



# Remittances and the Destination State: A Comparison of Bangladeshi Migrants in Japan and the USA

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## INTRODUCTION

Remittances are one of the most celebrated aspects in the discourses of migration. While migrants endure various kinds of uncertainty, hardship, and suffering on their way to their destinations as well as in their new residences and workplaces, their remittances considerably improve the lives of those they left behind—the family and community in their places of origin. Researchers have documented how remittances allow access to better education, health, and nutrition for the members of the migrant’s family (Amega 2018; Lu 2012; Thow et al. 2016), help develop local infrastructure, and boost economic activities (e.g., Redehegn et al. 2019). Moreover, remittances contribute significantly to GDP and help stabilize the national balance of payments for a number of origin countries (Meyer and Shera 2017). These macroeconomic impacts entice many countries in the Global

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South (Guevarra 2010; Iskander 2010; Rodriguez 2010) as well as international organizations (e.g., the International Organization for Migration, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the World Bank) to enthusiastically praise remittances as a source of funding development (Kapur 2004).

Contrarily, there are anti-immigration narratives that are built on a perceived fear and hatred of migrant populations among the conservative factions in destination countries. In fact, the growing right-wing political parties and their media front construct migrants as scapegoats for a number of structural problems in their native countries (Hogan and Haltinner 2015). A common focus in these discourses is the economic and social problems in the destination countries and the more or less subtle claims—almost always supported with fabricated evidence—that migrants are responsible for those problems. Consequently, calls for expelling migrants who are already inside the destination countries and stopping potential migrants at the borders are central issues in right-wing political activism. In Europe, public discourse on migration has substantially turned its focus on the recent “migration crisis,” feeding into pre-existing anti-immigration discourses and political actions (Dennison and Geddes 2018). Anti-immigration fervor in the destination countries also affects remittances, the lifeline of over 250 million migrants and their families in poorer countries (IOM 2020). In this context, it is important to understand the role of the destination state in the different discourses and regimes of migration. In this chapter, I argue that the different migration policies of the destination states have immediate effects on remittance-sending. I will explore this hypothesis with comparative data from Bangladeshi immigrants to Japan and the USA.

I will begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the role of the destination state in shaping migrants’ remittances and discussing their experience with the destination state. I will then present the methodology of this study. This will be followed by the case studies of Bangladeshi migration to Japan and the USA and the data analysis showing how the destination states shape Bangladeshi migration to these countries. Finally, I will analyze the influence of the destination state on remittances by focusing on the remittance decay hypothesis.

*Earlier Approaches to the Role of the Destination State  
in Remittance Research*

Remittances are defined as personal financial transactions whereby migrants send a part of their income to family overseas. Due to an inherent subject orientation in the social sciences and in contemporary migration research, the scholarly focus today mainly lies on the migrants and their families, which leaves the role of the state underexposed and under-researched. Interestingly, there was academic interest in the role of the destination state in remittances in the 1970s, long before the emergence of the remittance-and-development discourse of the late 1980s (De Haas 2010). In his study on the migrant workers in the mining sector in South Africa and those in agriculture in California, Michael Burawoy observed that the destination state deployed legal instruments such as “the influx control” and “the pass law” to give urban residence only to those employed (i.e., male workers) while keeping others in the reserves or Bantustans and surrounding black territories (Burawoy 1976, p. 1060). These laws required the workers to return home if their employment contract ended without a subsequent contract or if they became unemployed due to retirement, disability, or simply a scarcity of employment opportunities. The lack of a legal right for the migrant to permanently reside in the destination state compelled them to maintain contact with their families in the reservations, or the black territories. The families also needed the migrants’ financial support to subsist because of hardships in the local economy. This strong interdependence between migrants and their families is evident in remittance practices that facilitate family cohesion and belonging (p. 1062).

We can thus clearly see how the destination state influences remittances. It plays a decisive role in rendering the migrants’ entry and stay in the destination country conditional upon their employment and in keeping them apart from their families in their place of origin. Thus, the destination state makes the productive migrant functionally dependent on the reproductive family by the deploying state institutions. This link between the motivation to migrate and to remit to the family was theorized in the mid-1980s in the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM). Lucas and Stark (1985) published the first empirical study on remittances in Botswana, which conceptualized migrants as rational actors who enter into a contractual arrangement with their family whereby the family sends the migrants abroad to earn additional income and the migrants

reciprocate accordingly. While we owe much to the approaches of NELM, it has generated criticism as well, for example that, based on household surveys, remittance motivation is analyzed much more from the receivers' than the senders' point of view (Mahmud 2020).

