

**ETHNIC BUSINESS IN WHOSE NAME?  
TRANSLOCAL BELONGINGS AND BANGLADESHI  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN A BARRIO OF MADRID <sup>1</sup>**

*¿NEGOCIO ÉTNICO A NOMBRE DE QUIÉN?  
PERTENENCIAS TRANSLOCALES Y EMPRENDIMIENTO DE  
BANGLADESÍES EN UN BARRIO DE MADRID*

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**Abstract**

This article locates practices of representation of Bangladeshis in Lavapiés, a barrio of Madrid, within a framework of translocal identities and belongings. Networks, festivities, practices and habits of Bangladeshis in Lavapiés are generally oriented towards Bangladesh. Nevertheless, Bangladeshis dub their restaurants and other businesses “Indian” as part of an ethnic marketing strategy that uses national/identitarian descriptions as a resource. This self-denomination is explained through historic and cultural links to India, though the practice also evolved within the framework of colonial relations to Britain. As will be shown, the restaurant and food business in which Bangladeshis in Lavapiés engage emerged over centuries of cultural criss-crossings between Europe and the Indian subcontinent, only more recently being introduced to Spain. These translocal dynamics in the historic and contemporary dimensions of migrants’ experiences result in the possibility of highly contextual activations of self-descriptions and self-representations.

**Key words:** Translocality. Belongings. Identities. Ethnic marketing. Bangladesh. Madrid.

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## Resumen

El artículo ubica prácticas de mercadotecnia de Bangladesíes en Madrid, Lavapiés, dentro de un marco de translocalidad, identidad y pertenencia. La denominación de empresas como “indias” por parte de Bangladesíes ocurre predominantemente como parte de una estrategia de ‘marketing’, pero, al mismo tiempo, está influenciada por pertenencias históricas y culturales. La auto-descripción de Bangladesíes como “indios” como resultado de conexiones culturales e históricas hacia India tiene que ser contextualizada dentro de relaciones coloniales hacia Britania para ser íntegramente entendida. Se analiza como el empresariado gastronómico y de víveres Bangladesí se desarrolló en siglos de intercambio cultural entre países europeos y del subcontinente indio hasta su introducción más recientemente en España. Redes, festividades, prácticas y costumbres de Bangladesíes en Lavapiés no efectuados para una clientela europea son, a diferencia, más decididamente ligados a e orientados hacia Bangladesh.

**Palabras clave:** Translocalidad. Pertenencia. Identidad. Marketing étnico. Bangladesh. Madrid

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## INTRODUCTION

When I first came to the *barrio*<sup>2</sup> of Lavapiés I was surprised by the immense number of Bangladeshis bustling within and indeed characterising the ward. Only later I noticed that Bangladeshis in Lavapiés were considered to be Indians<sup>3</sup> by the inhabitants of other *barrios* of Madrid. This misconception might be due to the fact that many Bangladeshis mostly keep to themselves and is reinforced by Bangladeshis denomination of their stores and restaurants as Indian. This phenomenon, like Bangladeshi migrants<sup>4</sup> as such, are widely neglected by scientific debates, as well as within the Spanish public.

In Madrid, the central *barrio* of Lavapiés has become the focus of an increasingly important Bangladeshi concentration. Cheap rents within the rather poor neighbourhood have attracted not only migrants but also the creative community. Nowadays, there is a tendency toward gentrification (Diekjobst et al., 2012) and the place has become popular with tourists: a stroll along *Calle Argumosa*, the boulevard of Lavapiés, and a ‘caña’ (beer) in one of its traditional Spanish bars may well be combined with a dinner in an “Indian Restaurant” and a tour through the numerous small shops offering a huge variety of clothes, accessories and gadgets from Bangladesh and/or India, as well as from China, Morocco, Senegal or Otavalo in Ecuador. In Madrid, the *barrio* is known as the place to go to find Indian food and other Indian products. People tend to infer that the providers of these items are Indian or Hindu, though their country of origin is Bangladesh, and in fact, there are hardly any Indians in Lavapiés.

In certain specific contexts, especially when speaking about culture, it may happen that a Bangladeshi might self-define as Indian, though s/he will have a self-understanding firmly

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<sup>2</sup> Lavapiés is a *barrio* only in the social meaning of the notion referring to a spatially or geographically distinct neighbourhood that is socially conceived or framed: Officially there is no administrative unit called Lavapiés, which is instead a socially defined neighbourhood lying within the *barrio*, or ward, of Embajadores, which is part of the city district Centro.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that since Columbus mistook newly discovered America for India, in Spanish language the term “Indio” came to denominate a native Latin American or “indígena” in a depreciative manner, while Indians are denominated “Hindúes”, a notion including religious belief.

<sup>4</sup> Terms referring to “national migration communities” have to be employed carefully, as they suggest group homogeneity based upon what Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002) have criticised as “methodological nationalism” and Brubaker (2009) as “groupism”.

rooted in Bangladesh. However, the signs on the numerous shops and restaurants in Lavapiés characteristically indicate “India”, instead of “Bangladesh”. This article is an inquiry, from a translocal perspective, into the phenomenon of Bangladeshis’ collective self-representation as “Indians” in Lavapiés. Acknowledging the existence of flexible, multiple and contextual belongings makes the Bangladeshi naming practice less surprising, but does not explain it. The context in which this naming practice occurs – Europe – shows to be relevant: Self-representations in Madrid relegate to historical developments, influenced by colonial exchange between Britain and Bangladesh as part of the British Indian Empire. It will be claimed that within migration, Europe’s view shaped and sustained Bangladeshis’ way of self-representing, but not their self-understanding or self-identification. The ties of belongings of Bangladeshis in Spain will be shown to be contextual, shifting and flowing from Bangladesh to Spain and India, being also traceable to migration movements to Britain, with imaginations and representations becoming (re)constructed and formed concretely in-between. The question of whether Bangladeshis might self-describe as Spanish<sup>5</sup>, or adopt predominantly non-national self-descriptions, is beyond the scope of this research.

