eliminate the remainder. On the contrary, it foregrounds how any attempt to build relations across heterogeneity will leave elements that resist incorporation. These limits are not simply communicative failures. They are structural features of acting together across unequal histories, differentiated social locations, and competing normative grammars. At the same time, Mezzadra and Neilson insist that the common should not be imagined as consensus, unity, or shared identity. It is better approached as a field of political production that emerges through struggle, coordination, and contestation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 24–25; 283–84). For my thesis, this provides a way to conceptualise fragile forms of togetherness without romanticizing them: the common is neither guaranteed nor pure; it is a precarious outcome of practical work, always exposed to interruption.

If Mezzadra and Neilson provide the conceptual architecture for translation and the common, Anna Tsing's *Friction* provides an ethnographic theory of how global and local projects become effective through encounter. *Friction* is an ethnography of global connection grounded in Indonesia, with key parts of the book drawing on her long engagement in the Meratus Mountains of South Kalimantan and on the political-economic upheavals surrounding the late Suharto era and its aftermath (Tsing 2005, ix–xi). Rather than treating “the global” as a detached scale, she follows how projects such as business, environmental advocacy, and “local empowerment” take form through far-flung collaborations in which cultural diversity is not an obstacle to connection but the condition that makes connection possible (Tsing 2005, x–xi). Her analytic wager is that universals and large schemes do not simply descend on local worlds; they become powerful only through practical encounters,

what she calls “friction,” the awkward and unequal, but also creative, qualities of interconnection across difference (Tsing 2005, 1, 4).

My empirical setting is not a forest frontier but an urban European site shaped by migration governance. Still, Tsing’s method travels productively because it offers a way to theorise global power as something that moves through encounter, not as a seamless system operating above everyday life. I therefore translate her “global” not into a claim about planetary totality, but into the migration regime as a set of translocal projects that organise mobility, legality, and labour through documents, controls, and institutional routines. This matters because Tsing insists that friction is not merely what slows power down; it is also what keeps global power in motion, while simultaneously disrupting its fantasy of smooth operation (Tsing 2005, 5–6). In her formulation, hegemony is “made as well as unmade with friction,” and encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering rather than automatically emancipatory (Tsing 2005, 5–6). Read through this lens, the power-laden encounters among heterogeneous actors that structure migrant politics can be analysed without presuming either coherent domination or pure resistance. *Friction* becomes a way to grasp how uneven collaborations and partial alignments are politically consequential precisely because they are contingent, asymmetrical, and never fully settled (Tsing 2005, 4–6).

Translation, in Mezzadra and Neilson’s sense, lets me conceptualise political cooperation as an ongoing labour of articulation across heterogeneous struggles, rather than as an expression of an already shared worldview. Friction, in Tsing’s sense, prevents this from becoming an idealized story of “bridge-building” by insisting that encounters across difference are historically thick, unequal, and generative of both constraint and possibility. The combined framework makes it possible to treat misunderstandings, disagreements, and moral dissonances not as analytical noise, but as central to how fragile political commonality is produced, defended, and sometimes undone.

0.3.iv Contested Participation: Urban Citizenship, Belonging, and Political Home

Since many migrants in Europe are structurally excluded from full electoral participation, I treat “participation” less as a question of voting and more as a problem of how political membership is enacted, contested, and recognised in everyday civic life. I approach

participation as a field of practices through which people come to count as legitimate political actors, and through which the boundaries of belonging are made and unmade. This framing keeps the analytic focus on migrant activism and alliance building, while still taking seriously the spatial and institutional conditions that shape what kinds of participation are possible and legible.

To connect participation, belonging, and citizenship to the thesis's central concern with building a political home, I use the term *political home* in a specific sense. I treat it not simply as a descriptive metaphor, but as a conceptual lens developed in this thesis for analysing how migrants secure a local political foothold under conditions of partial membership. It does not refer to a private feeling of comfort or a settled cultural identity, nor is it a synonym for integration. Rather, it helps me think through how participation, recognition, and emplacement come together in neighbourhood life. Political home directs attention to the ways migrants become able, however unevenly, to act, appear, make claims, and be treated as participants in the social and political life of the place where they live. In this sense, the concept allows me to hold together two processes that are often analysed separately: contested citizenship, understood as practical claim-making without full formal membership, and contested belonging, understood as the uneven negotiation of local presence, legitimacy, and attachment. The question in this thesis, then, is not whether migrants belong in an abstract sense, but how political footholds are built, sustained, and limited within a particular urban setting.

Lefebvre is central here because his “right to the city” was never merely an urban planning slogan; it was a theory of political claim-making under capitalism. Writing from the conjuncture of postwar urbanization and the conflicts that culminated in 1968 France, Lefebvre conceptualises the city not as a neutral container but as a social oeuvre, something produced and therefore contestable, rather than a finished “product” to be administered from above (Lefebvre 1996, 26). On this view, participation cannot be reduced to inclusion in existing procedures, because the city itself is at stake: who gets to inhabit it, use it, and shape it. Lefebvre’s right to the city names a demand for access to urban life that involves both participation in decision-making and appropriation of space as a use value, especially against forms of urban ordering that privilege property logics and managerial control (Lefebvre 1996, 73–74). What matters for this thesis is not to treat Rome primarily as an “urban studies” case, but to use Lefebvre to theorise why struggles over public presence, meeting, assembly, and legitimate use of space become a key register of political participation for actors whose

formal citizenship is partial or absent. Lefebvre's emphasis on the right to the city as a demand, articulated through conflict, helps conceptualise participation as a contested relation to power rather than a granted membership (Lefebvre 1996, 77–78). Read this way, a political home is not a metaphor but a spatial and political problem: who can claim the city as a place where their presence is legitimate, and their gathering is not automatically suspect.

Holston's contribution is different in genre and method: it is a long, historically grounded urban ethnography of democratization and citizenship in Brazil, focused on how residents of São Paulo's peripheries built neighbourhoods, fought over land and legality, and generated new expectations of rights and entitlement in the process (Holston 2008, 4). The point I take from Holston is not a direct analogy between Brazilian autoconstruction and migrant activism in Rome, but his insistence that citizenship is not exhausted by formal status and that democratization transforms the very content of citizenship through practice (Holston 2008, 14). Holston theorises “insurgent citizenship” as an emergent formation that develops through conflicts over rights, recognition, and distribution, often from marginalized positions, and in tension with what he calls entrenched forms of citizenship. Crucially, he does not treat the relationship between entrenched and insurgent citizenship as a clean opposition; he emphasises their entanglement, and he cautions against turning “insurgence” into a moral label (Holston 2008, 33–34). This does not mean that social actors are not morally motivated or that they do not themselves frame their claims in ethical terms. Rather, it means that such claims should be analysed without presuming that insurgent practice is automatically coherent, emancipatory, or universally inclusive. It also helps clarify why a political home, in my sense, cannot be equated with formal inclusion: it is built within, against, and through entanglement with entrenched forms of citizenship that both enable and constrain what can be claimed.

If Lefebvre and Holston foreground the city as a terrain where claims to membership become concrete, Isin provides a sharper conceptual vocabulary for participation as eventful enactment. In a political theoretic intervention associated with “acts of citizenship,” Isin argues that focusing on the status or habitus of already recognised citizens can miss the decisive moments when subjects constitute themselves as claimants, including those without secure status (Isin 2008, 18). He urges a shift from asking who the citizen is to examining what is done in the name of rights, justice, and obligation, especially when such acts disrupt established scripts and scenes (Isin 2008, 19). This matters for my framing of participation because migrant activism often becomes politically meaningful precisely when it forces

recognition, creates new public scenes, or makes visible claims that institutions would prefer to keep procedural, individualized, or invisible. Isin's distinction between "active citizens" who participate in already written scripts and "activist citizens" who help write scripts and create scenes offers a way to conceptualise participation as creative and conflictual, rather than as compliance with existing forms (Isin 2008, 38; see also 36–37 on acts producing actors). Even more directly, Isin's formulation that acts constitute actors, and can bring into being new sites and scales of struggle, provides a bridge between street level politics and broader questions of citizenship, without presuming that citizenship is either fully present or fully absent (Isin 2008, 39). In the language of this thesis, a political home is built not only by occupying a place, but by producing scenes in which one is intelligible as a political actor, sometimes for the first time, and always under conditions that can withdraw recognition again.

Yuval-Davis strengthens this framework by clarifying why participation is always also a politics of belonging. Her work is not an ethnography of one site but a theoretically driven, intersectional sociology of how "belonging" becomes politically contested: who is imagined as part of the "we," through what criteria, and with what emotional and normative investments. A key move in Yuval-Davis is to distinguish belonging from the politics of belonging, the latter referring to the boundary work through which collectivities are produced, defended, and policed (Yuval-Davis 2011, 20–21). For this thesis, the value of Yuval-Davis is that it prevents participation from collapsing into a narrow civic republican ideal, where participation is simply the performance of "good citizenship." Instead, it keeps the analysis attentive to how participation is differentially authorized, how some forms of political presence are read as legitimate and others as threatening, and how such readings intersect with race, religion, class, and gender. Yuval-Davis's discussion of "active" versus "activist" citizenship also helps me situate participation within contemporary governance: "active" citizenship can be mobilised as a moralizing demand to contribute, volunteer, or prove worthiness, while "activist" citizenship names claim-making that can blur scales from the neighbourhood to the transnational (Yuval-Davis 2011, 59–60). This distinction is relevant for analysing migrant activism because it clarifies how participation can be demanded from below as a right, while also being demanded from above as an obligation or performance. It also sharpens what is at stake in calling something a political home: it is never simply "home," but a site where a local "we" is continuously made, disputed, and policed.

Finally, Çağlar and Schiller provide the scalar and political economic context that links belonging and participation to the city as a changing field of power, without reverting to methodological nationalism. Their “city making” approach emerges from migration scholarship that insists migrants are not external add-ons to urban life but constitutive actors in the production of cities, including through everyday practices and political engagements (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018, 3–4). They argue that the question is not simply how migrants “integrate” into a city, but how migrants are positioned within projects of urban restructuring and rescaling, and how these projects shape the possibilities for emplacement, recognition, and collective life (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018, 12–13). This matters for my conceptualisation of participation because it directs attention to the city as a multi-scalar political arena in which migrant claims are negotiated amid wider transformations of labour markets, governance, and spatial ordering. It also helps explain why neighbourhood-based activism can be politically consequential even when national citizenship remains out of reach: the city is not only a backdrop but an active site where membership is organised, contested, and sometimes redefined. In my terms, political home is therefore not only made in interaction; it is also shaped by how the neighbourhood is positioned within urban governance and political economy, and by how migrants are differentially emplaced within those shifting hierarchies.

Taken together, these perspectives allow me to approach political participation as spatially grounded, socially contested, and unevenly recognised. I draw on Lefebvre to understand participation as a claim to urban life, on Holston to examine citizenship as something also made through struggle, on Isin to conceptualise political agency beyond formal status, on Yuval-Davis to analyse the boundary work through which belonging is organised and contested, and on Çağlar and Schiller to situate these processes within changing urban relations of power. Bringing these insights together, I develop political home as an analytical way of thinking about the political footholds migrants can build under conditions of incomplete citizenship and contested belonging.

0.4 Analytical Arc of the Thesis

The empirical and analytical argument develops across five chapters. I begin by establishing Torpignattara not as a homogeneous migrant enclave but as a heterogeneous political field

shaped by particular histories of migration, settlement, labour, religion, and neighbourhood life. From this terrain, I examine how unequal conditions of settlement shape migrants' political subjectivities and their uneven pathways into political action. I then turn to the relationships through which some of these dispersed grievances enter collective politics, asking how alliances are formed and sustained across unequal positions and political differences. From alliance formation, I move to the work required to sustain collective action, tracing how grievances are translated, reframed, negotiated, or sometimes left unresolved across different political and moral languages. In the final empirical chapter, I examine what these processes enable in terms of participation and belonging, and I develop the concept of political home to theorise the political foothold migrants establish in the neighbourhood and its limits. In Chapter 6, I bring these strands together, synthesise the findings, and clarify the thesis's conceptual contributions, limitations, and wider implications.

Chapter 1

A Heterogeneous “Banglatown”: Torpignattara’s Migrant Political Field

Early in my fieldwork in Torpignattara, I found myself repeatedly drawn into the rhythm of its small shops and street corners: the places where people buy phone credit, collect remittances, exchange news, and quietly take the measure of who belongs and who does not. In an average Bangladeshi-run corner market, South Asian vegetables and spices sit alongside pasta and tinned tomatoes, and everyday consumption moves easily between rice and beer. Italian customers come in for cigarettes or a quick purchase, while Bangladeshi residents linger long enough to greet one another, ask for help with a form, or share an update from home. The neighbourhood’s ordinary landscape likewise holds together spaces that are often imagined as separate: Bangladeshi groceries and Italian cafés, mosques and churches, halal butchers and bars. Scenes like this are ordinary, but they show how “Banglatown” is made: not as an official enclave, but as a lived landscape shaped by work routines, neighbourhood infrastructures, and everyday negotiations of proximity.

That negotiated coexistence is also written on the walls. The streets of Torpignattara are a stage on which migrants struggle, and the neighbourhood’s leftist and anarchist idioms are made publicly visible through the constant turnover of graffiti, posters, and leaflets. During my year of fieldwork, I repeatedly encountered walls layered with political text and imagery, with some posters torn down and others quickly pasted over them, giving these inscriptions an explicitly ephemeral quality. I read messages such as “contro il razzismo” (against racism), “Documenti per tutti, repressione per nessuno” (documents for all, repression for none), “Basta la guerra” (no more war), “chiamano sicurezza il controllo e l’oppressione” (they call control and oppression “security”), “Basta NATO” (no more NATO), and “fuoco allo stato” (fire to the state). As street-level formulations, these slogans registered local grievances and the neighbourhood’s contested political terrain. They also staged politics in public by condensing demands into portable claims, naming shared antagonisms, and making certain forms of being-with visible, even when agreement and coordination remained unsettled. Notably, these messages were not confined to Italian alone. Posters and graffiti often appeared in multiple languages, including Italian, English, Bangla, and Arabic,

addressing the area's linguistic plurality and the mixed publics that political actors sought to reach.

In this chapter, I ask how Torpignattara became an unofficial “Banglatown,” and how this setting shapes migrants' everyday struggles and internal differences. Rather than treating “Banglatown” as a bounded community, I approach Torpignattara as a migrant political field: a socially dense and internally differentiated urban space in which settlement, labour, religion, commerce, and neighbourhood politics are closely entangled. To answer this question, I first situate Torpignattara within the wider European and Italian context in which migration and Islam have become central sites of political polarization and governance. I then trace the routes, regularizations, and labour trajectories through which Bangladeshi migration consolidated in Rome. From there, I map “Banglatown” as a neighbourhood formation, moving from Torpignattara's working-class history to the commercial, religious, and associational infrastructures that sustain everyday life, and to the public spaces where visibility, coexistence, and friction are negotiated. Finally, I show that this local formation is far from socially uniform: it is marked by uneven trajectories of settlement and onward mobility, by different forms of precarity and aspiration, and by pragmatic, shifting orientations to politics that emerge through routine encounters.

1.1 Migration, Islam, and Political Polarization in Europe and Italy

In this first section, I situate Torpignattara within a wider European and Italian context of migration governance, demographic change, and political polarization. The focus here is on concrete patterns of arrival, legal channels, and policy shifts that shape the conditions under which Bangladeshi migrants live and act.

Across the European Union, the 2010s saw a sharp increase in asylum claims and refugee admissions. In 2016, EU member states granted protection to about 710,400 asylum seekers – roughly double the number in the previous year – with Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans constituting the largest groups (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 151). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees noted the extreme pressure on national asylum and reception systems in 2015, along with persistent gaps and uneven implementation of the EU's Common Asylum System (UNHCR 2015a; UNHCR 2015b). What matters for the argument is not whether there was or was not a true “migration crisis,” but that, within a short period, humanitarian protection channels expanded sharply in visibility and volume, even as the

Common European Asylum System exposed structural weaknesses in law and implementation and many national asylum and social support systems were said to have reached a breaking point (Beirens 2018, 1).

Italy experienced these shifts in a particular way. For much of the postwar period, it was not a major destination for asylum seekers. Although Italy was subject to evolving European asylum regulations, as Ambrosetti and Paparusso (2018, 152) note, until the late 2000s its domestic asylum system remained fragmented and weakly institutionalised; immigration was governed primarily through labour and family migration channels rather than through a robust refugee protection regime. After 2011, escalating conflicts and instability around the Mediterranean led to a rapid increase in the volume and changing composition of boat arrivals via the central Mediterranean route. Italy's position as a major entry point suddenly exposed the limits of its patchy asylum framework (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 152). By the mid-2010s, Italy had become a fully established immigration country. The foreign resident population rose from about 737,800 in 1996 to over 5,026,000 in 2016 – roughly 8.3% of Italy's total population (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 154–55). Within this overall growth, annual asylum applications surged from 37,350 in 2011 to 123,482 in 2016 (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 164). Crucially, these were not neatly separable “refugee” vs. “economic migrant” flows. Italian evidence from the mid-2010s emphasises the rise of “mixed flows” from sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa, and also Bangladesh, which blurred legal distinctions between asylum seekers and labour migrants (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 164–65). Ambrosetti and Paparusso observe that “the rules in force in Italy make it easier to obtain a residence permit through the humanitarian channel than through the labour one,” creating an incentive that “causes a large presence of economic migrants among those flows regarded as humanitarian” (2018, 165). For many of the Bangladeshi migrants I met in Rome, this meant navigating an asylum system that had effectively become an entry and regularization channel – even when their primary motivations were economic or familial.

Once in Italy, migrants from the Global South are incorporated into segmented labour markets. Official Italian sources show that foreign and non-EU workers are concentrated in lower-paid and harder-to-fill sectors, including construction, hospitality, transport and logistics, and care work (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies 2024). They also face persistent earnings penalties and marked overqualification, with foreign workers earning, on average, more than 30 percent less per year than the overall workforce (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2024, 2). At the European level, Eurostat likewise documents

continuing labour-market disparities and high overqualification rates among migrants and non-national populations (European Commission 2025a, 2025b). These labour-market patterns intersect with demographic change. Italy's population aged 15–64 is projected to decline by more than one-fifth by 2050, intensifying structural demand for labour in sectors already marked by shortages (Reuters 2025). In this context, migrant labour is expected to remain central, particularly in care and low-wage service sectors. At the EU level, migrants are overrepresented in occupations experiencing chronic shortages, and immigrant employment has recently reached record levels. Yet employment gaps between immigrants and the native-born persist, and these gaps are especially pronounced for humanitarian migrants, who often face delays in labour-market entry and weaker employment outcomes in their first years after arrival (OECD 2024). This combination of structural dependence on migrant labour and unequal incorporation forms part of the background against which Bangladeshi workers in Torpignattara build their lives.

These class-based incorporations feed back into politics. In Italy, the “migration issue” has entered the core of political competition and is articulated along economic, cultural, and security dimensions (Castelli Gattinara 2016, 2–3, 19–27). Public debate does not frame migrants in a single, stable way. Depending on the context, the same populations may be cast primarily through security, labour-market, or humanitarian lenses. Often, the same migrant families appear across all these registers at once: as low-paid workers and caregivers, as parents of schoolchildren, as worshippers petitioning for prayer space permits, and sometimes as applicants for humanitarian protection. This multiplicity helps explain both the volatility of political discourse and the durability of migrants' local embeddedness in places like Rome.

From the early 2010s onward, Italian governments of various political stripes converged on a security-centred approach to immigration. Ambrosetti and Paparusso write that “since 2011 the perception of immigration as a security and public order problem has prevailed over the economic acceptance” of migrants, and that “Italian governments, irrespective of their political party, support this view” (2018, 167). This hard line became visible in centre-left as well as right-wing policies. For instance, under a Democratic Party Interior Minister (Marco Minniti), the 2017 “Minniti Decree” aimed to speed up asylum procedures and distinguish refugees from “illegal migrants,” even as Italy simultaneously embraced border externalization in the central Mediterranean (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 166). In early 2017, under Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, Italy struck a new agreement with authorities in Libya: the Libyan coast guard (trained and supported with EU and Italian resources) would

intercept migrant boats and return people to Libyan soil. Scholars have criticized this approach for exposing asylum seekers to detention and abuse in Libya (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 166), while Ambrosini shows how migration control is externalized through cooperation with transit states such as Libya and Tunisia, including support that can take the form of military supplies and security-force training (Ambrosini 2025, 12). On the electoral plane, comparative research helps explain why even mainstream parties adjusted their stances: Schain (2018, 18) argues that the radical right's direct policy impact in Europe has been "remarkably weak," yet its agenda-setting "contagion" has nonetheless pulled competitors toward more restrictive positions. In the Italian case, Castelli Gattinara likewise shows that immigration, once marginal to electoral campaigning, became normalized within party competition and developed into a defining and polarizing issue across local debates (Castelli Gattinara 2016, 2–3; Schain 2018, 1, 18). Within this configuration, Islam is repeatedly drawn into security and identity debates, and Muslim-identified migrants often stand at the symbolic centre of struggles over who "belongs" in the nation.

It is important to note that in Italy, the governance of religion operates through an asymmetrical framework. The Catholic Church's relations with the state are regulated by the Lateran Pacts under Article 7 of the Constitution, while religious denominations other than Catholicism may regulate their relations with the state through bilateral agreements, known as *intese*, under Article 8 (Senato della Repubblica 2023, arts. 7–8). As of March 2026, no Islamic organisation appears among the denominations that have concluded an *intesa* with the Italian state, meaning that Islam remains outside the ordinary *intesa* framework and is often managed through more discretionary or informal arrangements (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2024; Alicino 2022, 488–89; Naso 2021, 43–44). The main exception is the Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy, that is, the Rome Grand Mosque, which was recognised as a religious legal entity under the 1929 law on "admitted cults" by Presidential Decree no. 712 of 21 December 1974; by contrast, most other Muslim associations have operated under the general law of associations rather than as religious entities formally recognised through the bilateral system (Alicino 2023, 4; Alicino 2018, 368–69). In the absence of an *intesa*, successive governments have relied on consultative and administrative instruments such as the *Consulta per l'Islam italiano*, the *Comitato per l'Islam italiano*, and the 2017 *National*

*Pact for an Italian Islam*² (Ministero dell'Interno 2017; Alicino 2022, 488–89; Naso 2021, 40–44). Scholars therefore describe Italian Islam as highly visible yet only partially recognised, mediated through informal and locally contingent interlocutors rather than incorporated into the full bilateral regime available to denominations that have an *intesa* (Naso 2021, 44; Alicino 2022, 481–84, 488–89).

This European and Italian backdrop matters for Torpignattara in at least two ways. First, it structures the legal statuses, labour-market positions, and everyday insecurities that many Bangladeshi residents must navigate as they try to stabilize their lives. Second, it shapes the discursive and institutional environment in which local politicians, social centres, and extra-parliamentary groups position themselves either for or against migrants. In the following sections, I move from this national and European scale to the specific trajectories of Bangladeshi migration to Italy and then to the neighbourhood of Torpignattara, where these wider dynamics are refracted into a distinctive urban field.

1.2 Bangladeshi Migration to Italy: Routes, Regularizations, Settlement

During an exploratory visit to Rome in 2021, I met a small group of Bangladeshi men in the Vittorio Emanuele area, another mixed migrant enclave close to the central station. As we chatted over a late-morning snack, they urged me to accompany them to Torpignattara for what they promised was the best biryani in the city. I already knew the neighbourhood well enough, but greed won easily over restraint. At the restaurant, however, the meal quickly turned into something more ethnographically useful. When an older Bangladeshi man entered, the mood changed at once. The men with me stood up, greeted him, and introduced me as a researcher studying the Bangladeshi community in Rome. Wearing a blazer and hat, and smiling with evident pride, he declared that he alone had brought “3,000 people” from the greater Shariatpur-Madaripur area to Italy. “Tell anyone my name,” he said, “they will know me.” Of course, I could not verify the number. But such claims should not be read simply as factual descriptions. Rather, they point to the social logic through which migration is remembered and explained within the diaspora: not only through official visa categories or

² Signed on 1 February 2017, the *Patto nazionale per un Islam Italiano* was presented by the Ministry of the Interior as a framework for cooperation between the state and Muslim associations around an “open and integrated” Islam compatible with the principles of the Italian legal order. See Ministero dell'Interno 2017.

state policy, but through kinship, locality, brokerage, and chain migration. To understand why such a claim carried authority in that restaurant, it is necessary to situate Bangladeshi migration to Italy within its longer history of labour demand, regularization, networked settlement, and shifting migration routes.

Unlike Britain, Italy has no colonial ties to Bangladesh, and before 1990, the Bangladeshi population in Italy was tiny. The earliest trajectories were shaped primarily by political turbulence and onward movement within Europe rather than by an Italy-specific historical connection. A handful of political exiles reached Western Europe in the late 1970s, and some obtained asylum in West Germany after Bangladesh's 1975 military coup before moving on to other countries. A few later reoriented to France in the 1980s as immigration policies tightened elsewhere (Van Schendel 2009, cited in Della Puppa 2013, 101). These were comparatively small and socially selective routes, reflecting the fact that foreign travel from Bangladesh at the time was more accessible to urban and better-resourced families than to rural or working-class households.

Against that backdrop, Bangladeshi migration to Italy took shape as a late twentieth-century phenomenon, shaped by Italy's evolving immigration laws since the mid-1980s and consolidated through iterative processes of settlement and regularization in the 1980s and 1990s (Rahman and Kabir 2012, 254–255). The pivotal moment came in 1990, when information about a major regularization opportunity circulated rapidly through migrant networks already present elsewhere in Europe. Italy's Law 39 of 1990, commonly known as the Martelli Law, is remembered in this literature above all for the scope of its regularization provisions, which made Italy newly attractive to migrants who were already mobile within Europe and who sought a pathway into legal status and work (Priori 2024, 1–2; Knights and King 1998, 301). By the end of 1990, the number of Bangladeshis in Italy had jumped from a few hundred to over 5,000 (Priori 2024, 1–2). In my fieldwork, a second-generation Bangladeshi interlocutor in Torpignattara showed me a cherished photograph of his father on a train from Paris to Rome in 1990, the carriage packed with Bangladeshi men heading south to take advantage of the Martelli Law opportunity. The anecdote closely echoes what Knights and King documented in the mid 1990s, namely that news of the Italian amnesty travelled quickly through migrant networks and prompted a mass southward movement (Knights and King 1998, 301).

Once a foothold was established in the early 1990s, chain migration gathered momentum. Early Bangladeshi migrants in Rome began sponsoring relatives and friends, and a stratum of self-appointed community leaders or brokers emerged to coordinate jobs, housing, and documents for newcomers, often along hometown or kinship lines (Knights and King 1998, 317). Migrants' origins tended to cluster in a few areas of Bangladesh, especially parts of Greater Dhaka and the central districts of Faridpur, notably Shariatpur, Noakhali, and Comilla, producing locality-based chains (Knights and King 1998, 314; Priori 2024, 6). These districts already had longstanding links to labour migration in the Middle East, and some migrants in the 1990s moved onward from Gulf or North African sojourns to Italy, using savings and contacts accumulated abroad (Knights and King 1998, 308-309; Rahman and Kabir 2012, 257–258; Priori 2024, 6). By the early 2000s, more than 70,000 Bangladeshis had obtained Italian residence permits, and by the start of the 2010s, estimates of the total Bangladeshi population, including undocumented migrants, ranged from 80,000 to 120,000 (Della Puppa 2013, 102).

The routes that made these movements possible also changed over time. In the early 1990s, journeys were often multi-stage and opportunistic: after 1989, some travelled overland through Eastern Europe; others took maritime routes via Turkey to Greece; others crossed the Adriatic from Albania; and a minority arrived on Schengen tourist visas and then overstayed (Knights and King 1998, 306 to 307; Rahman and Kabir 2012, 257–258). These pathways were intertwined with Italy's own shifting immigration regime. The first amnesties in 1986 and 1990 provided thousands of Bangladeshi migrants with pathways to legalize their status and codified provisions for family reunion (Cesareo 2007; Knights 1996, cited in Rahman and Kabir 2012, 254–255). A further institutional turning point arrived with the 1998 Turco Napolitano law, which established the *decreto flussi* system of annual labour quotas, a channel that became widely used by Bangladeshis seeking official entry for work (Rahman and Kabir 2012, 254, 258). In the mid 2000s, family reunification emerged as another major route: the Italian embassy in Dhaka was issuing roughly 3,000 family visas each year by that period, opening the door for wives and children to join the predominantly male pioneer migrants (Rahman and Kabir 2012, 258).

Across the 2000s, the geography of irregular transit shifted decisively toward the Central Mediterranean, with Libya becoming the key hub (Rahman and Kabir 2012, 258). Recent monitoring confirms the scale of this corridor: in 2022, 15,228 Bangladeshi nationals, around 14 percent of all sea arrivals in Italy, came by boat, mostly through Libya (IOM 2023, 1).

These journeys are expensive and heavily brokered. Reaching Libya plus the final boat leg to Italy commonly costs over \$8,000, and the average total corridor cost approaches \$10,000, with more than 80 percent of those payments going to intermediaries, embedded in kin and locality networks (Rahman and Kabir 2012, 258–260; IOM 2023, 1). In this sense, diaspora networks did not simply transmit news but helped cultivate a geographical imagination of Europe, and of Italy in particular, as an attainable destination, while also structuring migration and early settlement through locality-based bonds that organised housing, work, documents, and everyday survival after arrival (Morad and Choudhury 2025, 5–6, 12–14).

Over the same period, the social profile of the diaspora evolved. The earliest Bangladeshi arrivals in the 1980s and early 1990s were mostly urban, male, and relatively well-educated middle-class people, including political exiles, students, and cultural workers, at a time when passports and foreign travel were largely accessible only to better-off city families. These earlier routes were comparatively small and socially selective, involving migrants who often had more educational and social capital than later labour migrants, even if overseas credentials did not always translate smoothly into status in Italy. A survey of Bangladeshis in Rome in the mid-1990s showed strikingly high education levels: 96 percent had completed at least secondary school, 76 percent had completed higher secondary school, and more than 25 percent had some university education, even though many experienced severe brain waste in low-status jobs (Knights and King 1998, 306–7; Della Puppa 2013, 101–3). As European labour markets opened up in the 2000s and brokered migration channels expanded alongside formal ones through the *Adam Bepari* (a Bangla term commonly used for manpower brokerage or migration brokering) system, the flow broadened socially and became more explicitly remittance-driven. It drew in not only relatively secure urban middle-class migrants but also people from more precarious middle strata who mortgaged assets to finance migration, seeing it as a risky bid for upward mobility (Priori 2024, 7–8). In my own fieldwork in Rome, the overwhelming majority of more recent Bangladeshi arrivals I encountered were remittance-oriented and came from modest socio-economic backgrounds with limited formal education. Even when some said they had university degrees, those credentials often had little currency in the Italian labour market. I also encountered both men and women with minimal literacy or schooling. Official profiles similarly show a workforce concentrated in low-skilled services, industry, and petty trade, consistent with this broader pattern of remittance-driven manual labour migration (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023, 5).

These longer histories help explain why Bangladeshi migration to Italy only became especially visible in Italian public debate in the mid 2010s, when Bangladeshis emerged as one of the most represented nationalities on the central Mediterranean route (UNHCR 2017, 2). In late 2016 and into 2017, Bangladeshi arrivals by sea rose sharply. By 22 May 2017, 5,650 Bangladeshi nationals had arrived in Italy by boat, accounting for about 11 percent of all recorded sea arrivals and making them the second largest national group after Nigerians at that moment (Cupolo 2017). Analyses of this surge point to two main pipelines: long-term Bangladeshi workers leaving Libya as insecurity mounted there, and new entrants flying to Tripoli, often via Istanbul or Dubai, and then paying between \$7,000 and \$10,000 to agencies and smugglers before embarking for Italy (Cupolo 2017). A key background factor was the contraction of legal labour migration channels. Cupolo cites Bangladeshi government data indicating that up to 2013 around 11,000 Bangladeshis per year came to Italy on regular work visas, but legal arrivals plummeted after 2014, falling to just 3 in 2016, as a UNHCR spokesperson noted that Bangladesh had been removed from Italy's list of countries reserved quota visas (Cupolo 2017). This tightening of legal entry coincided with a broader reshaping of Italy's permit regime, whereby new residence permits were increasingly issued for family reunification or humanitarian reasons rather than for work (Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2018, 163-164). Taken together, these shifts clarify why irregular entry and asylum claims became more salient routes for Bangladeshi migrants once labour quota admissions were curtailed.

Settlement patterns, too, changed over time. In the early period, Bangladeshis in Italy were heavily concentrated in Rome. Around 92 percent of Bangladeshis in Italy lived in Rome “until the end of the 1990s” (Della Puppa 2022). As early migrants secured residency and stable jobs, many moved outward, first within greater Rome and then to other regions (Knights 1996; Zeitlyn 2006, both cited in Della Puppa 2013, 103). By 2023, the region of Lazio hosted about 26.7 percent of Bangladeshi citizens in Italy, Lombardy 16 percent, Veneto 11.6 percent, with notable communities also in Campania at 6.6 percent and Sicily at 6.1 percent (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023, 3). Nonetheless, Rome remains the single largest node: as of 1 January 2023, the metropolitan city of Rome had 39,658 Bangladeshi citizens officially registered, or 24.4 percent of the national total, and the real number is higher when accounting for undocumented migrants not captured in those statistics (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023, 3).

At the neighbourhood scale, processes of clustering and dispersion coexist. In Rome, Torpignattara is widely known as “Banglatown,” a nickname used by residents and also in

academic studies (Broccolini 2014; Della Puppa and Gelati 2015; Piazzoni 2021; Priori 2017, 2024). The neighbourhood has attracted Bangladeshi settlers because it sits relatively close to the city centre, is well served by public transport and major roads, and, despite some recent increases, still offers comparatively affordable rents (Farro and Maddanu 2021, 101).

Quantitative analyses suggest that the high residential concentration of Bangladeshis in Rome is driven less by religious factors than by a combination of phenotypical difference, cultural distance from Italians, and the relative recency of their arrival (Artero and Chiodelli 2020, 878, 884). At the same time, religious institutions form part of the neighbourhood's social infrastructure where mosque-based networks, often informally organised in rented garages or community centres, provide everyday forms of spiritual support and mutual aid (Priori 2024, 1). Across these settlement patterns, transnational ties remain an ordinary feature of migrant life, shaping family obligations and future imaginaries even when long-term residence in Italy becomes more likely (Priori 2024, 16).

In the meantime, Italy's various "Banglatowns," from Torpignattara in Rome to Via Padova in Milan to Piazza Garibaldi in Naples, have become enduring features of the urban landscape. They symbolize a diaspora that found a foothold during Italy's more open phase in the 1990s and then adapted to quota cuts, externalized frontiers, and shifting routes in the 2000s. From being a historical footnote, Bangladeshis have grown into one of Italy's larger non-European immigrant groups, with over 160,000 legally resident by 2023 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023, 3). Their story of mobility, adaptation, networked support, and contested belonging is now integral to contemporary Italy's social history. The following section turns to Torpignattara to examine how this broader story plays out at the local level.

1.3 Torpignattara: The Unofficial "Banglatown" of Rome

Torpignattara, on Rome's eastern periphery, has in recent years become informally known as the city's "Banglatown." This emic label, not an official toponym but a nickname arising from the area's conspicuous Bangladeshi presence, reflects how locals themselves refer to the neighbourhood (Corte 2022, 122). Early in my fieldwork in spring 2023, I stepped into Anwar's shop, one of the many *Bangladini* in Torpignattara. In Rome, this term refers to Bangladeshi-run corner minimarkets that stay open long hours, selling a mix of South Asian

goods and everyday Italian items. These shops, often open until late at night, have become vital to local life. For many young Italians, they are convenient places to buy cold beer or snacks after other stores close, and their presence is now so normalised that a “Bangladini” app exists to help customers locate nearby Bangladeshi-run shops.

Inside Anwar’s corner store, South Asian and Italian products share the shelves. Plastic crates by the entrance brim with lauki (bottle gourd), green chilies, and bunches of *pui shaak* (a leafy vine), alongside tinned tomatoes, packets of pasta, and a humming refrigerator stocked with cold Peroni beers. Behind the counter stands Anwar, a genial man in his late fifties who clearly occupies a node of community life. As I browsed, I watched him exchange pleasantries with each customer: an elderly Italian man topping up his phone credit, a teenager grabbing a packet of crisps, a Bangladeshi woman comparing brands of basmati rice. During the year I spent living in Torpignattara, Anwar’s shop became one of my regular grocery stops, and through dozens of casual conversations, I pieced together his story.

He arrived in Italy in the early 1990s on a tourist visa and overstayed, as he put it, “to make life better.” At the time he left Bangladesh, he was a college student in Faridpur – one of the key districts heavily involved in chain migration to Italy. A Dhaka-based broker (a family friend) had helped arrange his passport and Italian visa. In Rome, Anwar’s first steady job was working at a tiny newspaper kiosk near Termini, the main train station. A Moroccan owner ran the kiosk, and for a couple of years, the two of them managed the counter together, communicating in a patchwork of broken English and broken Arabic – just enough to make change for customers and keep the line moving. Anwar lived back then in Esquilino, a well-known migrant enclave near the station, crammed into an apartment with six or seven other Bangladeshi men. One “educated” housemate (as Anwar described him) took it upon himself to coach Anwar in Italian in the evenings, while by day, at work and on the street, Anwar had to pick up the language on his own as best he could. He told me, with a chuckle, that necessity was the best teacher: “I learned Italian because I had no choice, I was pushed by circumstance.” On his second trip back to Bangladesh, in 2005, Anwar got married; his family had arranged a bride for him from their extended kin network.



Figure 2: Street view of a typical Bangladini shop in Torpignattara. The spray-painted graffiti reads, “No 41-bis: Alfredo libero, liberi tutti!” (No to 41-bis: Free Alfredo, freedom for all), calling for the release of an Italian activist named Alfredo, who is being held under Italy’s 41-bis prison regime. Photo by Punny Kabir, 22/10/24.

As the eldest son in his family, Anwar carried what he called a ledger of obligations in his head. “First, you secure a proper house for your parents and siblings,” he shrugged, “then you think of your own.” Before even considering bringing his wife to Italy, he used his earnings to make sure his younger brothers finished university, his sister got married, and the family’s tin-roofed house (the *tiner bāri* he had grown up in) was rebuilt as a sturdier brick-and-concrete home (*paka bari*). Only after those goals were met did he apply to bring over his immediate family.

Anwar reunited with his wife and their eight-year-old son in 2015 via a family reunion visa, and at that point, he moved from Esquilino to Torpignattara. “Torpignattara has a more suitable environment to live with a family,” he explained. “Especially, there are other *bhābis* (sisters-in-law – here used broadly for other migrants’ wives, whether actually kin or not) to keep my wife company when needed, since I am always busy at work.” The first few years of school in Italy were hard for their son, so they enrolled him in an after-school programme run by a community association, where migrant children receive Italian language help and homework support for a nominal fee. By now, Anwar says, the boy is fully comfortable with Italian school and language, and has “finished reading the Quran” at a Bangladeshi-run

*madrasa*³ in the neighbourhood. His wife does not work outside the home because of complications from diabetes, but Anwar adds proudly, “Mashallah (as God willed it), my income is enough, so she doesn’t need to work.”



Figure 3: The main tram station of Torpignattara. The visible litter in such street scenes reflects not only intense daily use but also the chronic failures of Rome’s municipal waste services. Photo by Punny Kabir, 19/10/2024.

Anwar remembers Torpignattara in the 1990s as a place “before the shutters were painted and the lights were fixed.” “It used to be a crime zone,” he told me. Unlit streets and derelict storefronts, he said, “provided cover for a revolving cast of petty gangs and drug dealers, Africans, Eastern Europeans, Italians, all jostling for the corners at night.” He insists that the first wave of Bangladeshi workers helped change the feel of the area by opening grocery shops like his, along with small laundromats, money-transfer counters, clothing stalls, restaurants, and cafés. “We turned on the lights,” Anwar said with quiet pride. “We made it a happening place, what it is today.”

Anwar’s story illustrates several everyday dimensions of life in “Banglatown,” without, of course, standing in for all of them. His personal trajectory links chain migration, brokered entry, years of low-paid work, and a gradual move into small business ownership. His “ledger of obligations” shows how remittances, building a “concrete house”, and siblings’ education

³ An Islamic religious school or seminary, typically attached to a mosque. Madrasas provide Quranic and religious instruction. In my research, I refer Bangladeshi-run madrasas in Torpignattara where children study the Qur’an.

in Bangladesh determined the timing of his family reunification. The presence of *bhābis*, the after-school programme, and the madrasa in his account shows how women's networks, educational support, and religious instruction shape family life in the neighbourhood. His claim that Bangladeshi shopkeepers transformed the neighbourhood reflects one way that long-term migrant residents narrate their role and sense of ownership of the area. It is, however, a partial and situated perspective – one that coexists with other, more ambivalent or even critical accounts of work, safety, and coexistence in Torpignattara. To understand how a little shop like Anwar's could become a familiar landmark in what many now call Rome's "Banglatown," we need to place his experience into the longer urban history of Torpignattara.

Torpignattara's origins as an urban district date to the early 1900s. Development initially clustered around the ancient Church of Sant'Elena (Saint Helena) and the old Via Labico. Early dwellings consisted of informal huts and *borghetti* – self-built shanty settlements typical of Rome's then-rural periphery – interspersed with a few small villas and low-rise tenements (Fioretti 2011, 2). During the interwar and immediate postwar decades, the area absorbed significant internal migration from central and later southern Italy, as workers came seeking jobs in nearby industrial zones. Construction in Torpignattara intensified from the 1920s through the 1940s under both private and public initiatives, and the neighbourhood's expansion was completed in the 1950s through intensive building projects led mainly by private construction companies (Priori n.d.). The result was haphazard growth and a "mixed, porous territory" marked by decaying industrial relics, poorly maintained public spaces, and ground-floor commercial strips that blurred distinctions between residential, productive, and retail spaces (Fioretti 2011, 2).

By the 1980s and 1990s, Torpignattara's native Italian population was in decline, and much of its housing stock was in disrepair. This vacancy and devalorization attracted illicit activities. In public discourse, Torpignattara began to be framed with stigmatizing labels such as *banlieue*, *ghetto*, and *degrado*. Here, *banlieue*, borrowed from French, did not simply mean a suburb in the neutral sense, but evoked a peripheral and socially stigmatized urban margin associated with disorder, exclusion, and danger. *Degrado*, likewise, did not refer only to physical neglect or "urban blight." As Herzfeld notes in his discussion of Rome, the term has become "a general expression of dissatisfaction with the sense of physical and moral collapse in society at large" (2021, 63). In this sense, such labels exaggerated perceptions of danger and flattened the neighbourhood's complexity, even if they drew on some real conditions of neglect and devaluation (Fioretti 2011, 3, 8; De Michele 2022, 222). At the

same time, the low property values and generally affordable rents made the area particularly open to immigrant settlement and small entrepreneurship. By the late 2000s, Torpignattara's foreign-born residents included sizable communities from Bangladesh, China, Romania, and Egypt (Fioretti 2011, 2–3). Rising numbers of family reunifications and children indicated a shift from temporary labour migration to long-term settlement and the emergence of second generations (Fioretti 2011, 3). From around 2000 onward, the share of foreign-born in Torpignattara stabilized at around 15–17 percent of the population, and immigrant-run businesses revitalized many commercial streets with grocery shops, halal butchers, barbershops, phone and remittance offices, and informal home-based enterprises (Fioretti 2011, 3). New arrivals, mostly young single men at first, often combined lodging and livelihood in the same premises, living, for example, in the back of the shop, and weaving dense economic, religious, and political ties across Rome's eastern suburbs. Meanwhile, a number of middle-class Italians and students, attracted by the cheap rent, also began moving into the neighbourhood. This set in motion a kind of grassroots, small-scale gentrification and created new intercultural contact zones.



Figure 4: A popular street in Torpignattara where trendy bars and Bangladeshi-run grocery shops co-exist. Photo by Punny Kabir. 22/10/2024.

To illustrate this evolving mix, consider Lorenzo, the manager of a small café-bar called Sip Bistrot tucked on a side street near one of the Bangladeshi community's mosques (the TMC mosque). Surrounded by Bangladeshi grocery stores and a short walk from the aqueduct-

arched Sangalli Park, Lorenzo has watched the area transform over the past decade. “I’ve known this neighbourhood for about ten years,” he told me. While many things have changed, he notes the area remains affordable and distinctly working-class in character. It was once notorious for petty crime and local criminal outfits involved in drugs and prostitution. “There are still crimes,” he says candidly, “but it’s not like some years ago... now it’s more small-scale.” The changes have been gradual but noticeable to him: there are more shops, more families out and about, and a more diverse mix of people contributing to the local economy. “It’s still cheap here because the people who live here – Bangladeshi, Afghan, Chinese – they rent apartments at lower prices,” he explained. “There are lots of little shops open until eleven at night. And it’s not just migrants; Italians also go there. It’s convenient and the prices are good.” He also points out how the nearby mosque shapes consumption patterns at his café, especially during Ramadan. “After prayer, many of the men come here for coffee or sweets,” Lorenzo said, noting that while they abstain from alcohol, they still frequent his bistro for other treats.

Today, Torpignattara encapsulates the complexities of multicultural urban life in Rome. Located roughly four kilometres from the central railway station, it is an eclectic enclave where past and present, neglect and regeneration, and Italian and foreign influences coexist. Each weekday, thousands of residents commute from Torpignattara to the city centre for work. Most take the aging but serviceable little tram, the *trenino giallo*, or one of two bus lines that connect Torpignattara to the rest of Rome. The busy streets around the tram and bus stops are lined with shops and eateries, many of them owned and operated by Bangladeshis. The rhythms of commuting sustain the street economy at both ends of the day. In the early morning, people grab quick shots of espresso at Italian bars or stop for a typical Bangladeshi breakfast⁴ at Bangladeshi-run cafés before heading to work. In the late afternoon and evening, residents return and run errands, dropping off laundry, buying groceries, getting a haircut, or picking up dinner. These daily cycles keep Bangladeshi-run shops, as well as neighbouring Italian businesses, busy and stretch operating hours late into the night. The neighbourhood remains active from dawn until nearly midnight. Crucially, the very long opening hours of Bangladeshi stores make them popular not only with Bangladeshi migrants but also with many local Italians. One Italian regular at Anwar’s shop, a woman in her fifties, told me, “I buy basmati rice here regularly; I prefer it to pasta because rice has less fat.”

⁴ A typical Bangla breakfast often includes hand-made flatbread served with fried vegetables or vegetable curry, lentil curry, an omelet, and sometimes sweets, accompanied by a cup of milk tea.

Whether or not that is nutritionally accurate, the remark hints at subtle shifts in local eating habits. These everyday interactions exemplify mundane forms of cultural exchange and practical cosmopolitanism.