Turning back to the destination state as a research interest, a number of scholars have identified the state's role in facilitating international migration as a strategy for earning foreign income. For instance, Rodriguez recognized what she called "migrant citizenship" through which the Philippine state reconfigures nationalism by drawing migrants into the rhetoric of filial piety (pp. 86–87) and thereby encourages them to remit (p. 185). Guevarra (2010) argued that the Philippine state works with a gendered and racialized moral economy, which bases the ideal behavior of migrant workers on remittances. Iskander (2010) was even more explicit in recognizing the state's role in remittances. By adopting what Iskander called an "interpretative engagement," the states of Morocco and Mexico formulated policies that channel remittances for investment in community development. They thus enhance the migrants' efforts to improve the lives of their families and communities and, more broadly, their nation. Clearly, these studies establish the role of the origin state in shaping migrants' employment abroad and sending remittances home, thereby demonstrating the need to move beyond the individualistic perception of remittances inherent in the dominant NELM perspective. Similarly, scholars recognize the active role of the destination state in regulating migration (Hollifield 2004), which inevitably affects the migrants' employment abroad and their transnationalism, including their remittances.

Remittances undergo noticeable changes over time and according to the personal situations and living conditions of migrants. The decline of money transfers in particular has been analyzed with the model of the remittance decay hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, remittance flows are influenced by the timespan during which migrants live abroad: the longer they live in their destination state, the less money they send. Remittances also decline when the family joins the migrant, and the death of parents also contributes to remittance decay (Carling 2008; Lucas and Stark 1985; Makina and Masenge 2015; Meyer 2020; Rapoport and Docquier 2006). Other factors like plans for return migration and the closeness to the remittance recipients also influence the amount of remittances sent home. What has not been added to this equation so far is the factor of the destination state and its immigration policies. In this chapter, I will address this question with a comparison of immigration to Japan and

the USA, the conditions of settling in those countries, and the consequences those conditions have on remittances.

### ENCOUNTERING THE DESTINATION STATE

Migrants inevitably encounter the destination state at its border, where it exercises sovereign authority over who is allowed in (Hollifield 2004; Zolberg 1999). Due to a lack of income opportunities at home, migrants go abroad for employment. While migration might be motivated economically, transnational practices including remittances are also conditioned by destination state policies. For example, Hollifield (2004) argued that the destination state is becoming inherently interested in regulating migration as much as maintaining the security of the state and the well-being of its citizens. Burawoy (1976) observed how the destination state directly engages in regulating migration by separating employable males from their families and defining the migration as temporary. Thus, remittances become an essential relation: the families depend on the migrants' remittance for subsistence while the migrants need to maintain their membership in the family to which they must return due to the inability to settle permanently in their destination country. In the Middle East and East Asia, destination countries use immigration laws to keep the migrants in certain labor market sectors by attaching them to a particular employer or job, housing them in workers' colonies, and restricting their labor market mobility, while rigid immigration controls (for instance frequent raids and strict security checks) prevent them from overstaying their visas (AlShehabi et al. 2015; Seol and Skrentny 2009; Shipper 2002; Tseng and Wang 2011).

Empirical studies have documented how the destination states exert control over the foreign populations through various legal mechanisms. For instance, destination states put in place extensive immigration and border control policies and practices that define the migrants either as "permanent residents" who are allowed to settle in the country, as "temporary workers" or short-term "visitors" who are allowed to stay for a certain period, or as "undocumented" foreigners who must evade the legal procedures upon entry (Castles 2011; Munck 2008; Neumayer 2006). Quantitative studies on remittances have shown how these different legal statuses affect migrants' income and remittances. For example, Glytsos (1997) found that remittances from temporary Greek immigrants in Germany and Australia constituted an obligation to their families back home, whereas remittances from permanent immigrants were voluntary

and followed the gift script (p. 429; on scripting remittances, see Carling 2014). Thus, the ability to settle permanently affects remittance behavior, specifically reducing the likelihood to send remittance (Markova and Reilly 2007). Perhaps this explains why temporary migrants send higher proportions of their earnings compared to permanent immigrants (Mahmud 2016), as Pinger (2010) explained by reference to their plan to return home. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the transition from undocumented status to permanent legal status and family reunification reduces the migrants' propensity to send remittances (Amuedo-Dorantes and Mazzolari 2010).

