Faithful Stories:

Exploring Shrine Veneration in Bangladesh in A New Light

*An Anthropological Study*

By

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# Abstract

This research study looks into shrines and shrine veneration in Bangladesh in its current context. Shrine veneration as a social practice within South Asia and elsewhere has been controversial within the religious revivalist discourse for quite some time. The rising religious reforms under revivalism and the impacts of globalization have had lasting effects on the perception and rituals of shrine veneration in Bangladesh today.

Moving beyond the political and religious framework and focusing on the ordinary individuals, especially women, who continue to venerate shrines, I study the intimate relationship between women and their piety, belief in Sufi saints, and the act of making sacred vows within shrine Sufi shrines' spaces from a post-piety-turn and everyday Islam framework in the Anthropology of Islam. I show that shrine spaces are not only places to practice spiritual attainment but also places of strength that foster resistance against the inherent patriarchal and structural inequality, offer refuge and healing, allow community engagements, and acquire religious knowledge that does not lead them astray from their religion but strengthens it.

Shrine veneration plays a crucial role in upholding a dying practice and giving space where women continue to overcome their struggles in an agentive way, contributing to the uniform community morale in a rapidly reforming context. Women portrayed here bring forth contested piety. They focus on the self and self-transformation to which shrine veneration significantly contributes. Some participants doubt their continuation of shrine veneration. In contrast, some participants transform or change their way of veneration due to evolving social discourse and the rising social stigma surrounding it. Therefore, moments

of contestation within their pious selves come and go.  Though a community-heavy ritual,

shrine veneration has become a private and individual journey of piety and self-discipline.

# Preface

This thesis is an original work by Nazia Binte Mahmud. The research study for this thesis received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: "Faithful Stories: Delineating Mazar Culture in Bangladesh" ID No. Pro00115464, March 30, 2022.

# Acknowledgments

Unconditional love, and for always encouraging me to be my best. I want to thank my sister, Nafisa, for telling me like it is and my brother, Kaif, for his companionship.

This thesis journey was expectedly strenuous but has been a crucial and formative part of my academic and personal growth. An unhealthy amount of chocolate milk, boiled broccoli, and a newfound obsession with K-dramas and Anime have pushed me through all the all-nighters I have had burned through. I am glad it has ended, but I am excited (and a little nervous) for all opportunities that may come my way because of it.

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# Glossary

Mazar/dargah/dargah sharif- Shrine

Shinni- Blessed food prepared in shrines

Toubarak- Blessed sweets distributed by shrines

Langor khana- Kitchen area in shrines

Iman- Faith

Dawat- Invitation

Milad- A gathering during auspicious or special occasions where Muslim clergy leads prayer followed by dua for the event. Food is served afterward.

Waz Mahfils- Religious parties lead religious sermons and discussions in a public gathering. Men typically attend it.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## A Typical Day at High Court Mazar

If you follow the carefully gestured instructions from local vendors situated ever so often on the sidewalks of the Curzon Hall circle in Dhaka University, you will eventually reach the busy Dhaka Press Club crossroads. Crossing the roads through the maze of every imaginable size of non-stopping vehicle and walking up to the sidewalk, you will find the dominating white gate leading to the High Court Mosque walkway. The mosque is attached to the grounds of the Bangladesh Supreme Court but separated by a wrought-iron fence that continues to the back exit.

The front of the gate is constantly populated with haphazard lines of parked rickshaw pullers, especially from afternoon till dusk. Some pullers gather around the small tea stations operated by one individual, some are fast asleep on passenger seats, and some stand lazily, smoking. Many varieties of vendors can be found spread out here and there. Cotton candy sellers walk with their long metal rods from one destination to another, skimming through traffic lines of cars to open areas. The metal rod poked with holes through which plastic-covered cotton candies are hooked, creating a flower-like structure, rests on their shoulder. Numerous vendors sell cigarettes and *paan* (betel leaves wrapped around betel nuts, slaked lime, and other condiments). Peanut vendors constantly frying peanuts in the sand are often surrounded by pedestrians patiently waiting for their peanuts. You will see umbrella-shaded ice cream carts during certain times of the day, especially just before and after school. Many rickshaw pullers call potential passengers who come out of the gate. Visitors to the mosque

and shrines can be seen, followed by mendicants surrounding the area. Beyond the gate, the shrine grounds have one or two vendors mainly selling ritual materials for visitors. These range from wishing threads and padlocks to incense, rose water, religious skull caps, prayer beads, and sometimes locally printed Arabic and Bangla-translated holy books.

When I was young, the setting was quite different. I remember the place to be much more crowded, with more vendors than one finds now. The vendors of my memories are even more colorful. The flower vendors sit in one line, selling all kinds of garlands of flowers. Mostly, the flower vendors would be accompanied by their children. Visitors would buy the flowers and leave them on the mantle of the shrine. Now, things are much more strictly managed. Aside from one or two vendors inside the area, the place inside the gate is usually quiet.

It was a sunny morning, casting shadows of tree leaves over the concrete that stopped and mixed in with the shade of the mosque situated central to the area. The mosque's left-hand side corner is the open area dominated by a huge banyan tree. Other giant old trees shade the whole available space. The concrete boundary of the tree serves as a sitting spot for many wanderers who populate the area. Their clothing ranges from mismatched tatters to colorful *fotuas* and *panjabis*.[1] Some have matted hair; some tie a bun on top, while others leave it down. They adorn themselves with numerous jewels and beads, their eyes either closed or keenly following each person who enters through the gate. If a person holds their attention, they walk up to the person and ask for money. Sometimes, they offer to tell you your fortune, but often, even locals find their coded language mixed with riddles challenging

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[1] Fotua are clothing articles that are slightly longer than a t-shirt and are mostly made with cotton. Panjabi and paijama are clothing articles mostly worn by men. Many would wear it, especially during prayers.

to understand. They mostly wait for meal times. Some may be possessed by some otherworldly presence, but there is no way to tell.

Meals come from the kitchen, which overlooks this backyard concrete space. In local terms, shrine kitchens are called *langor khana*. During meal times, lunch, and dinner, plastic plates with food are distributed to the people in the courtyard and taken inside the mosque. In busy times, especially during Friday *jamaat*,[2] throngs of people crowd this space, sitting in a line on the side of the road. They ask for alms and wait for the special Friday meals. On Fridays, mosques are especially busy because of the *jamaat*, and people tend to give more alms during those times. In shrines, there are much larger gatherings than at mosques because of the food based on the location.

Attached to another side of the mosque is another backyard. This backyard overlooks the small room of the mosque that serves as the women's quarters and prayer room for the women visitors. A brick path through a small gateway leads to the tin-canopy entrance. Here, two or three women can be seen sitting. One works as a security guard, and the other as a shoe collector for safekeeping. A small fee is given for keeping the shoes. Many more shoes are strewn all over the entrance as the small wooden shelf cannot house all of them. Immediately to the left is a space where the woman Khadim,[3] or custodian, is usually seen napping. The cool tiled floor and the morning-to-noon heat make for a relaxing downtime. This time is generally quiet, with only a few visitors sitting across the open space. On this particular day, the Khadim was not sleeping but sitting upright and talking to a young woman

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[2] Weekly Friday Congregational prayer
[3] Khadim's are custodians for shrines. The woman Khadim here is under the male Khadim.

in a red salwar kameez.[4] They spoke softly and relaxedly with a box of paan in the middle. The space behind them has a closed cupboard and multiple small, plastic shopping bags filled with various items like boxes of food, extra clothing, and other necessary items for the women workers. Across from the entrance, against the wall, are cupboards filled with cloth-wrapped Quran and translated books translated into Bangla, including *Ampara* and *Qaida.*[5] Beside the shelves is another closed shelf. This particular shelf's top surface provides a sleeping area for a mother cat and her three kittens. Above this family is the ancient switchboard for the huge ceiling fans hanging from above. The switches turned muddy yellow over the ages. The mother cat chose these boards because they provided some heat and were somewhat removed from everything else, giving privacy.

The main center of the room is usually a busy area. The front wall is decorated with three gold plaques with Arabic lettering. Two plaques are bordered with wooden frames and hung at the top, while the other hangs lower and more to the left side of the front wall. Hanging below these plaques is a new, large, colorful poster of a grander mosque with a concrete road and cars. The yellow Bangla lettering on the poster reads, "Renovation work on the mosque is ongoing; donate with an open heart," below which bank information is provided. Slightly above the poster and below the plaques is a long loudspeaker through which the call to prayer (*Azan or Adhan)* and the imam's sermons are blasted. Another two picture frames hang a few inches away, each with a different Arabic quote. Below one picture is a long, rectangular timetable depicting the five prayer times in analog style, and under another picture, a small sign is plastered. The sign has turned a bit yellow but is still

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[4] Clothing usually worn by women in South Asia consists of a long dress (kameez), pants (salwar), and long cloth used to cover the chest area. Some use it to cover their head, some just let it hang from the side.

[5] Books used to teach Arabic letters and sentences before starting the Quran.

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sufficiently legible. It reads, "Prostrating in front of the shrine is not allowed," and the smaller second line reads, "Do not venerate the shrine during daily prayers." All these things hang close to one another, crowding the fading pale bluish wall rather than giving it a decorated aesthetic.

At this point, it is already noon. Aside from the *Khadim* and her companion, no one else seems to be talking. Two individuals are fast asleep on one side against the walled-in shelves next to the enormous window that makes the saint's tomb room visible to the women venerators. The window is grilled with golden-colored bars. On some of the bars, cloth strings of red, orange, and white are tightly tied, while the ends of the bars are crowded with locked padlocks. Directly above this window, the name of the saint in Arabic and Bangla is written.

The window is tiled in with shades of chrome gray, and the name is styled with black tiles. From the opposite side of the room, big windows overlook the roofed open space and the open backyard. The open space today is empty, with only a few pigeons walking around searching for food. A woman in a black burqa sits with her chin resting on her knees underneath one of the windows. An older woman in a worn-out sharee (sari) sits at the front end of the room. This space is beyond the front wall, past the saint's window, making a small front dead end. This space's wall has one big painting of a mountain. The woman is rhythmically rocking and humming while reciting the Quran, one of the sounds that fills the room besides a few whispers and an occasional cough. A small group of middle-aged women sits against one of the pillars closer to the saint's window. One is on her phone, another is getting ready for prayer, and the other rests her back on the pillar with her eyes closed.

Sometime later, the midday (Zuhr) *azan* is heard, and the almost empty space gradually fills. The environment gets noisier as more and more women come through the door. Different conversations fly around. A woman with two children hurries to fit one of the quickly forming *jamaat* lines while her children run around the space behind. Eventually, one of them starts chasing a kitten. While the imam leads the prayer, the environment gets noisier than before with children's squeals, the running, shuffling movements, and the Imam's voice reciting the Qur'anic verses (*surahs).* Two women, not taking part in the prayer, start talking excitedly, giving the impression they've known each other from before. More women shuffle in and walk to the washroom in ones and twos for *wudu* (ablution). While most women have finished praying, the latecomers start praying, forming one small *jamaat* line at the front.

The time between Zuhr and Asr[6] is quite happening. The woman and her two children gather around one of the pillars, and she talks on the phone with knitted brows. From what can be heard, she tells her husband to hurry and pick them up. A few steps behind her, two women are sprawled on the floor, fast asleep with their faces covered. The shrine authorities do not employ them, but they help in some of the chores now and then in exchange for a few hours of shelter and food. They also ask visitors for alms whenever they want. They are different from the wanderers, though. The wanderers are often bejeweled with many different beads and rings, their hair matted and tangled. These tangles are considered holy and not to be cut off or washed. Some are well known for ritual purification from djinns and

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[6] Evening prayer.

other supernatural ailments. At this moment, there aren't women wanderers, and only male wanderers sitting outside under the shade of the banyan tree.

A group of women who are already done with their prayer and are sitting close to one another starts a conversation, and others join silently, chiming in now and then. One is talking about her recent dealings with hospital management, where her husband was admitted. The woman described how the hospital was just a money-making business and how much mistreatment was happening. Another shared her own experiences. The listeners shake their heads, sighing and exclaiming in disbelief. A few moments later, someone yells that food is being served. A lot of scurrying ensued. The women sleeping awaken quickly, fix their clothing, and head out. The woman with her children is long gone by now. A few of the women from the group get up, taking their bags with them.

As I observe the sudden movements, a plate of food is thrust upon me. I look up and see Hanifa, one of the workers. She gestures to take it and, before I can say anything, puts down the plate and rushes away, probably back to the kitchen. It is *khichuri* today, yellow rice mixed with boiled potatoes, green chilies, and nuts. Many returned carrying food with them, sitting down, and eating. The woman sitting at the front quietly reciting the Quran finally looks around and gestures to one of the people who is carrying an extra plate to give it to her. She seems to be in her sixties and speaks in a mixture of Urdu and Bangla. Many people from the old town of Dhaka speak like that. A new set of women came through the door, and their body language showed they were family. They were young, between their mid-twenties and early thirties. They walked around for a bit and chose a front corner. They placed their things and fixed their clothes, taking their *orna* and covering their head. One after the other, they go up to the window, stand silently, walk over to the window glass, rub

their hands, and bring them to their lips and chest. This gesture is done three times. After some time, another woman with a thick silver anklet grabs the bars and bows, rests her head on the titled panel for a long time before lifting her head and kissing the bar.

The time between Asr and Maghrib (sunset prayer) is the most happening. Many women from different walks of life have gathered here for various reasons but with similar intentions. They randomly go up to the window and venerate the saint. There was no particular order; some immediately venerate on entering before sitting down, and some do it before leaving. Some do not venerate at all. During prayer times, a black curtain from inside the saint's room is drawn and opened again after the prayer. During Maghrib, blessed sweets, called *tobarak*, were passed around. That day, it was a *jilapi*[7]. The woman speaking Urdu left, and a Hindu woman took her space. She dragged a plastic chair, sat down, and took out a long prayer bead. She wrapped them loosely around her hand, pressed her palms together, and closed her eyes in meditation. Right beside her, a woman sat her toddler down and gave her some snacks; she then stood up and started praying while her daughter played with her food. A few spaces behind, a different set of women sat in a circle drinking tea, which they sent one of the errand women to bring with the *jilapi*. These women talk and burst out in laughter now and then. Way at the back beside the entrance, the Khadim sat munching on puffed rice while Salma, the security guard, braided her oiled hair and talked to the women workers around her. Five women of varying ages sit separately, silently crying in supplication (*munajat*). One of them shakes uncontrollably. Unable to hold it in any longer, she lets out an audible shriek, prompting the Khadim and the workers to look lazily in her direction, after

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[7] A fried sweet soaked in sugar syrup.

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which they return to their activities, this time with a sigh. This crying young woman got up, walked up to the window, and brought her hands in munajat again. Her shoulders were shaking, and her head was bowed. After veneration, she rubbed her face with her *orna*[8], opened her purse, slipped some money on one of the donation boxes, and quickly walked away.

The decrepit baby blue walls look more forlorn during nighttime when the harsh fluorescent lights hit them. As Maghrib lazily reaches Esha (night prayer), only five people are left besides the workers: three crying women and two new mendicants. When the clock nears 9:30 pm, one of the woman workers swiping the floor calls out one last time that the shrine will be closed soon and for everyone to leave. The Khadim had already packed her bags and left.

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[8] *Orna* is a material of cloth that is paired in a 3-piece Salwar Kameez: a long tunic type dress that can be designed in many different ways, and a pant that often matches the kameez or is fashionably contrasted and the pair is made complete with *orna*, in India, it is known as *dupatta*.

Figure 1. 1. Threads and locks placed by visitors while making vows

## The Issue, the Approach, and the Research

This introductory vignette describes a typical weekday, from morning to evening, in one of Dhaka's shrines at the heart of the bustling city. The signs on the walls vocalize the gradual change occurring in shrines. One of the first things one notices when walking into the Mazar (shrine of a religious saint) is that it is a home for the vulnerable, for the homeless,

and those seeking food, as well as a space for prayers, a place for the well-off to come and pray, cry, and donate. It is a place that has witnessed countless yearnings, intentions, and tears of happiness. Shrines are a place where myriad visitors' saw their *manat* (vows) coming true, after which they expressed a *niyat* (intention, in this case, a promise) to fulfill some action in return, such as fasting a specific number of days or making a donation (known as Hadiya) to the poor such as chickens, goats, cows, etc. in return for their prayers being answered. One thing that remained the same was the various types of women from different social classes at their most vulnerable times, who prayed with such sincerity that the buzzing world around them seemed to stand still.

This research started with one single curiosity I had growing up whenever I accompanied my mother and her sisters to visit Mazars. During childhood, all the mazars looked the same to me. I never understood why visitors would put money in the donation boxes when it was apparent to me, at the solid age of 10, that it would not do anything. However, even as I had these thoughts every so often when going to shrines, whether, during family vacations or accompanying family with a particular intention, I was never really convinced of my skepticism. It still felt to me that it was much more than just praying and giving money. Although the visible exchange seemed somewhat transactional, I still felt an inexplicable yearning, especially as I grew older, even though I was unfamiliar with the concept of barkat (Arabic *baraka*), or divine blessing.

As I was growing up, the Mazars held with respect at one point seemed to have pushed back as more people slowly started to distance themselves from it. That was confusing because I was under the impression that Mazars were central to Islam. The gradual change was noticeable enough, especially during my undergraduate years. As faith grew visible in

public, so did people's perceptions of Mazar veneration. What do I mean by faith being more visible? I mean starting from seeing a change in my high school peers after one summer to my university and on the streets when many seemed to have begun to wear hijabs, niqabs, and burqas[9]. More so than during my mother's time in the 80s. More and more Persian words such as "namaz" ("prayer") were replaced with Arabic equivalents like "salat." Even Bengali dessert items were changed to Middle Eastern ones in *dawats*. More Kunafa and Baklava were seen than Chomchoms or Chana mishtis.

Mazar veneration has been downgraded to something not particularly Islamic. This widespread sense has become the norm due to the Islamic reform movement, which describes shrine veneration as a form of *bid'ah (religious innovation)* and *shirk (idolatry)*. However, the slow change in the perception of mazar veneration by many in the country did not necessarily stop many people from continuing to venerate in shrines. Why do people, especially women, rush to mazars despite the potential backlash and belittlement they might face? Why would they commit to something consistently labeled as something outside of Islam?

As I explored my participants' opinions and thoughts on shrines and shrine veneration, I realized that the relationship between having faith and following religious doctrines under the institutionalized religion is complex. This relationship can be harmonious, blurred, and also different. They become more distinct in situations of threat, human anguish, fear, and perilous times when faith overcomes the institutional religion. Women experience and negotiate their participation in these practices based on the

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[9] Various forms of veiling.

potential paradoxes, contradictions, and conflicts they face. In exploring how women venerators practice their faith and devotion to get through human anguish, fear, and perilous times in the face of opposition from reformist movements, it became clear that it is more complex than this text makes it out to be. Nor were these changes and developments unidirectional. The changes similar to human emotion were concurrent, moving back and forth and flowing depending on where it was happening and under what circumstances.

　　To understand what is happening to those individuals who continue to hold on to their practices amid change, I have looked into five shrines spread over three districts of Bangladesh. In this thesis, by looking into shrine practices in general and shrine veneration by women visitors and devotees in particular, I argue that when it comes to individual involvement of faith, the political, institutional, and global factors that shape religion are not determinative. During anguish, perils, and fear, faith transcends these boundaries, creating new interpretations and transforming new ways to look at everyday Islam and Islam in practice. My concern is not just to restate that there are different ways of practicing Islam and that Islam practiced in daily life depends on the country's politics, community, social relations, and everyday lives. Instead, I take these factors while adding that it is now essential to look at the specific conditions operating within these factors that *create* a set of *restrictive choices* left for the individuals, in this case, women, to carry out and cope with their conditions the best way they see fit. Thus, it is neither a free choice nor a forced choice but another struggle to handle fear through the strength of piety and trust in their everyday lives. In this struggle, shrine veneration plays a crucial role in upholding waning practices that contribute to the operation of community life.

In the end, no matter which way we look at it, during times of helplessness and anguish, what is most important to shrine venerators is finding a way of keeping it together, and during those moments, the things one might necessarily oppose or look down on become their biggest blessing. Mazars and the activities inside them are dynamic and personal. Though religion is a communal engagement and the shrine operates mainly through an interconnected community, webs of individual wants and anguish are intermingled.

## Breakdown of the Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the research, explains its methodology, and situates it within the broader theoretical framework. Chapter 2 provides a contextual history that shows that shrine veneration has been present in Bengal long before Islam. Therefore, the Islam that developed in Bengal has not been lesser but rather a Bengali Islam with a distinct Bengali Muslim identity. Chapter 3 goes back to the first question of why women tend to venerate at shrines, addressing broadly the themes discussed in the above sections to bring together and engage with the question of why shrine veneration is a necessary social practice in the lives of many. Through the stories of five women, we will see how shrine veneration brings structure to these women and how, in some way, they can control their situation. This is discussed in line with the theories within and responding to the "piety turn" discourse. This opens up the discussion to how veneration has been moving forward on its own, creating its own modern identity and giving new definitions of what is modern within what for years was called "popular Islam." The lasting effects of modernity have pushed the spaces of shrines to change their ways, and we will see where the situation is now and think about where it is going. Chapter 4 looks into the multifaceted conceptualization of the public space.

In those spaces, a new conversation occurs between worshippers, their selves, saints, and God. Depending on the shrine, women exercise their freedom, have leadership roles, and interact with other women, forming another interpretation of the public sphere away from masculine centrality, where women dominate in their way. Chapter 5 provides concluding remarks that summarize the sub-themes discussed in the above chapters and question how else we can look at shrine veneration as part of Islam within the current context.

## Revivalism and Reformism: A brief overview.

Religious revivalism (*tajdid*) in Islam and other religions can describe a sudden increase or a need to increase religious consciousness, revival, or resuscitation of religious activities in a community and society's private and public spheres. On the other hand, Reform (iṣlāḥ) can be considered a process of restoration or repairment and improvement (Moosa & Tareen 2015). During periods of renewal within a society, the general notion is to restore or repair the moral order in accordance with religion. In the case of Muslim societies, it is in accordance with the *Sunna[10]* of the Prophet. Both revival and reform have occurred in Muslim societies during periods of advancement or reformulation of social, moral order, and political ideology throughout history (Moosa & Tareen 2015). Reform, whether religious or not, keeps occurring within a society, especially today, where growth and development in all sectors are key factors for all nation-states. Reform can happen externally per society's values and needs to improve the standard of living, education, judgment, laws, and religion. It can also happen internally, for example, an individual seeking to reform their self. Reform

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[10] Muslim standards of behavior according to the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

can take place with revivalism. Religious revivalism, a sudden change or need for change in the hearts of society, community, or individual, can be understood as a need to resuscitate or renew religion within people's hearts and implement it in their daily lives and actions. Religious revivalism has dominantly and popularly been understood as either a puritanical or literalist reformist renewal followed by a call for change or repair because most of these religious movements either focused on keeping the puritanical understanding way of life unaffected or, in cases of modern reformation, leaving behind "un-modern," "irrational" or superstition heavy practices.

Moosa and Tareen (2015) discuss at length the genealogy of the concepts of revival and reform in Muslim society and the motivations behind it based on context. The authors present that Muslim reform across history was connected with restoring tradition and improving the community's moral order to strengthen *Din*.[11] The authors further demonstrated the styles of thought that shaped reform in the context of modernity, where Western discourses and ideas brought forth unwelcomed changes within Muslim societies or negatively impacted Muslim societies (Moosa & Tareen 2005). Therefore, a global reform was called upon to revive Islam. Moosa and Tareen (2015) identified two distinct thoughts that shaped modern reform: Muslim modernism and the other Muslim maximalism, or the Salafi tradition. One of the important figures of bringing forth modern reform in South Asia during British India to the hearts of young Muslims is Allama Muhammad Iqbal, a Pakistani philosopher and poet. In his work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Muhammad Iqbal introduced a philosophical thought that showed that the physical and the

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[11] *Din (Deen)* has a range of meanings and is understood contextually. Moosa and Tareen (2015) use salvation to describe it. Din describes a 'comprehensive system of life,' in general, a Muslim's way of life, comprising judgment and punishment, authority and subjugation, and methods of life (Khatami 2012).

metaphysical can be complementary rather than opposites, which classical Greek philosophy-inspired thoughts show.[12] Muhammad Iqbal was heavily inspired by Sufi thinkers and focused on the refinement of the 'self' which he understood both as the ego and the soul. To reach this refinement of the self, the self needs to be both present in this reality and the ultimate reality. In order to address the crisis of the modern world and for an Islamic state to prosper, the self needs to achieve enlightenment through Quranic teachings. Iqbal's work did not cover the devotional practices of saint veneration or any other ceremonial practices and pointed out that non-essentialist and popular practices need to be reformed to reinvigorate the self.

Muslim modernism and Muslim maximalism, although they emerged from different sources of thought and context, put renewed "emphasis on the Quran and the sunna as the only authentic source of religious practice" (Moosa & Tareen, 11). These involved jettisoning devotional practices of shrine veneration and mystical approaches of Islam. The shrines studied here belong to Sufi saints, each introducing different paths (*tariqat*) within Sufism to Bengal. The followers of these shrines may or may not belong to a particular *tariqat*. My participants were initiated under various dominant *tariqat* in Bangladesh, but it did not

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[12] Iqbal (2013) argued that the classical Greek philosophy limits the paradigm of understanding the teaching of the Quran as a revolutionary thought. He identifies the crisis of Philosophical thought in Islamic tradition because it is inherently anti-classical. In contrast, classical Greek philosophy, in turn, prevents, though it has been a great contribution to many Muslim thinkers as well philosophers and theologians, the value of the Quranic teachings. He argues a new philosophical perspective should be able to unify what in Greek metaphysics and, generally speaking, philosophy has been fundamentally characterized by opposition: What belongs to the realm of eternity and what belongs to the realm of becoming. He demonstrates this through the concepts of *Taqdir* (destiny) and *Tawhid* (Oneness of God). Iqbal's work is heavily criticized by some Muslim scholars, like Salafis, because of his discussions about *ijtihad* (Independent reasoning), where he states that for a society to keep moving forward, there may come a time when reform needs to be done within *ijtihad* of Quran teachings and Hadith to accommodate modern change. This led many Islamic scholars to call him a *kafir* (infidel) for his blasphemous statements, as in Islam, *Ijtihad* cannot be changed.

mean they were only following devotional practices. Many put renewed emphasis on the Quran and the correct understanding of *Sunna* while changing their way of veneration from intercessory prayer to only learning about the teachings of the saints and respecting their shrines. While others remained devotional through intercessory prayers and tried to understand the Quran and the Sunna from the babas they followed. In all cases, participants assimilated the devotional practices of Islam and followed the basic tenets of Islam with their daily lives to refine their virtuous selves.[13] Therefore, despite the many efforts of modern reform and puritanical thought, multiple ways of practicing Islam and moral piety persisted. This argument is highlighted in the following paragraphs and states which understanding of reformation is used in this study.

Reform in the history of Islam did not have a singular trajectory and was used differently and happened in different degrees at different times and contexts (Osella & Osella 2008; Moosa & Tareen 2015). According to Robinson (2013), Muslim states, communities, and societies have been experiencing renewal periods since the beginning of the Islamic era. The rise of modernity brought forth another wave of reformism that "valorized" rational ways of thinking where "the subject is not unencumbered by the burden of myth and superstition" (Moosa & Tareen 2015, 10). The process was much more visible starting in the eighteenth century when the process was seemingly happening across the globe

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[13] I would like to clarify that I am not stating that the whole of reformism is against Sufism or Sufi thinkers. I am also not stating that Sufism includes shrine veneration or supports the practice of shrine veneration. It all depends on the practitioners and the society and community itself. However, certain revivalist thinkers and movements are against Sufi thought and culturally influenced devotional practices like shrine veneration, like strict Wahabism and Salafism. At the same time, there are Sufi reformists that condone the practices of shrine veneration like Tablighi Jamaat but not following a *tariqat*.

simultaneously (Osella & Osella 2013; Robinson 2013; Metcalf 2009). Islamic reform in each occurrence has been based on each community's economic, political, and religious state. It is essential to consider an Islamic reform based on the specific region's history is much more effective because South Asian reformism will look different from Middle Eastern or African reformism. However, a generally agreed-upon description of Islamic reformism, and the definition used in this study, for the sake of comparison and orientation, can be defined as movements or changes to bring religious beliefs and practices per the core foundations of Islam through purging any "innovation, accretion, and the intrusion of "local custom'" (Osella & Osella 2008). In this process an "*authenticated Islam*" emerges that identifies a "*rationalized*" and "*modernized*" Islam as the "real" Islam while others are deemed "*backward,*" and "*superstitious*" (Deeb 2011).

Thus, South Asian Islam was called "popular" or "folk" Islam, and South Asian reformism is in the process of changing to a "rational" version of Islam by purging what reformists deem as innovative practices. One of the first practices to be targeted as innovative practice (bi'dah) was mazar or shrine veneration (Roy 2006; Metcalf 2009; Simpson 2007; Bruinessen 2009). Therefore, these "folk" or "popular" practices are not acceptable Islamic practices by people who follow reformist-influenced Islam. People who follow strictly the sharia law of Islam and adhere to basic tenets of Islam said to derive purely from the Qur'an and Hadith are sometimes described as essentialists or puritanical; the essentialist view is that there is one true Islam with a clearly defined and unified set of doctrines and practices (Tajdin 2022). The essentialist view of Islam has been criticized among anthropologists because, compared to everyday lived practices, such a unified view of Islam becomes untenable (el-Zein 1977; Geertz 1971; Asad 2009; Gellner 1984).

Ethnographic research on Muslim communities in various parts of the world consistently lends itself to the discourse that observed Islam is plural and syncretistic despite all being based upon Islamic doctrine (Das 1984).

Although the essentialist approach, often referred to as an "orthodox" Islamic approach, is often contrasted to "popular Islam," in reality, the two are usually not so easy to distinguish. What appears, in theory, to be strict binary opposites are fused concurrently pervading everyday life (Eickelman 1989; Gellner 1984). This dichotomous relation between the two sides of Islam (essential vs. pluralistic) was further highlighted and brought to much popularity by Geertz's (1971) ethnographic observations of Islam in Indonesia and Morocco (Asad 1986). Geertz (1971) found that Moroccan "scripturalists" were adamant in purging any "superstitious" practices and beliefs to "purify" Islam through activism and secular learning, while in Indonesia, emphasis was given to inward healing, patience, and self-transformation. Geertz (1971) argues that numerous labels such as "mysticism," "piety," "belief," "faith," and even "religion" are used to discuss religion in a particular context; however, although such labels are helpful when talking about a specific topic, it is crucial to keep in mind that different groups of people conceptualize their world differently. So even the same doctrinal religion, in this case, Islam, will be different across specific communities (Geertz 1971, 54). Hence, a comparison is not made to judge but to find different worldviews and frameworks that will help bring us closer to understanding the order by which humankind lives (Geertz 1971). Therefore, we need various ethnographic studies of Islam not so much to make comparisons against each other as to understand the "truth of being"

that Stoller (2013)[14] discusses in the anthropology of religion. We must acknowledge that there are other systems of knowing and being. This will lead us closer to understanding experience and give us a window to the "truth of being" (Stoller 2013).

It is also important to understand the dualistic notion of the relationship between ulama and the saints, one usually representing more of an essentialist approach and the other a mystical approach. The ulama is often seen as the only representative of the strict scripturalist, i.e., essentialist and monotheistic, approach to Islam, while the saints represent the mystical, ritualistic, abstract, and pluralistic approach to Islam (Gellner 1984; Geaves 2005). However, this strict separation of the ulama and the saint leads to the idea that only the ulama are well-versed in Islam's scholarly and scriptural texts. Ethnographic accounts of saints have shown that saints are important religious scholars, spiritual and mystical teachers, and guides having great importance in community life and social structure (Ewing 1997; Bruinessen 2000; Green 2008; Foley 2008; Metcalf 2009; Roy 2006), much as ulama often are. Asad (1986) observes that both play similar roles and represent the social order and history of the community. The Sufi saints who migrated to the part of Bengal that is now Bangladesh starting in the 14th century traveled to remote parts of the country, mostly in jungle-clad regions, and started preaching. The ulama may have been present in the Muslim Mughal courts in other parts of Bengal. Still, the saints acted as ulama to the newly converted Muslims within that specific social order where the relationship was based upon guru-shisho

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[14] Paul Stoller explains two different epistemologies when it comes to looking at the Anthropology of Religion: the "Truth of Statements," which is linear and a matter of logical coherence, and the "Truth of Being," which goes deep into philosophy and moves on the realms of human emotions of love, hate, fear, loyalty and such. Therefore, the Anthropology of religion lets us maneuver through religious experiences that are sometimes transformative. Consequently, I am taking a "Truth of being" epistemological path here that will take us closer to the "truth of being" and let us understand, however little, the interlocutor's experiences.

relation (teacher-student). In contrast, the ulama in the Mughal courts and other bustling city life represented the centralized institutions. Scott Kugle, in his life history of Ahmad Zarruq, proposes that Sufi saints are much more than just mystics and that emphasis on saints as just the practitioners of mystical Islam does not adequately represent their political power, scholarly authority, and determination to bring about Islamic knowledge as a moral and religious life guide (Boum 2008).