Indeed, the working-class urban fabric of Torpignattara is closer to what Hannerz calls “bottom-up” cosmopolitanism and what Werbner develops as “working-class cosmopolitanism”: a form of cross-cultural competence grounded not in elite mobility or cultivated taste, but in the practical interdependence of ordinary urban life (Hannerz 2004, 77; Werbner 1999, 18, 23, 33; Werbner 2006, 497). In other words, one can witness a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism taking shape on the streets. Walking through the neighbourhood, one can hear Italian, Bangla, and Arabic spoken within the same block. The air carries the smell of traditional fried snacks from Bangladeshi street vendors, mingled with the warm yeasty aroma from an old Italian bakery. Walls still bear faded graffiti and political posters from years past, alongside new, colorful murals commissioned by local groups to celebrate the area’s diversity. A trendy vegan pastry shop sits cheek-by-jowl with a longstanding Bangladeshi halal butcher. Across the road, an Italian bar faces a narrow money-transfer agency where Bangladeshi workers line up to send money home. Hip coffeehouses, small art studios, and book cafés now operate alongside the immigrant-run businesses that have anchored the neighbourhood for decades.

In recent years, Torpignattara has even started drawing attention as an alternative tourist destination for people seeking an “authentic” Roman experience outside the heavily touristed historic centre. Some tour guides include Torpignattara (often paired with the adjacent Pigneto district) in their itineraries to showcase a “Roma multietnica.” They emphasise the street art, the multicultural atmosphere, and sometimes invoke the legacy of filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, who famously engaged with Rome’s peripheral neighbourhoods and subcultures in his work. As a result, a certain romanticized image of Torpignattara has emerged in the tourist imagination – a vibrant ethnic enclave where one can “walk among different cultures” and glimpse a raw, unvarnished slice of city life far from the Colosseum. The neighbourhood’s diversity has even been commodified by some urban-tourism projects, marketing it as a kind of living museum of globalization. Visitors are told they will smell South Asian spices and hear Latin American music as they stroll the streets, encountering a quotidian cosmopolitanism that contrasts with Rome’s monumental core.

Interest from native Italians has grown as well. Some Italian artists and young professionals have moved in, attracted by the still-modest property prices (Torpignattara remains significantly cheaper than most of Rome – see Cacciotti 2021, 376) and the aura of gritty authenticity. This influx does not (yet) amount to gentrification in the classic sense: there has been no wave of affluent elites displacing the poor. Rather, it aligns with what Broccolini (2014) calls a process of “re-urbanization,” in which migrants and locals together repurpose a previously neglected space and assemble new social and economic networks.

Considering all these dynamics, one might ask whether Torpignattara will ever truly embrace the moniker “Banglatown” in an official or externally recognised way, akin to London’s Brick Lane. The evidence suggests that Rome’s Banglatown will probably remain informal and understated. The historical trajectories of the two neighbourhoods already point to profound differences. Bangladeshi settlement in London’s Brick Lane began much earlier – with Sylheti seamen (lascars) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – and accelerated after the mid-1960s through chain migration that brought male kin to work in restaurants, garment factories, and local industry. By the 1970s, those networks enabled family reunification, the growth of an ethnic economy, and the creation of community and religious institutions. The 1980s in Brick Lane saw Bangladeshi families pushed into the area’s poorest public housing estates by discriminatory housing policies and hostile segments of the white working class (Eade and Garbin 2002, 138–39). By contrast, Rome’s Bangladeshi community only began to form after the Martelli Law amnesty of 1990, making it a much younger community in generational terms – only one or two generations have attempted to establish themselves in Italy, compared to the long, layered presence of Bangladeshis in East London.

In Brick Lane, the cumulative efforts of multiple generations (from the early lascars to postwar factory workers, to a more educated second generation) turned the neighbourhood into a visible and recognised part of London’s multicultural identity. As Claire Alexander notes, “Banglatown” in Tower Hamlets took shape through the dense settlement of Bangladeshis and the external racialisation of Brick Lane as an “ethnic ghetto,” which was compounded by poverty and segregation – and then countered by community resistance, local political participation, and especially second-generation cultural and entrepreneurial initiatives (Alexander 2011, 212–13). Notably, the growth of Brick Lane’s famous “curry restaurant” corridor in the 1990s both claimed and remade the area, eventually earning municipal recognition and “Banglatown” branding on street signs and archways. In Rome, by

contrast, Bangladeshi migrants have not pursued – and have not been granted – such overt visibility.

In Torpignattara, attempts to organise large public cultural events have often faltered because of internal disagreements or a lack of resources. I heard many reminiscences about a once-popular Baul music event (celebrating the mystical Sufi folk music of Bengal) that used to take place in a public square in the neighbourhood – it ceased entirely after disputes among organisers. Tellingly, the square is still colloquially called Lalon Park (after Lalon Shah, a renowned Sufi poet-saint of Bengal) by local Bangladeshis, a quiet reminder of the cultural richness and spiritual harmony that once thrived there. But the energy that might have gone into sustained intercultural festivals has dissipated. By comparison, Brick Lane’s transformation was reinforced by food and cultural festivals such as the International Curry Festival and the Baishaki Mela, which formed part of a broader effort by Bangladeshi entrepreneurs and secular community leaders to produce “Banglatown” as a tourist-oriented and commercially visible space (Eade and Garbin 2006, 186–88).

Furthermore, the internal politics of Rome’s Bangladeshi community have not been conducive to any unified commercial promotion of Torpignattara. The community is fragmented along multiple lines: district of origin in Bangladesh, political party loyalties imported from back home, religious affiliation, and personal rivalries. Different factions have never coalesced around a single vision for developing Torpignattara into a showcase neighbourhood. If anything, the priority for most community leaders has been establishing a network of services for their own people, mosques, groceries, money transfer offices, and community schools, rather than attracting outsiders or marketing the area. By contrast, in London, at least some Bangladeshi entrepreneurs and secular community leaders were able to align around the promotion of Brick Lane through restaurants, festivals, and place-branding. This was facilitated by a much wider regeneration framework. As the Runnymede report shows, Brick Lane was drawn into the City Challenge scheme from 1991 to 1996 and later into the Single Regeneration Budget from 1994 to 2007, while partnerships such as the City Fringe Partnership and Cityside helped recast the area as an “Emerging Cultural Quarter” oriented toward outside visitors (Alexander et al. 2020, 10–11). Local Bangladeshi entrepreneurship in Brick Lane could thus plug into a larger framework of urban regeneration and multicultural branding, a framework that simply has no equivalent in Torpignattara.

What remains in Rome is a quieter form of “Banglatown,” one mostly inward-facing and rooted in the everyday needs of its residents. Torpignattara’s Bangladeshi-run businesses, the grocery stores, fishmongers, travel agencies, barbershops, clothing boutiques, and cafés, primarily serve other Bangladeshis and, to a lesser extent, other immigrant groups living nearby. These establishments are not designed to lure Italian customers with an “exotic” ambience; if anything, they keep a low profile. Store signs might be bilingual (Bangla and Italian), but the decor and offerings inside are utilitarian, not staged as cultural performance for an outside gaze. A walk down Via della Marranella, one of the main streets, offers plenty of evidence of the Bangladeshi presence: Bangla script on shop signs, clusters of men chatting in Bangla outside the mosque after Friday prayers, women in hijabs, niqabs, and saris shopping at the open-air market. Yet the street does not feel curated for tourists or for the Italian public. In many ways, this reflects the working-class, transitory reality of the community. Many Bangladeshi migrants in Rome view their sojourn as conditional, tied to immediate economic opportunities. Their main goals are to send remittances home, pay off the debts incurred to come to Italy, and eventually perhaps move on to what they perceive as “greener pastures,” whether that be northern Italy, another EU country like the UK, or even a return to Bangladesh if conditions improve. Given this tentative sense of the future and the lack of strong long-term permanence or upward mobility in Italy, there is less drive to build grand community institutions or public monuments that would anchor a “Banglatown” for generations. Instead, they have built what they need: shops to sustain livelihoods, prayer halls to sustain faith, and informal networks to sustain social life. This is an everyday Banglatown of necessity rather than spectacle.

1.4 Contested Multiculturalism: Multifaith Visibility and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

One spring morning in 2023, I joined the crowd gathering for *Eid al-Fitr*⁵ prayers at Parco Sangalli, the neighbourhood park in Torpignattara that abuts the ancient arches of the

⁵ Eid (Eid al-Fitr; Eid al-Adha): Eid refers to the two major annual Islamic festivals. Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan and is observed with a communal prayer (often held in large public spaces, including parks in diaspora settings). In my research, an open-air Eid al-Fitr prayer in Torpignattara appears as a significant form of public religious presence in the neighbourhood. Eid al-Adha (also written Eid ul-Azha) is the second Eid and is associated with the hajj period and the theme of sacrifice; it is likewise marked by communal prayer and collective observance.

Acquedotto Alessandrino. Several hundred worshippers, mostly Bangladeshi men and women, arranged their prayer mats on the grass and bowed and prostrated in unison to mark the end of *Ramadan*⁶. A few individuals and families of African and Arab origin (as local Bangladeshis described them) were present as well, most probably neighbours who use the same mosque networks. The aqueduct's stone arches loomed behind the congregation, layering the scene: an iconic Christian Roman landmark providing the backdrop to a large Muslim gathering. Several Italian passersby paused along the park's walking paths to watch, some even taking photos with their phones. The Bangladeshi organisers had coordinated with the municipal authorities for permission to use the park for the Eid prayer, and uniformed police officers were on site mainly to manage traffic and keep an eye on the assembly. Their presence was part of the routine choreography of public order in Rome, but it also signaled that such public religious events, while permitted, are treated as things to be facilitated and monitored by the state.



Figure 5: Eid prayer at Parco Sangalli in Torpignattara. Photo by Stefano Romano, 02/05/2022.

⁶ The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, during which Muslims fast daily from dawn until sunset. It is a time of prayer, self-reflection, and community. In my research, Ramadan shapes social life through practices such as gathering after prayers and organising communal iftar meals.

One detail at the Eid prayer spoke volumes: a separate space was set up for women to pray. In Bangladesh, it is not customary for women to attend the large outdoor Eid prayers; those events back home are overwhelmingly male, with women typically praying at home. In Torpignattara, by contrast, Bangladeshi women turned out in significant numbers, many dressed in their finest, to participate in the open-air Eid prayer. An area adjacent to the men was cordoned off for them, with loudspeakers positioned so that the women could follow the proceedings. This represents a shift in diaspora religious practice. The migration experience and contact with other Muslim communities in Rome, where women attending mosque prayers is more common, have influenced parts of the Bangladeshi community to adjust their norms. Women praying in public on Eid, in the same park as men (albeit in a designated section), signals a negotiated change in religious habit rather than a simple reproduction of Bangladeshi custom. It combines deference to traditional gender separation with newer influences of transnational Islamic practice and local expectations about public participation. Some of the Bangladeshi women I spoke with described it as the first time in their lives they had prayed Eid in congregation, and said it made them feel more included in community religious life than they ever had in Bangladesh. Not everyone in the community welcomes such changes: many families still do not bring their women to the park for Eid. But the scene clearly showed both an opening and the persistence of boundaries within the diaspora.

After the Eid prayer concluded with the familiar chorus of “*Eid Mubarak!*” (Happy Eid) and hugs all around, another ritual unfolded, one that blended cultures. I learned that many Bangladeshi families, after finishing the Eid prayers in the park, head to nearby Italian coffee bars and pastry shops to celebrate. I followed as crowds of worshippers streamed into a popular café in the area. Within minutes, the normally quiet weekday morning bar was packed wall to wall with Bangladeshi customers. The atmosphere shifted: children darted between tables; fathers clustered three deep at the espresso counter; mothers in bright traditional dresses squeezed into booths and chatted. The overwhelmed Italian baristas, facing a sudden wave of orders for cappuccinos and cornetti, nonetheless greeted everyone with cheerful “*Auguri!*” (best wishes) and hustled to keep up. I overheard one waiter try out a “*Buona festa!*” (“Happy Holiday!”) to a group of departing Bangladeshi women, who responded with smiles and thanks. In that moment, an Islamic religious holiday seamlessly folded into an ordinary Italian café routine. The café became a shared social space where

distinct rhythms of life intersected without fully merging, an everyday vignette of Torpignattara's pluralism.

Scenes like this, Eid prayers under the aqueduct followed by celebratory espressos at the local bar, illustrate how multifaith visibility and Italian sociability can coexist and occasionally overlap in Torpignattara. They suggest forms of pragmatic accommodation and casual familiarity. Yet, they do not erase the more uneasy reactions that sometimes accompany the growing visibility of Islam in the neighbourhood. Torpignattara, after all, is firmly embedded in Rome's Catholic landscape. The area is home to major sites of early Christian memory and pilgrimage, including the Mausoleum of Saint Helena and the adjacent Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, as well as longstanding parish institutions like the Church of San Barnaba (built 1932). These landmarks anchor the neighbourhood in a Christian topography that has been publicly recognised for centuries.

In recent decades, though, Torpignattara's religious landscape has expanded dramatically in step with new migration. The neighbourhood now hosts a substantial Muslim population (Bangladeshis being the largest group), alongside smaller communities of South Asian Hindus, Middle Eastern and African Muslims, Eastern European and Latin American Christians, and even a modest Buddhist centre. A short walk in any direction reveals this layering of religious infrastructures: Catholic churches alongside informal mosques registered as "Islamic cultural centres," storefront Pentecostal churches serving African or Filipino congregations, a Hindu temple, and a Buddhist meditation hall. This juxtaposition is not a deep historical pluralism but a contemporary layering of faiths in one urban space.

The picture of interfaith coexistence in Torpignattara is not without tensions. While many Bangladeshis here practice a form of Islam inflected by South Asian Sufi traditions (generally moderate and inclusive), there has been a noticeable rise in more conservative interpretations. In particular, men who spent years working in the Persian Gulf and then returned to Italy often bring back ideas that locals describe as Wahhabi or Salafi oriented, emphasising austere dress, strict gender segregation, and literalist religious observance. These currents have become visible on the street in the growing number of women wearing niqab or full black burqa, and in the sight of some young men adopting ankle length white robes (alkhallā') with untrimmed beards and shaved mustaches. Long time residents (both Italian and Bangladeshi) often view these styles as sitting uneasily beside earlier patterns of Muslim attire, which for women tended to be modest but colorful South Asian outfits and for men largely secular

Western dress. For many years, the visible face of Islam in Torpignattara was associated with Bangladeshi women's clothing like bright sarees and salwar kameez with coordinating headscarves. Italians would even say these colorful garments "add color" to the streetscape, and over time came to accept them as an ordinary feature of a multicultural neighbourhood. The more recent spread of the face covering niqab, especially among younger women arriving through family reunion, has provoked discomfort even among some of the most open-minded local observers.

Consider Angelina, a 74-year-old Italian woman whose family owns one of the oldest houses in Torpignattara. "The colorful hijabs look very nice to me; they add color to the social landscape," she told me. "But seeing women trapped inside black burqas and niqabs, not allowed to show their faces, it's just sad." Angelina hastened to add that she believes in individual freedom of dress: "I strongly believe everyone has the right to dress as they choose." Yet she also underlined the interpersonal difficulty: "If I can't even see a person's face, it's tough to interact or trust." She noted that the sight of groups of men wearing robes (alkhallā') in the streets is a novelty and that for some longtime residents this new visibility becomes a screen onto which broader anxieties are projected, including fears of religious radicalization or of the neighbourhood becoming what they imagine as a "parallel society."

Teachers in local public schools voiced similar worries to me. Some mentioned that fully veiled mothers often avoid eye contact or remain silent during parent-teacher meetings, typically deferring to their husbands to speak. One teacher at the Carlo Pisacane primary school said, "Language is already a barrier we're working on, but if these women won't even look at me, let alone speak, how can we build a relationship for their children's education?" In institutional settings like schools, the niqab is experienced by these professionals less as an abstract symbol of oppression and more as a practical obstacle to communication and trust.

The healthcare sector feels the effects too. Andrea, a 59-year-old Italian man working at the local Vannini hospital (the main public hospital serving Torpignattara), remarked: "Forget religion; if the doctors or nurses cannot see your facial expression, how can they tell if you're in pain or afraid?" For him, face-to-face visibility is central to medical diagnosis and empathy. Moderate Bangladeshi Muslims also expressed concerns. Subarna, a Bangladeshi cultural mediator who works in hospitals and schools, told me she frequently hears complaints from Italians about the niqab. "Even at the police station or clinic, I hear staff say they can't communicate with those women," she said. Subarna herself is critical of the trend:

“This rise in niqab is engulfing the community and creating a direct threat of total ‘othering.’ The more [Italian locals] see us as separate, the more we risk being excluded from the rest of the society.” She fears that the public image of the whole Bangladeshi community is being defined by its most conservative segment, with consequences for everyone.

From the viewpoint of those adopting these conservative practices, however, the niqab and similar measures represent an expression of faith and moral principle. Many of the Bangladeshi families who encourage wives or daughters to veil fully believe they are upholding a religious duty and protecting their family’s honor in what they perceive as a morally permissive society. What appears to Italian onlookers like self-isolation or imposed silence is, from the inside, understood as maintaining integrity and piety. These divergent interpretations of Islamic visibility in shared civic spaces underscore the complexity of multicultural coexistence in Torpignattara: practices that Italians like Angelina see as barriers to interaction are seen by some Bangladeshi Muslims as core values to be preserved. Clearly, context and perspective matter in evaluating these religious expressions.

As a Bangladeshi researcher, I did not encounter these shifts from a neutral distance. The growing visibility of niqab and Gulf-influenced styles unsettled me as well, not because modest religious dress was unfamiliar to me, but because I could see how quickly such visible markers intensified already strained boundaries between Bangladeshis and their Italian neighbours. At the same time, I was cautious not to collapse my discomfort into the secular gaze of European suspicion, which too easily reads Muslim women’s dress only as a sign of oppression or cultural failure.

Such internal cleavages reinforce Werbner’s insistence that any account of transnational cultural engagement must take class seriously. Diasporic communities are not homogeneous; they are stratified by class and other social differences, and these distinctions shape the degree and form of their members’ engagement with the wider society (Werbner 1999, 18, 23). Werbner also complicates Ulf Hannerz’s influential distinction between cosmopolitans, who are “willing to engage with the Other,” and transnationals, who travel through social networks without necessarily opening themselves to other cultural worlds. In her account, migrants may remain transnational for years while living within “encapsulated cultural worlds,” sustained by dense co-ethnic networks that minimise everyday exposure to the host society (Werbner 1999, 19; Hannerz 1992, 248–49, 252). Many first-generation Bangladeshis in Rome fit this description. In the Italian case, Knights and King underline the absence of

any colonial or linguistic affiliation that might ease communication on arrival (Knights and King 1998, 300). In their Rome survey, while almost all respondents reported speaking English (explicitly described as “the language of colonialism in South Asia”), competence in Italian was far more uneven, and only a small minority reported being able to write it (Knights and King 1998, 306).

The limited opportunity, or willingness, to speak Italian is therefore a practical barrier that easily becomes a cultural one. This is not because Torpignattara is linguistically sparse. If anything, it is saturated with overlapping repertoires: Bangla, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Italian, and often some English circulate together in shops, workplaces, mosques, cafés, and on the street, as people switch registers according to context and interlocutor. Yet this everyday multilingualism does not automatically translate into Italian acquisition or sustained interaction with Italian-speaking institutions. Virtually every Bangladeshi adult I interviewed identified Italian as the main hurdle to integration, not because they lived in a monolingual enclave, but because their daily routines made functional alternatives readily available. Many said they simply did not have time to attend language classes; they work long hours, often seven days a week, in community-run businesses and ethnic service economies where Bangla or other South Asian lingua francas are sufficient for most transactions, and where “getting by” can be achieved with only minimal Italian.

An elderly Bangladeshi man named Rahmat, who works in the kitchen of an “Indian” restaurant, chuckled as he told me he has lived in Rome for fifteen years and still speaks “very little Italian on a regular day.” He framed this not as an abstract deficiency but as a simple itinerary of habit. “I drink my morning coffee from the café next to my apartment,” he said. “I know that little Italian to order a coffee, ask how they are doing, and leave by saying *grazie, a domani* [thanks, see you tomorrow].” Beyond that brief exchange, however, he insisted that on days without any official errands, he “hardly” speaks Italian at all. The rest of his routine, he explained, unfolds almost entirely within a familiar circuit: “I buy groceries from a Bangladeshi-run store, get a haircut from a Pakistani barber with whom I speak in Urdu, to eat out with my family, I dine at a Bangladeshi restaurant, and socialise in Bangla, all within a few blocks.” Read through Werbner’s vocabulary, Rahmat’s mundane list is not merely a story of linguistic limitation; it is an emplaced account of how migration can “make the places travel” by reproducing an “ethnic world” in which public aesthetics, tastes, and social routines are transposed into the streets of the host city (Werbner 1999, 24-25). In this sense, what Rahmat describes is the local, practical texture of what Werbner calls “place

travel”: a social landscape made contiguous through co-ethnic commerce, familiar languages, and everyday exchanges that allow “Bangladesh” to be lived, in parts, inside Rome.

In Torpignattara, “place travel” is sustained by a dense co-ethnic circuit that makes it possible to live much of everyday life in Bangla and related repertoires. That convenience also means fewer routine occasions to practice Italian or build ties outside the community. Bangladeshi women often experience this isolation more acutely, especially those who arrived through family reunification and remain largely within domestic and intra-community spheres. They have fewer chances to learn Italian or to interact with Italians, especially when cultural norms expect them to stay at home or only socialize with other Bangladeshi families. Traditional gender roles, women as homemakers and child rearers, combined with the intimidation of venturing out in a foreign environment, mean Bangladeshi women are among the most socially isolated migrants in the area. They depend on husbands or children to interface with Italian society for tasks like government paperwork, school matters, and medical appointments, which reinforces a cycle of nonintegration. Italian language courses are available through NGOs and schools, but women often drop out because of family pressures or pregnancy. The result is that many Bangladeshi housewives in Torpignattara speak little to no Italian at all, intensifying the insularity of the community.

Lorenzo, the Sip Bistrot manager, confirmed these observations from his Italian perspective. “While Bangladeshi men try to communicate, the women stay more reserved. You often need a man in between to help,” he said. He recalled a young Bangladeshi woman who briefly apprenticed in his café but struggled with communication and initiative because of extreme shyness, a small incident that speaks to the ongoing cultural and gender dynamics. In effect, gender norms here function like an everyday border, determining who can engage in public life and under what conditions. Lorenzo noted that, over time, he has seen more Bangladeshi women out in public than before, although, as he wryly added, “even more men,” suggesting the gender imbalance persists. When I asked how Italian neighbours feel about the increasing visibility of the Bangladeshi population, Lorenzo was frank: “It’s mixed. Some people are fine with it, others not so much. Especially older folks, they might make racist comments, but then those same people rent apartments to Bangladeshi families or hire them for jobs. It’s contradictory.” His description echoes what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, 7) call “differential inclusion,” a pattern in which Bangladeshi migrants are welcomed as workers or tenants yet kept at arm’s length socially. Despite the ambivalence, Lorenzo feels the neighbourhood is gradually moving toward a more tolerant coexistence. “They’re not always friends,” he said

of Italians and Bangladeshis, “but if one of them becomes your friend, then it’s fine.” The social fabric remains layered and complex, but not entirely impermeable.

The pragmatic coexistence we observe in Torpignattara unfolds within a global order that, as Friedman and Ekholm Friedman argue, produces inequalities both between regions and within societies, that is, between classes (2013, 247). In other words, coexistence does not imply parity or symmetry. A brief comparison makes this asymmetry plain. The Italian butcher on the corner can close his shop at 8 p.m. because his employment is relatively secure and regulated; the Bangladeshi man working in the halal butcher shop next door keeps his shutter up far later, not out of any cultural preference for late hours, but because precarious, low-margin work forces longer hours to earn a living. In Torpignattara, a quick morning espresso at an Italian café may briefly place Bangladeshi workers shoulder to shoulder with native Italians, partaking in the same ritual. But for the Bangladeshi workers, it is often a hurried caffeine fix before a long shift, not a pause embedded in the relative familiarity and entitlement with which many local Italians, including working-class Italians, move through neighbourhood space. Standing together at the counter does not dissolve the invisible boundaries that reassert themselves once they step outside, classed and racialised boundaries that shape who can linger with ease and who must rush off to clean someone’s house or wash dishes in a restaurant kitchen.

Nonetheless, the younger generation points to different trajectories of multicultural coexistence. Bangladeshi children who arrived at a young age or were born in Italy typically grow up bilingual and culturally hybrid. They attend Italian schools, speak fluent Roman accented Italian with their friends, switch to Bangla at home with their parents, and often act as linguistic and cultural brokers for their elders. A notable emblem of this generation is Phaim Bhuiyan, a Roman-born Bangladeshi who wrote, directed, and starred in the award-winning 2019 film *Bangla*. The film is a lighthearted romantic comedy based on Phaim’s own life as a young Bangladeshi Italian man in Torpignattara who falls in love with an Italian girl and has to navigate between his Muslim family’s expectations and the secular, bohemian youth culture of Rome. At a community screening of the film in Torpignattara, Phaim himself introduced it by declaring (in a mix of Italian and Bangla): “Io sono 50% bangladese, 50% italiano, e 100% di Torpignattara!” “I am 50% Bangladeshi, 50% Italian, and 100% from Torpignattara!” This proud assertion of a blended identity drew cheers from the audience. It encapsulated the idea that the second generation can forge a local identity that is fully Bangladeshi and fully Roman at the same time. For many of these young people,

Torpignattara is home in a way that perhaps no place ever was for their immigrant parents. They claim the neighbourhood as their own and move with relative ease between its different social worlds.

In this sense, the bicultural confidence of the second generation resonates with Werbner's broader intervention that cosmopolitan orientations are classed and can emerge within working-class diasporic life, not only through elite global mobility. For Werbner, "working-class cosmopolitanism" names "a knowledge of and openness to other cultures," a disposition that may involve processes of hybridity without taking the elite forms that dominate much writing on cosmopolitanism (Werbner 1999, 23). The second generation in Torpignattara points to another route, less about travel than about growing up across social worlds, and learning to inhabit overlapping attachments in everyday life. In Werbner's terms, cosmopolitanism need not imply "an absence of belonging" but can involve "belonging to more than one ethnic and cultural localism simultaneously" (Werbner 1999, 34). Read this way, the youth's ease across languages, institutions, and peer worlds is not a diluted version of elite cosmopolitanism, but a locally produced competence.

1.5 Staying, Moving On, and the Work of Settlement

At this point, it is essential to assess the durability of the attachments described above, given that Torpignattara is not only a site of settlement but also, for many, a transit point, waiting room, or springboard to elsewhere. To understand what "Banglatown" truly represents, we need to look at who stays, who moves on, and how the work of settlement unfolds in this neighbourhood.

Migrants do not simply arrive and remain indefinitely; many keep their options open, test possible destinations, and recalibrate their plans as circumstances change. Their trajectories are shaped by shifting geographies of aspiration and constraint rather than by a single linear move from origin to destination. As Della Puppa and King show, onward migration from Italy to the United Kingdom was driven not by one single cause but by a bundle of interlocking motivations: the wish to secure a better future for children, access to English as a global language, escape from racially marked and socially limiting labour positions, entry into a larger Bangladeshi community, and the hope of a more meritocratic, multicultural, and

welfare-supportive environment (Della Puppa and King 2019, 1937, 1940–45). Their interview material is especially important because it complicates any simple crisis narrative. For most participants, the post-2008 economic crisis did not trigger onward migration because they had suddenly lost their jobs; rather, it generated a broader atmosphere of stagnation and blocked mobility, deepening the sense that Italy could offer little future, especially for the second generation (Della Puppa and King 2019, 1940). Official data support this wider context of labour-market strain without, however, proving a direct one-to-one causal sequence. The 2016 ministry report records an unemployment rate of 11 percent for the Bangladeshi community in Italy and notes the community's strong concentration in Lazio, especially in the province of Rome. At the same time, among non-EU residents in metropolitan Rome, unemployment rose from 8.5 percent in 2010 to a peak of 13.3 percent in 2013 before falling to 9 percent in 2015, while workers remained concentrated in low-paid and largely unqualified sectors. Read together, these sources suggest not a simple story of expulsion from the labour market, but a tightening horizon in which insecure advancement, racialisation, and concern for children's futures made London appear increasingly desirable (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2016, 3; ANPAL Servizi 2016, 26, 30). The route became materially viable once migrants acquired Italian citizenship, which, as Della Puppa and King note, functioned as the key to onward mobility within the European Union (2019, 1939, 1944).

Bacchu, a prominent leader of Rome's Bangladeshi community and founder of the Dhumcatu association, described this out-migration as a kind of "brain drain." As he explained, the community in Rome had produced some university graduates, doctors, engineers, and professionals, "but they all left for London. You will hardly find the second generation of Bangladeshi migrants in prestigious positions in Italy. This is a loss for both the Bangladeshi community and also for Italy. Because their basic education took place in Italy, the state invested in them in one way or another, but Italy could not keep them from getting the best out of them. It is a shame." His frustration names a broader structural problem: onward migration drew away many of those who were most resourceful, educated, or ambitious, not because Italy had no work at all to offer, but because it appeared unable to convert long residence, schooling, and even citizenship into full social recognition and meaningful upward mobility. Journalistic reporting from East London reinforces this picture. Gostoli describes Italian-Bangladeshis there as pursuing "better education for their children and more diversity," and quotes one migrant saying, "No one comes here for the money. We

do it for the children, so they can have more opportunities” (Gostoli 2019). The same report depicts an already consolidated Italian-Bangladeshi settlement infrastructure in East London, with advisers and community intermediaries helping newcomers navigate paperwork and residence issues, and cites an Italian Consulate estimate of around 7,500 Italian-Bangladeshis in the UK in 2019, excluding children and dependents (Gostoli 2019). This helps explain why the “UK dream” long retained its force: England represented not only jobs, but English, a historically charged linguistic and symbolic resource for Bangladeshis, a larger and more established diaspora, and a social environment imagined as more accustomed to diversity. Brexit did not eliminate that aspiration so much as reroute it. Since 2020, as Bacchu noted, Italian-Bangladeshis who once imagined London as the obvious next step have increasingly looked instead to Germany, Norway, Sweden, or Switzerland. Still, the symbolic power of the UK has endured, precisely because the aspiration was always about much more than employment alone.

While Bacchu laments departures as a collective loss, another interlocutor, Junayed, spoke about what it feels like to have grown up in Rome without ever managing to leave. I met Junayed, a man in his late thirties from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, during a practice match of the Rome Bangla Cricket Academy in a local park. He had migrated to Italy as a teenager via family reunification with his father, who had come years earlier and helped many relatives move to Italy. Many of his paternal relatives eventually moved on to England. Junayed, watching those cousins’ trajectories, now regrets not following them. “I missed my chance,” he said about not moving to London before Brexit closed that door. After more than two decades in Italy, he feels both rooted and restless, suspended between belonging here and longing to leave. “In London, they discriminate against South Asians, but they are friendly,” he said cryptically, trying to convey a nuanced comparison. Italians, by contrast, felt to him distant and uninterested in socializing with Bangladeshis. When I suggested that language might be a major barrier, he shook his head: “Many Bangladeshis speak Italian very well, but still they don’t have Italian friends or associations.” He believes this may slowly change for the second and third generations, who will grow up speaking Italian and attending Italian schools as natives. Religion, for Junayed, is central to why he finds Britain different. “Muslims feel less discriminated against in the UK,” he said. “Even women wearing hijab, niqab, or burqa are more accepted there. Here in Italy, they are treated with suspicion.” He recounted an incident in Rome where a Bangladeshi woman in a burqa was aggressively questioned by police in a public square. For Junayed, migration is no longer about adventure

or just making money. It is about seeking dignity and social recognition, things he finds hard to secure in Rome. Watching his cricket teammates pack up their gear at dusk, he added quietly, “Maybe things will change for our children. They will grow up here, study here, and maybe be accepted as part of this place.”

Junayed’s account makes visible the affective underside of onward migration: not only movement, but also the experience of being “stuck” when the desired exit becomes harder. A different long-term migrant, Naeem, a restaurant owner who arrived in the early 1990s, framed the same pattern less as personal regret than as a structural loss that reshapes the neighbourhood’s possibilities. “The ‘best’ ones eventually leave the place,” he lamented. “The bureaucracy is unbearable here. So people tend to seek opportunities elsewhere, and that’s a loss for us. If they stayed, you would see a very different look in the neighbourhood.” Naeem’s own Bangladeshi restaurant on Via Casilina, a major thoroughfare in Torpignattara, illustrates this sense of provisionality. The street outside is lively with foot traffic, but the interior of his eatery is strictly functional, basic furniture, no frills in the decor, minimal services. The clientele is almost entirely migrant: Bangladeshis and other Muslims who come because the food is halal and affordable. “It’s just for us,” he explained. “The prices are very reasonable, and we even offer a ‘monthly package’ for around 180 euros, where one can get two meals a day.” Given the prime location, Naeem is aware that the restaurant could be far more profitable if it catered to a broader public. The neighbourhood’s dense mix of people, including many Italians, certainly offers potential customers. Yet he, like many others, hesitates to invest in expansion or rebranding. “I’m not sure how long I’ll stay here,” he admitted. Both of his children, born and raised in Italy, moved to England for university and have now settled there permanently. He and his wife are considering joining them after retirement. This pervasive sense of impermanence shapes how Naeem and other Bangladeshi business owners engage with their surroundings. They keep their enterprises running to meet immediate needs, but they stop short of building for the long term or seeking wider visibility in Rome’s urban culture. By contrast, Brick Lane’s revival in the late 1990s was tied to the redevelopment of the street as “Banglatown,” the official branding of the area by Tower Hamlets Council, and the rapid expansion of Bengali-owned restaurants. As the Runnymede report notes, Brick Lane’s tourist economy and identity as London’s “Curry Capital” emerged with this redevelopment, and by 2003 there were 46 Bengali-owned “Indian” restaurants, rising to more than 60 at its peak (Alexander et al. 2020, 10–11). In Torpignattara, many

Bangladeshi spaces remain oriented inward, sustained by a community that is always partly looking elsewhere.

And yet, alongside these outward-facing orientations, a growing number of Bangladeshis now seriously consider Rome their permanent home. For these settlers, the horizon shifts from transience to permanence. They invest effort in learning Italian, stabilizing small businesses, purchasing homes, and bringing over family members. Brexit matters here not only because it restricts one destination, but because it subtly alters the calculus of futurity, making certain “easy exits” less available and thereby amplifying the difference between those who continue to plan for departure and those who begin to build a life that assumes Rome as the long term.

Even apart from Brexit, some Bangladeshis have developed a genuine affective attachment to Rome and its people. They speak of a pull (*taan*) that goes beyond calculations of income or welfare. Sultana, one of the few successful female entrepreneurs in the community, embodies this sentiment. She and her family actually tried moving to London for better prospects, but despite the economic opportunities, they struggled to adjust. Her children, born in Italy and accustomed to Italian friends and schools, felt out of place in Britain. “We came back because of our *taan* (magnetic pull or tug) to Italy,” she told me. Now firmly reestablished in Torpignattara, Sultana organises an annual sari festival that doubles as a promotion for her clothing business and a celebration of what she calls “the beauty of Bangla women.” For her, Italy has ceased to be a temporary station; it has become a place of belonging where her family’s cultural identity can take root even as they achieve economic stability.

While Sultana’s story foregrounds an affective sense of belonging, Farhad’s rootedness emerges more from the pragmatic work of building a livelihood, and in doing so it also traces how Torpignattara has gradually become more workable, and in some ways more hospitable, for Bangladeshi entrepreneurs over time. Farhad’s story is one of eventual rootedness. He has run the Sundarban Restaurant in Torpignattara for over twenty years, although his path was far from easy. In the early years, the pungent South Asian spices wafting from his kitchen drew constant complaints from Italian neighbours, forcing him to relocate the business three times. He recalls those days with some bitterness, but also with pride at having persevered. Today, Sundarban is thriving. Italians not only tolerate it, but they also increasingly dine there. Farhad laughed as he recounted, “The Italians complain about the food being too *jhal* (hot and spicy), but they come back. *Jhal* has an addiction; they complain and then come

back with more friends!” What once marked a cultural divide (the smell and heat of traditional Bangladeshi cooking) has become a point of connection and even local intrigue. Yet Farhad admits he long hesitated to bring his own family to settle in Rome. He feared the cultural gap, especially the challenges of raising children amid what he saw as contrasting social and religious norms. His perspective shifted as the Bangladeshi community grew and its institutions expanded. The establishment of multiple mosques that also offer weekend Islamic teachings gave him confidence that his children could be raised in Italy with a sense of continuity in their faith and culture. “Now there is a big community,” he explained, “and enough mosques and madrassas. So, I feel more confident nowadays.” Having once doubted whether his children could thrive in Italy, Farhad now feels the local infrastructure for faith, education, and community life is robust enough to support them.

Mostafa’s decision to stay in Rome is rooted too, but it is rooted in a different way, and it produces a different reading of the neighbourhood’s transformations. “When I came here in the mid-1980s, there were not even a hundred Bangladeshis in all of Rome,” he reminisced. Now in his sixties, Mostafa runs a weekend Bangla language and culture school in the nearby Centocelle district, where children of Bangladeshi migrants learn Bangla, Arabic, and traditional music and dance. The classes are held in a space affiliated with the centre-left Partito Democratico, symbolizing a fusion of civic and cultural realms. When I visited, the children were rehearsing for International Mother Language Day (21 February, commemorating Bangladesh’s 1952 language movement). Mostafa has managed this school for over 15 years and explained that it began when “a sizeable second generation was growing, and we felt a need to keep them in touch with their roots.” Yet he lamented that attendance has plateaued or even declined in recent years as more families prioritize sending their kids to Islamic classes. “They can’t exhaust the whole weekend learning Bangla and also the Quran,” he quipped. “The madrasa teachers go door to door, scaring parents with hell if they don’t send their kids there. I don’t have such a weapon!” Despite having his own wife and sons now living in London, Mostafa chose to stay on in Rome, partly out of commitment to this school, and partly because he prefers what he calls a “freer life.” “The community in London is more Islamized,” he explained. “Here I live my life. I have Italian friends, and no one bothers me.”

Taken together, these narratives reflect a subtle but significant transformation among Bangladeshis in Rome. While economic necessity once fostered a culture of mobility and exit, new forms of rootedness are emerging, shaped by emotional attachment, community

building, and the desire for stability. In this process, Rome, long imagined by migrants as a transient hub, becomes for some a site of cultural negotiation and belonging. The question, then, is not only whether people stay or leave, but how they redefine what it means to settle: to make a home, to claim space, and to cultivate a sense of permanence in a city that was never originally “theirs.” These shifting horizons of mobility and settlement also condition what feels politically salient in everyday life. Depending on where people imagine their future, they may feel more connected to, or detached from, particular kinds of public moments, whether neighbourhood concerns around schooling and recognition, religiously framed forms of visibility, or struggles tied to work, paperwork, and bureaucracy. The next section maps these everyday orientations by tracing the kinds of events and issues that different interlocutors gravitate toward, and the ones they deliberately keep at a distance.

1.6 Everyday Orientations to Politics

This section sketches the internal diversity of political participation among Bangladeshi migrants of Muslim origin in Torpignattara. I use the term “Muslim origin”⁷ descriptively rather than normatively. It includes very devout people, those modestly observant, the non-observant or secular, and even those openly agnostic or atheist. It also includes individuals who may be regarded as “Muslim” by their families, by community institutions, or by Italian public discourse, even if their personal religious practice is minimal. The point is to capture how being read as Muslim can matter in everyday public life, without presuming any single religious stance or level of piety.

Political participation here is not limited to formal voting or party membership, especially since many migrants in Torpignattara cannot vote in Italy until they become citizens. Yet local political life is still present in many ordinary forms. People may recognise unofficial

⁷ Bangladeshi Islam is predominantly Sunni and historically shaped by Hanafi jurisprudence, with a long and complex relationship to Sufi devotional practice. Alongside this majority of current reformist strands are associated with movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat and Ahl-i Hadith, which have gained visibility through transnational circulations. Shia and Ahmadiyya communities are also present, though national survey data do not disaggregate these currents precisely. Available scholarship and survey evidence nonetheless converge on the broad picture of a predominantly Sunni Muslim population, strong Hanafi influence, continuing Sufi presence, and visible reformist contestation (Pew Research Center 2012; Bennett 2018; Yarrington 2010; Siddiqi 2018)

spokespeople, endorse or distance themselves from self-appointed leaders, attend protests, strikes, vigils, and marches, sign petitions, negotiate with municipal offices, cooperate with trade unions, social centres, and anarchist groups, circulate messages on WhatsApp and Facebook, or show support for friendly candidates by attending public events. Rather than treating these practices as steps in a single pathway, I treat them as a set of available modes of involvement that people use unevenly, depending on biography, resources, and social ties.

It is important to map heterogeneity at this stage because Bangladeshi residents in Torpignattara do not converge on a single repertoire of action. People are drawn into public life for different reasons and through different settings. For some, questions of religious space and dignity are central, including the ability to worship or to appear publicly as Muslim without harassment. For others, moments when civic equality is violated, such as a racist assault, prompt a response. For yet others, everyday material concerns such as work permits, job security, wages, or housing conditions shape what feels urgent and what feels possible. In this chapter, my aim is to indicate these differences as part of the neighbourhood landscape, rather than to explain them as outcomes of a single underlying mechanism.

One recurrent orientation appears at the intersection of long-term settlement and claims to equal belonging in the neighbourhood. I met Arman (pseudonym) at an open-air film screening in a neighbourhood park, where an Italian film was being shown with Bangla subtitles to engage local migrant residents. Arman was part of the organising effort. He volunteered to translate the subtitles and to liaise with Bangla-speaking neighbours to encourage them to attend. Arman migrated to Italy at age 12 through family reunification, grew up in Torpignattara, earned a degree from Sapienza University, and now works as a manager in the health sector. A few weeks after the film event, I saw him again at a neighbourhood protest following a racist attack on a Bangladeshi man. Arman was standing with a group of his Italian friends from the area, people he had known since adolescence. The same skills that made him effective at the film event, bilingual mediation, ease in mixed company, confidence speaking to an Italian crowd, were also visible in this second setting, where he moved between groups rather than staying within one.

As Arman later explained, he and his peers who grew up in Torpignattara often feel most at ease in cross-cultural settings. “We,” he said (meaning those of his generation who straddle Bangladeshi and Italian life), “do not usually go to only Bangladeshi gatherings, because they do groupings based on which part of Bangladesh you come from or which political party in

Bangladesh you support. They judge what clothes we wear or who we hang out with, and then there is segregation between men and women, which is not cool. When we were growing up, we thought the community would open up with time, but it did not really evolve that way.” This critique of internal factionalism and moral policing helps explain why Arman and many of his peers often prefer civic engagement in mixed spaces rather than within tightly knit Bangladeshi circles. For Arman, participation is less about representing “the Bangladeshi community” as a bounded unit and more about asserting a form of equal presence in the neighbourhood that shaped him.



Figure 6: A scene from an open-air film festival where a Bangladeshi movie was screened with Italian subtitles. The event was held at the Parco Sangalli of Torpignattara. Photo by Punny Kabir, 07/09/2023.

A second recurrent orientation is shaped by conservative religious commitments and a strong sense of collective rights as Muslims. During fieldwork, I made repeated attempts to interview an imam from one of the neighbourhood mosques. Each time, my request was politely declined because the imam would not meet with an unrelated woman unless I brought a mahram (a male family chaperone). The refusal was explained by an intermediary not as hostility to my research, but as adherence to a rule of proper interaction, a way of protecting both his and my moral standing. Similarly stringent concerns about Islamic

propriety surfaced in a very different setting, an after-school programme run by an Italian association (Altramente) that offers free Italian classes for women and homework help for children. In one cycle of the children's programme, a Bangladeshi girl attended wearing a niqab. Her face veil made it difficult for the Italian volunteer teachers to gauge her understanding or correct her pronunciation. Because I was then a participant in the adult Italian class and had become a familiar presence, the teachers asked me to mediate. We avoided turning it into a symbolic confrontation and instead framed it in practical terms: the niqab was a barrier to learning Italian. We proposed that during class, held in a closed room with no men present, the girl could remove her veil and put it back on when leaving. Her parents agreed once we provided those assurances about the all-female environment.

A few weeks later, I saw the girl's father in a different context. He was standing in the crowd at a large anti-war demonstration in downtown Rome, protesting Israeli actions in Gaza. The rally was strikingly diverse, with Italian men and women standing together (most of the women unveiled), LGBTQ groups marching with rainbow flags, and local leftists, anarchists, and peace activists chanting side by side. Here was a man who, in daily life, insisted on strict gender segregation and purdah norms for his daughter, yet he did not hesitate to place himself in the midst of a mixed gender and politically heterogeneous crowd when he felt a duty to protest in defense of Muslims suffering abroad. I had not otherwise seen him in neighbourhood meetings or local organising. In this episode, a pan-Islamic moral and political concern made him present in a space that did not match the everyday boundaries he maintained within the community.

In such cases, participation is shaped by a conservative reading of Islam. Men like that father claim an equal right to pray, to establish mosque spaces, and to appear in public as Muslim subjects, while also preferring to maintain gender segregation, supporting the niqab, and restricting women's mobility within family and community life. Put differently, the demand is for recognition and respect in public, alongside the reproduction of a more hierarchical moral order in private and intra-community settings.

A third orientation is organised around immediate material concerns, particularly documents, work, wages and housing. Campaigns around regularisation and labour rights are highly visible in Torpignattara, but residents engage with them unevenly. These concerns therefore form another important strand of the neighbourhood's political landscape alongside civic, anti-racist and religiously framed forms of mobilisation.

These orientations do not sort neatly along class lines, even though income, debt, and job security clearly shape time and capacity. Legal status, gender, generation, language ability, and religious outlook intersect with class to open up certain forms of participation and close off others. The boundaries between orientations are also fluid: someone who usually feels comfortable in mixed settings may still turn to mosque committees for support when a prayer space is questioned, while someone drawn into public life through a documents campaign may later attend a neighbourhood anti-racist vigil. At this stage, the point is simply to mark this variability as part of Torpignattara's social landscape. What matters here is that "Banglatown" does not constitute a unified political constituency. It is a heterogeneous field in which different grievances, moral commitments, and forms of public engagement coexist. The next chapter asks how the unequal conditions of settlement shape which of these concerns become politically actionable, for whom, and under what circumstances.

1.7 Conclusion: Making a Heterogeneous Migrant Political Field

In this chapter, I have traced how Bangladeshi migrants came to be present in Rome and how Torpignattara emerged as an unofficial "Banglatown." I linked the politicization of migration and Islam in Europe and Italy to the consolidation of a Bangladeshi presence through particular migration trajectories and social networks, and I showed how that presence has, over the past few decades, begun to reshape a formerly working-class borgata into a neighbourhood in which Bangladeshi businesses, institutions, and cultural practices are embedded in everyday urban life. Rather than approaching Torpignattara as a homogeneous ethnic enclave, I highlighted its internal differentiations and the uneven ways residents relate to Italian institutions, to public visibility, and to one another. In doing so, I establish the social terrain on which the rest of the thesis builds. Through ethnographic vignettes, I introduce key interlocutors whose lives are anchored in Torpignattara yet oriented toward very different horizons of belonging and recognition. Read together, their experiences delineate a *political field* in which public presence is never simply granted, but is something to be negotiated, avoided, or strategically embraced. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the political field is "*the site in which, through the competition between the agents involved in it, political products, issues, programmes, analyses, commentaries, concepts and events are created*" – a space of contest

over how society is organised and understood (Bourdieu 1991, 172). Here in “Banglatown,” that field is constituted by Bangladeshi residents, Italian neighbours, local authorities, and activists all struggling to define rights, belonging, and order in the community. Mapping out this field clarifies the contested terrain on which processes of **political home-making** are being attempted in the neighbourhood.