The destination state also shapes remittances indirectly. For instance, the USA sometimes adopts policy measures for undocumented migrants to legalize their stay by allowing them legal permanent residency (e.g., the IRCA of 1986), which substantially increases the migrants' labor market position and bargaining power (Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002). The state also sets up mechanisms for these migrants to acquire citizenship that further improves their bargaining power and expands their rights and privileges (DeVoretz and Pivnenko 2005). In these circumstances, the migrants' income opportunities as well as their capacity to save in their destination country increases. If migrants acquire a legal status that increases their earnings and savings, but cannot settle permanently in their destination state, they are more likely to send remittances. As I have showed, multifaceted indicators can lead to an increase or decay of remittances. In this chapter, I will elaborate on these processes in the context of Bangladeshis' remittances from Japan and the USA.

## METHODOLOGY AND THE TWO FIELDS OF RESEARCH

This chapter is based on an ethnography of migrants' remittances from Japan and the USA to Bangladesh, focusing on the role of the destination state therein. I selected these two destination states because of their opposing approaches toward migration policies—inclusive in the USA and exclusionary in Japan—to see how they affected remittances differently. To this end, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo and Los Angeles between 2012 and 2015, which I followed up with short field visits in 2017 and 2018. In both cities, I conducted small, purposive surveys, based on a sample of 120 migrants in Tokyo and 200 migrants in Los Angeles, and used this quantitative data to assess general patterns of remitting. Further in-depth interviews with 42 respondents in Tokyo and 45 in

Los Angeles were conducted and analyzed along with ethnographic field notes to explore the social mechanisms of remittance practices. For the purpose of maintaining the interview partners' confidentiality, I used pseudonyms and fabricated personal information throughout.

During my fieldwork, there were about 10,000 Bangladeshi migrants in Japan, most of whom had come as laborers and lived in and around metropolitan Tokyo. Despite some migrants' willingness and active initiatives to stay longer and settle permanently, Japan compelled all migrants to return to Bangladesh after some time, or to remigrate to another country for a certain period of time (Mahmud 2014, 2017; Oishi 2012). Thus, the ebbs and flows of migration from Bangladesh to Japan as well as the migrants' experiences in everyday life, including remittances, were inevitably affected by Japan's policies toward the migrants (Mahmud 2013).

Turning to the research field in the USA, the Bangladeshi consul general in Los Angeles estimates that the total number of Bangladeshis falls somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 in Los Angeles and some 80,000 in California generally, making the region the nation's second-largest home to Bangladeshis after New York. These immigrants are mostly concentrated in the neighborhood called "Little Bangladesh" within Koreatown. The first Bangladeshi business—a restaurant-cum-ethnic store—was established in Koreatown in 1993. Today, there are six Bangladeshi restaurants and ethnic stores, two afterschool prep centers, and two video stores in Little Bangladesh, as well as about 300 liquor stores and gas stations owned by Bangladeshis all over Los Angeles.

The contexts and conditions for migrants settling reveal a number of differences between Tokyo and Los Angeles. First, Bangladeshi migrants in Tokyo found their stay in Japan to be temporary and their return inevitable, whereas those in Los Angeles saw the USA as their ultimate home for permanent settlement. This contrast was explicit in the continuous development and growth of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in Los Angeles, compared with the gradual diminution in the size of their counterpart in Japan. Beginning with a few hundred Bangladeshis in Los Angeles in the 1980s, the community grew to over 50,000 immigrants by 2010. By contrast, the number of Bangladeshis in Japan continued to dwindle from over 50,000 in the early 1990s to about 10,000 during my initial fieldwork in 2013.

Second, most Bangladeshis entered Japan as tourists and overstayed their visas, or entered under the pretext of being college students, earning an income illegally. By contrast, nearly all Bangladeshis in the USA entered

the country as legal permanent residents, eligible to work full time, or with a genuine intent to study, finding employment after graduating. This meant that the majority of Bangladeshi migrants in Tokyo worked in unskilled and part-time jobs, evading law enforcement, whereas Bangladeshis in Los Angeles were legally employed in both unskilled and professional jobs.