What interests us here is that the current wave of Islamic reformism that has been going on in Bangladesh and other countries since the early 1980s promotes the modern focus on refashioning the self. The call of the reformists to go back to the "fundamentals of Islam" (Dwyer 2016) could easily be mistaken for an extremist viewpoint with little room for freedom. I want to clarify that extremism is not reformism. It is pertinent not to mix reformism and extremism. As Eickelman ((1989) noted,

> It is impossible to discern a unilineal trajectory of political thought from reformism to radical Islam and secular nationalism. One must instead look situationally at who are the carriers of particular ideas and adherents to the organizations by which they are propagated" (Eickelman 1989, 317).

Reformism and radicalism, based on the context, could mean very different things. Whereas reformism is a choice of practicing faith in a certain way, extremism[15] is a political action by groups of a political organization with a fanatical agenda. Extremist acts, however, can be done based on reformist ideologies. In 2007, the shrine of Sufi saint Hazrat Shah Jalal of Sylhet was attacked. A local extremist group set fire to one of the buildings inside the

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[15] For a more detailed discussion on extremism terminology, see Bötticher 2017.

shrine grounds with the message that veneration of any form is a shirk. This is a reformist viewpoint, but the act is not what reformist ideology is about. Therefore, the focus on reformism in this thesis is not tied to extremism or radicalism but rather to an inward turn toward self, piety, and moral ethics. Therefore, when talking about women shrine venerators in comparison to reformists, I am merely talking about ordinary individuals, just like the people who prefer to visit shrines and venerate them, without any political agenda or affiliation attached to it but who practice Islam without subjecting themselves to any shrines or following any saints. They would condemn such behaviors and, at times, judge the practice of shrine veneration itself. Similarly, I have had participants who would condemn the viewpoints of reformists and show distaste for their opposing views on saints they put in high regard.

When discussing reformism in comparison to a specific act, like shrine veneration, that is separate from their ideology, it comes across as something inflexible and rigid. However, many ethnographic studies show that reformism in practice, as stated at the beginning of this section, is diverse and constantly shifting (Pool 2016; Mahmood 2005; Torab 1996). The studies show that reformist Islam has transformed practitioners' self and identity, positively impacting the community. Robinson (2006) maintains that reformist ideology slowly developed with a focus on hard work and ethics, emphasizing that humans can discipline themselves and contribute to creating a just society. Focus was shifted from asking God and relying on His mysteries for direct intervention to the mere human life and more on disciplining the self and working hard to attain a moral earning and way of living and instead increasing the fear of God and living a just life.

It meant devaluing a faith of contemplation on God's mysteries and of Belief in

His capacity to intercede for men on Earth. It meant valuing instead of a faith

in which Muslims were increasingly aware that they, and only they, could act

to create a just society on Earth. (Robinson 2006, 21)

The rise of reformist ideology led to the rise of disapproval and, in some cases, attack

on intercessory modes of praying. Saint veneration and in some cases even Sufi thought were

among the first main targets in India, Bangladesh, and other parts of South Asia and the

world. Liebeskind (2018), in her extensive research on Sufism and modernization in South

Asia, illustrated how saint veneration in three Awadhi shrines changed during the early

periods of reformism in the 20th century. The political and historical shift from Mughal India

to British rule considerably affected these changes of behavior in shrine veneration.

Robinson (2006) states that, during this time specifically, increased access to education and

literacy led Muslims to follow Islamic texts more literally. Robinson (2006) further noted

that women became the marker of public piety with the inward turn to the self in the reform

movements. However, this notion suggests that reform movements pressure women to

become publicly pious and force subjugation. Although this may be the case, Mahmood's

(2005) study on the reform mosque movements was critical in which the author illustrated

how some women are equally part of the pious reform movement and how it does not take

away their power but instead gives them their agency and voice within their subjectivation.

Mahmood's (2005) groundbreaking work influenced many academic works that

brought out the pluralistic nature of reform ideology. Pool (2016) captures the ethical self-

cultivation of Muslims of Joygram who, by inhibiting a "puritanical Islamic lifestyle,"[16] strive to cultivate the self in their everyday life to become their version of good Muslims in Joygram. The emphasis on ethics and the disciplining of the self is guided through the moral codes of Joygram's *dharma.[17]* The emphasis on ethical self-cultivation through piety and total submission to Islam and following the doctrine is also seen among the college girls in Bangladesh who started a Quran reading group and are part of a larger reformist group involved in Islamic activism in Bangladesh (Huq 2013). A different form of pious self-cultivation among Bangladeshi elite women is seen where the focus is on change and outlook of life rather than on reshaping moral order or reformist activism (Haq & Rashid 2008). Deeb's (2006) illustration of Lebanese women's participation in the public sphere, more specifically in the casual community life, brings forth a public piety that is different from the piety observed in Mahmood's (2005) study, where everyday modern life is highlighted that is part of faithful piety and not central. In Rinaldo's (2010) observance of the piety movement in Indonesia, we see how reformism brought new meaning to public piety, whereby self-cultivation not only led to agency for women but also provided space for them to seek new forms of political freedom and political participation as women activists. Torab (1996) looks into women's prayer groups (jalaseh), where pious women gather in religious meetings once a month to discuss religion, politics, and moral ethics of their community. An unwavering union between agency and piety is seen among the women as the author

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[16] Pool (2016) uses this terminology to describe, as closely as possible, their participants' lifestyles guided by Islamic reformist ideology. The author also uses reformism, as Osella & Osella (2008) described. By focusing on Islamic reformism in West Bengal, the author argues that Islamic reformism is a global phenomenon that "challenges a hegemonic global culture of secular modernity" (Pool 2016, pg. 282).

[17] Dharma is often translated to religion but dharma in vernacular context captures the moral justice and order in the society. For a detailed breakdown please see Pool (2016) page- 15.

discusses how these jalaseh meetings create contestation within the strict adherence to gendered rules by the jalaseh women. Osella and Osella (2008) trace a Kerala reformist party to argue that reformist ideology in Kerala is both local—complicating the popular view that reformism is essentially foreign—and transnational as it embodies historical characteristics of the development of Islam as a whole. The point of highlighting all these diverse studies of pious self-cultivation under the overall reformist ideology is to stress that reformism is not a single category. It is pan-Islamic and is shaped by political and historical contexts across various regions. Therefore, reformism is local and transnational and does not necessarily mean radical Islamic movements, nor is it only influenced by revivalist schools of thought like Salafism and Wahabism[18] (Osella & Osella 2008).

Moreover, reformism is not distinct or binarily opposed to the Sufi branch of Islam. In the South Asian context, veneration of shrines of Sufi saints is seen as part of Sufism and is practiced culturally to show deep affection and respect for the saint. Since reformist ideology is seen as something that opposes saint veneration, it is misunderstood as two separate realms. As demonstrated above, reformism can be diverse, and reformism within

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[18] Depending on the region or community, the extent to which the reformist movement within that context has been influenced by Salafism or Wahabism will vary. In the context of the Kerala reformist movement that Osella and Osella (2008) observed, it was not heavily influenced by Salafism or Wahabism. In my study, it was a mix of Salafism, some Wahabism, and mostly Tablighi-Jamati, which is a Sufi reformist group. However, I observed that among my participants, it varied from individual to individual, which ideology influenced their thinking. In all the cases, it was seen that they did not stick to nor did they label themselves as belonging to one definite party or ideology. It was rather a thinking or practice that can be identified under a branch of Islam, but for my participants in their everyday lives, as it is elsewhere, it is not something that they themselves liked to use.

For general reader clarity, Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam, and its followers try to mimic the first three generations of Muslims [the pious predecessors (*Al salaf al-ṣ āliḥ*)] as closely as possible, therefore following the sharia and hadith as closely as possible. Wahabism was influenced by the Salafi school of thought and is a movement originating with the Arabian Peninsula and focuses more on Islamic theology and "purifying Islam." For a short yet detailed and historical trajectory of Salafism and Wahabism, please see Joas Wagemakers (2016).

Sufism in South Asia and elsewhere has also been happening. Green (2005) looks into Sufi reformism in Hyderabad. Metcalf (2009) looks into the rise of the Tablighi Jamaat movement and how the followers do not oppose shrine veneration but seek to reform intercessory prayers to make them consistent with Islamic teachings. Sikand (2007) traces the Tablighi Jamaat's Sufi reform movements among the Meos of Mewat, while Werbner (2013) traces Sufi reformism in South Asia through the study of Naqshbandi saint and his devotees in Pakistan. Sufi reformism outside of South Asia also reminds us that Muslim communities, in general, have experienced various strands of reformism and so are not distinct categories (see Bruinessen 2007; Howell 2007; Genn 2007; Villalón 2007; Hill 2018).

Among my participants, there was a mix of followers from Maizbhandari tariqa, Chistiya tariqa, and Qadiriya tariqa, all of whom were striving to become a better version of themselves through constant reformulation of their mind and behavior. Yet each of them approached this quest differently in ways that often fell outside the tariqa they followed. Some did intercessory prayers in ways seen as "un-Islamic" by others who also did intercessory prayers. At the same time, others did follow specific "babas" (spiritual guides) but were trying to reduce shrine veneration. Elements of personal reforming among my participants of their piety within themselves were seen, and it was multifaceted and not static.

Simpson (2008) followed three Gujrati men across ten years to demonstrate how individual faith goes through different periods of contestation by showing that belief in saint veneration is not static and, based on context, defines what the venerator feels about saint veneration based on their situation. At times, they are indebted to saints, while at other times, they deem it "unIslamic" (Simpson 2008). Therefore, it is important to remember that,

though we know Islam is not monolithic, their practice will differ even if two separate communities follow a similar branch of Islam. Individuals in the same community following the same branch going through a specific reform will undergo, experience, and adopt different changes in their religious practice. Therefore, it is necessary to approach faith as constantly contested and a non-essentialist category constantly in reformulation. Consequently, it is essential not to restrict understanding of faith to categories like "Textual" vs. "Lived," "Orthodox" vs. "Popular" Islam, as they are inadequate to "effectively respond to the changing exigencies of history" (Santhosh 2013, 1), for it can be all of these that influence the individual. Sometimes, a person may be rigid in their practice, and at other times, they may attend a "sema" (Sufi chanting and dancing) night.

The constant religious, emotional, and spiritual change that my participants discussed is difficult to comprehend under the umbrella of "popular Islam" or "essentialist Islam" just for the sake of labeling. This applies not just to saint veneration vs. reformism. At times, my informants felt uneasy when talking about themselves because they did not know how to categorize themselves (not that it was what I sought from them). Still, they felt a need to place themselves appropriately. When describing themselves, they used to hesitate and think about how to organize their thoughts to most accurately describe how they felt inside. This contestation came most when discussing their identity as Bangladeshis (Bengali) and Muslims. Are they Muslims first or Bengali first? Would they be deemed as less Muslim if they embraced their Bengali culture? To what extent should they shed their Bengali identity to become a "true good Muslim"?

These are the questions that I often used to ponder while considering all these labels. In the next section, I discuss the historical trajectory of reformism in Bengal, how Bangladesh

has shaped a distinct Bengali Muslim identity and how this identity has experienced changes in belonging as Bangladesh was birthed, as it experienced changes in political parties and changes in the country's economy up until the present.

## Bengali Muslim Identity at A Crossroads

The contested identity of being a Bengali Muslim can be traced back to the early Muslim converts in the Indian subcontinent. According to Chatterjee (1993) and Metcalf (2009), some historians and Hindu nationalists of South Asia and Indian nationalism have often taken two approaches regarding including Islam and Muslims in their historical review of religion in South Asia. One is the focus on Muslim conquests in India and the eventual Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent, and the second is the approach to the domestication of Islam in the history of the Indian subcontinent before, during, and after the British colonial period. In this approach, "syncretistic," "tolerant," "popular," and "hybrid" are terms often used to describe the form of Islam in South Asia. Both approaches paint Islam as an essentially foreign entity to both Indian and Bengali history that was made local (hence, "local Islam" is also a term often used). Therefore, South Asia rarely comes as a first choice in studying Islam. Chatterjee (1993), while arguing how many Hindu nationalists approach the trajectory of Indian history as monolithic, brings forth Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's (BR) famous essay titled "The Origins of the Bengalis," where the novelist writes,

> The English are one jāti[19] the Bengalis are many jāti. In fact, among those whom we now call Bengali can be found four kinds of Bengalis: one, Aryan;

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[19] Jāti is caste. The Bengali jāti (the Bengali caste) comprises both Muslims and non-Muslims. Bengali Musalmans (Muslims) are Bengali jāti as are Bengali Hindus.

two, non-Aryan Hindu; three, Hindu of mixed Aryan and non-Aryan origin; and

four, Bengali Musalman. (BR, 363 as cited in Chatterjee 1993, 114)

Chatterjee argues that the focus on tracing a single monolithic "singular" history of

Indian history by Indian nationalist historians, and therefore Bengal's history, will provide a

one-sided view and hamper alternative approaches. In this singular view, Islam will always

be a foreign religion that took over India for a time. This is controversial as it places South

Asia at the periphery of the study of Islam rather than at the center (Metcalf 2009). The study

of South Asia needs to approach Islam not as a foreign migratory religion that was made

syncretistic but as one of the core elements that birthed the Bengali Muslims. During the

period known as the Bengali Renaissance, many literatures, architecture, art, political and

social theories were contributed to Indian history by Bengalis, who comprised both Muslims

and non-Muslims. Eaton (1993) notes that Islamization in Bengal and South Asia occurred

very gradually, and, therefore, the conversion of early non-Muslims to Muslims would not

accurately describe the historical record since "conversion" generally means replacing one

religion over another. Eaton demonstrated that Islamization happened so gradually that it is

"nearly imperceptible" (Eaton 1993, pg. 269).

Yet even if the change might be imperceptible, traces of it were still studied to

determine the trajectory of this gradual transformation. The overview of this trajectory will

allow us insight into why shrine veneration within Islam in South Asia and elsewhere was

part of the Islam responsible for the distinct formation of the Bengali Muslims in the first

place. Eaton (1993) came up with three different chronologies in which the rooting of Islam

took place. The first was the *inclusion* of Islamic ideology with Sanskritic and local myths

and epics. One such example is the portrayal of Eve as a Bengali woman who uses

sandalwood paste and black kohl and puts flowers in her tight bun (Eaton 1993, 278). The second stage was the *identification* of the superhuman beings in both Sanskrit and Islam as one another within the same cosmology. This rootedness of identity helped to form one single cosmology where both Sanskrit myth and Arabic myth coexisted with one another under different names and helped to create closeness of Islam with the locals, a form of revitalization perhaps. Roy (1983), however, maintains that Islam in today's context of Bangladesh specifically needs to be approached in a syncretistic mode as it is because of the assimilation of the early Sufi saints and religious teachers, the mullahs, Arabic teachings with the localized myths and epics that Islam became rooted. Roy argues that though Islam was syncretized, it must not be thought of as lesser or corrupt Islam because of the early reforms that eventually took place afterward. Eaton (1993) described this later period of reforms between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the *displacement* stage.

The early 18th-century Islamic reform movements were not organized but scattered without any form of organizational structure. One of the first movements to be recorded was the Faraizi movement, led by peasant-class Muslims against Hindu landlords supported by British power. During this period, community self-consciousness started to grow. As "the mosques took on a more meaningful role in the lives of ordinary Muslims, they tended to see themselves more and more as a distinct community from the Bengali Hindus" (Roy 2006, 58). The Bengali Muslims gained a political and socio-economic consciousness as a community. The strengthening of this consciousness necessitated an awareness of their unequal political status and citizenship status with that of the non-Muslims. A Bengali Muslim identity was born as the Islamic ideological movement became a revolutionary peasant class movement. It is to be noted that this simplification of what is a long and messy

history of Bengal is far too straightforward. There were clashes among the different classes of Muslims as well. One of the reasons why the early peasant class movements were so focused on purging what they thought were "non-Islamic" practices was that they sought to be accepted as a "true Muslim" by the upper-class elite Muslims who looked down upon the peasant class. The upper-class elite Muslims were migrants themselves and saw native converts as Hindus rather than Muslims. One of the tactics the elite Muslims used to strengthen their political power was to manipulate the lower Muslim classes to make them see the Hindus as their enemies who kept them in structural inequality (Asim Roy 2006, 69). Therefore, early reform movements started attacking the practices of local pirs and mullahs and shrine veneration. However, these attacks were not as readily accepted by the reformists as the non-Muslim neighbors' acceptance as enemies (Roy 2006; Karim 1959). Mullahs and pirs (religious teachers and guides) became the central link to Islam.

Eaton (2009) notes that, though Sufi saints who migrated to Bengal were invaluable mediators in spreading Islamic knowledge, the saints gained power and respect not just for their devotional teachings but for turning jungles into arable lands. Therefore, the connection between saints and their tombs is important because of their connection with land and agriculture. The arable lands for mosques and *khanqahs* (religious gathering places for saints and pirs) were not taxed, and they were able to form communities. Not long after that, every village and community had its mosques and saints, and they also acted as part of groups that oversaw the rules and moral code of the community. These meetings were called *panchayats,* where influential community members, elders, and mullahs came together in times of judgment of anything that happened in the community to decide what to do next or what punishment fit the crime. Saints and their tombs, therefore, are historically connected

across all forms of life in Bengal. They were in epics and myths and developed a sense of belonging and rootedness, a distinct cosmology that formed the Bengali Muslims in politics, where groups formed to fight for their identity and rights, and in land and agriculture.

The point of going back to the history of religious reforms that took place over the years is to lay the groundwork for understanding the reformist movements that are currently going on. The early Sufi reformism in South Asia was inherently connected with politics and striving for power. The question that kept arising while going over history was why shrines still existed and were powerful in people's hearts if continuous reformism had happened over history to denounce them. Why are they still popular? Why are people still attached to the land where the saint's tomb is buried? Is it because the current ruling party of Bangladesh is still in power? Would things have changed if the opposition party affiliated with a Salafi reform party, Jamati-Islami, were in control? Even while mulling these questions over, I understood that, though shrines still played an important role in the lives of many, many more others felt as detached from it as if shrines were never an important historical site in the formation of the distinct Bengali Muslim identity. Hence, it should be made clear that not all Bangladeshi Muslims' identities are inherently connected with Islam and saint veneration. I am therefore focusing on those whose identities are. My participants approach their relationship with Islam differently. One thing that is true for all is that the focus was on their self and identity for each of them.

The present reform, be it Sufi or otherwise, has put the focus inward. It is connected with disciplining the self and strengthening one's piety. My informants are focusing on their selves within the familiar structural violence, not necessarily to break free from it but to accept and work with it. Therefore, shrine veneration is also part of reformation within the

entire religious revivalism that has been going on in the seemingly secular public. In this process, many of them struggle within themselves. Are they leaving a vital part of themselves? Or are they reaching their true self? If they come to oppose intercessory prayers, are they opposing their beloved saints? If they continue with intercessory prayers, are they defying Islam? Are they Muslims first or Bengali first? One of the questions that kept coming back to me was, is it because we are Bengali that we find it hard to shelve these cultural practices that many say "corrupt" Islam? I find these questions necessary not to find answers but to keep moving forward with more questions. It is difficult to answer these questions in ways that perfectly capture each informant's inner struggles. Perhaps this is why religion is multifaceted: individuals try to find their true selves intertwined with their historical past.

## Ethnography and the Ethnographer: The Methods, The Field, and The Experience

### The Method

This thesis is based on ethnographic research[20], conducted in 2022 from late May until the first week of August. My field sites were five different Sufi shrines in Bangladesh. One, the Dhaka High Court mazar, was in the capital city of Dhaka; two were in Sylhet city— Hazrat Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif and Shah Poran Mazar Sharif; and two in Chattagram— Bayezid Bostami Mazar Sharif and Ahmadullah Maizbhandari Mazar Sharif. I started my research with Dhaka High Court Mazar Sharif and ended with the two Sylhet mazars.

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[20] Ethnography is the study of people and/or communities in their "naturally occurring setting" (the "field') and is an established research method of socio-cultural anthropology that involves participant observation, and unstructured/semi-structured interviews over a long period. (For a detailed discussion see Brewer 2002; Atkinson and Hammersly 1998)

The ethnographic research methods involved participant observation, a method in which the researcher partakes in the daily activities, rituals, events, and daily interactions of the people, community, or institution being studied to gain deep knowledge of their culture and the underlying social meanings (Dewalt and Dewalt 2000; Brewer 2002). Following participant observation in the shrines, tools such as unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews[21] were also used to establish rapport with informants, participate with them, and present their perspectives. I carried out group interviews, usually two in each place, in the women's quarters in the dargahs of High Courts Mazar, Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif, and Bayezid Bostami Mazar Sharif. Some participants preferred phone interviews, so I also had to conduct some phone interviews after my initial introduction to those women. All my follow-up interviews with my participants who agreed on follow-up interviews have also been over the phone. I conducted five follow-up interviews over the remaining year of my Master's degree after my return to Canada. I began my research in specific dargahs by walking around and familiarizing myself with the rhythms of everyday life at the dargahs, quietly sitting down for many hours in the women's quarters. On certain days, I just sat, prayed at prayer times, and took notes on my observations. I participated in *zikrs* (Arabic *dhikr*) and congregational supplications (munajat). I prayed the regular prayers and dressed modestly to fully immerse myself in my environment, both physically and mentally. The atmosphere of the dargah itself, in turn, left effects upon me that I will detail briefly throughout this section.

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[21] In-depth interviews are a technique used in participant observation and any form of qualitative research involving intensive individual interviews with willing participants to represent their views, position, and take based on the particular research (Boyce 2006). Here, in-depth interviews of shrine venerators have been taken to explore their views on shrine veneration, their reasons and connections, and what faith means to them.

Thirty interviews were conducted from all five shrine sites, six with people professionally involved with the shrine institutions. Four of the twenty-four interviews were very short because the participants were in a hurry and only told me why they were visiting that day and engaged in general conversation. Hence, I have chosen about twenty interviews of informants (other than the 6 professionals) to present in my thesis; however, the other four were very valuable to me in getting a more general idea of why people come to the shrines and their attractions to them. I followed the recruitment and consent protocols approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Alberta. This involved explaining the purpose of the study and my assurance of anonymity to all participants and obtaining their informed consent. As such, all the names of the participants presented in this research are pseudonyms, and personal information such as where they worked and their addresses have not been mentioned. No photos of the participants were taken to ensure their anonymity. All my participants consented to record their interviews on my phone. As for the six interviews of the people involved professionally, their names have been used along with their designation as per their consent. They have also permitted me to take their photographs and use them for my thesis if needed.

## The Field Sites

Dhaka is a bustling and overpopulated city. Traffic is never-ending, and frustrations rise high during the day and evenings. It is my home city, where I was born and raised. Yet my life within the city was very sheltered. I never really went anywhere unchaperoned. From school to undergrad, I lived in a very different bubble. This could be one of the reasons why it took much longer than I had expected to develop an understanding with informants. I was

only able to manage that with some of my informants. Ironically, it is well-established that many Bangladeshi parents feel safer allowing their children—especially daughters—to travel abroad alone than to travel alone within the country. Perhaps it is the systemized confinement of air travel where you cannot venture out of the well-guarded boundary and the in-betweenness that the airports are. Compared to this, maybe the rough streets of Dhaka become a concrete wilderness with unexpected dangers at every corner from which most parents deem it necessary to protect their children. And so, I had to do my fieldwork, a grown woman, with my parents tagging along. My father could not always accompany me because of his work, but he would be there on the weekends. At first, I was worried about how this might affect my research. I asked myself: Would it have effects on my observation? Would my findings be different if I were alone? Would it lead to any form of unacknowledged bias? My experiences have been unique and become richer because I could move safely from place to place without hesitation, allowing me to access more places. Moreover, I got different observations on the days my parents or mom went with me and the days they didn't. Despite my childish desire to feel the impossible glory of doing my first research as a lone anthropologist who had set out to witness something sacred and wonderful, I was quickly humbled on my first day and realized that fieldwork is much more complicated than just heading out with a notebook.

My first day during my one-week preliminary research in Dhaka High Court Mazar was a sunny Thursday morning after the Eid holiday when Abbu (my father) had a day off. We set out and reached the shrine about 2 hours later. The distance was only 35 minutes, but this is Dhaka traffic we are talking about. After reaching the site, I waited outside the mosque with my mom while Abbu went inside to enquire about the person in charge that

day. One of the custodians came out with my father and thought I had a very important exam coming, thinking the documents I had given them (my ethics documents showing I have permission to do fieldwork) were exam papers. He took them and hurriedly went back inside, saying, "choyai ditasi," which meant touching the papers against the saint's tomb as a way of blessing and good luck. When he returned, I repeated that I wanted to talk to people here and take interviews with the imam, if willing, and ask whether they would permit me to do fieldwork here. He immediately said no and said no reporters were allowed and went inside the mosque. My father told us to wait and went inside and returned with the custodian after about fifteen minutes. The custodian's face was different this time; he laughed and said that he misunderstood and I was welcome to start my research that day, but I also needed to speak with the imam, who would come the next day. My father later told me that he had explained that I was doing a project for my school and that I was not a reporter but just a student interested in mazars. Seeing my mother and father together confirmed that I was not a reporter. My father's presence had given me the authenticity that otherwise might have taken weeks of persuasion to cultivate. The mosque men were ready to listen to my father more than me, which was unsurprising considering I was just a woman and a student. In the women's quarter that day, my mother's presence had given me the confirmation of the identity of a "good girl," a pious girl from a "good family" in the eyes of the women who came to visit and for the women workers as well. Again, this might otherwise have taken days to accomplish on my own, if at all. As I continued going there, I was able to build a strong rapport with the women workers by the end of the week.

The mazar, also known as dargah, is managed by the Supreme Court Mazar and Masjid Administration Committee, although I did not have to approach them to make introductions.

I was able to contact the Imam of the Dhaka High Court. My mother and I went to the dargah the next day, and the custodian took us inside the men's mosque. We were taken up to a middle space that separated from the first section of the prayer floor to the inside one. A group of men were sitting in a circle having a light conversation, and one of them walked up to us. This was the imam, and he was looking at my mother and addressing her. My mother explained the matter, and the imam asked for the documents. I gave them to him, and while he was looking at them, my mother said she remembered his father, who used to run a popular TV show during Ramadan where he would broadcast Islamic historical sites worldwide, and that she was sorry for his passing. The imam thanked her and said that I could conduct my research, and he agreed to do an interview as well, but since he was usually busy during the day and did not want to be seen talking with a girl one-on-one in the mosque, he would gladly give a phone interview. In this situation, I am now aware that, more than the documents, my mother's presence allowed the imam to trust me enough to speak with me. Another important factor I must include is that I was not researching the dargah itself or how it is run or managed but the visitors who came there. This was also one of the reasons that allowed the people in charge to permit me easily because it was up to the visitors if they wanted to speak with me. After making the formal introductions and establishing my presence, the dargah being an open public space, I did not need formal permission from then on to conduct research at the High Court Mazar Sharif. I conducted my fieldwork there from mid-May till mid-June, and then I returned there around the first week of August to formally say goodbye to the women who worked there.

From mid-June until the first week of July, I was in Chattagram, where I flew with my mother and brother to conduct fieldwork in the Bayezid Bostami Mazar Sharif. We lodged in

a rest house on Surson Road, about 12 minutes away by car. We would commute through various modes of transportation, whether Uber or cngs (motorized tuk-tuk cars locally known as cngs because they run on compressed natural gas [cng]), and we rented a car for a week. Getting permission from the khadims of the Bostami dargah was much smoother, and I did it on my own. I approached the men sitting beside a small floor table with a bamboo basket. The basket was half-covered with a red cotton cover and had lines of thread spread over the edges on the open side, and inside were incense packets. They had some account books and a betel leaves box on the table.

There were four men, all from the same family. I introduced myself, and after I reviewed my documents with them, they gave me their permission and told me that many researchers and scholars had been there before, so I was welcome. I sat with them, and we had around an hour of group discussion, which they concluded by presenting me with a book about the shrine and its history by a devoted scholar. They also asked me whether I came alone, but I told them I was there with my mother. After that, I was free to interview willing participants. They gave me a tour of the entire place and told me that this shrine is managed by a committee of members from the same family, who take turns running it. From then on, I noticed different sets of men in charge of the place each week. I did not have to introduce myself the second time because they had all been informed. Some days later, my father took a few days off of work to join us in Chattagram.

My visit to the Fatikchari Mazar was not initially planned. Still, during my stay, I called the number given by one of my professors at Brac University (where I did my undergraduate degree), who told me to call it for my fieldwork at the Maizbhandari shrine. This was the number of Mejbah sir (popularly known as Mejbah Bhai), a scholar and teacher of Fatikchari

and member of the DIRI research institute of Ahmadullah Maizbhandari Manzil. I should have called the number before going to Chattagram because my visit there was eye-opening. The shrine's research committee took us and a few other researchers to Fatikchari. We started our journey around 6 a.m., and they gave us a tour of the entire place the whole day. I also got to meet the current saint of Ahmadullah Maizbhandari Manzil and his son, the current managing director. They generously hosted us and did everything to the best of their ability to ensure I could do my research. After our *darshan* (meeting with a holy person) with the Baba, who gave me his blessings on my journey, I was able to have a focus group discussion with Mejbah sir and three other teachers, where they taught me a great deal and informed me of the current circumstances of their area. I met seven of my participants from there, with whom I could also keep in touch through phone calls. I also met Koli, an undergrad student and devotee who has become a dear friend. I provided details of the Maizbhandari order and its different houses (manzils) in Chapter 2.

