Chapter 7
Disrupted Mobilities: British-Bangladeshis Visiting Their Friends and Relatives During the Global Pandemic

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7.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the cross-border mobilities of people and materials. The ramifications of such a sudden large-scale disruption of mobilities were hugely significant for migrants’ and diasporic citizens’ transnational way of life. Being ‘here’ and ‘there’ and maintaining intimate personal, familial and social ties between people and places transnationally suddenly became virtually impossible, and some of these blockages and brakes to mobility continue. National lockdowns by many countries across the globe and the virtual halting of international travel severely limited people’s capacity to physically travel. Visiting geographically distant relatives and friends, meeting them face-to-face and fulfilling cultural obligations and duties, such as providing care or attending a funeral, became very challenging. In this chapter, I examine the disruptions of human spatial-temporal mobilities of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) between members of the British-Bangladeshi diaspora in London and their home country, Bangladesh. Drawing from interviews both in-person and online via Zoom and WhatsApp, I analyse and interpret the complex experiences of their visits and the consequences of enforced immobilities for individuals and families during the pandemic.

The notion of ‘disrupted mobilities’ (Birchnell & Büscher, 2011; O’Regan, 2011) was coined in the aftermath of the Icelandic ash cloud from the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption in 2010. This concept provides an important lens to examine the complex social and economic effects caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit on a much larger scale. In what follows, I analyse the experiences and implications of visits and non-visits by British Bangladeshis and their left-behind relatives and friends in Bangladesh through the concept of disrupted mobilities.

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Empirical evidence shows that it was not possible to completely ignore the compulsion to proximity and the need for co-present sociality for many British Bangladeshis. The tough decision of travelling to the home country on the eve of or during the recent pandemic had to be taken. The mobility journey of those diasporic citizens was not necessarily undertaken in a stress-free way. Many migrants were physically stranded, emotionally overwhelmed and economically distressed. This coincided with the non-migrant relatives’ and friends’ highly unequal access to mobility due to the so-called ‘traffic light’ system imposed by host countries, notably the UK.

Note that, in conformity with one of the main messages of this book, which is to find alternative words to ‘crisis’ to refer to specific events and processes which often have complex and multiple dimensions (see back to Chap. 1), I refer to Covid-19 as a pandemic rather than a crisis, since the former is the more precise scientific term. I also prefer the term ‘disrupted mobilities’ to connote the often devastating events of the pandemic on migrants’ (and their families’) transnational lives.

In the next section, I review the literature concerning mobilities, especially the disruption of mobilities and the associated impacts on individuals and families across transnational space. The review is then extended to the disruption of VFR mobilities in the British-Bangladeshi transnational context. The results and discussion sections analyse and interpret the experiences of VFR between Bangladesh and London during the pandemic and compare and contrast their experiences to other communities and societies.

### 7.2 Disrupted Mobilities

Mobility is a necessary precondition for maintaining personal, familial and social ties with geographically dispersed families and friends (Urry, 2007). Virtual meetings over Zoom or other means can hardly replace ‘thick, embodied socialities of corporeal proximity where people are uniquely accessible, available and subject to one another’ (Larsen et al., 2006, 280). Such mobilities are occasionally challenged by different unsettling events and diseases. Recent examples include ‘foot and mouth disease’, ‘SARS’, ‘swine flu’, ‘MERS’ and ‘Ebola’ (Adye et al., 2021; Gössling et al., 2020). The Covid pandemic and associated mitigating measures like lockdowns, border closure, travel bans and the halting of air travel posed a greater challenge to human movement than the earlier natural and economic disruptive events. Whilst earlier pandemics have affected a small proportion of global population (often less than 10 per cent), it is claimed that over 90 per cent of the world’s population have come under some level of travel restrictions nationally and internationally during the current pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020, 7). This unprecedented response including border closure by most industrialised countries to all foreign nationals has seen ‘the restructuring of socio-spatial relations and mobility regimes’ (Adye et al., 2021, 2). The prospect of viral transitions has even portrayed human mobility as ‘a threat’ (Cresswell, 2021, 56). This demonisation of mobility...
disproportionately affects many social groups and reinforces existing inequalities, particularly migrant communities living at the margin of host societies with very little power to negotiate with local and national governments (Dobusch & Kreissl, 2020).