Third, almost all Bangladeshis migrated to Japan alone, regardless of their marital status. The temporary migration opportunities were open only to male migrants, who would have to return to Bangladesh to raise a family, whereas the USA allowed and even encouraged migration with family and permanent settlement in the USA. These differences in the destination states' immigration policies and practices affected the migrants' choices and their relationships with their families, communities, and states, all of which shaped their transnational practices, including remittances.

A comparison between the cases of Bangladeshi migrants in Tokyo and Los Angeles allows for a comparison of both South-South and South-North migration and of corresponding remittances. In addition, there was a practical concern in choosing these two field sites: having been a Bangladeshi graduate student in both Tokyo and Los Angeles, I was familiar with these migrant communities through networks of friends and acquaintances. Thus, gaining access to interview partners was relatively easy and we quickly built a foundation of trust.

### THE DESTINATION STATE IN BANGLADESHI MIGRATION TO JAPAN AND THE USA

According to Bangladesh Bank statistics, the total amount of remittances Bangladesh received from Japan and the USA in 2019/20 were USD49.35 million and USD2403.40 million, respectively.<sup>1</sup> While the government engages in the management of Bangladeshi migration to a number of countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the state has very limited—if any—influence on migration to Japan and the USA. Rather these two migration flows are primarily driven by the policies of the destination states. As I discuss below, the opportunity to migrate to Japan was limited to the rural communities of a few districts due to the heavy dependence of this migration on migrant networks, while migration to the USA was relatively open.

<sup>1</sup>Source: <https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/wagemidtl.php> (accessed July 22, 2020).



### *Japan*

Japan is known for its restrictive immigration policies, particularly toward low-skilled migrant workers. In the 1980s, Japan saw a strong economic boom coinciding with an acute labor shortage. Japanese employers, particularly small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs, were in such a dire situation that up to 50 companies would go bankrupt every week because they could not process orders due to the lack of workers on their factory floors (Goodman 2004). Therefore, Japan adopted a number of policies to promote labor migration while at the same time minimizing the possibility of permanent settlement of the foreign population. The conservative bureaucracy, unwilling to allow a large number of migrant workers into the country, offered visas on arrival to visitors from Iran, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Higuchi 2007; Okabe 2011). These visitors would immediately take up employment in Japanese companies and frequently overstayed their visas. Some enterprising individuals in Bangladesh found earning opportunities by migrating to Japan and some established businesses that arranged migration to the country for others.

As Mahmood (1994) observed, the number of Bangladeshis in Japan jumped from a few hundred to over 34,000 between 1987 and 1990. Two-thirds of these migrants had been employed or self-employed before their migration, and only one-fifth were students. This first period of Bangladeshi migration included middle- and lower-middle-class men from a few villages. It is estimated that more than three-fourths of them came from Munshiganj District, south of Dhaka. They were quite young, with some coming right after college graduation (Higuchi 2007). Since Japan did not allow low-skilled and unskilled foreign workers, Bangladeshis used informal networks of co-ethnics who helped them to enter Japan as visitors, tourists, or students (Rahman and Fee 2011). This migration abruptly stopped due to Japan's immigration policy reform in 1990, when the government rescinded the visa-waiver program in response to a combination of pushback from Japanese society against a rapidly growing foreign population, the unwillingness of the bureaucracy to allow the incorporation of migrants, and the discovery of another source of cheap labor in Latin America.

Migration to Japan had a good reputation in Bangladesh due to paying the highest salaries for low-skilled jobs and enabling the largest amounts of remittances compared to any other destination country of Bangladeshi migrants (Mahmud 2016). The cancelation of the port-entry visa facility