My last field site was in Sylhet, where I stayed in July. At the beginning of May, flash floods occurred due to seasonal rains. Sylhet was one of nine districts affected. This flash flood was followed by a second wave of floods in June, affecting 7.2 million people. I did not think I could conduct my fieldwork, especially in June, here in Sylhet, due to the devastating situation. However, by the first week of July, things came under control regarding the flood situation. This did not mean that the people who were directly affected could also overcome their situation. As the ways to go to Sylhet were open again, I decided to fly there because my childhood visits to the shrine in Sylhet started my curiosity about mazar veneration. My research would have felt incomplete without it. I was introduced to my contact person there through the people of Fatikchari. My family and I stayed in a rest house near the Shrine of

Shah Jalal on Circuit House road. Selim uncle was under the Maizbhandari order and is part of one of the Sylhet's *khanqah.* He was also familiar with Hazrat Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif and Shah Poran Mazar sharif. Through Selim uncle, I was able to get in touch with the Khadims of both of the shrine's sites and formal permissions before starting my research. Hazrat Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif is run by a very big committee and is divided into many groups because the Khadim lineage has now spread into more than 250 families. Many live in the Dargah lane (where Khadim family members live). More details of both of the dargahs are given in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

## The Experience

My ethnographic research is what is known as "native ethnography," the practice of doing research in one's own native country, ethnic community, or society as opposed to studying the "other." Native ethnography was traditionally introduced when people whom early anthropologists were studying, as the "others," were coming into the field of anthropology themselves. Studying other communities also became difficult and politically sensitive as the national borders and security to enter a community became more complex, especially in developing countries (Steinlein 1990). Hence, it was easier for "natives" to have easy access than foreign anthropologists. More importantly, as the theory of ethnography developed, it was seen that the native perspective representation would be much more authentic if it came from someone within the community. The native anthropologist was seen as the authentic insider already familiar with the community's way of living, thinking, and behaving (Sharrock & Anderson 1982). Thus, the native anthropologist is taken to have an insider's perspective, which is unique when compared to outsider foreign

anthropologists. Many criticisms followed this, notably that the native anthropologist will miss some key aspects to which they have become desensitized. Outsider anthropologists, this critique held, are better able to focus on those aspects on top of maintaining the objective view that anthropology was ideally about. "Native bias" and subjective aspects were underlined as factors that made native ethnography weak compared to the original ethnography of studying the "other." M. N. Srinivas, in his paper, "The Fieldworker and the Field," provides a comprehensive description of his time in the field, including the times when he felt like a complete outsider to ways of life in Rampura village, including in social, political, and caste norms and rules even though he was a native Brahmin. Srinivas (2002), being a native, had the privilege to engage with community people because they shared the same nationality. They were of the same earth, and this connection of relatability and belonging seemed natural. At the same time, he was as apart from them as one could be. When it came to living as the people of the village lived, he had to train himself mentally to become accustomed to the manure smell of the cowhouse. The community head reprimanded him for shaving after showering instead of before. This was a telling moment for him because he was reminded of the Brahmin ways by a non-Brahmin. By providing such rich details of his fieldwork, Srinivas emphasized the importance of living in the field to experience true ethnographic participant observation and engaging one's subjectivity. Trained by Evans-Pritchard and Radcliff Brown, Srinivas (1997) had strong training in long-term ethnographic research. He highlighted the importance of subjectivity within the research process. Be it foreign anthropologists or native ones, subjectivities allowed for depth and richness. He stated that if both foreign and native anthropologists provided their subjective view on the same communities studied by both, a range of subjectivities would be

created that would be better than one subjectivity. Srinivas was already looking at himself,

moving for a reflexive approach through this, where one shifts the focus on oneself while

conducting field research. This self is ever-moving and not fixed (Narayan 1993; El-Kholy &

Al-Ali 1999). Narayan (1993), in "How Native is a Native Anthropologist," argues about the

perceived notions of what constitutes a native anthropologist and proposes to dismantle the

fixed definitions. As the economic structures of societies changed with time, it has become

redundant to hold labeling terms like "native" and "non-native," where the labels focus on

race and ethnicity. Of mixed heritage, Narayan highlights how her access to the important

relationship with the Swamiji was strengthened because of who her grandfather was, yet at

the same time, she was also constantly looked at as an outsider. One example is when

Swamiji discussed how educated people will always keep asking questions with his example

of the "shit story" (316). During her menstrual cycle, Narayan would not enter the ashrams,

and thus, her gender came into play in the field as well. Instead of having a fixed definition

of "native/non-native," "insider/outsider," and "observer/observed," the author argues for

viewing anthropologists as individuals with shifting identities. She does this by borrowing

Rosaldo's "multiplex subjectivity" to show that it would be much more "profitable" to view

anthropologists in terms of individuals with shifting identities while in a field. The

anthropologists should know the power relationship between themselves and their

informants. The "loci" of those that the anthropologists study are often "multiple" and in

"flux," which they have to navigate or are forced to navigate based on context and the

prevailing vectors of power. An "enactment of hybridity" thus occurs in this fluid motion as

researchers navigate between their personal and ethnographic selves. This self needs to be

acknowledged when the work is shown. Narayan states that if this self is "effaced" by

focusing on the objective of producing a truly anthropological scholarly work, then that is not authentic. It is important to acknowledge the situated self; otherwise, the scholarship will be misleading and "do violence to our range of hybridity and professional identities that one navigates in our daily lives" (Narayan 1993). When we acknowledge our subjectivity and positionality, we are more likely to produce ethically sound narratives because ethnography heavily depends on people's narratives. If we only focus on objectivity, we might deface their humanity because we actively exclude what we make of situations. Interactions are situated and placed under power relations, which can be seen through our subjective and reflexive lenses. We see this in El-Kholy and Al-Ali's (1990) case. The authors had different experiences with their fieldwork in Egypt. While one was native, the other was a foreigner who sometimes felt more native than the actual native ethnographer because of the social background of their informants and their mixed heritage. They look closely at how their informants perceived them and how they engaged and perceived themselves in different contexts. Multiple factors created this movement of identities: education, social class, economic status, and lived experiences, both of the authors and their informants. The gap created by invisible structures from both ends formulated different selves to come forward. This does not mean that the research became vulnerable or incoherent; it means that some days were easier than others. A similar case is seen in Minocha's (2002) ethnographic account of a hospital in India. Nurses, doctors, and patients differently perceived the author. Previously, the author thought that it would be easier to mix with the doctors because, as they were educated, they would understand the research and thus provide more help; however, the experience was quite the opposite. The mostly illiterate patients welcomed the author, provided their accounts of how they viewed the doctors, and let the author in on the

different quirks of each personnel they cared for. To the patients, she was a doctor (despite her constant reminders that she was not), and to the doctors, she was some social worker whose purpose many did not understand in the hospital. The fieldworker became an object of curiosity. One of the important factors that the author highlighted was the fear surrounding the word "interview," which was often associated with reporters and politics. Like Minocha, I also found that the word "interview" scared participants or made them instantly guarded. So, I often told them that I wanted to talk to them because of the final research project I was doing for my university in Canada. This made them curious to know more, and then I would proceed with details and the ethical rules. For the professionals affiliated with the shrine, I would use the word interview or in Bangla *Shakkhatkar,* which made them feel more professional and important.

We have come far from the classical dichotomy of "native" vs. "non-native," as it has become clear that varied roles created by multiple factors affected the relationship of a native studying a part of their culture or sub-culture. It is well established that academic training itself "complicated" one's native identity (Forster 2012; Foster 1996; Page 1988; Williams 1996); if we remember Foucault's (1976) thoughts on academic training on how to think, produce knowledge, and create subjects goes on to create relations of power within its discursive relations in the academic institutions (Forster 2012). We have seen this in the cases of Srinivas, Abu-Lughod, El-Kholy, and Al-Ali, and many scholars. Kraidy's (1999) "glocalization" of native ethnography helps us take into account all the factors that are coming into play, allowing native ethnography to act as an adequate methodology "to understand the articulation of local practices with global discourses" (Kraidy 1999, pg-457). It is important to understand the power a native ethnographer may hold over their

informants, which could easily lead to "appropriation of voice." Both the researcher and the informant are at the borderline of two worldviews. They are creating an "intersubjective conversation" where the interaction alters within that moment. Through this occurs "a dialectic of identity"—a regaining of the shared past experiences between the researcher and the narrator—as well as "a dialectic of otherness,"—which is maintained by the differences emerging in the dialogue between them. Therefore, native researchers need to understand that failures in some senses are likely to happen, and it is important to remember that, through these failures, we are still accountable to our informant's stories that they chose to share because language and translation play a key role. Language establishes legitimacy and is part of the native identity (Jacobs-Huey 2002).

Anthropologists, irrespective of their ethnicity or terms of belonging, are responsible for the community they study. As researchers, we will always be outsiders on some levels because the position creates a barrier of "us" vs. "them." We are responsible for translating the community's knowledge in a way that best represents them and translating it to an academic discourse deeply entrenched in Western Eurocentric discourse (Forster 2012). Native anthropologists, especially those from Third and Fourth world countries, are positioned in a unique situation where they have to mediate between blurred lines, coming into and out of identities as self, self in their home terrain, self as an academic in Western soil, and researcher to be presented to them. Belonging to Generation Z, who are products of global media, this identity of a native ethnographer of a third-world country further created strenuous reflections.

The initial plan was that my parents would accompany me to the field in Dhaka for the first few days, and then, when they saw that everything was safe and that the people who

worked here knew me, I would go there alone. This plan worked. On the first day, both of my parents went, and the next few days, only my mother accompanied me or, in some cases, my mother and aunt. In all these visits, my mother just sat in a corner and waited, occupying herself with prayers and books. She was not involved in the interviews themselves. However, I noticed a sharp contrast between the days she went with me and those she did not. In the days she was there, it was easier for the women to trust me—they knew I was with my mother because the first question they would always ask was who I was and whether I had come alone. I would respond that I was with my mother, and they would ask, "Where is your mother?" After I pointed her out to them, they would carefully look at my mother and then back to me before deciding whether they were interested in being interviewed. Although I could get some women to talk to me when I went alone, it took more time and luck. They would quiz me on my background, the schools I attended, and what my parents did professionally. This alone was not enough, and they only became interested in asking me these questions after I said I was studying at a university in Canada. At times, I felt that I had subconsciously generated a different self to be presented when faced with such exhaustive questioning. This self was structured to fit into society's conception of what being modest is: someone who listened to their parents, did not have any "questionable" opinions, and was not like "other girls" whose only fault, according to most of the women I talked with, was that they deviated from the traditional norms of what being a woman meant and became "wild." My mother's presence made this "self" of mine more legitimate. In the eyes of the women, I was different from the girls they would describe as "immodest," or "Westernized," "modern," and "disrespectful." Everyone has to present themselves differently while conducting fieldwork, in a more professional manner, or in some other way as the environment

demands. In this case, the more relaxed and in touch with your environment, the easier it will be to get involved. But to do so, I had to change myself in many ways. I had to change how I held myself and how I would usually ask questions. I had to be very clear in my conversations yet not too outspoken. It was also important to pay attention to how I asked questions. I did not want them to mistake my questioning for a form of judgment, and I also wanted them to think they could trust me because of the sensitivity of the research.

I realized my mother's presence helped me bridge this gap, which otherwise would have taken much longer. Multiple factors created the bridge between my interlocutors and me. It consisted of age, education, social class, upbringing, lived experiences, and, most importantly, generation. My interlocutors were mothers, so I differed from their state of being.

As a woman in the field, some gendered limitations were mitigated while others remained present. I could conduct the women's quarters in the shrines, but my gender restricted me from going near the tombs of the saints to attending men's public sema and *zikr* or public places like *urs*[22] fields, which men predominantly crowded. However, I realized that my safety within the field sites and traveling would have proved much more difficult and, in some cases, impossible to do had I not had my father's company. Moving from city to city alone, booking rooms, managing the geography, and knowing the roads would have been extremely difficult without guidance. Although these could be accessible through trustworthy guides, I was saved from the hassle of finding trustworthy guides.

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[22] Death anniversaries of saints, a holy occasion.

Moreover, my safety was guaranteed. It was easier to access meetings with the dargah administrators who took me seriously enough to give me interviews, specifically at the Sylhet mazar. Traveling in strange places with booked cars would have been the scariest experience, and it was even scary with my parents with me, especially during the pitch-black hours in the mountainous, wide, deserted highways of Chattagram. I was able to go to *khanqahs* situated in places far from towns.

*Khanqahs* are specifically for men, where they discuss matters of their organization and the projects, they run, along with discussing Islam and doing *zikrs*. It would have been difficult if I had a woman companion or an unrelated man accompany me on these journeys. For my informants, it would have been questionable in their eyes as well because of the stigma surrounding an unmarried woman traveling alone or with an unrelated man. Although I was saved from ill experiences, my gendered identity was starkly visible while navigating all these places and during interviews with men. I was forgiven for my limited knowledge of their town's politics yet also belittled at the same time because they forgave my lack of knowledge because of my gender. I was reminded of Gupta's (2002) account of experiences in the field, in which she recounted attending one of the youth groups where she found herself surrounded by drunk men in their 20s and 30s. Her married status and age (having the social status of being an older sister) allowed her to use her social status to reprimand them and tell them to let her out. Gendered identity comes into play whether one wants to focus on it. In societies, it is inextricably linked.

There is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes Feminist ethnography. Following Visweswaran's (1997) approach to feminist ethnography, this thesis can be put under the umbrella of feminist ethnography, having varied categories such as experiential

dilemmas relating to being subjective and objective and contextual understanding and formation of a particular gendered identity (Stacy 2001; Visweswarran 1997). The fact that my study in some way can be seen as giving support to women subjugating themselves or lessening themselves for their Pir baba, their husbands, and elderly men in their family could be seen as placing my study in opposition to Western feminist discourses.

Skeggs (2001) focused on the reflexive part of feminist ethnography. They argued in discussion of the "self" and the "knower and the known" how the male researchers do not have to deal significantly with their "male identity" as many female authors might do because of the contextual gendered experiences female researchers face. In *Writing Against Culture,* Abu Lughod (1991) stresses how writing about culture will always keep on creating the "other' and that the "halfies" and feminist writings bring out the inequality and the positions of power. She emphasized feminist literature production within ethnography and halfies (ethnographers of mixed identities), who were excluded from the influential volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), thus challenging the self/other dichotomies within anthropology.

My informants were very exposed to YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp as participants in the millennial era. Even if they hadn't participated in research before, they had been exposed to the problems I am researching. They know, for example, that shrine veneration is seen as problematic by the masses. The reformist view of shrine veneration has almost become the norm because they all were concerned that I might be a newspaper reporter who might expose them to the general public. They also know about the unethical ways reporting has been conducted in Bangladesh and fear being targeted by reporters and wrongly portrayed.

People do not usually interview people of higher social classes to know their secrets. They are not approached as easily as others to share their life stories and provide intimate details unless the one asking has a solid connection with them. This fact demands an updated methodology because even if people are unfamiliar with anthropology, many are familiar with in-depth interviews. It is much harder and more complicated to follow people over a long period and live among them because everything is moving. They are busy with their lives, and as big homes were replaced with concrete and small flats, the community itself has become much larger and disconnected. The overall form of participatory research is not the same. It may be the case, not just for a three-month master's thesis project but even for more long-term research projects, that the researcher has to take a much longer time to keep pace with people because they cannot always be there in the same position for the anthropologists to do their job within 2-3 years of research. I think all of us researchers feel this, and we must keep talking about how social change affects our ability to do research. What I came to realize even more is my identity as a native researcher from a third-world country. I felt like I had to create a distance between my native self and an academic self because otherwise, I would not be creating academic standard research. My native self allowed me to form connections with my informants, but this was a guarded connection to keep my research objective. My imposter syndrome itself became heightened because I saw myself continuously policing my methods of engagement, hoping they would be regarded as proper Western academic behavior. This disjuncture may have further injured my inability to immerse myself in my environment fully.

Ethnography of one's people bounded by place, language, and the national border will always create resistance of some form within oneself. As Appadurai (1988) states, "natives"

are bounded and linked to a place, a geographical setting, and within that linked place, natives tend to be associated with a particular idea. Therefore, it is important to note that home and field are mutually dependent and not exclusive. Lines between fieldwork and doing fieldwork at home intermingle, allowing anthropologists, especially those not cis-males of the third world, to navigate their positionality within the field radically new ways. At the end of it, I am glad I could cover a more significant ground within 3-months, but I believe it would have been much more appropriate to focus on one or two shrines within these 3-months of research. This would have allowed me more time to spend on details I have no doubt overlooked and to contact more informants within the same area.

# Chapter 2: Belonging, Origin, and the Sacred Land of Karamati

## A Historical Walk through The Years

During the Muslim conquests in Bengal, the Sultans and Mughals made great contributions to establishing Islam, from erecting madrasas to bringing ulama into their court for advice (Karim 1959). However, credit for the speed with which Islam spread falls on the Sufis and those they trained because they settled in isolated parts throughout Bengal rather than commercial Mughal cities (Karim 1959; Eaton 1993). Islam in Bengal has on various occasions been described as "folk Islam," "corrupt Islam," or "local/popular Islam," all of them suggesting a lower form of Islam from "true Islam" or, more correctly, "authentic Islam." During the latter part of the twentieth century, many notable works came up, including Karim (1959), Haq (1975), Ahmed (1988), and Roy (1983), that tried to map the identity of what it means to be a Bengali Muslim and the struggle of self-identity at a time when most went through traumatic changes during a subsequently short period from the British colonial period to the partition of 1947 and then the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. Each of these stages during the lives of Bengali Muslims has tremendously affected identity formation in nationalistic and religious spirits. Roy (1983) calls it a distinctively syncretistic identity, which many other authors like Chatterjee (1993) argue against, pointing out that syncretism makes Islam foreign. However, Roy (1983) specifically focuses on the distinct Bengali Muslim identity and a Bangladeshi Muslim identity after the birth of Bangladesh in blood in 1971. Roy (1983) states, "Bengal was marked by its tendency towards convergence with and assimilation to the local cultural milieu" (4). The focus on Orthodox Sunni Islam's

rigid dogmas, careful and well-defined scriptures, official traditions, and monotheism conceals (when the ambition is to create one "monolithic facade") the inner social and cultural structure within which Islam is operating (Roy, 1983). This rings true when we remember Asad's (1986) focus on the particularities of the power structure and historical processes that create and reproduce certain conditions within which Islam operates. Hence, trying to "judge" a believer of Islam of a particular context through the lens of this ideal "monolithic facade" will give a seriously limited view. Islam has now been the state religion of Bangladesh for 34 years. We can study Islam before and after it became the state religion through two different lenses, as we can see the different growth stages of the country itself. Naturally, nationalizing Islam affected the population's shaping, routines, thought processes, and perspectives. From the 10th century onwards, the Bengal state started having frequent interactions with all kinds of trade via the Northeastern trade routes with Burma and China (Karim 1959). Notable merchants, traders, and thinkers have passed Bengal to and fro on their journeys. Thus, the region that comprises Bangladesh had encounters with the outside world, their knowledge, and Islam before Islam was officially introduced and implemented (Karim 1959).

Even though Islam as an established religion started taking place around the 14th century, it gained recognition before the Muslim conquest and the Mughal empire. More than Arabian culture from what is now Saudi Arabia, the Persian teachings and terms were first introduced by the traveling Sufis who wandered in Bengal through India, notably Delhi. According to Haq (1975), it was an "Indian Sufism" that Bengal started to borrow first before the Sufis decided to hold their lodgings permanently in Bengal. They had first stayed in India for some time, getting used to the region. It was easy for them, after being exposed to the

greater Indian subcontinent, to mix in with the region's people. This is because there were and still are many regional differences in living conditions, trade, food, and religion, but there were also many similarities. Many early writers and historians have examined why Islam spread rapidly in Bengal from the 14th century onwards (Haq 1975, Ahmed 1988, Roy 1983, Eaton 1993, Metcalf 2009). Although scholars have not agreed upon a trajectory, one proposed trajectory is that Islam's spread started with the agricultural sector's change and development. Eaton (1993) describes how mass conversion can be linked with the change in land systems. Bengal was transitioning from under Mughal rule to British colonial rule, giving the landowners more power. As land owners were mostly upper-caste Hindus, the majority of the lower caste gradually were seen to be converting more, slowly giving rise to the Muslim peasant class.

Another well-discussed theory that goes well with Roy's (1983) syncretistic approach is that the people readily took upon the religion because they were already connected with the ways of Islam. It was already familiar. The Sufis who traveled to India and later Bengal heavily used and reused yogic-tantric practice of meditation and spiritual healing and incorporated that into the spirituality of Islam, like zikrs, which are repetitions of God's name performed with rhythmic movements and certain respiratory techniques[23], along with the established relationship of master and student was familiar with the people (Karim 1959). The Sufi master and the initiation of the murid (devotee and student) under the master were easy for the people to understand and relate to, much like well-established *guru-shishsho* (teacher-student) relationships, which were also built on respect. The way

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[23] During zikrs the concept of "Latifa," the "center" of the human body is focused on bringing a kind of divine light (noor). Focusing on "Latifa", noor is said to descend during the practice of zikr (Roy 1983).

Sufis introduced Islamic ideals was not alien, and so many people could relate to it and, more importantly, could use it to hope for a better future is what empowered them the most. The mass conversion was mostly of the lower-caste people with no real opportunity to rise higher regarding social and economic status within their lower-status Hindu caste (Eaton 1993, Ahmed 1981).

Similarly, patterns can be seen during the constant reforms that Islam kept going through period after period during the Faraizi movements in the early 19th century, the Deobandi movements that started in the late 19th century, and then later the Tablighi jamaat movements in the early 20th century. Although the Faraizi reformists had broken down into new parties and groups, their roots are still active. The Deobandi and Tablighi are still active with their current name, although they have broken into many separate branches.

It may sound like I am stating something obvious. But it is precisely because it is obvious that we tend to forget it so constantly, and thus, it needs to be said again, especially now, when Islamic discourse is again shifting its course. If we look at Islamic history, it is easy to see how shrine veneration of the Sufi saints, who were the original preachers of Islam, is still one of the prominent practices of many Muslims of Bangladesh. Shrine veneration has been part of the Indian subcontinent long before Islam. The passing of the saint was observed as a great mourning period. It is a common belief that the saint's death is not the death of their miracles (*Karamati*) or blessings. They can still listen, communicate, and make people see their path past their hopelessness. As Karim (1959) stated,

Dargahs (shrines) have played and are playing today the most important part.
It would not be an exaggeration to say that they are nerve-centers of Bengal
Muslim society (138).

The culture now has been so polarized that, while many people cannot relate to dargahs, for others, dargahs are so prevalent and intermingled with one's life and upbringing, from how they eat to their politics, that one cannot separate them. This is especially true in the case of the followers of Maizbhandari tariqa (a Bangladeshi Sufi order)[24]. Many Muslims see shrine veneration as a deviation from "true" Islam and believe that those who revere shrines do nothing but commit *shirk* (idolatry and polytheism). The common view is that, in the past, it was easy for people to practice Islam in that way because they did not know better. Now, it is different. People have read Islamic texts and seen Islamic teaching videos on social media and the internet, such as YouTube. There are countless madrasas (Islamic schools), so Muslims against shrine veneration see no excuse for any Muslims to continue such practices. One of the initial causes of this reform was the increase in migration to Middle Eastern countries for jobs (the majority being labor jobs). Yet the veneration of saints is still prevalent, and despite its negative connotations, thousands of Bangladeshis flock towards the dargahs in times of perils.

It is still widely believed that a saint never truly dies, and their burial place becomes a site of divine power that courses throughout the space. The fact that the saint's presence can still, in some way, console souls and show some paths to their devotees is one of the reasons people continue to come to the shrine. However, it is not the only reason because even when the shrine goes "cold," people would still come to pay respect. The idea of a "hot mazar" or "cold mazar" refers to the mazar being active and inactive in their work of miracles. If the majority of the people who come see their wants and desires fulfilled, they

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[24] In Sufism *tariqat* means path. There are many orders or tariqas, Maizbhandari is a Bangladeshi-based one.

will continue to venerate more, and the word will keep spreading that the mazar helped them overcome their hurdles. If the mazar is inactive, and no one benefits, that mazar will be referred to as cold, meaning they are not as effective as it used to be. I have received comments like this in the mazar of Bayezid Bostami and Shah Poran, as informants have expressed that they continue to come as a form of respect and remembrance but that the mazar is not as *gorom* (hot) as it used to be.

Shrine veneration as a ritual observance is present in most other religions, not just Islam, including Catholicism and Hinduism. Many schools of thought in Islam see shrine veneration as a distortion of the religion or a forbidden act of polytheism. Mazar veneration has been a subject of research by many scholars. Some studies (Harder 2011; Alam 2010; Hossain 1995) focus on Sufism in Bangladesh, where shrine veneration is seen as one of the main rituals that play a complex role in maintaining the overall social and political structure. Similarly, studies have been done surrounding the culture of shrine veneration and its important part in Bengal's history (Ahmad, 1981; Roy, 1983; Hossain, 1995). These holy places and their associated rituals were part and parcel of the larger context of Bengal's other religious practices that seeped into Islam as it was introduced (Bertocci, 2006). Religion has always been conditioned by geographic location, time, culture, and historical processes (Asad 1986). Islam spread in Bengal, influenced and conditioned by such factors. These practices centuries later still have their voices within Islam and how it is practiced in Bangladesh. Wilce (1998) has called this phenomenon "multivocality," and the way Islam has been embodied has a rich history that leads to the complex negotiation of multiple religious voices (Ewing, 1998). Some studies have detailed the various tariqas in Bangladesh

in different regions and their many roles in the community structure (Bertocci, 2006; Alam, 2010).

It is evident within the literature that much work has been done focusing on how shrine veneration is a cultural practice that was adapted to Islamic teachings and how it promoted religious harmony. Shrine veneration has also been of much curiosity because of the magico-spiritual connection that draws people into the light of the Auliyah (saints). One of my participants described the "Auliayah's noor" (Auliyah's light) as something that emanates an otherworldly power across the land where it is situated. The attraction of the pir's and pirani's (female pir) holy abilities, the intoxicating qawwali at night (religious musical gatherings), the prospect of being blessed by the Auliyah's noor, and the never-ending hope of finally overcoming a problem, all of these pull all kinds of people from all kinds of economic and religious backgrounds to the shrines.

Among these multivocal voices of Islam, one was the niche and elitist viewpoint of the literalists who viewed such practices as "backward" (Bertocci, 2006). Islamization is a global modern phenomenon targeting locally practiced Islam as wrongful deviations from "true" Islam. The reformism that has taken place in Bengal has not been of the same kind (Dwyer, 2016). One of the earliest movements during the Mughal empire, also seen as one of the earliest peasant/reform movements mentioned above, the Faraizi movement, was a religious reform group that called to "return to the fundamentals of Islam" (Dwyer, 2016). The Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) movement differs from revivalist movements like the Faraizis because TJ is a reformist Sufi movement.

In contrast, the Faraizi movement called for literalist reading of the Quran and Hadith and leaving behind intercessory practices. The TJ gained prominence during the 1900s

(Sikand, 2007). Their goal is to change or, in their view, "fix" the way people have inhibited Sufism through shrine veneration and root out the *bid'ah* (innovation) rituals that take place in the graveyards of pirs (Metcalf 2009; Sikand 2007). On the other hand, the Salafi or Wahhabi movement, which comes from the Middle East, is completely against shrine veneration or going to the shrines to pray. Rituals like observing Shab-e-Barat (observed on the 15th night of the month of Sha'ban of the Islamic calendar), celebrating Eid-e-Milad-un-Nabi (celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday), holding religious musical gatherings, and *milads*[25] and the celebration of birth and death anniversaries of Auliyahs are some of the practices that Salafi-Wahhabi is completely against.

Legends and folklore of saints passed down from generation to generation are part of the reason that helps keep the strength of faith in saints alive. Saints were successful not only because they represented hope for many lower-class Hindu-turned-Muslims to rise in social ranks by adopting Islam (Ahmed 1981) but also because they served as cultural mediators in terms of education, mindfulness, and knowledge of Islam, which helped to bridge the gap between upper-class Muslim migrants with the newly converted Hindu Muslims, as they combined Hindu myths and epics with Islamic epics (Roy 1983). Eaton (1993) discussed how Sufis used deserted forest lands to build their religious khanqahs and preached Islam and where their devotees congregated to pray, making those lands untaxable and helping

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[25] Religious gatherings during special events such as auspicious days, birthdays, the opening of a new business, buying a house, death of a loved one, where duas are made led by an Imam. Men and women participate separately.

institutionalize Islam. Those lands fit well with the supernatural world sung in the epics.

The next sections discuss the shrines chosen for this study, the saints' hagiographies, and their miracles, showing how these saints helped consolidate Islam within their area.

## History of Shah Jalal and His Mazar Sharif

The story of Shaykh al-Mashaykh Makhdum Shaykh Jalal al-Din Mujarrad ibn Muhammad, popularly known as Hazrat Shah Jalal, in Bengal starts with the conquest of Sylhet and following mass Islamization in the northeastern part of Bangladesh, Sylhet.

Sylhet's name itself changed as the region underwent various changes of power. The name's etymology thus signifies the region's plurality that is powerfully visible in Bengal's history and folk culture. The transition of the name from Srihatta to Shillhatta to Jalalabad, then to Sillhet, and lastly, Sylhet intricately interweaves the Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic mystical periods and the British colonial period, each of which brings its distinct changes, additions, and subtractions of/from the region. The Sylhet region was under the Kingdom of Gour throughout the Middle Ages and was known by its Indo-Aryan name, *Srihatta*. The name *Srihatta* derived from the region's two distinct characteristics: the rocky region was covered with reddish rocks, known as *Shila*. The *"hatta"* (bazaar) sat atop these rocky hills. The name Sylhet was derived from combining the words "Shila" and "*Hatt"* to form *Shilhatta*. It is also said that the last Hindu King, Raja Gour Govinda of the Gour kingdom, kept such rocks for protection at the entrance of his capital, *Shilhatta*, whose name was transformed

over time into *Srihatta* – with Sri meaning, beauty, charm, and wealth. Hence, the beautiful and wealthy bazaar. Other accounts simply render the meaning "encircled marketplace"[26] a suitable name for a busy kingdom.

A more popular mythic account of the name's history is connected with the saint Shah Jalal himself. It is said that during the war of Sylhet in 1303, when Shah Jalal joined Nasir-al-Din's army, he crossed the river Surma and was met with King Gour's tower of rocks (the red shilas). Shah Jalal raised his hands and commanded the rocks to move away by uttering "Shilla hatt," shila as in rocks and hatt meaning move, hence "move away rocks"[27]. Sillhatta came to being, which then became Sillhet. During the British colonial rule over the region, the word Sylhet was introduced to make "Silhet" sound distinct from "Silchar" (a town in Assam) by the British East India Company.[28]

The early 13th century brought the beginnings of Islamic culture and rule to Sylhet via the Middle Eastern Sufi mystic Hazrat Shahjalal and his 360 (one account says 311[29]) companions. One of the first stories I heard from the locals and the caretakers of the Dargah was when they excitedly retold the *keramat* (miracles) of the saint and how he saved the kingdom from the frightful king and his kingdom of witchcraft and magic. Gour Govinda would be the last king to succeed his predecessor and take over northern Sylhet (Srihatta).

Under the Raja Gour Govinda (1260-1303), the kingdom was said to have thrived economically. The Raja introduced new defensive strategies and regained lost territories when he came to power.  Remembered as an intolerant tyrant, Gour Govinda used to oppress

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[26] (Khan 2012, 24).
[27] (Ahmed 2011,17)
[28] (Ahmed 1999)
[29] (Hanif 2002)

religious minorities, including the few native Muslims. Myths and legends of these historical

accounts tell how Raja Gour Govinda would use witchcraft over his kingdom in Srihatta, a

mountainous beauty, a land of witchcraft reigned by a tyrannical king. I have collected the

biographical accounts of Shah Jalal from several sources, and now what I present is a very

compressed summary of much more extensive works that have been produced over many

years. I drew considerably from the books presented to me by a member of the Mufti family

(one of the Khadim family), Mufti Jamal Uddin Hasan Banna when I visited him in the Dargah

Mohalla. Dargah Mohalla is an old area where the families of the Khadim lineage reside. He

gave me the book "The History of Shah Jalal and his Khadims" by Mufti Azharuddin Ahmad.

It was written around 1913, and this original writing has been republished many times. This

book has been among the greatest resources for many local scholars because it holds

together the rare accounts in Suhail-i-Yemon, the saint's first and only written records by

one of his disciples. The edited version that I received was both the Bangla and English-

translated one. My research also drew on academic historical works, including Abdul Karim's

*Social History of The Muslims in Bengal*, Enamul Haq's *A History of Sufism in Bengal*,"

Richard Eaton's *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier,* A. Rahim's *The Saints of Bengal*

and Mohammad Mojlum Khan's *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal*.

The advent of Shah Jalal to Srihatta and the start of Islamic expansion started with the

tale of one lone Muslim named Borhan-uddin. He lived during the reign of Raja Gour Govinda

in one of the hillocks called Tultikor. In honor of his son's birth, Borhan-uddin secretly

sacrifices a cow, a prohibited act in this Hindu kingdom. A crow—or, in some accounts, a

kite—steals a morsel of the cow flesh and drops it near a Brahmin's house, and in many

popular accounts, it is said that the flesh drops right into the king's court. Enraged, Raja Gour

Govinda seeks out the culprit. He butchers Borhan-uddin's infant son and cuts off Borhan-uddin's right arm. Distraught, Borhan-uddin travels to places under the Muslim Sultan's rule to seek justice for his son. His plea reaches Shamsuddin Firuz Shah, Sultanate of independent principality Lakhnauti. Shamsuddin Firuz Shah sent his sister's son Sikandar Gazi with an army to take over Sylhet. On his way, Sikander Gazi conquered Sonargaon. Sikander Gazi attempted to take over Sylhet three times. Still, he was defeated each time by Gour Govinda, after which Sultan Firuz Shah told the governor of Satgaon, Nasir al-Din, to join his nephew Sikandar Gazi. Around Tribeni, near Satgaon, Nasir-al-Din meets the saint Shah Jalal and his 360 followers. At this point, Shah Jalal has already met Borhan-uddin on a journey where Borhan-uddin was returning to Sylhet and chance-met the saint. Hearing the injustice Borhan-uddin suffered, Shah Jalal decided to help the Muslim forces take over the region. His meeting with Nasir al-Din near Satgaon was perfect, and from there, Shah Jalal, with his disciples, Nasir al-Din and Sikandar Gazi, with their army headed one last time for Srihatta. This time, they defeated the king and took over Srihatta. This war, known as the Conquest of Sylhet, took place in 1303 C.E.

After the conquest, Shah Jalal decided to spend the remainder of his years there. We must go back to Shah Jalal's history to understand this motivation. Not much is known about this great mystic. Some accounts even said Sheikh Shah Jalal was another great saint, Sheikh Jalal al-Din Tabrezi of Bengal. However, much of the research existing cleared this confusion and traced that they were two different saints.[30]

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[30] For details see Dr. A. Rahim's "The Saints in Bengal: Sheikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi and Shah Jalal," 1960. The author breaks down the reasons for the confusion and clears out the confusion as per historical dates and relevant sources.

The khadims of the dargah have preserved the accounts of Shah Jalal. According to the records of the dargah, there have been two written accounts of Shah Jalal, one of them called *Rauzat-us-Saletin*, and another was written by one of the Khadim's of the dargah, Moinuddin, around 1711 AD, named *Risalat*. These two accounts were compiled into a document by a Tripura native named Munsef Nasir-uddin Haider during his stay at the *dargahmohalla* (the Dargah Sharif area) in 1859 A.D. This pamphlet came to be called *Suhel-i-Yemon*. The earlier two records are now extinct, and only the *Suhel-i-Yemon* is said to have survived and is preserved by the khadims of the dargah. Local hagiographical records of the great saint are abundant and accessible in local references. However, detailed accounts of his life and journey are limited to Bangladesh and the area, Sylhet, where he dedicated his life, and no mention of the saint is found in notable Indian *Mulfazats*. Apart from Suhail-i-Yemon, the Persian inscriptions found at the dargah and the accounts of Ibn Batuta in his travel log *Rihla* are the only sources that point to the existence of the great saint.