In Chapter 2, I take the next step by examining political subjectivity as the hinge between structural conditions and concrete action. I explore how migrants come to understand their own positions, gauge the risks they confront, and decide which claims are worth making in public life.

Chapter 2

Settlement Conditions and Political Subjectivities

“I never joined political protests in Bangladesh. I was neither active in any political party, nor did I need to stand up for my very basic rights to work. But in Italy, after waiting for more than three years for the *permesso di soggiorno*, I started joining demonstrations because I am tired of working *al nero*, without a proper contract,” said Shahidul, a 34-year-old Bangladeshi migrant, as we had a chance encounter at a demonstration at a central area of Rome called Piazza Santi Apostoli in early spring 2023.



Figure 7: A scene from the demonstration at Piazza Santi Apostoli in Rome. Photo by Punny Kabir, 30/03/2023.

Shahidul had been selling bags and scarves at a roadside stall in the Esquilino area for the past few months – just one of many jobs he had taken on since arriving in Italy. In the last three years, while living in a cramped apartment in Torpignattara, he had shifted from kitchen work to logistics to street vending. Each job was short-lived, unstable, and often underpaid. On the afternoon of the demonstration, he handed over the stall to a friend for a few hours and walked to the piazza where a protest was taking place. Migrant workers from Latin America, Africa, and Asia had gathered to demand regularization and rights. Like Shahidul, many had applied during the 2020 *sanatoria* (amnesty) hoping to escape undocumented status, but were still trapped in bureaucratic limbo. Some had paid intermediaries or fake cooperatives for work contracts that never materialized. Others were still waiting for basic steps like fingerprinting, unable to access healthcare or secure proper employment in the meantime. “They need our arms, but deny us a life,” one speaker said, summarizing the contradictions of Italy’s immigration policy. Among many chants and speeches, “*Documenti per tutti!*” (“Documents for everyone!”) was the most popular. The demonstration was organised by several grassroots migrant groups, including Dhuumcatu, and was supported by Italian leftist organisations such as Partito della Rifondazione Comunista. The timing was pointed: the fixed term contracts of agency hired staff in the *Questure* (provincial police headquarters) and the *Commissioni Territoriali* (Territorial Commissions for International Protection), the offices handling immigration files, were set to expire at the end of March (27 to 31 March, depending on the office), even as substantial backlogs from the 2020 regularization persisted. Protesters demanded not only regularization for the undocumented, but also the stabilization of those precarious public workers who had become essential to the system. Shahidul did not stay long at the rally – just enough to show up, listen, and feel part of something larger than his daily hustle. Then he returned to Esquilino, back to his scarves and bags, wondering how much longer he would have to wait for papers that never seemed to come.

Stories like his are not exceptional in Torpignattara. They show how long periods of waiting, precarious work, and the struggle to secure a place from which to speak and act reshape how migrants understand themselves in relation to the state, to employers, and to the neighbourhood around them. In this sense, Shahidul’s brief appearance in the piazza is less an isolated act of protest than an entry point into the wider question that guides this chapter: how legal status, labour conditions, racialisation, and Islam shape migrants’ political subjectivities and their sense of possible action. To answer this question, I trace how subjectivities are

reworked through the overlapping pressures and encounters of settlement. The chapter's contribution is to show how migrants come to calculate risk, assess what they are entitled to, and recognise certain forms of treatment as humiliating, negotiable, or publicly challengeable.

In this chapter, I examine how Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara become political actors through the pressures and encounters of settlement. I do not treat political subjectivity here as an abstract philosophical category existing before social life. Rather, I use it to describe a gradual and uneven process through which people come to assess their own position, register what kinds of treatment are normalised around them, and decide what can be endured, negotiated, or publicly challenged. In Torpignattara, this process takes shape through repeated encounters with legal uncertainty, exploitative labour arrangements, minority status, moral scrutiny, and everyday racism. These are not separate domains. They overlap in ordinary life and together shape what migrants come to perceive as risky, humiliating, necessary, or worth acting on.

I therefore approach political subjectivity in this chapter as an emergent positionality formed within the process of settlement itself. What matters is not whether migrants arrive with a fully formed political consciousness, but how living and working in Rome reorganises their sense of caution, dignity, entitlement, and possible action. I trace this reworking across everyday situations in which power is felt most directly: in documents and waiting, in work and dependency, in the public visibility and contestation of Islam, and in racialised encounters on the street and in institutions.

2.1 Negotiating Minority Status

Most Bangladeshi migrants I encountered arrived from a social world in which Islam was the majority religion, Bangla the dominant language, and belonging largely taken for granted. This was not true of everyone, and Bangladesh's own minority populations⁸ are not absent from migration. But for many of the Muslim migrants who form the main focus of this

⁸ Bangladesh is overwhelmingly Muslim, but it is not religiously homogeneous. According to the 2022 national census, Muslims constituted 91.08 percent of the population, Hindus 7.96 percent, Buddhists 0.61 percent, and Christians 0.30 percent; Hindus are by far the largest religious minority in the country. (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2023, 69).

chapter, arrival in Rome meant entering a very different arrangement. Here they had to learn to live as members of religious and racial minorities, in an Italian-speaking environment and within a labour market that placed many of them in low-status work. Rights are tied to documents and procedures, and prolonged waiting comes to structure daily life, budgets, and mobility. Prayer rooms and cultural associations often sit in a legal grey zone and face periodic checks. Access to job shifts, housing, and paperwork runs through co-ethnic intermediaries who can either help or exploit. Everyday racism surfaces on the street, at service counters, and at work, as they are frequently labeled *extracomunitari*, an Italian bureaucratic term for non-EU citizens that carries stigmatizing connotations. As anthropologist Anna Tuckett observes, *extracomunitario* is an ideologically loaded label in Italy, typically reserved for immigrants from the Global South and marking them as permanent outsiders (Tuckett 2018, 7, 115). The Bangladeshi migrants of Torpignattara thus enter Italy already positioned on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy – deemed “foreigners” in a way that, say, an American or Australian immigrant might not be. From this perspective, contemporary labels that sort those imagined as naturally European from those marked as external condense long histories of empire into apparently neutral legal categories. For migrants who arrive with the experience of religious and national majority status, learning to inhabit this postcolonial minority position is one of the most disorienting steps in the reworking of political subjectivity.

Ariful (pseudonym), for example, arrived in Italy about ten years ago and now runs a one-room tailoring shop in “Banglatown” with his wife. Their workshop and storefront share the same cramped space; finished and half-finished garments hang along the walls. From black burqas to *ghagra-choli* sets (the long skirt and blouse popular across South Asia), their clothing rack signals a wide range of women’s attire. I visited several times for alterations and repairs. As a regular customer, I observed their work rhythm and heard parts of their story.

Ariful came on a *decreto flussi* work visa arranged through a broker, paying roughly €7,500 for the opportunity. An uncle in Genoa had facilitated the contact. He first worked in a Genoa café kitchen and rented a room in a shared apartment with two Italians and a Romanian. He had brought some savings – raised by selling a small piece of family land – which covered the broker’s fee and travel and helped him start out. Still, earnings from the café barely covered his own costs, and he could not send money home. He also faced tensions over ncooking: he preferred Bangladeshi food, but complaints from housemates made this

difficult. Frustrated, he moved to Rome, where his uncle had contacts. He found a job in an *alimentari* (grocery) and moved into a shared flat with nine other Bangladeshis. It was cramped but cheaper, he said, and it allowed him to save and remit money. Through a neighbourhood fixer, he sought help with paperwork to extend his work permit and residence.

After about six years in Italy, Ariful married a divorced Bangladeshi woman he met in Rome. She is skilled in tailoring, and together they opened the shop. He described demand as “better with time,” noting an increase in Bangladeshi families in the area. He observed that many women prefer a female tailor for modesty reasons. His wife speaks Italian more confidently than he does and, according to him, this has attracted some Italian customers for simple repairs. He recounted this with a smile that mixed pride with a hint of embarrassment at being outpaced by his partner.

Neither Ariful nor his wife has Italian citizenship. Ariful called the paperwork “endless.” They have a two-year-old daughter; he hopes she will attend school and grow up without discrimination. He noted ongoing *andolon* (Bangla: social movement or protest) among migrants calling for birthright citizenship for children of immigrant parents, and said he joined a neighbourhood rally for that cause. Even so, he was not optimistic: “This government does not like migrants, and I don’t see them leaving power anytime soon.” Because his daughter is not a citizen by birth under the current law, he anticipates further bureaucratic hurdles ahead.

Ariful’s reflections illustrate a broader process many Bangladeshi Muslim migrants undergo in Italy: a reconfiguration of previously unexamined assumptions about identity, privilege, and exclusion. Migration, in this sense, is not just physical displacement but a moral and political awakening – one that forces a reckoning with one’s own past complicities and present vulnerabilities. Reflecting on his newfound vulnerability as an immigrant, Ariful contrasted majority and minority positions. “Back in Bangladesh,” he said, “we used the word *shonkhyaloghu* (minority) as a kind of joke, to tease someone with an unpopular opinion. I didn’t think much of it. We had *Bihari*⁹ friends too, but we never really reflected on what it meant for them. I was part of the majority, so the word didn’t carry weight for me.” In Rome, by contrast, he felt “on the other side” of that word: “Here I share the same minority

⁹ In Bangladesh, “Bihari” commonly refers to the Urdu-speaking community often described as “stranded Pakistanis” after the 1971 Liberation War. Many have faced long-running political and social marginalization, including contested citizenship status for decades.

status with Bangladeshi *Rohingyas*¹⁰, but sometimes I feel even more excluded by Italian society because I am visibly Muslim.”

This transformation of consciousness often becomes tangible in moments of collective confrontation with the state. One such moment unfolded in autumn 2023 during a public meeting at the local municipal office in Torpignattara. Organised by Dhuumcatu, the gathering brought together community leaders, imams, and mosque committee members to respond to renewed scrutiny by the authorities over the legal status of local Islamic cultural centres (many of which function informally as mosques). Some participants perceived the scrutiny as disproportionate compared to the treatment of other civic associations; others saw it as a predictable outcome of the centres’ uncertain legal status. The discussion revealed internal fault lines within the community. These informal mosques often operate with little transparency, and religious leadership appointments are made without broader community consultation. Safety regulations are inconsistently followed. Many prayer spaces operate in legal grey zones. Some community members defended these informal arrangements as “necessary shortcuts” in the face of bureaucratic exclusion and financial precarity. But such *informalism* also has consequences – potentially deepening internal inequalities or undermining the community’s broader claims to legitimacy and inclusion.

Amidst the tense exchanges at that meeting, Bacchu – the president of Dhuumcatu (formally, Nure Alam Siddique) – shifted the tone by drawing an unexpected historical parallel. He invoked the Bihari and Rohingya minorities in Bangladesh, stateless Muslim groups who have lived in that country for decades, often in dire conditions. Bacchu remarked to the group, “We used to think we were the majority, but here we are not. And now we must ask ourselves – how did we treat our own minorities back home? How do we treat the Rohingyas and Biharis in Bangladesh? We are now in their shoes.” This was significant not to absolve anyone of responsibility, but to lay bare the circularity of marginalization: how holding power in one context can blind one to the suffering of others. Now, in Italy, many Bangladeshi Muslims found themselves being racialised, surveilled, and pushed into precarity – not so different from the minorities they had ignored or even belittled in their home country. As Krause and Schramm note in their discussion of boundary-focused approaches to citizenship, some subjects are “controlled and put under surveillance in order to identify who is qualified

¹⁰ The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar’s Rakhine State who have faced decades of persecution and mass displacement. Since 2017, large numbers have sought refuge in Bangladesh, where many remain in protracted displacement, and some later move onward through further migration routes.

for citizenship and who is not” (2011, 124). In this sense, the meeting did not simply reveal a new moral reflection on minority status; it exposed the concrete mechanisms through which belonging is policed and conditionalized.

In effect, Bacchu and his peers were treating their minority position as a standpoint from which to question who counts as an insider and on what terms. This resonates with Mezzadra and Neilson’s view that the border between majority and minority, insider and outsider, can become a critical vantage point – one that reveals how belonging is constructed and contested (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 13). These reflections in the meeting formed a bottom-up critique of taken-for-granted categories, questioning who sets the terms of belonging and with what effects.

Carlo, an Italian leftist who has worked closely with the Bangladeshi community for over 30 years, put it plainly: “The working-class migrants from Bangladesh learn the very basic vocabulary of leftist politics only through their struggles here. They did not have any prior exposure to leftist ideology. There’s almost no leftist education among them.” Unlike certain political exiles or refugee populations, the vast majority of Bangladeshi labour migrants arrive with limited prior engagement in organised leftist activism or ideology – a pattern rooted in Bangladesh’s own political history¹¹. As political theorist Sandro Mezzadra (2018) observes, orthodox Marxism failed to account for certain social differences and therefore could not mobilise many subaltern groups. The Bangladeshi case epitomized that failure: broad-based class consciousness did not emerge in a society where leftist movements were fragmented and delegitimized.

Back home, then, these migrants’ concerns were mostly economic and familial rather than ideological. They came to Italy imagining themselves as workers and providers, not as political actors. This expectation was often shaped by brokers, who promised quick contracts, fast-tracked documents, and a clear path to stability. Family and peer networks reinforced these assurances. A vignette helps illustrate how expectations collide with hindsight. Farhad,

¹¹ Since 1971, Bangladeshi politics has been dominated by bourgeois centrist parties like Awami League and BNP, while the left has remained electorally marginal, organisationally fragmented, and often absorbed into patronage-based alliances with these larger parties (Shehabuddin 2016; Sarkar 2015). Early repression of radical opponents through the Rakkhi Bahini, the 1975 BAKSAL one-party project, and the subsequent decline and factionalization of key left actors such as Jasad and Maulana Bhashani’s NAP further weakened prospects for a durable class-based mass politics (Shehabuddin 2016; Sarkar 2015). Later constitutional Islamization, the stigmatization of “atheism,” and the rise of Islamist actors narrowed the legitimacy of overtly secular-left projects (Riaz 2013; Islam 2018; Siddiqui 2003). This helps explain why many Bangladeshi labor migrants come to Italy with little experience of leftist movements, even though they have lived through discrimination, exploitation, and poverty at home.

who owns a popular Bangladeshi restaurant in Torpignattara, migrated in the 1990s and obtained political asylum when gang violence made life dangerous in parts of Bangladesh. He told me that the migration and settlement process was simpler then, and that he now advises friends and relatives not to come to Italy under current conditions. “I came here because of special circumstances, and the process was easier at that time. Now it is very complex, and the paperwork is endless. The bureaucratic trauma one has to suffer is not worth the pain, compared to what you get here,” he said. When I asked why prospective migrants still picture Italy as an easy opportunity, he offered two reasons. First, people want to present a happy and successful face to their family for reasons of prestige, so they conceal hardships. Second, many are linked to brokers in one way or another and earn commissions, so they have little incentive to describe the difficulties honestly.

Over time, many Bangladeshi migrants in Rome learn to adjust rather than assimilate. They begin to recognise overlaps between their own vulnerabilities and those of other minorities, other migrants, and the economically precarious in Italy. This growing awareness of minority status forms the backdrop against which their journey toward political subjectivity will unfold. Yet it is not the mere *fact* of being a minority that politicizes them. Rather, it is the concrete challenges accompanying this status – above all, the fight for legal recognition and the experience of prolonged uncertainty – that slowly plant the seeds of a political awakening. Before examining how these seeds grow into overt activism, we must first understand the legal limbo in which many migrants find themselves, and how waiting, uncertainty, and bureaucracy come to dominate their lives in Italy.

2.2 Legal Liminality and the Politics of Waiting in the Documentation Regime

Shujan and Mehedi (pseudonyms), both in their mid-20s, worked as waiters and kitchen assistants in a modest Bangladeshi restaurant in Torpignattara. This eatery, one of my regular fieldwork hangouts, sits on a busy street and is known for its affordable meals for working-class migrants. Initially, my interactions with Shujan and Mehedi were limited to pleasantries as they brought food to my table. They were curious about my presence because an independent woman like me rarely frequented their restaurant, and they understood I was doing “research on migrant rights,” my simplified description of the project. One slow morning, when the restaurant was nearly empty, they approached me with a cup of ginger tea

I had ordered and hesitantly asked if they could discuss a “problem.” Only then did I learn their full stories. Like many undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in Italy, their lives were defined not only by long hours of physical labour but by a less visible burden: the slow, open-ended waiting for regularization – for relief, for recognition. They saw themselves as part of the so-called “remittance warriors” – a term the Bangladeshi state uses to glorify those who migrate abroad and send money home – yet the glossy promises brokers had made to get them to Italy bore little resemblance to their reality. The decision to migrate, shaped by economic desperation and fed by the brokers’ assurances, had led them instead into lives suspended in uncertainty.

Shujan’s journey began with such promises. A broker in Bangladesh guaranteed him work in Europe in exchange for a steep fee of around €15,000. He first arrived in Romania, only to have his passport seized and destroyed, a tactic traffickers use to sever legal traceability. Eventually, he crossed clandestinely into Italy, undocumented and adrift. With no official entry record, Shujan found himself unable even to initiate a regularisation process. Mehedi, who had arrived a few months earlier via a similar route, did manage to file a police report for his lost passport, but new immigration regulations soon closed off even that modest avenue. Thus, both young men remained in Italy, legally invisible and waiting for an opening, or, more precisely, any opportunity that might alter their condition. Their everyday rhythms were shaped by repetition and anticipation. They worked twelve-hour shifts seven days a week, with only one half-day of rest. Each day resembled the last, but beneath this grind lay a silent, anxious hope for a document, a reform, an NGO that might help, or a connection that could lead to a stable employment contract. Conversations with Shujan and Mehedi often circled around their legal status, only to return to the same impasse. They distrusted the “community lawyers” who charged high fees while producing few results, while large NGOs felt distant and inaccessible. This was why they approached me. Having seen me with Italian friends, they hoped that I could connect them with Italian humanitarian organisations that might help, since they no longer trusted the familiar Bangladeshi brokers.



Figure 8: A scene from an anti-racist demonstration in Torpignattara. The banner reads “Contro il razzismo” (Against racism) and highlights key demands: *soggiorno* (residence permits), *casa* (housing), *lavoro* (work), and “documenti per tutti” (documents for all). Photo by Punny Kabir, 25/02/2025.

They waited not only for documents, but also for clarity, direction, and trustworthy guidance within a system marked by opacity. Their situation reflected a broader structure in which waiting becomes a durable social condition. As Bandak and Janeja observe, situations of such waiting often produce diverse responses and can generate “existential questions and doubts” (2018, 17). In this case, Shujan and Mehedi were not simply awaiting documentation but inhabiting a condition in which doubt, limited hope, and strategic calculation shaped everyday survival. Their lives were organised by repetitive labour, deferred possibility, and continual judgements about whom to trust, which information to act on, and whether any apparent opening might alter their legal or social position. Waiting was therefore not merely an interval between migration and settlement, but a formative condition that structured expectation, action, and the horizon of possibility. The brokers who had facilitated their migration, some of whom had since become relatively successful within the local diaspora, continued to benefit from this system of deferred legality. By contrast, migrants such as Shujan and Mehedi remained in low-paid work with no stable path forward, their plans repeatedly postponed even as they continued to hope that legal recognition might eventually make a more secure future possible.

Stories like Shujan’s and Mehedi’s are common. Many Bangladeshi migrants spend years trapped in a state of legal invisibility, unable to regularize their status. For a newcomer without family ties in Europe, the official avenues of entry are extremely limited. Only a

small minority arrives through formal labour recruitment, such as Italy's seasonal or quota-based work visas under the *decreto flussi*, and even those places are difficult to secure. Many more come through long, circuitous journeys facilitated by smugglers or by overstaying short-term tourist visas. Recent trends confirm the predominance of irregular routes: in 2022, Bangladeshi nationals accounted for roughly 14 percent of all undocumented sea arrivals to Italy, about 15,300 people, making Bangladesh one of the main countries of origin for boat migrants that year (IOM 2023). Whatever their route of entry, many eventually find themselves undocumented or only precariously documented after settling in Rome.

Those who arrive without prior authorization are initially given little more than an STP code (*Straniero Temporaneamente Presente*, or “Temporarily Present Foreigner”), which grants access to emergency health care but no right to work. From there, the road to a proper *permesso di soggiorno* is arduous. Depending on one's luck, contacts, housing situation, work history, and sheer bureaucratic endurance, it can take anywhere from one to ten years to obtain a more stable permit or a *carta di soggiorno*. Migrants must secure a steady work contract, find registered housing that meets strict requirements, remain continuously employed, and avoid even minor infractions. Each step is uncertain. As one migrant put it to me, life turns into “a series of bureaucratic traumas” in pursuit of documents.

What emerges from these experiences is a condition of forced waiting. Migrants wait for appointments at the immigration office, for responses to applications, for employers to regularize contracts, and for the possibility of becoming “regular” in the eyes of the law. In this sense, the Bangladeshi men I met in Torpignattara lived in what Khosravi describes as a space of waiting imposed by bordering practices, where uncertainty is not incidental but built into the regime itself (Khosravi 2021, 202–6). At the same time, this waiting is inseparable from what De Genova calls deportability: the condition in which the constant possibility of falling back into irregularity disciplines everyday life (De Genova 2002, 431–33). The point here is not simply that migrants are excluded, but that the system keeps them hovering between partial presence and possible expulsion.

In Italy, legal residency is tightly tied to continuous formal employment and adequate housing, a combination that is extraordinarily difficult for low-wage migrants to maintain. A single lost job or an apartment that fails to meet the housing code, for example because it provides less than fourteen square meters per person, can mean the loss of one's permit. The system thus generates new forms of irregularity even among those who had briefly achieved a

measure of legality. An estimated thirty residence permit renewals per day are rejected by the Rome police headquarters for technicalities like these, amounting to more than 7,000 people pushed back into illegality each year in this city alone (Progetto Melting Pot Europa 2024). As Della Puppa and Sanò note, Italy's reception and migration system often institutionalizes marginalization rather than opening a path to social mobility (2021, 17).

For Bangladeshi migrants, the practical consequences of this legal liminality are far-reaching. Without proper documents, they cannot access stable jobs beyond the informal sector; they cannot rent decent housing in their own name; and they live under constant fear of random identity checks by police. Even those who manage to secure a temporary permit remain perpetually insecure, since permits are often short-term and tied to employment. Legal status is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing struggle: every year or two, one must submit renewals, pay fees, prove a minimum income, and hope that no new law or bureaucratic whim will derail the renewal process. The practical similarities with Anna Tuckett's Italian material are striking. In her ethnography, migrants likewise confront shifting *questura* interpretations of the law, misleading or contradictory information, and the possibility of slipping into a "limbo of illegality" through opaque administrative requirements (Tuckett 2018, 54–55, 70–71, 125). One migrant might spend an entire day in line at the *questura* only to be told to come back with yet another missing document; another might be given an appointment date six months away just to submit an application.

In the meantime, their unofficial status renders them deportable and their lives difficult to move forward. What is palpable in Torpignattara is something close to what Ghassan Hage calls "stuckedness": not total immobility, but a form of existential immobility in which one keeps working, waiting, and enduring without feeling able to advance toward a stable future (Hage 2009, 98–100). Migrants continue to labour, renew documents, shift houses, consult intermediaries, and improvise strategies, yet many remain stuck at the same legal threshold for years.

Importantly, this waiting is not experienced equally by all migrants. As Khosravi notes, waiting is racialised: some groups are made to wait longer than others, and this differential waiting helps reproduce broader inequalities (Khosravi 2021, 204–205). Bangladeshi migrants, being non-European, non-white, and generally of modest class background, often perceive that they face some of the longest waits and steepest barriers. Their paperwork is

scrutinized closely, appeals are met with skepticism, and even within formal procedures they sense that they are being processed as less trustworthy subjects.

The psychological toll of this condition is considerable. Bangladeshi migrants often describe life as being on hold, unable to invest fully in a future in Italy, yet unable to return home because of debt and family expectations. Tarek, a 38-year-old migrant who had shuttled between Italy and Malaysia after 2008 before returning to Rome in 2017, shared insights into both his personal life and his activism. He is married, but after more than three years he is still waiting to be reunited with his wife, who remains in Bangladesh because of Italy's onerous family reunification process. "I've been married for over three years, and I'm still waiting to be reunited with my wife. The process is dragging on, and it's incredibly frustrating," he told me, his tone heavy with emotion. The delays of family reunification are a central issue for many migrants in Italy, and Tarek's experience highlights their deep personal cost. "You can't really plan your life when you're always in this state of uncertainty. I'm stuck, and every time I think the process is about to move forward, there's another delay," he continued. Notably, Tarek is an active member of Dhumcatu and maintains regular ties with Italian leftist and anarchist activists, yet even with such connections he remains subject to the same grinding waits as others.

The precariousness of paperwork, especially for family reunification and residence permits, is indeed a pressing issue. "It's not just paperwork — it's about building a future," Tarek emphasised. The uncertainty, he pointed out, is not only frustrating but profoundly disorienting. Here Khosravi's point is again apt: prolonged waiting robs migrants of time and makes it difficult to project themselves forward into a stable future (Khosravi 2021, 204). In Torpignattara, young Bangladeshi men often postpone marriage or starting families until they "get papers." Older migrants like Afzal continue to toil in manual jobs well past normal retirement age because, without secure status, they cannot access pensions or dependable support. Everyday life therefore becomes organised around vigilance: people watch for changes in the law, rumours of a new sanatoria, or shifts in permit rules, and try to avoid the small mistakes that could push them back into illegality.

In this sense, waiting is not entirely passive. Migrants strategize within it. Some obtain false-but-plausible work contracts, paying an employer under the table to sign a paper stating they are employed, just to meet permit renewal criteria. Others rotate through short-term jobs or rely on contacts who know how to navigate bureaucratic loopholes. These practices do not

abolish waiting, but they show how people try to maneuver inside a system that is strict on paper yet uneven in practice. Through this drawn-out ordeal, something also begins to shift in migrants' sense of self and justice. What initially appears as an unfortunate price for a better life abroad increasingly comes to be understood as a patterned unfairness. Years of work can still leave one bureaucratic decision away from destitution. Friends are deported, injured, or pushed back into illegality despite doing everything “properly.” It is here that legal liminality begins, for some, to generate not only exhaustion but a more critical understanding of how the system is structured against them.

2.3 Internal Hierarchies: Brokerage, Class, and Exploitation

Andalib (pseudonym), a Bangladeshi man in his thirties who represented what many in “Banglatown” would call the upper class, worked for a private immigration brokerage firm run by Bangladeshis that “assisted” their compatriots in migrating or obtaining legal status. In an interview in mid-2023, he confided that Italian immigration agencies were anything but transparent or fair. His firm was associated with one of the most prominent community associations. Andalib himself had come to Italy on a tourist visa and overstayed, but, coming from an affluent family background, he had been able to invest time and money in learning Italian soon after his arrival. By virtue of speaking fluent Italian, he managed to secure a work permit fairly quickly. Having some class privilege also allowed him easy access to the “upper class” of “Banglatown” and landed him this brokerage job. A man in his mid-30s, Andalib, seemed to be satisfied with his salary as we discussed his job. From his insider perspective, he joked that during the *decreto flussi* season (the periodic intake of work visas via quotas), “we need a dedicated person just to calculate all the money,” a nod to the off-the-books fees that candidates pay, both those still in Bangladesh and those already in Italy seeking inclusion or conversion, and sometimes also fees or kickbacks from employers. Andalib's account shows how informal brokers step in to mediate a convoluted process at a steep price; many Bangladeshi migrants feel they have little choice but to rely on intermediaries, whether immigration lawyers, *patronato* office clerks¹², or Bangladeshi

¹² *Patronato* (plural *patronati*): a Ministry-recognized, publicly funded assistance office that helps workers, pensioners, and migrants with social-security and immigration procedures. Services are typically free or low cost. Distinct from *CAF* tax-assistance centers.

“agents” like Andalib, to navigate the paperwork. This reliance breeds exploitation (brokers can charge exorbitant sums for assistance) and underscores migrants’ powerlessness in the official system. Tuckett (2018) documents how Italy’s migration regime is deeply transactional: migrants without social capital or fluent Italian must depend on private facilitators operating in the grey spaces between legality and illegality. The outcome is a bureaucracy that, rather than providing clarity or integration, keeps migrants in a protracted state of dependency and insecurity.

The brokers are usually embedded in the diaspora network – sometimes, former migrants who have turned to profiting off new arrivals. This creates a morally complex scenario where today’s exploiters were yesterday’s exploited. Within the community, there is ambivalence about these figures. Some leaders condemn them for “swindling” naïve youth with false promises. Others justify their role by pointing to the Italian state’s failure to provide legal pathways – arguing that without brokers, many aspiring migrants would never make it to Europe at all. Regardless, the outcome for the migrant is often heavy indebtedness (frequently €12–15,000 paid for the journey and “job placement”) and a sense of betrayal when the promised work or residence permit fails to materialize. Carrying large debts to family or loan sharks back home, these migrants are under immense pressure to earn quickly. That pressure, in turn, forces them to accept any working conditions. As Farhad, the restaurant owner, put it, “They come spending about €15,000 through the brokers... They have a huge loan on their shoulders. Then they need to at least eat and pay rent... All these elements make them work at whatever exploitative rate they get.” In this way, the structural violence of the migration regime (the debt, the lack of documents) feeds directly into labour exploitation on the ground.

Popular discourse often imagines immigrant “communities” as internally cohesive and uniformly supportive. In reality, the Bangladeshi community in Torpignattara is, as one Italian activist observed, “united, but also divided.” Shared ethnicity and religion do provide a basis for solidarity – newcomers frequently receive help finding housing or jobs through co-ethnic networks – but stark hierarchies of class and legal status shape social relations among Bangladeshis themselves. Not everyone experiences migration equally: some early arrivals have managed to navigate the system and establish themselves as business owners, community leaders, or legal residents, while others remain undocumented workers trapped in exploitative conditions. Over time, an informal stratification emerges. At the top are the more “settled” Bangladeshis – those who have secured *permessi di soggiorno* or even Italian

citizenship, who may own a small grocery, a phone call centre, or a restaurant, or who serve as brokers and middlemen in migration and business deals. These individuals often leverage their legal status and local know-how to act as patrons or power-brokers for newer migrants. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the recent arrivals and the persistently undocumented – the men (and some women) toiling in restaurant kitchens, market stalls, cleaning crews, and food delivery, usually working off the books (*al nero*) either for other Bangladeshis or for Italian employers. In between are various intermediaries: bilingual “fixers” who volunteer at advocacy groups, translators, labour brokers, and cultural mediators – themselves Bangladeshis with slightly better standing (perhaps a work permit or long-term residence). This layered social structure means that compatriots can be both a source of crucial support and, paradoxically, a source of oppression for the newly arrived.

Giuseppe, a long-time Italian resident of Torpignattara who works alongside many Bangladeshis in a large restaurant near Rome’s tourist centre, describes a stratified field rather than a unified “community.” In his account, a small set of well-connected intermediaries – employers, sub-landlords, association brokers – sit at the top of a patron–client pyramid, controlling access to shifts, beds, and help with paperwork. Recent arrivals and others in precarious jobs or without stable status depend on these gatekeepers. In that context, silence within the community is less about presenting a united front to Italians and more about managing risk internally: people worry that criticizing “insiders” to outsiders could be traced back to them, with consequences such as lost work hours, eviction from a shared room, withdrawal of help on documents, or exclusion from key WhatsApp networks. Even those fluent in Italian often self-censor, because the social distance to local Bangladeshi patrons is great and the power gap inside the diaspora is felt through everyday sanctions. What can look like “insularity” is therefore a defensive posture shaped by brokerage, class dependency, and legal precarity. Language barriers matter, Giuseppe notes, but the stronger constraint is the fear of being identified and punished within a tightly interconnected hierarchy.

The patron–client dynamic within the diaspora often manifests in labour relations. Many small businesses in Rome’s informal economy prefer to hire co-ethnics – ostensibly because “they understand the language and culture,” but also because co-ethnic bosses can demand longer hours and lower pay than would be acceptable to most Italian workers. Bangladeshi shop owners and restaurateurs in Torpignattara commonly employ other Bangladeshis, frequently those who are most vulnerable (paperless and in need of any income). This has

given rise to what community members critically refer to as “internal exploitation.” In an interview, Bacchu described the problem bluntly: “They [the Bangladeshi business owners] make them work 12 hours, even 14 hours sometimes, and pay 15 to 20 euros a day. This is so unfair... Sometimes they don’t pay them for months. And when the worker protests, the owner makes a false allegation against him – says he stole money from the cash register or something. This happened many times. The owner, being more powerful – he’s settled, he knows people in the right places – will threaten to call the police on the undocumented worker.” This testimony sheds light on an unsettling reality: some Bangladeshi migrants exploit the desperation of their compatriots “even more than the Italians do,” as Carlo – the Italian activist introduced earlier – observed. “Their enemy is not only the Italian capitalist, but also the Bangladeshi capitalist – and even their own Bangladeshi government,” Carlo noted. His statement underscores an important point: class exploitation can cut across ethnic lines, and migrant workers often face dual oppression – on one hand by the host society’s employers and institutions, and on the other by members of their own community who have acquired a degree of power. This reality complicates any romantic notion of a unified immigrant struggle. As Mezzadra (2018, 4) reminds us, the working class (or in this case, the migrant “community”) is never monolithic: axes of difference like class and legal status produce complex forms of subjection and agency that must be acknowledged. In Torpignattara, any nascent collective politics among Bangladeshis must grapple with these internal power asymmetries even as the community as a whole faces external marginalization.

Several ethnographic cases illustrate how these internal hierarchies operate. Mohsin’s (the young man from the beginning of this chapter) predicament working in a Bangladeshi-run restaurant for a pittance exemplified this dynamic. His employer – also Bangladeshi – was in a sense both Mohsin’s lifeline (providing shelter and a job) and his exploiter. When Mohsin finally demanded proper payment and help with regularizing his status, the owner grew hostile. Mohsin eventually quit in frustration and disappeared from that network; presumably in search of a more tolerable arrangement elsewhere. Another friend of Mohsin’s, whom I met at the same demonstration, recounted how he paid a Bangla-speaking intermediary €200 to arrange a construction job, only to find the job lasted mere weeks and came with no contract. When he asked for a refund of the “fee,” the intermediary laughed and threatened to report him to immigration authorities for working without papers. Stories like these circulate widely among Bangladeshis, creating an atmosphere of cynicism and caution. New migrants

learn quickly that not all countrymen can be trusted unconditionally – especially when money and documents are involved.

Language barriers exacerbate these dependencies. Many newer migrants speak little Italian, which forces them to rely on co-ethnic go-betweens to navigate anything from hospital visits to permit renewals. This linguistic precarity reinforces reliance on intermediaries, who are often other Bangladeshis acting as brokers, translators, or “helpers” in exchange for fees (Tuckett 2018, 127). The very people who can bridge the language gap may also be those who profit from others’ ignorance.

Internal class stratification also affects how the diaspora organises socially and politically. Those with legal status and businesses often occupy leadership positions in community associations and act as liaisons with Italian institutions. Meanwhile, undocumented workers feel they have little voice and must defer to their “seniors.” This can lead to a degree of paternalism within the community, where leaders speak on behalf of others but may downplay issues that would challenge their own interests (such as labour exploitation in co-ethnic businesses). Bacchu’s organisation, Dhumcatu, has at times tried to mediate labour disputes between Bangladeshi workers and Bangladeshi bosses. Bacchu describes their approach as akin to a *shalish* – the traditional village mediation council in Bangladesh. “If we know both parties, we try to bring them together and settle it by talking,” he says, rather than involving Italian legal authorities. This approach can resolve individual cases quietly, but it also reflects a reluctance to engage with the formal justice system. As Bacchu explains with a rural proverb, going to the Italian police or courts is often seen as futile or even dangerous for migrants: “If you file a case for the theft of a chicken, there’s no surety you’ll get back the chicken. But to run the case you will have to sell your cow – that is for sure.” In other words, the legal route is prohibitively costly and yields uncertain results; worse, involving the authorities could expose an undocumented worker to immigration enforcement. Hence, the community tends to handle matters internally, which can limit accountability for exploitative employers.

Nonetheless, one might argue that the ultimate ‘culprit’ behind this vicious cycle of exploitation is the state’s denial of legal status. “The guilty party is the state. Neither the owner nor the worker is ultimately to blame. If the state would provide documents so he can claim his rights, then the owners wouldn’t be able to exploit them,” Bacchu contends. By keeping workers undocumented, the state creates a pool of labour that can be easily abused

with impunity. Indeed, business owners – Italian and Bangladeshi alike – know that an undocumented worker cannot safely complain to a labour inspector or the police about abuses. Thus, precarious legality is a structural condition that underpins migrant exploitation. This perspective is now commonly voiced in community meetings and migrant forums in Rome: regularization (granting legal residency to undocumented people) is seen as the single most important step to improving migrants' lives and curbing exploitation. It is telling that a slogan like "*Documenti per tutti*" ("Documents for everyone") has gained such currency – it directly links the fight against labour exploitation to the fight for legal status.

These internal social dynamics have, in some cases, led to frictions and reckonings within the diaspora. Accusations of corruption and self-interest have been leveled against certain community leaders, indicating that their authority is contested. For instance, Bacchu – a founder of Dhumcatu and a prominent (if controversial) figure in Rome's Bangladeshi networks – was himself arrested in April 2024 on kidnapping and extortion charges. Such controversies highlight that the Bangladeshi community is not monolithic; there are power struggles and divergent interests at play.

Crucially, these internal challenges contribute to an environment where ordinary Bangladeshi migrants may begin to question not only the inequities of Italian society but also the inequalities within their own ranks. This critical awareness can become a seed of politicization: workers realizing that their plight is part of a broader system of injustice – one that encompasses both capitalist exploitation and state negligence. As Maurizio (pseudonym), an Italian activist in the Torpignattara solidarity network, put it: "We support the Bangladeshi workers. And we tell them: your boss may be Bangladeshi, but he's part of the same system that exploits you. We are in this struggle together as workers."

In another interview, Stefano Galiani, a senior leader of Rifondazione Comunista (which maintains a party office in Torpignattara that functions as a social centre for the community), also acknowledged the internal class exploitation. He noted that many Bangladeshis in Italy form a kind of "transnational middle class." In his view, "They own businesses, manage properties, send money home, and in some cases employ others under conditions of low pay and long hours." He added, "The financial remittances and entrepreneurial success stories that circulate within and outside the community, while often celebrated, can also conceal patterns of labour exploitation and class stratification." Stefano recalled a fatal incident in Piazza Vittorio a few years ago, where a fire in an overcrowded flat led to the death of a

mother and her child. The apartment, Stefano later discovered, housed 25 people in unsafe conditions. What struck him most was that the landlord was not Italian, but a Bangladeshi migrant. “There you have a master,” he says, “who is not your ally.” This “chain of exploitation,” as he calls it, reveals a layered structure in which migrants – especially those with legal status, capital, or early-arrival advantages – can occupy positions of authority and control over others with fewer protections. These hierarchies, he emphasises, are often naturalized or hidden under the discourse of “community,” but in practice they can be quite severe. “It doesn’t matter if both are from Bangladesh,” Stefano says. “There are those who exploit and those who just arrived.” Such statements resonate with migrants who have directly suffered exploitation; they help frame personal grievances in terms of collective struggle and class politics.

In summary, life within the Bangladeshi diaspora of Torpignattara is characterized by both communal solidarity and stark internal stratification. The conditions of legal limbo and economic precarity create opportunities for intra-communal exploitation, straining the notion of a harmonious “immigrant community.” These very conditions also lay the groundwork for a shared understanding among migrant workers that their vulnerability is systemic. The triggers of politicization here include the lived experience of workplace abuse and the dawning realization (often articulated by community activists) that the solution lies in securing rights and documents for all. Before long, this understanding sets the stage for alliances beyond the community – as Bangladeshi migrants begin to connect with broader social movements and Italian activists who share a vision of justice for migrants. The next phase in their transformation into political subjects involves precisely these encounters with allies and the translation of private hardships into public, collective action.

2.4 Islam in the Grey Zone: Visibility and Suspicion

Among the different lines along which Bangladeshi migrants are sorted and problematised in Italy – race, class, language and legal status – their identification as Muslims carries a particular weight. In Bangladesh, Islam is woven into majority public life, whereas in Rome their religion is often treated as foreign and politically sensitive. As outlined in Chapter 1, Italian Islam occupies what legal scholars describe as a regulatory grey zone: most associations that function in practice as mosques are registered as private cultural

organisations, and attempts to stabilise their position through a national agreement have repeatedly stalled. The result is a field in which Islamic spaces are publicly visible yet do not benefit from the full set of rights normally attached to recognised denominations and remain mediated through fragmented, locally rooted interlocutors (Alicino 2023, 249–51; Naso 2021, 35–47).

In Torpignattara, the prayer rooms that Bangladeshis frequent reflect this ambiguity. They are not officially registered as places of worship, but operate under the label of “Islamic cultural centres,” offering Qur’an lessons, language classes and space for the five daily prayers and Friday jumu‘ah. At the same time, these venues function as practical refuges and resources for recent arrivals. Many newcomers arrive without close kin, in unstable work, indebted to intermediaries and uncertain about their documents. Mosques and Islamic centres provide a regular place to go, a familiar language environment and routines that give structure to days otherwise dominated by irregular shifts and waiting. People exchange advice about the immigration office, share information about wages and hours, or pool small amounts of money for emergencies. As vulnerability deepens, the refuge role becomes more visible: men in crowded shared rooms use the mosque to sit and talk after work; those on night shifts anchor their sleep and meals around prayer times; during Ramadan, shared iftar meals reduce costs and provide company. Corte’s research also confirms that these mosques function as modest welfare infrastructures, collecting funds to assist families who lack money even for basic groceries (Corte 2022, 128). Rajib, a restaurant worker who regularly attended one of the community mosques, told me that committee members sometimes helped regular attendees mediate with landlords or translate legal documents.

In this setting, defence of religious space becomes one of the first arenas in which many Bangladeshis move from private grievance to public stance. Religious identification here does not translate into a ready-made political theology, but into a sensitivity to moments when routine practices are rendered suspect or precarious. Marx’s early remark, read through Mezzadra, captures the movement that can follow: where suffering is real, religion may carry a protest that needs to be translated into “earthly” arrangements, the “criticism of heaven” becomes the “criticism of earth,” not to strip away consolation but to make room for a liveable practice (Marx 1844, cited in Mezzadra 2018, 22).



Figure 9: A scene in front of the entrance of a community mosque. Photo by Punny Kabir, 18/10/2024.

When a prayer room is sealed, or its activities are restricted, what is usually lived as quiet piety can turn into a more explicit claim for recognition and respect. Corte's analysis of mosques and prayer halls in Torpignattara underlines this point, showing how Islamic institutions in the neighbourhood encounter institutional resistance that reflects broader policies aimed at containing the visibility of Bangladeshi migrants in public space (Corte 2022, 126–29). Interlocutors described how even people who do not see themselves as political activists have joined demonstrations or signed petitions when Islamic spaces were at stake. One such recent example was when Masjide Ummah, a mosque run by the Bangladeshi migrant association Dhuumcatu, was shut down by the authorities in May 2022.

Politics around religious sentiment is undoubtedly influential among Bangladeshi Muslim migrants in Rome, yet reactions to religious disputes are far from uniform. While many interpreted the closure of Masjide Ummah as a clear sign of Islamophobia and state hostility, others within the community framed the event differently. A founding member of another mosque committee – one of the oldest Bangladeshi community mosques in the city – contrasted his own experience with that of Dhuumcatu: “Our mosque has never been shut down. If this were Islamophobia, why wouldn’t they shut down all the mosques?” he

challenged. He added, “There’s a competition going on. Some influential people get together, form a group, and open a new mosque to assert their dominance.” In his view, some mosques operate carefully within legal requirements, while others “cut corners and then politicize the issue and blame the state” when sanctions follow. From his perspective, the issue was not uniform repression of Islam, but rather Dhuumcatu’s attempt to transform a regulatory dispute into a political narrative. By contrast, Dhuumcatu activist Subarna suggests that authorities intentionally “pick one” mosque as an example to “send a message to all.”

Some leaders attempt to “soften” the public image of Muslim spaces by emphasising their educational or cultural missions. Others quietly urge their members not to attract attention – “better to be discreet,” as the owner of an *alimentari* shop near Dhuumcatu’s old office told me, “than to give the authorities a reason to interfere.” Still others choose to confront the issue publicly, asserting the right to religious expression as part of broader claims to inclusion and dignity. These differing views highlight a heterogeneous field of power around Islamic spaces and intense internal competition among mosque committees and community figures.

Yet these religious spaces are not outside power. They depend on committees, donors and preachers who decide how they run and who often speak on behalf of congregants. Not the Imams but the committees usually manage finances, programming and appointments (Corte 2022, 127), and influence is closely tied to financial contribution and social capital. They are run by a community-pays model: leaders coordinate logistics and budgeting; congregants contribute “according to ability” through routine offerings and targeted appeals (Russo 2017, 155; Corte 2022, 127–28). Those who donate large sums towards rent or refurbishment often gain disproportionate authority in decision-making. Donations from figures involved in morally ambiguous practices, such as brokerage or exploitative employment, can be converted into moral capital when those donors are seen funding religious projects.

Transparency of funds is yet another issue. Committees collect donations from worshippers, yet not all operate with clarity regarding how much is raised or how funds are spent. Opening or taking charge of a mosque can thus become a way to consolidate authority and build followings that extend beyond strictly religious concerns.

Rules, fundraising and the distribution of resources generate obligations at the same time as they provide access to services and support. Worshippers weigh the benefit of access against the risk of depending on leaders who may also control introductions to employers, sub-landlords or municipal offices. The committee members, who can also be political actors, can

mobilise the mosque-goers before or after prayers for some agendas that are pressing for their own political careers. In all of these cases, leaders may channel the needs and visibility of vulnerable migrants toward their own organisational projects: attendance at prayers or events can be turned into supporter lists, photographs or slogans; charity distributions can build a following; religious talks can frame problems and solutions in ways that align with particular platforms. Some participants experience this as helpful representation; others describe pressure to conform or to back initiatives they did not choose. People respond with selective participation – attending one venue for prayer and another for practical advice, accepting assistance without endorsing a political message, or stepping back when they feel their presence is being instrumentalised. The point is not that religious refuge is inherently good or bad, but that exclusion, isolation, exploitation and financial instability make such spaces attractive, and that the same features that make them refuges also make them valuable tools for actors with distinct agendas.

Everyday judgements about the proliferation of mosques add another angle. A Bangladeshi restaurant worker I spoke to, employed near one of the oldest neighbourhood mosques, expressed frustration at the number of prayer spaces: “Why do we need eight or nine mosques in this little neighbourhood? I would prefer one big mosque where on Friday I could greet all the people in one place and have a constructive community discussion after. But one does not go to a certain mosque because one of the founding members is from a certain political background, or a broker who exploited someone he knows,” he said. His words underscore how mosque affiliation can be shaped as much by social and political divisions as by religious devotion. Anthropologist John Bowen notes that the French state sought to establish a recognised Muslim representative body through which it could handle practical matters such as places of worship, religious burials, and the broader public regulation of Islam. Yet this effort sat uneasily with the diversity and discord of Muslim organisations in France (Bowen 2007, 48–49). The case in Torpignattara echoes this tension: rather than facing a single “Muslim community,” authorities encounter a constellation of local associations and mosques with different practices, leadership structures and degrees of regulatory compliance. Pluralism here reflects internal diversity but also makes institutional dialogue more difficult and can encourage a bureaucratic preference for silence or erasure over accommodation.