Systematic studies of such disruptions of human mobilities have emerged only recently. The most notable examples of in-depth studies prior to the Covid-19 pandemic were conducted in the aftermath of the disruption caused by the aforementioned Icelandic ash cloud. Although it happened on a different scale and without causing any deaths, there are some similarities that can be drawn. Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Icelandic volcanic eruption severely disrupted or almost halted air travel. Aeromobility is central to transnational mobility, particularly for long-distance diasporic communities like the British Bangladeshis. Following the volcanic eruption, a lot of the blame was attributed to official policy failures in Europe (Birchnell & Büscher, 2011). The Covid-19 pandemic has also seen peoples’ dissatisfaction with inconsistent and in some cases inadequate policy responses in many countries across the globe. The British government’s inadequate preparation and planning, and inconsistent policy in response to the pandemic have also been subject of scholarly (Webster & Neal, 2021) and popular media scrutiny (BBC, 2021), as well as an ongoing official enquiry. Most importantly, both events also revealed the complex social, emotional and financial realities of dealing with the consequences of strandedness by individuals and families.

7.3 Transnational Family Ties and Spatial-Temporal Immobilities

Transnational family ties are underpinned by migrants and their relatives’ and friends’ mobilities across space and over time. Restricting the mobilities of members of transnational families can put a heavy burden on them (Merla et al., 2020, 394). Disruption in mobilities can deeply affect migrants’ relationship with their non-migrant relatives and friends. Different members of transnational families are differently positioned and there are certain exceptions and moral obligations for them. Migrants have a moral obligation of repaying the debt of their community, families and friends by sending remittances and attending to other needs such as providing care for their elderly parents in the home country. Not being able to fulfil those moral obligations can be considered as a sign of ingratitude and can affect their reputation in the home-country society and amongst their extended family. The pandemic-induced immobilities imposed on migrants produced severe consequences for such transnational processes. Migrants’ immobilities deprive their non-migrant transnational family members of their ‘morally founded entitlements’ of receiving economic, social, cultural and moral support (Carling, 2008). This is amplified further by the highly limited access to mobility of non-migrant family members, other relatives and friends due to stringent immigration policies and
border practices, which has seen even stricter control during the pandemic through so-called traffic-light systems and other testing, tracing and social distancing measures. Mobility plays an essential role in sustaining transnational intergenerational family relations. This is particularly evident in the intergenerational reciprocal caregiving practice, from younger migrants to their elderly parents or from elderly parents to their migrant grandchildren, which has been the subject of a growing body of empirical research (see Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Brandhorst et al., 2020; Merla et al., 2020).

### 7.4 Disrupted VFR Mobilities and the Transnational British-Bangladeshi Context

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is a specific form of human spatial-temporal mobility though which migrants maintain their intricate personal, familial and social ties to their home country and people (Janta et al., 2015). Visits are a central aspect of the migration experience (King & Lulle, 2015) and migrants’ transnational way of life. ‘The visit’ is considered as a ‘secular pilgrimage’ (Baldassar, 2001) fuelled by nostalgia and undertaken routinely by first-generation migrants, and acts as a transformatory rite of passage for second and subsequent generations, a process though which they are introduced to their ancestral culture and heritage. There are multiple other practices that are also embedded in VFR such as providing care for left-behind children or elderly parents and attending and commemorating important family rituals such as weddings, births and funerals (see Miah, 2022 for a comprehensive overview). These visiting mobilities are also reciprocal, bilateral and bi-directional between migrants’ home and host society. Visits are undertaken by migrants to their home country and by their non-migrant relatives and friends from the home country to the host country.

Mobilities that require corporeal travel and enable face-to-face meeting through visits have seen significant disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a need to understand the impact of such a disruption on transnational relationships. What are the ramifications of such a disruption of VFR mobilities for migrants and their relatives and friends? How do British Bangladeshis and their relatives and friends experience and negotiate their ‘strandedness’ and associated emotional and financial stress? Are economic and social inequalities reinforced as a result? In this chapter, I attempt to answer these questions.