The late compilation that gives some details of the life of Shah Jalal in Suhail-i-Yemon is based heavily on tradition and oral accounts, yet it cannot be dismissed off-hand. According to Rahim (1960), its records are corroborated by Bengali literature and contemporary references. Therefore, it is important to weigh it against other relevant facts. According to the written biography in the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Sufis* compiled by N. Hanif (2002) and the Suhail-i-Yemon accounts, Sheikh-ul-Mashaikh Hazrat Makhdum Ghazi Shaikh Jalaluddin Mujjarad or Hazrat Sheikh Jalal was born in Yemen in 1271 AD. There has been some confusion regarding his origin because one of the three inscriptions found in the walls around the tomb dated 1505 AD read.

He who ordered the erection of this blessed building, attached, attached to the

house of benefit (Silhet)- may God protect it against the ravages of time-the

high, the great shaykh Jalal, the Mujarad, of Kunyai[31]

Kunyai referred to here, is also debated. In Suhail-i-Yemon, and by the current

khadims, it is maintained that he is of Yemeni descent and that Kunyai may have been a

village in Yemen[32], or it might be that Sheikh Shah Jalal might have lived in Konya, Turkey,

for some time. It is accepted that he is from Yemen. His father, Hazrat Mohammad bin

Mohammad Ibrahim, is said to be of Quraish descent, and his mother is a descendant of the

Sayed family. Hazrat Shah Jalal is said to have lost his parents during infancy. He grew up

under his maternal uncle's care, Syed Ahmed Kabir Suhrawardy, in Mecca, where he was

taught religious and mystical practices. Hazrat Shah Jalal became a religious and spiritual

scholar and his uncle's devoted disciple. Satisfied with his growth, his uncle gave him a

handful of dust and ordered that he settle wherever he found dust of similar color, smell, and

taste. Shah Jalal started his journey to Yemen with 12 companions. During his journey

through Yemen, the Arabian Desert, Iran, and Afghanistan, he tested the soils to match the

dust his uncle had given him.[33] In Ibn Battuta's records, it is mentioned that Hazrat Shah Jalal

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[31] AH, Dani. Analysis of Inscription, 1957. Pg-103. In Asiatic Society of Pakistan Vol-ii. See also E. Haq, A History of Sufism in Bengal, 1975, pg-222-223.

[32] In "The History of Hazrat Shah Jalal and his Khadim's" by Mufti Azharuddin Ahmad, the author refers to one Mr. Blackman and writes that since the word "Koniyeh" is not Arabic, it could be a derivation of the word Kanna, a village in Persia. Another explanation discussed was it could be "Kanbiya" in Gujarat because the difference between "Koniyeh" and "Kanbiya" is one dot. Since no form references were listed in the edited version of the book. It is difficult to identify who the author meant by Mr. Blackman. At this point, we can only know that it is generally accepted that the saint was from Yemen and it was what was said to me by one of the Khadims of the dargah, Mr. Shamul Mahmud Khan.

[33] (Hanif 2002)

recounted that he had seen the Abbasid Caliph Mu'tasim bi-Allah in Baghdad and was present in the city during the time of the Caliph's assassination in 1258 AD[34].

When he reached Delhi with his Mujahids, he was welcomed as a guest of the renowned saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. Nizamuddin Auliya gifted Shah Jalal two pairs of pigeons during his last day in Delhi. He set out to Satgaon with his 360 followers. Satgaon was where he met the army general Nasir-uddin, joining him to conquer Sylhet. Some legendary and popular accounts state that when King Gour Govinda burned the boats of the Muslim army, Shah Jalal took his prayer rug and ordered his disciples to do the same. Together, they crossed the Surma River on floating prayer rugs. Stripping the legend from its magical influence, we know that Shah Jalal was present during the war and participated. Another inscription from the records (now in the Dhaka Museum) of the conquest dated 918 AH states that,

> By the grace of the Sheikh of the Sheikhs, the venerated Sheikh Jalal, the hermit, son of Muhammad, the first conquest of Islam of the city and Arsah Srihat (Sylhet) was at the hands of Sikander Khan Gazi during the reign of Sultan Firuz Shah Delvi, in the year 703 AH.[35]

After the war was won, Hazrat Shah Jalal stood before the King's court and called the first *Azan* (call for prayer) in the now-Muslim state. Legends say that the King's court crashed as Shah Jalal called to prayer. Many of the women I interviewed retold this incident as well. Shah Jalal decided to make Sylhet his final place because he found that the dust his uncle gave him matched the dust of Sylhet. He led a secluded life, as his last name suggests, Mujarrad,

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[34] (Metcalf 2009,139)
[35] (Dani 1957,07)

meaning hermit. Shah Jalal, the hermit, secluded himself in a hill cave where he used to stand in prayers all night. His influence on the spread of Islam in Sylhet and nearby places was extraordinary. His established *khanqah* became a refuge for hermits, travelers, and the distressed. His advice was respected, and his actions followed. With his knowledge and that of his followers, Shah Jalal spread Islam successfully. From the accounts of Ibn Batuta, Shah Jalal was a tall, thin man with little facial hair. During his last 40 years, he kept to himself and lived mostly on milk, and he fasted continuously, breaking his fast every ten days. Ibn Batuta wrote that the saint had predicted his arrival and sent four of his disciples to welcome him and that,

> When I came into his presence, he rose to greet me and embraced me. He asked me about my native land and traveled, and when I gave him an account of them, he told me, "You are the traveler of the Arabs." Those disciples there said, "And the non-Arabs too, O our master." "And the non-Arabs too," he repeated, "So show him honor." They then took me to the hermitage and gave me hospitality for three days.[36]

The saint kept the pair of pigeons he received from Nizam-uddin Auliya, and slowly the number of pigeons grew and became known as "Jalali Pigeons." Today, pigeons are everywhere in the shrine; they have a three-story house and a huge square space for food where people can buy birdseed and throw it in the space. Many people do it as part of the veneration process, as the birds are considered holy and special. There is also a miracle pond

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[36] (Metcalf 2009, 141)

filled with catfish, which people feed for good luck. It is said that the catfish were black magicians that Shah Jalal defeated and turned into fish.

The accounts of Shah Jalal, both historical and legendary, maintain a level of spiritualism and miracles necessary for a mystical saint to be venerated. Along with this, the spiritual lineage of the saint is also quite important. The spiritual lineage listed is as Hazrat Mohammad Mustafa (S.M), Hazrat Ali, Hazrat Hassan Basri, Hazrat Habib Azami, Shaikh Dawood Tayee, Shaikh Ma'roof Karkhi, Shaikh Sari Sukhti, Shaikh Mamshad Sindri, Shaikh Amed Dinuri, Shaikh Ambia, Shaikh Aziuddin Suhrawardy, Shaikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardy, Shaikh Mukhdum Bakauddin Zakaria, Syed Jalal Surkh Bukhari, Syed Ahmed Kabir Suhrarwardy, and Hazrat Shah Jalal Mujjarad[37].

## The Dargah Complex

Since its inception, the dargah complex has comprised a mosque, the tomb at the top of the hill, a miracle pond, the dargah office, and another building beside it that is used as extra space for various occasions, like a women's prayer space. Outside the complex, there are madrasas and an orphanage, the dargah lane, and a variety of shops that opened surrounding it, and outside are homes of workers who are also caretakers of the area.

The shrine has two main entrances that are frequently used. One of the main entrances is decorated with a grand gate locally known as the Dargah gate, and there are two other entrances for a total of four. The shrine area in total is around 78.4 acres. The hill on which the tomb is situated is known as the dargah tilla, and the small women's quarters are

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[37] (Hanif 2002, 460.)

at the foot of the hill. Beside it are the stairs that lead up to the tomb and the mosque. The mosque is one of the largest mosques in the Sylhet region. In front of the mosque is a tower decorated with the word Allah in Arabic. A clock tower can be seen at the south of the dargah. Besides the women's quarters, a small structure is built for ablutions (wudu). Beyond that is the pond of catfish, known as *gojari mach*, which is also considered miraculous. Overlooking the mosque and the tomb is the vast courtyard, where the pigeon square can be seen in front of the large two-story pigeon house. The square is a boundary filled with pigeon feed thrown by the visitors. On the west side, a well is located, often called a miracle pond. This pond's water and the area surrounding it are considered sacred. People throw money on the sides of the construction that surrounds the well.

Throughout the area, many different donation boxes are situated in many ways. There are locked boxes at the entrance, through the courtyards, outside the women's quarters, in front of the office and the mosque, and through the walkways and gates. Money is thrown in huge lidded pots in front of an open area under the spare building. Money is also thrown on the sides of the well and used to buy food for pigeons and catfish. The money received in donations mostly goes to the shrine fund used to maintain the management and helpers' salaries and wages. Besides that, the "bari system," said to have been established during Hazrat Shah Jalal's time, gives the Khadim family a right to a share of the money donated to the shrine. This "bari tradition" makes the Khadim family the successor of these "bari" properties. This distribution system happens every year. So, the money from Boishak to Chaitra (Bengali months) of the previous year is given to the families the following year every month. Aside from donations themselves, visitors spend money on items such as

candles, *agarbatti* (incense), *tasbeehs* (prayer beads), and various kinds of foods and sweets from the local vendors surrounding the *dargah* lanes.

The family also has archeological artifacts of the saint, such as his sword used in the war, his wooden sandals, and the two inscriptions found on the walls of the old mosque. The old structure and the mosques underwent several changes as maintenance work was done.



Figure 2.1: Courtyard of Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif, 2022
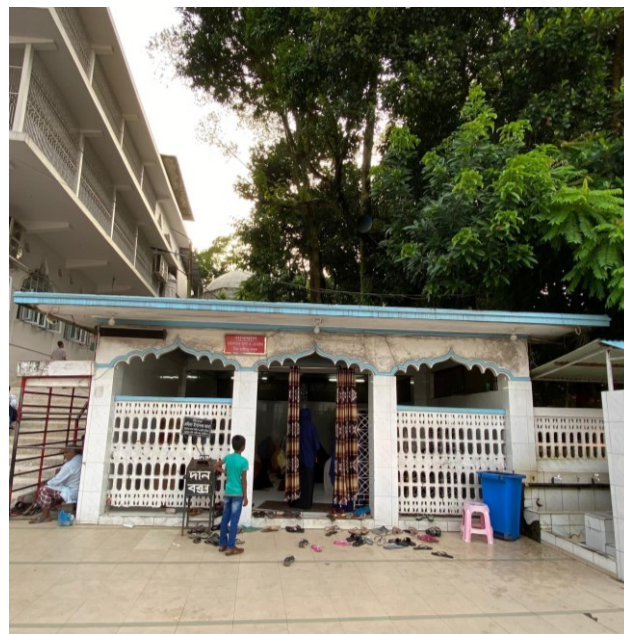
Figure 2.2: Women's space of veneration at the foot of the hill in Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif

## Hazrat Shah Paran and His Mazar Sharif

My visit to the mazar/dargah of Hazrat Shah Paran was contemporaneous to my visits to Shah Jalal Mazar because of their proximity. I went to each shrine interchangeably. Those who came to visit the Shah Jalal mazar also visited the Shah Paran mazar. This itself became a sort of systematic ritual of its own.

Over months of research on the accessible literature, I could glean little about Shah Paran. Most of the mentions of the saint and his mazar were part of the works on Shah Jalal. The information I got from my informants and the current Khadim of the dargah was based on the oral accounts of his miracles. The exact date of birth and death is not recorded, although reports agree that Hazrat Shah Paran was one of the original 12 followers of Shah Jalal when he started his journey from Yemen. Shah Paran is Hazrat Shah Jalal's sister's son, his nephew. Shah Paran was also part of the 1303 conquest of Sylhet. It aided Shah Jalal in spreading and preaching Islam by establishing a Khanqah of his own at the Khadim Nagar in Dakshingarh Pargana, about 8 km from Sylhet town. From local accounts, it is said that Shah Paran was born in Yemen and is of Suhrawardy and Jalalia spiritual lineage. One of the notable characteristics of this saint is that he was known to be angry and short-tempered. In Sylheti dialect, they phrased it as "*uni onek gorom chilo,*" literally, "he was hot," meaning "he was a very angry person." The sources and details I mention here were all collected from the conversation with Selim uncle, my informant, a local devotee and poet, and Farid Mia, the current Khadim of the shrine. Despite being an influential historical person in the area, it

seems that Hazrat Shah Paran has been the subject of little literary coverage, unlike Hazrat Shah Jalal.

Farid Mia stated that Shah Poran baba's shrine and area used to emanate his anger as well. Even after passing, he did not tolerate any form of disrespect.

When I was little, I saw with my own eyes that if anyone disrespected the place in any way within his area or did not have good intentions, they would start bleeding from their mouth and nose.

They related a story from this conversation, which my mom also said she heard from her mother. A Bangladeshi actor of the 80s visited the shrine for a tour, hearing about its popularity. He was in the area for a shoot. Since the saint's shrine was atop a hillock, people had to climb upstairs to reach it. As a woman, I could not climb the stairs to see his tomb as it is forbidden for women to go near shrines, tombs, or gravesites of Muslims. All the venerators must remove their shoes and climb up the stairs as it is a sacred place. The actor was told to do the same, and he made a snarky retort, "*amar pa tao khule jai?*" meaning, "Should I take off my legs as well?" After this encounter, he lost his legs in an accident sometime after the shooting. Many say that it was a form of punishment or payback for his disrespect towards the saint. Farid Mia's father was the Khadim at that time. And so, Farid Mia ended it by saying,

That is why I say, shorol pothe thako, khezmoth koro (literal meaning would be: stay on a straight path, do good)

In other words, lead a simple life, do good, and care for others. Before leaving, Farid Mia gave me a dried fruit as a form of blessing and told me to eat it by mixing it with milk. My mom then safely wrapped it up somewhere. It was from the huge tree in the center of the

complex, named 'Ashagachh' (a tree of hopes). The tree leaves resemble a mixture of fig, mango, and some other fruit, possibly a mixture of all these different fruit trees, said the Khadim. People eat the seeds of the figs devotionally in the hope of getting rid of diseases or receiving blessings. He sighed and added that the tree does not bear fruits like it used to. When he was little, the fruits used to be twice as large and used to decorate all the branches.

Farid Mia is now in his 70s, and his once-henna-stained red hair and beard, as depicted in the colored picture provided at the end (fig: 6.13), are now snow-white. He spoke quietly yet with a playful note, often breaking into a smile. Growing up, when his father used to run the shrine, he saw many strange things that used to happen in the mazar. He continued to tell local stories about the saint and the miracles. The saint Shah Poran's anger and arrogance towards anyone not a Muslim was well known, even to the great saint Shah Jalal. He told a story of how the saint wandered through the jungle searching for Tillagargh Hill (the place of Shah Jalal). He came in contact with someone who worked for Shah Jalal and under whose care the great saint had given two of his Jalali pigeons, saying, "If you get lost on your path, just release the pigeons, and they will be able to tell you your direction." Shah Poran was tired and hungry from his journey and, seeing the pigeons on the fellow traveler, demanded that the man give him the pigeons to eat since he was hungry and was Shah Jalal's nephew. The traveler initially did not agree but, eventually, feeling the aura of power and seeing the face of anger, surrendered the pigeons to him and went on his way. After hearing this, Shah Jalal found Shah Poran and said what he had done was sacrilegious. Shah Poran became angry at this accusation and then simply took two feathers out of his bag and blew on them. The feathers turned into many pigeons, "here are your pigeons."

Shah Poran was banished from the court of Shah Jalal for eating the sacred pigeons, so he established his khanqah some distance away. It is said that over the years, the pir's name was changed to Shah Poran, "Poran," meaning soul, used as an endearment, and that there is no record of the original name of the pir.

## The Dargah

The hilltop shrine of the saint overlooks a very beautiful pond. The main open area houses the ancient Tree of Hopes, around which a protective boundary has been made. The tree trunk is usually wrapped with a red or green cloth. Local fakirs can be seen lounging around there, facing the pond. Behind the tree and up the stairs are beautiful and intricately designed double doors leading to the women's space. It is very strangely designed. It is not a usual square four-walled room. In front of the entry corridor, a big cauldron wrapped in red cloth is situated on either side of the doorway. There are narrow alley-shaped hallways.

From the left, walking and turning will lead to a place filled with prayer mats. Some wood boxes are kept for the shoes a few steps before that. Generally, you take off your shoes and carry them to the shoe boxes. There are spaces for shoes outside, but some just leave their shoes at the base of the stairway. The halls are L-shaped, so you have to make a turn to reach the praying spot. There is a big window facing the outdoors. From the right, you keep on walking, and this L-shaped hallway feels longer and leads to another praying spot. This one is long and faces several windows to the outside. There are mats placed across the long and narrow hallway. Small cupboards are pushed against the wall with Qurans and some religious books, most in Bangla. Passing the hallways, you see long spaces sectioned off by wrought-iron fences in the middle part of the place. These fenced-off areas include an outer

area, another past this one, and a middle inner room that you can view from the hallways. Plastic chairs and more books are kept inside this inner room, which is also used for praying, although the area is mostly kept clean and locked. They open this room during rituals like the urs to accommodate the crowds.

The windows from the hallway overlook the graveyards where all the descendants of the pir's companions and the generational khadims who passed away are buried. I saw one or two fakirs giving respect to them as they walked past the mud grounds by raising their hands and touching their foreheads. I saw many baby goats strolling by as well. There were overhead ceiling fans slowly spinning as I looked through the window. The weather was warm and welcoming that July. I sat there long before realizing the old walls were filled with writing. I turned back, and sure enough, the walls were filled with notes written by visitors. At the back were the lower and side walls, as most were open grills through which you could see the empty inner rooms. I got up and started reading them. Written in Bangla or English were various wishes from people who came here. Most were addressed to Allah. It felt like a wish well (in this case, a wish wall) where you can read a human's innermost wishes, hopes, and dreams. It was humbling to see that most wishes were for good health, a good life, or a chance to reconnect or reunite with families rather than for more wealth or power.

Figure 2.3: Inside Women's Quarters in Shah Poran Mazar Sharif.
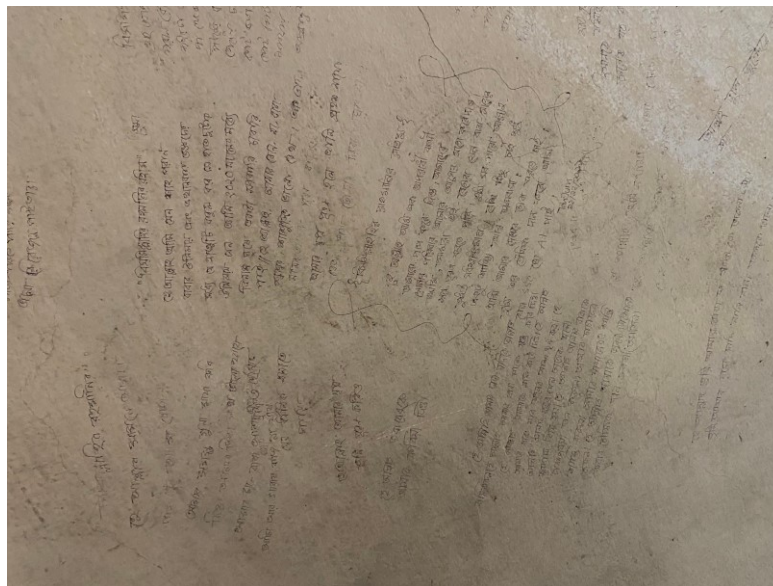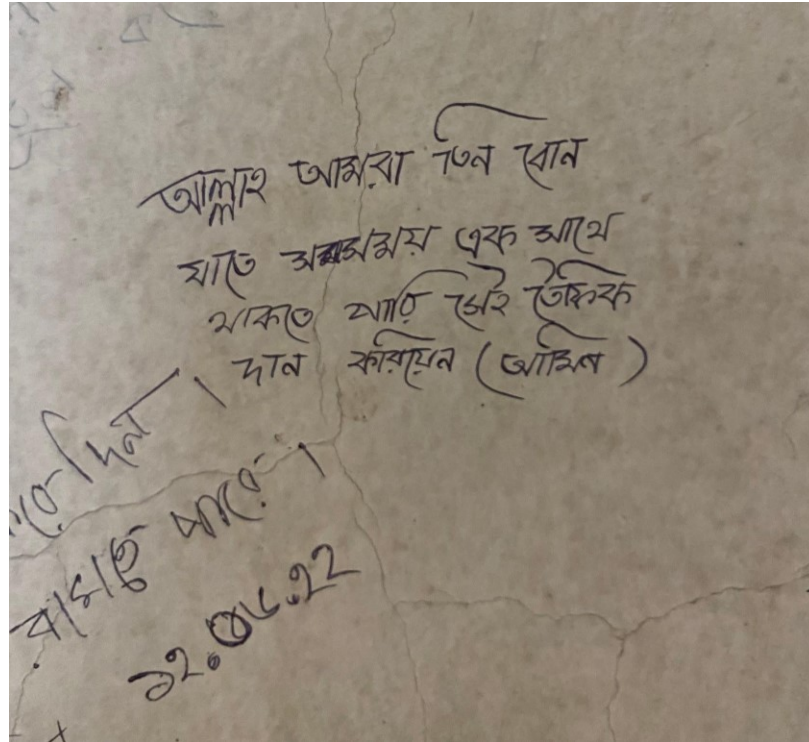
Figure 2.4: Writings on Walls.

The above photo reads, "Allah grant us the toufique so that we three sisters can

remain together forever (Ameen)."

Figure 2.5: The Tree of Hope (Ashagach).

# Hazrat Bayezid Bostami and his mazar sharif

I purposely chose to stay in a place close to the shrine so the commute would not be too long. One time, after the end of the fieldwork for the day, I called an Uber to take us back to our rest house. The Uber driver asked if we were still inside the shrine, and I said yes after telling the driver to pick us up from the shrine's entrance. He told us that he was also in the shrine and told us to wait a bit as he was coming out of the shrine mosque. He noticed us standing by the pond and waved and then walked to the further side of the corner wall, which served as parking space. He brought around the car, and off we went. That day, I had my mother with me. All of us started having a casual conversation. The driver wore a blue punjabi and a white tupi, and his beard was dyed orange with henna. I asked if he frequented the shrine, and he said the place was convenient because most of his trips fell around the area, but then he firmly added that he did not believe in shrines and the practice of veneration. He added that the saint was extraordinary, had spiritual strength and devotion, and should be respected but not venerated. I asked if he knew about the saint's history, and he said,

> Not much, but growing up, I heard one story of his that stayed with me all my life, and I even told it to my children. When Saint Bayezid was a young boy, his sick mother asked him for a glass of water one night; Bayezid noticed the drinking water was empty and took the pot to get more from the nearest well. When he poured the glass of water and brought it to his mother's bed, his mother fell asleep. Bayezid stood where he was with the glass of water all night, and when his mother finally woke up, she saw Bayezid standing in front of her, and he said, "Mother, here is the glass of

water you asked for," and his mother realized he had been standing all night and became overwhelmed with love for her son and prayed to Allah for blessing him with her. Seeing mother's love and blessing, Allah blessed Bayezid with awliyah's noor and that he gets the proper training to be awliyah. So, I do believe in saints.

The driver laughed, then added: "My mother used to teach us (my siblings and I) proper conduct and respect for parents through that story."

There was no way to tell whether this story originated in Bengal, whether it traveled from elsewhere, or whether it was adapted from another story. During the interviews with the custodians, I learned little about the saint himself. The family did not seem to know much well. All they said was that I should read the book they gave me and I would find all the information I needed. The book they gave me was in Bangla and from a local publication. I did not take the book at its face value. My impression was they did not want to go into details with me or share anything that might cause harm to their image. Some scholars have argued that the shrine of the saint Bayezid Bostami is empty, a jawab (imitation)[38], and that the saint never really came to Bangladesh. The enshrined tomb then is empty. Then, whose story is being passed down from generation to generation? Was this another saint with spiritual strength who was forgotten because there were no written records? This could be a strong possibility because oral literature and knowledge are important, but it can, like written records, become changed or misinterpreted through the years.

Hazrat Bayezid Bostami, or in proper terms, the great Sufi scholar Bayezid Bistami, labeled as Sultan-ul-Arefin, was born in Bostam (Iran). The date of birth is unknown, but the

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[38] Karim (1959). This is agreed with Enamul Haq (1975).

date of death is speculated to be 874 AD. This is one of the first reasons why the saint never entered Bengal because the advent of Islam in Bengal in historical records did not start before the 10th century. There are no known historical records of the saint being in the region. This shrine of his tomb sits on a hilltop in Nasirabad, about 7 km from Chattagram city. The famous pond of softshell turtles is opposite the mosque and the hilltop shrine, locally known as the "mazari gazari" pond of "tortoises and fishes." The pond of the soft-shelled tortoise (Aspideretes nigricans) is known to be holy. The local legend has it that certain djinns got turned into turtles as a form of punishment by the saint. Since then, the turtles that have been surviving are the descendants of those djinn turtles and hence are sacred. People who come to venerate feed the turtles bananas and sweets that can be purchased from the store that surrounds the mazar sharif. Ahsan and Saeed (2009) reported that these soft-shelled turtles were no longer endemic only to Bangladesh and that the pond was excavated around the 17th century; the area of the pond was around 0.58 ha (94.64x61.27 m). The Khadim family overlooks the maintenance and breeding of the turtles. I have seen about ten soft-shelled turtles above water and sometimes less during my visits. The water is filled with fish, well-known as "gazaris." The *khadims* say that fishing is not allowed, and the turtles have been under strict surveillance since the pond was poisoned in 2007. The Khadim with whom I talked said they were poisoned due to possible rivalry, but this attack miraculously harmed no turtle. The *khadims* were able to take the turtles away, and once the water was cleaned and poison free, they released the turtles into their home territory again. "No one can harm them even if they want; our saint won't let them," says the *Khadim*. The breeding ground for the turtles is sectioned off in a corner and is routinely regulated. The pond has one front set of stairs from which visitors feed the turtles and

silently offer a prayer. A study showed about 500 of these turtles; it is the only place in Bangladesh where they can be found. The breeding ground is said to be about 300 sq.m. The mazar committee is guided by the Wildlife and Nature Conservation Division of Chattagram to help regulate, maintain, and breed the turtles (Das et al. 2018).

## The Shrine area and women's quarters

Facing the pond is the shaded area leading to the shrine's stairs. The hill on which the saint's tomb and asthana (refuge, meeting place) are about 50 meters high. Various wanderers like *fakirs*[39] are seen sitting on the stairs asking for alms. They often offered to give tabeez and threads (religious amulets) that they would blow into. The fakirs are also seen on the asthana pathway at the back of the tomb house through a thin grassy pathway. The women's quarters are facing directly at the top of the stairs. It has some holy books, including the Quran, and faces two open windows from which the women can see the grand tomb room. A large tray is kept at the base of the window sill on the other side. I have seen women going up there, placing some money in the tray through the window grill, after which a man will come, take a peacock feather touched to the tomb, and lightly beat it on the heads of the women or their children.

The man, usually a *Khadim* and imam, would hear the women's wants and recite surahs while touching them with the feather. The person doing that is not offering the

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[39] Ascetic individuals who live a life of complete freedom. They do not hold jobs or any responsibilities. They usually wear ragged clothes, various metallic jewelry, and rings. Their hair is matted, and "chuler jot" (hair tangles) are created and kept. The hair tangles are considered sacred to them, and they do not cut them. They usually ask alms and talk in riddles. Many sings and carry a musical instrument with them, notably the one-stringed ektara. They would usually sing spiritual Lalon giti, the musical genre of Lalon (spiritual poet and ascetic) part of the Baul genre.

blessing, but since the feather touched the saint's tomb, it carries the saint's power and light. In the middle of the main room is the decorated shrine. Coming out of the woman's quarter on the right is the pathway where people will pass two more graves (they are said to be tombs of the close followers and companions of the saint), a place to light candles, and two trees where devotees can perform *manat* and tie in knots. The threads and *attar* (concentrated perfume) are sold outside and inside the mazar. The family of men sits just outside the shrine's main room (the room where the decorated tomb is) on a one-step raised platform. In front of them is a donation box, a basket full of threads, and account books. They conduct their daily business of handling the shrine from there. It is where I sat and conducted meetings with them.

Normally, a woman is not allowed anywhere near a tomb, but they did not seem to mind because I wasn't entering the room and the doors were wide open. The men would enter the room, raise their two hands, and recite surahs and prayers, after which they would touch the tomb and place their hands in their mouths and chests. This action is repeated once or thrice. Several fakirs and spiritual devotees sit at the back of the tomb and pass time on either side as the pathway continues. They also offer to read duas over you, some offer to read your fortune, and some just ask to leave them money in the name of God. At the end of the pathway is another area. This was also heavily decorated with different colored tarps, and many candles and *agarbattis* were lit. Reportedly, this was the place where the saint used to hold religious discussions. Here again, the people of the shrine ask visitors to leave money, and their heads are brushed with peacock feathers. One side of the wall was smeared with the message "No photos or videos allowed."

Figure 2.6: The Shrine of the Saint (Permission for the Photo was given)
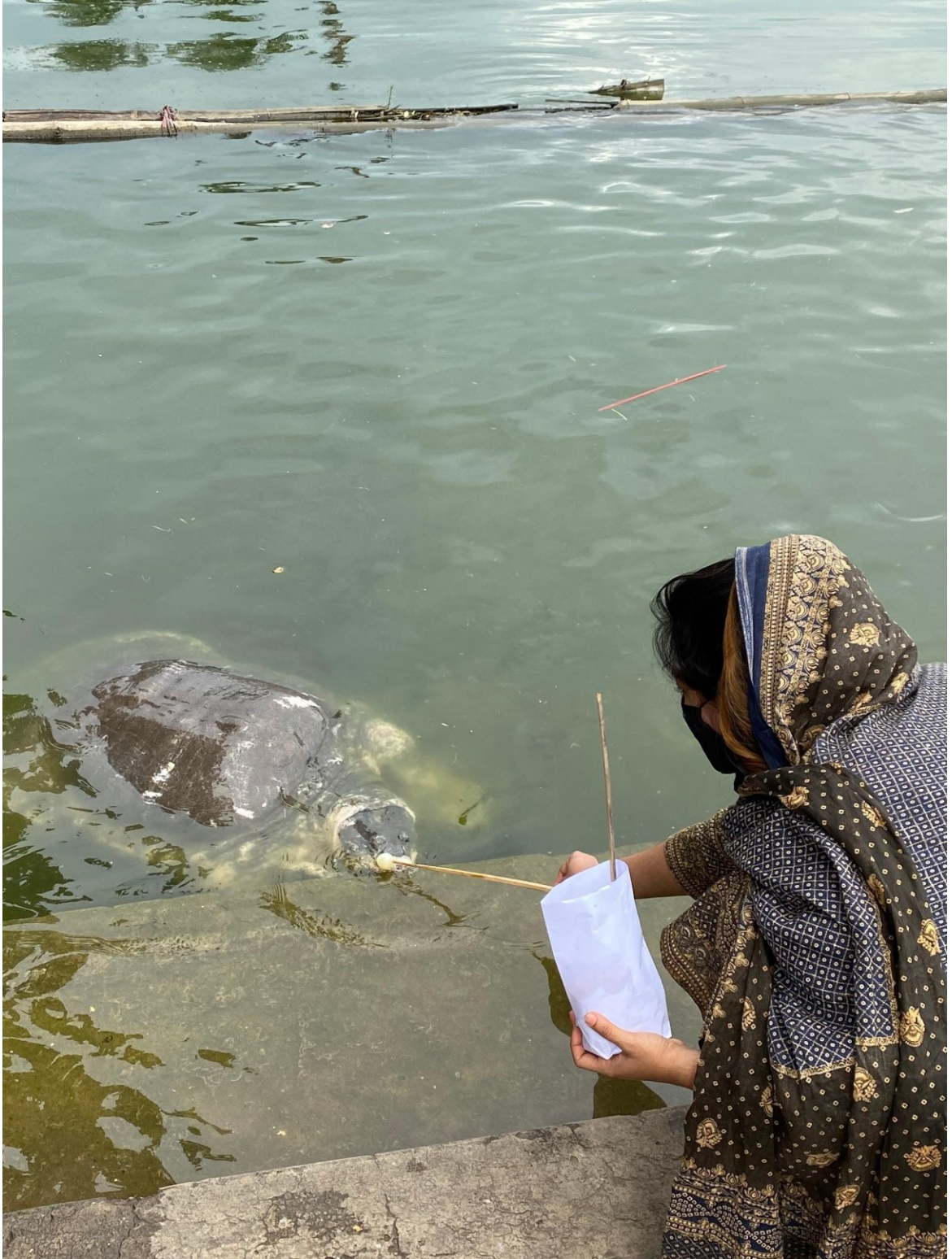
Figure 2.7: One of the Soft-Shell Turtles takes a sweet from the researcher.