Methodologically this article is based mainly on participant observation and ethnographic and go-along interviews accomplished during two four-month stays in Lavapiés in 2011 and 2012. Additionally, some open interviews with experts and persons of social and political importance among Bangladeshis in Lavapiés were held, as with restaurateurs and other business men, with representatives of associations and journalists. Moreover, 10 semi-structured narrative interviews (8 males, 2 females) centred around guiding questions on personal migration experiences, naming practices of shops and the importance of Bangladeshi festivities were conducted with Bangladeshi shop owners, shop staff and relatives in the *barrio*.

In the following, the conceptual terms applied in the case study will be briefly clarified and the general characteristics of Bangladeshi migration to Lavapiés and communitarian activities will be described, before characteristics of the ethnic economy and the naming practices are analysed within the migration contexts.

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<sup>5</sup> As a statement by the clothier Shafik (all names of interviewees are changed) evidences, some Bangladeshis in Lavapiés have developed strong connectedness: “Now my family is living here and we cannot move now. Now we are nearly like Spanish. We could have transferred before but now I have to stay as I have been here for such a long time”.

## TRANSLOCALITY, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Transnational flows of people, money, goods and ideas, facilitated through technological advancements and globalisation discourses in the last decades, have challenged the traditional imaginings of space as a container, a physical unit of independent existence. Space is nowadays increasingly regarded as socially constructed, with human geography and social sciences recognising its hybrid nature, as socially produced upon a physical basis, noticing the interactions between these two dimensions (Schroer, 2010; Jüssen and Youkhana, 2011).

The concept of translocality acknowledges that place-based processes can have important local-local connections through transnational networks (Brickell and Datta, 2010). From a different stance, translocality is conceptualised as a space that is the result of processes of flows and mobility as well as of processes of installation and preservation (of self) within fluid, unregulated situations (Freitag, 2005; Freitag & von Oppen, 2010):

“In the centre of analysis are the effects of spatial mobility and exchange on processes of consolidation and institutionalisation of cultural, social and political structures. To describe this phenomenon the notion of installation was chosen, in the sense of an installation (of self), of a production of order or creation or maintenance of possibilities of acting in fluid, unregulated situations. (...) These processes of installation are interpreted as attempts by the actors to develop or maintain certain spaces or patterns of practices, communication and imagination in such situations affected by mobility and *flows*.” (Freitag, 2005: 3, translation by the author)

Understood as such, translocality signifies movement, mobility and flow of people, goods, ideas and symbols across geographical, cultural or political boundaries. Through these transitions, local adaptations, restructurings and recreations occur, sometimes in a transient, non-permanent manner, producing unordered spaces. This conception represents a departure from the perception of the ‘local’ as a self-contained unit with inherent structures.

This article conceptualises identity and belonging upon the matrix of translocality. Both are conceived as being flexible, multiple and contextual and can be associated with shifting,

complex and even contradictory locales. But while identity, or identification, is an integral part of belonging, the former is concerned with created descriptions of self and other, which may be individual or collective, while the latter focuses on ties and bonds of connection. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) puts it, identity is homogenising, while belonging stresses commonality, mutuality and attachments, being more of a ‘docking’ nature. It is thereby a much more open conceptualization, permitting changes in attachments, new ties and bonds to be established, and old ones to become possibly less important.

For Yuval-Davis (2006), belonging is composed of identifications and emotional attachments, as well as social locations and ethical and political values, while the ‘politics of belonging’ are describable with reference to the permeability of a society. The latter is also related to struggles regarding the determination of the specific criteria that define belonging in a given context, and involves contestations about the participatory character of citizenship. Anthias (2008) distinguishes identity and belonging in the following manner:

“Identity involves individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labelling, myths of origin and myths of destiny with associated strategies and identifications. Belonging (...) is more about experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways in which social bonds and ties are manifested in practices, experiences and emotions of inclusion. (...) To belong is to share values, networks and practices” (Anthias, 2008: 8)

Inclusions and exclusions (or, more broadly, inequalities) occur along the axes of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, age and so on, as intersectionality theorists have sustained – a point which is taken up by Anthias in her concept of translocational positionality. With this term she points at the importance of context in complex, shifting locales. For her, the challenge within migration studies is “to think of belonging and identity within a transnational and what I have called ‘translocational’ frame which recognises that people have multiple locations, positions and belongings, in a situated and contextual way, but which does not end up as a thoroughgoing reification or deconstruction of difference” (Anthias 2008: 6)

Belonging and identity as conceptualized through the lens of translocality, are both regarded as concepts allowing for fluidity and contextuality. ‘Identity’ is rather based on

self-understandings and self-descriptions, and regarded as distinct, even though close to, self-representations, which include a staged presentation of self, while ‘belonging’ is more of a ‘docking’ nature, with attachments, ties, links, bonds and connections as central features.