The British-Bangladeshi context is unique in multiple ways. The history of arrival and settlement of Bangladeshis in London also resonates with different regimes of mobility and strandedness. The British-Bangladeshi diasporic community was established by seamen working on European merchant ships in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Adams, 1987; Choudhury, 1993; Eade et al., 2006). On the one hand, poor working conditions onboard and wage discrimination forced some of them to jump ship and look for a job in the colonial mother country; while
many others, on the other hand, were made redundant by the captain before the voyage back, leaving them stranded in British port cities (Ahuja, 2006). These men worked in the port and industrial cities across Britain but eventually concentrated and settled in East London. According to the British 2011 census there are nearly half a million people of Bangladeshi heritage, consisting of multiple generations, living in the UK, more than half of them in London. British Bangladeshis are considered to be one of the most transnationally active communities (Gardner, 1995), particularly known for their strong ties with Bangladesh. Most British-Bangladeshi migrant families have relatives, friends, properties and investment there. Transnational ties are maintained by both migrants and their non-migrant relatives and friends through bilateral visits between the two countries (Miah, 2019; Miah & King, 2018, 2021). Disruption of mobilities between London and Bangladesh, compared to intra-European examples of disruption, is inherently complex due to the long distance involved and because of the unavailability of any dependable alternate means of transport in the absence of long-haul flights. This is strengthened further by the relative lack of ‘network capital’ (Urry, 2007) that could help in mitigating their social and financial stress. Examining the disruption of VFR mobilities in a British-Bangladeshi context can contribute to our understanding of mobilities and strandedness in a spatial and temporal context where there is a relative lack of physical proximity, of freedom of movement and of resources.

7.5 Method

The ways in which social scientists collect data have also been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the new socially distant reality, many methods of ethnographic fieldwork including face-to-face interaction, participant observation and interviews have not been possible in many cases. Many researchers switched their ethnography to online with regular exchanges on social media apps such WhatsApp and online interviews via Skype and Zoom (De Barros et al., 2020); however, this has not happened without challenges (Dacontoa et al., 2020). Creating the right environment and building a trustworthy relationship with participants are needed even during those online interactions and conversations. Technological expertise and accuracy of digital data are also essential for credible analysis.

I have similarly switched to online methods to gather empirical data for this study. For this chapter, I interviewed 15 men and women of different generations who themselves, or members of their family, have planned and/or visited during the pandemic. The interviews were carried out in 2021. Building a trustworthy relationship with the interviewees was fairly simple in my case. All the participants took part in my doctoral study previously that was conducted between 2017 and 2019 (Miah, 2019). This chapter is a follow-up study in the context of the pandemic, conducted through re-interviewing already-known participants. Whilst the participant number was greater in my previous study of VFR mobilities in a broader context, a subsample, 15 to be precise, was selected for this follow-up study. The key
selection criterion was their willingness to share their experiences of (im)mobility during the pandemic. Interviews were conducted in London both in-person as well as via Zoom and WhatsApp. These were recorded, transcribed and translated by me with oral consent at the beginning of each interview. Analysis is done thematically through the lens of disrupted mobilities. In the discussions and analyses that follow, pseudonyms are given to preserve the privacy and anonymity of the participants.

7.6  Contexts of Visits and Disruptions

In times of a viral pandemic like Covid-19, bodily movement, intimacy and proximity are considered dangerous and mobilities are often ‘stigmatised’ (Adey et al., 2021, 3), forcing people to seek and adopt alternative means of communication and socialisation. Many individuals and families in the UK during the lockdown moved online and utilised video-calling platforms and social media apps to maintain intimate friendship and family relationships. This is more challenging where such relationships transcend national boundaries and time zones and where there is a lack of technological know-how and a dearth of access to smart devices that can enable such contacts online (Walsh, 2021, 158). Visiting friends and relatives in a faraway country reveals these complexities. Most of the British Bangladeshis originated from Sylhet, the north-eastern peripheral countryside region of Bangladesh where there is a relative lack of smart infrastructure and devices to facilitate a smooth transition to online social reality. Physical travel is the only credible way to maintain ties with relatives and friends in Sylhet. Besides, some duties, such as providing care for elderly parents, cannot be substituted by online contacts. Take Washim, a first-generation British Bangladeshi in his early 40s, as an example:

I visit Bangladesh on a regular basis because my mum is there. She is 85 now, pretty old. This is the main reason for my visit. My father died 12 years ago. Last time, I went on the 6th of March 2020. There was no travel restriction at the time in Bangladesh and London. The first lockdown in the UK was announced two weeks after my departure.