for Bangladeshis caused a halt in new arrivals from Bangladesh. Anti-immigration measures, particularly police raids in workplaces and immigrant neighborhoods, resulted in massive numbers of arrests and deportations of Bangladeshis in the early 1990s. However, the awareness of high-earning opportunities and the presence of relatives and friends in Japan continued to attract new aspirants from Bangladesh, who would look for alternative ways to migrate to Japan and earn their fortune. Entering as a student emerged as the alternative they were looking for. In 1984, the Japanese government had inaugurated policies to internationalize higher education (Liu-Farrer 2009, p. 2011). With Japan's cancellation of visas on arrival and the deportation of undocumented migrants, acquiring a student visa as a self-funded language student became the primary route of entry. With the help of relatives as well as professional migration agents, aspiring Bangladeshis obtained information about admissions, courses, fees, etc., procured the documents, such as the certificate of eligibility issued by the immigration department in Tokyo, and found accommodation and jobs once they arrived in Japan. Although these migrants held student visas, they were qualitatively different from student migrants in the USA, the UK, and Australia, in that these migrants in Japan used student visas for legal entry while they spent all of their time earning, saving, and remitting money. Empirical studies have recognized that these self-funded students frequently violate the 28-hour work limit set by their visa category and work as long as—sometimes longer than—a full-time employee (Liu-Farrer 2009; Mahmud 2014). The most recent immigration policy revisions in Japan also recognized international students as a pool of part-time workers (Milly 2020).

### *The USA*

Bangladeshi migration to the USA was very meager until the introduction of the Diversity Visa (DVI) lottery in the early 1990s, when Bangladeshis began to enter the USA in their thousands. The statistical yearbooks for the US Immigration and Naturalization Service documented only 154 Bangladeshis in 1973 and 787 in 1983. Then, in 1990, the introduction of the OPI visa lottery (the predecessor of the DVI visa lottery) resulted in the admission of 10,676 immigrants from Bangladesh (Aswad and Bilge 1996, p. 159). Thereafter, the immigrants entering through this visa lottery program outnumbered those entering the USA by other means. Each year, several thousand Bangladeshis entered the USA through this

diversity visa lottery, until they reached the numerical threshold that excluded Bangladesh from the program in 2012.

Despite this exclusion from the government-sponsored DVI visa lottery program, immigration from Bangladesh to the USA continued to grow. Thanks to the US family unification policy, those with family members and close relatives who are US citizens can still enter the USA as immigrants. According to US Department of State statistics, 14,946 Bangladeshis entered the USA with immigration visas in 2018. Almost all of these immigrants (14,818 or 99 percent) obtained their visas through the sponsorship of immediate family members or close relatives. State Department statistics show that from 2012 to 2018, the total number of immigrants from Bangladesh remained over 12,000 per year. Vaughan and Huennekens (2018) observed that between 2000 and 2016, the Bangladesh chain migration multiplier was 4.44, higher than the most recent worldwide average chain migration multiplier of 3.45.

US policy toward foreign students offered another avenue for Bangladeshis to enter the USA. The US ambassador to Bangladesh reported 7143 Bangladeshi students in the USA at the graduate level in 2018, making Bangladesh ninth among the top 25 student-sending countries. The US embassy in Bangladesh eased student visa processing in 2012, which caused a significant increase in the flow of Bangladeshi students to the USA. Between 2012 and 2017, the number of Bangladeshi students in the USA increased by 53.5 percent, with a 9.7 percent increase in 2017 compared to the previous year, while the international average increased by only 3.4 percent according to the 2017 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. After graduation, these students usually find professional employment and acquire permanent residency and citizenship, thereby facilitating further migration of their close relatives through the family unification policy. Members of the Bangladeshi diaspora community are more likely to have a university degree than the average population of the USA and have a higher household income than the US median (MPI 2014).

Finally, unlike in Europe, where most Bangladeshis enter by crossing the Mediterranean (Qayum 2017), they very rarely number among the undocumented migrants in the USA. Perhaps this is due to the vast geographical distance between the two countries and the absence of transnational underground networks like those serving other well-known migrant groups. Nevertheless, there is a small but significant number of undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in the USA, who entered as tourists or

visitors and then overstayed their visas. The majority manage to legalize their stay through marriage or applying for political asylum, while a few remain undocumented.

### REMITTANCE DECAY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DESTINATION STATE

Although the governments of both Japan and the USA play a decisive role in Bangladeshi migration to these countries, they pursue their policies from different motivations, resulting in exclusionary and receptive destination contexts respectively. These, in turn, have divergent impacts on remittance behaviors.