Figure 2.8: Inside the women's quarters.

From my observation, the people coming to the shrine do not necessarily dwell on the historical background or authenticity of the place. Over the years, the place became a religious pilgrimage site with historical relevance. The rare soft-shelled turtles are also one of the attractions, and their rarity allows for serious conservation. The shrine has been there for a long period. So, even though the saint may not lie here, miraculous events occur. However, some people believe that he came here at some point in his life. The Arabs used to travel to the harbor of Chattagram with commerce ships as early as the eighth century AD. Therefore, it is not impossible that the saint arrived here in the ninth century as a form of visit, after which his admirers may have built a memorial place for him. This is just speculation, though, as there is no verified account of Bayezid Bostami's visit to Chattagram. Based on oral traditions, as stories and songs of certain Bengali poets and bards of the 18th century were being passed down using the memories of one Nasirabad's "Shah Sultan '' in their poetry, some academics contend that Shah Sultan and Bayezid Bostami were the same person because the poem's "Shah Sultan'' is an acronym for "Sultan-ul-Arefin ''. According to Hamidullah Khan, a 19th-century historian, Muslim fakirs and wanderers who traveled many places might have settled on secluded hilltops and built tombs and mausoleums in the names of Abdul Qadir Jilani and Sultan-ul-Arefin Bayezid Bostami and many other saints they knew of to commemorate them. These mausoleums over the years might have turned into religious temples and shrines by the people close to these wanderers or followers of these wanderers (Karim 1957; Haq 1973). As noted above, the visitors do not question whether the place holds the actual saint. My interviews revealed that the sacredness of the place is not questioned because many miraculous deeds were realized. Even among the many who

do not support the veneration, like my Uber driver, men would gather for daily prayers at the mosque and occasionally spend leisure time in the open courtyard or pond.

## Hazrat Sharfuddin Chisti Mazar Sharif (Dhaka High Court Mazar Sharif)

Hazrat Sharfuddin Chisti is also popularly known as the "Auli-o-Bangla." Little research has been found on the origins of the saint and the shrine itself. Information gathered at the shrine introduces the saint as the second son of the second wife, Bibi Ismat, of Hazrat Shah Moinuddin Chisti himself, whose renowned shrine is situated in Ajmer Sharif, Delhi, by the name "Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti Dargah - Ajmer Sharif Dargah." The shrine workers gave me a little handbook during my fieldwork there. The little book entitled (translated) "Hazrat Shah Khwaja Sharf-uddin Chisti (RA)'s brief biography and introduction to the Supreme Court Mazar and Mosque," published by the Supreme Court Mazar and Masjid Administration Committee and under whose authority and care the shrine has been run since 1968, recorded that after careful research, they can safely say that Hazrat Shah Sharfuddin Chisti was born in 1230 AD in Ajmer. The notable references providing information about Sharfuddin Chisti include "Fawaid-Al-Fuad" by Nizamuddin Auliya, the writings of Hazrat Hamiduddin Savali, and various other nameless *Malfuzat* (written discourses and sermons by Sufis), *Maktubats* (collection of letters of Sufi scholars), and in *tazkirat* (hagiographic collection of Sufi saints). However, I have not corroborated the information provided by the booklet, as I have not found anything related to my research,

and I have not consulted the writing "Fawaid-Al-Fuad" myself. As such, all the information I can report was what the people at the shrine provided me.

It is noted that Sharfuddin Chisti's birth name was Husam-Al-Din. He lost his father at age 5 and was brought up under the care and teaching of another great saint, Nizamuddin Auliya, eventually receiving his bayat. At 45, Sharfuddin Chisti's father, Moinuddin Chisti, came to him in his dream with a message to travel to Bengal. The dream was received as a form of "Basharat" (good news), and Sharfuddin Chisti permanently left Ajmer late one night without telling anyone. After leaving Ajmer his first stop was Delhi, where he learned that another saint, Hazrat Shah Jalal, and 12 of his companions had also started their journey to Bengal. Sharfuddin Chisti then joined them in Sonargoan's Samarkand and, as such, partook in the 1303 AD Sylhet war. After the conquest, Sharfuddin Chisti remained with Shah Jalal for about two years and continued his further studies under him. During this time, Shah Jalal learned that he was the son of the great saint Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer and decided to name him Sharfuddin Chisti. The record did not elaborate on the motivation behind the name change by Shah Jalal and stated that Sharfuddin means "Change." However, the literal translation of the Sharaf al-Dīn would mean the glory of faith, as "Sharaf" in Arabic means "honor" or "glory." It could be that the Arabic word "Sarf," which means "change," could have been mixed with "Sharf".

Around 1305 or 1306, it was decided that the Sufis would spread out around the parts of Bengal with the mission to spread Islam. Sharfuddin Chisti was instructed to go to the North of Bengal, to Ramna village. During that era, Ramna village was a Buddhist- and Hindu-majority area, mostly covered in dense forest. The part where Sharfuddin Chisti decided to stay was close to a famous Kali temple, known as Ramna Kali Temple. The temple is still in

operation, although it went through major reconstruction, especially after the 1971 Kali Temple massacre by the Pakistani Army during the frightful and haunting night when Operation Searchlight[40] was carried out. In this planned genocide, many scholars, writers, journalists, students, and other innocent people, were brutally murdered during that night's curfew. The Kali Temple, where many had taken refuge, was one of the sites. After the killings, the temple itself was destroyed. In the 14th century, however, the Ramna village was well known for the Kali temple. Sharfuddin Chisti and his companions sailed on a boat along the Buriganga River and entered a small creek. They found a small forest clearing near the temple, which was noticeably deserted, and Sharfuddin Chisti decided to settle there. He built his *Khanqah* and started spreading the word of Islam. He was successful in converting many local people and gained followers and popularity. It is mentioned that his quiet demeanor and powerful aura led many people to be his devotees. The creek that he initially sailed in is now an Eid-Ga field (a field where the morning prayer of Eid-Ul-Fitr is held). The *khanqah* was turned into his final resting place by his followers, and through the years, the Mosque and the shrine developed. The Kali temple is still in operation across the Suhrawardy field.

For the rest of the 32 years of his life, Auli-O-Bangla continued his duty of preaching Islam. It is recorded that he lived up to 110, passing away in 1338. During his time and some years after his death, the area was known as the "*Chistiya Moholla*" (Chistiya neighborhood). During British Colonial rule around 1905, a government house was created nearby, which was turned into the Supreme High Court of Bangladesh in 1947. Around 1968, both the

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[40] Operation Searchlight was a planned genocide led by then-West Pakistan (now Pakistan) on the night of March 25, 1971, in order to suppress Bangladesh's (then East Pakistan) nationalist movement.

mosque and shrine were given under the authority of the High Court office, and a new Supreme Court Mazar and Masjid Administration Committee was created to look over its operation.

Another thing to note is that shrine veneration is not publicly denounced by the government or any current ruling parties. The shrines are supported by many political figures, and the saints of Bangladesh are respected. It is the veneration itself that is *socially* decreasing and being looked down upon by many people, and it is publicly denounced by certain Islamic reformist parties and followers of such parties. For example, the followers of Wahabism. Currently, there are no religious reformist parties with ruling power in Bangladesh.

## The Shrine Area

The front entrance to the mazar is through a huge decorated white gate. The mazar is situated to the side of the Supreme Court. Pathways inside lead in and out of each of these places. The border to the Eidgah field is made with metal bars that protrude from the cement bars from the ground and rise to a foot. The women's quarters are situated behind the back of the mosque. The mosque itself is huge and spacious and went through many renovations over the years. Although women are usually not allowed in the men's section of mosques, even outside prayer time, on this occasion, I was allowed to walk inside and look around because of my position as a researcher. Most mosques in Bangladesh, especially the old ones, do not have a women's section, and it was not a norm for women to go to mosques to pray. It was only in shrine places that women were able to frequent for religious purposes during

old times. Today, many mosques come with sections for women, but it is mostly in the cities or towns.

The High Court mosque was cool and tiled. There were cupboards made into the walls filled with Quran and Islamic books. There were small, wooden bookshelves beside them, as well as holding books and cloth-wrapped Quran. The Holy Books were placed on the top shelves and separated from other books. As you continue to walk forward, there is a wide space that leads to another inner spacious open room. A small area at the front is separated at the front by a carpet with a huge chair, a stand, and a microphone. I guess this is where the Imam leads the five daily prayers after the Azan is called out. This is as far as I was able to walk. Beyond in front of the imam's space is yet another spacious room, which holds the shrine of Hazrat Sharfuddin Chisti. From what I could observe from where I was standing, the tomb itself was raised from the ground. It was surrounded by huge canopy posters around four corners and adorned with multi-colored cloths and garlands of flowers. A strong smell of *attar*, rose water, and *agarbatti* (incense) wafted from the room. Inside that room, at one of the far ends of the wall, is the huge window, which overlooks the women's space and allows women visitors to have a peek at the saint's tomb and to converse with the saint from within their quarters. The window is closed off with a heavy glass panel and heavy golden grills to prevent men from seeing into the women's space. During prayers, a black curtain is drawn over the window, and I am guessing a black curtain is drawn to cover the entrance and that other windows (If there are any) are covered as well. This is done when Azan is given, and prayers will start. The curtains are drawn to provide a barrier between the Saint's tomb and the people praying to signify that the saint is not being worshipped and also to ensure that no one is venerating during prayer times.  One hour before and after

prayer, the curtains remain closed. Coming out of the mosque and climbing down the small set of stairs, on the left side is the road that leads to the exit gate, and before that, on the side, there is an open courtyard. A huge banyan tree is in the middle. The tree has concrete surrounding it. Here, many fakirs (ascetics), rickshaw-pullers, and vagabonds pass their day under the shade of the tree. During meal times, meals are arranged and given out from the *langar khana* (community kitchen in shrines) in that area because it is by the kitchen. Many rickshaw pullers, after the end of their prayers, sit and drink tea from the street vendor. There are women fakirs as well. Some sit and sell flowers. This space is a refuge for them. It works as a waiting space, a meeting spot, and a place to sit and smoke and sometimes play their ektara (one-stringed musical instrument) whenever the mood hits. The daily meals prepared on the shrines were funded by numerous sources. The shrine's donation boxes, the hadiya (gifts) given by venerators after *manats*, and the shrine's budget, which is mostly run by donations as well.

That was the left side of the mosque's front entrance. To its right, the road leads to another road that connects to the inside of the high court and another road to another exit from the place. Just a few steps to the right side of the mosque, there is a small red-brick pathway that leads to another backyard. This backyard is not a concrete road but is made of earth. In a corner, a healing baba sits. A tin barrier is placed to give some privacy, and you cannot see what is going on unless you cross the backyard and go around it. The darbar worker referred to him as a doctor who sits there to give out remedies and medicine for all kinds of ailments and problems, but the patients who came to him referred to him as Baba. During the nighttime, an open fire is lit, and the baba continues to see people until 8 p.m. Many huge trees surround the small backyards. In front of the tree closest to the doctor, there

are several candles lit at its base. White and gray pigeons walk and fly here and there. Surrounding this backyard are individual, single-story cement dwellings, which must be for those who work there. Some might be used as storehouses.

Figure 2.9: The Shrine Mosque
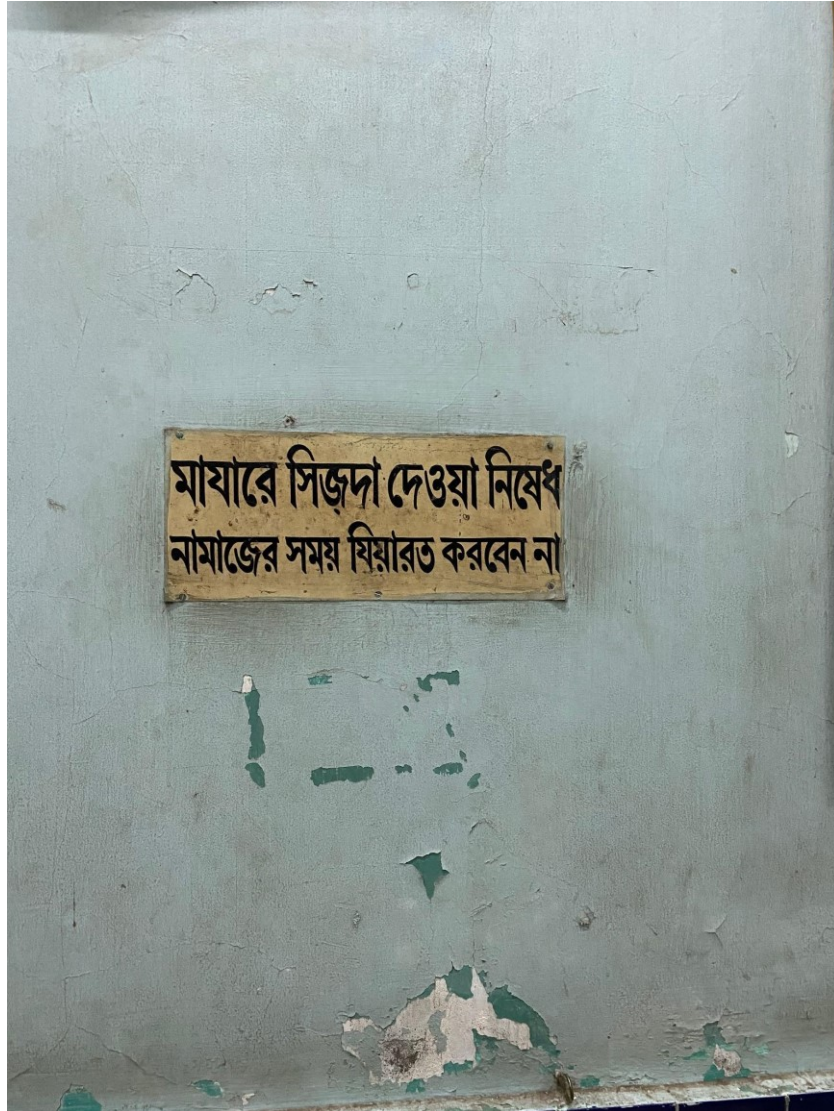


Figure 2.10: The poster reads, "Prostration in Mazar is strictly forbidden. Do not venerate during times of prayer."

# Maizbhandari Tariqa- Gausul-Azam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah

That shop is better in which everything is available; I have everything here. It is an

uncontaminated ocean. The dirty water of a drain or a river becomes pure when it meets an

ocean. By their blessings, we sank into that ocean—I was contaminated, but I am not

contaminated anymore.

—Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari[41]

The Sufi saint known as the founding father of the distinct Bengali tariqa

Maizbhandari Order is Saint Syed Ahmadullah, who is recorded to be a descendant from a

line of followers of the famous, revered saint Abdul Qader Jilani (1077-1127) of Baghdad. It

is said that the Qadiri holy men and imams were sent to Bengal from Delhi with the mission

to propagate Islam. One of them decided to travel further in Chattagram around 1575 and

settle permanently in the rural village of Chattagram, Maizbhandar. Gausulazam Shah Sufi

Syed Ahmad Ullah (1826-1906) is his descendent. Ahmad Ullah received his schooling in

local schools and madrasas and went for higher studies at Calcutta Auliya Madrassa. After

his studies, he served as a *qadi* in Jessore before returning to Calcutta and teaching there for

several years in a major Islamic school (Alam 2010; Bhuiyan 2022).

It is said that during his time teaching Islam in Calcutta, Ahmad came to know of a

great Sufi saint who was in Calcutta at the time and started his spiritual journey under this

saint by taking *bayat*. Receiving the "Qadiriya spiritual mantle," in addition to his spiritual

lineage that goes back to Abdul Qader Jilani, Ahmad returned to his village Maizbhandar as

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[41] In Alam 2010

a trained mystical saint and started a life of preaching, teaching, and performing miracles. Slowly, he gathered a brotherhood that came to be known as the Maizbhandari tariqa, an indigenous Sufi-inspired movement in Bangladesh. Since then, the spread of Maizbhandari Tariqa has been widespread. Starting with a mass rural following, the tariqa itself branched out and climbed up the ladders, garnering the devotion and love of people from every class. With the tariqa's growth and popularity, its structure itself started to become complicated. There are more than two hundred families who have spread out and formed their manzils (households). However, three manzils[42] are considered to be the inner structure of Maizbhandar, namely the Ahmadiyya, Rahmaniyya, and Haq manzils. The information that I received from the pamphlets and guidebooks given to me at the darbar sharif explained the distribution thus: The Haq manzil is comparatively new and was developed much later than the previous houses. Based on the houses, the descendants of each house created their offshoots and lineages, creating different schools of thought of their respective houses and garnering their own sets of followers and devotees. The names are representative of their respective saints: Founding father Ahmadulla (the Ahmadiyya manzil), his nephew Golam Rahman (Rahmaniyya manzil), and his great-grandson Syed Ziaul Haq (Haque manzil). Although the village Maizbhandar now has more than 500 shrines, I am told that the shrines of these three notable saints are considered properly legitimate by the descendants of many people and the Maizbhandari family.

After the death of Sufi saint Ahmadullah, the son of his youngest brother, his nephew Golamur Rahman (1865-1937) became his successor to the Bangladeshi Sufi order. Golam

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[42] For more information on Maizbhandari manzil and familial structure see Harder (2011)

Rahman was locally also known as Baba Bhandari, and the Bengali sufi preacher became one of the notable pirs whose miraculous spiritual power (*adhahtik shokti*) awed many, and his followers and his family's influence became more pronounced. In the Ahmadiyya manzil, the grandson of Ahmadullah, Delwar Hossain (1893-1982), after having the necessary training, education, and meditation, took the role of the leading pir. During my fieldwork, the impression and impact that both Baba Bhandari (who later became Delwar Hossain's father-in-law as well) and Delwar Hossain left in their wake were seen. During the remaining years of Syed Delwar Hossain, he passed on his spiritual lineage to his sons. His eldest son, Syed Ziual Haq (1928-1988), became as popular as his predecessors among the followers of this Sufi order and went on to create his own house. His shrine and tomb are elaborately made in modern architecture that represents the flower lotus. The grand shrine is as beautiful and pristine inside as it is from the outside. The family of Haq created their separate manzil, Gausiya Haq Manzil, and operates under the institution Shahensha Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari Trust (SZHM Trust).

The current pir leader, known as the *sajjada nissin* (Supreme head) of the Gausiya Ahmadiyya-e-manzil Maizbhandari Sufi order, is Syed Emdadul Haq. He is also the younger brother of Ziaul Haq. He was born in 1936 to Delwar Hossain Maizbhandari and his mother, Syeda Sajeda Khatun. His mother was also the daughter of Sufi Golamur Rahman (nephew of the founder Gausulazam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah), thus his great-uncle and his maternal grandfather. Syed Emdadul Haq Maizbhandari was said to have been initiated by his father in 1974. Before joining as the supreme leader of the Maizbhandari movement, Emdadul Haq worked as a bank official for 20 years. His younger brother, Didarul Haq, is a medical doctor who also served as a consultant to Unilever. The youngest brother, Shahidul Haq, has an MA

in Bengali Language. Together, Emdadul Haq, with his remaining brothers and son Irfanul Haq, now directs the *anjuman* (central committee) of their organization.

The philosophy or the school of thought of Maizbhandari tariqa was given to me in a straightforward lesson: It's divine love. Love for the creator, the world, the humans, and the simple things in life. Yet, they stressed, this simple thing is perhaps one of the rarest things to truly achieve in life. Perhaps this simple thing is what the saints devoted their entire lives to, living in seclusion after they had done their part of preaching and spreading Islam to achieve the divine connection of love and get as much as they could with the creator. The Maizbhandari tariqa focuses heavily on the discipline and purification of the self.

The tariqa combines both Qadiriya and Chistiya and even, to some levels, Khidiriya (Alam 2010). The founding father borrowed heavily from the Qadiriyya and Chistiya order, for example, in using songs as a form of worship. From the Qadiriyya tariqa, they mainly follow the tilawat-e-ozud or seven kinds of zikr (invocation) with their own Usul-e-be or the seven principles (seven fundamental restraints to follow). The followers of the Maizbhandari tariqa have to follow the seven principles and seven kinds of zikr to be true devotees while also maintaining the five daily prayers, fasting, and observing certain rituals.

The main objective is to search for knowledge within through the rules tilawat-e-ozud[43]. While performing this zikr, one has to imagine the reflection of Allah over one's face to enlighten oneself with the divine lights and attributes. The tariqa teaches that there are seven layers of the human ego or nafs. The objective of the seven layers of routine is to overcome these seven layers of the human ego. The zikr is rigorous, and not many can fully

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[43] For a detailed breakdown of tilawat-e-ozud please see Alam 2010.

keep up with it. The seven fundamental principles of the Maizbhandari order are ambitious and rigorous as well (Bertocci 2006). My informants mentioned that they try to keep up with as much as possible, not the entirety of it but segments of it; even then, it proves to be challenging. The details provided below have been taken from the written sources provided to me and combined with conversations with tariqa representatives. Some sources differ slightly in explanation and translation based on author-understanding; therefore, I have relied on the direct sources from the Maizbhandari tariqa to provide the information as closely as possible with the correct message.[44]

## The application or the inhibition of the Usul-e-Saba

Usul-e-sab'a (the Seven Fundamentals) is a form of "lifestyle" (as one of my informants put it) that strives to purify the self by restraining bad instincts to achieve and sustain good instincts, behavior, and thought. Saint Ahmadullah introduced these fundamentals, *Sapta Paddhati*, "Seven Paths," to achieve this state of purification. Their principle depends heavily on the purification of the self not only to reach closeness with the creator but also to overcome the difficulties, frustrations, anger, and hopelessness that come with life. The devotees say that following these steps with their continued zikrs as a form of meditation works like therapy for most. The *Sapta Paddhati* itself is divided into two parts: (i) Fanā-e-Salasa (The Three Annihilation) and (ii) Maut-e-Arba'a (The Four Deaths).[45]

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[44] See (Hossain 2023), and other sources see (Bhuiyan 2022; Harder 2011; Alam 2010).
[45] The lists are from (Hossain 2023, 126-127).

- (i) Fanā-e-Salasa (The three Annihilation) are as follows

  - Fanā anil Khalq (Annihilation from the Creation) is the practice of self-reliance; this teaches not to expect, desire, or want from any earthly creation.

  - Fanā anil Iraāda (Annihilation from Own Desire) giving preference to Allah's will and surrendering one's will to God to achieve total submission and, therefore, the satisfaction of being one with God.

  - Fanā anil Hawā (Annihilation of Ego) means avoidance of unnecessary conversation and actions, which will make life easy and free of troubling distractions.

- (ii) Maut-e-Arba'a (the four death)

The four deaths described here serve as the death of the bad characteristics that can be found in the self. By sacrificing certain elements, one can achieve greater things.

  - Maut-e-Abyad (White Death). This is achieved through the practice of fasting and frugality, and through this, the mind and soul are enlightened.

  - Maut-e-Aswad (Black Death). To do this, one must willingly receive criticism, allow for judgment, and tolerate enmity. This is because criticisms will allow the person to work on self-reflection.

  - Maut-e-Ahmar (Red Death). Striving to free oneself from sexual impulses and lust. This achievement will lead to the qualification of being belayat (from Arabic wilāyat, spiritual power) and can be considered among the saints.

  - Maut-e-Akhdar (Green death). This is achieved by leading a simple life of frugality. This will result in a self that wants nothing and has everything by their Creator's love.

The followers, after becoming murids, are told to follow these seven principles as much they can and that, even if they cannot achieve them completely, Allah will see their struggle and effort and reward them. These seven principles do not replace other rules such as five prayers, fasting, giving zakat, performing Hajj, reciting the Quran, and performing dhikr, but these seven principles will allow an individual to do these more regularly. The principles act as an aid to becoming a "good Muslim."

## The Grounds of the Shrine

The shrine of Ahmadullah Maizbhandari sits in the middle of a vast land, about 3.6 square miles, that surrounds the other operations and institutions of the Maizbhandari households. The design of the shrine is grand, depicting an open book in front of the dome. Many devotees and people who come to pray at the mosque near it perform their wudu there with the pond's water. On its right side is the office or throne of the pir. The glass-encased room (measures taken during covid) holds a *godi* (chair) that is decorated in special red cloth. The pir, who is currently Emdadul Haque, sits there at certain times of the week for a certain period to deliver holy speeches as well as attend to the devotees personally. The lines to have a one-on-one meeting with the pir sometimes extend past the pond, considering the size of the open space. The devotees wait in lines for hours on end. During the time of my fieldwork, it was summer, and the sun's scorching heat made the concrete road extremely hot. Since it is a shrine complex, many devotees, in fact, most, prefer to walk barefoot. They did not seem to mind waiting in the heat barefoot for hours.

The shrine complex spread over a vast area. The Ahmadiyya manzil comprises the grand tomb of the founding father and, beside it, a pond with stairs leading to the water. One

side led to the office buildings of the shines. On the other side, the left side is the main office building where the seating area of the pir baba is situated. The visiting area is open so that the public can see the baba. Through the back entrance, we got to see the sectioned-off room where a mental health counselor sits and sees individuals whose records show that the individual can be helped through proper counseling. If they find that the individual needs to see a psychiatrist or a therapist, they would then recommend the individual to those they know. In most cases, the trained counselors and therapists working under the Maizbhandariyya tariqa can help with the cases they get. These records are collected in another room situated in another building within the shrine grounds. The record room is where the "foriyod"[46] team sits at long tables, taking one visitor at a time to hear about their problems and then adding them to their database. They work with laptops provided by the shrine committee. There is a mosque inside the shrine, along with a kitchen. The kitchen is built at the back and is huge, with more than 20 people working there. They prepare three meals a day every day for thousands of visitors, staff, workers, and the administration. During the urs or khosroj sharif of the saint, a three-day program, the number of workers increases because the meal is made for many thousands of people. The buildings have rest houses and sleeping quarters. Often, the staff and admins spend the entire night in discussion, work, or musical gatherings and meditation. There are lodgings for scholars and researchers as well. There is a polytechnic institute just outside the main courtyard built by the order called "Gausul Azam Maizbhandari Polytechnic Institute."

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[46] Foriyad, is a term used to describe a person who complains or has a complaint. It is used as foriyadi like asking for a solution or advice or someone who does foriyod requests for their problems to be solved.

Beside the Ahmadiyya manzil ground is the ground of the shrine of Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari, which also covers a vast area. The mausoleum is built in the shape of a lotus flower, the national flower of Bangladesh, and besides this is another ground that is a hostel for women students of Maizbhandar. The hostel also contains lodgings for women researchers. Coming out of the Ziaul Haque grounds is a decorated pond, and the pathway between the pond and the gate of Ziaul Haque leads to the mausoleums of Delwar Hossain and his wife, the father and mother of late Ziaul Haque and the current leading pir of Ahmadiyya manzil, Emdadul Haque.

The Maizbhandariyya order uses songs to induce a trance-like state where the communion between self and the Creator is created in a strong spiritual connection. The songs emphasize love, both physical and spiritual, that transcends religion itself. Hence, many of their devoted artists are from different religions as well. They have their own songs, which mix Bangla and Urdu. The Maizbhandari manzils each have their own projects and foundation. My informants, who respect each of the manzils and accept all three major saints equally, were under the Ahmadiyya manzil. Ahmadiyya Manzil has invested in madrasas, schools, clinics, and polytechnic services for women, as well as their own research journal foundation called Darul Irfan Research Institute (DIRI). Similarly, the other two manzils are also heavily invested in social welfare of all kinds, not only in the village of Fatikchari but all over Bangladesh. Visitors and venerators from all walks of life and religion are welcome.

Figure 2.11: Tomb of Ahmadullah Maizbhandari, founder of Maizbhandari Tariqa

Figure 2.12: Foriyod room in the Mazar

## Grounding Legitimacy

The point of revisiting the history of the saints is to emphasize their importance in the heritage of the place. The effect of place and territory is important in order to analyze the continuing practice of saint veneration. It is important to understand the historical significance of the Sufis who came to Bengal with a mission to spread Islam. Not only did the new religion give a newfound identity to lower-caste Hindus, but it also led them to form political organizations in order to consolidate their status and rise in social rank in order to achieve higher-paid positions, status, and recognition from weavers, masons, tailors, and

barbers to teachers, bankers, politician and rulers (Ahmed 1981). However, this itself did not provide proper and concrete reasons for mass conversions. Roy (1983) argues that, although this newfound status no doubt provided the initial attraction, it was the assimilation of the new religion with the existing characteristics of the region that made it a compelling alternative. The religion lacked epics and materialistic extravagance, and this was overcome by incorporating the yogic-tantric meditation forms and adapting Hindu epics by substituting the Hindu heroes with the Prophet and his disciples. Even the roles the Prophet's wives played were adapted to the epics as a form of oral stories, songs, and metaphors in order to teach morals, routine, practice, and reasoning. The Sufis acted as cultural mediators of the newly converted Muslims. From there, we see how these Muslims gained rank and status through mixing in with the migrated upper-class Muslims in Bengal and the slow change of names from Hindu-sounding names to Muslim names (Ahmed 1981). This was no doubt the very reform that was followed by the Faraizi movement. We see subsequently the reformation of the Deoband and the Tablighi. The reformation that we are seeing now is another stretch that is seen as going forward. In each step, the target was to shed as much of the Hindu and Bengali elements as possible. Moving past that, another reform seen among Bangladeshi Muslims is that of the newfound personalization of the religious self through the proper practice of sharia. The Maizbhandariyya Sufi order is taking that personalization of self and now moving forward with both elements of practicing strict sharia with the old practice of keeping the pir-murid relationship. This relationship is grounded in the traditional adherence to proper Bengali etiquette shown towards the higher status that pir-babas possess.

The veneration of saints is intricately linked with place, territory, memory, and history. The shrine tombs and veneration, in turn, operate as part of the deeper structure that keeps the community together. Therefore, many may look down on veneration itself, but Islam in Bengal and in Bangladesh is engulfed within the deeper structure of the Bengali identity by the cultural mediators that came from faraway places, who brought about a process of revitalization through this assimilation of Islam with the locally existing beliefs. Yet another revitalization has been taking place since the 1980s that is now armed with global forces. Each time, in each of the reformation stages, cultural aspects seem to be sifted and "purified," a process that is happening everywhere, not only in matters of religiosity but also in other aspects of life as well.

# Chapter 3: A Blessing Received and a Love Letter Sent: Saintly Love, Devotion, and Contested Piety

One of the most difficult questions I struggled with during my research and frequently got asked was, why shrine veneration? Of all the things that were there to study, why study shrines? This curious question came from many people at various points, conversations, and places, especially from my informants. Each time, I could not come up with a satisfactory answer and was taken aback by the question. It unsettled me because I did not know the answer myself. At least not a concrete one. I understood that it was not, at least now, a "hot topic" to pursue for many people I came across while doing fieldwork. The question that came to me slowly was why shrine veneration on a Muslim's journey of piety was taken so lightly. It was as if people saw it as an external activity with little significance. The few stories collected over three months that I present here demonstrate the opposite. Veneration played a much larger and more significant role in shaping women's piety and faith, irrespective of the religion they followed. In this chapter, I provide five vignettes of five women that explain why they come to the shrine and how much significance it holds to them. Each of these stories shows a different way of practicing faith within the same religion.

By providing these stories of the women I met, I wanted to bring forward another expression of piety that may differ from reformists' understanding. Piety, as we understand it, is sincere devotion to God. Whereby individuals orient their livelihood according to their religion's teachings and ethics to attain ultimate union with God. Some of the piety movements within Islam that have been studied were based on either Islamic reform movements and on reformist ideology (Mahmud 2005; Haq 2008; Tong & Turner 2008; Ali

2011; Chavoshian 2023) or within everyday Islam where the practice of Islam was not rigid but liberal and within a modern secular public sphere (Deeb & Harb 2013; Pribadi & Sila 2023; Bagdogan 2023). The focus on piety within Islam has unintentionally been associated with Islam that is based on a reformist ideology. That is, it has focused on women's piety that is based on the didactic texts, like The Quran and Hadiths, and the daily prayer (namaz) where the emphasis was put on living life by strictly following the religious text and teachings of the Prophet, which would generally be called an orthodox approach to Islam. Studies often unknowingly presented Muslim shrines and South Asian mystics as "less than" and "unorthodox." Although studies have been done to show diverse ways Islam is practiced (Pemberton 2006; Ewing 1994; Flueckiger 2006; Metcalf 2009; Bruinessen & Howell 2007; Bruinessen 1999), reformist connotations of piety have overshadowed other forms of piety. Through my research, I have found that, although my informants led very pious lives, which are quite different from the pious lives seen in the studies of Mahmood (2001, 2005), Deeb (2009), and Haq (2008), their piety was viewed as "less than" by those who identify as "Orthodox Muslims." These remarks that are often publicly voiced then lead these women to experience feelings of confusion, hurt and sometimes shame that they still venerated shrines and followed pirs, although some were defiant. Therefore, even while presenting a different way of being pious that may not necessarily go with the reformist connotations of piety, the women themselves questioned their piety and often went through doubts because of the various messages and teachings from the reformist movements. The personal vignettes presented here take us on an intimate journey of diverse individuals and provide us with a range of views on faith and struggles within an Islamic context. The relationship with faith is neither static nor uniform but a complex web of emotions and self-doubts followed by the

heaviness of last resort. Individual pious journeys, whether they take a form approved by reformist ideology or one that incorporates saintly veneration, are one of the important aspects to focus on to understand the tensions created by the coexistence of religious movements and modernity.