## MIGRATION TO MADRID

There is no significant relationship between Bangladesh and Spain. Most Bangladeshi and Spanish people do not know much about each other, and a Spanish embassy has only existed in Dhaka since 2008. In 2004, most Bangladeshis in Europe resided in Britain, followed by Italy and Greece, while Spain came fourth, with an estimated 7,000 sojourners registered (Zeitlyn, 2007). In Spain the number of registered Bangladeshis has increased heavily since: according to the *Padron municipal*<sup>6</sup>, in 2011 there were 12,246 Bangladeshis living in Spain (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2011).

Migration from Bangladesh to Europe and Madrid is usually organised by families and friends of migrants and through *dalals* (middlemen or brokers) or *adam bepari* (human smuggling). According to Zeitlyn, travelling to Europe costs US\$10,000 to US\$11,000, while in my field work I found prices to be between €7,000 and €14,000 for coming to Madrid. The travel route used in the 1990s, entering legally into Russia and Eastern Europe and then illegally into the European Union, has become less popular in more recent times due to increased border controls. Nowadays, the route through North Africa, and subsequently crossing the Mediterranean Sea in small boats (*pateras*) into a European country, is generally used (Zeitlyn, 2006; Zeitlyn, 2007), with migrants sometimes taking several years to reach European destinations. An alternative, safer way to reach Madrid is by travelling by air to any European country and continuing overland from there, although obtaining a visa for a European country through *dalals* or *adam bepari* is usually very costly. Movements to industrialised countries are rather destined to be long-term migrations, in

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<sup>6</sup> The ‘Padron Municipal’ is Spain’s administrative register in which the neighbours of the municipality are listed (Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)). People within an administratively irregular situation usually also register, as they then benefit from certain rights (e.g. until September 2012, including basic sanitary services), and since registration is advantageous for future regularization.

contrast to the short-term contract labour migrations to Middle Eastern or East Asian countries<sup>7</sup> (Siddiqui, 2003).

In more recent years, people from various parts of the world have come to settle in the *barrio* of Lavapiés, whose immigrant population is estimated at 50%, while Embajadores, with 33%, is one of the five *barrios* with the highest share of immigrant population in Madrid, of which nowadays about one fifth are Bangladeshi. The Bangladeshis in Embajadores account for 67% of a total of nearly 5000 Bangladeshis living in Madrid in 2011 (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2012; Observatorio de las Migraciones y de la Convivencia Intercultural de la ciudad de Madrid, 2011a). The number of Bangladeshis in Madrid almost doubled between 2006 and 2011 (Observatorio de las Migraciones y de la Convivencia Intercultural de la ciudad de Madrid 2011b: 11). The major national backgrounds of the inhabitants of Embajadores after Bangladeshi are Ecuadorian, Moroccan, Chinese and Italian, and there is also a very concentrated Senegalese population (Observatorio de las Migraciones y de la Convivencia Intercultural de la ciudad de Madrid, 2011a: 3), so that there is a highly diverse population within the *barrio*.

In 2004, Zeitlyn surveyed 40 Bangladeshis in Lavapiés which he described as having completed secondary or higher education, representing Bangladeshi ‘middle class’ (Zeitlyn, 2006). He also found them to originate from urban environments, many coming from Dhaka, Chittagong or other Bangladeshi cities. These findings were confirmed by my interviewees, while a rather recent, new and important influx of Sylhetis<sup>8</sup> was occurring, many of whom were relocating from Great Britain, so that one interviewee estimated their share among Bangladeshis in Lavapiés to have reached around 40%.

In general, Bangladeshis in Lavapiés keep rather to themselves, being marginalised in the sense of having little personal contact with other neighbours. This stands in contrast to other immigrant groups in Lavapiés, like Senegalese or Moroccans, who partially share networks with the Spanish and international population of the *barrio*. There are numerous Bangladeshi “flying vendors” on the streets of Lavapiés, selling cans of cold drinks and

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<sup>7</sup> Most Bangladeshi migrants relocate to Middle Eastern countries, where four million of a total of between six and seven million Bangladeshi residing abroad live. Bangladesh received over US\$11.5 billion in remittances in 2011, accounting for 13% of gross domestic product – money flows originating mainly from the Gulf States (Kibria, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that 95% of Bangladeshis in Britain are from the Bangladeshi regional district of Sylhet (Knights, 1996: 107).

beer, in the evening and night time, or gadgets in tourist locations, the monthly income amounting to about 300-400€. Street vending is an activity in which many Bangladeshis initially engage when newly arriving in Madrid while their administrative situation is yet to be settled, meaning they are in constant danger of being detected as irregular migrants in police controls (Amnistía Internacional, 2011, Brigadas Vecinales, 2011). Police fines for unauthorised vending are as high as €140. Besides the police, the increased exposure to attacks through stronger and locally better connected Africans is a problem, who deem resentment as legitimate because Bangladeshis passed through African territory in order to reach Madrid. The poor income of a street vendor does not permit the sending of remittances, nor does it enable the paying off of the debts taken up for travel expenses. Bangladeshi newcomers live in overcrowded houses under the most precarious conditions. The economic crisis in Spain since 2008 has complicated the situation of all irregular migrants, as a residence permit is only granted in many cases upon presentation of a work contract, which, in times of crisis, is most difficult to get.