For Washim, it is a regular duty for him to visit his elderly and widowed mother. Attending to her care needs is not something that can be delivered online. Instantaneous and real-time online communication cannot replace co-present care. Without physical visits such care duties are put ‘on hold’ (Brandhorst et al., 2020). Similar instances can also be seen in recent studies of Indian migrants in the US and their roles as ‘in-absentia carers’ for their elderly parents in India (Kalavar et al., 2020). It is argued that care-giving practices without being physically present can add more burden and stress for the migrant offspring. Hence, the visits are persuaded to take place, as in the case of Washim, even in the face of uncertainties around transnational mobility. Predicting the shifting trajectory of a viral pandemic and associated disruptions is also challenging for people. Washim travelled to Bangladesh in the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic and the announcement of the national lockdown and border closure. Rifat, another British Bangladeshi, in his late
30s, who visits his relatives and friends in Bangladesh once every year, could also not cope with the lockdowns following this travel. In his words:

I go to see my parents and relatives once every year. I have always done that. Last time around, I went there on the 1st of March [2020]. I went there for six weeks but I was stuck for six months and came back in September [2020].

Many other British Bangladeshis like Washim and Rifat travelled to Bangladesh and were not able to return as they planned. On the eve of the pandemic and with uncertainty around, they had to take a tough decision to travel. For them, at that time, the necessity to travel physically to visit parents, relatives and friends outweighed the uncertainty of an extreme global event. There are also many others who would have done the same thing but were forced to abandon their plans at the last moment. Kabir, a first-generation British Bangladeshi in his late 60s, had to abandon his plan to visit because of the flight ban. In his words:

I was supposed to visit Bangladesh last April [2020]. I booked that flight back in March, in the first week of March. In early March, there was no lockdown. There were news circulating about the virus in China, but things were still normal in the UK and Bangladesh. Then, things started to become very different very quickly and my flights, all flights were cancelled by April. I wanted to go. This was my routine. Over the last seven years, I visited Bangladesh at least once a year, sometime twice. So, this visit was due for me. However, it did not happen because of this terrible pandemic. I am still planning to go early next year if the situation allows me. I don’t know yet.

Kabir and other British Bangladeshis of his age, gender and generation have lived in the UK for decades and actively kept their ties with the home country through frequent back and forth visits. Their life is defined and characterised by their transnational practices and the ways in which they live life both here and there. In addition to relatives and friends, many of them have properties and business investments in Bangladesh that they need to attend to in person. Kabir continues to explain why it is necessary for him to visit physically even in times of a pandemic:

I own a flat in Sylhet city. My tenants left a while ago. I don’t have a new tenant yet. I could have resolved it if I could go there physically. You know, it is not good for a house without people. It becomes bad over time and needs maintenance. It is better if you have people living there. So, the flat is now locked and the keys with someone else. My other house in the village is also locked up for a long time. I needed to go there to get some maintenance work done. Besides, my elder daughter got married two years ago. She wanted to visit Bangladesh and take my son-in-law there for holiday. He is very interested to go. However, I need to go there first to complete the maintenance and bring the house to order before they can go on a visit and stay there. This now has to wait till these pandemic restrictions are gone.

It is common practice among transnational migrants to have properties and other material interests in their home country. These properties are important for many reasons including as accommodation during migrants’ home visits (see Miah, 2021). Such properties need to be periodically attended to and serviced to keep them in good order, particularly if they are rented out, as in the case of Kabir. The pandemic affected this regular transnational practice by restricting transnational mobilities. Apart from these maintenance and income-related issues, another aspect
of Kabir’s account above highlights the cultural process of the visit as a ‘rite of passage’ (Baldassar, 2001). Houses in the home country provide accommodation and are always at the centre of planning upcoming trips to Bangladesh. They are also built and kept in good order to encourage second-generation British-born children of Bangladeshi heritage to visit their ancestral country. These visits (re)introduce them to and (re)affirm the second generation’s hybrid cultural identities. Trips to the homeland function for them as a rite of passage and the first generation plays the key mediating role. The pandemic disrupted these important cultural practices and processes for many transnational British-Bangladeshi families, as well as affecting other parts of their social and economic life that are subjects of further analysis in the next section.