The scholarly focus on women's piety has been a crucial element in the anthropological study of women and within academia in general. It provided space to think about women who practiced a form of life that many secular feminists, both Western and non-Western, saw as submissive to the oppressive patriarchal system. The study of piety movements brought forth new ways of talking about women's agency and Muslim women's feminism. Mahmood (2005)'s work on the piety movement in Egypt is one of the most cited works in the discussion of piety and women's agency. Mahmood's groundbreaking work was a critical post-colonial feminist theory that forced secular feminists to recognize the limits of feminism, especially Western secular feminism, and rethink it. Sehlikoglu (2009) discussed how Mahmoud's work inspired many studies that looked at women's piety within religious grounds as a critical aspect of the formation of selfhood within women (Deeb 2009; Huq 2008; Tong & Turner 2008; S. Huq & Rashid 2008). Sehlikoglu (2017) termed the period of the rise of such scholarship within feminist literature a "piety turn." Then, there was a shift away from this emphasis on religion in shaping subjectivity and ethics toward an approach that proposed moving beyond piety. The focus started to emphasize different aspects and ranges of religiosity and diversity within Islam and Muslim lives by focusing on everyday Islam (Schielke 2012; Deeb & Harb 2013). Schielke (2010) argued there was "too much Islam in the Anthropology of Islam" (2) since Muslims' complex lives are not only linked with the textual religion itself. Therefore, piety can also be viewed among Muslims who may not

follow the religious guidelines strictly or may even choose to be religious only at certain times, for example, during Ramadan. In response, Fadil and Fernando (2015) critiqued the way this "everyday Muslims" discourse contrasted everyday life to piety and devotion. The authors argued that, while it is important to highlight how religion can be inhibited in several ways and that piety and devotion cannot be measured or compared between individuals based on actions, it is not necessary to focus on Muslims who choose a life of complete devotion both inward and outward to bring out the range of religiosity. Deeb (2015) further argues that the separation of everyday Islam and piety need not be so strict, a point that is shown in the work of Deeb & Harb (2013), "Leisurely Islam," which finds piety through the moral rubrics of everyday interactions. They depict Muslims whose lives consist of a conversation between their interior pious selves and the secular lifestyle into which their piety bleeds.

The progression of piety turned to the progression of everyday lived Islam and acted as the base that ignited many other diverse aspects to come into the platform. Hill's (2018) work on Sufi Muslim women religious leaders in Senegal has shown how Muslim subjectivity and pious disposition can also involve public engagement within a space that is innately dominated by male religious leaders. In a completely different context, we see the loving portrayal of Amma by Flueckiger (2006). Amma held a religious leadership role within a uniquely gendered and complex milieu, where her spiritual authority was backed by her husband's presence. While in Hill's work, we see a leadership role grounded in Sufi reformation, in Amma's context, we see the South Asian Islamic spiritual piety that is opposed by reformism. Therefore, piety depending on the social, historical, and politics of the specific place and keeping in mind what the state of that particular context means by

secularism, modernity, and religion bring forward and affect the chosen relationship an individual has with their piety and what they mean by piety and their selfhood.

Thereby, piety and everyday Islam can have a broad range of understanding and may not necessarily be separate from each other. Pious subjectivity within a secular and religious state will shape an individual's relationship and how they choose to carry it on. However, depending on the webs of the internal structure the individual is linked with may shape their relationship and even be the reason to act opposite to it. For example, the Islamic revivalist movements in Cairo were a grassroots revolution that occurred in response to what they deemed a secular state that provided little space for visible Islam. The concept of secularism itself is a matter of discussion. For Asad (2009), a secular state is not the separation of state and religion but rather a particular interlinking of religion and state. Mahmood's (2001, 2005) reconceptualization of the Islamic revivalism movement did not seek to propose a different kind of breaking the glass ceiling but rather highlighted that feminism does not always have to be about breaking the glass ceiling. The recurring view that all Muslim women are oppressed and, therefore, need to be liberated was a Western concept where the liberation was focused on the Western conception of secularism, which Abu-Lughod's (2002) work has critically pointed out. Therefore, the question was not about liberating the individual, but rather, it was about protecting Western thought and enforcing that thought universally without taking into consideration the social and political structure. Hence, Mahmood's argument on ethics and morality through devotion is not to show a different kind of liberation or any form of liberation but to highlight the individuals and their relationship with their religion and how they were trying to reach taqwa (piety) and that they did not

seek liberation as generally understood. In a critical discussion of what is secular and liberal speech during the 2007 Lars Vilks blasphemy controversy, Mahmood argued,

> The hope that a correct reading practice can yield compliant subjects crucially depends, in other words, upon a prior agreement about what religion should be in the modern world. It is this normative understanding of religion internal to liberalism that is often missed and glossed over by commentators when they claim that liberalism is anemic (suffering from) in its moral and religious commitments. (Mahmood 2009, 74).

Islamic reform movements and stories of revivalism, like the stories portrayed in Mahmood's work, were not intentionally aimed to discredit other ways of inhibiting Islam. However, as I mentioned earlier, unconsciously, this focus on revivalism has led to unwanted comparisons and a single understanding of pious subjectivity. The rise in reformist movement and Islamic revivalism throughout, to universalize one single understanding of "proper piety," even though ordinary Muslims who identify as orthodox Muslims may not actively seek to be part of reformist groups, has had effects on bringing changes over the years, yet practices and beliefs that may not align with reformist ideology continue (Osella & Osella 2008; Ewing; Flueckiger 2006; Metcalf 2009; Pemberton 2006; Werbner 2016; Robinson 2006; Roy 1983; Simpson 2007; Callan 2008; Liebskind 2013). Sehlikoglu (2017) revisits the genealogy of the concept of agency as it developed within the anthropological field of Muslim and Middle Eastern women. She discusses how the notion of agency was looked at and discussed concerning context, history, and period, and the individual focus was maintained within the structure of the society. The author states that less focus was given to an individual's imagination, desires, and yearnings—the imaginative aspects and their way

of knowing. The author then posits an epistemological approach to these imaginative aspects of women's agency rather than just a structural and analytical approach. This approach draws on Mittermaier's (2012) exploration of the realm of dreams to provide a different approach to looking at one's devotion and practice of religious life than through the discipline of self-cultivation provided by Mahmood (2005), Asad (1986), and Hirschkind (2001), an exploration that focuses on passion. Mittermaier suggests that focus on self-cultivation, although it contributed significantly to the anthropology of Islam, at the same time overshadows other forms of devotion and practice of self. That focus on discipline and specific forms of religious practice does not allow us to explore alternative religious and non-religious practices that also affect and contribute to one's faith and devotion. The act of passion, she writes, can come from places that are not the self that acts on religious practice but from being acted upon. She adds nuances to self-cultivation itself and reveals more to what she calls the "axis to religiosity." Therefore, even if it seems like a critique of Mahmood's work, Mittermaier's approach helps expand the analysis of self-cultivation. Engaging with a Sufi community whose serious consideration of the role of dreams in the everyday activities of community members brings forth an important aspect that shows how "other-worldly" phenomena are understood to act upon and make a religious subject. Moreover, Schielke and Debevec (2012) highlighted how the religious self is also affected by the non-religious activities of life. The mundane tasks of living have a great impact on the subject as well. Thereby, the complexities of life, especially the mundane activities, along with the faith in dreams that surround the Sufi community, make the subject religious. The form of self-cultivation is therefore not only made of religious activities but also non-religious activities (Mittermair 2012; Schielke & Debevec 2012).

Keeping my informant's notion of their selfhood in mind and presenting their fears, yearnings, longings, desires, and regrets, I follow a similar epistemological approach that focuses on the imaginative aspects of human subjectivity that transcend economic, political, and social structures. This approach provides an open view of the informant's emotions outside of the limited structures; however, it also allows us to understand that these emotions and formations of selfhood are bounded, twisted, and broken by the very factors that caused this turmoil. Therefore, even though they are in a loving union with their saint, which helps them in achieving a higher connected spiritual state, they believe that their connection to the saint is not valuable enough or strong enough compared to that of the men they know. The relationship, however pure, is very gendered and portrays the structural inequality that they are inherently linked with. Moreover, the ethnographic study highlighted that my informant's relationship with their piety is not static, and it goes through ranges. There are periods of intense devotion, and there are periods of detachment. Moreover, whereas dreams and visions were seen as powerful "technologies" to gain spiritual and charismatic authority among women because of their limited public access to saints (Hill 2023), almost all my female informants explained that they did not receive dreams of saints, although dreams of saints were common among the Maizbhandari men devotees that I have talked with. My informants would constantly remind me that their religiosity was minimal or not deep enough when compared to their husbands.

The problem that further, to some extent, constrained or increased the inner contestation among the male and female devotees of shrine veneration was the trailing effects of reformist ideologies and actions. The years-long reformation has had effects on the way shrines are venerated, and it has rooted out some cultural rituals that were observed

before while creating doubts among the devotees as well. Many women felt the need to explain that they were not regulars and they did not particularly believe in all this "stuff." However, they felt the need to come nonetheless. A few explained to me that they continued visiting the shrine out of familiarity and habit rather than devotional connection, while others visited because they had specific niyats (requests, wants, pleas) to make to the saint. Despite many gradual changes, there were still hundreds of devotees visiting the shrines every day. Some of the stories shared here are about those women who continue to hold onto their way of knowing and practicing despite the changing conversations around Islam that surround them, irrespective of the tariqa they follow.

In the sections that follow, a brief overview of the process of veneration is introduced, along with the process of initiation (taking bayat) to a Sufi tariqa. Then, vignettes are presented of women who share their spiritual and loving journey and their contested piety. Lastly, a short conclusion again engages with the discussion but now with more questions.

## The Act of Veneration

Veneration in the simplest form observed within the shrines of Bangladesh was more or less similar among both Muslims and non-Muslims. The only difference was how they raised their hands in prayer. For Hindus, it was the Anjali Mudra (pressing of the palms together), and for Muslims, it was bringing their hands together in an open cupped position in front of them. The first step was to enter the house of the saint, which was often attached to a mosque with the right foot. The second step was to proceed to the tomb of the saint and

provide salaam (Muslim greeting).[47] Men typically enter the room where the saint's tomb is laid, give their salaam, and then touch the surface and kiss their fingers as part of the salaam. They would then bring their hands together and say a few prayers. Women, according to Islamic rules, were not allowed to go near tombs or graves; therefore, they had a special room, which also served as the prayer room, from which they could provide their respect and salaam. A specific section, in general, is usually marked for that. For the Dhaka High Court shrine and the Bayezid Bostami shrine, it was the blinded windows, whereas, for the Shahjalal and Shah Poran shrines, respect and salaam could be sent through intercessory prayer facing a blank, clean wall. The act of intercessory prayer usually refers to prayer in the form of a request to a saint on behalf of oneself. Muslims and non-Muslims who visit the shrines of saints often send requests to the saints in the form of prayer to speak on their behalf to the Creator, Allah (swt) for the Muslims and for non-Muslims blessings from the saint himself.

At Bayezid Bostami's shrine, visitors first buy some food for the blessed tortoises, feed it to them, and greet them with salaam. The water of the pond is used by many to perform ablution (wudu), mostly by men. There is a separate corner with a tap by the mosque downstairs as well. The mosque and the open courtyard are used for daily prayers by men. The women's prayer room is situated upstairs by the room of the tomb. The tomb is situated at the top of the hill, and stairs with shade are built against it. After greeting the tortoises, visitors take the stairs to the tomb. Some stop on reaching the top stair, touch the ground, and bring their fingers to their lips. It is not common anymore, but some still do. Women go

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[47] The Hindus and non-Muslims greeted the saint in their own way.

into their room, while men go to the room of the tomb. The act of veneration is the same for both men and women. They hold up their hands, give salaam to the saint, and perform their prayer. The depth and length of the prayer depend upon the individual. Many cries. After the prayer is done, people who made *niyats* would then buy a thread and tie it to the small tree trunks outside the tomb's room by the side of the hill. A few feet away is a place to light candles and burn incense. Inside the women's room, a small blinded window gives the women a chance to look into the room and offer their prayers. During daily prayer times, this window is covered with a black curtain. The window has a small till on the other side where women would place some money. A local hujur (imam) of the shrine would then come to the window from the other side and recite surahs and blow them over to the devotee and their children while tapping their heads with a peacock feather that has been touched on the tomb. As women themselves cannot physically touch the tomb, it is a way of transferring the blessed light of the saint onto the women and their children. A blessed touch for each individual can manifest differently. For the sick, it can be a way to hope for a quick recovery; for others, protection, especially to protect children from the evil eye and to protect their health and well-being. Many visitors end their veneration by donating money. Some visitors walk backward as they exit their rooms so as not to turn their backs on the saint.

A stark contrast to the Bostami shrine is the shrine of Saint Ahmadullah Maizbhandari. The tomb is situated in an elaborate structure with modern decoration. The women can see the decorative tomb of the saint through a fancy decorative glass display. Women enter the room and stand in front of the glass in supplicant, offering prayer. Many sit for a long time counting prayer beads and reciting surahs. I have not seen women pray inside the room. Young male students who are initiated under the Maizbhandari tariqa and

work for the shrine institution keep surveillance. Photos are not to be taken inside the room, nor are any form of threads or locks allowed to be tied (although many were sold in the little shops scattered around the area). Veneration of the saint here is in the form of giving salaam to the saint and making any *niyats* or requests. On certain occasions, on special dates announced beforehand, the current living saint gives *khutbah* to a public audience, and the crowd, after veneration, then huddles together in front of the open office where such khutbahs are given. In the absence of the current saint, his son takes his place. The Maizbhandari tariqa emphasizes music, love, and mental healing through which one can achieve a state of peace and feel closer to one's Creator. The saint, therefore, acts as a life guide, a teacher, and the light which leads the individual toward their Creator. Through music, qawwali, and sema, they strengthen and ignite this connection. The love they have for their Creator and their Prophet, followed by saints, is nurtured through self-cleansing through zikrs after every daily ritual prayer. There are special zikrs and duas to be recited at scheduled days and times and through sema music. The pilgrimage to the shrine is part of this self-journey, which also provides the devotees a chance to meet with their saint, especially women who have little public access to saints other than such audiences.

Veneration of a saint, thus, is a journey to the place and home of a saint. On the journey, people visit the saint, offer prayers, and through this personal intercessory form of prayer, have a personal conversation with them. They would then, as part of their request, if they left any, would offer something within their means to the shrine. Another form of request, manat, which is also often used simultaneously with niyat by my informants, is making promises to the saint. If their requests come true in any way possible, they would, in return, do something as a way to give back. Stories shared in this chapter and discussed

throughout provide ample examples of such forms of giving back to the saint. It is not seen as a transactional exchange by the informant, nor do they feel it as an obligation to give back. However, promises made to the saint in such a form of veneration must always be fulfilled sometime in their life if they get the results they want. This may be seen as an obligation, but divine obligation may not be the obligation that we normally understand, nor is it about reciprocity within gift exchange (Mauss, 1925). This is linked to the concept of *barkat* (Arabic baraka). *Barkat* is a divine power and blessedness that is placed on saints by Allah (Geertz 1971; Saniotis 2008), and the *barkat* is felt by ordinary people in divine blessings (Mittermaier 2013). *Barkat* is the noor (the light) that the devotees seek to feel and touch to get the blessing of *barkat* from the saints. Any act of goodness, donations, charity, and feeding a community by a person can be done in order to achieve as much *barkat* in life as possible; in this understanding, the reciprocal relationship may not adequately capture the divine weight of barkat and how the believers describe them, at least for many of my participants. *Barkat* is not only beneficial for them in this world but also in the afterlife as well. In contrast, Mittermaier (2013) explores the transactional exchange seen within religious giving. The exchange is highly economical and is inherently linked with the idea of exchange and higher profit for this life and the next in the forms of abundant blessings by borrowing Schielke's (2012) argument of capitalist ethics within religious blessings and practice among people of Cairo (Mittermaier 2013; Schielke 2012). Bertocci (1999) writes about a wealthy Maizbhandari man who arranged a *Urs* (death anniversary, an auspicious event celebrated annually as a marriage reunion of the saint and the Creator) in the Dhaka High Court mazar at his own expense. This form of the act and heavy financial undertaking during special religious occasions is part of their activity of getting as much barkat as possible. The more

one has, the more one will give. The shrines that I have visited, irrespective of their size, have multiple donation boxes scattered all around the mazar complexes. Visitors and devotees donate anything they can. People with special *niyats* and *manats* will bring in animals or larger amounts of money as well. Animals such as cows, goats, and chickens are frequently donated to mazars, especially during *Urs*, when a huge batch of food is made from all the animals given by everyone and given to the entire community and anyone who visits. Stories of well-off families taking charge of planning, organizing, and funding expensive occasions are not uncommon, especially during the month of Ramadan. All of these are tied to *barkat*.

A journey to the mazar with the intention of veneration is called *jiarot* (Also ziyarot, meaning visit or pilgrimage). During the act of veneration, during the intercession, a *manot* (a vow) or a *niyot* (an intention) can be made. A person asks for a particular thing (their *niyot*) and then makes a *manot* (a promise, a vow to do something in return). The stories below give examples of such intentions and promises. Many people's *manot* is a form of giving, like a cow if they get a particular promotion or simply coming back to the shrine, praying, and giving a certain amount of donation in the name of the saint. This form of giving is called *hadiya* (gift). Some tie-in threads while making *manot*. However, this practice has considerably decreased and is one of the effects of the changing patterns of reformism. Many pray for it in silent supplication and then, before leaving, put money in the donation boxes. There are people who frequent the shrines and have taken *bayat* (formal allegiance or initiation) into a particular tariqat (Sufi path). The prevalent tariqat in Bangladesh are Chisti, Qadiriyya, Naqshbandi, and Maizbhandari. I am told that, although there are different paths, all paths lead to the same destination, which is the highest level one can achieve through spiritual devotion. In my study, I mostly came across women who were under either the

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Maizbhadari, Qadiri, or Chisti path. In many parts of the Muslim world, a Sufi saint and teacher is known as a Sheikh. In the Bangladeshi context, they are referred to as baba, awliya, or auli.

Veneration or visitation of Muslim saints is not limited to people who formally follow Sufism and are under a particular path. It is open to anyone, even non-Muslims and non-believers. It is said that all are welcome in the court of the saint. Figures 3.1–3.3 below show some people in veneration.

Figure 3. 1: Young venerators locking in their *manot* (vows)

Figure 3. 2: A woman offering salaam to the saint. She did not raise her hand in supplication as she only raises her hand to Allah.

Figure 3. 3: Bayat ceremony. Students are waiting to receive their bayat from Sufi Emdadul Haque Maizbhandari.

# Sketches of Muslim Shrine Venerators

I have had many encounters and many conversations on this journey, each of which brought out the complex beauty of ordinary Muslim lives. Amidst life's harsh struggles—be it domestic, economic, mental, or in relationships—each story brought out the joys of small things and the importance of gratitude, yet it also served as a reminder of the structural violence that was part and parcel of modern Bangladeshi society. The women did not see themselves as agentive individuals being liberated from their harsh realities, however. Rather, they garnered strength through dependency on their saints or through the solace of being closer to a saint and their absolute in Allah. The writings on the walls of the women's space of Shah Poran Mazar Sharif in Sylhet show how pure an individual's wishes are when it comes to an intimate conversation between them and their Creator. The stories shared here show the various ways women in shrines engage with their faith and their understanding of faith. Each of the stories reflects a different kind of pious journey but, most importantly, highlights the importance of individuality within a communal space. In all the stories that follow, the most apparent relationship is the gendered position of women within a patriarchal society. No matter how much agency may or may not come out from the chance of choosing veneration themselves, it is through their gendered position. It is important to understand that these women, depending on their economic status, have different experiences and relations to the shrine. Women with a stable income and higher socioeconomic status have more space to focus on themselves and their piety. Women who come from a lower income group and are more vulnerable both in terms of money and mental health focus all their faith in wanting to solve their problems. In all cases, however,

they all believed their husband's *deen* and religious knowledge were much stronger than theirs. Although it is likely that their husband had more access to knowledge of the Quran, the hadith, and religious sermons called *waz mahfil*s. When it came to faith and the emotional connection, their feelings of inadequacy were probably influenced by their surroundings as well. For example, women in Bangladesh's higher social classes have more access to Islamic knowledge and, therefore, confidence in their faith, while women from lower social classes and rural towns do not have significant access to formal Islamic knowledge even though there are Madrasas (Islamic schools) everywhere and also do not carry a personal validation of themselves as upper-class women do. Another factor is women's lack of time and space to focus on religious training, which is not expected of the women by their community and family but is celebrated when it is done by the men of the family.

With these things in mind, I now introduce Julekha, Rima Aunty, Shirin Aunty, Shabana Aunty, and Asha.

## Julekha

It was mid-morning, and I had just arrived at Chittagong one day earlier. I was staying in a rest house on Sarson Road, in a Dak Bungalow, sitting on a steep hill. Going up and down the steep hill was quite a workout if the taxi or Uber drivers refused to go up from the main gate. I decided to go to the Bayezid Bostami mazar because it was an old establishment and still held some of its attractions despite the consensus among researchers that Bayezid Bostami's tomb is not in Bangladesh.

I did some online research about the Bayezid Bostami mazar hours of operation. Finding that it stays open, I decided to make my first visit that day. It was about 6.2

kilometers away from Sarson Road and took about 15 mins without any traffic to reach there. The elaborate gate of the mazar has seen years and seemed to have blended in with the environment, and if not for the Uber driver pointing it out, I would have completely missed it.

Through the gate is a narrow, busy street known as "Dargah Lane." The Bayezid Bostami dargah lane was filled with all kinds of shops on either side selling various confectionaries, groceries, and snacks. Many old sold attars (perfumes), rose water, surma dani (kohl pot), incense, candles, tupis (religious skull caps typically worn by men), prayer beads, and many packaged sweets to feed to the soft-shell turtles.

I went inside the crowded women's room. The room itself was quite small, facing a small cupboard with books, a clock, and a window through which the women could see the tomb and venerate it. I had to snake my way into a corner. It was after the Duhr (midday) prayer. As I sat down, the woman beside me struck up a conversation. She asked me where I was from, who I came with, and what I did, a normal conversation. I told her my reasons and my curiosities. She was cradling her baby in her arms and wanted to see the papers I was carrying. They were the ethics clearance documents, which also had some information about my research and a set of questions. They were written in English, but she told me that she could read them. After that, I asked whether she'd be interested in talking with me, and she told me she would let me know and was quiet for some time. After a while, she asked me whether she would get into any kind of trouble talking with me, and I assured her that she would not and that I would not use her real name or any personal information that could be traced back to her, she looked a bit relieved and asked me what I wanted to know. Later on, it occurred to me that maybe she agreed to talk to me because she was the one who first

started our conversation and that I did not purposely select her among all the other women. Maybe that led her to make that decision, but it is only a guess. That and the fact that she was able to go over my documents with her own eyes, not because the documents convinced her but because I gave her the papers and not her husband. Later on, she said that, normally, any form of documents, irrespective of what they are, are always handled by her husband.

Julekha was a 30-year-old housewife. She was wearing a chocolate brown burqa with her niqab turned over her head when she was inside the women's space so that it revealed her face. She told me that her husband was in the land business and dealt with land contracts. The baby in her arms, her 7-month-old son, was her reason to visit this shrine that day. Julekha was married off after her intermediate schooling was over. She talked about her husband in an affectionate manner but always referred to him as "my son's father." This was both a sign of respect towards her husband and also her shyness to refer to him as her "husband." It is quite common not to call one's husband by their name. Growing up, I never heard my mom call my dad by his name; she always said "Nazia's abbu" (Nazia's father). Usually, the eldest child's name is used. Most, if not all, people from my parent's generation and older seem to have followed this practice. However, Julekha did not refer to her husband with her eldest child's name, which was her 2-year-old daughter, and she also did not say her son's name. It was just "my son's father" ("Amar cheler baba"). She told me that they were from Chattagram, not from the city but from a remote village named Anwari. She came with her brother and her sister-in-law.

Julekha had been here before. During their first pregnancy, all were expecting a boy, but it turned out to be a girl. When she became pregnant two years later, she was advised by her family, her husband, and some neighboring women to come here and pray for a son.

Julekha wanted a son because then they would not have to conceive any more children. A daughter and a son seemed complete. She came here during the first month of her pregnancy with her husband and tied a knot at the tree that is opposite the shrine's tomb. It was a small tree without any leaves, but the tree itself was covered from top to bottom with colorful red and orange threads.

> I heard that many people who came here were fortunate enough to get blessed with their *manot*. So, I did my foriyod to Allah coming here. Who knows, He might bless you once; He does not have any kind of shortages. You know, so I prayed for a son, and then before leaving, I tied my knot, and in my manot, I mentioned that I would bring back my son here If I were to be blessed with one.

Around this time, the baby started making noises. Lifting him up, Julekha gave him a kiss, smiled, and asked me if we could pause. She unzipped a chain that was not visible among her layers and started breastfeeding, in between carrying on conversations and asking me whether I had similar experiences. I recounted some of the stories I heard as well, and how many of them referred to their babies as miracle babies. She laughed at that, sighed, and continued that she hoped her brother and sister-in-law would get some good news as well. They have been trying for seven years and are still unable to conceive. Julekha counted on her fingers the various procedures that her sister-in-law had gone through to get pregnant, telling me that they had taken and were still taking all kinds of medications and going to 4 different doctors and still, for seven years had been unsuccessful. They came to the shrine as a form of last resort and with much hope, said Julekha.

I have told them not to think much about it and not to get their hopes up as well. This is completely Allah's will. However, coming here, visiting a sacred place, and doing a niyat is not bad at all, no matter the outcome. It is still a blessing just to come here. There's no harm in trying, right?

As Julekha lives in a remote village, she does not frequent the Bayezid Bostami shrine. She was able to bring her son back 5-months after he was born, and her coming today was not pre-planned as well. She came to the city for some personal business and was staying with her parents, so her sister-in-law approached her and asked whether she would come with them to the shrine since she was already here and had been there before. So, she decided to join them so she could fulfill her promise and untie her knot as well, as the tree itself had become covered with knots. It is not possible to remember one's own, so the usual custom is that when you tie a knot, you can untie any knot. This way, yours will be untied by another stranger, and you are untying for another as well. If your niyat was not meant to be, then you do not need to untie any knots.

Julekha stated that she herself never really frequented mazar growing up. She visited them once or twice, but it was never part of her upbringing. They did, however, believe in them more than the Wahhabi family she married into. Still, Julekha told me even though many people say that Wahhabis are strict and do not believe that shrine visitation is part of Islam, she never faced restrictions or belittling. Her husband was even one of those who had advised her to come to mazars during her second pregnancy. She added that when she was around six months pregnant, she even visited the Shah Jalal and Shah Poran mazars to do foriyodi for a son. She now plans to go to a mazar of another saint in Kutubdia in Cox's Bazar and give a goat as *hadiya*. I asked whether she had seen any differences between her two

families, and she replied that there was not much difference except that her husband and his four brothers usually attend more waz mahfils and invite the bigshot hujurs who give waz to eat at their home. Another difference is that her husband's family does not necessarily celebrate Eid-e-Milad-un-Nabi (the celebration of the Prophet's birthday). In her own family, her brothers organize dua-mahfils, where, if they are able, they will sacrifice an animal, and if not, food is still distributed to everyone in the neighborhood and to the needy as well. Her brothers bring in a group of young hafez (someone who has memorized the Quran) from the madrasa orphanage to recite the Quran from start to finish instead of hiring hujurs for that; this way, she says, these orphaned young hafez earn money as well as recognition. Food is given to the madrasa as well. This kind of preparation is done on all special occasions such as Eid-e-Milad-un-Nabi, Shab-e-Barat (the middle night of the month of Sha'ban), Shab-e-Qadr (night of destiny during Ramadan), and the holy month of Muharram in addition to mandatory prayers and special prayers as well. Another important difference she has seen is that in her area, babies are often taken to the hujur at a shrine near their home and fed kheer (sweet rice pudding) at the age of around seven months for boys and five months for girls. This was not a running custom in the area where she lives with her in-laws. Still, she abided by the rule she knew and brought her daughter to the hujur when the daughter was five months old. She will do the same for her son when he reaches seven months of age, she told me.

Even though it seems like Julekha is between two extremes at the same time, she has not personally felt any form of pressure or prejudice from either. She is happy to follow any rules that her in-laws follow, and she is also happy to carry out the ones she learned from her parents. It is also interesting to note that, though the husband's family is Wahhabi, we

see both her husband and her brother-in-law visiting the shrine after exhausting all forms of ways of having children. Julekha says that it is her husband's wish that she will most likely follow as they are part of one single life. Otherwise, it did not matter to her what rules anyone else had set or not.

> I know many people distrust shrine visitations or making promises here, but for me, I believe it, and I cannot just erase it, you know. I cannot…no, I do not want to unlearn it. I let people say whatever they want, but I do not go into arguments with them. Just because they are misbehaving does not mean I should. What is good, we have to admit it is good; just because other people think it is bad does not make it bad.

Julekha would refer to herself as Sunni and her husband's family as Wahhabi as two separate entities. The waz mahfils that were common in the community she lived would congregate and talk about the differences, Julekha said. However, the way Julekha described the situation, I got the feeling that these waz mahfils themselves gave out unclear talks while referencing hadiths and the Quran out of context. Julekha's manat was granted from this shrine, and so she came back to complete the niyot she made. In contrast to many reformists' claims that those who visit mazars are committing shirk and that these are places of idolatry where obscene dances take place, Julekha observed strict veiling and followed many Wahhabi traditions through her husband's family.

## Rima Aunty

I met Rima Aunty in the darbar sharif of Hazrat Ahmadullah Maizbhandari at Fatikchari. Rima Aunty is 42 years old and has a BA in art from her local college. She is a

housewife and divides her time between her family and her regular prayers and zikrs. The day I met her, Rima Aunty had come to the shrine as one of her regular monthly visits. She came with her husband and her two sons. She was wearing a nude pink burqa with a deep blue silk tunic. The most catching feature while conversing with her was her nose ring. It was really pretty. She was genteel and calm and kept apologizing throughout the conversation because she felt she wasn't being helpful enough. She said that she always had trouble expressing herself and that most of the time, she could not really put into words all the overwhelming feelings she goes through. Growing up, she was not really exposed to the world of spiritual Islam (she used the term *adhatik Islam*, □□□□□□□ □□□□□, which is often used to refer to Sufism). By this, she meant that, although her family used to pray and recite the Quran, they did not go as far as to delve into spirituality. Their religious practice was limited to the five daily prayers. She visited the shrine complex when she was a child of around 7-8 years old with her paternal grandmother, her *dadi*. As a child, she did not really understand much about the shrines except that it was a sacred place where people would go to pray and pay respect. Other than her grandmother, no one in the family would frequent shrines. After her grandmother became more ill due to old age, the visits stopped altogether.

Rima Aunty got married in 1998 when she was 19 years old. It was an arranged and happy marriage. When she got pregnant with her first child, it was the happiest moment of her life; however, the newborn got really sick. She could not accept the fact that her newborn was severely sick, so she stayed in prayer throughout the night. Amidst running to and from the hospital, she remembered her childhood days of visiting the Maizbhandari darbar and silently made a niyat (intention) that she would bring her son to the darbar if he got well. Her son eventually recovered, and when he was 7-8 months old, she brought him to the

shrine and gave *hadiya* as promised. From that moment onwards, she felt strangely drawn to the place and started to make frequent visits. Rima Aunty said that she had never felt anything like it before, and again, she was sorry for not being able to express exactly what she felt. She just knew that it felt insanely peaceful.