Once regularised, vendors might go on to become waiters, and, once established, possibly shop owners. If a man's situation is stabilised, which may take several years, he might fetch his wife and children or marries in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi women in Lavapiés usually do not engage in paid work, but still enjoy the increased freedoms they seem to claim within the Spanish society.<sup>9</sup> Bangladeshis are the migrant group with the lowest proportion of women in Madrid: only 16% (Observatorio de las Migraciones y de la Convivencia Intercultural de la ciudad de Madrid, 2011b). Dannecker (2005) explains that it is considered inappropriate for women to migrate by themselves, while it is also impeded due to women's exclusion from the elaborate male migration networks. Only in 2007 did the Bangladeshi government lift a ban on female labour migration.

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<sup>9</sup> Interviewees described Bangladeshi women's activities in Lavapiés as "going shopping" and "wandering around", besides looking after children and performing household duties. The former seem rather unusual activities for urban middle-class women in Bangladesh, as they involve moving in the public sphere, which is deemed inappropriate for Muslim women in Bangladesh. This indicates that they have greater social room to manoeuvre, which, however, is contrasted by the persistent economic dependence of women on their husbands, which also influences the destinations of remittances: men seem to decide in favour of their own families and to the detriment of their wives' families, as some women complained.

## BANGLADESHIS IN LAVAPIÉS

In general, Bangladeshis in Lavapiés keep rather to themselves, being marginalised in the sense of having little personal contact with other neighbours. Bangladeshi and Bengali<sup>10</sup> national and ethnic symbolism is created and recreated in Lavapiés through organisations, social networks and activities, within which India appears rather neglected. Networks of shared flats and workplaces are mainly extended among Bangladeshis, but include next to no Indians. The “Association of Bangladeshis in Spain” arranges national and ethnic festivities on the central Plaza Lavapiés, as e.g. international language day, *Ekushe*, on 21<sup>st</sup> of February, which commemorates the rallying of students to support the acceptance of the Bengali language as a state language under Pakistani rule, and which is commemorated on the Plaza Lavapiés with a replica of the *Shahed Minar* monument near Dhaka university.



The picture shows the festivities of Bangladeshi New Year *Pobela Boishakh* in Plaza Lavapiés, Madrid, 13.4.2011 (Foto: Eva Youkhana).

Also celebrated is Bangladeshi Independence day on 26<sup>th</sup> of March, commemorating the declaration of independence from Pakistan in 1971, as well as the day of Bangladeshi New Year, *Pobela Boishakh*, around the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, which is celebrated in Bangladesh and in those Indian states where Bangla language and culture are widespread: West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. Moreover, there are the religious festivities of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha,

<sup>10</sup> While “Bengali” and “Bangla” are ethnic and linguistic descriptions of the people and their language, “Bangladeshi” is a more state or country centered description, meaning literally “land of Bangla”.

which Bangladeshis have in common with Moroccan and Senegalese Muslims in Lavapiés. In spite of this religious commonality, though, there are not much celebratory exchanges. Further cultural events include food promotion organised by the Bangladeshi women's organisation "Bamos", theatre plays, and football tournaments. Journalists cover migrants' activities within self-made newspapers like "Probash Kantha" (Foreign Voice), or disseminate news through social media such as YouTube or Facebook. Thereby, Bangladeshis in Madrid and other cities connect translocally. Every year, in Barcelona, an award ceremony for Bangladeshis engaged in international community work takes place: In 2012 two residents from Lavapiés were rewarded.

Political organizations have also been erected, as the "Association of Bangladeshis in Spain", who hold an elected presidency. Besides organising festivities, the association collects donations for communitarian activities, such as the production of the newspaper "Ekushe – Europe's Bangla News Monthly" or a children's school for learning Bangla in Lavapiés and also holds certain social authority: the Association collects donations for the repatriation of deceased or, more recently, of a homeless Bangladeshi, and they have a social or "juristic" function, as it is claimed that Bangladeshis who behave in an unlawful manner, for example, stealing or cheating, are urged to make amends.

In historically or culturally relevant events, as well as through networks, organizations and practices a reference to Bangladesh and/or Bangla is obviously dominant. In the following, it will be scrutinized how Bangladeshis present their businesses within an urban context where most potential clients and passers-by are relatively uninformed about Bangladesh, while the general public does dispose of associations with India, conventionally constructed around exotic mystery and adventure. The activation and utilization of these associations within the "ethnic economy" will be traced.

### **"ETHNIC ECONOMY" IN CROSS- AND SUB-CULTURAL REGARD**

After a severe decline in family-run businesses in Lavapiés, immigrants have revitalised the area through the opening of numerous retail and wholesale shops, finding a way to self-employment (Riesco Sanz, 2010; Cebrián de Miguel and Bodega Fernández, 2002). Lavapiés is once again an important hub for marketable merchandise. Riesco Sanz shows that, with 1,725 establishments dedicated to retail and wholesale commerce within the ward

Embajadores (which contains the neighbourhood Lavapiés), it concentrates 82.3% of commercial businesses within the district Centro. Businesses are typically small and mostly family-run, with about two thirds of all businesses having only one or two employees (Riesco Sanz, 2010: 222ff).

Miguel de Cebrián and Bodega Fernández (2002), who define “ethnic economy” as comprising “all business activities of foreign residents belonging to represented minorities” (Miguel de Cebrián and Bodega Fernández, 2002: 566), found that Bangladeshis were the second most numerous entrepreneurially active group after the Chinese in Lavapiés. In Lavapiés, nearly all the numerous *locutorios* (phone houses and internet cafés) are owned by Bangladeshis, as well as most grocery stores, several Indian clothing and gadget shops, as well as Döner Kebap Houses and the Indian restaurants. Dr. Shokot Ali, a highly respectable restaurant owner, awarded by the Barcelona community for writing a Spanish learning book for Bangladeshis, estimated the number of Bangladeshi shops in Madrid to be about 400, indicating a substantial amount of ethnic business workplaces.