#### *Japan: Temporary Migration without the Family and Remittances*

Japan is known as an exceptionally restrictive immigration destination among all the liberal democratic countries (Oishi 2012). Nevertheless, the total non-citizen population in Japan increased by about 20 percent between 2007 and 2017, from about 2.1 million to nearly 2.6 million. Together with various government programs to bring in foreign workers, this rising number indicates an opening of the Japanese border for migrants. However, Japan is maintaining its policy not to allow permanent settlement by adopting various direct and indirect mechanisms (Mahmud 2014; Okabe 2011; Tarumoto 2019).

It is obvious from the formal immigration policies and practices that Japan wants foreign workers to enter and work for a certain number of years, and then leave Japan. My interview partners who entered Japan as short-term visitors or as self-funded students confirmed this assumption. For instance, Rahman (a 54-year-old community leader and permanent resident through marriage) stated:

While it was easy for us to enter Japan and find highly paying work [compared with work in Bangladesh], we all knew that we would have to go home. Also, living on construction sites or in factories in remote areas was difficult. Moreover, the fear of being arrested and deported was always there. So, we would spend all of our time working and earning so that we could earn as much as possible and leave Japan with ‘big’ money.

The first influx of foreign workers to Japan occurred when the port-entry visa policy for citizens of Iran, Pakistan, and Bangladesh was introduced in 1987. The rapid increase of Bangladeshi migrants in Japan between 1987 and 1990 noted by Mahmood (1994) primarily consisted of undocumented migrants who entered Japan as tourists with permits for 15 to 30-day stays, but who would take up employment and overstay their visas. With new immigration policies adopted in 1990, the Japanese government started to arrest and deport many of those migrants. Scholars have argued that Japan changed its position regarding those visa-overstayers because a large population of migrants of Japanese descent were identified living in Latin America, whom the Japanese government actively pursued to bring back to replace the undocumented Asian migrants.

Studies have observed a similar reluctance by the Japanese government concerning self-funded students violating the immigration law. While there is a 28-hour weekly work limit for students to engage in part-time jobs, most students take multiple jobs and work much longer hours to maximize their earnings. These student migrants conceal their violation of the legal work-hour limit by maintaining multiple bank accounts and getting paid in cash. The immigration authorities turn a blind eye and rarely investigate the students' entire banking transactions to detect their violation of the work limit. Moreover, several language schools developed a reputation for selling student visas, whereby students would enroll to maintain their student status while working in multiple part-time jobs for longer than full-time employment. Inspections by the immigration authorities and corresponding restrictive measures were temporary and would eventually be lifted, thus allowing these schools to bring in more student migrants. However, Japan strictly enforces the rule for maintaining student status for these migrants to stay on. Given that the studentship ends after four to six years, the migrants have to leave Japan and return home. As Kamal (27 years old, single with a student visa, four years in Tokyo) shared:

I would have stayed here for a few years more. But my education does not help me to get a job that would make me eligible for work visa. It is also impossible to overstay, as there are police everywhere, you know. So, I have to return home despite opportunities to earn high amounts of money really fast. You know how it feels! I have come here to earn money, and there are plenty of jobs. Yet, I cannot stay.

I observed that entering Japan as a self-funded student in Japanese language schools emerged as the most common way for Bangladeshis to migrate after the visa-on-arrival scheme ended. This migration was more selective than the previous one due to the higher costs and bureaucracy involved in getting admission into language schools, preparing paperwork for various institutions to process the visa, and arranging for housing and other daily necessities once in Japan. The legality of their stay allowed the migrants to live in metropolitan Tokyo and other large cities and work in better-paying restaurants, unlike their counterparts among the visa-overstayers. The opportunity to earn through multiple part-time jobs, the necessity of sending money home, and the inability to find professional jobs due to not studying enough make these migrants' return to Bangladesh inevitable.

Similar observations can be made about those Bangladeshis entering Japan through the newly enacted Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) that requires the interns to return to their home at the end of their five-year stay. While originally conceptualized as a temporary training program through which Japan contributed to the origin country, the recent change in this program (adopted in 2017) allows the interns to extend their stay by up to five years, with some eventually able to acquire permanent residency and citizenship, thereby revealing the true motivation of Japan to use the TITP as a way of recruiting migrant workers. Representatives of the Japanese government signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with Bangladeshi government representatives on August 27, 2019, which specified 14 sectors in which Japan will recruit migrant workers from Bangladesh. Although interns in a few specific sectors are allowed to renew their visas multiple times and acquire permanent residency and even citizenship, the number of naturalizations is negligible compared to the total number of migrants who have to leave Japan. Thus, Japan constructs migration primarily as temporary, whereby it allows foreigners to enter and work, but only for a certain period.