She had received her bayat along with her husband and had been regular to the shrine for four years. She tried her best to live by maintaining the seven principles of the Maizbhandari order (Usul-e-Saba), she told me, but is not yet able to live by them fully. It was extremely difficult, she said, but she was trying as best as she could to remain within the principles. One of the better things about leading her life through these principles was self-reflection. She stated that she regrets her past life and the way she used to live. Her father, she says, was very liberal-minded and encouraged his daughters to keep up with the latest knowledge and fashion. During her college years, Rima Aunty always used to adopt the latest clothes and hairstyles. She used to wear her hair short and opt for longer skirts than kameez. Rima Aunty said that she did not feel that that was a sinful life, but she regretted starting her journey of religious self-reflection much later than she would have liked.

She believes that the way she is living now, through limiting her exposure to the outside world, mostly staying at home and dressing modestly, has given her a newfound life and release. She is more at peace, and she can quickly catch her wrongdoings and ask for forgiveness while trying to better herself. Her past life felt more competitive and wrong. When I asked how this process of finding herself came into being, she said it was through her zikrs and Baba's speeches, which she attended monthly at the darbar. Baba also has a *khanqah* in the area where she and her husband live, but they still block out time to visit the main shrine. She reminds me that doing the zikr and achieving a high place of concentration

are two different things. It takes time and practice. She adds that though her past life was not wrong or illegal, it was not right. She felt that the zikrs and self-discipline challenged her to do better and question herself constantly.

Before, I used to feel like I was right all the time like whatever I did was right. This was the case. Now, I constantly question my actions and think before I act. Now, when I sit for *zikr*, I feel like I still haven't reached that point, and I feel like I need to invest more time in it, and I know I may never achieve that state. Honestly, since we have to maintain a family and have kids to look after, we cannot do everything. Baba tells us we have to do everything like we have to keep everything on track; we cannot abandon our responsibilities as a wife and mother. Kind of manage everything.

From a sheltered girl with her shelf full of music CDs of the latest national and international artists to a pious woman with her phone full of qawwali and sema religious songs, Rima Aunty feels like a transformed person. Her father, though old, is alive and does not stop or criticize her new way of living. She admits, though, that he does not really approve of it. Rima Aunty says that she could listen to Baba talk for 8 hours straight, standing in the heat, feeling as if an angel were standing and talking before her. Her mood immediately becomes calm, and the words make her feel connected and encourage her to try hard to improve herself. She feels extremely blessed for receiving bayat and becoming a murid, and if she had the chance to become murid even earlier, that would have been even better.

When I asked her how she feels about the fact that most people do not like shrines or shrine veneration, she told me she feels extreme pity for those people because she could see her old self in them. She never felt that she was committing *shirk* or that it was *bid'ah*.

Through this spiritual self-refinement, she now gets to know more about Islam, its history, Allah's words, and the prophet's life and actions. She tries to mind her own business and actually trains herself to maintain seclusion whenever she can. She has neighbors who do not believe in shrines and oppose veneration of any saints, so she does not talk about her views because she knows that they are not ready to have a conversation about it. To those she finds are interested, she tries to invite them to hear baba speak. When they don't show up, she feels bad but tries not to think about it. She says it is a strange feeling to try to defend her practice because she was never disrespectful toward how others practiced their own religion, even when she wasn't particularly religious herself.

> I cannot speak for other people; I can only speak for myself, and for me, this is the most peaceful place, and Baba's words are peaceful. It always felt like I was looking to hear those exact words and needed to hear those words, but I did not know that myself. The last time I didn't have the courage to request it of them was the last speech he gave over the Zoom call. If they could share the recording with us on WhatsApp, then we would have been able to play it whenever we liked, but I am planning to suggest it next time.

> Both Julekha and Rima Aunty can be seen as agents trying to refine themselves within a Sufi reformist ideology that focuses on ethical self-cultivation.

## Shirin Aunty

During one of my earlier visits to the high court mazar, at a point when I was not a stranger anymore, I witnessed a verbal fight between two women. One of them was sitting and reading a book. She suddenly started screaming at the woman in front of the window to

stop giving sejdah (prostration). She kept harassing the woman verbally, and when the woman was done with her veneration, she walked up to the woman and started to shout back that it was her faith and that the woman should mind her own business. She said she should not have to explain anything to her but that she was not doing a sejdah but was kissing the mantle and the glass. She was paying her respects. This back-and-forth exchange kept up for some time, and I could see how embarrassed and visibly upset the woman who was venerating was. The justification of the other woman was that it was her right to say something because a "sin" was being done, as it was clearly written on the walls not to do sejdah.

Before this incident, the woman who started the fight had come inside the shrine carrying a lot of bags with her. She was casually dressed, with a short-sleeved kameez, salwar, and a thin satin *orna* loosely draped over her short hair. She took out a small plastic footstool and sat herself down at the front beside a pillar. She proceeded to take out a bowl, poured water on it, then took out a small bag containing white powder and mixed it with the water. She called out to the cats that were sitting at the far end of the corner behind her; they came slowly and gingerly smelled the liquid substance and then started happily lapping it up. I realized it was powdered milk. She took out her prayer beads and a small book and started to recite silently. After a while, another woman in a lavender kameez and gold jewelry was seen in front of the entrance, and before entering, she touched the floor with her fingertips, brought them to her lips, and then to her chest in a gesture of salaam (greetings of peace). Apparently, in a hurry, she briskly walked up to the window and started her veneration. When she was done after a few minutes, she held the window bars and lowered her head. Seeing this, the woman on the footstool pointed her finger and shouted, "Stop,

that's shirk! Sejdah is not permitted." I did not really anticipate this; it happened really quickly. As mentioned before, she finished her veneration but soon turned around defiantly to point her finger back at the woman and shout, "I am not giving sejdah; I am giving my salaam and respect; mind your own business." The fight continued for quite some time and, as the woman in lavender was in a hurry, she concluded that "I may know little, I may know nothing, I may be illiterate, but that does not give you the right to misbehave toward me and shout at me. I will practice the way I want, and you can do as you wish" and she stomped across the room.

This was how I met Shirin Aunty. That day, I went after her, and we decided to schedule an interview. She told me that she was a regular and had been coming there for years and was actually coming back from a Quran book club that she was a part of, and in her book club, they talked about how shrine veneration was nothing to be ashamed of as she was handing out tips to the security Aunty and Aunty in charge of shoes. Even though she just had a fight, she did not look angry or exasperated. She was smiling and talking excitedly about how the person she goes to is a scholar of religious studies and very pious and encourages her rather than demeaning her for shrine visitations and veneration. Before leaving, she introduced me to her husband, who came to pick her up and told me to go see the scholar in his office.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Our next conversations happened over phone calls. I found out that Shirin Aunty stayed extremely busy and could not accompany me to one of her sessions with the scholar she talked about, as there was no regular routine for that. She used to visit him whenever she could find time, at least once a month. I did not get the chance to meet this scholar, but

through Shirin Aunty, I learned that he was a professor at Dhaka University, now retired, and currently works as a writer of the religious section at a newspaper agency. It was not really a book club, but, like Shirin Aunty, many other people go to him to discuss the Quran. Shirin Aunty says that since she did not understand Arabic, she would read the Bangla interpretations and now consults the scholar, whom she refers to as Munshi Bhai, to learn the possible interpretations. Like Shirin Aunty, many other educated and working people would visit him to discuss the Quran and religious discourses. When Shirin Aunty was not able to make time for me, I tried asking whether I could speak to him via phone, but due to his old age, phone conversations would be difficult for him as he was in his late 70s. For Shirin Aunty, Munshi Bhai became an extremely influential person and mediator of religious knowledge who taught how to live by the light of the Quran.

Shirin Aunty was 44 years old when I spoke to her and lived with her two sons and husband in one of the busiest areas of Dhaka city. Her husband was involved with many religious groups and parties in the same "line," by which she meant those who follow Islam as she does, following not just the Quran and the Prophet but also pirism (following saints) and shrines. As a housewife, she related that most women she knew had to sneak around their husbands in order to visit shrines and certain pirs because their husbands did not believe in them or that the husbands did, but the wives didn't. She was lucky because both she and her husband were equally devoted, making it easy for her to get to shrines or visit babas quickly without the hassle of planning out trips.

She had always had sincere faith in the miracles and the strength of pirs and babas. Her great-grandfather had great *keramati* (miraculous powers) that people in those times had seen and heard of, and these stories were passed down through generations, so she grew

up hearing them. Her great-grandfather, Abdur Rahman, in a remote village, was known as Qari Shaheb or Qari Baba. Qari (the one who recites/reads) is a title given to those who attain the ability to recite the Quran in the proper way and with proper pronunciation. Shirin Aunty's great-grandfather was known as the Qari Shaheb of their village. He became the first of their family to be a murid under a saint named Abdullah Shah Gazi, and after years of spiritual training, he came to Narayanpur, Shirin Aunty's home village, and started to teach Quran and mystical knowledge to the people of the village. According to Shirin, Aunty's relatives and the people of the village, even djinns and poris (fairies), used to come to him to learn Arabic and Quran recitation and had great respect for him. He was also taken to the realm of djinns by the djinns who came to learn from him. He became well known for his miraculous deeds.

One time, a villager was walking along the road and noticed the Qari Shaheb was sitting on one side of the grass, lost in reading. It started to rain heavily, drenching the villagers, but he noticed that Qari Shaheb and his book were completely dry. The rainwater seemed to be falling around him, but Qari Shaheb himself seemed to have not yet realized it was raining and that he was not getting wet. He then noticed someone was looking at him, and it dawned on him what had happened as he registered the shock on the villager's face. He called the villager to him and requested him not to say anything about this. Another time, the village of Narayanpur fell under extreme drought, and there was no rain for weeks. Qari Shaheb had aged considerably now, and he was being escorted to the Eid-gah (the prayer field in the morning of Eid-ul-Fitr) in a *palki* (palanquin); as soon as he held up his hands in munajat, a heavy rain started falling that morning during that draught season.

After Qari Shaheb passed away, his immediate son, Shirin Aunty's grandfather, did not receive the powers, and though her grandfather's brother did receive some, he was not able to retain them. However, her mama (mother's brother) did get the ability to see beyond and have an inner intuition to some extent. Shirin Aunty was adored by her mama, Mohammad Mijanur Rahman. Since childhood, Shirin Aunty narrated how she always felt a certain kind of care and protection even though she was not immediately under his care. Her mama was an engineer and worked for a company in Gazipur. Even after her marriage, her mama used to constantly check up on her. Shirin Aunty, since childhood, used to wonder how her mama's predictions always came true; whatever her mama predicted on any matter used to occur as predicted. "It was always like this," Shirin Aunty paused and took a sigh, "I don't know where to start; there are so many things that happened!"

Shirin Aunty's first pregnancy was difficult. At the end of her third trimester, her mama came to visit her,

> He seemed tired, I remember, but he was happy to see me. Before leaving, he said to me, "When you do the cesarean, in many cases, the stitching does not immediately heal, and at times, bleeding does not stop as well. When that happens, do not get scared. If anything goes wrong, start calling the name of Qari Shaheb Hujur (her great-grandfather)

As predicted, Shirin Aunty's pregnancy was not smooth. Shirin Aunty's bleeding did not stop, and it reached the point where the doctors started to look for blood bags to give her a transfusion. Shirin Aunty in that state remembered what her mama advised and started calling upon her great-grandfather, thinking, "I do not know what is going on; the nurses and doctors are running around in search of blood; please help control the situation." After a

while—and Shirin Aunty here sounded as shocked as if she was experiencing it all over again—bleeding started to slow down, and, in the end, she did not need any blood. Shirin Aunty since then realized that her mama had some form of abilities, in that whatever he said happened. This is how Shirin Aunty explained her faith became more grounded and developed because she had been experiencing miracles and hearing stories of miracles growing up, and it was in her blood. Her husband had made a small shrine around their graves for Qari Shaheb and her now-deceased mama. During each of their death anniversaries, Shirin Aunty and her husband go to the village along with other family members and hold a dua-mahfil ceremony.

The ceremonies start with Quran khatam (complete recitation of the Quran from beginning to end), and then duas are held by the hujurs, followed by feeding the villagers, including those who attend the ceremony. Shirin Aunty started smirking a little and added,

You know, when people say that people like us do puja or call us "mazarpuja kore" [shrine worshippers], I get frustrated sometimes because this is my truth. I cannot explain any of it, but I have lived it. This is how my faith came to be; all this negative backtalk does not make sense; they are wrong. The real pirs do not outwardly show their abilities—it is cloaked (gadhaka dei)— however, they do not back down. This is why I asked you to meet with Munshi Bhai because I cannot explain it well. He is learned; he translated the Quran into Bangla. It would have been good for you, but I like that you went to the high court mazar as well; it is "alive" (jibonto).

Shirin Aunty had been going to the High Court mazar since 2011. Shirin Aunty's practice had led her to keep correcting herself and achieve as much amol as she could. One

of the things that she was most proud of was that she could count on her fingers the number of times she had lied in her life. Sometimes, there were times she had to lie, and during those times, she asked forgiveness from Allah 1000 times. She added

It is also important to stick to one path. The more you start to doubt your learning or the things you feel, the more distracted you get. Because these "things" (referring to spiritual abilities and mystical knowledge) are muddled. From my end, I try not to delve into what others are telling me or showing me. I try to stay on my path, pray five times a day, and sometimes recite the Bangla translation of the Quran. I do not cheat or judge, and more importantly, I do not lie.

My question is, why wouldn't I believe it when I have seen it multiple times when I watched it happen? My belief will automatically come if I experience it.

Another example Shirin Aunty said of her mama's ability was that when her mama's son was an undergraduate student at Polytechnic, her mama said 3-months before the publication of the results that his son would stand first in Bangladesh in Polytechnic, and then, when the result came three months later, the son did come first in the discipline. This son is now settled in Canada, apparently working for Tesla from Canada.

You know these abilities come with a cost. It is not good to share what you see or feel. This knowledge is supposed to stay hidden, or if you want to warn someone, you have to do it by giving hints. My mama could not keep it hidden. Maybe that is why he left us so early. My mama's "ontor chokh" (inner eye) was open. My mama was able to tell a person's past, present, and future just by looking at them."

Having any form of abilities, spiritual or miraculous or both, and the fact that it is supposed to be hidden is a common understanding of many. Even when you feel you know more than you should, it is best to keep it hidden, and this was what Selim Uncle had said as well, my referee and guide in Sylhet. He confided that years on the path allowed him to sharpen his intuition, even though he did not possess any form of spiritual abilities.

Shirin Aunty also confided that she also got the same feeling from Munshi Bhai, the scholar and teacher. At times, Munshi Bhai would talk to her in riddles, hinting at her something. Shirin Aunty continued that she received bayat from her mama under the Chistiya tariqa. In her house, at least thrice every month, her husband and his friends organize dua-mehfils for select pirs and auliyas from all over the country. She named and described several of these saints, including Amber-Ali-Shah of Comilla, his protégé Dr. Badiur-Zaman of Noakhali, who took him to a forest for 12 years to remain in seclusion and meditate, after which Badiur returned and later became a doctor, and Amber-Ali-Shah of Comilla, Dargahbari of Shah Abdullah. A nephew of the late pir, Dr. Badiur-Zaman, who used to frequent Shirin Aunty's house, gave her the contact of Munshi Bhai. Shirin Aunty again said she did not have to seek out anyone or any pir, as she was always surrounded by them. She told me:

> My mama [maternal uncle] once said, 'In your deathbed, when you see you, your mother and father come to accompany you; do not be afraid because we will be here.' My mama told me not to be afraid of my death. I do not usually say this, but I am telling you.

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Shirin Aunty admitted that she did come across pirs and babas she felt were frauds, but she did not return to them. She said that it is because of these and the rise of such people that pirism now has a bad reputation. Shirin Aunty told me that she did not know much but that she did not want to. It is not like she does not have access to knowledge, but she chooses not to. She focuses on running her household and raising her son. Often, she did not have the time to speak with me and had to reschedule because she was running around collecting documents for her son's undergraduate application. In our last phone call, she said her son got the visa and was now in Canada for his undergraduate studies. Before her son left, she made sure he was wearing *attar*. Her advice to me was always to the point. The piece of advice she most lives by is that today's reality is if you share your difficulties and sadness, people laugh, and if you share your good, they become jealous.

She reminded me of our first meeting when she got into a fight. She says she faces such detractors often but that it does not matter if you can stand your ground:

> It depends on you how you will give love, and it depends on the saint and how
> they will take it or whether they will answer your requests (Bhalobasha tumi
> kibhabe prokash korba, eta tomar bepar. Ar uni kobul korbe kina eta onar
> bepar). The thing is to remember that Allah is real, that Prophet is his
> messenger, and the pirs are our guides and teachers who will help us to reach
> our Allah and our Rasul [Prophet]."

Shirin Aunty says that love for a pir can be expressed in many ways. Some pray, some wear *attar*, some bring flowers, and some do all of the above. As long as the intention is right, there is no wrong or right way of approaching it. From this, I gather that although Shirin

Aunty is not actively training in tariqat, she does have her way of maintaining some form of it because, as a devoted wife and a mother, she chooses to.

Compared to Rima Aunty and Julekha, Shirin Aunty's faith seems substantially different. Although all these women have come under some form of criticism from anti-shrine reformers, Shirin Aunty's faith is what some would call "extreme." Yet, through her valiant efforts, she maintains her way of knowing and conceiving Islam.

## Shabana Aunty and Conversation on Bodily Movements, Zikrs, and Djinns

I went to the Dhaka High Court mazar later than usual that day. I arrived after 3 p.m. and on a Friday. Friday is considered to be a special day because it is the Jumma prayer, which occurs every week. The mazar was more crowded than during any other day of the week. This was not surprising because Thursday, Friday, and even sometimes Saturday are the busiest days. Friday and Saturday are also weekends. The imam of the mosque was providing Friday *khutbah* (sermon). I could tell it must have been more crowded during the Duhr prayer time. After sitting down on the floor, I started looking around and noting down general observations while the imam's words blasted from the speaker. There were groups of women all over the room. Many came with groups of friends or relatives, or they came alone. A few minutes later, there was a rhythmic shuffling, and I looked up from the notes to see that all the women were getting ready for the monajat.

After the monajat ended, zikr started. After considerable time passed, a group of women of 4, who looked between in their early 40s and 50s range, started getting more frenzied. It started from a rhythmic movement to the chants of "Allah Hu," and then as they sped up their chants, their head and body movements started increasing as well. At one point

it looked like they went into a trance where they were continuously shaking their bodies and chanting in heavy voices. Their hair came undone, and their head covering fell. One of the women got up in that state, unable to sit any longer, went over to the window through which the saint is venerated, took hold of the window bars, and continued her movement, standing and vigorously moving her head up and down instead of side to side. After some time, she fainted from exhaustion. There was another woman in the far corner who was chanting "Allah hu" and moving her head and body up and down in short movements, but she was also very loudly thumping her chest with every chant. She joined two of her hands in a fist and together kept thumping harder, causing her chants to falter with very heavy thuds when her fists met her chest.

After the zikr ended, the woman who fainted was woken up by her group and given water. That group settled down again, wiping off their sweat and carrying on their regular conversation while taking out betel leaves from their paan boxes. The woman who banged her chest also stopped and was now sitting quietly with her eyes closed. I looked beside me, and two women, one young in her late 20s and one old in her 60s, were sitting in a relaxed manner with their backs against the pillar. I reached them and struck up a conversation. They did not have any particular reason to come to the mazar aside from to pray and attend the monajat since it was a Friday. I asked their names, and the young woman said she preferred not to say her name as she knew I was recording when she gave me permission to do so. We can call her Ritu and her aunt (the older woman) Shaila. Ritu expressed that she did not believe in veneration of the shrine itself, yet she would come to the shrine because it was a sacred place and because there was a women's space to listen to the imam, pray together with other women as Jumma, and listen to the sermons. She appreciated that this place was

also a resting place for a great saint, but she did not feel like she had to be venerated. In fact, she opposed veneration, and she never made any vows or requests or asked for blessings from the saint. She believed that this practice was not really Islam but an unnecessary show of emotions. Referring to the zikrs done by the women earlier, she angrily said

> I know passing judgment is wrong, and it depends on the people they wish to practice, but really, it is very infuriating. I get angry whenever I see this, and it happens very often. I understand that during *zikr*, it's hard to control emotion, and many cannot, so they go into such a state, but really, one should practice doing it silently and not get overcome with emotions. It is more important to restrict oneself. It is annoying and shameful.

Here, her aunt also added that they know people cannot control and some just get overwhelmed with emotions. Shaila Aunty continued that it is not modest and that women should be modest. The movement of the body so forcefully that it rearranges and messes up your clothes is why these heavy movements and kinds of dances feed into the obscenity that many people say mazar symbolizes. That is all about singing, dancing, and plain obscenity.

Another woman who was sitting close and listening to our conversation decided to join in. She was with her mother, her mother-in-law, and two cousins. She brought her baby daughter with her. She wore a deep brown burqa and played with her daughter while sharing her views. She also did not believe in the exaggeration, as she called it, of the veneration of the shrine. She says that since they were saints, it was, of course, our duty to respect them, but bowing or asking something from them was not right. Moreover, she said that dancing in the presence of a pir is itself a sin, a "heinous distortion of Islam." It is a great place to come

for women to pray and meditate, but that is it. However, she also added that her husband and her father-in-law were both murids under an Atrashi pir from Mirpur. As her daughter had developed a cold, they suggested that the women of the family bring the daughter to the High Court shrine and the Golap Shah shrine so that the environment would touch the daughter. They had seen a doctor and were giving their daughter medicine, but by doing this, they just wanted her to recover in good health and quickly.

I wanted to converse with the group of women who went into a trance, so when I went up to them and told them about my research. They seemed really happy. I asked if I could have an interview, and one of the women said that they would be happy to, but she said they were leaving and gave me a time one week later. Unfortunately, it was during the end of my fieldwork, and the time did not match mine, so I asked if we could talk over the phone, but she politely declined, saying she was too busy and that it would be difficult to speak over the phone. This was one of my many regrets during my fieldwork, as it would have been nice to get their perspective as well. I hope someday I get a chance to talk to them about it.

I recognized another person while walking back to my place. I had met her before a few times. She never agreed to talk to me as an informant but was always nice and gave me helpful advice. When I went up to her to say hello, she looked up and gave me a big smile. She asked how I was doing and how my mother and aunt were doing (she met them when my mom and my aunt accompanied me during one of my visits). She asked whether they would come this time, but I said I was alone today. We started conversing, and after some time, she said that she had thought about it for a while, and she decided to talk to me. I was really happy to hear it. We will call her Shabana Aunty. She was a 43-year-old housewife who

came to the shrine at least once or twice a week, sometimes with her neighbors and sometimes alone.

Shabana Aunty has three daughters, who are all studying to be religious teachers in girls' madrasas and strictly forbade their mother to stop going to shrines. I was surprised to hear this because I saw her many times here. Shabana Aunty, at this time, looked apologetically guilty, like a child caught sneaking candy. It took time, but she was able to convince her daughters to let her come here. She promised them that she would only do her prayers and listen to the imams. She would not eat the *shinni/tobarak* (blessed food/sweet) given at the shrine, and she would not pray to the saint.

She still paid her respect to the saint before leaving. She would stand in front of the window, offer a silent prayer, and give her salaam. She informed me that she liked coming here but could not explain why. She also reached out and started eating the *tobarak* that was being distributed by the women who work/volunteer there, again while giving me a guilty look. She smiled and joked, "Don't tell this to my daughters!" Shabana Aunty comes to the shrine because she feels good doing so. Not only does she get to complete her prayers, but she also gets to interact with other women who come here. Being married at the age of 17, she never had proper schooling, so her recreational time was limited or non-existent outside of her family and extended family. Coming here now provides her with a chance to socialize and spend time outside her home.

Shabana Aunty then started talking about her early days of marriage. She used to live with her husband and in-laws in a village. The house was made of mud and had three rooms. As she was a young bride, she would not talk much and just kept quiet. She just knew that her mother-in-law was very religious and had a strong *ibadat* (worship practice). Her

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mother-in-law used to stay up all night, enclosed in a room on a prayer mat. She said she did not know then but later found out that her mother-in-law used to stay in that room all night because she had a djinn with her, with whom she would take during the nights. One time her *nonod* (her sister-in-law), Sheila, her husband's younger sister who was older than her, barged into the room where Shabana Aunty's mother-in-law was. After some time, she came out with her hair disheveled and a mad look in her eyes. Shabana Aunty got scared, but her mother-in-law came out of the room and told Sheila Aunty to leave them alone. The next day, Shabana Aunty found her mother-in-law making a hole at the base of the outer wall. Since it was made of mud, she kept wetting the walls and eventually was able to make a small hole and poured some more water on it. Then her sister-in-law came out and, at her mother's instruction, dipped her hand in the hole and brought out a very old and worn-out tabeez. Sheila Aunty said,

> My mother-in-law then took the tabeez and gave it to me to open it up while she recited some dua and blew it over her daughter. Inside the tabeez (amulet), there was folded paper. It was a very old paper and was wet as well. I carefully opened it, and inside, there was no writing, just a picture of a human with inverted feet. My mother-in-law then said that her daughter was put under that tabeez by someone, meaning she was cursed. I found later that my mother-in-law carried a djinn with her from neighboring women and that it was well known that her mother-in-law carried a djinn. Apparently, no one knew except the women of the family. The men didn't know. It was this djinn who told Shirin Aunty's mother-in-law that her daughter was cursed.

Shabana Aunty then sighed and said, "I do not know why I said that to you. It happened a long time ago, about 20-26 years ago. I guess I am just reminiscing about my young days. My mother-in-law is dead now, and my sister-in-law is married and lives abroad. She has two kids now. No one knows if my sister-in-law is still cursed or not." Shabana Aunty, after some time, took her leave and told me to say salaam to my mom. I sat there sometimes thinking of a young 17-year-old bride somewhere in a remote village dealing with djinns and curses while negotiating her own identity as the bride of the family in a completely unfamiliar setting. The dark room where her mother-in-law secluded herself was a house with no electricity surrounded by trees. It is said that djinns live in tree branches and become active, especially at night. If anyone were to pass a tree of a bad djinn at dark, something would surely happen to the person. It is also one of the reasons why many young girls are advised not to let their hair down at dusk and walk under trees lest they catch a djinn.

Bodily movements that occur during zikrs and religious songs like qawwali are among the practices that many Muslims of various ideology strictly forbid as bi'dah (innovation). It is one of the activities that Rima Aunty, for example, would condemn and speak out against. For me, the question does not come down to who is right and who is wrong. Rather, the purpose of bringing forward all these differences is to accommodate different epistemologies of knowing and believing Islam. In my research, I had the opportunity to talk to two Hindu women. Although they did converse with me, they did not explicitly want to become informants because they feared for their safety. Being Hindus, they had to be extra cautious. They told me that they believed in the powers of the saint and, therefore, came to visit. They saw the saint's power as connected to the land, of which they were part, so irrespective of the religion, they had the right to receive the saint's blessings as

well. One of the Hindu women, however, interestingly pointed out that she herself did not like when some women would start going into a trance and vigorously move. She also thought of it as indecent for women.

## Asha Apu

Even though it was July, as the evening set in, the atmosphere was cooler. The sky was tinged with light pink and orange against the baby blue. There were a few crows flying around, and some young boys were leading herds of sheep into the shrine complex back from their graze. Asha Apu and I were sitting on plastic chairs overlooking the pond. The crowds had quieted down, and we both preferred to sit here than inside the conference room of the dargah.

Asha Apu was in a blue-black burqa that also covered her face. She told me she was not as regular as she wanted to be to visit the shrine. When I told her about my research interest, she did not look surprised. She said that, although what I am doing is uncommon because most people tend to opt for a science degree or economics, it was still a *meherbani* (meaning favor or mercy) directly from above. Even if I did not think about it, I had an inner faith that subconsciously led me to this journey, which was actually influenced by my upbringing. (I had told her my aunts and my mother used to take me to the shrine when I was little whenever they went to venerate in times of familial perils.) She continued that sometimes she gets lost in her thoughts, and she realizes that all the little things that happened during the days or a few days together, however insignificant, are little blessings that we often tend to overlook. I might have chosen my research, but it was made for me

subconsciously from before, similarly to how, against her in-laws' wishes, Asha Apu keeps

coming to the shrine whenever she can manage. It is her destiny.

We were not able to talk for a long time because she had to return home with her

husband, or else her in-laws (especially her mother-in-law) would be angry. I appreciated

the half an hour she gave me. Asha Apu's family, including her grandparents, her parents, her

uncles, and even her brother, are all under some tariqa. So, she grew up respecting saints

and their shrines. She received her bayat under the Maizbhandari tariqa when she was in

class 9. She used to come to baba and would talk to him about school life and problems. Baba

used to motivate her to study for her exams. Before major exams, she used to come to baba

and take his blessings. She felt more prepared after that, and she felt that she could get

through her exams. This became her crucial step before sitting for any exams. She told me

that baba always adored her and used to listen to her silly problems all the time. She saw the

same connection she saw growing up whenever she brought her daughter to baba as well.

Like her, she brought her daughter to baba so that he could bless her. She described what

her daughter told her after coming home from school on the day of her exam:

> My daughter came back from the exam and told me excitedly, 'During my
>
> exam, there was nothing in my head honestly, but my hand was still writing by
>
> itself even though my head felt empty. I felt like someone else was writing it
>
> down for me,' this is what she was telling me. So yes, this is how it is (laughs).
>
> My husband is slowly seeing it and slowly building a connection.

When she married, she learned that her mother-in-law was strictly against shrine

veneration and saw it as shirk. At first, she faced many kinds of sneering comments that

dragged her entire family into it, claiming that she came from an uneducated, backward

family and so on. She feels extremely shameful when her mother-in-law starts berating her in front of other people, like her brother-in-law and his family and other extended family members, during family gatherings as well. Now, apparently, it is not as bad. Even though they still don't support it, they let her come. This became possible because her father-in-law, before passing away, supported her faith somewhat, as did her husband. So, in order to maintain peace, they just avoid conversations regarding these. One of the things that keeps coming up from her mother-in-law, as well as her brother-in-law, is that shrine complexes are basically businesses that profit from people's sufferings and vulnerable conditions.

During the first years of marriage, Asha Apu faced a lot of mental pressure from her mother-in-law and was hurt because she could not see her baba, the person she considered her mentor and best friend, the person she saw growing up. She told me that she was able to get through all that because she knew she would return here one day and that it was not easy to just erase your own way of knowing and practicing something. She was glad that her husband would come with her and was starting to get more devoted over time. Although their visits were infrequent and irregular because her husband is busy and cannot make time always, she considered it better than not being able to come at all. For her, Islam was like a medium that could be approached from any path, and her preachers taught her that no matter what tariqa you choose, you will reach the same destination. However, many other mazar devotees in Chattagram, Sylhet, and other places feel there is something bad coming. The Sylhet flood disaster was just a warning because Saint Shah Jalal's mazar is there, and many other notable pirs' powers are present in Sylhet, yet they faced a terrible natural disaster that displaced many permanently or temporarily. Asha Apu told me:

If we compare Bangladesh with other Islamic states, Bangladesh is not at war like most. I see it as barkat, but I also feel like Allah is angry with us. I used to think that because Bangladesh is 12 auliyar desh (country), we are protected by these warriors. However, the flood happened in Sylhet, you know. For that reason, I am somewhat confused; why did it happen there? It happened in Chittagong as well. So natural disasters are from Allah; He gives them, but He also saves us from them. So, of course, we need to know more about that, but currently, I do not know much more about it. So, the puzzling question that comes to me is, was that a curse? If so, for what? So, these kinds of questions do arise. Like, did the disaster come in the form of obhishap (curse) or ashirbadh (blessing)? It could be a blessing; we just didn't know maybe.

## Do the Women see themselves as agentive?

"Am I being agentive? I don't know, what do you mean when you say if I feel some sense of agency[48] within my religion?" asked a perplexed Shokhina Aunty. Shokhina Aunty was married to her husband when she was sixteen years old. Although she was from a family that maintained shrine veneration, she only visited shrines before school tests and exams in order to do well. After her marriage, following her husband's example, she slowly started to follow the Maizbhandari saint's khutbah and teachings more closely.

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[48] I asked in Bangla, "Aunty apni jokhon jiarot koren ba mazar e ashen, apni bolechen apni mukti onubhob koren. Eta ki apnake nijer upor shadhinota ane apnar dhormo o bishshash er upor?". Translation "Aunty when you venerate or when you come to the shrine you experience a certain release (can also be interpreted in this context as freedom). Does the release bring you freedom (freedom to choose, i.e., control) over your religion or freedom?". I have chosen the word "agency" to capture the interpretation of "release" and "freedom" discussed.

"My practice and *deen* are marginal and small compared to my husband's. He encourages me and inspires me to do well and to keep at it," says Shokhina Aunty. Shokhina Aunty started to practice religion more diligently when her husband migrated to Qatar for a better-paid job. He shifted places three times, first moving to Qatar, then to Kuwait, and lastly to Oman. In all these countries, her husband mostly ran shops and did many other odd jobs in order to send money to his family. In those days, the young mother of two, Shokhina Aunty, was left to run the household and manage two children. Other than the physical hardships, restlessness and loneliness dominated her mental well-being. Unable to cope with her emotional instabilities, she started to visit the mazar whenever she had the chance, usually carrying her two children with her.