In their analysis of marketisations of ethnicities, Comaroff and Comaroff (2011) only include examples of indigenous marketable productions within what they might regard as their original spaces of evolution. In migration contexts, though, too, a key difficulty inheres in the assessment of an economy as “ethnic”, “ethnicity” conveying the assumption of bounded cultural homogeneity of a fixed minority group, as criticised by Riesco Sanz (2010: 193). In this sense, ethnic economies are usually regarded as culturally authentic:

“In relation to their own community, the ethnic economy paths migrants a way out of anonymity and at the same time it enables them to maintain their traits, introducing the younger generations with the culture of their progenitors, playing a principal role in the process of cultural reproduction.” (Miguel de Cebrián and Bodega Fernández, 2002: 572)

The assumption of cultural authenticity results from the idea that ethnic economies exclusively supply for the needs of “their” ethnic minority. This is not necessarily the case of the Bangladeshi/Indian businesses observed here. Businesses also differ from the owner’s or his progenitors’ culture in character, while evolving in translocal contexts, (re)producing old and new hybrid cultures, identities and belongings, instead (García

Canclini, 1989; Bhabha, 1996). Nonetheless, these businesses do sustain traits usually associated with “ethnic economies”, as e.g. employment of “co-ethnic” migrants, while they simultaneously depend on social relationships and cultural (re)creations and (re)inventions that transgress narrowly defined ethnic frames.

The aim here is not to describe how ethnic economy emerges, nor to debate the conceptual adequacy of possible alternative concepts such as “ethnic enclave economy” (Light et al., 1994), but rather to consider the employment of “ethnic markers” in the “Bangladeshi ethnic economy”. The term “ethnic economy” being “more often a misnomer than accurate” (Pieterse, 2003: 30) Pieterse points out that these economies are embedded in cross-cultural networks of social capital. While cross-cultural dynamics might be verifiable for Bangladeshis in Lavapiés, e.g. through Döner Kebap Houses that purchase from a Turkish provider, or through the BollyMadrid festival<sup>11</sup> organised by a project manager of Argentinian origin, etc., Bangladeshis in Lavapiés perform a different form of cultural crossing: through presenting their products and shops as “Indian”, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs become themselves the agents of cultural switch. In consequence, many inhabitants of other *barrios* in Madrid believe that there are many Indian/Hindu people living in Lavapiés who engage in an “Indian ethnic economy”.

In addition, the concept of “ethnic economy” transmits the idea of ethnic homogeneity disregarding the multiplicity of cultural, regional, religious or language groups or networks within each nation as well as existing political cleavages (Pieterse, 2003: 34). The historical evolution of certain divisions in the origin country will be briefly explained, hoping to provide helpful background information for interpreting some of the statements made by interviewees regarding the naming practice of Bangladeshi businesses in Lavapiés.

Bangladesh, like Pakistan, was part of British India or the British Raj in colonial times. In 1947 independence was gained and the colonial territory was divided into present-day India on the one hand, and Pakistan, including the territory of what is today Bangladesh, on the

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<sup>11</sup> Since 2008, every summer this three-day festival is organized by a private enterprise on the three major squares of the *barrio*. At the BollyMadrid festival, visitors can listen to Indian singers, see Bollywood-dancing, watch Bollywood films and enjoy Indian foods – but all the food stalls and most of the vendors at the market are Bangladeshis. Similarly, most of the clothes vendors at the festival are Bangladeshi, as are some of the artists, like “Bamos”. BollyMadrid is an example of a European enterprise engaged in cultural event management, having bandwagoned on selling the Bangladeshi spirit in Lavapiés as Indian. Despite the distortion involved in portraying Bangladeshis as Indians, the festival is a way to visibilise the presence of a particular group of people in Lavapiés, which is enjoyed by Madrileños and Bangladeshis alike.

other. This separation was grounded on religious reasons, and led to outbreaks of violence and mass population movements of Hindus to India and Muslims to Pakistan (Saha, p.115ff). People from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and Bengal were, though, politically dominated by the Pakistani government. The pressuring of Dhaka University students for Bengali to be made an official language besides Urdu became emblematic as the Bengali Language Movement. The situation escalated into a bloody war and eventually led to the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Ideological divisions evolved in Bangladesh, causing cleavages reflected in the views of the two major political parties today: Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) supporters, sustaining ethnic and linguistic dimensions, stress the importance of cultural productions and humanistic traditions as elements of both the political profile of their party and of Bangladesh identity. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is more essentially (Sunni) Muslim, while it also emphasizes a linguistic identitarian definition. These cleavages have resulted in different interpretations of the nation's history: for example, supporters of the Awami League present the Pakistani period as a misstep that was, fortunately, rectified, while adherents of the BNP consider it as a necessary stage in state formation.

Investigation in Indian-Bangladeshi borderlands also confers insight into highly relational issues of (ethnic) identity and belongings: Saha (2007: 127ff) shows the importance of religion, social and cultural stratification, and state affiliation in the Indian-Bangladeshi borderland, and how categories are maintained at times while at others they collapse, how bonds exist between people on either side, and how flows of people, goods and culture transgress the border. This leads Samaddar (1999: 53) to even declare the border as “routinized and thus marginalized or rendered insignificant”. This social scientific description is not shared by the Indian government, though. The fear, Bangladeshis could enter India under administratively irregular conditions, has led to killings by India's Border Security Force. Meanwhile, there are families that have extensive ties across the borders and there exist 197 exclave-villages of one or the other country within the territory of the other. Inhabitants of these villages are forced to break the law daily when going shopping, to school, to the doctor, etc. (Samaddar, 1999; Saha, 2007; Van Schendel, 2009: 96ff), and have even changed their “nationality” or citizenship numerous times between British Indian, Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi (Van Schendel, 2009 :102f), underlining the considerable relativity of citizenship itself.