Italian institutional expectations intersect uneasily with this landscape. Officials periodically call for better “integration” of imams and for sermons that include Italian alongside Arabic

and Bangla. Yet, as one imam in Rome admitted, he found learning Italian “too hard” despite repeated attempts. When I visited his mosque with a group of Italian students on a study trip, he struggled to explain his role and the functions of the space in broken English. Many preachers lack the proficiency needed to communicate with public institutions or even with younger Bangladeshis who are more fluent in Italian than in Bangla or Arabic.

Taken together, the legal ambiguity of prayer rooms, the fragmented landscape of mosque leadership, and the refuge role of Islamic spaces do not produce a single, coherent “Islamic politics” in Torpignattara. Instead, they generate a field marked by internal fault lines, in which different leaders, networks, and doctrinal orientations compete to define what counts as proper religious conduct, legitimate authority, and acceptable forms of engagement with Italian institutions. These dynamics can push some Bangladeshis away from certain religious networks, draw others more deeply into particular circles, and leave many oscillating between gratitude for support and suspicion of being instrumentalised. In this sense, Islam is not simply a shared identity but a contested terrain that triggers different trajectories of withdrawal, accommodation or assertiveness. This combination shapes Bangladeshi Muslim political subjectivities in Torpignattara as at once cautious, morally invested in community respectability and sensitive to threats against their religious spaces. It is a configuration that will matter later when alliances with Italian leftists crystallise around the defence of mosques and the visibility of Islam.

2.5 Navigating Everyday Racism

Torpignattara has long absorbed newcomers, from rural Italians a century ago to international migrants in recent decades, but the speed and scale of the recent Bangladeshi influx is unprecedented and has turned the neighbourhood into a loaded symbol in national conversations on immigration, celebrated as “Rome’s Little Bangladesh” in some accounts and condemned as a “ghetto” in others. This external gaze compounds the pressures of everyday life. On the surface, there is a dense, practical cohabitation: Bangladeshis and Italians use the same supermarkets and buses, their children attend the same schools, they pass each other on stairwells and in courtyards. Yet these shared spaces are also where everyday racism is most keenly felt, as ordinary interactions slide into suspicion, complaints about “too many foreigners,” or conflicts over noise, smells, queues, and the “proper” use of

streets and parks. Xenophobia appears not only in spectacular incidents of verbal or physical attack but also in minor refusals of service, comments about skin colour or clothing, or neighbours silently tolerating Italians' small infractions while calling the police on migrants for the same behaviour. For many Bangladeshi residents, it is precisely through these repeated, low-level frictions, being watched, questioned, or treated as out of place in their own neighbourhood, that a diffuse sense of injustice forms, which some later carry into more explicit forms of complaint, self-defence, or alignment with anti-racist and leftist actors.

Returning to Farhad, whom I introduced earlier, his experience also shows how everyday racism entered business life in more mundane ways. In the early years, complaints from Italian neighbours about the smell of South Asian spices forced him to relocate his restaurant three times. He described how, in his first location, neighbours would demonstratively pinch their noses while walking past his door – and make sure he saw them doing it. “They would wait until our eyes met, you know!” he recounted with a laugh that barely masked his lingering melancholy. He finally managed to establish his restaurant as a popular spot even for Italians, but the journey was not easy.

The politics of visibility in this working-class enclave are constantly negotiated: Who has the right to occupy certain streets or parks? Whose businesses are seen as an asset versus an encroachment? Who is considered part of the community, and who is viewed as a guest or intruder? By encountering these questions in everyday life, an average migrant can gradually reevaluate their sense of justice, become vocal, and seek alliance.

Besides a sense of cohabitation, everyday encounters also include incidents of verbal abuse or discrimination that punctuate the lives of the migrant residents. My regular Bangladeshi grocer told me of customers (or sometimes random passersby) accusing them of “taking over our shops.” This rhetoric of “taking over” interestingly mirrors a joking claim I once heard from a Bangladeshi shopkeeper at Rome’s Termini station (“We will take over Italy”) – except that when hurled by an Italian resident, it is no joke but an expression of anxiety and resentment. It reflects a fear of economic displacement: the idea that immigrant entrepreneurs are driving out Italian businesses. It aligns with Montanari’s observation: “Many people in Rome wonder how Bangladeshi citizens have managed to buy so many local stores,” as they frequently outcompete Italian shopkeepers (Montanari 2018, 7). This process is driven by a system where workers eventually save enough to open their own businesses, perpetuating the cycle of migration and economic exploitation (Montanari 2018, 8).

Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara sometimes experience the local park or piazza as unwelcoming, reporting feelings of being watched or treated with suspicion, especially when groups of young Bangladeshi men gather. An innocuous cricket match among Bangladeshi youth, for instance, can attract irritated stares or remarks from some Italian park users who describe them as “too loud” or simply “too many,” as several frequent park-goers mentioned in casual conversation. This dynamic reflects what Maurizio Ambrosini describes as the tension between political alarm and practical tolerance: while migrants are structurally incorporated into everyday urban life and relied upon in multiple domains, their visible presence in public space continues to trigger anxieties and perceptions of disorder (Ambrosini 2013, 2–3). In this sense, the discomfort expressed in the park is not about the specific activity itself, but about the moment when migrants shift from being individually accommodated figures to collectively visible actors in shared urban space.

I spent a day with the entire team of the Rome Bangla Cricket Academy – the name makes clear who they are. They kindly took me from Torpignattara to the opposite end of Rome where a large horse racing ground is occasionally rented out for practice matches. There were cricket teams from the Afghan, Pakistani, Indian, and Sri Lankan diasporas, with very few Italian players – perhaps 10% of all participants that day. The Bangladeshi club had no Italians, though one Bangladeshi player does play on the national Italian cricket team. While people like him seem well integrated and content with their lives, there is another side. One of the players, Romel (pseudonym) – in his mid-30s, who migrated 10 years ago and is married to an Italian woman – said they used to get bullied when practicing in parks in Torpignattara. “Now we have a formal academy fund, so we can occasionally pay to hire this ground or other places. But it was not easy in the beginning,” he lamented. When I asked if language was the biggest obstacle between Bangladeshis and Italians, he was skeptical – many Bangladeshis speak fluent Italian, and still they don’t have Italian friends or associations. He thinks this may change for the second or third generation. Junayed added that he loves Italy’s sunny, warm weather, the landscape, and the food – but still, for economic security and less discriminatory working conditions, he does not recommend that hopeful migrants in Bangladesh come to Italy.

One particularly stark incident was a racist attack in the neighbourhood park called Parco Sangalli in the summer of 2024. According to *La Repubblica* (2024), what began as a simple dispute over a ball between two groups of teenagers escalated into a violent assault. A group of Italian teens started hurling racial insults about the skin color of some Bangladeshi boys,

provoking an argument. When the children's parents arrived to intervene, the situation worsened. About 15 local Italians joined in, intensifying the insults and physical hostility.

The confrontation quickly turned brutal. A beer bottle was thrown, followed by punches and kicks. In the chaos, a 44-year-old Indian man was slashed in the throat with a broken bottle, while two others – a middle-aged Indian and a 74-year-old Bangladeshi man – were also injured. The attackers fled before the Carabinieri (military police) arrived, leaving the severely injured man hospitalized in critical condition. Security camera footage from a nearby bar helped launch an investigation, but what stood out most was the boldness of the perpetrators – one teenager was overheard boasting, “*Tornate a casa vostra, siamo razzisti*” (Go back to your home, we are racists). The incident sent shock and anger through the community.

In the aftermath of the Parco Sangalli attack, however, something heartening for the affected community happened: on 2 July 2024, a large anti-racist gathering returned to the same park to condemn the violence and to signal public solidarity with the injured people and the targeted communities (ANPI Provinciale di Roma 2024; Portelli 2024). Reporting describes a turnout in the hundreds in some accounts and in the thousands in others, and emphasises that the mobilisation took the form of two adjacent but distinct sit-ins (Frignani 2024; Zanella 2024). The crowd brought together neighbourhood school and parent networks, anti-racist civic groups, anarchist militants, party and union contingents, and migrant residents, and the speeches included a Palestinian youth voice that explicitly challenged mainstream political actors for their role in fueling racist climates (Portelli 2024). Banners condensed the message into slogans such as “Against the everyday war on immigrant people,” while the official call framed the aim as reclaiming streets and public space from violence and fear (ANPI Provinciale di Roma 2024; Zanella 2024).

The park incident underscored that everyday encounters with racism can become catalysts for political community. Bangladeshi migrants, through such experiences, learn to see themselves as political subjects with a stake in broader fights against intolerance. Their struggle for respect and space in the neighbourhood links up with Italian-led struggles against fascism and racism. In fact, a similar racist attack on the Bangladeshi community in the past did spark the beginning of a ‘formal’ alliance between Dhuumcatu and several leftist and anarchist groups, which you will read in detail in the next chapter.

2.6 Conclusion: From Settlement Pressures to Uneven Pathways into Political Action

The anti-racist mobilisation discussed above might suggest a relatively direct movement from experiencing injustice to acting against it. My fieldwork, however, points to a much less linear process. The pressures traced throughout this chapter, including legal uncertainty, exploitative work, minority status, religious scrutiny, and everyday racism, do not turn migrants into political actors in any uniform way. They can sharpen a sense of injustice and alter what people believe they should have to tolerate, but recognising a grievance does not automatically lead to public action. The question is therefore not simply whether migrants become politically conscious, but when and under what conditions a grievance becomes something that can be voiced, acted upon, or carried into a collective arena.

Many of the Bangladeshi migrants I got to know in Torpignattara would not describe themselves as activists. Some remain largely “off the radar,” dealing with paperwork, work problems, and other obligations through quiet and private channels. They compare information among friends, seek advice from more experienced compatriots, approach intermediaries, or try to navigate institutions such as the questura without entering public assemblies or demonstrations. Others participate only occasionally, when a particular problem becomes immediate enough to demand a response. A racist assault, an unresolved residence permit, unpaid wages, or a threat to a familiar community space may bring someone into a demonstration who is otherwise absent from organised political life. Shahidul, whose story opened this chapter, illustrates this more episodic form of engagement. After years of precarious work and waiting for his residence permit, he left his roadside stall for a few hours to attend a demonstration demanding documents and regularisation, then returned to work. His brief presence in the piazza mattered politically, but it did not turn him into a full-time activist. A smaller group, by contrast, becomes more consistently visible in collective life, taking on roles that involve speaking publicly, negotiating with officials, translating between actors, circulating information, or helping to organise events and mobilisations.

These differences cannot be understood simply as differences in political interest or willingness. Public participation carries practical and sometimes serious costs. Long and irregular working hours can make attending a weekday protest difficult. An undocumented worker or someone dependent on an employer for a contract may have more to lose from public visibility than a person with secure legal status and employment. Limited Italian can

make speaking to officials or addressing a mixed crowd intimidating, while linguistic competence can enable others to become translators or intermediaries. Family responsibilities, gendered expectations, debt, reputational concerns, and religious commitments further shape which spaces feel accessible and which forms of public action appear appropriate. Some migrants manage to attend demonstrations by leaving work early or using a day off, while others cannot risk losing wages, attracting an employer's displeasure, or entering situations in which they are uncertain about police scrutiny. Scepticism also matters. For someone who has waited years for documents or repeatedly encountered institutions that appear unresponsive, staying away from a demonstration may reflect not political indifference but a practical judgement that the likely outcome does not justify the cost.

This is why the boundary between participation and non-participation is unstable. Remaining outside organised activism does not necessarily mean remaining outside politics. A person who avoids demonstrations may still exchange information about documents, challenge an employer, seek collective help after an injustice, or recognise a community spokesperson as someone able to make claims on their behalf. Conversely, appearing at a protest does not necessarily indicate a durable activist commitment. Participation may intensify around a particular grievance and recede once the immediate issue passes. The same person can therefore move between quiet navigation, episodic public action, and more sustained involvement as legal status, work, family obligations, or the perceived urgency of a problem changes. Political subjectivity in this setting is better understood as a shifting capacity to judge when speaking, appearing, withdrawing, or seeking collective support becomes necessary or possible.

Nor do these pathways map neatly onto class or legal status. Material security clearly matters, but it does not mechanically predict political engagement. Greater stability may provide the time, language skills, and institutional confidence needed for sustained public participation, yet it may also reduce the urgency of particular struggles. Conversely, legal and economic precarity can generate acute grievances while simultaneously making public action more costly. Religious commitment may draw someone into mobilisation around a mosque or an international Muslim cause while leaving them detached from labour or anti-racist campaigns. Experiences of racism may produce anger and public assertion in one situation but caution and withdrawal in another. What emerges is therefore not a ladder leading from

political passivity to activism, but a field of uneven political dispositions in which the willingness and capacity to act are continually recalibrated.

Seen in this way, becoming a political actor does not require becoming an activist in the conventional sense. It involves a more gradual reworking of how migrants interpret their circumstances, what they consider legitimate or unjust, what they believe can be demanded, and what risks they are prepared to take in making those demands visible. For some, this remains largely within private or interpersonal forms of navigation. For others, particular experiences push grievances into public view. For a smaller number, repeated involvement develops into sustained organisational and representative roles. These differences are important because collective politics in Torpignattara does not emerge from a uniformly mobilised migrant community. It depends on the points at which unevenly positioned people become willing and able to externalise particular grievances, and on the actors and infrastructures capable of carrying those grievances into a wider political arena. The next chapter turns to those infrastructures and to the alliances through which dispersed experiences of injustice are articulated as collective claims.

Chapter 3

Forging Political Solidarity in Torpignattara

Having traced in the previous chapter how political subjectivities take shape under the pressures of settlement, I now turn to how these dispositions enter collective action. In this chapter, I ask: How do Bangladeshi migrants build and sustain alliances with the local extra-parliamentary left across differences? I examine how Bangladeshi and Italian actors come to act together in concrete struggles, how their cooperation is organised in practice, and where tensions emerge. The focus is not on migrants' integration into a pre-existing political field, but on the making of political relationships across unequal positions and different political and social commitments. In this setting, being addressed as *compagni*, or “comrades,” is not an automatic or universal designation, but a situated political relation that is unevenly granted, strategically invoked, and sometimes qualified or withheld.

On the Bangladeshi side, the central organisational interlocutor is Dhumcatu, the migrant association that mobilises around regularisation, documents, workplace grievances, and broader anti-racist demands. On the Italian side, the main actors belong to the extra-parliamentary left active in and around Torpignattara: radical-left parties, self-managed social centres, neighbourhood platforms, and anarchist or libertarian networks. Traditional labour unions, with their orientation toward large workplaces and formalised labour struggles, are largely absent from this fragment of the city. Instead, political life is organised through smaller and more flexible formations that link housing, bureaucracy, anti-racism, urban conflict, and everyday mutual support.

Following Sally Scholz, I approach political solidarity not as diffuse sympathy but as a demanding relation formed in response to injustice. As she argues, solidarity is “an admirably complex moral relation” and “a unity of individuals each responding to a particular situation of injustice” (Scholz 2008, 51). Rather than resting on shared identity, it binds differently positioned actors through a joint commitment to confront injustice and to support one another's efforts to remedy it (Scholz 2008, 16, 52, 186–87). This is useful for Torpignattara because it keeps the analysis focused on what people do together rather than presuming a ready-made migrant-left community. It also foregrounds the asymmetries that structure these alliances. Italian activists generally move with the security of citizenship and greater institutional literacy, while Bangladeshi migrants bear the immediate risks of document

precarity, police control, exploitative work, and racialised exposure. As Teresa Cappiali notes for Italy more broadly, “vulnerable immigrants and racialized groups mobilize for their rights at a historical conjuncture particularly hostile to their claims” (Cappiali 2022, 2). Political solidarity, in Scholz’s sense, therefore, helps illuminate how unequal positions are negotiated, sometimes challenged, and sometimes reproduced in practice.

Alongside this, I use Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen’s concept of transversal solidarity to name the specific pattern of alliance that emerges in Torpignattara. They define it as solidarity “produced through alternative and inclusive social and spatial practices” that generate new bonds and widen participation (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 859). Forged in contestation and directed against exclusion, it links actors who do not dissolve their differences into sameness, but maintain distinct positions while forging common ground (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 859–61). This concept captures the alliances I observed between Bangladeshi migrants and Italian leftist and anarchist activists: ties grounded not in shared culture, religion, or language, but in converging diagnoses of institutional racism, economic precarity, and urban marginalisation. These alliances are place-based and cumulative. They grow through co-presence, repeated encounters, and recurring mobilisations, even as they remain uneven, selective, and vulnerable to strain.

To answer the chapter’s guiding question, I trace how this alliance becomes intelligible, organised, and durable in practice. I begin by situating it within the neighbourhood’s longer political history, then move to the organisational actors through whom migrant and Italian political worlds become connected. From there, I follow the concrete sites and practices through which solidarity is enacted: demonstrations, neighbourhood campaigns, bureaucratic support, shared infrastructures, and everyday acts of coordination. Taken together, these layers show that the alliance is not a pre-given community of values, but a historically situated and practically assembled relation, built through repeated encounters across difference.

3.1 Torpignattara’s Political Heritage and New Migrant Proletarians

The political landscape of Torpignattara offers a useful lens on Italy’s wider social and political transformations. Over the last century, the neighbourhood has moved from being

widely associated with working-class politics and anti-fascist memory to being known, in Rome, for a large South Asian migrant presence. This shift is not a simple story of replacement. It is a layering of histories in which older narratives of the *Resistenza* are invoked, contested, and reworked in present-day struggles over racism, migration, and belonging.

Torpignattara's role as a site of alliance is rooted in this longer history. As discussed in Chapter 1, the area emerged in the early twentieth century as a borgata on Rome's eastern periphery, shaped by self-built housing, industrial work, and a strong working-class presence (Fioretti 2011, 2; Priori n.d.). Over time, it became part of Rome's "red belt," a term often used for peripheral districts where communist organising and anti-fascist identities were historically strong. In this landscape, the memorial popularly known as *Il Cannone*¹³ condenses local narratives of sacrifice and resistance into a repertoire of commemorations and rituals that still anchor public memory in the area.

The left-wing party organisations that long shaped political life in the neighbourhood also changed. In 1991, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) dissolved. Most of its leadership refounded as the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS), later Democratici di Sinistra (DS), moving toward a social-democratic, centre-left profile, while a substantial minority created the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) to retain communist symbols and traditions (Pero 2007, 25). These organisational shifts did not erase older centre-periphery antagonisms, but they did alter how they were expressed. In the same period, international migration began reshaping peripheral districts like Torpignattara. From the mid-1990s onward, the neighbourhood saw the settlement of a large Bangladeshi community, to the point that it is now "also called the Roman 'Banglatown' precisely because of the conspicuous presence of migrants from Bangladesh" (Corte 2022, 122, 124). Everyday politics in the area increasingly hinge not only on class, but also on legal status, race, and religion.

For long-time PRC organisers, this was less a rupture than a transformation of an existing map of conflict. Cristina, a senior PRC leader and long-standing resident, described the continuity succinctly in an interview: "The borgate areas, known as the 'red belt,' stood against the centre. At that time, these areas held internal migrants from the far south of Italy;

¹³ *Il Cannone* is a small neighbourhood memorial to local soldiers killed in the First World War, inaugurated in 1924, built around a captured Austrian cannon mounted on a base with a commemorative plaque, located along Via Casilina in Tor Pignattara.

now they contain migrants from the global south. The ‘centre’ was fascist before and fascist still. It is bourgeois, white-supremacist, anti-migrant. And we are still fighting against them.” Her words show how anti-fascist imaginaries can be re-articulated to include South Asian migrants as part of a renewed “periphery.” Memory, however, is not enough on its own to produce alliances. In Torpignattara, solidarity between Bangladeshi associations and Italian leftist and anarchist groups has often taken shape around concrete episodes of violence. As Donatella della Porta and Elias Steinhilper put it, “contentious migrant solidarity unfolds in complex arenas,” marked by “shrinking spaces for migrant solidarity” where activists nonetheless “organise solidarity against the odds” (della Porta and Steinhilper 2022, 15).

In conversations with participants in the neighbourhood solidarity network, I learned that an early flashpoint for cross-cultural mobilisation was a racist attack in 2009. During preparations for the Bangla New Year celebration in a nearby park, a group of around fifteen assailants stormed the grounds. A former Dhumcatu member, Anik (pseudonym), recalled: “They came with iron bars and sticks. They attacked the Bangladeshi people who were there and the Dhumcatu volunteers looking after the festival materials. Several people were injured. They also damaged our equipment and a van before running away.”

Anik explained that they quickly understood the political nature of the attack: “It was not a random fight. It was a planned fascist attack on the Bangladeshi community. People were shocked because they attacked us so openly.” He connected the violence to the conduct of the local authorities: “Before the attack, the local authorities had first refused to give us a public space. Then they ignored our requests for security. To us, this showed that they simply did not care. But the violence of the neo-fascists was still a wake-up call.”

The attack prompted an immediate collective response. “That same day, Dhumcatu and other migrant associations joined with Italian leftist and anarchist groups. We held a press conference and organised a protest march starting from the site of the attack,” Anik said.

The demonstration functioned simultaneously as a denunciation and as an assertion of presence, a refusal to be pushed into invisibility. For many Italian anti-fascist groups, the 2009 incident marked a turning point. Fascist violence was no longer just a story handed down from the resistance era or a marginal subculture – it was visibly directed at racialised neighbours with whom they shared streets, buses, and workplaces. Anti-fascism could no longer be imagined without migrants.

Cristina of PRC, based at the social centre Casa del Popolo in Torpignattara, referred to this period as “Banglatour¹⁴,” a term used to describe moments when fascist groups moved through areas with dense Bangladeshi populations, such as Torpignattara and Pigneto, deliberately targeting migrants to instil fear and disrupt daily life. She described it as a time when there had been episodes of racism directed at Bangladeshis, though, in her words, “they have become much less intense in recent times.” She recalled that there had been “a period that was bad” and mentioned incidents where, besides some physical acts of violence, “they went to the shops run by Bangladeshis and took beers without paying.”

As explained by Cristina, in the aftermath of these incidents, leftist collectives with deep roots in Rome’s radical scene began actively reaching out to migrant-led groups like Dhuumcatu. They recognised that any meaningful anti-fascist struggle in today’s Rome must be intersectional and transnational, uniting native and migrant, brown and white, under a shared banner. The 2009 attack thus catalysed a new political awareness. Not all members of the Bangladeshi community were politically mobilised, but the violence helped cultivate a shared sense of vulnerability and the need for alliances. In its wake, Bangladeshi organisers and Italian activists started coordinating more closely, from neighbourhood watch efforts to joint political actions.

These ties were tested again when another serious hate crime¹⁵ against migrants rattled Rome in 2014, in another eastern neighbourhood called Tor Sapienza. The networks that had formed since 2009 sprang into action. Anik recalled how “around 3,000 people came out [to protest]. It was a strong moment – people marched through the neighbourhood saying ‘fascism must

¹⁴ In the early 2010s, Rome saw a wave of racist violence against Bangladeshi migrants that came to be known as the “Banglatour.” An investigative report in *la Repubblica* first exposed how far-right youths linked to Forza Nuova would leave the party office premises “to go do a Bangla,” driving through areas with a strong Bangladeshi presence – including Torpignattara, Casilino and the Prenestino area – and carrying out ritualised beatings of lone workers in the street (Angeli and Scarpa 2013). A subsequent investigation by the Carabinieri ROS, code-named “Banglatour,” reconstructed at least fifty such assaults between late 2012 and late 2013 and in January 2016 led to searches and charges against thirteen neo-fascist militants for racially motivated violence, incitement to racial hatred, weapons offences and other crimes; prosecutors described a small criminal association using racist raids as both “punitive expeditions” and a form of militant indoctrination (*la Repubblica* 2016; Osservatorio Repressione 2016; Cronache di ordinario razzismo 2016). As Leonardo Bianchi notes in his reconstruction for *VICE*, Bangladeshi migrants were targeted precisely because they were seen by the attackers and their lawyer as “docile” and unlikely to retaliate or press charges – the “ideal victims” of a xenophobic street practice that turned entire slices of Rome’s eastern periphery into hunting grounds for “Bangla tours” (Bianchi 2016).

¹⁵ In November 2014, the working-class Roman suburb of Tor Sapienza became a national symbol of anti-immigrant unrest, when groups of residents repeatedly attacked a reception centre for asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors on viale Giorgio Morandi. Over several nights, crowds hurled stones, bottles and firecrackers, set cars and rubbish bins on fire, and shouted threats such as “vi bruciamo vivi” (“we will burn you alive”) at the young African and Bangladeshi residents of the centre (Internazionale 2014; Lunaria 2020, 10).

not pass’. A lot of different kinds of people showed up.” Organisers explicitly framed the shooting as an act of fascist terrorism that the whole community must reject. Davide, a long-standing activist of Torpignattara Solidale (a neighbourhood platform where neighbourhood-based groups like Dhumcatu, anarchist collectives, left-wing groups, and some individual activists coordinate), added to the story: “The slogan *Non passerà* (‘It shall not pass’), echoing the anti-Mussolini resistance, signalled continuity with Italy’s antifascist heritage. By invoking that legacy, Italian organisers created a narrative in which Bangladeshi migrants could see their own plight as part of a broader moral struggle familiar to Italian society. In joining the march, Bangladeshi participants were not only demanding safety for themselves but also inserting their claims into an older, recognisable script of resistance.”

For Italian anarchist activist Maurizio, such moments bring “a clear position against racism into the public eye, demonstrating that locals and migrants will defend each other against extremist violence.” Public solidarity in the streets acted both as a shield against immediate threats and as a performative statement of collective identity: Torpignattara will not be divided by hate. The pragmatic solidarities forged in these conjunctures, often driven by activists within the Bangladeshi community (including members of Dhumcatu), exemplify what Rozakou (2016) terms “socialities of solidarity,” forms of relation that emerge in complex urban settings around shared risk and mutual aid rather than pre-existing sameness.

At the same time, the alliances first forged in response to racist violence did not remain limited to anti-racist defence, but gradually expanded as different and evolving issues shaped the relationship and drew in different forms of participation. As Scholz notes in her discussion of Weber’s account of solidarity work, such trajectories are often marked by changing problem-fields and by the practical labour of learning how to work across difference: participants have to “learn the cultural codes of their fellow solidaristic actors” and, especially for those who are more institutionally protected, to confront how their own social position can both constrain and enable the relationship (Scholz 2008, 263–64). The next subsections, therefore, map the alliance by introducing its key actors and infrastructures, beginning with Dhumcatu and then the extra-parliamentary left and anarchist formations in the neighbourhood, showing how each side frames the relationship and what each considers politically at stake.

3.2 Dhumcatu Between Services, Religion, and Political Brokerage

For many Bangladeshi migrants, initial contact with the solidarity milieu is often pragmatic. One common entry point is Dhumcatu. A newcomer with a query often hears, “Go to Dhumcatu,” from a community member. From there, individuals are sometimes connected to a wider solidarity network that includes Italian leftist and anarchist groups offering language classes, legal advice, and medical assistance. A person who enters such a space seeking help with a residence permit or medical insurance may leave with more than administrative guidance. They might also receive an invitation to a neighbourhood assembly on housing rights, or a flyer (in Bangla and Italian) about an upcoming demonstration for immigrant regularisation. These moments can function as small, cumulative forms of political exposure.

In 1992, a group of Bangladeshi migrants responded to community needs by forming Dhumcatu. “Dhumcatu” is Bangla for “comet,” a symbolism the association embraced as a self-image of guidance for new arrivals, as the founder Nure Alam Siddique Bacchu (popularly known as Bacchu) emphasised in one of several interviews during my fieldwork. Born in Dhaka in 1965, Bacchu migrated to Italy in 1989 and, two years later, became one of the founders of Dhumcatu, a grassroots association in Torpignattara that supports foreign residents with a wide range of administrative and legal matters (Comune di Roma 2006; Ricci 2020). Over the following decades, he emerged as one of the most visible leaders of Rome’s Bangladeshi community. Unlike many other migrant associations that focus on cultural or religious matters, Dhumcatu embraced an overtly political role from the outset, coupling social assistance with public protest.

The association’s early activity combined a low-threshold helpdesk with public mobilisation in and around the Esquilino/Piazza Vittorio area, by then a key hub for new migrants in Rome. By the mid-2000s, Dhumcatu was organising actions on residence permits, housing, and recognition. A key moment was a May 2006 march after the eviction of the “Casa dei diritti negati,” a squatted housing and rights space run by migrants (Taffon 2009, 42–43; Angiuoni 2007). In October 2007, it helped promote a demonstration of several thousand mostly irregular migrants by popularizing the slogan “permesso di soggiorno per tutti” (resident permit for all) (Rovelli 2009), consolidating its role as a Bangladeshi-led protest reference point, alongside its role in organising cultural festivals.

By the late 2000s, Dhumcatu started operating from Torpignattara, where the Bangladeshi migrant community had already secured a strong presence; this remained the association's base thereafter. The association, despite many controversies, cemented its presence in the so-called “Banglatown,” and the founder Bacchu became one of the most influential leaders of the community by simultaneously maintaining liaisons with social, political, cultural, and religious actors from Bangladesh, other migrant communities, and Italy. During these years, Dhumcatu also cultivated ties with left-wing social centres, base unions, and anarchist collectives active across adjoining eastern districts. Within that alliance geography, Quadraro and Centocelle were relevant as neighbouring areas with antifascist legacies and dense associational life that helped receive and amplify the association's campaigns. His leftist allies often call him, with a mix of joke and admiration, “il capo” (“the boss”) of the community.

When I first visited Dhumcatu in February 2023, the association was operating temporarily from a room in a CAF¹⁶ office that hosted them after their eviction from their previous premises in May 2022. They were in a transitional phase, still looking for a new space. In autumn 2023, they moved into their own office on Via Casilina, the main road that cuts across Torpignattara. They inaugurated the new premises with a large gathering organised as a *Milad*, a devotional gathering centred on prayers and Qur'anic recitations, followed by a communal dinner. At the back of the current premises, there is also a prayer space, with a basement level extending the area for women.

This very mix, however, is central to how Dhumcatu defines itself. One of its most distinctive features, as Bacchu repeatedly explained, is its self-identification as a left-oriented association grounded in Muslim social ethics. In an interview, when I asked him directly whether Dhumcatu belonged to the Left, he replied, “Of course it does. We believe in communism... common rights, common welfare, equal distribution.” At the same time, he rejected the notion that embracing leftist politics requires shedding religion: “I don't agree with the popular idea that communism is inherently against religion,” he explained.

“Communism doesn't talk about religion extensively; it's all about economics: about who gets what, about the fair and equal distribution of wealth.” For Bacchu, economic justice outweighs doctrinal atheism. This perspective allows Dhumcatu to align with secular Italian leftist groups without asking its members to renounce their faith. For him, “the ultimate

¹⁶ Centro di Assistenza Fiscale, a tax assistance centre that supports residents with tax declarations and related bureaucracy.

measure of politics is material justice: ideological debates, whether about religion or the form of government, remain secondary to the question of who ensures fair distribution and welfare.”

Bacchu claims that the association’s core principle is to always side with the less powerful party in any conflict (a classically leftist, pro-subaltern stance applied in practical, sometimes personal, situations). “We never help an employer file a case against a worker. No matter what the reason,” Bacchu stated plainly. “Same with landlords: if a landlord is in dispute with a tenant, we won’t assist the landlord. No matter how ‘right’ he might be, we’ll always take the tenant’s side. That’s a core principle: we assist the weaker party, the one with less power.”

He insisted again, “Dhumcatu is definitely on the Left.” He continued, “There’s no connection with right-wing politics, that’s for sure. But that doesn’t mean we always see eye to eye with the leftist organisations in Italy either. We’ve had our share of conflicts with them too.” His critique was anchored in a long view of policy outcomes rather than political labels. Recalling the late 1990s, he argued that migrants could not assume protection simply because the Left governed: “Even when the Left was in power, things didn’t necessarily go in favor of migrants. We organised plenty of protests and demonstrations during those years, too.” He pointed to the introduction of detention infrastructures as a defining example, recalling that “The first detention centres for migrants in Italy were introduced in 1997,” at a moment when, in his telling, a left coalition was in office. From this perspective, the difference he observed between left and right was less about whether migrants were governed through coercive infrastructures than about political style and public affect: the right “does take a direct hostile stand against migrants,” he said, while the Left does not mobilise votes through anti migrant campaigning, which for him was “an advantage,” even as he insisted that “neither has been particularly in favor of migrants.”

The routine work I observed during my frequent visits to the Dhumcatu office revolved around paperwork for migrants. A recurring task involved handling clearance certificates issued by the Bangladeshi Embassy for applicants seeking to apply for or renew Italian work permits. The attestation itself is a free state service, “but booking an appointment with the immigration office is complex and slow,” claimed Bacchu. “Dhumcatu members collect the certificates from applicants, enter their details in a register, assemble them into batches, and bring them to the office on submission dates,” Bacchu explained the service.

On at least three occasions, I saw the office handle formalities for repatriating the bodies of deceased migrants to Bangladesh. Notifications reached them through colleagues, friends, clinic staff, or the police. The first step was to contact relatives in Bangladesh to obtain consent and to ask whether they could cover the cost. Bacchu said, “Repatriation typically costs about €3,500. In many cases, families could not pay the full amount, or they offered only a part. When that happened, we listed potential donors, made phone calls to them, and sent out words via mosque committees and posted appeals on Facebook.”

Discussions about protest tactics took place in the same office as these bureaucratic and religiously framed tasks. On one of my visits, I overheard a heated exchange between Bacchu and a small group of people about an Occupy-style action. He suggested beginning on a Friday night and continuing through the weekend, to exert pressure on Monday when offices reopened. The issue under consideration was making family reunification rules more flexible for Bangladeshis. He mentioned figures of six to ten thousand potential participants and referred to roughly nine thousand flats with Bangladeshi residents as an indicator of possible turnout if even one person per household joined. He added that he had led a similar sit-in against the deportation of migrants in 2008, which he considers having been successful.

Bacchu also offered a concrete organisational explanation for why public demonstrations that were once larger now often appear smaller. “In the past, we used to have bigger demonstrations,” he said, but “now we don’t have the capacity to reach out to so many people.” He described a reduced mobilisation infrastructure that depends on “Facebook posts, phone calls, and some door-to-door campaigns targeting community leaders,” alongside a loss of the earlier ability “to reach out to all corners of Rome like we used to” since many “so-called activists” lost interest in politics at the point when they became “successful” in life. Social media, in his view, also reshaped participation itself: “People now feel like they can just watch events online or see them live-streamed on Facebook. They don’t feel the need to show up in person because they think they can just catch up later.” But Bacchu added that the “solidarity” with local far-left actors and infrastructures “grew stronger with time.” He described the everyday collaboration with leftists and anarchists as sustained less by ideological sameness than by a practical agreement to bracket lifestyle and religious differences in the name of shared opposition to oppression and discrimination. Asked about possible conflicts around religion and gender, he stressed that “There has never been any major conflict.” Instead, he framed the relationship as mutual non-interference: Italian comrades may be “smoking cigarettes” or “drinking alcohol” and are often “atheists or

agnostics,” while “as a muslim identity we do not practice these within our association.” Yet, he continued, “neither we ever said, ‘Please stop, it bothers us,’ nor do they ever raise any objection about our way of life where religion plays a vital role.” For him, the practical effect of this arrangement was that collaboration could continue without requiring consensus on ethics or intimacy of everyday life.

I encountered this ethos most clearly in small, ordinary alliance settings rather than as a declared political principle. In spring 2023, I attended a Ramadan dinner organised by Dhumcatu in an abandoned park that members had partially cleared and repurposed as a community space. When the call to maghrib prayer began, the Muslim participants moved to prayer mats placed to one side, while others simply waited nearby, and then the gathering resumed without comment. After the prayer, serving began from large pots set over a makeshift stove on the ground, and people queued for plastic plates. There were no dining tables; instead, participants sat on sheets spread across the park in small clusters as they ate. A substantial portion of men and women remained in separate clusters for most of the evening, with only limited mixing across the groups. And there was also a clear separation between the Italian attendees and the average Bangladeshi migrants, unlike Dhumcatu organisers, who moved back and forth more freely. Still, the atmosphere felt convivial. Practical in the sense of ordinary coordination: making space, sharing food, keeping the line moving, and helping each other in tidying up at the end.

Dhumcatu initiates these kinds of cultural programmes a few times a year, marking major events of the Bangladeshi diaspora, and they often invite extra-parliamentary left (EPL) allies to attend. In that sense, the relationship is carried beyond regular political programmes and moments of mobilisation, and extended into cultural exchange and ordinary social co-presence.

Bacchu’s reflections frame Dhumcatu’s claim to be “on the Left” less as allegiance to any Italian left party or government, and more as a shared political alignment with those neighbourhood actors who explicitly stand on the side of people at the margins. Scholz’s definition helps specify what kind of unity this produces. Political solidarity is “a moral relation forming a unity, though it does not always look so unified” (Scholz 2008, 67). In Torpignattara, the cause that generates this unity is not a single demand but a cluster of migrant justice struggles, above all against racism, exclusion, and exploitation. As Scholz puts it, “A commitment to a cause establishes voluntary relations and obligations to that

cause” (Scholz 2008, 84). Here, those obligations are enacted not only in demonstrations and sit-ins but also in the mundane work of keeping the alliance going, so that joint political presence remains possible even when everyday worlds stay only partially shared.



Figure 10: A scene at the Ramadan dinner where the men are praying in the middle of a squatted community space. Photo by Punny Kabir, 17/04/2023.

3.3 The Extra-Parliamentary Left in the Neighbourhood Solidarity Network

The previous section traced Dhumcatu as the central organisational actor through which many Bangladeshi migrants enter collective claims-making in Torpignattara. This section shifts to the Italian side of the alliance by mapping the extra-parliamentary left infrastructures and actors in the neighbourhood and the roles they play in sustaining their solidarity with migrant struggles. The Italian actors discussed here include radical-left parties, self-managed social centres, and anarchist and autonomist networks that have long treated Torpignattara as part of a wider political geography of antifascism and working-class mobilisation. Their involvement becomes visible in the work through which grievances are turned into public action. In this sense, the Torpignattara alliance also resonates with a broader pattern described

by della Porta and Steinhilper: migrant solidarity across Europe is often built through coalitions of heterogeneous actors, including anti-racist activists, migrant self-organisations, and ordinary residents, formed in response to the securitisation of migration and oriented toward challenging exclusion (della Porta and Steinhilper 2022, 3–4).

For analytic clarity, I distinguish three connected elements. First, I discuss non-anarchist left actors and party-form organisations, focusing on how they narrate the alliance with Bangladeshi organisers and sustain everyday co-presence and practical support. Second, I focus on militant squatted anarchist spaces not as open community venues but as politically dense infrastructures where encounters nonetheless occur, and where some migrants sought and received help in ways that complicate easy assumptions about who these spaces are “for.” Third, I turn to anarchist and autonomist actors in the neighbourhood solidarity network, whose accounts foreground organising, direct action repertoires, and the risks and obligations that shape alliance-making with migrant associations.

The boundaries between these elements are not rigid: the same protest may bring together party militants, squat collectives, and anarchist networks, and some actors move between them. But the distinctions matter because they imply different relationships to institutions, different styles of leadership and legitimacy, and different ways of sustaining solidarity over time.

3.3.i Communist Actors and Infrastructures

On the Italian side of the alliance, I encountered a set of actors who described themselves through the language of communism, but who related to institutions in noticeably different ways. This spectrum included party-linked figures such as Stefano from Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), and Carlo from Partito Comunista Internazionale, and openly non-institutional street communists such as Massimo (pseudonym), who represents a radical-left group called Fiori Salvatici (pseudonym). In practice, their engagements in and around Torpignattara often looked less like formal party outreach and more like repeated, improvised work in neighbourhood space: showing up, co-addressing, hosting, leafleting, sustaining contact. What links them is not a single organisational form but a shared claim that migrant struggles are not external to class politics, and that alliances are built through co-presence rather than symbolic support.

Stefano Galiani, a senior figure in the PRC long involved in grassroots migrant organising in Rome, underlines this perspective. In recent years, he argued, migrant workers have increasingly been at the forefront of Italy's labour unrest: "The last serious demonstrations, the last real *scioperi* (strikes) in Italy, they weren't led by Italians. They were led by migrant workers, both men and women," he noted. What is striking here is not simply that migrants participated in labour struggles, but that people conventionally cast as peripheral to the nation were increasingly acting as protagonists of class conflict. This suggests a significant reconfiguration of political agency in post-industrial Italy: those most excluded from formal citizenship were often among the most active in collective struggle. A comparable dynamic appears in Cappiali's account of housing struggles, where "Immigrants were the first to organise the occupations and the radical left simply decided to support them" (Cappiali 2022, 169).

For Stefano, this commitment was not simply party rhetoric but something grounded in lived experience. Recalling the early 1990s, he described how everyday solidarity shaped his politics: "In 1990, near Piazza Porta Maggiore, there was a building, a disused pasta factory. It was enormous and empty. At the time, about 1,000 to 1,500 people were sleeping in the streets nearby. So, together with friends and many migrants, including Bangladeshis like Bacchu and some others who eventually moved away from the political scenario, we occupied the space. It was an absurd, unlivable place at first. Poor, cold, in ruins. But people stayed together. People helped each other." This memory is revealing because it shows solidarity emerging through a collective response to abandonment, precarity, and immediate material need. The occupation was not merely a symbolic act of protest but a practical response to urban neglect and the urgent need for shelter. In Stefano's telling, politics emerged through the effort to inhabit and sustain a ruined space together, with migrants appearing not as passive beneficiaries but as co-participants in the making of a political community. The episode also helps explain why parts of Rifondazione's grassroots milieu continue to approach migrants as active subjects of neighbourhood politics rather than as an external constituency to be represented from above. In this sense, Stefano's recollection echoes Gill and Kasmir's argument that solidarity emerges as people confront the fragmentation produced by capitalism and begin to imagine social relations beyond kinship, tradition, or village ties (Gill and Kasmir 2009, 175).

Stefano's memory is also a story about solidarity being built through the sharing of space and the ability to remain together within it. In present-day Torpignattara, I found the Casa del

Popolo, a PRC-run space and a key node in the neighbourhood's left infrastructure, to be one of the sites where this practical togetherness is organised and made visible. The building stands on one of the neighbourhood's busy streets, lined with residential blocks, several Bangladeshi-run grocery shops, a Hindu temple, a popular South Asian clothing store run by a Bangladeshi woman entrepreneur, and, nearby, one of the best-known Bangladeshi restaurants in the area. Against this everyday commercial and residential setting, the Casa's façade, covered with political posters and visual traces of leftist history, introduces a striking presence into the street. Images of Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, posters on workers' unity, and notices for political events mark it clearly as an ideological space. At the same time, many materials are translated into different languages, including Bangla, signalling an effort to make the space legible and approachable to migrant residents.

I was particularly struck by this when I first entered the Casa del Popolo. On that visit, it was hosting a fair organised by a Bangladeshi women's association, with stalls selling women's and children's clothes and accessories. It felt almost unexpected to encounter such an apparently non-political event in a space saturated with images and posters from labour and communist politics. Yet this juxtaposition revealed something important. The Casa was not only a venue for meetings and ideological gatherings. It also functioned as a space where migrant women, including those who might not otherwise enter a left political setting, could come for practical and social reasons.

This was especially evident in the posters advertising Italian language courses for migrants. A woman might come to the fair to look at saris or children's items, notice a Bangla-language poster about language classes, and then begin a conversation with the party members or volunteers sitting at the reception desk. In this way, what seemed like a cultural or commercial event could also become an entry point into broader infrastructures of support. Volunteers at the Casa offer Italian language classes and help with permits and paperwork. The space also hosts small cultural events, puja celebrations, and clothing and food festivals organised by migrant women's groups. A Sri Lankan diaspora communist party wing regularly holds meetings there, and neighbourhood gatherings repeatedly bring Italian and migrant political actors into the same room to discuss local issues. What mattered to me was not that political difference disappeared in this space, but that the Casa made repeated forms of co-presence possible. It was one of the material settings through which solidarity was practised, extended, and made socially durable. In this sense, the Casa functions as an infrastructural node that makes coordination and co-presence possible, in ways that resonate

with Cappiali’s observation that such sites are where “convergences and assemblies are organised” (Cappiali 2022, 168).



Figure 11: Posters on the door of Casa del Popolo in Torpignattara. Two Bangla posters at the top announce and invite neighbours to a Hindu community programme (in Bangla). Below them, a poster for a Unione Popolare (a left-wing political coalition) event carries the slogan *Si confronta con i lavoratori stranieri* (English: “Engaging with Foreign Workers”). Photo by Punny Kabir, 08/07/2023.

PRC’s practice in Torpignattara operates across both the piazza and the everyday. Other party-form actors in the same political ecology emphasise the piazza even more directly as the primary site where solidarity is made durable.

Carlo, senior leader of Comunista Internazionale, offered a bluntly movement-centred account of how this alliance is made and sustained, locating its basis in repeated co-presence in struggle. He told me that his group first met Dhumcatu in 1997 in Italy and that, over time, they became “very close friends” because Dhumcatu is “an immigrant organisation that fights, that struggles in the squares, mobilises, and organises.” “We have spoken together for years, addressing both immigrant and Italian workers.” The emphasis here is on sustained

co-address, the repeated effort to speak in a way that includes multiple segments of the working population, rather than on one-off symbolic solidarity.

For activists like Massimo, an activist at Fiori Salvatici, their political orientation is presented as straightforward. “They call us the radical left, but in reality, we’re just communists,” he explained. “We are involved in all communist struggles: those of workers, against war, and all struggles of the revolutionary left.” In Massimo’s account, this milieu does not approach migration as a marginal policy issue or primarily through humanitarian charity. Instead, the figure of the migrant is central to how he reads global capitalism. “For us, the issue of migrants is fundamental because they are the new ‘slaves’,” he said. In his formulation, enforced mobility, expulsion, and hyper-exploited labour are not problems to be managed through policy or charity, but structural conditions of contemporary capitalism, a position that resonates with theorisation of the migrant as a paradigmatic figure of dispossession and labour’s forced mobility (Nail 2015, 85–88).

What he emphasised as distinctive about this strand of the radical left is its insistence on migrant self-organisation. Alliances with Bangladeshi-led associations, including Dhuumcatu, are not framed as patronage or one-way aid, but as relations between political actors. Massimo stressed that he values migrant autonomy. “It doesn’t need Italians; they have, in a certain way, self-determined, and that is what we want,” he said. In this view, migrants are not positioned as recipients of assistance but as organisers of their own collective capacity. In Gill and Kasmir’s terms, this is a form of solidarity that “involves a politics of recognition and requires organising,” rather than a simple extension of charity (Gill and Kasmir 2009, 175). The point, for Massimo, is not only to address immediate problems but to acknowledge migrants as participants in a shared field of exploitation. He framed the role of Italian communists not as speaking for migrants, but as standing with them when called upon, whether in demonstrations for Palestine, neighbourhood marches for permit rights, or confrontations with local authorities over bureaucratic injustices. “For us, this type of relationship is important,” Massimo insisted.