7.7 Experiences of Visits During the Pandemic

The British Bangladeshis who had to travel to Bangladesh on the eve of the pandemic were then mostly involuntarily stranded in their ancestral home country. Relatively economically underprivileged members of the British-Bangladeshi community in the UK carefully plan their visits in accordance with their personal financial capacities well in advance unless there is an emergency in the family. It is a carefully choreographed and labour-intensive act of mobility (Miah, 2019; Miah & King, 2021). Any disruption to their rhythm of movement has unwelcome consequences as this can expose their financial weakness and affect their status and dignity in the eyes of their family and community. Imposition of lockdown by the government and subsequent immobility ‘reinforces already prevalent inequality regimes based on class, gender and migration relations’ (Dobusch & Kreissl, 2020, 711). The experience of visiting British Bangladeshis of being stranded for a much longer period of time than their expectation throws their personal finances into chaos. Washim, whom I have quoted earlier, shares his experience of this:

My plan was to stay there for four weeks but I ended up staying for five months. I was worried for my job as I took four weeks holidays. I had to report every two weeks to my employer regarding my situation. I did not lose my job, but I did not get paid after the fourth week either. I attempted multiple times to come back earlier. I booked flights on two occasions, but both were cancelled at the last moment. Financially, I am devastated. I had zero income but still had to pay six months’ rent as soon as I arrived back [in London]. I had to self-isolate for two weeks here. Besides, I spent a thousand pounds or so every month while I was there [Bangladesh]. Just consider these amounts, forget everything else. Luckily, I had some savings in my account, years of hard-earned savings, towards buying our first house. It’s all gone now. This is painful. […] It was hard for me to digest the financial shock of it. Besides, it was not a pleasant time either. There was a degree of panic everywhere.

Being stranded in Bangladesh meant financial ruin, the anxiety of losing his job and the postponement of his dream of buying their own house. The level of anxiety and complexity of strandedness was amplified by the obvious geographical distance between Bangladesh and the UK. Cancellation of flights meant no alternative way
to return to their place of work and residence. In the context of air travel disruption from the volcanic ash cloud, there were examples of people having the ability to self-organise and grouping together using their social network and resources to arrange alternative means of travel such as journeying from Norway to Britain in a hired coach (Barton, 2011). The same can hardly be imagined in the British-Bangladeshi context. For Rifat, the financial situation become even worse than for Washim. In his own words:

I was furloughed by my employer because the business was closed. However, this was not enough for me. I had regular expenses including all credit cards, loan payments, and utility bills were going out of my account. I borrowed money in Bangladesh whilst my wife borrowed money from her relatives in London. We were getting child tax credits etc. but these were not enough. I am still not getting full salary; they have not opened yet. I feel ashamed to share this, but you can guess my struggle.

Unlike Washim, Rifat did not have savings to help him cope with his financial struggle. He is living partly on credit. This has also brought a feeling of being ashamed and not being able to provide for his wife and children, something that is very much expected in his culture and religious belief. The moral obligation of migrant men to discharge care and fulfil financial needs for families both here and there has been challenged in Rifat’s case. Apart from the economic consequences of immobility, many have experienced emotional hardships for not being able to attend sacred family rituals and other happenings. This is reflected in the account of Nahar, a first-generation British-Bangladeshi woman in her late 30s:

It was in 2017 when I visited Bangladesh last time. It was quite a while ago. We were planning to go again. My parents are quite old. And my father passed away in the middle of the pandemic, and I could not go. I could not see him for one last time. I have since not been able to go. There are always restrictions, sometimes they announce lockdown here and sometimes there in Bangladesh. There has not been a time that would allow me to visit my mum and siblings there. Sometimes, I feel like I have failed as a daughter. I could not even do the grieving with my family. I could not be present in any of the rituals. They pushed back the dates of some events a couple of times in the hope that things will get back to normal. But it never did. In fact, we still don’t know when this pandemic will be over.

Nahar’s recollections and emotional grief resonate with other examples of disrupted mobilities. Ash-cloud disruptions in aeromobility in Europe and beyond also revealed such experiences of emotional trouble (Jensen, 2011), where intimate personal and familial relationships were ‘stretched and strained’ (Adey & Anderson, 2011) in the absence of co-present sociality. Further evidence of such strains on relationships amongst the British Bangladeshis during the pandemic can be seen. Additionally, this is revealing of gendered and generational differences. In the account below, Rifat describes his complex experience of familyhood whilst he was stranded far away:

I have two kids. My wife and kids were here in London. I could not meet them for six months. We were speaking over WhatsApp regularly. But I have never been away from them for such a long time. My elder daughter thought I will never come back to them. It’s not a good feeling, it’s like when parents get divorced and kids are separated. My kids thought I did not want to live in London anymore and went back to Bangladesh for good.
Rifat’s experience of mobilities and absence also indicates a gendered pattern of mobility amongst diasporic British Bangladeshis. Transnational visits are undertaken regularly by men; visits *en famille* happen only occasionally, generally coinciding with school holidays in the UK. There is also a generational difference where the first generation have a stronger tie with Bangladesh than their children and grandchildren. These generational and gendered dimensions of mobility and immobility can reveal more complex experiences when the whole family is stranded. This also indicates how intergenerational relationships and obligations can be affected when mobilities are interrupted. In the quotations below, a married British-Bangladeshi couple with their daughter explain their experiences of visits and strandedness in their home country during the pandemic:

*Rakib (the husband):* We went there [Bangladesh] in the last week of February [2020] with our daughter, she is four years old, but we were stuck there for almost seven months. Things were going fine at the beginning. We went to our grandparents’ house in the village. We went out to restaurants and other places. However, from March the situation went out of control. We were staying home all the time. It became really boring. Sometimes, I spent all night watching web series on my mobile. I lost count of how many web series I watched over those few months. There was nothing much you can do.

[...]

*Hasna (the wife):* I don’t like watching drama series on my mobile like he does. Honestly, I had a very good time there. I slept well. My parents took care of our daughter most of the time. They brought balloons and cakes and so many other things to keep her happy. They were very happy to have us for a long time. The most positive thing was that my daughter can now speak Bengali fluently. It would never have happened if we were not there for seven months. She did not have any alternative but to learn the language if she were to speak to our parents and relatives.

Rakib and Hasna’s account above (re)illustrates gender relations and experiences in the patrilineal Bangladeshi society (see Gardner, 1995), where the male members of society enjoy relative freedom in public life outside home, whereas the female members’ sphere of influence is restricted to the home environment. In the case of Rakib, he enjoyed travelling around and eating out in restaurants, but felt bored at home and moved online to mitigate his boredom. By contrast, his wife, like other Bangladeshi women, felt more comfortable at home and enjoyed spending family-centred time within the household where childcare responsibilities were shared, allowing her enough time to sleep and rest. This is something she can barely access whilst in London on her own. There is also a generational element to note here. Their daughter’s rite of passage has become more successful. This is arguably a blessing in disguise. A long stay with family in Bangladesh meant there was no other option for the 4-year-old daughter but to learn and speak Bengali with her cousins, uncles, and grandparents. Her fluency in Bengali also allowed her to learn other customs and cultural traditions easily, which in turn informs her developing hybrid cultural identity of being both British and Bangladeshi.
# 7.8 Conclusion

My discussion and analysis in this chapter highlights the nuances and drawbacks of transnational visiting mobilities under an environment where physical mobilities are suddenly disrupted. As a caveat, the chapter draws from the accounts of a relatively limited number of research participants; therefore, scientific robustness of the claims and generalisations might differ from other studies with large research samples. Drawing from the British Bangladeshis’ experiences, there are three key areas where this chapter contributes further nuances to our understanding of visiting mobilities as well as implications of disruptions to migrant mobilities.

Firstly, VFR mobilities take place even in the face of a perilous global pandemic like Covid-19. For many British Bangladeshis, the necessity of physical visits outweighed the unpredictable financial and health risks. So, visits still took place, albeit to a much-reduced extent. This also reaffirms the claim that co-present sociality can hardly be replaced with digitally transmitted social interactions. This is particularly the case for transnational migrant families and diasporic communities where the distances are long. Fulfilling cultural obligations, providing care and attending family rituals require physical co-presence. In the absence of this physical proximity, far-flung social relationships are stretched, strained and stained with feelings of grief and shame.

This, however, is not without other consequences. Most visitors experienced financial difficulties, in some cases devastation, as a result of the disruption caused by the pandemic. Unplanned and involuntary stays for a much longer period, often extended by many months, meant more spending from either hard-earned savings or credit cards. This is also coupled with anxieties around jobs and income. Whilst eroded savings meant the postponement of home-buying, keeping up with credit card payments and other bills meant a struggle to uphold dignity and manhood in the family and society. The pandemic and associated measures that halted or severely reduced non-local human mobility reinforce existing inequalities that migrant groups face in the host societies.

Finally, the experiences of mobilities and immobilities during the Covid pandemic also revealed and reaffirmed complex gender relations and generational processes. Being stranded in the home country was experienced differently. While men felt tired of staying at home, women considered lengthy time spent in the family to be pleasant, relaxing and worthwhile. Staying at home allowed women to temporarily escape intensive household duties such as cooking and childcare as these were happily taken over by siblings, cousins and grandparents in Bangladesh. An extended stay also provides the opportunity for the second generation to learn better their parents’ language, customs and cultural heritage.
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