Within this highly fluid and fragmented patchwork of what it means to be “Bengali” or “Bangladeshi”, naming shall be traced in a contextual and situated manner, focusing on the presentation of business enterprises in Lavapiés.

### **INDIAN OR BANGLADESHI: ETHNIC BUSINESS IN WHOSE NAME?**

It may seem to be a bizarre phenomenon that almost all Bangladeshi shop owners refer to India in the names of their numerous business enterprises, independent of the sort of business they are involved in: in Lavapiés you can find Indian clothes shops, Indian grocery shops and Indian restaurants, all run by people of Bangladeshi origin. The countless Bangladeshi-run *locutorios* (phone houses and Internet cafes) in Lavapiés who do not refer to origins at all are an exception in this regard.

Only very few shops use Bangladesh or Bangla as a reference, and the ones that do, do so as an element in an enumeration of other origins, such as “Products of Spain, Bangladesh, India, Latin America, Africa”, sometimes mixing country and continent names. Others opt for a double indication, like “Fashion from India/Bangladesh” or refer to continental names, e.g. “Alimentación – African Asiatic Arab Latin – International Products”, also switching from Spanish to English. The great majority of businesses run by Bangladeshi people have “India” written somewhere on their store sign instead of “Bangladesh”. Interviewees give various explanations for the naming practice, for instance:

“It is a bit difficult because an Indian restaurant has Indian people... But we were Indians about 50 years ago. And also, the food is very similar. Indian food is very famous all over the world, - that is why. The food is nearly the same, only the name is different” (Shaimum Khan).

“People write ‘India’ only because nobody knows Bangladesh. If they wrote ‘Bangladesh’ nobody would know it and nobody would come, that is why they write ‘India’” (Zahid)

“The name of India is famous all over the world. It is for business reasons” (Tariq)

The worldwide fame of India and Indian food was often evoked as reason for referring to India. By employing this kind of “ethnic corporate identity strategy” the business people try to give their mostly European and international consumers an idea of what kind of goods

they offer. When referring to India, Bangladeshis are not referring to the country as a political community or nation state, but rather seek to evoke certain cultural associations.

There were only 3 Bangladeshi restaurants in Lavapiés in 2004 (Zeitlyn, 2007). In 2012, in only one street, there were nine restaurants that refer to India on their shop signs, all within no more than 50 metres, five of them being located side by side. According to my interviewees there are about 17 “Indian” restaurants in the rather small neighbourhood of Lavapiés, only one being owned by an Indian, all others by Bangladeshis. Some less high-class restaurants use very simple names, such as “Indian Restaurant” or simply “India”. Some restaurants offer a mixture of Turkish Kebap and Indian food, which reflects in names like “Restaurante Indio y Doner Kebab”. Higher-priced restaurants use names that decidedly refer to India, like the “Restaurante India – Momtaz Mohol”, which, according to the owner, refers to the Taj Mahal; or “Bombay Palace – Indian Restaurant”, referring to the former name of the Indian city Mumbai. The “Shapla Indian Restaurant” is a special combination and provides a hint for Bangladeshi insiders: *Shapla*, the water lily, is a Bangladeshi national symbol. Jamal, a restaurant owner whose place was called “Indian Restaurant” was thinking about a new name and considered using “Bangladesh”. He held that some restaurants in Britain had changed their names after a long period of existence, maybe 10 years, when regular clients, by then knowing that the owners come from Bangladesh, started asking them why they use “India” instead of “Bangladesh”. (The influence of Britain in the genesis of representational constructions of Bangladeshis in Lavapiés will be regarded in more detail in the next section.)

Besides the naming, symbolism is employed strategically: besides pictures of Bangladeshi monuments, such as the *Shabeed Minar*, which commemorates the martyrs of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952; or *Jatiyo Smriti Soudho*, commemorating the martyrs of the War of Liberation, which European clients are unlikely to recognize, restaurants’ interiors are decorated with pictures of famous Indian monuments like the Taj Mahal, which do not have prominent relevance within Bangladesh itself.

One principal reason why Bangladeshis make their shops Indian is economic in nature:

“Everybody always says to us ‘India, India’. And if you say that you are from Bangladesh they say ‘India, India’. Until now they do not know Bangladesh. It is also our fault because we do not represent our country because we always say India. But what counts is

the money. In the end, it doesn't matter if you represent your country or another country because you have to make money." (Sahrina)

The proven success of the reference to "famous India" as a marketing strategy contrasts with the perceived, and probably actual, economic risk of referring exclusively to Bangladesh in the shop's presentation to the public: The "Baisakhi Indian Restaurant" opened in 1988 on Calle Lavapiés as the first Indian Restaurant in Lavapiés. According to Dr. Shokot Ali, the Baisakhi had originally used "Bangladesh" in its name, and business was going badly. When they changed to "India" business went up, so that now nobody dared to use "Bangladesh" any more.

Another reason stated by interviewees for the evocation of India was historic in nature: many people were eager to explain that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh had been one country up until 1947, like Sohél:

"Actually, you know that India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are one country ... So actually Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi culture is very equal".