At the same time, Massimo’s emphasis on autonomy does not eliminate the practical work of negotiating difference. Cross-cultural negotiation is a routine part of this alliance, and it becomes especially visible where political commitments meet more conservative norms in parts of the migrant community, for example, around gender roles. Massimo framed such differences as a terrain to be worked through rather than as an insurmountable barrier. He

pointed, for instance, to the public presence of Bangladeshi women in protests: “They’re very active... women are also present in the struggle. They were at the front of the march.”

Aligning a revolutionary, secular politics with a largely religious migrant milieu requires adjustments on both sides. Italians refrain from serving pork or wine at joint meetings out of respect and accommodate religious needs in scheduling, while Bangladeshi partners accept working with avowed atheists and communists. Massimo did not describe these adjustments as a loss of principle but as a routine practice of respect through which political trust can be maintained. “We respect religion. If you pray and do what pertains to your religion, you are respected,” he explained. What matters, in his view, is that collective struggle against exploitation and repression remains before cultural difference.

Massimo’s account also draws on a specific political geography beyond Torpignattara. His collective, Fiori Salvatici, is based in Quadraro, a nearby neighbourhood in eastern Rome whose anti-fascist memory is part of how local militants narrate place and political inheritance. During the Nazi occupation of Rome, Quadraro earned a special reputation for resistance activity. Massimo invoked that legacy, extending it to struggles against state and economic violence in the present. “For us, communists from all over the world are the same,” he said, underscoring a principle of proletarian internationalism that he associates with street politics linking local Bangladeshi workers, visiting South Asian activists, and Italian abstentionist militants in common actions.

This political orientation is also expressed in their rejection of electoral politics. They run abstentionist campaigns and urge people not to vote, even for parties that call themselves communist. “There are parties that claim to be communist, but the moment you gain power, you’re forced to make choices, and we don’t want to make choices that could involve compromising on migrant struggles,” Massimo argued. For his collective, staying outside institutions is presented as a condition for maintaining consistency. Their aim is not parliamentary reform, but direct action oriented toward specific objectives, such as obtaining residence permits, preventing deportations, and protecting workers from exploitation. “Voting doesn’t change anything, we’ve seen it,” Massimo said. “What’s more important are migrants’ documents, their basic human and legal rights, which currently don’t exist.”

On an everyday level, Massimo described the group’s practice in Quadraro as an extension of its abstentionist and grassroots approach. He described the area as a neighbourhood with a very strong Bangladeshi presence. The collective distributes flyers in Bangla, co-organises

protests with Dhuumcatu, and sustains the relationship through repeated contact over time. Massimo contrasted this collaboration with their ties to Sri Lankan communists, whom he described as “communists like us,” signalling a clearer ideological overlap. With Dhuumcatu, he was explicit that “Dhuumcatu is not a communist group at all,” yet he treated that difference as secondary to what the organisation represents on the ground: “a huge migrant group whose struggles are real.” In that register, the relationship is framed less as ideological alignment than as standing alongside an existing organising capacity. As he put it, “It doesn’t need Italians; they have, in a certain way, self-determined, and that is what we want.” Where institutional leftists, such as those in Rifondazione, may hope that winning seats on a city council can translate into policy change, Massimo’s milieu remains skeptical of institutional routes. In their experience, entering institutional politics entangles movements in the same power relations that structure migrants’ lives. Solidarity, in their framing, requires building autonomous spaces of resistance, not only through services or representation but through practical and ideological alliances forged on the ground. Their stance can be read alongside Mezzadra and Neilson’s claim that durable connections between struggles emerge from within struggles themselves, “percolating up from below rather than being imposed by leadership or vanguard” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 307). In this sense, Massimo’s account presents proletarian internationalism less as an abstract principle than as something to be tested and assembled through repeated local cooperation.

3.3.ii Squatted Spaces as Resistance and Contact Zones

Alongside party-run and communist street infrastructures, the alliance ecology in eastern Rome also intersects with a different kind of political setting: militant squatted anarchist social centres. These spaces are not designed as open neighbourhood venues. Their schedules can be irregular, access is not guaranteed, and entry often depends on informal familiarity with the scene. Yet in specific moments, and often through personal mediation, they can still become practical points of support for people who do not usually inhabit these environments.

In the Roman context, these spaces are often described through the language of *centri sociali occupati autogestiti* (CSOA): occupied and self-managed social centres that combine political organising with cultural programmes and everyday forms of collective reproduction. In the literature on Italian urban movements, such spaces are typically framed as infrastructures produced through occupation and maintained through self-management, where political

claims are articulated not only through protest but through the creation of alternative social and cultural environments (Mudu and Rossini 2018, 101). The point, for my purposes here, is not to treat squatted centres as uniformly accessible “community hubs,” but to recognise them as politically dense sites whose openness is conditional and situational, yet whose resources sometimes become available in moments of need.



Figure 12: A poster of Karl Marx at an anarchist space. Photo by Punny Kabir, 11/02/2024.

These occupation repertoires do not circulate only within Italian anarchist milieus. In Torpignattara, I saw Dhumcatu draw on similar practices when they served organisational needs and offered leverage in local negotiations. During my fieldwork in early summer 2024, the group had been occupying a semi-abandoned piece of public land on the edge of Torpignattara for over two years. Yet the association did not publicly frame its presence there as a “squat.” Instead, Bacchu, Dhumcatu’s founder-president, consistently described the initiative as “urban regeneration.” Members cleared debris and overgrowth from the plot and tried to keep its footpaths usable. They organised small cultural programmes and children’s activities on site, treating it as a neighbourhood park rather than a temporary encampment.

Dhumcatu’s claim to the space rested on use, care, and collective benefit rather than formal title. As Bacchu put it to me, “If we clean it, organise events, and make it safe for families, isn’t that what the city should be doing anyway?” In practice, the occupied site functioned both as a community amenity and as a statement about the association’s capacity for self-organisation. It offered a venue for gatherings that would otherwise require permits and fees, and it signaled an ability to mobilise people and maintain a shared resource. Read alongside Rome’s CSOA traditions, this can be understood as an established activist repertoire deployed in a migrant-led context. At the same time, not all Bangladeshi migrants interpreted it in those terms. For some, it remained an unauthorised use of public land that could at any moment prompt police intervention, fines, or eviction. Others worried that a visible association with a squat-like initiative might jeopardize already fragile residence permits. These concerns align with policy frameworks that explicitly connect housing illegality to bureaucratic exclusion: Mudu and Rossini note that Article 5 of the 2014 “Legge Lupi” “deprives illegal occupants from the right to have access to residence permits and to utilities such as water or electricity,” a provision they argue has “radicaliz[ed] precarious conditions” for squatting households (2018, 114). Seen from this angle, the occupation combined practical benefits with a persistent calculation of exposure, especially for those already positioned in insecure legal and housing circumstances. In that context, a migrant-led squat can also be read as an embodied, everyday form of resistance, not necessarily through overt ideological declarations, but through the act of sustaining presence and collective use in a governance regime that tries to make legal recognition contingent on compliant forms of residence and property.

If this migrant-led occupation shows how a squat-like repertoire can be reframed through care and neighbourhood use, Ex Snia Viscosa, named after the former SNIA Viscosa

industrial site, offers a contrasting case: a long-standing Italian CSOA infrastructure where everyday support work, including language teaching and migrant women's education, has been hosted over time. I encountered Ex Snia less as a "service-providing institution" than as a setting where practical support, political sociality, and everyday critique coexist. It was also one of the places through which Simona, a retired social worker and lifelong leftist, organised her engagement with migrants. Simona did not speak as a formal representative of any party. She described her volunteer work as an explicitly political stance, but one rooted in everyday practice rather than in organisational affiliation. "My volunteer work," she explained, "is a political position. In Italy, some oppose migrants and those who stand with them. I wanted to be on the side of welcome." For years, she volunteered as an Italian-language teacher for migrant women, first at Ex Snia and later with Altramente in Torpignattara, moving between these spaces as the practical needs of women shifted.

Simona's narrative also situated these spaces within a longer memory of pro-migrant mobilisation in Rome. She recalled a 1989 demonstration as a landmark moment, when diverse migrant communities marched to demand basic rights: the right to stay in Italy, reunite with family, access healthcare, and obtain education. "Back then," she emphasised, "there was unity across parties and associations in the spectrum of the left." Over time, she felt that unity fractured, and she returned to one demand that remained unresolved: local political inclusion. "If you live here, work here, and pay taxes, you should be able to vote. That's what they asked. But it didn't happen," she said. At the same time, she refused to romanticise voluntary action as a substitute for structural change. "I volunteer because it enriches me. Teaching migrants teaches me too," she told me. "But true change needs political will, laws, not just good intentions."

From Ex Snia, the ethnographic path leads to another major node in Rome's squatted landscape: Forte Prenestino, occupied on 1 May 1986 (Mudu and Rossini 2018, 101). I encountered Forte not only as an icon of Roman autonomist history, but as a living site of encounters that can look improbable from the outside. On a summer evening in 2023, I met Masum there, a Bangladeshi man in his fifties with a long beard, dressed in an alkhalla and an Islamic cap. Around him, young Italians with tattoos and dyed hair danced to loud music under graffiti-covered walls. At least at first glance, it seemed a setting far removed from his religious commitments, and yet Masum stood there smiling.

In conversation, Masum (pseudonym) told me that he is an active member of Tablighi Jamaat, a transnational Islamic revivalist movement oriented toward personal piety and missionary outreach. When I asked how he became connected to people gathered at a space like Forte, he returned to the COVID-19 period. He had a heart condition, underwent open-heart surgery, lost his job, and fell behind on rent. He said he faced eviction. Masum recalled that a collective of anarchist activists linked to the social centre arrived early in the morning to resist the eviction, and that their intervention led the police to suspend the action. He also emphasised that none of his Bangladeshi acquaintances from his mosque circle came that day.

Reflecting on these differences, Masum told me, “They don’t judge me for my clothes or my beliefs, so why should I judge them? This is their culture. If I live here, I must accept it.” He added, “They may dress in ways I find vulgar, they may drink alcohol, but the humanity they practice, I haven’t seen that among many of my Tablighi companions.” After this experience, Masum began describing himself as one of their “comrades,” and he started attending protests, demonstrations, and meetings with them. What is ethnographically striking here is not a story of ideological conversion, but a pragmatic recalibration of trust: access to help became the basis for continued co-presence, even across sharp differences in religious and lifestyle norms.

A smaller but equally revealing scene unfolded in another squatted space in the same constellation: Spazio Liberato (pseudonym), located near Torpignattara, managed by a collective of Italian anarchists. The collective presents the space as self-managed, anti-fascist, anti-racist, and secular. According to their own narrative, they first occupied a disused municipal nursery kitchen in the 1990s, then obtained a temporary city permit, but later appeared on a municipal “blacklist” of spaces to be reclaimed and re-occupied it again after a period of closure. The group describes the centre as operating independently of political parties and state institutions, financed through its own activities. Its members also participate in events and cross-cultural initiatives with Bangladeshi associations, including Dhumcatu and Mohila Shomiti.

In this setting, I met a woman I will call Rehana (pseudonym). I first noticed her during an informal weeknight gathering of members and friends of the social centre. The room was dimly lit. A small group was preparing to screen a film, while others sat on benches drinking beer or wine, talking over loud punk music. The attendees fit a familiar countercultural profile, from younger activists with piercings and dreadlocks to older veterans of the 1990s

squat scene. In that environment, the presence of a middle-aged Bangladeshi woman in a modest headscarf stood out.

Rehana had migrated to Rome around twenty years ago as a spouse. It seemed that she was no longer living with her husband, though I was not sure whether she was widowed or divorced. She told me that “since his support was no longer available,” she started working at a clinic. Because she did not have a nursing degree, the position was insecure, and she was laid off during COVID. At the time I met her, she was under financial strain. She had found some support to pursue training for a nursing diploma, and she was combining her studies with temporary work in home care. She also stressed that before reaching Spazio Liberato she had tried to seek assistance elsewhere, without success. “I heard legendary stories of some migrant leaders,” she said, “but when I approached them, they did not help me at all, nor did they connect me with anyone. It is through a church-based charity group that I got connected with them,” she added, gesturing towards the anarchist collective. Her account pointed to a gap between public visibility and practical accessibility: in her experience, the route to help was not direct but brokered, dependent on which networks she could enter.

When I gently asked whether she liked the space, Rehana answered in a lowered voice that she did not feel entirely comfortable. “I am Muslim,” she said. “I came because I needed help, but this is not our custom. The way they greet, especially kissing on the cheeks, is not allowed in my religion. I still do it so as not to offend. I kiss back, and in my mind I say *astagfirullah*, asking God’s forgiveness. They mean well. They are good people. They are not from my religion, perhaps most of them have no religion, but they are honest and helpful.” Her description foregrounded everyday frictions: bodily comportment and touch, the presence of alcohol, loud music, and the general informality of social mixing. At the same time, it showed a pragmatic strategy of accommodation: she managed difference through situational adjustment rather than by seeking full cultural convergence.

Over the following months, I continued to see Rehana at neighbourhood solidarity events: rallies around migrants’ document rights, demonstrations against migrant detention centres, and other small mobilisations. At a later indoor event at Spazio Liberato, I noticed a subtle shift in her bodily ease. She was leading the cooking that evening, moving through the room as if she knew where things belonged. After dinner, we spoke at length. She told me her financial situation was still unresolved, and she was still looking for stable work. But one sentence stayed with me: “The burden feels less heavy,” she said, because she now knew

there were friends there who would help her when she was in trouble. What changed was not the militant character of the space, or her religious boundaries, but her footing within a network she had learned to trust.

These cases show how militant squatted spaces can become occasional infrastructures of encounter and support, even though they remain politically dense environments with conditional openness. The next subsection shifts from spaces to anarchist actors in and around Torpignattara, focusing on how they narrate alliance-making with migrant associations through networks, repertoires of mutual aid, and the risks that accompany visible political activity.

3.3.iii Anarchist and Autonomist Actors

While I have just traced how party-based and communist street actors engage Bangladeshi migrant struggles in Torpignattara, now I turn to the anarchist and autonomist interlocutors whose work often moves across spaces, assemblies, and neighbourhood networks, including squatted social centres, but is not reducible to any single site.

In their accounts, the state was frequently treated as a structure that governs life through exclusionary categories, policing, and paperwork, rather than as a neutral arbiter of membership. Bakunin's critique that the modern state operates through a "political religion" in which "natural society" is "sacrificed on the altar of political religion" captures the anti-statist background assumptions that shaped many conversations (Bakunin [1873] 1990, 55). In the same text, Bakunin describes the "State" as a "grand cemetery" where "all real manifestations of life and individuality" are "sacrificed" (Bakunin [1873] 1990, 55). Yet among the anarchists I spoke with, the analytic emphasis did not rest on portraying migrants as passive objects of state violence. Instead, they repeatedly stressed migrants' political agency, including survival strategies, informal organisation, and participation in collective struggle, as practices that complicate the state's claim to monopolise legitimate political life and membership.

A local anarchist, Davide, a long-time Torpignattara resident active in the neighbourhood solidarity network, works as an academic. He told me activism had become his "second profession" in recent years, and that it only grew stronger with time, beginning more casually "something like a decade ago" when he moved to Torpignattara. He spoke about the personal consequences of activism, especially when one is tied to institutions like universities: "Every

time I sign a contract with a school, I have to show that my criminal record is clean. One conviction, and it's over. You lose your job. Even a speech at a protest can put you at risk. But it's part of the game."

Davide described maintaining regular relationships with migrant associations and other grassroots groups through Torpignattara Solidale, a neighbourhood network rather than a physical space. He is also closely associated with Spazio Liberato, a squatted anarchist space. He situated the alliance in a longer political history: "When the Solidale started around 2013, the fellow activists already had the intention to build a relationship with the Bangladeshi community. They said from the beginning: 'We have this contact with Dhumcatu and we want to organise a network of solidarity in the neighbourhood.' It was part of their project from day one."

He said the alliance with Dhumcatu works best when organising issue-based street-level protests, rallies, or cultural events. It is not a "continuous movement" towards one unified goal, but moving together through different struggles across a long period. As he put it, "By now we know what will be between us and not considering ideological and political cultural difference, but we acquired a rhythm". He then connected this rhythm to earlier attempts to build relations outside established organisations like Dhumcatu: "There was a time I was more active socially than politically. With some Bangladeshi friends, we started an association focused on basic services, Italian and English language classes, legal advice through a lawyer from Rifondazione Comunista, and Bangla classes for kids. It wasn't meant to be a political association like Dhumcatu." Still, he said, even that project was absorbed by what he called the "politics of community." "Even when we tried to do something different, it became the same. It got absorbed by the need for symbolic visibility. They invited the ambassador, diplomats, political leaders, and then we're back to old dynamics, status, hierarchy, control." So, their tie to the community is Dhumcaatu-centric. He also noted that Bacchu maintained ties with other extra-parliamentary actors, including radical trade unions outside the mainstream confederate unions: "He managed to involve some Bangladeshis in housing occupations in the 2000s or early 2010s. Dhumcatu was always attentive to building these alliances with the Italian left because that's where they could find real structural support, despite ideological differences."

The alliance, Davide added, has fluctuated: "There were years when the connection between Dhumcatu and the leftist scene was strong, and then quieter periods. But in the last two or

three years, it has become stronger again.” He linked this renewed intensity to COVID-19, which reactivated neighbourhood mutual aid: “During Covid, groups like Torpignattara Solidale organised support for people who couldn’t work or were in vulnerable conditions. This wasn’t a new relationship; it already existed structurally, but Covid made it stronger.”

Davide’s account highlights alliance-making as a matter of rhythm, repetition, and practical coordination, but also as a field shaped by internal styles of leadership and competing expectations about what a political solidarity should look like.

Greta (pseudonym), another organiser in the neighbourhood solidarity network in Torpignattara, located her attachment to migrant struggles in a trajectory that began well before her connections to Torpignattara. She grew up in a southern suburb of Rome, on the outskirts of Rome, and described how, over time, migrants arrived in the same peripheral spaces where low-income Italians were already being pushed by housing costs. She stressed that early neighbourhood struggles over “housing or life” were not initially fought with migrants. What shifted her political focus, she said, was the creation of Italy’s first expulsion centres under the Turco-Napolitano framework, which she recalled as “prisons to deport migrants.”

From there, Greta connected detention politics to wider migration and labour geographies. She described directing people toward struggles in southern Italy, where migrants seek contracts, residence permits, and housing while living in “ghettos and slums,” in conditions shaped by employers’ demand for low-cost labour and the state’s regulation of work and legality. “I went side by side with them in these fights,” she said, presenting this as part of how her involvement consolidated.

Her relationship with Dhuumcatu, she told me, goes back roughly twenty years, emerging through national demonstrations against anti-immigrant “security package” measures. Initially, she said, she mostly knew Bacchu and experienced the organisation as highly mediated through a single spokesperson: “There was only Bacchu to talk to.” She framed this as a problem in tension with her preference for “horizontal contexts of struggle,” while also noting that informal hierarchies can form in many collectives. She emphasised that her relationship to the association changed as participation broadened, particularly with the emergence of a women’s association and more routine encounters beyond protests: “dinners, lunches and parties,” and a social familiarity that extended into everyday street recognition.

Crucially for her, the relationship was also tested in moments of legal pressure. Greta reflected that, at first, she worried about being “only called when needed,” especially given the heightened policing that often follows anarchist milieus. Yet she returned to a specific reversal: when anarchists faced “trials for terrorism” and “heavy attacks from the courts,” she recalled that Dhuumcatu “was there,” even in circumstances where public association could be risky. In her framing, this did not erase asymmetries, but it complicated any simple reading of the relationship as one-directional assistance by showing how solidarity could also take the form of mutual presence under institutional scrutiny.

Maurizio, who volunteered alongside Davide and Greta in Torpignattara Solidale, moved between worlds in a way that shaped how he read the neighbourhood alliance. He works as a sailor and spends roughly half the year at sea, often in Greece, and the other half in Torpignattara with his family. He also located his political orientation in a longer inheritance. His father was a communist, and Maurizio described this background as one reason he was drawn “naturally” to the forms of neighbourhood organising that link anti-racist work, labour concerns, and migrant struggles.

From that vantage point, he offered a sober assessment of how the alliance has shifted over time. In his view, it is “no more holding large demonstrations as before.” He contrasted the present with an earlier period when mobilisations around documents and residency were able to draw large numbers of Bangladeshi participants. “In the past, we saw big mobilisations, especially around documents and residency issues,” he told me. “We organised demonstrations with 2,000 people, 80% of them Bangladeshi.” He added that there was also collective participation around Islamophobia, and he linked this to a specific conjuncture. After the Bataclan attacks in France, he and others anticipated a rise in Islamophobic sentiment in Italy, “both from the state and the public,” and “we tried to come together and organise.”

At the same time, Maurizio suggested that the most visibly mixed and spontaneous participation he had seen more recently emerged through pro-Palestinian mobilisations. He described this as the first time he saw “lots of people from the neighbourhood, women with kids” joining in, and he emphasised that it was not primarily the result of Dhuumcatu or any organisation calling people out, but because “they felt compelled to show up.” Against this background, he framed solidarity less as an identity-based affinity and more as a relationship that has to be continually produced through routine practices. Community dinners, anti-racist

marches, and quick mobilisations after racist attacks. In these settings, he suggested, differences of religion, language, or lifestyle do not disappear, but they can recede behind shared material pressures that bring people into the same streets and kitchens. “When people are struggling together, identity differences fade,” Maurizio observed. He also stressed that he did not understand this work as “helping” migrants out of charity or pity, but as acting on an assumption of equality in a context where institutions do not treat people equally.

Taken together, these accounts point to solidarity as something built through joint work rather than delegated representation. Cappiali shows that immigrant activists often resist being turned into objects of advocacy, especially when allies decide priorities “on our behalf” without meaningful participation (Cappiali 2022, 7). In one interview, a migrant leader criticises left actors for having “prevented us [immigrants] from having a say in the decisions taken on our behalf,” and insists instead that “we have to construct the political itinerary together” (Cappiali 2022, 222). Relatedly, Cappiali documents repeated demands for participation understood as co-drafting and listening, rather than presenting migrants with pre-written programmes (Cappiali 2022, 234). Davide, Greta, and Maurizio describe alliance-making as something built through repeated coordination across difference, shaped by unequal exposure, and tested in moments when participation becomes costly. This prepares the ground for the next section, which steps back from individual trajectories and names the configuration produced by these interactions, including how division of labour, backstage coordination, and uneven stakes structure what becomes possible in practice.

3.4 Transversal Solidarity

One of the earliest street demonstrations organised through the neighbourhood solidarity network that I witnessed during my fieldwork took place on a cold, overcast day in March 2023. A broad grouping of migrant associations and local political collectives assembled in Torpignattara for a march that marked the arrival of spring while calling for specific demands. The event was organised under the slogan “Basta stragi in mare” (“Enough massacres at sea”), referencing recurring deaths in the Mediterranean. One of the largest banners read in Italian: “Noi vogliamo una primavera con la pace, con cittadinanza ai bambini nati in Italia, senza guerre, senza sfratti e sgomberi, senza razzismo, senza morti sul lavoro, senza sfruttati, senza paura,” translated as: “We want a spring with peace, with

citizenship for children born in Italy, without wars, without evictions and clearances, without racism, without deaths at work, without exploited people, without fear.” Approximately three to four hundred people took part in the march.



Figure 13: A scene of the spring demonstration jointly organised by the migrants' associations and local leftist-anarchist groups in Torpignattara, Rome. Photo by Punny Kabir, 19/03/2023.

Within the procession, different organisational styles and political languages remained visibly distinct, yet the event appeared as a coordinated public scene. At the front, the Bangladeshi migrants' association Dhumcatu set the pace and much of the messaging, while other groups walked in recognisable clusters behind and alongside. Partito della Rifondazione Comunista members held a banner reading “Asilo ai profughi di guerre, fame e colonialismo” (“Asylum for refugees of wars, hunger, and colonialism”), and another banner stated “Sinistra Europa aderisce alla manifestazione Dhumcatu” (European Left joins Dhumcatu's demonstration). An anarchist collective voiced demands following the recent imprisonment of their comrade Alfredo. Alongside them were other presences that folded religious, migrant, and housing concerns into the same street choreography, including a local transfeminist bloc, Bangladeshi women's associations, Indian Sikh community members, madrasa students with their hujur (teacher), and the anti-eviction collective Autodifesa dagli Sfratti Roma.

The street here is a stage where solidarity is made concrete and contestable, not assumed as a shared moral consensus. The slogans and posters do not only communicate grievance; they also attempt to organise social relations in public by asserting equality, rejecting charity as the

dominant frame, and making lateral forms of being-with temporarily practicable. This is close to what Rozakou calls “socialities of solidarity,” spaces that seek to “materialise alternative worldviews” and produce lateral relationships, while remaining inhabited by contradictions rather than resolved unity (Rozakou 2016, 185-86).

In the moving crowd, solidarity was not primarily articulated as shared ideology, but as recognisable participation over time. As one marcher put it: “I don’t know who leftists or rightists are here. I speak basic Italian and cannot have a real conversation with them. They dress and behave very differently from us. But I still came to know a few of them who regularly come here to the street protests, and we also shared meals on some occasions.” What this remark indicates is not political clarity but accumulated familiarity produced through repeated encounters in streets and squares.

During the rally, I also spoke with Laila, a prominent Bangladeshi woman community leader who was present at the demonstration and has long been involved in the broader neighbourhood alliance, while also participating in centre-left Italian party politics; she is not a member of Dhuumcatu. Her account stressed reliability over doctrinal unity: “We were very few in the beginning. Now we see more participation. I know many Italian activists with whom we have been protesting side by side for many years,” she told me. She then anchored this in a repertoire of repeated joint work across Rome’s streets: “Across numerous squares and streets of Rome, we have chanted slogans, distributed leaflets, and posted posters together on issues like citizenship by birth, abolition of the Bossi-Fini law, workplace safety, and standing against racism and Islamophobia. This creates a bond. Even if we don’t see each other in daily life, we know we will come together again at protests.” In her framing, solidarity is sustained less by intimate everyday sociality than by the expectation of future reassembly and the practical memory of having stood together across many different mobilisations.

In Torpignattara, these commitments take concrete form in the practical labour that makes joint presence possible across language, organisational culture, and political style: distributing leaflets, showing up at the demonstrations, holding the banner, guiding someone through a residency appointment, and negotiating with the administrative bodies for permission, etc. The rally shows how these forms of coordination can be enacted publicly without requiring participants to converge on a single political identity, a shared repertoire, or a unified horizon of struggle.



Figure 14: Partito della Rifondazione Comunista's banner saying "Asilo ai profughi di guerra, fame e colonialismo" (Asylum for refugees of wars, hunger, and colonialism). Photo by Punny Kabir, 19/03/2023.

The type of solidarity I observed in Torpignattara can be described as transversal solidarity, borrowing from Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen's concept, because the alliance repeatedly works through plurality rather than fusion. Agustín and Jørgensen develop transversal solidarity to "reflect [the] plurality" of solidarity practices and to "avoid dichotomies between in-group/out-group, national/international or society/institutions" (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 859). The spring rally illustrates this well: it brought together differently positioned actors who remained visibly distinct, while still forming a coordinated public presence. In this sense, the rally did not produce a unified "we," but a situational common ground organised around overlapping grievances and shared targets. Agustín and Jørgensen's framework is also useful because it clarifies that such encounters do not need to culminate in a new collective identity. Instead, transversal solidarity makes it analytically possible to describe coordination across difference as a political form in its own right, grounded in situated practices rather than ideological convergence (Agustín and Jørgensen

2021, 859). Their typology further helps specify the organisational heterogeneity visible in the rally, since they conceptualise transversal solidarity as “a complex definition based on three dimensions (identity, space and organisation),” differentiating autonomous, civic, and institutional forms (Agustín and Jørgensen 2021, 870). Read in those terms, the rally brought multiple organisational modes into one event: autonomous militant repertoires, civic neighbourhood demands, and institutional claims addressed to the state.

3.5 Conclusion: From Political Memory to Street Alliance

In this chapter, I situate the neighbourhood alliance within Torpignattara’s longer political history, tracing how the area’s working-class and antifascist memory, shaped through the fascist period, World War II, and later transformations in Rome’s urban periphery, continues to inform what counts as legitimate political struggle in the present. I then followed the contemporary recomposition of the extra-parliamentary left landscape in and around Torpignattara, showing how older infrastructures and newer radical formations have recalibrated their practices in response to changing conditions of labour, housing, and migration.

Against this background, I moved from historical and political context to the actors themselves. Through interviews and observations, I examined how Dhumcatu and different extra-parliamentary left and anarchist interlocutors describe, justify, and problematise the alliance, and how they narrate its shifts over time. I then grounded these accounts in an observed mobilisation, using the spring rally vignette to show how the alliance becomes visible and workable through concrete organising labour and coordinated public presence.

Across these layers, I suggest that the alliance is sustained through a combination of historical intelligibility, organisational mediation, and repeated mobilisation practices.

Chapter 4

Friction and Translation: Making and Unmaking Solidarity in “Banglatown”

On 1 May 2023, Labour Day, I walked with the Torpignattara solidarity network in the May Day march. The day was organised as a joint initiative across the network’s different components, with Dhuumcatu marching alongside Italian extra-parliamentary groups and neighbourhood activists. When the procession paused for speeches, Dhuumcatu leader Bacchu opened the rally by citing a saying attributed to Prophet Mohammad: “The wage of the labourer should be given before his sweat dries.” He delivered the line first in Bangla and then repeated it in Italian for the mixed crowd. The applause that followed did not suggest a shared theology so much as a shared recognition of exploitation. In that moment, the quotation worked as a bridge. It placed Muslim moral language alongside leftist concerns with labour justice without requiring either side to abandon its own vocabulary. Bacchu then continued, still addressing a mixed audience, moving from the prophetic saying to unpaid wages, exploitative contracts, and the bureaucratic violence of residency documents.

Yet the same rally also made visible how uneven this communicative work could be within the alliance. After Bacchu, other speakers addressed the crowd only in Italian, and their speeches thickened with the established language of the Italian left: *proletariato* (proletariat), *borghesia* (bourgeoisie), *materialismo storico* (historical materialism), *lotta di classe* (class struggle), *capitale finanziario* (financial capital), *imperialismo occidentale* (Western imperialism), and many more. For many economic migrants, who had come to Italy primarily to work rather than to join a revolutionary project, this register remained distant even when the themes were not unfamiliar. Their more immediate language of survival was shaped less by ideological categories than by permits and contracts, wage theft, the fear of losing a job, and the endless temporality of offices and appointments. The gap, in other words, was not only linguistic. It also concerned what kind of language felt realistic, what kind of political horizon felt livable, and what kinds of risk could actually be carried.

As the march advanced, this gap appeared again in the street. We passed long rows of Bangladeshi shops that remained open despite the public holiday. Some shopkeepers looked up briefly, waved, or stepped outside for a moment, then returned to their counters. Others watched without moving. A small number joined the march, while many remained at the

edge, visibly sympathetic yet not entering the demonstration itself. Their distance did not necessarily indicate indifference. It could reflect the demands of work, reluctance to assume an explicit political label, limited familiarity with the protest's language and framing, or simply a choice not to participate. The open shops, the people watching from the side, and the specialised political language of the march all suggested that not everyone related to the protest in the same way. They pointed to a gap between working time and protest time, between struggles over residence permits and legal status and the march's leftist language of class and labour, and between different ideas of what counts as political action. Protest assumes availability, while precarious livelihood often demands staying open, especially in a neighbourhood economy where missing a day of work can mean falling behind on rent, remittances, or debt.

I approach these tensions as part of the ordinary difficulty of sustaining a shared politics among people who do not begin from the same histories, moral vocabularies, social positions, or political idioms. These tensions were not confined to the May Day march only. Across the wider political field of Torpignattara, I repeatedly encountered situations in which actors had to make different understandings of leadership, religion, gender, class, and political commitment intelligible to one another without ever fully collapsing them into a common language. In this sense, Mezzadra and Neilson's description of translation as "above all [as] a social praxis," "a material practice forged from below within struggles" helps situate the practical work through which collaboration is attempted (2013, 271–72). Yet this work did not dissolve the difference. What I encountered again and again was close to what they describe: in metropolitan struggles involving migrant workers, "the encounter with the untranslatable is a daily occurrence" (2013, 307). These encounters often took the form of what Tsing calls the "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (2005, 4).

Starting from the May Day scene but moving across the wider political field of Torpignattara, this chapter asks: How do migrants' everyday grievances become shared political demands through these alliances? I examine the work of translation through which differently positioned actors try to make grievances politically intelligible and actionable across differences of leadership, religion, gender, class, and ideology. I trace this process through disputes over leadership and brokerage, the public performance of Islam in protest, contested female participation, tensions around queer politics, unequal exposure to risk and documentation, and divergent political horizons within the alliance. These frictions show that

grievances do not simply become collective demands once an alliance exists. They have to be translated, reframed, negotiated, and sometimes selectively accommodated. Solidarity is therefore sustained not by resolving difference, but by finding enough common ground to continue acting together despite what remains difficult to translate.

4.1 Leadership, Brokerage, and Trust

Dhumcatu and Bacchu occupy a central place in the alliance, particularly on matters of migrant politics. Their prominence has also drawn scrutiny. Questions recur about how the association operates, how decisions are made, how money is handled, and how politics and religion intersect in its public activities. Debates over whether the assistance Dhumcatu provides with documentation, permits, and other bureaucratic procedures should be understood as community service or as a brokerage that produces personal profit have surfaced periodically.

A major point of contention in the solidarity network in recent times was the April 2024 arrest of Bacchu, as reported by the Italian press in connection with allegations including extortion and kidnapping¹⁷. Allegations that he and some associates exploited vulnerable migrants by charging for assistance with residency applications or religious burials, and that intimidation may have been used to settle disputes, immediately divided both Italian activists and members of the Bangladeshi community. Although Bacchu had long been a visible organiser, the episode disrupted an image of cohesion that many had taken for granted. In early December 2025, Bacchu stated on his Facebook page that a court decision lifted his house arrest and that a further hearing was scheduled for 5 February. This self-reported update does

¹⁷ On 11 April 2024, police and the Carabinieri arrested Nure Alam Siddique in Rome. According to Italian press reports, prosecutors with the Rome District Anti-Mafia Directorate (Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia, DDA) allege that he was the instigator (mandante) of a kidnapping that occurred on 30 October 2022 in Torpignattara, reportedly connected to a private debt of €100,000; two other Bangladeshi suspects were reportedly placed under reporting obligations. After an initial period of custody, Siddique was placed under house arrest. By May 2025, during a follow-up visit to Rome, I interviewed him at his residence under a partially relaxed house arrest regime that allowed him to leave home for up to four hours per day. In early December 2025, Siddique stated on his Facebook page that a court decision lifted his house arrest and that a further hearing was scheduled for 5 February. As of this writing, no final judgment in the case has been made public in the sources available to me. In the absence of a court ruling, a scholarly position must remain analytically agnostic: the case is politically consequential, as it shapes Dhumcatu's public image and legitimacy within the community, but it cannot be taken as evidence of legal guilt.

not in itself indicate that the proceedings have ended, but it is relevant for understanding how the case continues to shape public narratives around his leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of the arrest, Dhumcatu and segments of its allied network mobilised a public demonstration in Torpignattara calling for Bacchu's release and denouncing the charges as politically motivated. A video report published by Alanews on 26 May 2024 documents roughly one hundred participants, mostly Bangladeshi residents, migrant workers, and local activists, gathered in the neighbourhood in solidarity with him (Alanews 2024). Protesters held placards asserting that the arrest was a "mistake" and called for "thorough investigations." The footage also captures participants chanting in Bangla, "Mukti chai, mukti chai, Bacchu bhai-er mukti chai," meaning "We demand release, we demand release, we demand Brother Bacchu's release." Among the speakers was Carlo Gaetani, a senior leader of Comunista Internazionale, who argued that Bacchu had become "a target because of his long militancy on behalf of migrant workers and against Western wars." Participants further criticised Italian media for spreading defamatory reports immediately after the arrest, framing the case as part of a broader pattern of repression against migrant self-organisation. Gaetani concluded his speech by saying that the attack on Bacchu is intended to "attack the capacity of immigrant workers to defend themselves, to organise," and to render them "incapable of engaging in politics." Posters expressing solidarity with Bacchu subsequently appeared on walls in parts of Torpignattara.

At the same time, within the broader alliance, internal disagreements emerged about whether to publicly endorse these protests or to withhold judgement while the case remained before the court. An Italian anarchist member of the solidarity network, who asked to remain anonymous, described the division: "We had strong arguments about whether we should support Bacchu or not. There is a faction, including people close to other Bangladeshi community members not involved with Dhumcatu, who have been hearing complaints for a while. When the arrest happened, they did not want to repeat the usual line that he was 'framed' because of his political work. They are not denying the possibility, but they also do not want to give him a clean sheet without knowing everything."

Meanwhile, a member of an anarchist group that runs a multifunctional squatted space in the neighbouring area of Centocelle, who continues to support Dhumcatu's calls for Bacchu's release, offered a more nuanced defense: "He has been a target for years, not only by the authorities but also from within the Bangladeshi community. Some people never liked how

outspoken he was. Yes, we have been constantly criticizing his authoritarian approach and his recent turn towards religion. But the charges against him are absurd. He knows the Italian legal system too well to make such basic mistakes. You would have to be really careless to do what he is accused of doing. And Bacchu is anything but careless.”



Figure 15: A poster on a wall in Torpignattara calling for the release of Dhumcatu leader Bacchu. Photo by Punny Kabir, 18/10/2024.

Likewise, a Bangladeshi man who had previously worked with Dhumcatu but was no longer active explained why several supporters avoided public involvement: “After the arrest, some of us chose to stay quiet. It is not that we believe he is guilty. But it is also not safe for everyone to be visible in this kind of trouble. Some of us have families, papers still pending.

Getting involved in a public campaign is not so easy.” His remarks highlight how administrative precarity and family obligations can erode public solidarity, even among ideological allies. The withdrawal of these figures was noticeable at public events and in online forums. While the association continued to function, attendance declined, particularly among participants who had previously been closely engaged in protests or campaigns.

Ultimately, the episode exposed the fragility of an organising ecology that had grown dependent on a single figure. A circle of Italian and Bangladeshi activists continued to respond to Dhumcatu’s initiatives through poster campaigns, social media updates, and informal meetings to keep the case visible, while others stayed silent and a smaller fraction voiced concerns that had been accumulating over time. Read through Scholz’s account of political solidarity, this ambivalence is not only a split in loyalty but a moment when the alliance is forced into what she calls the duty of “social criticism” attached to the relation to the “cause, goal, or ends,” a critique that “must remain active throughout the course of the movement” and that is also “turned back on the solidary group and solidaristic activity itself... to avoid the antinomies of action for social change” (Scholz 2008, 13). In this sense, the emerging criticisms were directed not only at an individual but at the alliance’s own practices of leadership, accountability, and dependence, and at how these practices might undermine the very cause the network claims to serve.

Besides, outside the network, the Bangladeshi community has divergent views on Bacchu. For example, Hasan, a well-settled Bangladeshi man in his late fifties who has lived in the neighbourhood for nearly thirty years and owns a large grocery store, offered a layered but ultimately affirmative perspective. He told me that he has known Bacchu “all his life” in Rome and is well aware of “his ups and downs” as well as “all the controversies around him.” Still, Hasan affirms, Bacchu remains “the only one” who has consistently tried to do something for the community. Hasan himself does not identify with “left” or “right” political ideologies. His engagements are grounded more in communal responsibility than in ideological alignment. Nevertheless, he makes a point to participate in most demonstrations and protests organised by Dhumcatu, where he has become familiar with some of Bacchu’s Italian allies. He appreciates what he calls the “solidarity” that these joint actions enable, and sees Bacchu’s role as important in maintaining the community’s visibility in the public sphere.

By contrast, another long-term Torpignattara resident of Bangladeshi origin, whom I pseudonymously call Mohabbat, offered a sharply critical view. Mohabbat, who owns a restaurant in “Banglatown”, perceives Bacchu as someone who surrounds himself with “losers”: people he describes as “good-for-nothing” followers who idolize him uncritically. In Mohabbat’s view, Dhumcatu frequently “picks up issues” not out of genuine political concern but to “instrumentalize” them for personal or organisational gain. “They do it to make a name and stay relevant,” he said, accusing Bacchu of converting his symbolic capital as a community leader into tangible “real capital” through his brokerage business. In Mohabbat’s account, Bacchu is less a political actor than a savvy “social entrepreneur” and an “opportunist” who transforms communal grievances into resources for consolidating influence and extracting value.

These strongly contrasting views reflect a deeper ambivalence surrounding the figure of the migrant leader. Among many working-class Bangladeshis in Torpignattara, political brokers like Bacchu occupy a paradoxical position. On the one hand, they are often indispensable intermediaries, especially for newly arrived or linguistically disadvantaged migrants who struggle to navigate the bureaucratic landscape of residency permits, job contracts, housing papers, and health registrations. On the other hand, they are also treated as opaque actors whose motives are questioned, and whose “help” is sometimes experienced as extractive.

This ambivalence surfaced repeatedly in my everyday field encounters. In long conversations with newcomers about documentation struggles and settlement pressures, dissatisfaction with the wider brokerage landscape in the neighbourhood came up often. More than once, interlocutors asked me to connect them with “Italian” or “international” human rights associations or NGOs, explicitly because they wanted to avoid Bangladeshi brokers after direct experiences of scams or after hearing similar accounts from people they trusted. In those moments, I was not approached primarily as a researcher but as someone who might have access to alternative channels of help that were perceived as safer, more regulated, or less entangled in local networks of obligation and profit.

Such requests were possible precisely because many migrants already knew that free or low-cost assistance exists through municipal helpdesks, NGOs, and volunteer groups, including city-run integration centres and church-based charities that offer translation, legal advice, and paperwork support. The problem, as interlocutors framed it, was less the existence of these services than the difficulty of actually using them: long waiting times, uncertainty about

procedures, limited Italian, and discomfort with unfamiliar institutional environments often made access feel fragile and unpredictable. Against this backdrop, brokers like Dhumcatu's services are experienced by many as immediately reachable: offered in Bangla, in a familiar cultural frame, within the neighbourhood, and in an office that feels legible and close at hand.

Yet this accessibility comes at a cost. The service fees at Dhumcatu are, by Bacchu's own admission, arbitrarily determined. He told me that they charge different rates for different socio-economic groups: one fee for the wealthy, another for middle-income individuals, and a reduced or waived fee for those in poverty. In principle, this flexible pricing model reflects a commitment to community equity. In practice, however, it introduces opacity, as there is no fixed fee structure, no receipts, and no official regulation. While some users appreciate the sliding scale, others suspect favoritism or personal profit-making.

On Bacchu's desk sit two clearly marked donation boxes, one for the mosque he helps operate and another for the project of establishing a Muslim graveyard on the outskirts of Rome. The boxes signal aspiration and authority at once, but they also illuminate the classed political economy through which Dhumcatu's "greater causes" are financed. During fieldwork, I repeatedly saw that Dhumcatu's religious and communal campaigns drew support from across Banglatown's stratified social field, including from wealthy business owners, entrepreneurs, and political figures who relied on the labour of poor and undocumented co-ethnics in their own businesses under highly exploitative conditions, marked by very long hours and very low pay. This contradiction was visible not only in everyday talk about donations but also in the staging of public programmes, where lists of chief guests and special guests often featured elite members of the community. In principle, Dhumcatu's politics positioned it against the exploitation of poor and undocumented workers. In practice, however, some of these same employers, entrepreneurs, and political actors reappeared within its public sphere as donors, sponsors, and honoured guests, with their contributions sometimes announced over the microphone before they were invited to speak. At a children's drawing competition organised by Dhumcatu to mark an important date of Bangladesh's independence war, for example, the chief guest was a wealthy and politically influential leader from the Rome branch of the Awami League, the ruling party in Bangladesh at the time. His speech had little to do with the children's drawings and turned instead into partisan propaganda. I cannot confirm whether he financed that particular event, but his prominence on the stage made visible a broader moral and political economy in which communal programmes became occasions for powerful figures to display influence,

generosity, and proximity to “the community.” Donations and public sponsorship thus worked as means of converting wealth into respectability, allowing elite figures to accumulate social and religious capital through an organisation that claimed to represent collective needs. This arrangement could help sustain communal infrastructure, but it also generated controversy because it could blunt Dhumcatu’s capacity, or willingness, to side unequivocally with the poorest workers when grievances implicated the very figures who financed, sponsored, or publicly performed generosity on its platform.

Analytically, the problem is not that collective organising requires resources. The grey zone emerges because Dhumcatu’s work is simultaneously described as voluntary, demanded as continuous, and experienced as infrastructural: it involves mediation, representation, and day-to-day administrative guidance in a documentation regime that forces migrants into repeated bureaucratic exposure. Where stable and transparent forms of remuneration are absent, money tends to enter through informal streams such as donations, patronage, or discretionary “contributions,” and then organisational authority becomes harder to disentangle from unequal relations within the community. In such settings, funding disputes are rarely only about “transparency.” They are also struggling over who can claim to represent migrants, which relationships must be protected for organisational survival, and which conflicts can be carried publicly without jeopardising the organisation’s standing.

Recent work on Italy’s legal-administrative intermediation field helps clarify why these legitimacy struggles persist in spaces where solidarity and money coexist. Bonizzoni, De Blasis, and Lampredi describe a varied and loosely regulated field marked by “blurred boundaries between licit and illicit practices” (2025, 1625), in which intermediaries must repeatedly justify what counts as acceptable conduct while operating close to the everyday coercions and temptations generated by legal precarity. They conceptualise this as “ethical boundary work,” which they define as “the process through which actors define and sustain identity divisions by applying different ethical lenses to shared challenges” (Bonizzoni, De Blasis, and Lampredi 2025, 1625). Crucially, they note that an actor’s ethical self-presentation often takes shape through contrast, since “a role’s ethical dimension often emerges in contrast to the perceived unethical behavior of others” (Bonizzoni, De Blasis, and Lampredi 2025, 1625). Read with this frame, the controversies surrounding Dhumcatu are not reducible to individual virtue or individual corruption. They point to an organisational vulnerability that is structurally produced: when community-based advocacy and intermediation require sustained labour but lack accountable funding mechanisms, legitimacy

is continuously negotiated through moral boundary claims, and authority is continually contested through accusations that the line between solidarity, representation, and extraction has been crossed. In Torpignattara, that boundary work is not only about fees or paperwork practices; it also concerns the ethics of funding and public recognition in a stratified community, and it shapes how claims to speak “for migrants” are enabled and constrained by the unequal relations that make organisational survival possible.

Even so, these tensions do not simply weaken Dhumcatu’s position; they also shape how it is read and used by potential allies. For Italian activists, the association appears at once as an indispensable point of access to Bangladeshi workers and as a contested, sometimes mistrusted broker whose authority is not uncontested within the community. The fragility of its leadership and the ambivalence of some Bangladeshi interlocutors mean that solidarity cannot be taken for granted, but has to be continually renegotiated around concrete issues and events.

4.2 Public Performance of Islam as a Protest Language

It was a Saturday in October 2023. The Dhumcatu Association co-organised a demonstration in Torpignattara in support of Palestine and against war. Led by Bacchu and joined by several Italian organisations, the gathering began in the early afternoon at a neighbourhood intersection. The initial turnout was modest. Organisers rehearsed the order of the procession and positioned banners and placards in Arabic, Italian, Bangla, and English. The largest banner read in Italian: “Liberazione della Palestina, Liberazione del Proletariato,” explicitly translating a distant conflict into a class idiom for Italian left audiences.