In sum, Bangladeshi migration to Japan began with the visa-waiver program adopted by the Japanese government and was shaped thereafter by successive changes in Japanese immigration policies. This partly explains why the number of Bangladeshis in Japan continuously declined, from its peak at over 50,000 in the early 1990s down to approximately 16,000 in

2018 (according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs).<sup>2</sup> I argue that this inability to stay permanently and raise a family in Japan causes Bangladeshi migrants to send a large portion of their income to Bangladesh for family maintenance, investment, and savings. I enumerated from a purposive sample survey that these migrants sent about 60 percent of their income in remittances to Bangladesh for family maintenance as well as to realize their future plans including investing in income-generating activities and savings in their country of origin. This finding also suggests that remittances from Japan—and other destination countries characterized by temporary visa status and family separation—will remain high. Most importantly, these findings show that the destination state shapes remittances by requiring family separation and denying permanent settlement.

*The USA: Permanent Settlement, Family Unification,  
and Remittances*

In contrast to Japan, the US immigration policy welcomes specific groups of migrants to enter and permanently settle in the USA through its DVI lottery program, family-sponsored immigration, and employer-sponsored immigration, among several other programs. The US government's interest in keeping migrants in the USA is also manifested in its occasionally adopted Temporary Permanent Status (TPS) programs. Moreover, the government runs various programs to support the naturalization and settlement of new immigrants and provides fund to civil society organizations to offer supporting services to the new immigrants. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) department, a total of 834,000 new citizens were naturalized and nearly 577,000 individuals were granted permanent residency in 2019.

Permanent settlement defines Bangladeshi migration to the USA. From the very beginning, all of my interview partners reportedly knew that they were going to leave Bangladesh to settle permanently in the USA. The US immigration policy of allowing family unification led to the migration of entire families to the USA. Consequently, Bangladeshi immigrant neighborhoods have sprung up in most large US cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Boston, Indianapolis, and Chicago.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/bangladesh/data.html> (accessed July 5, 2023).

Despite fostering a national tradition of immigration, scholars have also recognized racism in US immigration policies and practices (Tourse et al. 2018; Valdez 2016), especially during the Trump administration from 2016 to 2020. Nevertheless, and contrary to my expectations, my interview partners shared very positive impressions of the USA as a migration destination and of their new permanent home. The increase in anti-immigration rhetoric and discrimination under the Trump administration did not cause any significant change in this perception, as demonstrated in the continuously high number of new immigrants from Bangladesh. My interview partners would often cite their lives full of uncertainty and insecurity in Bangladesh to support their claim of having a better life in the USA, and they praised a range of support services from the US federal government and local governments. These include subsidized English language classes and vocational courses with stipends from the government, free or subsidized health insurance, low-income housing, and tax refunds. Moreover, these immigrants can send their children to public schools for free. Finally, there are other employment-related services for new arrivals. While some questioned the adequacy of these services, they presented these as evidence of the US government's welcoming stance toward the new immigrants and their permanent settlement.

My interviewees experienced both economic and social security after migrating to the USA. They found opportunities for upward mobility—though limited—not only for themselves but also for the next generation, opportunities that they had not experienced in Bangladesh. They were able to establish their own ethnic neighborhoods, which provided them with familiar public spaces in the foreign land. Although they still belonged to a minority, the Bangladeshi diaspora community was well integrated into the labor market and social life in the USA. While low-paying jobs enabled the first generation to survive, their emphasis on higher education for their children, who were able to accompany them to the USA, facilitated a quick improvement in social status for many in the second generation, as is substantiated by numerous instances of highly educated Bangladeshi youth coming out of working-class families. In a way, they lived the American Dream at a time when many Americans had lost sight of it. Settling permanently and sponsoring immigration of their close relatives was one of the main goals of the migration project, as Aatur (a former schoolteacher in Bangladesh who entered the USA on a diversity visa in 2011 and is now a cashier in a gas station) stated:



My work is very painful. I have to stand behind the cash register for the whole period of eight to ten hours each day for six days a week. This causes severe pain in my back and legs. But I cannot leave the job because I need money to send home for my family. Therefore, I take pain medicine so that I can endure the pain. It is just for a few years until my family joins me here [he smiled, giving an optimistic impression]. I'm working here because I will be able to bring my parents and younger brothers to the USA. This is an unimaginable success for a school teacher like me.