The third explanation repeatedly given was that of high cultural proximity, many people stating that the culture is the same, the food is the same, the clothes are the same (*salwar kameez* or *sari* for women and *lungi* or *panjabi* for men), some adding that they are not *quite* the same, but similar.

Other reasons were given by fewer people, and were sometimes influenced by the interviewees' ideological and personal positions. The clothier Shafik, for instance, used a geographic argument, maintaining that by using the term "India", people were referring to the subcontinent of India, and another interview partner even claimed a "cultural right" to use "India" by that reasoning. The argument of political friendship between Bangladesh and India was used to explain that Bangladeshis liked the more libertarian Indian films and Indian dancing, while others remembered the military support given by India in the Bangladeshi liberation war against Pakistan. Some, however, delimited the "friendship" they recognised between the two countries by denouncing the political problems Bangladesh has as junior partner with the international power India<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Besides border struggles, a recurring political issue between India and Bangladesh is connected to the water supply through the Ganges river, called Padma in Bangladesh, which ends in the world's largest delta,

Political conflicts between the two countries were also used to denounce reference to India. Only two interviewees, both very religious persons, expressed a negative attitude to Bangladeshis' use of India as an ethnic corporate identity. The strongest rejection was expressed by the owner of a shop that explicitly and only used Bangladesh as its corporate identity, locational and social reference. Tellingly, this shop had a distinct business strategy, and could afford to do so: it sold typical Bangladeshi sweets and breakfast, and was, as such, mainly selling to a Bangladeshi clientele. As the shop assistant stated, only few Spanish people entered the shop and usually bought only a few pieces to try.

Analyzing the reasons why Bangladeshis name their businesses "Indian", it can be concluded that using India's fame is part of an "ethnic business marketing strategy" that strategically employs ethnicity as resource. Thereby, considerable cultural and historic commonalities and attachments between India and Bangladesh are collectively activated in name-choosing. Name-choosing might therefore be considered as an expression of a form of self-reflective recollection of similarities. Ultimately, there is no need whatsoever to legitimise the use of whatever country or other indication as corporate identity and/or marketing strategy.

Another important explanation is to be found in the migration history of Bangladeshis to Europe, hinted at by a few, more informed interviewees who had previously lived in Great Britain. It shows how migrant communities translocally connect and how the experiences of the first Bangladeshi migrant community in Europe influence the practices of today's Bangladeshis in Lavapiés. I will focus upon the food business for explaining these historic entanglements.

## **MIGRATION HISTORY EXPLANATION AND ANGLO-INDIAN CUISINE**

By asking: *business in whose name?* and answering with "India", or "Bangladesh", not only is a cultural community evoked, whether that of India or Bangladesh, but also a place (physical and social) – so the question could just as well be: *ethnic business with reference to where?* By posing the question in its spatial dimension it becomes more obvious that, besides "India"

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contained within Bangladeshi territory. Bangladeshis complain that India blocks the water supply when there is drought, and on the other hand in the rainy season does not help to prevent Bangladesh from being flooded, causing increased natural hazards and problems for agricultural production for Bangladeshis. Moreover the water that reaches Bangladesh is highly polluted.

or “Bangladesh”, the answer might also be “London” or “Britain” as these are places where what is referred to as the “curry industry” was developed, elaborated and brought to its current form. When asked why Bangladeshis include “India” in the names of their businesses, Dr. Shokot Ali answered: “This comes from Britain. For them we are still India.”

The migration history of Bangladeshis to Europe is interlinked with colonial history and practices that played an important role in the establishment of Britain’s Bangladeshi community and characterised their experiences. The delta region of Bengal, part of which is now Bangladesh, is where the British East India Company started expanding its power and imperium in India after the battle of Plassey/Palashi in 1757. The territory was transferred to the British Crown in 1858. Since then, and increasingly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bangladeshi seamen from Sylhet were employed as workers in the engine rooms of British ships. As sailors, they travelled to London and New York, and many Bengali families in Britain today trace their ancestry to these sailors. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Britain faced labour shortages which were filled by South Asians and people from the Caribbean. In Bangladesh, Sylhet became the prime sending area, and from the 1960s onwards thousands of men came to Britain and worked in factories, - the Indian subcontinent being still under British colonial rule. When immigration laws were tightened, travelling back and forth became more difficult and settlement became more permanent. (Van Schendel, 2009: 225f; Gardner, 2002: 49f, 88ff).

Through observing the food business, it becomes apparent how practices of former Bangladeshis in Britain influence today’s practices in Lavapiés. According to Grove and Grove (2008) the history of Indian food in Britain is now almost 400 years old. They trace the origins of the word “curry”, which nowadays has taken on the meaning of any kind of “Indian dish”, but which was originally a term for a meat, vegetable or fish dish with spicy sauce of Indian origin. There is agreement that the word originated somewhere in or near to India, maybe derived from the Tamil word *kari*, meaning “spiced sauce”. Defenders of the British origins of “curry” hold that the word was used in the title of the first British cookery book, dating from 1390, “The forme of Cury” and was an adaptation from the French word *cuire* (to cook, boil, grill), although the word began to be associated with its current meaning only with the arrival of British merchants in the Indian subcontinent at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Curry and India came to be closely connected, and along

with Britain's influence, the "Anglo-Indian cuisine" was created as fruit of historic entanglements. Still, the food eaten by most Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani people differs from the food offered in Indian restaurants in Europe, which is adapted for the European taste. Moreover, most Indian cooks, including those in Lavapiés, hold that there is no "Indian cuisine", and that instead the term refers to a certain spicy way of cooking acquired through "learning by doing" and elaborated by the creativity of each cook. Besides, the Indian cuisine within India differs widely from North to South and from East to West, its extreme variety reflecting India's size as well as its cultural and religious diversity. For instance, new foreign dishes were adopted in India, such as *Vindalho* from the Portuguese, originally a pork dish, today often served with chicken, especially by Muslim restaurateurs, though not by vegetarian Hindus.