Before the march started, participants gathered in a square where women of Bangladeshi origin stood together with children nearby, a typical scene of gender-based grouping. A large group of men and boys from local madrasas assembled in traditional attire (long khameez, beards, Islamic caps). The organising team placed women at the front, followed by others in two lines with a central gap to elongate the procession visually. From the outset, the march addressed multiple publics: multilingual signs and outward-facing slogans for the neighbourhood and the city; an internal choreography oriented to community expectations.

With the microphone, Bacchu led chants: “Palestina libera,” “Free, free Palestine.” He then invited a Palestinian student from Sapienza University to address the crowd, who thanked his Bangladeshi friends at the university for standing by the Palestinian people at such a crucial time. Several Bangladeshi university students, men and women, were present; some had been active in Palestine mobilisations elsewhere in Rome. The Bangladeshi contingent included many faces not usually seen at Torpignattara protests, especially young men from religious schools (identifiable by their caps and tunics) and women in burqas and niqabs who were not the ‘regular’ actors of the neighbourhood’s protest scenario. The number of Italian participants was lower than at some earlier events, probably because other marches were taking place elsewhere in the city at the same time. In their speeches, those present condemned the violence in Gaza, U.S. imperialism, and the war economy. During the demonstration, music became a test case. Resistance songs and a national anthem were played over the loudspeaker. Anticipating objections, Bacchu acknowledged that some religious figures might disapprove, but he insisted such songs were essential to the march’s repertoire. Here, translation did not dissolve what remained unshareable: the secular, even revolutionary musical traditions were placed into a space where some might find them uncomfortable, yet they were deemed necessary to maintain the multi-ethnic protest culture.

Similarly, gender ordering operated in a distinctive way. Women led the banner; men formed a double line behind. Yet two Bangladeshi-origin women, one in hijab, the other wearing a keffiyeh, addressed the crowd over the microphone.

As the procession moved through Torpignattara, residents watched from sidewalks, windows, and balconies. The familiar grammar of protest—multilingual placards, chants, short speeches—coexisted with local dynamics: careful internal ordering, visible religiosity, and the presence of neighbourhood-based Italian groups. Translation here was not only interlingual; it was inter-political. Distinct political languages, religious obligation, human-rights discourse, and anti-imperialist critique were placed in adjacency so they could act together without being resolved into a single idiom.

Cristina, from Comunista Internazionale, addressed onlookers directly, urging them to “come down and join.” She argued that the suffering of the oppressed is legible through shared class experience, criticized individualist comforts, and called for normalizing migration rather than criminalizing it; nationalism, she warned, serves capital. Her speech translated a distant war

into a local class narrative and invited bystanders to recognise a stake in what might otherwise seem a remote conflict.

Comunista Internazionale distributed two multilingual leaflets, one outlining the organisation's principles, another supporting the day's action and the Palestinian cause, in Bangla, English, and Italian. The leaflets recognised that participants arrived with divergent frameworks and offered parallel entry points: practical explanations seeking overlap without imposing uniformity.

When the procession reached another large square in the neighbourhood and the Bangladeshi contingent paused to pray, Italian allies instinctively stepped to the margins. Those who remained did not simply stand still. Some used the pause as a break: they lit cigarettes, drifted toward the surrounding little bars, and took a quick beer or coffee while keeping an eye on the group. The moment made visible two different ways of inhabiting the same demonstration without interrupting it. For the Bangladeshi participants, the prayer was a shared religious ritual carried out within the demonstration. At the same time, in a march framed as solidarity with Palestine, the prayer also carried an additional political resonance, since many of those being invoked and defended were understood as fellow Muslims. The separation was temporary and respectful, and when the prayer ended, people re-formed the lines and the procession resumed.

Still, not everyone stayed. Some quietly left during the prayer break. Among those who left, I later had the opportunity to speak with someone during a gathering organised around the discussion of a booklet published by an anarchist association. The publication addressed a recent incident in which a CPR (detention centre for migrants) was set on fire. This individual is affiliated with Torpignattara Solidale and frequently participates in its events. The conversation turned, almost inevitably, to who shows up to what. He began with a general observation about participation, saying that Bangladeshis rarely take part in political initiatives that fall outside what he called their own "syllabus." Then he gestured to the room we were in: "Look, none of them are here today."

From there, he moved to the demonstration in Torpignattara. In his view, the occasions that reliably draw a strong Bangladeshi turnout are Palestine-related mobilisations, which he read primarily through a religious register. "You'll see strong participation in Palestine-related programmes," he said, "and that's because they are Muslims." He added that his own relationship to the Palestinian struggle was structured differently: "I see the struggle in

Palestine from a very different perspective.” When I asked him about that particular march, he said he had been present but left at the moment of the prayer pause. “I was present at the demonstration that day in Torpignattara,” he explained, “but I left when they began to pray.” He described this not as a conflict but as a hesitation, and he framed it as something others shared: “Many of us left at that point because we weren’t sure how to respond.” I asked directly whether the prayer break had annoyed him. His answer began with a personal positioning: “I am not religious. I was not even baptized. I am reluctant about religion.” But he immediately qualified this reluctance by locating it within an Italian social landscape where public religiosity is not unfamiliar. “As an Italian, I am used to being around different religious events and festivals,” he said, “as people here are very religious.” From there, he described the prayer as something he could accept as a normal difference rather than something he opposed. “The Muslims have a different religion; they will pray differently, that is normal,” he said. He even assumed that permission had been sought: “I guess they also took permission from the authorities for the prayer, so I have no problem.” What remained difficult for him was not the right to pray, but his own place in that moment. “But I did not see how I could participate,” he concluded. “That’s it.”

This anecdote points to the subtle boundaries that can surface even within shared action. When the Bangladeshi contingent paused to pray, the ritual, as a public expression of Muslim identity, briefly exceeded what some Italian allies felt able to inhabit, producing a quiet moment of separation in the crowd. Notably, the activist who left did not describe his departure as anger or refusal. He framed it as uncertainty: he did not know what his role could be during a religious act inside a secular demonstration. His remarks suggest that agreement on the political issue does not automatically generate a shared protest form. People may oppose the same violence or exclusion, yet express that opposition through different repertoires and meanings.

This is one way an action can become “untranslatable” within an alliance. In the absence of a shared grammar of aims, the same performance can be read as piety by one side, treated as culture-war material by opponents, and remain politically opaque to class-oriented comrades who do not know how to place it. The effect is not simply misunderstanding; it is a friction produced by the coexistence of different political languages that run alongside each other without fully merging.

Mezzadra and Neilson help clarify why such moments matter. For them, building common ground depends on a “labour of translation” that is material and open-ended and that must “insist on the singularity of social experience” rather than flatten difference (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 277–78). Read through this lens, a highly codified ritual inserted into a protest can become difficult to translate across the alliance: instead of doing the work of making heterogeneous experiences speak to one another, it may harden the very gaps that translation would need to work across.

This is where Yuval-Davis helps specify what is at stake. If religion is simultaneously sacred, cultural, and political, then conflicts around its public visibility cannot be reduced either to private belief or to questions of policy and regulation alone (Yuval-Davis 2011, 116, 121). In Torpignattara, collective prayer, hijab, or campaigns around mosque space are not only religious expressions; they also operate as public signs that reorganise relationships within a mixed alliance and invite competing readings from allies and opponents. In this context, what some Bangladeshi participants experience as ordinary religious practice within a march can be read by some Italian allies as strategic, even as a “populist” register of mobilisation, precisely because it is performed publicly and attached to a political cause.

At the same time, these frictions cannot be understood as a simple clash between “religious” migrants and a neutral secular public sphere. Following Asad, I treat “the secular” as a historically contingent set of sensibilities that shapes what counts as acceptable public religion and how religious acts are perceived, tolerated, or problematised (Asad 2003, 1, 191). Read this way, the discomfort voiced by some Italian activists is not only an individual reaction. It is also an effect of a secular political culture in which religious ritual inside a demonstration can appear as an interruption, an ambiguity, or an excess, even when the broader political aim is shared.

One of Bacchu’s longstanding “comrades”, Matteo (pseudonym), explained: “Bacchu and I have been working together in the Roman protest scenario for almost 30 years. I closely observed the ups and downs of his life, and so did he. While Bacchu learned the vocabulary of the Italian leftist politics, we also learned a lot about the everyday grievances of migrants from Bacchu. Together, with other comrades, we crafted ways to weave those issues into the political scene. He was more leftist than a Muslim. But lately, he seems more interested in portraying himself as an Islamic leader. But that does not stop me from calling him a comrade. I guess some events in his personal life influenced him on this path.” Matteo also

acknowledged that broader political dynamics might have contributed to this shift: “The anti-Islam stance in society and politics is becoming more vivid these days. This can also reinforce his Muslim identity.” His observation resonates with Frederiks’s insight that religion often becomes a means of resilience and re-signification in the migrant condition: “religion sustains people in times of difficulty... it can serve as an identity marker in a new context or as a source for reconciliation and healing in cases where the story of migration and the migrant’s experiences have been humiliating, hurtful, violent or demeaning” (Frederiks 2015, 186-187). In this light, Bacchu’s evolving public religiosity may be read not simply as an ideological reorientation but as a reassertion of dignity and belonging in a context where migrants, and particularly Muslim men, are continually stigmatized. Religion here functions both as a moral refuge and as a renewed language of political self-definition.

Matteo also reflected on how Bacchu’s transformation has “affected” the community, especially after a series of headline-grabbing actions. In 2016, for instance, the mass prayer held beside the Colosseum to protest the closure of informal mosques in Rome produced a highly visible public scene and quickly became a focus of debate. As Matteo put it, the event “galvanized Bangladeshi migrants under a religious banner in a way that previous, purely labour-rights activism had not.” He added that ever since, some of his “comrades” in the broader centre-left circle have occasionally hinted at “Islamism” when talking about their alliance with Dhuumcatu. In Matteo’s telling, the phrase was not used as a neutral description, but as a suspicious shorthand, a way of naming unease about what it means for secular left actors to share a platform with a migrant organisation that increasingly stages Islam publicly.

That unease also draws on a wider European polemical vocabulary that has formed around visible Muslim politics. In some uses, “Islamism” is invoked to imagine, or defend, alliances between leftist movements and Muslim publics around shared anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist commitments. In other uses, and in a harsher register, labels such as “Islamofascism” are mobilised to cast public Islamic visibility itself as inherently authoritarian or incompatible with secular democratic life. What Matteo’s recollection helps show is how the Colosseum prayer did not remain a one-off protest tactic. It became a legible public sign that invited interpretation, suspicion, and strategic framing, both from opponents and from uneasy allies. In this sense, the episode also resonates with analyses of how Islam is managed and read in European public space. Cesari notes that institutional engagement with Islam can simultaneously invite cooperation and yet treat visible practices as political

provocation, reshaping Islamic authority while framing public Islam as a challenge to secular citizenship (Cesari 2014, 7).

For example, one Italian anarchist activist expressed anxiety about authoritarianism and transnational funding: “One of our core values is the anti-fascist movement. We stand against the fascist side of the right wing, who are intolerant and white supremacists. But we are also aware of the fact that there are fascist elements in the way many of the Muslim-majority countries run their governments. They are undemocratic and oppressors of their minorities. Some of these countries are rich, and they are infiltrating the Muslim migrant networks all over the world. This is a concern for us and makes the situation more complicated.”

Dhumcatu’s increasing emphasis on Islam, while effective in mobilising segments of the Bangladeshi community, also generated significant friction on multiple fronts, both internally and externally. Within the Bangladeshi community, reactions were mixed: many felt a sense of pride and empowerment in seeing their faith publicly affirmed and defended against state encroachment, while others were more hesitant about this overtly religious turn. For some, like activist Malek (pseudonym), a key turning point was a 2007 demonstration in central Rome calling for the regularization of migrants’ papers. The march coincided with the Maghrib (sunset) prayer, and, as he recalled, “During the protest, it became time for Maghrib, and Bacchu asked the khatib of a mosque who was present as a participant of the event to give the call to prayer. It was the first time such a thing happened in Rome.” For Malek and others, that moment, when public prayer was folded into a political march at Piazza Vittorio, marked a historic breakthrough. Tarek later framed it as the groundwork for what followed: open-air Eid prayers that now take place annually in some 30 to 35 locations across Rome, with police providing security. “It started with that first open-air prayer at Piazza Vittorio, and now it has grown into a tradition. Every year, Eid prayers take place in the open, and the community has secured the right to do this in public spaces,” Malek noted.

One of the most widely discussed public events organised by Dhumcatu was a protest followed by a collective prayer in October 2016. On a Friday in late October, hundreds of people gathered near the Colosseum to protest the municipal closure of informal Muslim prayer rooms in Rome’s eastern districts, including Torpignattara. *La Repubblica* framed the event as a peaceful appeal for the recognition of Muslim worship spaces, while Reuters reported that demonstrators carried placards such as “Peace” and “Open the mosques” (*La Repubblica* 2016; Reuters 2016). By contrast, right-wing political actors, most notably the

Lega Nord, condemned the authorization as “a provocation” (ANSA 2016), highlighting the polarized response. The gathering was notable not only for the large turnout of Muslim worshippers but also for the visible presence of Italian allies from leftist and anti-racist collectives, who joined in solidarity yet stood apart during the prayer itself. Moreover, staging the event before one of Rome’s most internationally recognizable monuments drew international media attention, as coverage presented it as a highly visible assertion of Muslim civic presence and a plea for religious accommodation in Italy (The Guardian 2016; BBC News 2016).

Arman, an influential figure from the second generation of Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara, said: “The mass prayer in front of the Colosseum was a special event because there was an ongoing operation to shut down small mosques. So, it was a symbolic act of protest; I get it. Since then, they have continued to do this at other political gatherings and protests where there is no such connection. Other religious communities are unlikely to occupy public space during a political demonstration to hold prayers. This stirs controversy and gives the right-wing more reason to portray us as non-secular and undemocratic.”

Arman’s concern points to the double-edged effects of visibility. Public Islamic signs can consolidate participation and communicate collective presence, but they can also be seized upon by hostile actors to frame Muslims as incompatible with secular civic life. Allievi documents that far-right actors repeatedly capitalize on mosque controversies and visible Islamic signs. The British National Party “capitalized successfully on the case of the mosque in Stoke-on-Trent” to win local council seats, while similar campaigns fueled support for the Austrian FPÖ (Allievi 2009, 70). Catholic leaders in Austria warned that “the threat was not Muslims but rather the political groups that were mobilizing against Islam,” exploiting hostility “for their own purposes” (Allievi 2009, 77).

When asked about potential conflicts, Massimo, a seasoned communist activist whom I mentioned earlier in the thesis, offered a pragmatic yet more nuanced perspective: “As an association and as communists, we are atheists; we don’t believe in religion. In some cases, this might create tensions, but we believe it’s they who need to understand that, well, maybe God can help them, but for your rights, you have to fight yourself. You can’t just turn to God.” He emphasised a crucial line in their approach: “But we can’t be the ones, as Westerners, to say this. They need to realize it for themselves that if they don’t take action, no one else will, not even God. That’s our position.” This stance encapsulates a delicate labour

of translation: acknowledging and engaging with the religious identities of their allies as an unavoidable reality, while subtly, indirectly promoting a secular, self-emancipatory political praxis. As Massimo articulated, “We don’t make a big deal out of it, we have to deal with it. Today, many Arab, Bangladeshi, and Central African communities are Muslim. We can’t avoid engaging with them just because they’re Muslim. We try to engage with that contradiction and involve one another.”

4.3 Gendered Limits of Participation

In Torpignattara’s Bangladeshi community, gender roles sharply shape solidarity and expose clear “limits of inclusion” rooted in different migration experiences, unequal economic agency, and entrenched patriarchy. Among Bangladeshi migrants legally residing in Italy, 76.7 percent are men and 23.3 percent are women (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2023, 6). Most Bangladeshi women are housewives who arrived through family reunification visas, and their expected duties, including childbirth, child-rearing, and household management, anchor them firmly in the private sphere. For many, this domestic focus provides little incentive or opportunity to learn Italian, a gap that in turn limits their autonomy, integration, and ability to participate in public life.

Women’s paths into activism often begin through “private” channels such as care work, language classes, and legal aid, rather than formal political organisations. This private/public divide carries secular, gendered assumptions that can devalue women’s agency. For Bangladeshi women in Torpignattara, religion and gender are deeply intertwined: struggles over modesty, prayer spaces, and family roles are political precisely because they span sacred, cultural, and social domains. In practice, this means women’s concerns often appear as personal or cultural issues until circumstances force them into the political arena.

Italian NGO workers emphasise language acquisition as a crucial first step toward empowering women. Gabriella, a teacher at Altramente (a local social centre for migrant women), noted that “the process of economic migration... prepares men and women very differently”. Men typically endure a perilous, irregular journey that forces them into immediate engagement with the new environment – learning its language and rules out of necessity. In stark contrast, their wives often arrive by plane with visas, bypassing those

dangers. For many women, it is their first time abroad, and they have often never worked outside the home in Bangladesh. As Gabriella put it, “this whole package makes them very naive about having an idea of a foreign land”. Men face intense pressure to learn Italian and navigate daily life, whereas women are not subjected to that same urgency. This creates a significant linguistic and cultural barrier that limits women’s independent agency and political participation. Still, Gabriella observed that some women do learn Italian, especially when their young children begin attending Italian schools; mothers often learn alongside their children to communicate with teachers. By contrast, women who arrive with older children have much less immediate incentive. Gabriella shared a poignant anecdote: one student had struggled with Italian for years, but when her husband suddenly fell ill, and she had to take their children to school and find work, she finally learned, “it often comes for them the hard way”. Gabriella’s point is not only that a crisis can accelerate language learning, but that it forces an encounter with institutions in which the ability to speak, interpret documents, and press claims becomes unavoidable. This resonates with Fraser’s argument, developed in her critique of needs interpretation and the politics of discourse, that inequalities are reproduced not only through material distribution but also through unequal access to “the socio-cultural means of interpretation and communication,” including the recognised vocabularies and idioms through which claims become intelligible in public life (Fraser 1986, 426). In such settings, those who lack these resources are structurally hindered from participating “on a par” in communicative interaction, even when the need is urgent and the stakes are immediate (Fraser 1986, 426).

Despite these barriers, a nascent cohort of women entrepreneurs has emerged in Torpignattara, creating new spaces of economic agency and visibility. Women now own boutique clothing shops, beauty salons, and restaurants, and they frequently insist that earning an independent income is fundamental to empowerment – even without fluent Italian. This might seem to contradict standard integration narratives, but Torpignattara increasingly functions as a semi-ghettoized enclave: with many Bangladeshi employers and customers, one can indeed operate without Italian. For example, one entrepreneur recounted that two women in her clothing shop speak no Italian yet maintain vibrant social lives because their own earnings let them go out with other women for coffee or shopping, fostering a sense of autonomy apart from their husbands. Beyond entrepreneurs, some Bangladeshi women now work in grocery stores, restaurants, caregiving jobs, or as home tutors teaching Bangla or Arabic to younger generations. Long-time residents confirm this is a gradual shift: women’s

visibility in the workforce is slowly increasing, signaling a perceptible change in gender roles.

Consider Sultana, who runs a women's clothing store and a women's association for female entrepreneurship. She started with just ten garments 26 years ago; now she employs four women and helps others become self-sufficient. Dressed in hijab and saree, Sultana rejects "hard" *pardah* and asserts that "Islam encouraged women to work and earn, and to support the household better" – adding that preachers who insist women stay home "are not real Muslims... [they] terrify us and make Italians more terrified of us". Though her association is not overtly political, its members take stands on community issues: Sultana reported that they joined a recent anti-racist demonstration in Torpignattara. She also recounted her own experience with racism: when she first opened her shop, she endured slurs and even had bottles of foul-smelling liquid thrown in her store. Yet she noted a positive change: "Now many Italians come to my shop and buy dresses. They even buy bridal dresses from my shop".

Despite these gains, patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched. Women typically work outside the home only when pushed by extreme economic need or explicitly permitted by their husbands, highlighting that earning an income is often a concession rather than a right. Many women must even secure permission to attend language school; some arrive at class fully veiled (niqab or burqa) even when assured no men will be present, underscoring the constant negotiation of public space and religious norms. If attending school or getting a job is already so fraught, participating in street protests is an even greater leap – requiring exceptional courage, agency, and often explicit permission from male relatives.

Yet a dedicated group of women does engage in public political programmes, often through Dhumcatu. For example, Subarna, Bacchu's sister in law, works as a cultural mediator for an Italian association that supports vulnerable Bangladeshi women. Describing her work, she explained that she deals with "cases at police stations, hospitals, schools, involving Bangladeshi women," ranging from domestic abuse to extramarital affairs and abandonment. She also observed that these women "only come for help when the situation is too bad," suggesting that many endure severe distress before seeking support outside the family. She attributes this to two linked vulnerabilities: language barriers and non-citizen status. Non-citizen women, she warned, are "the most vulnerable". Subarna stressed that formal citizenship would transform their prospects: "When you are a citizen, you can claim your

rights. This is very important for them to understand,” she said, explaining that Dhuumcatu aims to convey to women the importance of learning Italian, working, and becoming active in the community. Dhuumcatu activists like her campaign for policy changes (e.g., reducing residency years for citizenship, automatic citizenship for migrant-born children) to turn personal precarity into collective demands. Yet Subarna lamented that turnout from Bangladeshi women for these campaigns remains low “no matter how hard we try to convey it,” she said. She linked this lack of participation not to a single cause but to overlapping constraints: the heavy burden of child raising and household duties, restrictions within families that limit women’s mobility and time, and, in many cases, a basic unawareness of the campaigns and their stakes.

Class also shapes women’s participation. A visible minority of educated, middle-class women, entrepreneurs, language tutors, and community leaders are using migration as a platform for upward mobility. But this contrasts sharply with the daily reality of the majority: women with little education, minimal Italian, and heavy domestic or care burdens. Read with Fraser’s critique of neoliberal “empowerment,” this contrast matters analytically. As she warns, “A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now celebrates female entrepreneurs,” while neoliberalism can recast intensified exploitation as emancipation, “turn[ing] a sow’s ear into a silk purse by elaborating a narrative of female empowerment” (Fraser 2013). For many women in Torpignattara, migration often doubles the weight of life, layering economic survival on top of existing social expectations. The result is that empowerment through migration is unevenly distributed. In practice, women’s political engagement in Torpignattara is thin and class-skewed: the few women who speak at meetings or appear publicly tend to be educated, documented, and time-flexible; their visibility does not translate into broader participation. Most Bangladeshi women I met live with economic and legal insecurity, juggling low-wage jobs, caregiving, language barriers, and residency precarity, so the costs of showing up in public often outweigh any perceived benefits. Religious respectability norms and community surveillance further narrow what is deemed acceptable behavior, leading many women to self-limit their visibility or be kept at the margins of the local political field. The picture that emerges is a highly stratified terrain: a small entrepreneurial cohort can act publicly, while most women remain structurally sidelined in collective decision-making.

The influence of conservative Islamic currents adds another layer of constraint to the neighbourhood’s political and social field. Many local “Islamic cultural centres” (informal

mosques or madrasas) periodically invite Salafi- or Wahhabi-oriented preachers who promote more orthodox interpretations of Islam, while mosque committee members – often recognised as local leaders – also circulate into neighbourhood political events, where their presence can extend moral authority beyond strictly religious settings. Redwan (a former Dhuumcatu member) framed this in explicitly transnational terms: he noted that Torpignattara’s mosques often invite “more conservative Islamic scholars from the UK Bangladeshi diaspora,” and added that many mosque-based networks feel they are “lagging behind” the UK diaspora in conservatism. For him, the shift was not only doctrinal but classed and infrastructural: he linked stricter moral projects to the expansion of a “middle class” in Torpignattara, arguing that they are increasingly willing to invest in “controlling the moral boundary.” Samiha, a 32-year-old recent migrant to Rome who arrived as a wife after leaving a banking-sector job in Dhaka, echoed this sense of intensified boundary work by inverting the common expectation that Europe necessarily produces “progressive values”: having grown up in a peripheral area of Dhaka, she remarked, “one would think that a diaspora in Europe must have more progressive values, but the community here is more ‘backdated’ than any random area in Dhaka, or even in whole Bangladesh.” Yuval-Davis’s argument helps clarify what is at stake here: religion relates to the sacred but is lived through everyday social boundaries and norms (Yuval-Davis 2011, 116), and projects that police communal respectability often make the patriarchal family and the control of women central to moral order (Yuval-Davis 2011, 130). The effect is less a simple “importation” of conservatism than a locally reproduced regime of respectability, where moral authority consolidates around gender-regulatory norms framed as communal authenticity, narrowing the space for intersectional feminist claims and cross-community coalition and displacing questions of social injustice with debates over “proper” gendered conduct and communal boundaries. These tensions also spill into public space: during my fieldwork, anti-fundamentalist graffiti – “Maolana nipat jak” (Down with fundamentalism) – appeared in the neighbourhood at least twice, and each time it was quickly erased, only to reappear later. Rather than reading it as a one-off provocation, the cycle of inscription and removal suggested a material glimpse of an ongoing, low-level struggle over moral authority and the right to define the neighbourhood’s public face.



Figure 16: Graffiti beside a Bangladeshi-run grocery shop in Torpignattara. The remaining Bangla word “Maolana”, meaning an Islamic cleric (often used locally as a shorthand for religious fundamentalism), is visible; the original slogan read “Maolana nipat jak”, meaning “down with the fundamentalism”, but it was later partially erased. Photo by Punny Kabir, 14/09/2023.

Overall, questions of gender equality and women’s participation reveal some of the starkest contradictions in the Bangladeshi-Italian solidarity network: both within Dhumcatu and among its Italian left allies, patriarchal norms persist, creating frictions that everyone tacitly recognises but struggles to confront, and that repeatedly test the inclusiveness of the Torpignattara coalition. As Davide (Torpignattara Solidale) put it, these frictions expose the “limits of inclusion” in solidarity itself, because the issue is not only whether migrant claims are supported but also who is recognised as a legitimate political subject inside the alliance. This is precisely the problem Nancy Fraser theorises in *Scales of Justice*, where justice is not reducible to redistribution or recognition but also hinges on the “who” of justice—her framing question is, “who counts as a bonafide subject of justice?” (Fraser 2009, 5).

In Torpignattara, that “who” is unevenly distributed: Bangladeshi women are present in the social world of the network, yet they are far less present as agenda-setters, public speakers, or recognised leaders, and this imbalance is sustained through everyday decisions about representation, voice, and legitimacy—mechanisms that can leave some actors “wrongly excluded from consideration” even within movements that define themselves as anti-racist

and pro-migrant (Fraser 2009, 6). The resulting question is therefore not an abstract appeal to “intersectionality” but a concrete test of membership and voice: can the coalition confront gender oppression alongside immigrant oppression without treating women’s claims as secondary to unity, and, in practical terms, who gets to speak, who gets to lead, and who is recognised as a full equal member of this solidarity? Dhumcatu itself has been sharply criticized as a male-dominated organisation. Italian anarchist organiser Davide said bluntly: “Is it a movement of the Bangladeshi community, or is it a movement of Bangladeshi men?” My observations confirmed his critique. Women in the community are largely marginalized in formal leadership. At meetings or protests, those labeled as “leaders” are often visible only through family ties to prominent men. As Davide noted, “Bacchu’s wife and Bacchu’s brother’s wives are the ones... taking some position... I don’t see that they could, or even intend to, contest him”. In effect, women’s public roles tend to be symbolic or supportive, not autonomous.

Dhumcatu’s policies on family matters further illustrate these norms. In a candid reflection, Bacchu admitted that Dhumcatu consistently refuses to assist husbands in filing complaints against their wives, even in unpleasant domestic situations. “Let’s say a wife has had two or three extramarital affairs; we still won’t help the husband file a case against her. That’s just how we operate,” he said. Yet, when asked whether the organisation supports women in seeking a divorce, his tone shifted: “There are always ways to reconcile. That’s our stance. We don’t assist with divorce... Yes, I agree that Islam allows it... But we don’t want to be involved in that.” These statements reveal the ambivalence and limits of Dhumcatu’s progressive commitments, especially regarding gender justice. This selective alignment complicates the image of Dhumcatu as consistently leftist in a broader feminist sense; it highlights how the organisation navigates a negotiated and sometimes contradictory terrain.

Bacchu offered a partial defense. He pointed out that Dhumcatu participates in International Women’s Day events, has a women’s wing for issues affecting women, and even marched in a feminist rally in Rome. He also mentioned that during his legal troubles (including house arrest), his wife and sister-in-law led Dhumcatu and kept its work alive. “This journey made them stronger and set an example to the other women.” Said Bacchu.

Importantly, Italian activists also acknowledge their own blind spots. Davide stressed that patriarchal structures cut across cultures. “Some [on the Italian left] still act like it’s the 1970s, dismissing gender as a secondary issue or even calling it a capitalist conspiracy...

Patriarchy is deeply embedded in society, just like class,” Davide said. In some anarchist/leftist circles, gender equality is still dismissed as “bourgeois” or less urgent. This observation underscores that gender asymmetry is not solely a “foreign” problem but a shared structural issue. This is also why it matters how solidarity is organised, and who becomes dependent on whom. In the Introduction to their edited volume on migration, squatting, and radical autonomy, Mudu and Chattopadhyay examine how grassroots solidarity projects and radical urban infrastructures often operate through uneven relations of access and authority. They describe “the asymmetry that exists between migrants and their supporters” as a recurring feature of such arrangements, shaped by unequal resources and unequal control over spaces, negotiations, and public voice (Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017, 5). Read back into Torpignattara, this helps frame why gender tensions do not appear only inside the Bangladeshi community, but also in the wider infrastructures through which migrant claims become speakable and actionable.

Even so, many Italian activists see slow progress. Cristina noted that Dhuumcatu “always makes sure to include women in protests... and they hold the banners. Yes, it is tokenism, but still, it is symbolic.” She celebrated that whereas “before, they were only holding banners,” now “one or two are also showing enough courage to take the microphone and speak up”.

Laila, a prominent female leader of the community, also confirms that more women are participating in politics, which was unimaginable 20 years ago. “Now there are at least 3-4 different women’s associations. They are not political in that sense, but they are at least organising. For certain causes like demanding citizenship for the children of migrants or issues related to racism they show up.” She added, “For women of the Bangladeshi community, the struggle is much harder. On one side, there is the bureaucracy, language, cultural gaps and then there are the men who would discourage us and mock us for going to the protests. They will call us with ‘lipstick party’ or some derogatory terms, which right away stop many of the women from coming and joining.”

What Laila describes is not only low participation. It is a situation in which women’s public presence is treated as negotiable and easily delegitimized. The ridicule she names does political work: it reframes women’s participation as vanity or moral failure rather than as civic engagement, and it becomes one more obstacle layered onto bureaucracy, language, and the cultural apprehension of moving through Italian institutions. In that sense, the question is

not simply whether women “show up,” but under what conditions their participation is recognised as legitimate within the community and within the wider solidarity field.

Here, Nira Yuval-Davis’s writing on transversal feminist politics offers another layer of analysis. Yuval-Davis describes transversal politics as “building solidarity across differences,” grounded not in uniformity but in empathy and shared values. She also writes about women in national liberation movements, from Egypt to South Africa to Palestine, who joined the struggle for independence but refused to accept that their own liberation would have to wait. Many reasoned there was “no sense in fighting to be equal to men if the men are not free citizens of their own nation,” yet they simultaneously resisted being told that women’s rights could only come “after.”

Read alongside Laila’s account, this helps clarify what is at stake in Torpignattara.

Bangladeshi women in and around Dhumcatu are part of the struggle for migrant rights and recognition, but their own claims, whether about respectability, autonomy, or protection from gendered harm, are frequently treated as secondary to the “larger” cause of community survival and legalization battles. Dhumcatu’s stated refusal to intervene in domestic conflicts, combined with deference to male leadership in public decision-making, sets a hard boundary that many members of the larger network read as a limit to solidarity.

Similarly, attitudes toward sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues present another delicate frontier for solidarity, as the following section explores.

4.4 Queer Politics and the Limits of Reciprocity

In Torpignattara’s solidarity network, LGBTQ+ issues are largely understood to be “off the table,” underscoring the coalition’s conditional inclusivity. A longtime Solidarity member, Cristina of Partito Comunista Internazionale, in an interview, expressed her doubt, saying, “I am not sure if most activists from Dhumcatu would feel comfortable being in a programme together with trans people,” a reality that Italian allies know well. Consequently, there is an unspoken agreement to set aside queer issues to keep the coalition intact. As Cristina explained, “These gaps are often quietly overlooked... not because they are unimportant, but because there are more urgent matters at hand”. Everyone tacitly agrees not to push the

Bangladeshi group on LGBTQ+ participation or rights, for fear of “destabilizing the fragile trust” that binds their cooperation.

Such strategic silence may preserve unity, but it comes at a cost. It forces LGBTQ+ activists to conceal or downplay parts of their identity and agenda within the movement. Maurizio articulated why the coalition tolerates this compromise. He argued that in “everyday organising for survival, material needs often override ideological differences.” He observed that basic necessities like work, housing, legal status, etc., tend to be “more central when your basic needs aren’t met,” making identity issues less urgent. Maurizio also critiqued the broader Italian left for focusing narrowly on individual rights rather than social rights, a focus he says alienates the poor and immigrant communities they claim to serve. In short, solidarity here is maintained by restricting its ideological scope: the coalition fights vigorously for migrants’ rights against state and capital, but it avoids challenging gender or sexual norms either internally or within the community.

Fieldwork in Torpignattara revealed that queer issues are not impossible to address in practice. For instance, one winter evening, I attended an event at a local anarchist squat, a graffiti-covered warehouse hosting about 120 people for a migrant solidarity fundraiser. A collective selling food to support anti-detention activism ran the event. Amidst this setting, I noticed an unexpected attendee: a Bangladeshi Muslim man, a friend of one of the queer-focused group. I had seen him at a few previous protests, but his presence at this explicitly queer-friendly gathering was surprising. A few other Muslim migrants (from Morocco and Tunisia) were also there. The Bangladeshi man described himself as a “moderate Muslim” and saw no conflict between his faith and showing solidarity with these groups. He explained it pragmatically in terms of “reciprocity”: “Because they always show up when the migrant communities are in trouble”. In other words, his support was not about resolving ideological differences, but about mutual recognition of a shared struggle and returning favors. This suggests that solidarity here can be forged not by erasing big differences, but by a commitment to help one another in hard times.

To probe further, I spoke with Mohuya (a pseudonym), a mid-30s mother of two and among the most progressive Dhuumcatu members. A vocal opponent of Islamophobia, she said: “From a human rights perspective, I support [LGBTQ people]; I want their safety and security as citizens. In our solidarity network, there are some Italian members who are queer, and almost all of them are supporters of LGBTQ rights. They have been standing beside us

all these years through all the difficulties”. Yet she immediately added that Islamic teachings forbid such relationships: “Yet, I know I would not approve of it for my children. Whenever the issue arises, I feel uncomfortable and torn”. Her internal struggle epitomizes a tension of translation: balancing religious doctrine and cultural norms with universal appeals of human rights and solidarity. It also highlights a common misunderstanding: expecting Muslim allies to prove their secularism by accepting LGBTQ rights sets a double standard. As Maurizio pointed out, “There are so many white Westerners who are anti-LGBTQ, but they are not called out as anti-secular”. Homophobia, he reminded us, is a global phenomenon not confined to any single religion or culture.

An Italian anarchist activist, Greta, provided another perspective. Openly lesbian, Greta noted that many Bangladeshis in the movement respect her because she has “always been at their side in difficult times,” though “only from those who know the struggles”. She said, “It’s clear that I’m a lesbian,” and that within activist circles her identity was known. Nevertheless, she also pointed out that outside that context, “in the shops or on the street,” people kept their distance. But she also added, “Italians do this too... There is homophobia even among Italians”. Greta’s story shows that solidarity can grow incrementally through personal commitment and shared action, creating pockets of respect that bridge deep social distances. At the same time, it underscores the enduring reality of homophobia across migrant and Italian communities, meaning these tensions over gender and sexuality require continuous negotiation even in progressive spaces.

Greta drew a clear distinction between defending religious freedom and endorsing religion. After defending the local mosque from eviction, she told me: “If a mosque is shut down by the authorities as a political move, I will go to protect the mosque... But personally, I would never celebrate a mosque or any other place of worship, as I am not a believer in any conventional religious doctrine.”

For her, anti-racist solidarity with Muslims is anchored in opposing discriminatory state action rather than sharing religious commitments, and she extended this stance to queer vulnerability inside community life: “if a lesbian asked me for a way to deal with this problem, I would be at her side to find a way to live better.”

At the same time, she located the broader struggle over gender and sexuality in Italy within a critique of Catholic moral authority: “The problem in Italy is the Vatican which has a very great power in the culture of this country,” she argued, adding that “Feminists and LGBTQ

reject the power of the Vatican because it wants to give a specific role to women in the family and excludes the desire for another sexuality and sets fixed rules.” Her position thus holds together two moves that are not easily reconciled in practice: a readiness to defend Muslims against Islamophobic governance, and an explicit refusal of religious institutions—Catholic or Muslim—as legitimate arbiters of gender and sexual order.

In a separate conversation, Bacchu invoked the Vatican in a strikingly different register—less as a moral regime to be resisted than as a template for coalition-management through strategic ambivalence. When I raised the question of potential ruptures around LGBTQ issues, he insisted that nothing dramatic had occurred and summarized his stance this way: “We’re not bothered by that. Our position is almost like the Vatican’s. We don’t approve of it, but we also don’t oppose it. We want peace and equal rights for everyone.”

The contradiction is not simply that the same institution is referenced with opposite valences; it is that the coalition is held together through a practical, negotiated coexistence between Greta’s explicitly secular commitments and Bacchu’s strategy of keeping sexuality in a low register, so that collaboration against state discrimination can continue without making LGBTQ politics a public fault line. This tension is sharpened by the fact that Bacchu himself described Greta as one of the most committed partners in the alliance, and my own field presence repeatedly confirmed her near-unmistakable visibility: she was almost always there—at demonstrations, assemblies, and neighbourhood initiatives—doing the work of showing up, mediating, and defending migrants against racist institutional moves. The coalition thus depends, in a very concrete way, on actors like Greta to sustain anti-racist struggle in public space, even as it also relies on an implicit boundary-setting that keeps LGBTQ claims in a low register so that “peace” can be maintained across unequal moral and religious sensibilities.

In Torpignattara, the tactical bracketing of sexuality in public coalition work can be read not as a denial that sexuality and religion matter, but as an attempt to prevent a volatile axis of difference from being weaponized against “bread-and-butter” struggles over documents, wages, and housing. This matters because, in the broader European field, LGBTQ rights are frequently mobilised as a civilizational yardstick: as Jasbir Puar notes, “acceptance” and “tolerance” for gay and lesbian subjects have “become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated” (Puar 2013, 336). Under these conditions, keeping sexuality “off the mic” can function as a defensive move that protects cooperation

across racialised and religious lines, especially where Muslims are already positioned as suspect. Yet the costs are not evenly distributed: the quieter sexuality becomes as a public political issue, the more queer migrants and queer Muslims risk being rendered peripheral, while openly pro-LGBTQ Italian allies are nudged toward selective silence. Massad's warning is useful here because it clarifies how rights talk can harden rather than open political possibilities: transnational rights discourse, he argues, "can best be described as incitement to discourse," through which "the very ontology of gayness is instituted" within a polarized frame of endorsement or rejection (Massad 2002, 374). If that is one danger of publicizing sexuality, the alternative danger is to treat religion as an untouchable domain of "culture," thereby leaving gendered regulation intact; as An-Na'im insists, implementing human rights norms requires "thoughtful and well-informed engagement of religion" rather than dismissal or avoidance (An-Na'im 2000, xxi). The dilemma, then, is not whether the coalition can postpone sexuality and religion, but how it can negotiate them without either triggering externally exploitable polarization or reproducing internal exclusions by default.

Beyond these cultural and identity-based frictions, the solidarity network also must confront basic class divides. The next section examines how divergent class positions among participants influence the alliance and its struggles.

4.5 Uneven Risks, Uneven Voice

Beyond the cultural and identity-based frictions traced above, the Torpignattara alliance is also structured by unequal stakes: differences in legal security, time, money, and exposure to sanctions that shape who can speak, who can take risks, and which political horizons feel livable. Even when activists and migrants share a language of "working class" unity, participation is never evenly distributed, because the migration regime makes documentation a decisive threshold of political voice and vulnerability.

Carlo, from Partito Comunista Internazionale, articulated this asymmetry plainly: "We believe that immigrant workers are part of the working class, just like Italian workers. Ideally, there should be no difference between them. And yet, immigrant workers face more problems. For example, I don't have to worry about a residence permit, but immigrant workers do. That's a huge issue." For him, the residence permit was not a side theme to be

addressed after class politics; it was the condition that decides who can endure escalation and who is most exposed when conflict with employers, police, or institutions intensifies. In this sense, unequal stakes become a mechanism through which precarity is converted into competition: “There is competition between Italian and immigrant workers, especially in the labour market. This competition benefits the capitalist system but harms workers.” Carlo pushed the point further into a political economy of managed division. “Italian and European capitalism needs immigrant workers, but with zero rights,” he argued, and hostility is continuously reproduced because “The ruling class wants to maintain hostility between Italian and immigrant workers to justify denying them rights.” His insistence on unity, then, was inseparable from his diagnosis that unity is hardest precisely where rights are most unevenly allocated.

Maurizio did not reject Carlo’s horizon, but he grounded it in the everyday mechanics of scarcity and resentment: “In theory, it’s a good idea. In practice, it’s very difficult. The ‘war between the poor’ is the easiest conflict to manufacture.” Importantly, he emphasised that this is not only an Italian-migrant antagonism: “It happens even among immigrants themselves. Moroccans complain that Romanians took their jobs. It becomes a competition over who will work for less.” He located this in the structure of a post-industrial labour market, where stable, unionized jobs are limited and the few sectors of migrant organising power remain exceptional. In his account, aspiration and stigma do much of the ideological work: “Italy has become a bourgeois society. Most people aspire to middle-class lifestyles.” Yet the low-paid, socially devalued work still has to be done, and the “solution” becomes racialised outsourcing: “No one wants to pick tomatoes for three euros an hour. Not even for seven. Yet someone has to do it. And here come the migrants from the ‘third world’ countries.” The slogan that migrants “stole jobs,” he argued, is the end point of a much longer chain of market pressure and downward price competition, a convenient simplification that displaces attention from the structural production of cheap labour.

Paula (pseudonym), a Torpignattara-based activist in the solidarity network who also periodically organises in grassroots union contexts in the South, approached the same questions less as abstract debate than as lessons drawn from practical, close-range experience. She said: “When migrants say, ‘Our first demand is documents,’ they’re not asking for charity. They’re saying: Give us the legal recognition, and we’ll handle everything else ourselves.” For her, the problem was not only institutional delay or denial, but the repeated re-translation of migrant priorities by others: “The system doesn’t listen. And white people in

positions of power decide what migrants need, which is a form of double violence.” She extended this critique beyond the state to a wider field of professionalized mediation: “In Italy, the problem isn’t just the institutions. It’s also this whole world of NGOs, unions, and associations that try to normalize and control relationships between Italians and migrants. They act like institutions. They manage people. They don’t want spontaneous solidarity or self-organised spaces.” When asked where she most clearly saw the contradictions produced by unequal positions, she refused the idea of a single defining scene and instead named the baseline asymmetry of entry into alliance: “It starts with understanding privilege, skin color, place of birth, class. Even as a woman, I’m still privileged compared to many migrants.” And she was equally direct about the Italian activist milieu: “Absolutely. Many leftists and anarchists do come from middle-class families. And let’s be honest: you need some kind of economic cushion to do activism, to have the time, to feel good about yourself while doing it. All of this comes together.” In her framing, “difference” is not simply a cultural gap to be bridged; it is a distribution of safety and time that silently shapes the alliance’s repertoire, its internal tolerances, and its practical limits.

This is where Scholz’s account of political solidarity clarifies the ethical demand implied by unequal stakes without reducing solidarity to something only the oppressed can do. Inclusive solidarity, she argues, requires “a renunciation of privilege” and “active communication across differences” (Scholz 2008, 186). At the same time, she is explicit about how unequal stakes bear on agenda-setting: “The more one experiences the hardships of oppression and injustice, the more claim one has to moral and epistemological privilege”, and the oppressed are often “more entitled to set the agenda” because “they have more at stake” (Scholz 2008, 159). Read through this lens, the recurrent centring of documents in Torpignattara is not a narrow issue competing with “real politics,” but a grounded claim about whose risk defines the political present, and thus whose priorities must structure what can be fought for, when, and by whom.

Torpignattara Solidale member Davide reflects on the ethical responsibility of those in more privileged positions. “We are privileged. Even working-class people in the anarchist movement have more stability than 99% of migrants. From our side, we remember it and try to behave accordingly. But that gap is so evident that no matter how hard we try, they will prefer not to mingle with us. I don’t exactly know what Marx or Lenin said about class hatred, but if the migrants who come here, taking life risk crossing the Mediterranean, resent someone like me just for who I am, this is valid! His life trajectory pushes him to do so.” In

his account, the problem is not that allies “lack empathy,” but that the alliance is built across a structural asymmetry of security, and that asymmetry is felt in the body as comfort, distrust, resentment, and self-protection. This is close to what Gauditz observes in no-border spaces: “privileges define borders,” not only territorial borders but “mental and embodied borders, too” (Gauditz 2017, 51). Davide’s “gap” can be read as precisely such an embodied border, shaping who feels at ease with whom inside a coalition that is nonetheless committed to acting together.

Unequal stakes also fracture the category “migrant” itself. Davide was sharply critical of internal class stratification and exploitation within the Bangladeshi community: “There is a huge difference between those who arrived 20 or 30 years ago and are now economically comfortable, and those who just arrived and are working in their shops for 2 euros per hour. The former shows up at demonstrations to take pictures with white allies, while their workers remain in the shop, overworked and underpaid.” He described political participation as a “luxury good,” unevenly distributed inside the community: “You see who is allowed to speak at the mic during community events. It is the donors, the powerful. Not the language teachers, not the people doing the work. It is all about hierarchy and visibility.” Read through unequal stakes, the issue is not hypocrisy but structure: those who can absorb the costs of visibility become the public face, while those most exposed to economic sanction remain in the background, and what counts as “the community’s interest” is filtered through these internal hierarchies. The pattern echoes Gauditz’s observation that “privileged activists dominate public discussions, appeals to the state, and internal decision-making processes” (Gauditz 2017, 52), with the crucial addition that, in Torpignattara, this dominance is not confined to white European allies but is also reproduced within the Bangladeshi field itself.

Comparative work helps show that these distributions of voice are not unique. In Sweden, Hansen notes that pro-asylum activism can “enable precarious migrants to enter the public sphere and to make themselves visible as political subjects” (Hansen 2020, 2), while the organisational core often skews toward people “with middle-class backgrounds and experiences of attending university” (Hansen 2020, 6), producing a division between “supported” undocumented young men and more secure core organisers (Hansen 2020, 10). In Rome, I observed a similar pattern: English-speaking, Italy-educated Bangladeshis often became spokespersons, while newly arrived migrants or those with limited Italian tended to remain behind the scenes. Women, Italian and Bangladeshi alike, frequently carried much of the practical organising work even as public leadership still skewed male. These are not

merely sociological details; they are the everyday mechanics through which unequal stakes become unequal voice.