This statement supports the idea that migrants persevere in back-breaking jobs to earn and send remittances to their family in their country of origin (Ahsan 2011; see also the remittance script “sacrifice,” Carling 2014). However, it also clearly shows that Ataur’s financial bond with the homeland has a time limit and that remittances for family support will stop once the family reunites in the destination country. Finally, as family unification is regulated by the state, this case demonstrates that state policies have a considerable influence on remitting.

I enumerated from a purposive sample survey that the migrants send about one-third of their income in remittances to Bangladesh. Once their families reunite in the USA, living expenses increase and there is less money available to send to their places of origin. However, my interview partners recognized that even their small savings translated into large enough amounts to invest in assets in Bangladesh that would bring them both income and prestige. They also talked about helping their relatives and neighbors in times of need as well as charitable spending for schools, religious institutions, and so forth. Nevertheless, these remittances tend to be significantly smaller and mostly occasional compared to remittances for family support. Thus, I recognized declining patterns of remittances among Bangladeshi migrants in the USA, which support the remittance decay hypothesis. More precisely, remittances not just declined but also transformed: from regular family support toward unsteady investments and charity. The migrants’ permanent settlement and family unification in the destination country causes remittances to gradually decline. Yet greater economic opportunities as well as the presence of kin and other relatives in the origin country are likely to encourage migrants to send remittances, although less frequently and in smaller amounts.

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to the individualized conceptualization of migration, I found that the destination state plays a decisive role in shaping international migration and remittances. Both Bangladeshi migrations to Japan and the USA are primarily shaped by the destination states' immigration policies. Japan not only regulates Bangladeshi migrants' entry to the state, but also their stay in and departure from the country, which is most clearly observed in the case of self-funded language students. Japan allows these de facto migrant workers as international students and overlooks their unauthorized extended work hours in multiple part-time jobs at restaurants. Yet Japan strictly enforces the conditionality of maintaining studentship and ensures their return home when their student status runs out. Given that these migrants do not earn credentials nor work experience that would allow them to access professional jobs and stay longer, they solely focus on earning as much as they can and remit most of their income to Bangladesh. This illustrates how transnationalism—or maintaining cross-border connections and sustaining these through various practices including remittances—is strongly linked to the state's policies and practices. Furthermore, I observed a perception of Japan as forever foreign among most Bangladeshi migrants, which potentially influences their high propensity to engage in transnational practices like remitting.

Like the case in Japan, US immigration policy plays a central role in Bangladeshi migration. As discussed above, Bangladeshi migration to the USA until 2012 depended primarily on the DVI program. Nowadays, nearly all Bangladeshis migrate through the family unification policy. Unlike Japan, the USA offers various forms of support for immigrants to settle permanently. These immigrants not only settled with their respective families but also sponsored the immigration of their parents and siblings: All of my respondents among the low-income families and most of those among the professional immigrants reported applying for the immigration of their parents and siblings as soon as they got US passports. Settling permanently and sponsoring close relatives became so common that these behaviors would influence almost all aspects of their lives after migration, especially remittances.

My analysis show, Japan allows migrant workers to enter and stay for a few years, but maintains that they should not settle permanently and raise families in Japan. Therefore, migrants in Japan always need to send remittances for various purposes including family maintenance, investments,

and savings. By contrast, the USA not only allows immigrants and their families to settle permanently, but also offers various means of support to this end. Consequently, remittances have gradually declined as they do not need to send money for family maintenance. Nevertheless, these migrants still send remittances in order to invest or to give to charity.

Migrants' motivations for sending remittances are well established in the current literature. Some scholars have also convincingly demonstrated the role of the origin state in shaping remittances. What lacks attention is the respective impact of the destination state. This chapter contributes to closing this gap by recognizing the role of the Japanese and US governments in shaping Bangladeshi remittances. Remittance decay depends not just on the time period migrants spend abroad, but also on a bundle of legal factors, such as immigration policies and visa regulations. Further studies are necessary, for example looking at successive generations of migrants in various destination countries characterized by different immigration policies.

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