This high degree of flexibility and variability enabled the further development of the "Indian" cooking style in Britain, along with its commercialisation through high-end spice elaboration into what is now known as the "curry industry", which is accompanied by awards ceremonies like the "Asian Curry Awards" or the "British Curry Awards", visited by high ranking politicians and celebrities.

There are some Bangladeshi dishes, mostly sweets, which have spread all over the Indian subcontinent. Like Indian cuisine, Bangladeshi cuisine also differs regionally, and also according to occasion, special festivities being associated with specific dishes. The most widespread meal in Bangladesh is plain rice, *bhat* (of which tens of different kinds are recognised), eaten with *dhāl*, (lentils, but prepared in a more liquid manner than in European Indian restaurants), accompanied with some hot vegetables or a slice of *hilsa*-fish, hardly available in Europe. The dishes sold in Indian restaurants in Lavapiés, are not really the same as in Bangladesh. This is not very surprising, as most restaurants that prepare non-European food for a European public adapt to European habits, e.g. serving far less spicy or sweetened food, as the restaurateurs and cooks in Lavapiés expressed repeatedly. Some, though, claimed that the food obtainable in Bangladesh was the "original", which has since been copied and adapted, thereby including adaptations of Indian-style food.

Expectations about Indian food formed within Britain were also mirrored by clients: Restaurateurs in Lavapiés held that clients who had visited Britain brought along an idea of

Indian food obtained from there, which he tried to satisfy. So, when the restaurateurs refer to the “Indian cooking style”, they actually refer to a cuisine that is both influenced by their own Bangladeshi cultural food habits and at the same time imitates Anglo-Indian cooking habits, which in turn have developed over the past centuries between Great Britain, Europe and the Indian subcontinent. I was confronted with this locational mixture while ordering in one of the Indian Restaurants on *Calle Argumosa* and asking the waiter, in a mix of basic Bangla, English and Spanish, about the origin of some of the dishes. He said they were from England, before correcting himself: they were from Bangladesh, but adapted to European taste.

## CONCLUSION

The Bangla language and ethnic community extends far beyond the borders of Bangladesh into India. Further commonalities between Bangladesh and India are obvious, evidenced by similarities in food, clothes and cultural practices evolved through centuries of shared history and neighbourly friendship. Self-describing as Indian is not necessarily extrinsic to Bangladeshis and there might even be a commonality to the extent of a kind of *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983), – though, other than conceptualised by Anderson, it might be of a kind transgressing narrowly defined “national” grounds.

This article analysed the initially surprising phenomenon that Bangladeshis in Lavapiés embellish their stores with shop signs displaying a strong reference to India instead of Bangladesh. Bangladeshis deliberately employ this public self-representation of cultural identity, which is mainly done for business purposes, though historic, cultural, geographic and friendship factors also have an influence. Rejections of the use of “India” are based on the denunciation of political problems or religious differences between the two countries.

In any case, using a country’s name for business purposes is not necessarily proof of strong identification with this country – it might e.g. be simply an indication of geographic or cultural origins of purchasable goods. There is also no situation of Indian domination over the Bangladeshis of Lavapiés: Cultural, national and religious festivities, community organisations, networks of living and working and news dissemination all have a decidedly Bangladeshi character, so that on an agency level, ties and bonds to Bangladesh appear to be strong. At the same time, though, Bangladeshis are marginalised to the extent of being practically ignored by the general public and important social networks in Lavapiés. Self-

presenting as Bangladeshi seems unattractive under these conditions, while linking oneself to India's fame helps to overcome this situation. Sometimes, though, rather seldomly, it is also referred to Döner Kebab or pan-ethnic marketing strategies are applied, as these are attractive business catchphrases that overcome reputational shortcomings or unfamiliarity of the name of Bangladesh.

But there is more to it: Regarding collective naming in its translocally and historically entangled dimension of Bangladeshi migration to Britain reveals that Bangladeshi entrepreneurs' references to India are partly attributable to the legacy of colonial times, when Bangladesh was a part of India. Bangladeshis' introduction in Britain as "Indians" still influences the business and marketing methods of Bangladeshis in Lavapiés today, who continue to use proven and successful "ethnic corporate identity strategies". The use of the name of India can thus be traced to colonially influenced dynamics that were shaped in Britain and sustained as an everyday pragmatic decision based on economic deliberations. It becomes obvious that India is an idea that Europeans like to construct around Bangladeshis in order to experience feelings associated with exotic "Incredible India", as promoted by tourism commercials, while Bangladeshis within Europe employ their ability for contextual self-representation and use the idea and name of India as a way of connecting themselves to a larger-scale ethnicity, and as a resource.

Practices in the naming of businesses are expressions of multiplicity, contextuality and fluidity of business strategies in relation to identitarian practices. By publicly appropriating "Indianness", Bangladeshis in Lavapiés might be practising a cultural representation based on an essentialisation of past and present socio-cultural commonalities.

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