Laila offers a concrete case of how unequal stakes inside the community can also enable political participation. As the wife of a major CAF owner and an entrepreneur in her own right, she holds a level of socioeconomic security that clearly supports her public role, and she has extended that role into collaboration with a newly formed leftist party. Yet her political reasoning does not romanticize participation; she frames it as necessary labour tied to ordinary governance failures: “We do not have any big platform. But migrants have a lot of issues to be solved. And the only way to claim your rights is through politics. For instance, there are a lot of open waste bins in Torpignattara, which are overflowing, and the city does not empty them routinely. This might sound ‘silly’, but for such a thing, you need to join politics. Politics means you need to be ready to get your hands dirty. It is not easy.” Her account highlights that political engagement is partly a matter of disposition, but it also indirectly underlines the unequal conditions that make “getting hands dirty” more feasible for some than for others.

Across these episodes, unequal stakes emerge as a structuring principle of the solidarity field: it shapes who can afford visibility, who can withstand risk, whose priorities become foundational, and whose grievances are translated into the coalition’s public vocabulary. This is why frictions persist even when participants share an anti-racist horizon: the alliance not only bridges ideological differences, it operates across uneven distributions of safety, time, and voice. The next section turns to another source of strain that interacts with unequal stakes but cannot be reduced to it: divergences in long-term political aims among migrant participants and their leftist allies.

4.6 Conflicting Political Horizons

This section shifts from unequal stakes to a different kind of friction: divergent political horizons inside the solidarity network. I examine how migrant community organisers and their allies from the extra-parliamentary left often orient themselves toward different futures, and how these differences shape, and sometimes strain, their collaboration. For many Bangladeshi migrants, politics is anchored in immediate horizons of stability: securing legal

status, access to work, housing, health care, and the basic rights that make everyday life manageable. For parts of the Italian extra-parliamentary left, especially anarchists and radical socialists, politics is more often framed through longer horizons of systemic transformation and suspicion toward state power. These different horizons do not always translate smoothly across the alliance. A residence permit, for migrants, is not an abstract sign but a concrete condition of possibility for ordinary life, while some anarchist idioms treat “papers” primarily as symbols of domination to be refused. The work of solidarity, then, is not the achievement of one shared worldview, but the practical labour of coordinating across multiple struggles and political subjects, building partial common ground where it exists, and recognizing when translation between political horizons breaks down.

4.6.i When a Slogan Does Not Translate

The complexities of forging solidarity across vastly different political imaginaries became starkly evident on a cold February afternoon in 2024, during a protest that convened in Torpignattara. The demonstration was held after a young Bangladeshi migrant, called Suman, died by suicide in a neighbourhood park. Suman, like many of his peers, had been trapped in the labyrinth of Italy’s immigration bureaucracy, waiting endlessly for a residence permit that never arrived. His story was not an anomaly but a painful echo of countless stories I encountered during fieldwork: “administrative limbo.” The event galvanized both the Bangladeshi community and their Italian allies. In Torpignattara’s streets, they gathered, banners held high, to mourn Suman and condemn the system that contributed to his despair.

The scene followed familiar patterns of Italian protest: placards and banners, rhythmic chants, and personal testimony. Bangladeshi speakers, often relaying their stories through interpreters or halting Italian, shared heartbreaking accounts of “bureaucratic violence”: being trapped without documents, barred from legal work or healthcare, and vulnerable to exploitation. To those in the crowd, obtaining a *permesso di soggiorno* was not an abstract matter of policy but the very condition of survival in Italy. As one speaker explained, the permit was “the gateway to survival, stability, and a semblance of belonging” in a country where undocumented migrants otherwise live constantly at risk.

Suddenly, the demonstration’s somber mood was disrupted by an anthem of another world. An Italian anarchist unfurled a sign and began chanting a libertarian slogan in Italian: “***Carta di soggiorno, carta d’identità, la carta è solo carta, la carta brucerà!***” (“Residence permit,

identity card – paper is just paper, the paper will burn!”). A few activists of the same circle echoed the chant briefly, but it quickly faded. In that moment, I felt the thickness of the gap between two political worlds. On one side were migrants demanding recognition and protection from the state through legal papers. On the other was a tradition of anti-statist protest that rejects bureaucratic authority altogether. To the anarchist chanting, the slogan was a defiant rejection of state power, which is a symbolic “imaginative liberation” from national borders and control. To many Bangladeshi participants, however, it felt bewildering or even cruel. For them, the word carta (paper) did not mean an abstract symbol but a practical infrastructure of everyday life, shaping access to work, housing, health care, and the basic ability to stay in Italy without constant fear. Telling these migrants that “paper is just paper” sounded at best confusing and at worst neglecting their needs. In effect, the chant carried incompatible stakes: what was a sign of control for some was a lifeline for others.

This scene poignantly illustrated a “translation” problem deeper than language. The chant could be translated word for word, but its political meaning could not travel intact. For anarchists influenced by no-borders ideology, burning documents symbolizes freeing people from arbitrary exclusion and critiques how nation-states restrict mobility. For undocumented migrants, by contrast, papers are not an abstract object of critique but the basis on which everyday risks are managed, across work, housing, health care, and the ability to remain in Italy without constant fear. As one activist later reflected, a chant intended as a radical critique was received by many migrants as the idea of “burning the last available protection.” In short, the same slogan carried fundamentally different meanings for each group. The gap exposed the limits of translation within the alliance: opposing racism and repression was not enough to erase the distance between those who can treat paper as “just paper” and those whose practical futures are organised around obtaining it.

In conversations after the protest, long-time organisers put this mismatch of political horizons into context. Davide, an Italian leftist, acknowledged openly that “of course, the views are very different. But people on both sides are aware of these differences.” He stressed that the alliance is pragmatic but not opportunistic, rooted in mutual recognition of distinct roles and needs. He noted that anarchists personally reject the state: “They are not simply against the wrong kind of power, they’re against power itself. But they also understand that migrants cannot afford to live without documents.” In Davide’s view, both sides accept this paradox. Dhumcatu is explicit that it is not part of the libertarian milieu, and everyone recognises that: “It’s a relationship built on political difference and solidarity,” he explained. In practice,

the alliance moves forward by holding these differences without resolving them, maintaining a united front on shared problems while knowing that deeper disagreements remain.

Greta added a sobering assessment of how tactics and language shape who can realistically participate. She pointed out that some anarchist repertoires, such as clashes with police or unsanctioned marches, effectively exclude undocumented migrants, not because they are apathetic, but because avoiding police contact is a rational form of self-protection. As she put it, “From the point of view of some anarchists, we clash with the police and call illegal demos. But those who have problems with documents do not want to have problems with the police. The way we fight, we don’t create contexts in which everyone can feel comfortable.” She also criticized the movement’s communicative style, noting that “We speak a difficult language... we make non-direct speeches in the air,” and that without clear explanation “people don’t choose to fight” with you. In her framing, exclusion is produced not only by risk, but also by opacity: when tactics presume a willingness to confront police and language remains coded, solidarity becomes harder to inhabit for those whose stakes are defined by documentation and everyday survival.

Greta then explained that the problem is not only how anarchists protest, but also what they ask for. She said that when a movement fights for something concrete, like “No evictions,” many people can join easily because they understand it immediately and it relates to daily life. But anarchists also fight for bigger goals, like “no prisons” or “no borders.” Greta was not saying these goals are wrong. She was saying they are harder to explain in a few words, and harder for new people to understand quickly. Without that explanation, fewer people feel confident joining. For her, the difficulty is again a matter of translation: concrete demands bring people together faster, while very broad demands need more time, more language, and more shared context, which makes building a large coalition in the neighbourhood harder.

Despite these gaps, the protest over Suman’s suicide also showed that solidarity does not require total agreement on ideology or horizon. Torpignattara’s alliance operated as a “difference within common cause” (Tsing 2005, 246), where Italian allies and Bangladeshi organisers brought “misunderstandings into the core of alliance” while still working together against racist policies (Tsing 2005, 247). Each side laboured with only “barely overlapping understandings of the situation,” yet that friction became part of their practice (Tsing 2005, 247). In this sense, two different political horizons coexist within the coalition: one side speaks the language of radical transformation, while the other is focused on documents,

stable work, and a livable foothold in Italy. The Suman episode was a concrete instance of this horizon mismatch. It tested the limits of solidarity and required an ongoing, uneasy negotiation of shared purpose amid different ideas of what liberation can realistically mean.

4.6.ii Beyond the Alliance: New Political Horizons

Italian communists and anarchists have long framed migrants from the Global South through a particular political frame: the migrant as the new proletariat, a precarious and racialised worker whose exploitation could renew class struggle. Some anarchists extend this horizon further by describing migrants as “stateless subjects,” whose liminal legal status is imagined as an inherent challenge to the nation-state. In these views, solidarity appears to follow naturally from shared precarity and a common position against capital and state power.

On the ground, however, Torpignattara reveals additional political horizons that do not fit neatly into this frame. A rising layer of migrant entrepreneurs, intermediaries, and community brokers has emerged, including people who run tax assistance offices, remittance services, and other forms of support that navigate Italy’s bureaucratic maze. These actors do not usually speak the language of militant class struggle. Their political agency is often expressed through mediation, problem-solving, and negotiation with institutions on behalf of their communities. In practice, some also make their livelihood through the very bureaucratic system that produces migrant vulnerability. This does not cancel the reality of exploitation, but it complicates the older horizon of the migrant-as-proletariat by showing that parts of the migrant field are oriented toward different futures, including stability, business mobility, and forms of civic recognition that are pursued from within, rather than against, the institutional landscape.

Liakat (pseudonym), a prominent Bangladeshi organiser I met in a busy migrant neighbourhood (Vittorio Emanuele), embodies this trajectory. He runs a network of *CAF* offices (tax assistance centres), which are lifelines for many migrants dealing with permits and paperwork. As a successful businessman and intermediary with the Italian state, Liakat no longer lives in Torpignattara; he has moved to a more affluent part of the city, a pattern common among upwardly mobile migrants. Liakat’s history is colorful: “I did politics with the communists all my life,” he told me, recalling early ties to local left-wing spaces that once claimed migrants as fellow workers. At that time, his aspirations had been framed in the

language of collective labour struggle that focused on higher wages and better conditions, consistent with the “comrade” identity the Italian Left assigns to workers.

Today, however, Liakat’s political vision has shifted. Along with other upwardly mobile immigrants, including business owners, service intermediaries, and professionals from multiple migrant communities, he is in the process of building a new party oriented toward rights, recognition, and civic inclusion. When I asked if their platform was left or right, Liakat replied firmly: “That division does not make sense anymore.” He went on to explain that the old ideological binaries are obsolete, given changing demographics: “The white Italian population is aging and shrinking. The future belongs to the migrants. We are the ones making Italy our home.” In his view, migrants are not primarily the exploited workers of leftist theory, but rather “new citizens-in-the-making.” In his view, this is a demographic force whose collective presence will shape Italy’s future. Liakat’s words capture a different political imaginary: one in which migrant middle-class actors see themselves as community leaders and negotiators, not proletarian vanguards. Rather than framing politics as overthrowing capital, they focus on building legal status, businesses, and formal integration.

Liakat’s shift reflects several converging factors. First, his personal class trajectory has changed: as an employer and bureaucratic intermediary, his material interests diverge from those of wage labourers. Once he was the “worker-activist” who marched for higher wages; now he runs a business and leverages state institutions for economic gain. Second, Italy’s complex legal system makes *mediation* a form of politics. Through his CAF offices, Liakat learned how to navigate permits, and he sees gaining documents and starting businesses as key political acts, distinct from mass protest. Third, the lived experience of migrant life that consisted of a struggle for survival and legal belonging steers political attention toward immediate, legible goals such as documents, access to services, and routes to upward mobility. As Liakat frankly observed, most migrants’ ultimate goal is simply “to secure a foothold in Italy, build businesses, and become recognised citizens,” rather than pursue “some abstract ideological aims.” In short, upward mobility and the demands of daily life have pushed Liakat and others toward a more pragmatic, integrationist politics.

This evolving subjectivity has important implications for the solidarity network. The Italian Left’s longstanding discourse of migrants as the “new proletariat” now only partially resonates. As Davide, who still maintains a friendly relation with Liakat, noted, that this framework “sometimes fails to adequately translate or account for [migrants’] emergent

political agency”. Indeed, Liakat’s departure from Torpignattara, a classic migrant-aid hub, complicates organising: if economically successful migrants disperse to wealthier neighbourhoods, the dense local networks of mutual aid are weakened. In practical terms, when potential “comrades” increasingly pursue individual advancement within the system rather than its overthrow, the basis for neighbourhood alliances becomes more fractured. Liakat’s journey is an ethnographic counterpoint, reminding us that migrant political life is far from monolithic. It forces a re-evaluation of solidarity: the coalition must navigate both economic and ideological shifts if it is to remain durable in Torpignattara.

4.6.iii Onward Mobility and the Shifting Grounds of Solidarity

A final factor shaping the Torpignattara alliance is onward migration. Many Bangladeshi migrants in the neighbourhood do not see Italy as a final destination, but as a stepping stone toward wealthier countries in Northern Europe. In interviews, people repeatedly linked this desire to move on to Italy’s heavy bureaucracy, blocked opportunities, and experiences of racism. Some families who have become relatively established in Rome even invest in sending their children to study in England, with the longer-term hope of relocating there. This shared sense of Italy as a temporary stopover has also produced a small local industry of *dalals* (migration brokers) in Torpignattara who facilitate moves to the UK or Germany.

Such outward mobility poses concrete challenges for local solidarity work. Dhuumcatu leader Bacchu expressed deep concern: many of his most seasoned “comrades” have emigrated to England, and their departure “significantly weakened the movement”. He explained that building an organisation requires diverse skills and relationships – some people are great at communication, others at cultural events or reaching particular constituencies (women, youth, religious groups, etc.). These capacities take years to cultivate; when key individuals leave, “it weakens the association very strongly”. In Bacchu’s words, each departure is a loss of social capital and organisational memory, undermining grassroots activism and forcing the remaining organisers to fill multiple roles at once.

Bacchu’s Italian “comrades” differ widely in how they view this migration. Greta, reflecting her anti-statist outlook, was almost glad to see migrants moving on: “I’m happy for them; Italy is not the best country. If they go to live better, I’m happy. Italy is a bridge to the rest of Europe, so be it.” Her assessment of Italy is candid, suggesting that “the laws are getting harder for the migrants and there is racism, xenophobia, and many other issues.” While she

has reservations about national identification, “If a Bangladeshi feels Italian and is content here, I am happy for them,” she ultimately prioritizes migrants’ well-being and agency. For Greta, migrant mobility is not a loss for a particular national struggle, but an expression of individual freedom and a rational response to an undesirable environment.

Massimo, a radical-left member of the network, echoes Greta’s pragmatic, even celebratory view of migrant mobility. He observes the often-precarious living conditions that compel onward movement, noting: “Many Bangladeshis live 10 to 12 people in a single house, obviously that’s not a good situation, so after a few years, they go back to Bangladesh. Yes, some move to England, also to Germany.” He attributes this mobility to systemic factors: “Italy has very repressive migration laws, and in England or Germany it’s easier to find work. So of course, if you have a passport, you go there without needing a visa.” He even notes the visible presence of Bangladeshi migrants in Berlin: “I’ve seen them. I am happy for them.” Massimo’s acceptance of onward migration aligns with his faction’s philosophy: “We don’t do politics of visibility or number to eventually take over the institutions. We are against the power structure.” For him, the goal is not to amass a numerical base for state-centric engagement, but to challenge power structures themselves, rendering individual mobility a form of everyday resistance and an affirmation of autonomy.

In contrast, institutional leftists such as Stefano of Partito della Rifondazione Comunista lament that mass emigration dilutes the push for political change in Italy. Stefano blames the system rather than migrants themselves: “Italy’s nexus of capitalism and repressive law forces them to leave.” From his perspective, thousands waiting decades for citizenship or informal work before moving on is not an aberration but by design. He argues for reforms to make citizenship and voting rights easier to obtain. Like others, Stefano bemoans the radical-left faction’s lack of interest in these goals – “it’s a shame that we ourselves cannot unite on such basic questions”.

In sum, the transnational character of migration in Italy forces the alliance to work across different political horizons. Many migrants do not see Italy as the place where they will build a long-term future, and this creates a basic tension: when someone expects to return home or move onward, investing in sustained political change within Italy can feel less urgent than securing mobility and immediate stability. The Italian Left is also pulled in different directions. One segment, represented by figures such as Stefano and other institutional leftists, treats the horizon of struggle as reform within Italy, expanding rights, citizenship, and

political inclusion. Another segment, represented by anarchist allies such as Greta and Massimo, places more emphasis on autonomy, freedom of movement, and resisting state power, even if that means people do not remain in Italy.

Crucially, onward mobility not only shapes political horizons but also reshapes the movement's practical capacity. As Bacchu observed, when experienced organisers leave, the association loses skills, relationships, and continuity, and those who remain must carry additional responsibilities. It also complicates futurity. Long-term plans become fragile when key participants may leave at any moment, and the alliance must constantly recalibrate its expectations about who will be present to sustain organising over time. As one organiser put it, outward mobility “highlights a profound difference in ultimate political aspirations between allied groups,” because the ends of struggle are not always located in the same place or imagined in the same way.

These frictions of horizon and mobility underline the limits, but also the specificity, of solidarity in Torpignattara. The coalition holds because people continue to see value in collaboration, but it does so while managing real differences: some seek protection and recognition from the state, while others remain skeptical of the state as such; some invest in building community institutions in Rome, while others prioritize the possibility of moving on. Rather than resolving these differences, the network lives with them through pragmatic tolerance and constant negotiation of shared purpose. In this sense, Torpignattara’s solidarity remains a fragile, task-oriented configuration, sustained by shared grievances and practical commitments, yet always shaped by divergent futures among its participants.

4.7 Conclusion: A Fragile Commonality

In this chapter, I have examined how migrants’ everyday grievances become shared political demands through the alliances of Torpignattara. This process is neither automatic nor neutral. Experiences of bureaucratic delay, religious restriction, workplace exploitation, racialisation, gendered exclusion, or unequal political recognition do not simply enter collective politics in the form in which they are lived. They have to be articulated, translated, reframed, and negotiated across actors who do not necessarily share the same political language, moral commitments, or understanding of what is at stake. Translation therefore matters here not

because it eliminates difference, but because it is the practical work through which particular grievances become sufficiently intelligible to others to support collective action.

The chapter has also shown that this translation is selective and uneven. Leadership and brokerage shape who is able to articulate a grievance and through which political language it enters the alliance. The public performance of Islam shows how a religiously grounded claim can become part of a wider language of rights and anti-racism, but also where secular political expectations place limits on that translation. Women's participation reveals how inclusion in collective struggle can coexist with gendered constraints on voice and leadership. Questions around sexuality show more sharply that some differences are not fully translated at all, but managed through restraint, selective visibility, or tactical silence. Unequal legal status and exposure to economic or institutional risk likewise shape whose grievances can be voiced openly, who can afford confrontation, and whose priorities acquire greater political weight. Everyday problems therefore become shared demands through a process that both creates common ground and filters what can enter it.

It is in this sense that the idea of the common becomes useful. Mezzadra and Neilson write that "Differences appear as the ground on which the common can be built" (2013, 283–84). In Torpignattara, cooperation likewise does not arise from prior sameness. It is produced through the effort to make differently situated grievances politically legible across social and ideological divides. I describe the result as a fragile commonality: a provisional and uneven field in which enough shared language and practical agreement are produced for collective action to become possible, even though substantial differences remain. Some differences become negotiable; others are postponed, displaced, tactically muted, or left unresolved.

This fragile commonality became visible across the cases examined in the chapter. Religious claims could be translated into wider demands for dignity, recognition, and freedom of worship, but not without tension over the public place of Islam. Women could enter collective political spaces while remaining unequally positioned within them. Queer politics exposed limits to reciprocity that could not simply be resolved through a shared anti-racist language. The unequal distance between a legally precarious Bangladeshi worker and an Italian activist with secure citizenship and greater institutional confidence shaped not only what each could risk, but also how grievances were presented and which demands could be carried collectively. Nor did participants necessarily imagine the same political future. For many migrants, collective action remained tied to immediate concerns such as documents, wages,

religious space, or protection from harassment, while some of their Italian allies placed these struggles within broader projects of systemic transformation.

What emerges, then, is not a coherent political community or a unified political programme. It is a process through which heterogeneous grievances are made partially shareable without becoming identical. In this sense, the Torpignattara alliances resemble the collaborations Tsing describes, which “bring misunderstandings into the core of alliance” and through that friction “are also the stuff of emergent politics; they make new objects and agents possible” (2005, 246–47). Mezzadra and Neilson similarly remind us that “Borders will continue to cross the common. And the common will continue to contest borders” (2013, 279). The common produced through these alliances is therefore always incomplete. It depends on continued translation, negotiation, and selective accommodation, and it remains marked by the inequalities through which grievances enter collective politics in the first place.

The significance of this fragile commonality lies precisely in what it makes possible despite these limits. Through it, problems that might otherwise remain individual, private, or confined within migrant networks can become publicly articulated claims around documents, work, religious freedom, racism, and neighbourhood belonging. Yet the ability to make such claims does not erase the differences and inequalities among those who make them. The next chapter therefore shifts from the making of shared demands to their consequences: how alliance-enabled participation reshapes migrants’ presence and belonging in Torpignattara, and how far these processes contribute to building a neighbourhood-scale political home.

Chapter 5

From Alliance to Participation: Political Home-Making and Its Limits

In this final empirical chapter, I turn from the making and maintenance of solidarity to what these alliances enable migrants to build in Torpignattara. The previous chapters have shown how political subjectivities emerge through the pressures of settlement, how alliances are formed across difference, and how everyday grievances are translated into shared political demands. I now ask: What kind of political foothold do these alliances enable migrants to build in the neighbourhood, and how far does it extend beyond the local scale? The focus therefore shifts from how collective action becomes possible to what repeated participation does to migrants' position within the neighbourhood.

I approach this political foothold through questions of participation, citizenship, and belonging. Repeated involvement in demonstrations, neighbourhood events, struggles over public space, negotiations with institutions, and everyday forms of cooperation can make migrants more able to appear, speak, make claims, and be recognised as legitimate participants in local life. This does not amount to smooth inclusion or the removal of legal and social inequalities. Rather, it creates a more grounded capacity to act within the place where migrants live, work, worship, raise families, and build social relations. Torpignattara becomes, in this sense, more than a site of residence or economic survival. It becomes a place in which political presence can be asserted and negotiated.

I use the concept of political home-making to theorise this process. Political home does not name a settled condition, a completed achievement, or a space that migrants simply acquire through participation. I use it to describe the ongoing and uneven process through which migrants build a political foothold in the neighbourhood through practices of presence, claim-making, participation, and recognition. The alliances examined in this thesis are important because they make this process more possible: they widen the spaces in which migrants can act, provide relationships and infrastructures through which claims can be articulated, and strengthen their capacity to negotiate local belonging. Political home-making therefore refers not to the disappearance of exclusion, but to the practical work of making a place politically inhabitable under conditions in which membership remains unequal and contested.

The chapter traces this process across several interconnected registers. I first examine struggles over public space and urban visibility, then turn to the everyday practices through which neighbourhood participation and belonging become more established. I then ask how far this political foothold travels once participation moves beyond Torpignattara, before examining its uneven reach across generations. Taken together, these sites show both what alliance-enabled participation makes possible at the neighbourhood scale and where its limits become visible. Political home, as I develop it here, is therefore neither secure nor universally shared. It is a situated and uneven process of political anchoring whose strength is most visible locally and whose reach becomes more uncertain as it moves beyond the social and spatial relations through which it was built.

5.1 Public Space, Visibility, and Contested Citizenship

Bangladeshi activists in Torpignattara have repeatedly claimed the city's public spaces through direct action, enacting a grassroots right to the city in the Lefebvrian sense. A vivid test of this came during the Pohela Boishakh (Bangla New Year) festival of 2024. Pohela Boishakh, the largest secular festival for Bangla-speaking people, is traditionally celebrated with music, food, sports, and cultural displays. In Rome, various Bangladeshi associations held modest, scattered celebrations in past years. But in 2023, the migrant-led Dhumcatu Association – which had emerged as a primary organiser of the New Year festivities – made a bold decision: they would hold the festival on a plot of land in Torpignattara that they had occupied and self-managed for two years as a makeshift community park. The land in question was a derelict, abandoned lot until Dhumcatu members “regenerated” it by cleaning the debris, planting greenery, and informally maintaining it as a gathering place. By choosing this site, Dhumcatu was effectively asserting the community's autonomy to occupy urban space on its own terms, turning a neglected patch of the neighbourhood into its space. This plan, however, quickly brought them into conflict with municipal authorities, who refused to recognise the group's right to use that land for a public event.

City officials urged Dhumcatu to move the celebration to a municipally approved park, citing concerns that the occupied lot was not an authorized venue. They suggested an alternate park that was “better maintained and more readily supervised.” Dhumcatu, however, declined this offer, insisting on using the space they had created. As Dhumcatu's president, Bacchu, argued: “The park they sanctioned is in the middle of a residential area,

crisscrossed by traffic. We plan a four-day programme with live music and 20,000 people – it would be chaos for our neighbours. The park we’ve regenerated is isolated; no one will be disturbed. But they [the authorities] want to use every occasion to turn anti-migrant sentiment against us.” In other words, the association suspected that the city’s obstruction was less about public order and more about denying a migrant group the legitimacy to occupy urban space independently. By standing firm, Dhumcatu was not only defending a practical choice of venue; it was asserting a principle that Bangladeshi residents had the right to define and use a piece of the city for their own cultural and political life. This assertion is a clear example of claiming a political home: establishing a local site where their presence and practices set the terms, in defiance of being treated as perpetual outsiders.

When the Boishakh festival began on the occupied lot, the confrontation escalated rapidly. Within an hour of the opening, police arrived and intervened forcefully. Officers sealed off the interior of the park and confiscated Dhumcatu’s sound equipment, effectively attempting to shut the event down at the outset. The authorities’ action, barricading a community space and silencing the festival’s amplification, was a dramatic statement that the Bangladeshi organisers’ self-designated right to that space was not recognised. In response, Dhumcatu members and their supporters did not disperse. Instead, they improvised a solution that demonstrated the strength of alliance-based solidarity in the neighbourhood. The organisers and attendees shifted the festivities to an adjacent parking lot just outside the barricaded area. Almost immediately, phone trees and WhatsApp groups sprang into action, and dozens of Italian radical-left, anti-fascist, and anarchist activists from around Rome converged on the scene to help salvage the event. These allies assisted with logistics, bringing in replacement sound systems, helping redirect hundreds of attendees to the new makeshift venue, and physically standing by as a buffer to deter further police interference. In a spontaneous display of alliance work, the Bangladeshi community and Italian activists together transformed a parking lot into a festival ground, ensuring the New Year celebration could carry on. For the next three days (the duration originally planned), the community persevered with a somewhat pared-down festival in the open parking area. Food stalls were reorganised along the pavement; alongside homemade traditional snacks, sweets, and huge pots of biryani prepared by community members, some Italian participants contributed their own dishes (from barbecue to classic Italian pastries) in a gesture of reciprocity. Performers took turns using smaller speakers and megaphones brought by activists. Children played in the remaining open space, while crowds mingled under improvised banners and canopies.



Figure 17: Women posed in traditional outfits during the 2023 Pohela Boishakh event organised by Dhumcatu. Photo by Stefano Romano, 14/05/2023.

This episode was chaotic, but it was rich in political significance. It illustrated how migrant participation becomes a contested, confrontational practice when formal authorization is withheld, and how alliances function as an infrastructure that can sustain that participation in the face of opposition. The struggle over the festival venue essentially became a struggle over who has the right to public space in Torpignattara. Dhumcatu's insistence on holding Pohela Boishakh in the occupied park can be read as an enactment of what Lefebvre (1996) calls the right to the city: not merely inclusion in officially sanctioned spaces, but a claim to participate in and appropriate urban space according to lived needs and social use. By regenerating a lot and celebrating there without permission, Bangladeshi organisers and their allies asserted that they, too, were entitled to shape the urban environment according to their own practices and aspirations. In Lefebvre's terms, the city is not simply a managed product but an *œuvre*, a collective work whose meanings and uses remain contestable (Lefebvre 1996, 26). The Boishakh festival standoff therefore brought into sharp relief a conflict over who may legitimately inhabit, use, and produce urban space, and under what conditions. At the

same time, the events revealed the fragility of this emergent political home. The police clampdown showed that the autonomy of migrant claims remains precarious and can be swiftly curtailed by state power. Even after the community and allies successfully relocated the festivities, the situation remained tense. Patrols lingered at the edges of the gathering; participants worried that further intervention could come at any moment. The festival's continuation depended heavily on the rapid solidarity of Italian activists, highlighting how interdependent this political home is: without allies supplying equipment and protection, the celebration might have ended in dispersal and defeat. In this sense, the political home being built in Torpignattara is neither fully secure nor self-sufficient. It relies on what we might call infrastructures of translation and support, the personal networks, trust, and practical resources that alliances provide. Those infrastructures allowed a contested event to go forward and a migrant collective to appear publicly as rightful claimants of urban space, even if only in a provisional way.

The Boishakh festival confrontation also generated new narratives in the neighbourhood. Many Bangladeshi residents and their Italian “comrades” came away from the event with a sharpened sense of both possibility and constraint. On one hand, the fact that the festival ultimately took place and drew a large, diverse crowd in defiance of official orders was a symbolic victory. It demonstrated that “we can do this ourselves,” as one young Bangladeshi volunteer put it, meaning that migrants could hold major public events through their own initiative and solidarity networks. The occupied park and even the adjacent parking lot became, in those days, a stage for political belonging: a space where Bangladeshi culture was not only displayed but defended as a legitimate part of the city's life. On the other hand, the heavy-handed response from authorities reinforced a collective awareness that such belonging remains conditional. The park that Dhumcatu had made usable was still, legally speaking, off-limits to them, a reminder that their place in the city can be negated or challenged at any time. As Bacchu bitterly noted after the event, “they want to use every occasion to turn anti-migrant sentiment against us.” After the event, “they want to use every occasion to turn anti-migrant sentiment against us.” The incident thus fed into local critiques of how the state and certain political forces construct migrant-led initiatives as threats or nuisances. It also underscored why the notion of a political home must be “made through struggle,” and why it remains exposed to reversal. Each public appearance by migrants in Torpignattara, whether a protest, a festival, or an occupation of space, has to contend with this dual reality: it can widen the space of recognition and membership in the city, but it can

just as easily provoke pushback that reveals the unstable footing on which that recognition rests.

In summary, the Boishakh festival episode exemplifies contested participation as a practice of urban citizenship. Bangladeshi migrants and their allies asserted a claim to the neighbourhood on their own terms, effectively attempting to build a piece of their political home in an abandoned lot. They staged themselves as political subjects, as organisers, hosts, and rightful users of the city, rather than as a passive minority asking for inclusion. Their public claim to the space did not simply express a pre-existing political subjectivity. Rather, in Isin's terms, "acts produce actors that do not exist before acts" (Isin 2008, 36). The alliance with Italian activists was crucial in this staging, providing the reinforcements and legitimacy of broader support. This resonates with Engin Isin's idea of "acts of citizenship" that bring new political subjects into being through the act of claiming rights and space. By acting as if they had the right to occupy and celebrate in that park, the festival organisers were constituting themselves as citizens-in-practice, regardless of their official status. The outcome, a mixed but momentarily empowered space, shows both the potential of such acts (new scenes of migrant visibility and solidarity were created) and the limits (state authority reasserted itself, and the autonomy of the space remained in question). In the next sections, we move from this dramatic confrontation to the quieter, everyday scenes in which a political home in Torpignattara is built and maintained, and then to the question of how far its boundaries extend.

5.2 Everyday Participation and Contested Belonging

Beyond grand events and flashpoint confrontations, migrants' sense of political belonging in Torpignattara is nurtured in small, ordinary acts that gradually transform the neighbourhood's social landscape. In the daily life of "Banglatown", street corners, walls, shops, and parks become the canvas of a lived politics. Spray-painted anti-racist slogans, posters calling for working-class unity, and weekend marches against oppressive documentation regimes have turned the very pavements and facades into a kind of living archive for Bangladeshi activists and their Italian allies. The walls remember what might otherwise be fleeting: they bear the traces of past campaigns, the names of grassroots collectives, and announcements scrawled in Italian, Bangla, and English. Public space in Torpignattara thus becomes a layered palimpsest

where migrant presence is not only visible but argumentatively defended. One large graffiti inscription on a wall, near a cluster of Bangladeshi-run shops and halal restaurants, bluntly declares in Italian: “Unici stranieri gli sbirri,” which means “The only foreigners here are the cops.” Positioned amid the everyday bustle of a multicultural street (with Bangladeshi grocers, new craft beer bars catering to youth, and the arches of the ancient aqueduct in view), this slogan pointedly inverts the usual discourse of insiders and outsiders. In this neighbourhood of migrants, students, precarious workers, and militants, the graffiti suggests, those truly “out of place” are not the immigrant residents but the agents of state control who treat the area as alien territory. Such street art is more than an aesthetic flourish; it performs what we might call an insurgent politics of belonging, crystallizing a shared distrust of oppressive authority and a reversal of the “us versus them” narrative. Importantly, it invites different residents to recognise themselves on the same side of a local divide – to see “we who live here” as inclusive of migrants and Italians in a common struggle, with the police cast as the outside force. In a single bold stroke of paint, a claim is made: this is our neighbourhood, and those who come only to surveil or control are the real outsiders.



Figure 18: A wall of Torpignattara where a slogan in spray paint says “Unici stranieri gli sbirri” (The only foreigners here are the cops). Photo by Punny Kabir, 07/01/2024.

These kinds of street-level interventions and encounters are where participation becomes a practice of citizenship. They are not simply signs of comfort or passive coexistence; rather, they are moments in which local membership is enacted, tested, and sometimes quietly

withdrawn. Following Nira Yuval-Davis, we can say that belonging is never separate from boundary work: “the politics of belonging involve not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging... but also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 20). In Torpignattara, everyday sites – streets, shop fronts, markets, bus stops – function as arenas where people learn (and occasionally dispute) who is entitled to occupy space, to speak, and to be recognised as part of the neighbourhood “we.” A mundane act like lingering in the piazza, chatting in Bangla outside the mosque after evening prayers, or Italians and Bangladeshis jointly putting up posters for a rally, all become small tests of belonging. Each of these acts asks implicitly: Is this public space ours to use? Will our presence here be accepted as normal, or seen as a provocation? The answers are continuously negotiated in practice, through smiles or scowls, through the flutter of pamphlets being handed out, or through the benign neglect of authorities who choose not to intervene in a small assembly.

One striking example of how repetition and familiarity build a sense of local belonging can be seen in the use of specific gathering points. The small triangular plaza next to Torpignattara’s main tram stop – an unassuming wedge of pavement and benches – has, over the years, become a familiar political home for the local alliance. Time and again, activists have returned to this little square (and the nearby larger intersections) to hold rallies, vigils, and sit-ins. With each gathering, the spot becomes further inscribed with memories of collective presence: a successful protest against a racist attack, a candlelight vigil after a tragic accident, a jubilant celebration when a particularly unjust policy was overturned. Through these sedimented memories, the physical place is transformed. What was once just another transit point in the city now feels claimed and collectively inhabited by those who participated. Regular protesters know exactly where to stand, where banners can be hung, which sympathetic shopkeepers will let them use an electrical outlet for a microphone. In this way, the very choreography of protest – assembling at the same corner, marching along the same route, chanting the same slogans – reinforces a sense of belonging. People come to recognise these sites as spaces where their voices and bodies matter, not just as anonymous passersby but as political actors with a stake in the locale. The neighbourhood terrain is thus subtly re-territorialized: certain corners and corridors of Torpignattara feel like “our” places in the city’s map, the places where we come together and appear in public. This process reflects what Lefebvre envisioned about the appropriation of space for use value, as well as

Holston's observation that citizenship is remade through everyday practices of claiming rights and space (Holston 2008). Here, that remake is tangible on the street corner.

Crucially, the labour of building this everyday political home often falls on the shoulders of community organisers who pay attention to inclusion and confidence-building. Laila, a prominent female leader in the Bangladeshi community, explained to me that the early years of street protesting were not easy – especially when it came to encouraging new activists, and in particular women, to feel at ease joining public actions. “We encouraged them to even come with the children in the stroller,” Laila recounted. “We would pick them up and bring them. We still do that for newcomers. Sometimes our Italian female volunteers accompany them from their house to the spot of the demonstration so they feel more confident, because for the migrants’ cause the Italians are showing up. Then, if we are of migrant origin, we feel more encouraged to show up.” For her, even the journey to the protest – walking to the tram stop or square together – is part of the work of belonging. It is a shared ritual that slowly erodes the intimidation a person might feel in taking up public space. In the beginning, many Bangladeshi women were hesitant to appear in street protests, having internalized a sense that such spaces “belonged” either to men or to Italians. By literally walking side by side – migrant women with their children, alongside Italian women allies – those barriers began to break down. Over time, Laila noted, many of the women became more autonomous participants. Even when a demonstration is held outside the immediate neighbourhood, these women now organise among themselves: they gather at a fixed time and place in Torpignattara and travel together by tram or bus to the protest site. “In our WhatsApp group, there are our Italian female comrades too, who join them, and they feel more confident not to get lost,” Laila said. These small, repeated practices have transformed both routes and routines. What was once a daunting trip to an unfamiliar piazza becomes a familiar group outing. Protest sites across the city turn into “landmarks” in a political and affective landscape, known by the participants as places where we have been together before. For instance, a central location like Piazza del Campidoglio (Rome’s Capitoline Hill) is remembered by some Bangladeshi activists not just as a tourist site or seat of the municipality, but as “the place where we held the big rally to stop our deportation.” Malek, a longstanding Dhumcatu organiser, told me that he and his peers often refer to certain places by the protests associated with them: “We’ll say, ‘meet at the place where we staged the big strike,’ using the protest memory rather than the street name.” In doing so, they are effectively rewriting the city’s geography with their own community’s history. A piazza that

might otherwise have symbolized state authority or been merely a backdrop for daily commuting becomes, in their mental map, the site of our collective stand. This is a modest but powerful re-signification of urban space. It mirrors what Çağlar and Schiller describe in their discussion of emplacement: migrants and local allies together build “sociabilities of emplacement” – relationships and routines that ground social belonging in the city. By renaming and reinterpreting city landmarks through the prism of migrant-led actions, Bangladeshi organisers are crafting a sense of being at home in the city, not in a private or parochial sense, but as urban citizens who have inscribed part of their lives and struggles into Rome’s public memory.

If the graffiti, marches, and demonstrations discussed so far inscribe belonging in the language of conflict and claim-making, belonging is also performed in moments of joy, cultural exchange, and everyday togetherness. The alliances in Torpignattara have learned that celebrating culture can itself be a political act – a way to normalize migrant presence and expand the local “we.” Dhuumcatu and other associations in the Torpignattara Solidale network occasionally organise intercultural festivals to create inclusive public moments where differences are shared rather than policed. For instance, one winter weekend they hosted a Pitha Utshab, a traditional rice cake festival, in a local park that happens to host the weekly Italian farmers’ market. The choice to hold the event concurrently with the farmers’ market was deliberate: it ensured an organic mingling of communities. The scene that unfolded was almost carnivalesque. On one side of the park, Italian neighbours browsed stalls of wine, cheese, and sausages as they normally would on market day; on the other side, Bangladeshi women set up tables to prepare and serve pithas (traditional rice cakes) and steaming vats of biryani. The air was filled with the mixed aromas of grilled pork panini and spicy samosas. Curious Italian passersby wandered over to sample the sweet pithas, while Bangladeshi families strolled through the Italian produce stands. A small stage was set up from which Bangla music blared; women in colorful saris began an impromptu dance circle, and a few Italian onlookers smiled and clapped along, eventually even joining the dance. At the end, the organisers made a point of distributing free biryani to everyone – a gesture of hospitality that invited all present, Italian or Bangladeshi, to break bread (or rice) together.



Figure 19: A scene of the Pitha Utshab, traditional rice cake festival, organised by Dhuumcatu. Photo by Punny Kabir, 03/02/2024.

One Bangladeshi mother, who works as a catering cook and occasionally joins protests, watched her young children play under the aqueduct arches while music filled the park. She told me, “There was a time when we were hesitant to even enter these parks because the environment was hostile. But now our children are born here, growing up here. We try hard to make them feel that they own the place.” Her words capture a profound shift: a space once experienced as hostile had become somewhere her family could feel at home. By situating the Pitha festival within the rhythms of local Italian life, in this case the farmers’ market, the alliance created a scene in which different attachments to place, family, neighbourhood, and public community converged. This is close to what Yuval-Davis describes as the multi-layered and multi-scale character of belonging (2011, 12). The mother’s wish for her children to “own the place” also resonates with Yuval-Davis’s definition of belonging as an emotional attachment, a feeling of being “at home,” bound up with the experience of a “‘safe’ space” (2011, 10). What emerges here is not simply a sentimental sense of home, but a political shift in the local boundaries of belonging. For that moment, the park was no longer contested ground but a shared zone of familiarity, ease, and presence, produced through food, music, and co-presence.

Alongside these visible public practices, perhaps the most profound signs of a developing political home emerge in places and decisions that are unexpectedly private yet carry public significance. One such sign appears in how people handle the very end of life. For many

years, Bangladeshi families in Rome followed the custom of sending deceased loved ones back to Bangladesh for burial. This practice quietly reinforced the idea that, ultimately, “home” lay elsewhere, that no matter how long one lived and worked in Italy, one’s final resting place should be in the ancestral land. Recently, however, a notable shift has occurred: increasingly, Bangladeshi families, especially those with Italian-born children, are choosing to bury their relatives in Rome. To put down roots in the soil of Rome, even in death, is a deeply symbolic act. In Yuval-Davis’s terms, belonging is “about an emotional (or even ontological) attachment, about feeling ‘at home’.” Drawing on Hage, she adds that home is “an on-going project entailing a sense of hope for the future” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 10). The decision to bury one’s parents or grandparents in Roman soil can be read as precisely such a project of home: it signals the hope and intention that this city is not merely a temporary workplace, but the locus of family continuity and memory. Choosing a Roman cemetery over repatriation of remains is therefore a quiet but powerful declaration that this community belongs here. It asserts a claim to be part of the city’s history and future, that Bangladeshi families, too, will be remembered in Rome’s cemeteries and inscribed into the social life of the city across generations.

Responding to this emerging sentiment that “home is here,” the Dhumcatu Association has taken up an initiative called the Koborstan Prokolpo¹⁸ (Cemetery Project): a campaign to establish a dedicated Muslim cemetery in or near Rome. Bacchu, Dhumcatu’s leader, frames the project in pragmatic, generational, and religious terms. In an interview, he explained the reasoning: “We calculated that there are about 1 million Muslims living in Italy, and 10 percent of them live in Rome alone. There is a graveyard in Rome called Prima Porta, where a corner is dedicated to Muslims. Yet, there is very little space there compared to the need.” The shortage of burial space for Muslims became especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when international travel was shut down. “During the pandemic, this need was particularly felt because sending dead bodies to Bangladesh was not possible and many bodies were stuck in morgues for a long time,” Bacchu recounted. Beyond the logistical crisis, he pointed out a generational reality: “There will be no one to receive their dead bodies in Bangladesh, nor will their children or grandchildren want to bury them in Bangladesh, because Italy is their first home. Hence, we thought that a dedicated graveyard is necessary.”

¹⁸ The graveyard project for Muslims in Rome has also been covered in the international press; see Francesco Bongarra, “Italy’s First Islamic Burial Place Planned for Rome,” Arab News, June 4, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1684951/world>.

Here, Bacchu invokes a future in which the second and third generations of Bangladeshis in Italy will have no personal ties to the old country's soil, and their attachments will lie here, making an Italy-based cemetery an inevitable need.

Bacchu also emphasises that religious obligations under Islam reinforce this orientation toward local burial. "Shariah¹⁹ says that a Muslim should be buried in the place where they die and should be buried as soon as possible. The repatriation of bodies clearly negates what is instructed in the Quran. And practically, considering all the bureaucracy it involves, it is also very difficult. Therefore, we thought of buying private land and turning it into a graveyard." The plan, still in its early stages, has been discussed with various Muslim organisations and with the alliance's Italian partners. "We discussed with many other organisations, and especially with our political allies; all of them agreed to the idea. They politically supported the project, and perhaps they might provide some logistical support in the future, too," Bacchu noted. At the same time, he also acknowledged that official support was lacking: "It is not possible to get any external funds from the state or any political organisations. It has to be done with our own funding." This underscores that while Italian allies may lend political and technical help, the community will probably have to build this piece of infrastructure largely through its own resources. This reflects both the empowerment and the marginalization at play: they have agency to pursue such a project, but little institutional recognition or funding.

What emerges ethnographically is a shift from belonging as an implicit orientation to belonging as an explicit public claim. A family's decision to bury a relative in Rome can remain relatively private, quietly normalizing the sense that "we belong here until the end." But once the community begins to organise collectively for land, permission, and recognition, that quiet sense of home enters a more openly political terrain. This is precisely the move that Yuval-Davis describes in her distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging, when attachments to place become publicly organised, debated, and contested (Yuval-Davis 2011, 18-21). In this case, the effort to secure a Muslim cemetery forces a public reckoning with whether Bangladeshi Muslim lives and deaths are recognised as part of Rome's moral and spatial order, entitled to dignity, continuity, and a lasting place in the city. What struck me in this material is that the cemetery question was never discussed merely as a technical

¹⁹ Shariah is Islamic religious law derived from the Quran and Hadith. It covers many aspects of life, including family law and burial rituals. In my research, Shariah appears in discussions of death and burial, particularly in the view that Muslims should be buried promptly and, ideally, in the place where they die. This understanding shapes some migrants' decisions about whether to repatriate deceased relatives.

religious need. It was also discussed as a question of generational settlement, family continuity, and whether a life built in Rome could be allowed to end in Rome without being symbolically returned elsewhere. The *Koborstan Prokolpo*, therefore, turns belonging into a concrete test of recognition. Whether it succeeds or not will reveal much about the conditions under which migrant presence in the city can be acknowledged as enduring rather than provisional.

The project also reveals that the making of political home in Torpignattara extends beyond visibility in everyday public life. It raises the question of who may remain in the city symbolically and materially, even after death. In that sense, the cemetery campaign is not simply a religious demand. It is also a claim to durable urban presence. It asks whether Bangladeshi Muslim families can be recognised as part of Rome's long-term social fabric, rather than as temporary workers whose lives unfold in the city only to be folded back elsewhere in death. This expands the question of city-making beyond commerce, visibility, and everyday sociability toward a more durable claim on the city's moral and infrastructural landscape. Çağlar and Schiller's insistence that migrants are "integral to city-making" through their varied engagements in urban life helps name this broader process (2018, 5), while their notion of "sociabilities of emplacement" also resonates with the practical cooperation visible here between migrants and local Italian actors around land, permissions, funding, and institutional navigation (2018, 130). But in this case, those sociabilities are being stretched beyond ordinary coexistence into the question of where a community may bury its dead. The cemetery campaign thus extends political home-making beyond demonstrations and neighbourhood events into the terrain of posterity. It links family futures, religious obligation, and collective memory to the urban fabric itself. Above all, it shows that the struggle for belonging is not only about visibility in life, but also about the right to remain, to be remembered, and to take up space in death.

Taken together, the episodes in this section, from graffiti and demonstrations to festivals and cemetery campaigns, show political home as an ongoing attempt rather than a settled achievement: incremental, uneven, and reversible. The next section turns to what happens when this neighbourhood-based effort is asked to travel, as participation moves into broader arenas and a new generation comes of age. I trace which forms of participation extend outward and endure, and which stall or dissipate, to clarify what can and cannot be sustained from "Banglatown".

5.3 Beyond the Neighbourhood: Spatial Limits of Participation

The rich tapestry of spatial claims and cultural initiatives traced above raises a further question: What happens when alliance-based participation moves beyond immediate neighbourhood struggles? In other words, after all the collective activism and place-making in “Banglatown”, who engages in wider political arenas and on what terms, and where do the limits of that engagement appear? Put differently, how far can the political home that they had built in Torpignattara extend into broader fields of politics, and what happens when its residents step outside its familiar bounds? My fieldwork suggests that while Bangladeshi activists and their Italian allies have clearly expanded the local spaces in which migrants can appear as political subjects, their involvement in formal and city-wide politics remains selective and uneven. Not all forms of activism and participation are equally accessible or appealing to the Bangladeshi residents who have been active in the neighbourhood. Issues of scale, risk, legal status, and everyday life constraints shape a pattern in which certain pathways of participation flourish, while others remain faint or fragile.

One revealing example came from a small weekday demonstration on the far outskirts of Rome. The protest took place in front of the headquarters of a major arms manufacturer and was organised largely by anarchist and anti-militarist groups. Through the usual WhatsApp networks and social media, the organisers invited their Bangladeshi *compagni* (Italian for “comrades”) to join, framing the rally as part of a wider anti-war struggle that linked conflicts from Palestine to Yemen to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. When I arrived at the industrial-zone location, I did not see Bangladeshi participants at all, apart from a handful of long-standing militant figures I already knew from the wider network. I do not read this as apathy toward war or injustice, since I also observed anti-war mobilisations in Torpignattara on weekends, where the turnout was not insignificant. Rather, this particular episode suggested a more situational combination of legibility, time, and perceived risk. The location was far from the neighbourhood, in an unfamiliar industrial area that few residents had everyday reasons to navigate. The political framing relied on connections, such as arms economies and geopolitics, that may not have felt immediately usable for everyone as a language of local struggle. And because the protest took place on a weekday, participation required taking time off work or reshuffling precarious schedules, then travelling to a setting where some might not have felt fully secure or confident about what kind of policing or confrontation could unfold.

This scenario highlighted a threshold: participation tends to be strongest where struggles are grounded in immediate, recognizable needs, such as documentation, housing rights, religious freedom, or the right to use local urban spaces. By contrast, actions that target wider scales or more abstract issues often fail to mobilise beyond a small core of politicized Bangladeshis. The arms industry protest, framed in a broad anti-imperialist narrative, felt too remote from the daily priorities of many in Torpignattara. As one community member later explained to me, “I care about Palestine, of course, but if I have to choose between that and helping someone with their paperwork on *permesso di soggiorno* that day, I’ll do the *permesso*. That’s what affects us directly.” There is also a risk calculus at play. A protest focused on a high-security target like an arms company potentially invites a heavy police presence or confrontation. For a migrant – especially one without secure legal status – the idea of being caught up in a violent clash or even an arrest far outside their normal environment can be terrifying. The economy of time and safety that many Torpignattara residents navigate is already fragile: long work hours, the need to stay out of trouble, and the constant vigilance if one is undocumented. Participating in a protest that does not clearly connect to those pressures can seem like an unjustifiable gamble.

Interestingly, some of my Italian activist interlocutors were themselves aware of this disjuncture. Greta, an anarchist activist deeply involved in the Torpignattara networks, reflected on how her own movement’s tactics might inadvertently exclude their migrant allies. “I can tell you from the point of view of some anarchists,” she said, “the choice we make in the struggles is often to clash with the police and to call non-legal demonstrations. So those who have problems with documents do not want to have problems with the police. One of the problems is the way we fight. It can sometimes turn violent, which not everyone feels comfortable with or able to participate in.” Greta’s comment pinpoints a structural dilemma: forms of militancy that make sense for long-time Italian activists (who have citizenship, know the legal terrain, and are perhaps willing to risk arrest for a cause) can be too risky for undocumented or precariously documented migrants, even if they agree wholeheartedly with the political message. In this sense, the alliance must constantly negotiate its repertoire of contention. To truly include migrants, certain tactics may need to be tempered or translated into safer forms. Otherwise, participation will remain limited to those few migrants who, by virtue of personality or status, dare to step into high-risk actions, while the majority, understandably, stay away. What we see here is that the political home constructed in the relatively safer space of the neighbourhood does not automatically extend

to every kind of street politics. It has boundaries defined by risk and familiarity. Within those boundaries, for example, a permitted march in Torpignattara or an encampment at the local park, a broad range of migrants might participate. But if the action crosses those boundaries, many will retreat to safety.

This pattern recurred throughout my fieldwork. Participation was broad and enthusiastic when the cause intersected with tangible everyday issues: a rally to demand speedier regularization documents, a demonstration to keep a prayer room open, and a march against a xenophobic attack on a local Bangladeshi shopkeeper. These were fights people could immediately grasp as their issues. By contrast, when activism shifted to issues perceived as more distant, such as protesting Italian military involvement abroad, calling for broader wealth redistribution, or supporting causes like LGBTQ+ rights that some more conservative migrants viewed ambivalently, the Bangladeshi presence usually narrowed to a small, committed circle. It's not that most Bangladeshis in Torpignattara are uninterested in those broader issues; rather, those issues often feel less urgent or less accessible given the limited bandwidth people have. Many are juggling two jobs, family duties, and the ongoing labour of navigating life in a foreign country. Energy for political engagement is a scarce resource, and most choose to spend it where it yields the most immediate and visible returns for their community.

Another set of limits becomes evident when we shift from street alliances to the realm of electoral politics and formal civic participation. Part of the original research question asks how far participation can travel beyond the neighbourhood – and one obvious test is whether migrant-origin residents engage in the more institutionalized arenas of politics, such as voting, party activism, or running for office. Here, too, we find the extension of the political home to be partial and fraught. From Dhumcatu's perspective, the question of formal political inclusion has always been on the agenda, even as they focus on street activism. In a 2023 conversation, before his arrest, Bacchu described how the association had campaigned repeatedly for local voting rights for long-term residents. "We have gathered signatures many times," he said, arguing that migrants with regular residency who pay taxes and raise families in Rome should be allowed to vote in municipal elections even if they are not citizens. To him, "the right to vote where one lives and works" is a logical extension of everyday contributions to the city, "not a radical demand," as he put it. Bacchu's advocacy aligns with a broader principle of urban citizenship: the idea that membership in the city, through living and contributing, should confer certain political rights, even if national citizenship is absent.

It is a notion not unlike Lefebvre's right to the city applied to suffrage, emphasising place-based belonging as a basis for rights. Yet, as Bacchu lamented, these efforts have hit a wall in Italy's legal regime.

An instructive case is that of Laila – the same woman who played a key role in street mobilisations. Having moved to Rome in the 1990s and built a life as a shop owner and community leader, Laila eventually made a foray into institutional politics. She became one of the very few Bangladeshi Italians in Torpignattara to join a political party and stand as a candidate in local elections. With strong ties to the neighbourhood's radical-left groups, she nonetheless chose to run with a new centre-left party (called Demos) that emerged in the late 2010s, aiming to represent marginal urban areas. Her motive, as she explained, was to open a channel for Bangladeshi voices into the official political system. "No one is going to take Bangladeshis seriously if we don't take part in electoral politics," she told me bluntly. For Laila, running for a seat on the municipal council was less about expecting to win (she was quite aware that was unlikely) and more about making a statement: encouraging her community to see elections as a legitimate arena for their concerns, and forcing Italian political actors to acknowledge a Bangladeshi candidate and constituency.

Laila's campaign, though short-lived, was revealing. She made a point to involve a handful of Bangladeshi youths in canvassing and campaigning. "This was an opening for them to engage in dialogue, to understand both the obstacles and the opportunities [of politics]," she said. In essence, she was trying to educate and inspire the next generation about democratic participation, starting with the very basics. This intuition of hers – that having minority candidates might encourage minority residents to pay attention and vote – echoes findings in European political research that "selecting minority candidates might increase a party's attraction in the eyes of immigrant and minority voters, or even encourage them to vote for the first time" (Bloemraad and Schönwälder 2013, 565). In practice, what Laila encountered on the campaign trail was an eye-opener. "What I discovered was shocking," she admitted. She repeatedly met Bangladeshi-origin residents who did not know whether they were entitled to vote, had never applied for a voter registration card, or were unsure about their legal status in relation to voting. Italy's laws are strict: only citizens can vote in national and local elections, with a minor exception for EU nationals at the local level, so most first-generation Bangladeshi migrants without citizenship simply have no voting rights. But Laila was talking even about those who did have citizenship, either through naturalization or by being born in Italy. Many of them still treated elections as something "for Italians," not for

people like them. In other words, formal eligibility had not translated into a feeling of political entitlement. This points to a subtle but important threshold: electoral participation is not only a legal matter but also a psychological and cultural one. Years of being marginalized or of focusing on homeland politics (or simply surviving economically) can result in a local political alienation so deep that even when one has the right to vote, one may not exercise it or even be aware of it. Laila's experience underscores that becoming a voter, or in other words, becoming a political subject in the electoral arena, requires a sense that one's voice actually matters there, that "people like me" are included in the political community. That sense was weak in "Banglatown". Voting, unlike protesting with friends in the piazza, still felt to many like stepping into someone else's house in which they might feel like unwelcome guests.

The structural barriers behind this are significant. Italian electoral law, as noted, confines voting in state elections strictly to citizens, and courts have struck down local efforts to extend voting to non-citizens. Thus, with few exceptions, the vast majority of Bangladeshi adults in Torpignattara who lack Italian passports cannot vote in any election. They can join marches, sign petitions, even partake in party rallies, but come election day, they have no ballot to cast. Some Italian parties, aware of demographic changes, have occasionally tried to involve migrants in indirect ways – for instance, by allowing foreign residents to vote in open primary elections for party leadership. Bacchu himself noted this: parties like the Democratic Party (PD) sometimes invite "stranieri residenti" (foreign residents) to participate in primaries or consultations as a way to seem inclusive, yet those same migrants remain excluded from the actual general elections where official power is decided. Bacchu criticized this as instrumental usage: "migrants are used when convenient and forgotten afterwards," he said, pointing to the 2017 PD leadership primary where non-members, including 16- and 17-year-olds and non-citizen residents with *permesso di soggiorno*, were allowed to vote upon a token registration. That experiment gave a small taste of political voice to some Bangladeshis in Rome, but it was a one-off, symbolic concession – it did not alter the fundamental exclusion from official electoral participation. The result of all this is a pattern of political engagement that remains skewed: high visibility and energy in certain street-based and community arenas, but a very narrow, tentative entry into formal political arenas. Such piecemeal inclusion can even be cynical: it mobilises migrants to legitimize party decisions, but it does not give them a seat at the table when real offices are at stake.

This gap produces frustration among many politically conscious members of the Bangladeshi community. “Shahed” (a pseudonym), a Bangladeshi Italian man in his mid-fifties who is a local labour organiser, voiced sharp criticism not only of the failed referendum on citizenship reform in 2025 (which would have eased naturalization requirements but failed because of low turnout), but also of what he saw as misplaced priorities within his own community’s leadership. “The so-called leaders of the Bangladeshi community here are busy with politics back in Bangladesh, or caught up in *Adam Bepari* (manpower brokerage) – both things that bring quick money,” he told me with evident anger. “They don’t think about how the next generations will stake their political claims here. They’re wrapped up in their little clique politics. And then there are a few who are always out protesting with the radical left; those groups don’t care if you’re a citizen or not, if you have voting rights or not. They never teach people about these basic things. It’s always either festivals or protests – both just chances to collect money!” Shahed’s critique is harsh and certainly colored by his personal viewpoint (he was advocating for more focus on institutional empowerment). But his words encapsulate several fault lines at once: the tension between transnational political engagements (focusing energy on Bangladeshi national politics or business) versus local civic empowerment; the gap between street activism and voter education; and differences in leadership style (some community leaders being more interested in symbolic or economic gains than long-term inclusion efforts). After hearing Laila’s accounts of voters’ lack of interest and Shahed’s blistering remarks, it became clear that the low electoral participation cannot be explained by any single factor. Rather, it reflects a cumulative effect of structural exclusion (laws barring non-citizens), institutional neglect (Italian parties rarely courting migrant voters seriously), and internal community dynamics (little investment by community elites in fostering a voting culture, and perhaps even skepticism of Italian politics among migrants themselves).

A more recent development in Rome brings this selectivity into even sharper focus. In late 2025, MuRo27, short for *Musulmani per Roma 2027*, emerged as a Muslim civic association seeking to intervene in public debate around the 2027 municipal elections. Public coverage described it not as a party or electoral list, but as an association that wanted to contribute to local political discussion and make Muslim presence legible as a legitimate civic and political voice in the city (Pandolfini 2025; Raimo 2025; Prenda 2025). During my fieldwork, I encountered its spokesperson, Francesco Tieri, at several political and cultural events organised by Dhuumcatu, where we had brief exchanges before I later interviewed him. Tieri described MuRo27 as an association of “political culture” composed of Muslims who live,

work, or study in Rome, and explained that “religious belonging is not the end goal of the association but the means through which we want to engage in politics.” He added that the initiative seeks to reverse a dominant condition in which Muslims appear mainly as “political objects,” insisting instead, “We want to be political subjects.” At the same time, his reflections made clear that this citywide initiative does not straightforwardly draw in most Bangladeshi Muslims in Torpignattara. Tieri observed that “most Bangladeshis may not be interested in MuRo27 and are already taking part in the campaign activities of the major political forces,” and he argued that what many Bangladeshis in Torpignattara fundamentally lack is “a life perspective,” shaped by insecure settlement, the difficulty of obtaining citizenship, and the wider hostility of Italy toward religious difference. He was careful to add that MuRo27 “does not have a specific project for Bangladeshi Muslims,” since it does not see itself as a Muslim lobby but as a broader civic initiative concerned with questions such as religious freedom and the common good. Precisely for that reason, MuRo27 is useful here less as evidence of an outward extension of Torpignattara-based participation than as a sign of how uneven that extension remains. Even where a new citywide Muslim political horizon has opened, it does not automatically absorb the Bangladeshi residents of Torpignattara, many of whom remain oriented toward more immediate struggles, major-party campaign circuits, or uncertain futures of settlement. Seen in this light, MuRo27 helps clarify the argument of this section: once participation moves beyond immediate neighbourhood struggles, it becomes narrower, more selective, and much harder to consolidate across the wider migrant population.

Returning to the guiding question of this chapter, I show that participation in Torpignattara does not simply expand outward once local alliances have been built. Rather, it remains spatially uneven and strongly conditioned by where a struggle takes place, how immediately legible it feels, what kinds of risks it carries, and how easily it can be fitted into the fragile economies of migrant work and legal insecurity. While the alliance has widened the local spaces in which Bangladeshi migrants can appear as political subjects, that political home does not travel automatically beyond the neighbourhood. Participation is strongest where struggles are grounded in recognizable and immediate concerns, such as documents, housing, religion, or local urban space. It becomes thinner when action shifts to unfamiliar locations, broader political scales, or high-risk repertoires that require time, confidence, and legal security that many migrants cannot afford. In this sense, the limits of participation are not

external to alliance-based politics but built into the very social and spatial conditions under which it becomes possible.

The limits traced above are not only spatial but also generational. The next section asks whether the migrant–left alliance in Torpignattara recruits and retains the second generation, or whether its political home remains largely a first-generation formation whose language of struggle, leadership styles, and organisational habits do not travel well to young Bangladeshi Italians.

5.4 Intergenerational Reach and Limits of Participation

In this section, I turn to the second generation and to a question that follows directly from the chapter’s focus on alliance-enabled participation and political home-making: to what extent does the Torpignattara alliance offer second-generation Bangladeshi Italians a meaningful and intelligible space of participation, and can the neighbourhood-scale political home built through first-generation struggles be inherited, inhabited, or reworked across generations? I use “second generation” broadly to refer to Italian-born or Italian-raised children of Bangladeshi migrants, including those who arrived as young children. The young people discussed here are Italian citizens by birth or early naturalisation, fluent in Italian schools and media, and less directly entangled in the documentation struggles that structured their parents’ everyday political horizons. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether they can enter the polity in legal terms, but whether they enter the alliance as a political infrastructure: whether its forms of claim-making, leadership styles, and idioms of struggle feel relevant and legitimate to them, and whether it provides a social space through which they can enact citizenship and belonging in practice. Put differently, this section asks whether the political home built in Torpignattara remains largely a first-generation achievement anchored in specific histories of precarity and street-level organising, or whether it becomes a platform through which the second generation can participate on their own terms and extend the alliance’s reach beyond its original grammar.

The evidence from Torpignattara suggests a mixed picture. On one end of the spectrum, a cluster of second-generation youth remains closely tied to community structures, but often in ways that parallel rather than intersect the leftist alliance. For example, some young

Bangladeshi Italians are active in mosque-based groups or Islamic cultural associations. Their participation in public life tends to be episodic and issue-specific. They might turn out for a protest when there is an explicitly Muslim cause, for example demonstrating against an Islamophobic incident, the closure of a prayer space, or rallying for Palestine. In such moments, they are visible on the streets, often moving in tight-knit groups under the guidance of local imams or community elders. At a large protest I observed against the shutting down of “illegal” prayer rooms, a contingent of teenagers from one madrasa marched together, clearly following instructions on how to behave and what slogans to chant. Their presence was important because it added numbers and showed a Muslim youth voice, but it was also very disciplined and inward-facing, almost like a school group procession. Outside of those specific moments, many of these religiously oriented youths did not participate in the broader alliance activities. They rarely attended the more secular rallies or the neighbourhood assemblies organised by Torpignattara Solidale. Such engagement has precedent elsewhere: studies in the UK, for instance, suggest that some revivalist Islamic movements have channelled youth activity primarily into forms of religious renewal within Muslim communities, reinforcing internal cohesion while limiting wider social engagement (Geaves 1996, 171, 173). In Torpignattara, a similar dynamic may be at play – a segment of the second generation is active, but only within a bounded sphere that may inadvertently isolate them from broader civic life.



Figure 20: A scene from a demonstration condemning the war in Gaza. Photo by Punny Kabir, 29/10/2023.

On the other end of the spectrum, some second-generation individuals are carving out very different identities and political practices, often outside the “Banglatown” milieu. I interviewed two brothers in their early twenties who are members of *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* (GMI), a nationwide Muslim youth organisation. Born and raised in Rome, these brothers represented a more cosmopolitan, networked kind of Muslim identity. They organised annual Ramadan iftar events at Sapienza University, mixing with Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds. They spoke Italian among themselves and slipped into Bangla or English depending on context. Interestingly, they distanced themselves from the older Bangladeshi-run cultural centres and mosque committees, describing those as mired in parochial politics and “factionalism” from back home. “We do not like the politics among different mosque committees and whatever faction of Islam they try to teach,” one of them said. They described their approach as a kind of “secular Islam,” not in the sense of abandoning faith, but of living it in a way they see as compatible with European public life. One brother proudly recounted attending a conference in Germany for young European Muslims and noted, “I am happy to be in Italy. Muslims in France or Germany are more discriminated against than they are here.”

These young men hardly participate in the local protests or alliance meetings “unless it is really something pressing,” as one admitted. For example, they did join a large rally after a mosque vandalism incident. But they showed little enthusiasm for the well-known first-generation activists in Torpignattara or for the leftist and anarchist network, which they saw as somewhat outside their world. Their energies were directed toward bridging communities in a different way, such as through cultural events and interfaith dialogues. What this illustrates is a generational reconfiguration of Muslim identification. Rather than locating themselves primarily as “Bangladeshi” in Rome, they embrace being Italian Muslims and seek commonality with other Muslims and like-minded peers across ethnic lines. In this sense, their trajectory reflects what Cesari describes as a shift in the way “specific persons and collectivities of Muslim extraction, organise and view themselves” (2014, 10). She also cautions against treating Islam as “a primary unifying signifier,” and that caution is especially relevant here, because these brothers’ orientation cannot be understood through religion alone (Cesari 2014, 10). It is equally shaped by generation, education, urban upbringing, and their comfort in Italian and trans-European public spaces. Their distance from older Bangladeshi committees is therefore not a retreat from public engagement, but a relocation of it into a different social field. This certainly challenges the first-generation alliance’s mode, which

was built around solidarity across ethnic and religious difference in the neighbourhood. The second-generation GMI activists, by contrast, find solidarity through a shared Muslim framework that cuts across national origin and connects them to university spaces, interethnic Muslim youth networks, and broader European encounters. Their orientation may therefore lead them toward collaborations quite apart from the Torpignattara alliances, including interfaith initiatives, university-based organising, or wider Muslim advocacy networks.

Somewhere between these poles are figures like Arman, a cultural mediator in his mid-thirties who has one foot in the local alliance and one foot in broader social initiatives. Arman grew up in Torpignattara from the age of 12, fluent in Italian, and was mentored by some of the liberal Italian activists in the area. He told me he feels more “himself” in mixed settings than in exclusively Bangladeshi ones. “We – those of us who grew up here – do not usually participate in only Bangladeshi gatherings because they (the older generation) have groupings based on which part of Bangladesh you come from or which party back home you support,” he explained, rolling his eyes at what he considered divisive parochialism. Instead, he prefers civic activities that bring different communities together – for example, volunteering to translate at a neighbourhood open-air film screening, or helping organize an anti-racist school event. “For me, political participation is less about representing a ‘Bangladeshi community’ than about protecting a sense of equal belonging in the neighbourhood where I came of age,” Arman said. His activism is anchored in everyday attachments and long-term friendships across communities. Torpignattara, for him, is unquestionably home, and he wants to ensure it remains a place of tolerance and equality. Interestingly, Arman has also become vocal about what he calls “religious spectacle.” While he respects everyone’s right to worship, he is wary of street demonstrations that are very explicitly religious in form (such as mass prayers as a protest). “The mass prayer in front of the Colosseum [referring to a high-profile protest prayer some years back] was symbolic; I get it. But since then, they keep doing these displays... it makes me uncomfortable,” he confessed. Arman’s stance reflects a desire to see his community integrate into a secular civic culture rather than stand apart through conspicuous religious identity. His view resonates with anthropologist Talal Asad’s insight that secularism does not simply erase religion but “re-describes” it, relocating faith into a more private or controlled sphere and cultivating new sensibilities about where faith belongs (Asad 2003). In Arman’s case, his secular sensibility tells him that too much public religiosity might hinder the acceptance and equal footing he seeks for his community in Italy.

These differences matter for participation because they shape who can appear comfortably within the alliance's existing repertoire, and therefore who can actually inhabit the political home that first-generation organisers and Italian allies have built in Torpignattara. In Torpignattara, the Dhumcatu network has limited second-generation presence in its regular protest scene. Very few Bangladeshi youths are consistently visible in the neighbourhood's mobilisations, which remain dominated by men in their late 30s and 40s and a smaller number of women above 30. This does not mean that younger Bangladeshis lack political concerns. It indicates that the alliance's main infrastructures of participation, its office routines, meeting styles, and protest repertoires, are still more tightly aligned with first-generation struggles and with forms of public presence that not all second-generation actors find attractive or worth the cost.

An exception during the period when Bacchu was subject to custodial measures, including house arrest, was a young Bangladeshi man, Rakib (pseudonym), in his late 20s, who was seen regularly at the Dhumcatu office. He said he was "committed to working-class migrants' rights and to protecting them from the *dalāl* (broker) network." When asked about the so-called "Islamic turn" of Dhumcatu and whether it was inspiring the new generation, he seemed unaware of any such "turn." He explained, "Being a Muslim sometimes adds another layer of discrimination for us. When it happens, we address it and protest it, of course. But religious identity politics is not the main motto of our association." His remarks locate participation in a pragmatic rights-based vocabulary rather than in religious mobilisation. Regarding the low turnout of the new generation, he observed, "Most of them are career-oriented or trying to migrate to another country. They are not interested in investing their time and energy for the betterment of the community." Read through the chapter's lens, his diagnosis points less to a moral failure than to a limit of participatory reach: when younger citizens orient their lives toward careers, mobility, or other civic arenas, the alliance does not automatically become the place where they enact belonging and political membership, even when they do not reject its goals.

Besides the factor of religion, there are other constraints that shape the link between the alliance and second-generation participation. In my conversations with second-generation interlocutors, neighbourhood-based activism and party politics rarely appeared as primary sites through which they imagined political life. They spoke more readily about the difficulty of finding stable work, the experience of everyday racism in schools and the workplace, the pressures of balancing family expectations with their own aspirations, and the strain of

inhabiting two cultural worlds. This does not mean they are apolitical. It means that the alliance does not automatically function for them as the main infrastructure of participation. Even when the same structural problems are present, the route from experience to collective action is mediated by different moral vocabularies, different aspirations, and different thresholds of time, exposure, and relevance. In other words, what the alliance offers as a language of claim-making does not always feel like the most convincing or usable language for second-generation citizens.

An episode at a cross-cultural event in Torpignattara illustrates this uneven fit. There, I met two Bangladeshi Italian women in their early thirties whose trajectories cut across common assumptions. Both had been born and raised in the neighbourhood but had moved to northern Rome later in life. One wore jeans and a Western-style top; the other wore a long dress with a hijab. Each described being judged from different directions. The woman in Western clothes told me she was regularly criticised within Bangladeshi circles for her dress, yet she also described how strictly she had followed her family's insistence that she marry a Muslim man, no matter his ethnicity. Some of her Italian and Bangladeshi friends, who saw her as "secular," were "pissed off," as she put it, by this decision. The woman in hijab, by contrast, recounted facing hostile or patronising comments from both Italians and some "progressive" Bangladeshis who doubted that her choice of dress was really autonomous. "Neither the Bangladeshi progressives nor average Italians want to believe that I chose this attire myself," she said. "Neither my father nor my husband forced me to do so."

What surprised me most was their shared stance on national politics. Despite these different presentations of self, both expressed support for the government of Giorgia Meloni. Defending her choice, she said their programme is more "in order" than the leftists', who are "full of rhetoric and have no pragmatic solutions." Their hardline anti-immigrant rhetoric did not trouble them as much as one might expect from daughters of immigrants. The woman in hijab told me, "I feel pity for the migrants who risk their lives in the Mediterranean to come here just to have a better life. But that is the failure of the governments of those countries. Those people in the government are filthy rich. Don't you think Bangladesh has money? They do, but everyone at the top is corrupt. And they let the human traffickers do business too. But why should Italy suffer for that?" Her friend added that left-wing protests "never attracted" her. Read through the lens of this chapter, their comments are less important as an index of "right-wing tendency" than as a sign of how participation travels poorly from the alliance's repertoire into second-generation political imagination. The neighbourhood and its

anti-racist street politics may still be part of their biography, but it is no longer the main scene through which they seek recognition or belonging. Their claims are oriented toward respectability, order, and “pragmatic” solutions. Their distance from the leftist repertoire suggests that neither legal citizenship nor Bangladeshi-origin background translates automatically into a shared political idiom, a common horizon of belonging, or continuity with the alliance politics that shaped the first generation. For Italian activists in the solidarity network, such encounters are both familiar and unsettling because they expose a limit of alliance-based participation. They confirm that experiences of racism do not translate straightforwardly into pro-migrant or leftist commitments, and that the alliance’s moral economy of solidarity can fail to recruit those who do not recognise themselves in its idioms. Davide, a long-standing anarchist militant in Torpignattara, remarked that intense competitiveness and social pressure within the Bangladeshi community also shape young people’s dispositions towards collective politics. “There is this culture of comparison, pressure to outperform,” he said. “You see it even in children’s drawing contests. Parents arguing over who should preside over the programme in front of the kids. It’s toxic.” In his view, this atmosphere can prompt young Bangladeshis to prioritise individual advancement and respectability over risky, time-consuming collective struggles. Seen through the lens of this chapter, these encounters show that while the alliance has expanded participation for many first-generation migrants by making certain public acts feel safe and worthwhile, it has a weaker hold on second-generation futures, where the relevant stakes, political idioms, and costs of participation are not the same. Paula, an Italian anarchist activist I mentioned earlier in the thesis, who has worked for years in Torpignattara, reflected on how hard it is to involve the children of migrants in explicitly leftist activism. “It is difficult to connect with younger people,” she told me. “Still, I do have some contact with them, especially through activism. Most of this is rooted in schools. You only start to see some engagement at the university level, and even that is slow, slower than in France or Germany.” She contrasted Italy’s situation with countries where colonial histories or earlier migration waves created different conditions: “In France, many migrants come from former colonies, so they already speak the language and can participate more immediately. In Germany, Turkish communities have been organising since the 1960s. Italy? We’re far behind. Most of the Bangladeshi parents do not speak fluent Italian; the language barrier overwhelms all the other struggles and blocks political participation. The second generation learn Italian at school, with friends, at work, but they do not learn the language of struggle in Italian from their parents.” Her reflection clarifies a specifically intergenerational limit of political home-making: the alliance can

stabilise local scenes of participation for first-generation migrants, yet the “grammar” of that participation is not automatically transmitted within families, and the home risks remaining a first-generation infrastructure rather than a shared intergenerational dwelling.

Approaches to reaching this generation vary among activists. Laila, a first-generation Bangladeshi immigrant woman active in both community work and party politics, is one of the few who explicitly connect her engagement in institutional politics to concerns about the next generation. “No one is going to take Bangladeshis seriously if we don’t take part in electoral politics,” she told me. For Laila, running in a local municipal election was a deliberate pedagogical act as much as a bid for office. “I ran for a local election knowing that I would not win,” she said, “but I still ran and made sure to engage a handful of youths in my campaign. This was an opening for them to engage in dialogue, to understand both the obstacles and the opportunities.” I read her strategy here as an effort to widen the repertoire of political home-making beyond street-level claim-making by incorporating institutional literacy and presenting electoral politics to younger citizens as another possible scene of participation rather than as someone else’s terrain.

Stefano, a senior leader of Partito della Rifondazione Comunista and an important interlocutor for this research, openly acknowledges that the Italian left more broadly has not developed adequate strategies to engage second-generation youth. He describes his own party as “very weak” and “made up of people whose average age is too high,” which makes it difficult to establish relationships with younger Italians and with the children of migrants. He points out a few exceptions: a second-generation Dominican man who became the secretary of a local party chapter in Liguria, or strong participation of young Maghrebi and Bangladeshi workers around Padua. In Torpignattara’s Casa del Popolo, migrants sometimes attend party meetings or use the premises for their own gatherings. But these remain isolated examples. “We would need, almost physically, to rebuild a relationship with young people and to meet the second generations,” he told me. His remarks underline an institutional dimension of the same problem: even where a neighbourhood political home exists, it does not automatically connect to party structures that are capable of sustaining and amplifying participation across generations.

In recent years, Stefano has tried to compensate for this institutional inertia through personal initiatives. He visits high schools in northern Italy to talk about immigration and racism, seeing this as crucial for reshaping the broader cultural environment in which second-

generation youth grow up. He also participates in a “law on hospitality” working group where young Italians and second-generation activists discuss possible reforms. Through these networks, I met Tashina, a young woman of Bangladeshi heritage who ran as a council candidate in Ancona, on the Adriatic coast, representing a leftist coalition. Tashina’s agenda focuses on skilled migration and language learning. “Our politics is to promote the idea of inclusion; integration is one-sided,” she told me. “But inclusion has to come from the migrants too. We are working on equipping migrants with skills and language so they can also be inclusive. It is a two-way road.” Together with young Italians and Bangladeshi second-generation peers, she is developing online language courses, with basic materials free and advanced content paid.

Her reformist, education-oriented approach contrasts with the more confrontational repertoire of extra-parliamentary activism in Torpignattara. At the same time, it raises questions about reach and inequality. Initiatives that emphasise self-improvement and language learning may speak most directly to those who are already relatively integrated and motivated, while leaving aside the most precarious segments of the Bangladeshi population. The examples of Laila and Tashina show that second-generation and naturalised activists can become bridges to institutional politics. But the field as a whole remains uneven: many young people stay distant from leftist activism and from party politics alike, while a smaller number experiment with new forms of engagement.

These second-generation trajectories indicate a clear intergenerational limit to the alliance’s influence. The political home built through first-generation struggles is anchored in specific neighbourhood sites and a transversal repertoire of solidarity in which migrants and leftist Italians act together against racism and precarity, and some younger Bangladeshi Italians do step into this infrastructure, often through concrete openings such as electoral campaigning, interpreting and youth support work, or participation in citizenship-focused initiatives, thereby functioning as occasional bridges between older activist worlds and newer institutional or professional arenas. Yet the broader field remains uneven: many second-generation youths, despite holding formal citizenship, stay ambivalent toward both radical-left activism and mainstream party politics, directing their energies instead toward education, careers, or other networks that feel more rewarding and less socially costly. What emerges, then, is not a simple story of decline but of selective uptake and partial translation: the alliance’s repertoires, relationships, and reputations form part of the environment in which these young citizens grow up, but they do not reliably coalesce into a shared pathway into

organised politics, and participation is more likely to surface episodically around issues that feel urgent and legible (including discrimination or religion-related claims) or to take different forms outside the neighbourhood, rather than reproducing the protest-centred model of the first generation. In this sense, alliance-enabled participation can be inherited and renewed in fragments, but it remains intermittent and difficult to stabilise beyond a small core, marking a structural limit to how far Torpignattara's political home travels across generations.

5.5 Conclusion: From Participation to Political Home-Making

This chapter has shown that the alliances built in Torpignattara widen Bangladeshi migrants' capacity to act, speak, make claims, and be recognised in neighbourhood life. This political foothold is visible in struggles over public space, repeated forms of neighbourhood participation, and everyday practices of cooperation and recognition. These gains are not evenly shared, but they alter the terms on which migrants inhabit the neighbourhood: Torpignattara becomes not only a place of residence and work, but a setting in which migrants can increasingly assert a legitimate political presence.

The strength of this foothold, however, is closely tied to the local scale at which it has been built. Participation becomes less consistent when action moves beyond Torpignattara, where the familiar relationships, political infrastructures, and immediate relevance of neighbourhood struggles are weaker. Its intergenerational reach is similarly uneven. Younger Bangladeshis inherit some of the relationships, repertoires, and political possibilities created by the first generation, but they do not necessarily reproduce the same forms of organised participation. What travels beyond the neighbourhood, whether spatially or generationally, is therefore selective rather than cumulative.

Political home-making captures this uneven achievement. The alliances have helped create a meaningful political foothold in Torpignattara, but one whose reach remains bounded by scale, unequal access to participation, and changing political orientations. The significance of political home lies precisely in this tension: migrants have gained greater capacity to act upon the place in which they live without those gains becoming universal, transferable, or secure across wider political fields.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Rethinking Solidarity and Migrants' Political Participation

The central question of this thesis has been how Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara and the local extra-parliamentary left build and sustain alliances that make migrants' grievances politically actionable, and what kind of political foothold those alliances enable in the neighbourhood. The answer developed across this dissertation is that such alliances do not rest on shared identity, ideological unity, or equal footing. They are assembled in a heterogeneous field of settlement marked by legal precarity, labour exploitation, racialisation, public scrutiny, and uneven access to political and institutional resources. They take shape through place-based encounters, organisational mediation, and repeated struggles in which differently positioned actors learn to act together without fully overcoming the differences that separate them.

What these alliances generate is therefore neither simple inclusion into political life nor a straightforward dissolution of marginality. They produce uneven forms of participation, recognition, and public presence at the scale of the neighbourhood. At the same time, they reveal the limits of solidarity under conditions of partial citizenship, unequal risk, and divergent political horizons. The argument of this thesis is that migrant political participation in Torpignattara is best understood not as a status already secured, but as a contingent achievement. It is built through alliances that endure not because difference disappears, but because it is mediated well enough for collective action to remain possible.

6.1 Main Findings and Conceptual Contributions

This thesis began from a dissatisfaction with approaches to migrant political participation that take citizenship and voting as their primary measure. My ethnography in Torpignattara shows that this frame is too narrow for understanding how working-class migrants act politically in cities where formal membership remains partial, delayed, or altogether absent. What becomes visible in Torpignattara is a more grounded political field in which participation takes shape

through neighbourhood struggles over documents, work, public space, religious visibility, racism, and access to institutions. I therefore shift the discussion from participation as formal inclusion to participation as neighbourhood-based claim-making under conditions of unequal membership. This move does not deny the importance of citizenship. Rather, it shows that when citizenship remains deferred, migrants still act politically by making demands, building relations, negotiating institutions, and asserting presence in the places where they live.

A second contribution lies in how I analyse alliances between Bangladeshi Muslim migrants and the local extra-parliamentary left. In broader European debate, such formations are often flattened before they are properly understood. They can appear through suspicion, as though any convergence between Muslim actors and the left were strategically manipulative, normatively dangerous, or evidence of an alien political intrusion. They can also appear through an overly affirmative language of solidarity, as though cross-difference alliance was self-evidently emancipatory and internally coherent. I complicate both readings. The alliances I observed were neither opportunistic arrangements without substance nor exemplary moral communities that rose above power. They were historically situated, organisationally mediated, and continually tested by unequal risk, different temporalities, and unresolved disagreement. By following these relations ethnographically over a sustained period, I show how such alliances are assembled, maintained, strained, and recalibrated in everyday life.

A third contribution is conceptual. I develop translation as a lens for analysing solidarity in a Europe where migration is no longer an exceptional event but an enduring condition of urban social life. I use translation not in the narrow sense of language alone, although language matters throughout my material, but in the wider sense of the labour through which grievances, moral claims, political idioms, and practical demands are made sufficiently legible across unequal social worlds. This allows me to avoid two unsatisfactory conclusions. I do not need to assume that solidarity requires a shared worldview, and I do not need to treat disagreement as evidence of failure. Translation allows me to show how alliances work through selective intelligibility. Some claims travel only through reframing. Some remain only partially translatable. Others are carried through tactical silence, restraint, or compromise. In this sense, translation is not secondary to solidarity. It is one of the conditions of its possibility in a post-migrant urban Europe.

A fourth contribution follows from this argument. I treat solidarity as an empirical achievement rather than a moral premise, and I show that one of its most important outcomes in Torpignattara is the production of what I call political home. By this I mean neither cultural comfort nor full political inclusion. I mean a local foothold through which migrants gain greater capacity to speak, organise, appear in public, negotiate with institutions, and act upon the place in which they live. Political home names a level of political inhabitation that is more substantial than episodic protest but less secure than recognised membership. It is built through repeated alliances, practical mediations, and neighbourhood-scale struggles. It is therefore meaningful, but its reach remains uneven and spatially bounded, while its durability depends on continued alliance work.

Taken together, these contributions allow me to make a broader argument about how migrant politics should be studied ethnographically. My thesis shows that migrant political life does not begin only when formal inclusion is achieved, nor does solidarity emerge only where ideological agreement already exists. Politics can be built from within partial membership, through local alliances that make everyday grievances collectively actionable. Solidarity can be sustained without sameness, but only through ongoing labour. Translation can create enough shared ground for action without eliminating deep difference. And when these processes hold, even provisionally, they can produce a local political foothold that I conceptualise as political home. In this sense, my central contribution is to show how settlement, alliance, translation, and neighbourhood struggle together generate forms of political participation that are real and consequential, even when they remain incomplete, fragile, and unresolved.

6.2 Relevance and Limitations

This thesis was written in a wider context in which many European cities contain populations who live and work for years under conditions of partial membership, while political participation often takes shape through mediated claims rather than electoral inclusion. Bureaucratised migration regimes generate a strong demand for intermediaries and practical expertise, while unequal resources within migrant fields shape who can become publicly recognisable and who remains dependent on others to carry claims outward. This is also a moment in which Europe is increasingly polarised over migration, and assistance to migrants

is frequently exposed to suspicion, sanction, or criminalisation. The wider relevance of the case becomes sharper when placed against the legal and administrative pressures now shaping solidarity across Europe. In many contexts, assistance and support are increasingly governed through suspicion, while the boundary between legitimate solidarity and punishable “facilitation” is rendered deliberately unclear. PICUM’s monitoring of cases recorded during 2024, published in 2025, notes that at least 142 people faced proceedings in 2024 for actions including sea rescue, providing food or shelter, and participating in protests. It identifies “a consistent and noticeable rise in the criminalisation of solidarity actions towards migrants and those crossing borders irregularly across Europe” (Carta 2025, 4, 6–7). The International Commission of Jurists similarly defines this criminalisation as the use of criminal or administrative sanctions against those who assist migrants, stressing that such measures create “a hostile environment for groups providing services to migrants” and have a “chilling effect” on civil society organisations, while depriving migrants of vital support (ICJ 2022, 2–3). Read in this light, the mediated and selective forms of solidarity visible in Torpignattara are not merely local peculiarities. They form part of a wider European condition in which support for migrants is itself becoming increasingly risky. My fieldwork took place within a rightward political climate that sharpened pressures surrounding documents, racialisation, public Islam, and everyday visibility. These conditions shaped the particular forms that solidarity, translation, and political participation took in Torpignattara, and caution against treating this case as historically interchangeable with other migrant neighbourhoods.

My research also brings into view a grey zone that is often flattened by polemical labels such as “Islamism-leftism.” The ethnography suggests that collaborations involving Muslim-marked migrants can be misread when religion is treated as their primary or sole political content. In Torpignattara, what may appear from the outside as “Islamic politics” is often composed of more ordinary and immediate concerns: regularisation and paperwork, working conditions, housing, racism, and neighbourhood struggles over space and recognition, alongside religious claims and sensibilities. At the same time, the public visibility of Islam does not function as a fixed identity that automatically drives collaboration. It is a variable and contested political register, actively staged, translated, negotiated, and argued over. In some protest moments, public prayer, religious symbols, or explicitly Islamic language become heightened performances of visibility that some actors regard as necessary and mobilising, while others consider them tactically risky or politically ambiguous. Rather than confirming a simple convergence between “the left” and “Islam,” the case shows how religion can become a

condensed sign through which multiple conflicts are politicised, even when the everyday substance of mobilisation is shaped largely by labour, documents, racism, and racialised exclusion.

The limitations of this thesis follow directly from its strengths. This is a neighbourhood-scale ethnography grounded in one urban formation, one migrant concentration, and one particular ecology of alliances. At the same time, my analysis is more explicit in naming anti-Muslim hostility, suspicion, and bureaucratic containment than in examining internal ideological tensions within the alliance, especially those involving conservative Islam, gender hierarchy, pan-Islamic sentiment, or possible anti-Western and anti-Zionist political horizons. This asymmetry is partly methodological. I did not pursue such questions directly or systematically enough to make stronger claims on behalf of my interlocutors, and I therefore hesitate to attribute to them political positions or horizons that I did not explicitly elicit and test. This caution, however, was not simply an abstract ethical choice. The field itself was difficult to access. Speaking about politics in a heavily male-dominated environment, while moving as a woman across marked socio-educational differences, already involved forms of negotiation, hesitation, and constraint that shaped what could be asked directly, when, and with whom. In this context, pressing too quickly on such questions also risked positioning me, in the eyes of interlocutors, as another Western-educated liberal academic approaching Muslim politics primarily through suspicion. I therefore treat this not as a resolved argument, but as an important limit of the present account and a question requiring more systematic investigation.

The fieldwork was also conducted within a particular political and historical conjuncture, meaning that the forms of participation analysed here are situated rather than timeless. My access was strongest among organisationally visible actors, mediators, and participants in alliance spaces. It was thinner among more disengaged residents, those who remained deeply sceptical of politics, and actors whose distance from collective settings limited what I could observe directly. Gender likewise remained an important methodological boundary. Although I worked to include women's experiences and perspectives, many of the spaces in which alliance politics became publicly visible remained male-dominated. My evidence on second-generation trajectories is suggestive rather than exhaustive, while my treatment of internal Islamic ideological differences remains necessarily cautious because I did not systematically elicit them across cases. Finally, my linguistic competence was uneven across the field. Some

nuances in Italian therefore became accessible through mediation, repetition, and cross-checking rather than through equal direct linguistic access. These limitations do not undo the argument. Rather, they define its scope and specify where its claims are strongest.

6.3 Directions for Future Research and Final Remarks

The analysis developed in this thesis opens several lines of inquiry that I could not fully pursue within the limits of a single ethnographic project. These directions follow directly from the questions of durability, comparison, institutional response, and transnational circulation raised by the Torpignattara case.

The first is longitudinal and generational. If political home is a contingent local achievement, the next question is how durable it is over time and whether it travels across generations. Do the forms of claim-making documented here deepen, thin out, or change as policy regimes shift, organisations fragment, and younger Bangladeshis grow up with different linguistic, educational, and political horizons? A longer temporal frame would make it possible to distinguish more sharply between political footholds that stabilise and those that remain tied to particular organisers, conflicts, or historical moments.

A second direction is comparative. I have not presented political home as a model that can simply be transferred from Torpignattara to other settings. Its value lies instead in providing an analytical proposition that can be tested against differently configured migrant neighbourhoods. Comparative research across European cities could ask under what conditions similar forms of alliance-enabled participation emerge, where they fail to emerge, and which elements of the Torpignattara configuration prove more or less consequential elsewhere. This would require attention to differences in migration regimes, citizenship law, municipal politics, histories of left activism, migrant associational life, religious governance, and neighbourhood composition. Such comparison could show whether the processes identified here, including mediation, translation, alliance, public visibility, and locally grounded claim-making, recur in other settings and, equally importantly, where the concept of political home reaches its limits. The purpose would therefore not be to validate Torpignattara as a replicable model, but to test the analytical reach of the argument through comparison.

The third direction is institutional ethnography. Much of this thesis approaches the state, municipality, schools, unions, and welfare offices from the side of migrants and activists who encounter them. A complementary project could follow these institutions more directly to understand how local bureaucrats, educators, municipal actors, and police perceive migrant claim-making, process demands, and respond to alliance pressure. Such research would extend the thesis without displacing its central concern, because political home is shaped not only by collective action from below but also by the institutional fields through which that action must move.

The fourth direction concerns transnational afterlives. My ethnography repeatedly encountered the presence of Bangladesh in migrants' moral horizons, community tensions, family obligations, and political vocabularies, but it did not follow these transnational circuits systematically. Further research could ask how experiences of minority status, neighbourhood solidarity, religious visibility, and political translation in Italy travel through return visits, digital media, remittances, family conversations, or longer-term re-migration. Such a project would clarify whether the practical and political lessons generated through local settlement remain tied to Rome or acquire wider political and moral afterlives beyond it.

I end, then, with the central finding of this thesis. Bangladeshi migrants in Torpignattara do not overcome their partial political membership simply by entering alliances with local actors. The contradiction remains. They continue to inhabit a city that depends on their labour and presence while recognising them unevenly as political subjects. Yet the alliances examined here matter precisely because they enable migrants to act politically within that contradiction. They widen the space of voice, negotiation, and public appearance without abolishing vulnerability. They create political traction without guaranteeing equality, and they make a foreign place more politically inhabitable without turning an unfinished achievement into completion. That, finally, is what I mean by political home.

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