The mazar environment and the khutbahs she attended helped with her restlessness, fear of the uncertain, and loneliness. She felt peaceful and had a quiet determination. Although her husband's example had already inspired her *deen*, it was her husband's absence that strengthened her *deen* and allowed her to cope with her deteriorating mental health during that time. Shokhina Aunty related the blessings she had received over the years because of her devoutness. Her husband had permanently come back and had been running an electric repair shop. Both she and her husband had gone through public humiliation from their own family members as well for following saints. Her mother-in-law came from a Wahhabi family and was quite shocked to learn of their religious practice. Ever since then, although the entire family followed a certain saint, the mother-in-law did not stop berating everyone. Shokhina and her husband started to live separately from his mother after a family feud took place many years ago. The mother-in-law's cousins came to visit, and Shokhina Aunty's father-in-law approvingly started to tell a story of how a reputed saint came to live

in their home and sat in this chair (showing them the chair). The guests were enraged and started shouting and went and broke the chair as well as other furniture while the mother-in-law just stood there, ashamed to have a husband and family that followed a saint. Shokhina Aunty's husband then decided they would live separately from his mother, and after a few years, he went abroad to work, leaving Shokhina Aunty alone with two children.

Similar to Shokhina Aunty, the other women portrayed here have never considered their devotional actions as part of an agentive behavior or something that is liberating, comparable to a sense in which we might understand liberation in a liberal context. Rather, it was part of another activity of their life that was oriented toward healing oneself, finding solutions to problems that they had no other means to solve, learning, and finding solace, often as a last resort. Irrespective of their economic and social standing, saints' shrines have pulled them in for one purpose or another. Therefore, even though initiation under a saint or venerating a deceased saint has been an active choice for them, it was, under the webs of structural inequality and the community culture, the best possible option for them that may lead them closer to their Creator. The saint, awliya, a God's friend, is someone they have chosen to save them, even momentarily, from their harsh reality. Therefore, by exploring the intentions behind saint venerations, we glimpse not only the depth of human connection with their faith but also how deeply grounded shrine veneration is within Islam in Bangladesh.

Piety as an agentive force for those who choose to live a life of complete devotion viewed within a particular context helps to bring out the gendered positionings of women. Women do have authority over their lives, and that authority may be different from how authority is normally interpreted. The important thing is that the end goal is not to become

an agentive force, but, within that process, the women may or may not achieve their notion of agency. Within their restrictive choices that have been conditioned by external forces (the power relations they are in), they seek to do what is best for them and their family, a pursuit that itself is very agentive.

# Chapter 4: A Private Public Space? Sense of Belonging and Strength of Character Inside Shrines

An important aspect that may not play a key role in the decisions of the women frequenting the shrines but is far too present and visible is the access to the public sphere. Two assumptions are often associated with shrine spaces inside women's quarters: One is that women who do not know the correct practices of Islam and, therefore, are naively blinded by cultural forces frequent the shrine spaces and waste their money through donations. Two is that the continuation of belief in the saint's powers is keeping these women from becoming enlightened and coming to the correct Islamic path. I want to state that I am not trying to make an argument that women who believe in the veneration of saints and the actions with which they choose to venerate are the correct Islam. In fact, I do not seek to determine what constitutes correct and incorrect Islamic practice. Rather, I am trying to bring focus on how shrine spaces are utilized by the women themselves and their way of life in relation to the power structures they are embedded in and how these spaces allow women to participate in religious activities in public spaces where the multiples power structures they are embedded in does not hold them back as they do in other areas of their lives.

I want to show three things: first, how, in yet another way, Islamic reformism indirectly affects women's belief; second, how shrine spaces, much more than just places of veneration, are places of refuge, healing, and engagement with public activities; and third, how some shrines are places that foster awareness and enlightenment for women who do not have access to quality education and teachings of Islam. Indeed, focusing on how women

choose to deal with changes in Islamic practices and their behavior patterns will help us understand how women are bringing their ways of being pious Muslims within the public realm. The stories provided here show how this journey is neither intentional nor easy.

Before diving into the main arguments, it is important to understand the binary dichotomy of the private and public, and since it is a very broad category, I discuss how I conceptualize its place in my argument. The public realm throughout history has been associated with a men's world, while the private spaces were seen as more feminine and dominated by women (Afsaruddin 2000). This public space comprises many domains, such as the political sphere, the workforce, career, power, and all other social realms outside the family sphere. Feminist movements throughout history have fought for women to break into the public sphere and to get equal access in all these domains. Since then, there has been another wave of feminist scholarship that calls for looking at this binary dichotomy of the public/private sphere[49] beyond the Western perceptions of these domains. Therefore, what constitutes the public and the private must be understood in relation to history, social relations, and the power structure within which the society operates (Rosaldo 1980). Nelson (1974) demonstrated how the 'public' and the 'private' in Middle Eastern society are at times interconnected, and the public spheres themselves were defined through the roles women played within that context. Therefore, in order to understand the public and private

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[49] Habermasian notions of the public sphere that essentially describe the bourgeoise public sphere, and the other variant as well as the dialogical exchange of rational conversations have been under many feminist criticisms (Thompson 1993). Here the public sphere is used in a much more comprehensive way. Therefore, the public is considered in relation to the current society, politics, religion, and individual understandings of the public (Deeb 2005; Deeb 2009; Salvatore & Eickelman 2004; Asad 2009; Mahmood 2005). Therefore, the people and community define the "Muslim Public," be it secular or religious public. It is therefore much more de-spatialized. The shrines are therefore a public community space where the dialogues of religion, politics, private matters of life, and private conversations of the heart are exchanged in the form of dialogical exchange, debates, prayers, and sermons (khutbahs).

dichotomy within Bangladesh, it is necessary to understand how public and private spaces are constituted.

## The Public vs. the Private

Afsaruddin (2000) uses Islamicate society to describe societies that have "consciously adopted" Islamic beliefs and practices as public symbols to represent or rather guide public morals and, in many cases, their rules. The public vs. private debate within Islamicate societies has always been enmeshed with religious and cultural values, where the political and religious have been the men's domain while the private were women's, and to what extent women could or could not negotiate their public freedom depended on their socioeconomic ability (Afsaruddin 2000). It is important to remember that the religion associated with public life in any given context will shape public life in particular ways, thus simultaneously creating "religion as a public category" itself specific to context (Butler 2011). The public scene in shrines is different from the public scene of mosques and demands different engagements based on context.

Religion becomes part of the public engagement within that sphere. The question of the extent to which religion can be a separate category from other aspects of one's life has been a long-standing debate (Taylor 2011; Butler 2011; Deeb 2009; Afsaruddin 2000). Religion, specifically Islam, instead of being studied as a separate category, is usually better studied as part of everyday life, both public and private, that gives a much more nuanced and richer insight into society as well as of the individuals themselves, a fact that in turn shapes everyday public life and provides richer narratives in the discourse of the diversity of Islam (Schielke 2008; Deeb 2013; Abu Lughod 1985; Flueckiger 2006; Osella & Osella 2007;

Simpson 2007; Fadil & Fernando 2015). Religion, therefore, has to be carefully treated both as a way of life guide depending on the individuals and as part of the discursive tradition of the society (Asad 1986). This, in turn, will help us understand the public in relation to its history, politics, and society and where women are situated within the public sphere (Rosaldo 1980; Afsaruddin 2000). It is then seen that the binary dichotomy of what is public and what is private is not so distinct and often blurred.

Bangladesh self-identifies as a democratic country with the state religion of Islam, which was established in its constitution in the late 1980s (Roy 2006). Bangladesh, under this viewpoint, can be taken as part of the Islamicate world. Gender segregation in Bangladesh in the public domain is usually not extended beyond religious spaces such as shrine spaces, mosques, and Islamic schools like madrasas. However, the segregation that can be seen in places like women's hostels or women-only colleges and schools is because of the cultural norms of the society. Societal and cultural norms, irrespective of religion in Bangladesh, make spaces for women to participate in the public sphere but within a preexisting conception that surrounds them in an invisible boundary. A woman's ability to expand or contract this boundary depends on her family, opportunities, and socioeconomic standing. For example, elite-class and middle-income women have more options to exercise their power in public than less privileged men. However, women from low-income groups and working labor jobs are more likely to be discriminated against and have fewer to no opportunities within the public realm. In Siddique's (2009) study of garment women workers, we see their engagement within a public sphere but in a role where they are exploited and underpaid. Not only that, but how they negotiate safety and dignity each time they go to work where sexual harassment is rampant and often goes unrecorded.

Microfinancing in rural areas of Bangladesh and in slum communities by many NGOs aims to provide funds to rural and vulnerable women, helping them start their own small business ventures. However, many women, through this process, fell into great debt when they were unable to pay back the loan. Moreover, the microfinancing scheme was abused within the communities themselves, where women's in-laws and husbands would force them to get a loan, loan sharks were increasing, and one of the tactics to make sure women pay back their loan was community pressure and public shame (Karim 2011; Ali & Hatta 2012). In Bangladesh, especially today, many women have access to the public sphere, consisting of the opportunity to work outside in offices, hospitals, schools, businesses, government, companies, religious schools, and manual labor jobs. However, this access comes with great costs because many women, especially women with no money and status power to back them, face sexual harassment, unequal benefits, and wage discrimination (Uddin 2008; Karim 2014). They are prone to having more responsibilities and worsening mental health, especially vulnerable women in slum communities working for less than minimum wage (Rashid 2007).

Deeb (2009) illustrates how women's status is often reduced to being indicators of a society's civilization status, a barometer that shows what kind of civilization a country follows. Deeb traced how some Shi'i women have their own way of performing their religion within everyday life while also maintaining a secular modern public image (Deeb & Harb 2013). In the case of Iran, it was through forced veiling that the ruling party wanted to show a certain kind of civility, and yet women continue to fight for their own voice (Moghadam 2002; Afsaruddin 2000). In Turkey, the ruling party banned the headscarf on the grounds that it detracted from Turkey's modern secular image. The ban was lifted in 2013

(Coreckgioklu 2013; Deeb 2009). In Abu-Lughod's (1985) stories of the Bedouin community women, we see a different kind of civility among women in the public realm in front of men and then another form of casual, informal, and at times teasing and flirty inside women's only tents. Bedouin women's seclusion from men and having little public engagement with men does not, however, mean that they are weak or in need of help, as women exercise their own agency, affecting the public sphere from their own private domain and are extremely strong-minded (Abu-Lughod 1985). In Dhaka, we see how elite women exercise their own pious religious subjectivity within the secular-minded high society of Bangladesh, in which oftentimes religiosity in public is seen as less modern and fashionable (Haq & Rashid 2008). One example of this is the donning of the hijab. In rural communities in Bangladesh, however, in order to advance the country and "digitalize" it, vulnerable women are given chances to participate in the capital economy and advance by being entrepreneurs through microfinancing or working labor hours under inhumane conditions, all in the name of modernity (Karim 2011; Kabeer & Mahmud 2004). It can be seen in all these cases that the women's status is subject to change depending on what an Islamic state decides to do and declare what for them means modern or not. The public image of women and their engagement in the public sphere marks a society's characteristics. In Dhaka and in other districts, such as Sylhet and Chattagram, women have access to engage in the public sphere in numerous ways, albeit while upholding a certain morality depending on their status and community. This invisible boundary that women operate in is, in many ways, absent in shrine spaces. It is more lenient, and the boundaries, even though they exist, are less strict than gender-segregated mosques. Like example, women cannot go inside the rooms where the saint's tomb is located, but they can engage in public activities that occur in the shrine spaces.

The sacred spaces operate as a kind of sanctuary that allows them both private spaces of serenity and public engagement in their own subjective ways.

## The Women's Quarters in Shrines

Generally, the public sphere or the public space refers to the spaces normally open to everyone. Shrines are public spheres open to everyone with gender-segregated spaces, such as the mosque, the saint's tomb, a men-only congregation, and the separate women's praying and veneration rooms. Batul (2021) labeled shrines as demarcated public spaces and looked at how shrines allow Kashmiri women not only to socialize but also actively participate in rituals and sermons that otherwise would not have been possible in other circumstances like the *khutbah* (religious sermons) delivered by the imams in mosques. Although women may have access to them in gender-segregated mosques (which is not the majority of the mosques in Bangladesh), shrines are easy access for women to participate in *khutbahs* as shrines are more prevalent in small towns and villages than mosques that have women's spaces. The informal ambiance of the shrine allows women to take down their guard and act without fearing any form of shyness or overstepping boundaries. Mernissi (1977) states that shrines "must be seen as informal women's associations" (105) where women gather and engage in conversation, be as loud in their crying or as quiet as they want. The shrines, being sanctuaries, become a place for women to "experience in suffering" (105), where they come together to discuss, rant, and soothe each other against the injustices they have faced. Existing literature on shrine veneration has focused on the demarcated gendered spaces of shrines and observed the freedom of actions and behavior that is not seen outside of such places (Mernissi 1977; Uddin 2006; Sood 2013; Betteridge 1993; Honarpisheh 2013; Batul

2021). Especially observed were the gendered aspects of the types of venerations and the vows made to the shrines. The men, who would rarely make vows, would often make vows regarding their profession, career, and business, while the vows made by women mostly concerned family matters, fear of black eyes and curses, children, barrenness, anxiety, and mental health (Uddin 2006). The women, then, were mostly stressed with household and family-related matters while the men were worried about their business and career, highlighting how patriarchal structures have divided the work between men and women in ways that continue to uphold that structure (Mernissi 1977). However, another important factor to point out is that the vows themselves reflect a patriarchal characteristic. For example, the women's vows related to family matters and personal struggles are private (women representing the private sphere), and men with their careers and businesses, seen as more ambitious, reflect the public (men representing the public sphere). However, this does not necessarily indicate that men tend to visit shrines less frequently or that women devotees are much more in comparison to men. My observations in the field showed something a little different. While it is true that men are more visible in public, it is also true that there are many men devotees, at times much more than women. Perhaps this is much more visible because they tend to be open. Men's religious gatherings, zikrs, and prayers often occurred in the courtyard, while the women's spaces were hidden from the public. Harder (2011) and Bertocci's (2006) in-depth study of the Maizbhadari men reveals men's deep spiritual connection with their saints. Men are also closer with their pirs and babas in ways that women do not get to have because they tend to have much more access to them both in public and in private, such as intimate conversations during informal meetings, during men-only gatherings, during the late-night singing, gathering and conversations, and

late-night prayers. The men that I came across during my fieldwork most times would lovingly talk about their babas. It was much more than respect; it was more of a loving union they had. It is similar to the kind of love seen during *Urs* (death anniversary) of the deceased saints, which is seen not as a mourning period but as a reunion of the saint with their Creator. Women, in this sense, have a very small window of access to their living saints and babas. Similarly, they have literal window access to deceased saints' tombs as well because walls barricade all the women's shrines spaces, and only through a blinded window can they venerate and send in their respects. In the Sylhet shrine of Shahjalal, there is no window altogether. However, this is not a complaint that the women visitors make. It is why the shrine spaces for women become a much more intimate and comfortable place for them. It is "women only," but this does not reduce their access to public activities but increases their access to public religious activities. Women participate in religious sermons and *milad*, become volunteers for the shrines, and look after women visitors during religious occasions all the while interacting with men, but the power dynamics are lessened. In spaces outside shrines, the very men might not engage in the exact manner outside the shrine. For example, seeing women as equal peers in volunteering. The access to public activities also increases their baraka and allows them precious times with their saints that are impossible on any other platforms.

During covid times, the Maizbhandari current babas would meet with their devotees through Zoom and stay in contact through WhatsApp. This was also the case for other saints from different tariqas as well. Online media access allowed a different kind of public arena for the women to engage in personal conversations that did not fall under the public/private dichotomy. This, however, did not hamper their wanting to visit the shrines themselves, as

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many women devotees noted that the shrine spaces were sacred, and the very first thing they felt was inner peace and contentment. Another crucial factor was their view of participating in shrine activities like volunteering during *Urs* and other special events like the Mawlid and Thursday-night zikrs. However, to describe the shrine spaces as transformative (Honerpisheh 2013) in Bangladesh's context would not truly capture the essence of the place. It is transformative in certain actions and feelings, but these occur at rare times depending on the individual and how their self is feeling and is connected to the moment. The transformative parts happen, but in special cases, not as soon as they enter the place. This transformative self is different from the inner peace that the women mentioned. Therefore, the shrine places are much more than just places where the self gets transformed. A range of emotions is felt depending on the situation. There is much more grief and heartbreak than feelings of agency and leadership, but it is in this grief and tears that the women experience strength and find community in others. They can take control of their grief as they shed tears to the Creator as well as during intercessory prayers. The place plays an important role in the intimate connection formed among devotees. The place, especially those of a deceased powerful saint, emanates the supernatural strength of the saints and makes it powerful. Entering the place is seen as part of the *barkat*, and giving back to the place in terms of donations or in volunteering adds to this baraka. The consuming of the blessed food, the *tobarak* and *shinni*, is seen as sunnah, or a practice recommended based on Prophetic precedent.

The following sections are small accounts of three separate stories in three separate shrines that highlight the various ways shrine spaces are made meaningful, not only due to their supernatural strength but also due to how they are utilized by the women themselves.

The use of the public space reflects the nature of the shrine's environment itself. In the High Court Mazar in Dhaka, the space was utilized by the women workers in a much more intimate way than it was by visitors, suggesting a space that is less frequented by tourist crowds and is rather much more frequented by regulars. For the women workers, it served not only as a workplace but as a place for social interaction and recreation. At times, though it was a workplace, it also provided an escape from their household chores and responsibilities. Women's spaces in other shrines were utilized in different ways than in Highcourt. The Khadim and workers in both of the four shrines in Sylhet and Chattagram were not seen at all during the day times or during busy hours. One of the core reasons for this was that these places were famous for tourist attractions and tended to get more crowded. Hence, the spaces were often filled with people coming for various reasons and out of curiosity. There was less time to be together and spend time leisurely than at the High Court. This is not to say that the spaces were only used for quick visiting. It was just much more eclipsed by the tourists and the lay visitors. Additionally, the Maizbhandari shrine in Fatikchari provided more hands-on participation and was more involved with their followers through various activities like in-person seminars, personal meetings with Baba, and their famous spiritual healing activities that combined modern medical treatment with spirituality. Maizbhandari has its own volunteer doctors and mental health counselors who often give free health checkups and advice. The doctors themselves are devotees of the Baba.

## Back to the High Court

The courtyard is surrounded by trees. The atmosphere of the afternoons during weekdays is usually cool and quiet. Before you can go inside, you must remove your shoes.

An attendee, Hanifa, sits on the raised panel of the floor to collect the shoes and keep them in a very old shoe rack that is against the wall. A small fee is given to her for safekeeping. She sits there along with a woman security guard whom we will call Salma. Salma sits on a plastic tool in her security guard uniform and a cotton *orna* draped around her. She does not cover her head, but it is in a tight bun. Her mouth is stained red from paan (betel leaves), and she wears blue plastic sandals. She greets people she knows who frequent the place and stares at people she does not know in a curious manner. At first, they were skeptical of me when I first made introductions and told them the reason for my frequent visits. However, after some time, when they decided that I was not a journalist or a media person, they became more at ease with me and conversed with me in their usual manner. During one of the slow hours after Maghrib prayers, all the attendees present sat around Salma. I was hanging by the door saying goodbye to one of the visitors I was talking with, and Salma gestured me over to sit on one of the empty stools. Nazma started complaining about the doctor she recently went to for her joint pain while Salma intricately folded betel leaves with betel nuts and slaked lime paste and passed them around the group.

Salma had been working as a security guard for over eight years now, while Nazma had been the shoe attendant for around three years. They all more or else live in nearby rundown areas. Chewing her paan, Salma asked me how my interviews were going and whether I was getting all the information I needed to write about the shrine. I told her it was still quite rough, especially the introductions, and she told me to have patience. Even though Salma had been working for more than eight years, she did not have any form of job security or insurance and could be let go anytime. Aside from her, there was one other woman security guard. Even though Salma was not particularly happy with her job conditions, it

demanded less physical labor than her previous jobs. Here, her main duty was to maintain general order and to stop any form of trouble arising from the homeless women who slept on the shrine's grounds during the day. Most of the homeless women at this point were familiar to the workers. I have seen Salma leisurely pass the time sitting by the front door and humming to herself. There were times when she was fast asleep inside the women's quarter in the shaded area near the front door. During those times, she would delegate her responsibilities to one of the girls, mostly to Hanifa. It was clear that Salma was respected and listened to by the rest of the workers. In turn, Salma reported to the woman Khadim. Whenever her kids' school was over, they would run to the shrine and spend the rest of the time with their mother, running around the place and playing with the cats. The lunch and late evening snacks were covered by the shrine's daily kitchen. Salma did not have to keep a close eye on them.

The circle was joined by Hanifa and her two companions. Hanifa saw me and exclaimed, "apu ekhono asen eikhane?" (Sister, you are still here?), I smiled and nodded my head. Hanifa had just come back from the bustling New Market. The New Market area is a long stretch of shops with vendors outside its gate as well. Hanifa and her companions were carrying packets of puffed rice and jhal muri and were laughing. From their conversations, it was clear that all of them were intimately connected with each other's personal lives. It is not only because they have been working together for a long time, but it is the usual way of getting to know each other by discussing very personal matters from the start. The setting of the shrine, other than the religious congregations, allows the women to work outside of their homes while having the home with them. Even though their salaries are very little and

they mostly depend on tips and donations, their work provides them the comfort of having the public space feel like a home space within a male-dominated area.

Alternatively, while the spaces serve as a second home outside of the home for the women workers and a space where they have some limited dominance at home, it was also an unintentional meeting ground for the women visitors. Shrines represent a space to let out their life's heavy struggles, yet within these spaces, they find solace not only through prayer and devotion but also in the companionship of women and the sharing of grief. Another important factor is that the shrine being public is easy access to shelter. Numerous homeless women on the street find shade and food during the early morning and noon hours, and they, at times, become errand women for the women employees, bringing tea from the nearby stalls and such. Women who run away from home or find themselves in a situation where they need immediate shelter also turn to shrines. For Mithila Aunty, it served as a place to rest, spend time, have one meal a day, and wait while she fought her case and chased lawyers at the High Court office attached to the shrine.

Looking back, I remember how Mithila Aunty washed and hurriedly went to get the day tobarak/shinni given at the mazar darbar. This was her food of the day. The shinni was spicy yellow rice with boiled potatoes and a few nuts. Her husband does not give her money, not even Tk.1000 when she leaves home to journey to Dhaka from Nouga. She has to leave around 5 a.m. to get to Dhaka mid-morning. She has to visit her lawyer frequently and request that they give her a hearing. It is not easy to get justice in Bangladesh. The more money and power one has the better one's chances. But if you are an ordinary citizen, there is nothing you can do. Sometimes, she doesn't even have money for transportation, so she has to walk from the train station to the bus station and from there to the High Court office.

The mazar became her place of rest, prayers, access to the washroom, and the day's meal. There were times she could not even meet her lawyer and had to go back. Back home, her husband pesters and beats her because she hasn't been bringing any money. He will demand her status and when she can go to the school to collect her salary, which has been pending since 2015. As it is an 80 percent public school, even though the board denies her position and does not let her teach, she is still entitled to that salary.

> You know, there were days I did not even eat anything; with the money I saved,
> I would buy something my daughters would request when I left for Dhaka,
> "Ammu, can you bring this chocolate for us? It kills me not to be able to fulfill
> their small wants. So, I just buy their stuff with my lunch money. One day, I
> even lost consciousness in the Gausia market, and I did not know how long I
> was lying on the road.

She called me to let me know that she was able to get a date where she might get a hearing. She spoke softly, but I could sense the weight of this achievement built on years of mental and physical strain she took on while raising her two daughters to get where she was now. Before cutting the call, she reminded me what she had said during our first meeting, "the High Court mazar may be changing, but it still works."

What constitutes a public space can vary based on its location (Iveson 1998). Generally, the public space is the space outside one's own home, a space that is free to navigate yet is not under any institution's direct control. Habermas pointed out that public space is where gathering and public talk can take place, like the marketplace of ancient Greece (Thompson, 1993). A privately owned public space would be a space that is not operated by the government but is owned by a private party and given access to the general

public. Therefore, the general public is an important indicator of whether or not a space is public or private. Shrines can be situated under two varied definitions of public space: the "community model of public space" and the "liberal model of space" that Iveson (1998) defines. The feeling of being accepted that surrounds a shrine space quickly fosters a sense of community on its own. Shrines are much more flexible than mosques because it is not necessary to pray there, making this much more open to non-Muslims.

This sense of community and general acceptance makes shrines much "freer" than community mosques in the neighborhood, especially in Bangladesh, where mosques with women's spaces are more likely to be found in upper-income group areas. Moreover, mosques generally demand general conduct and quiet emotions, a moral silence that is unlike the nature of shrines, where much more open and outward emotions of grief, troubles, and losses can be expressed (Spooner 1963; Betteridge 1993). The freedom and leisure that Salma and other workers can enjoy while maintaining their daily work cannot be experienced in other types of workplaces. Halima grew up working in the shrine while her uncle was the shoe keeper at the mosque (the men's section), and now she and her husband are raising their two sons while being employed by the shrine. The shrine is both her home and means of livelihood. The connection between the place and the saint is much more intimate than just the act of belief and veneration.

## Naina Aunty's escape zone: Women's space in Sylhet Shrine

The Friday jamaat would start soon. The small women's quarter was already filled to the brim. Each corner of the space had been occupied. The latecomers kept snaking their way through the congested mass, trying to flip up whatever crack of space had been left. While

many were trying to snatch some places, the rest of the women were occupied with their activities. After venerating the saint, a group of women at the front started a discussion on the pains of traveling here and what each of their relatives has been up to. Some were fanning themselves absent-mindedly. A woman in the front corner sat crouched with her head resting on the cool tiled wall that is used to venerate the saint, crying silently. Many sat counting prayers on their prayer beads. Some lifted their heads and told people there was no space and to stop stepping on their fingers. The women in the back row were even more flustered as more and more women kept entering or leaving, causing the curtains to get tangled up and exposing the space to the outside courtyard, which was also bustling with crowds of all kinds, including visitors, tourists, mendicants, babas and paglas, venerators, and men who came for the jamaat. One woman kept getting up and fixing it. The worn green curtain, purdah, that hung on a plastic blue wire, was used to enclose the space.

Amidst this buzzing environment, Naina Aunty sat on the second row, right beneath a ceiling fan, with two legs spread out and chewing on her paan, wondering why she was there.

I do not know why I am here. The fact that I am here means that I have left behind something. I have left behind my family and have been sitting here since morning, trying to figure out why I am here.

Naina Aunty was being a bit dramatic. She comes to the shrines when upset or annoyed with the household's help. She has been living with her daughter and her son-in-law. This caused her both pride and embarrassment. She was proud that both her daughter and her son-in-law were established government officers, but she was embarrassed because,

at times, she felt like an outsider. She informed me that this was an internal conflict she had been struggling with for the past few years. Even though it was her own daughter's place that she lived in, it still didn't feel like her own. This feeling stemmed from the fact that parents in their old age usually live with their sons, not with their daughters. If it were her son's household, she would not have felt like a long-term guest because, to her, she would have a right to it. Naina Aunty did not have a son.

Naina Aunty reached the age of 67 that year. Her usual routine would be getting up and, as her daughter and son-in-law leave for work, leaving instructions for the maid on what to give on the kids' lunch that day. After the children went to school, Naina Aunty and the maid would be alone. Naina would pick fights with the maid on various pretexts, complain about her laziness, or worry that the maid had put something suspicious in her food. Most of the time, she would complain about her growing knee pains. On days when she feels especially alone and abandoned or greatly irked by the maid's behavior or her grandchildren's shenanigans, she would leave the house and find herself in the shrine. She told me that at the end of the day, her daughter and her husband would come to her directly to get her and then leave together. This was apparently a recurring thing.

Naina Aunty had been visiting the shrine long before settling in Sylhet. She visited the shrine with her mother and aunts when she was a child. On one of the visits with her mother and her sister when she was young, a djinn followed them home. They later realized that even though it was a good djinn, it was because her sister peed on the shrine grounds, unable to hold it in any longer. The djinn would pinch her sister awake at night or take away food from their mother's plate. Nowadays, even though her sister lives somewhere else, she would

often call Naina Aunty and tell her how the djinn made her cook through the night, always special dishes like polao and korma that are usually cooked on dawats.

I asked Naina Aunty if the shrine felt comforting to her, but she instantly dismissed the idea. Naina Aunty would say that coming to the shrine is haram, that a safe place can be created in the heart, in a women's mosque, or even in one's room if one makes it a secluded prayer room. Naina Aunty would continuously contradict herself, saying saints were the warriors of Islam and should be properly venerated but in the same breath saying that saint veneration does not belong in Islam according to the waz she has been listening to on YouTube, and therefore saints should not be venerated. Muslims should not believe it important to note that, even though Naina Aunty would often mix her views, whether she supported veneration or not is not a matter of concern here. The interesting thing to focus on is her continuous change in views because of the mix of the views she kept getting from different local hujurs or ulama through social media. Just like her internal conflict at home, whether she is a guest or family member, she was also facing internal conflicts not only in her beliefs but in her external practices as well. Despite her changing views, she would still seek shelter in the spaces of a shrine instead of a women's mosque. Naina Aunty and her family continued to give hadiya to the shrine, and she stated that before her son-in-law's job interview, all of them came and venerated the saint, as did her daughter.

It is clear that, even though she was stating what she heard on YouTube, she was frustrated with all the mixed messages she got when, each time she listened to these preachers on YouTube, they would name one new act that is considered not Islamic. The latest one was wiping the neck with the back of the hand during ablution. She also stressed

how she could not keep up with all the changes and how her grandchildren would often make fun of her Arabic pronunciations:

I know our Arabic pronunciation is not good. We cannot pronounce it at all, but that is how we were taught by our hujurs. Now, where will we go? Can we really compete with you? With the people who know so much? Since we do not know anything about anything, should we just disappear? Because we are illiterate or know little? Will we follow YouTube, or will we follow the teachings of our parents, our forefathers, and our ancestors?

Naina Aunty pondered these questions as she wiped beads of sweat from her forehead with her peach-colored dupatta. At this point, three women surrounding us started chiming in with their own experiences. The conversion carried on until the call for Duhr prayer.

## "Islam Is a Lifestyle": Public Engagement in Pious Ways

In the shrine of Maizbhandar, the public space may include the vast community or just the shrine grounds. Despite the community's vastness, its elements are closely connected. It comprises the shrine grounds, schools, training and research centers, offices, and welfare programs. In turn, Fatikchari's moral, social codes and morality are shaped and informed by the numerous shrines within the small town, the strongest influences of which are the Maizbhandari tariqa. To understand the subtle differences in mannerisms and moral behaviors in Fatikchari, comparing them with the morals and ideology prevailing in Dhaka city will be helpful. This is by no means a comprehensive description of the morals, etiquettes, and ideals of public piety seen at the shrines of Fatikchari and the Dhaka, both of

which are rich in diversity, in community, religion, socioeconomic class, and upbringing and also include individual conceptions of freedom, equality, and liberty, but a very surface outlook intended to give a general idea.

Dhaka's High Court shrines are frequented by diverse people from various socioeconomic classes. The upper class who comes to visit the shrines tends to spend less time within the space, visiting with a sole purpose and leaving as soon as their veneration is complete. They would never leave the shrine without donating any money. The High Court Mosque is frequented by men holding various forms of high status. At a central location and attached to the High Court, it is also frequented by high government officials. Women in the upper middle class also maintain a certain distance from the rest of the women in the room and keep to themselves, leaving as soon as their prayers and veneration are done after having left money and tipping the attendees. The women of lower classes and women who have nowhere else to go often find refuge and mental solace within the shrine spaces, each for her own reasons. Their notions regarding freedom and liberty are often intimately tied with religious values, which are also intertwined with cultural and societal values that accord to women a status unequal to that of men. At the same time, women of upper socioeconomic classes have views of liberty and freedom that are similar to views found in the West, especially those containing secular views in public, where piety is more internally realized than being public, and the individual is emphasized. In Fatikchari, being pious and subjective in public was important to be in the community's good grace. This did not mean having less access to public activities but more so within the community's accepted standard. This standard applied to men as well, who would follow public piety accordingly. The marker of dressing is also important. Some women at Dhaka's shrine, especially women of higher

socioeconomic status, would dress modestly, covering their heads with their *orna,* while women of lower socioeconomic status were seen in burqas and hijabs. I would like to stress that a woman's economic status does not indicate her manner of dressing, nor is it the only ruling factor in how the woman chooses to dress. Hijabs and burqas are worn by educated women of higher socioeconomic status as well. What can be noted is that women in Fatikchari belonging to upper economic status and having education were more likely to wear the hijab and don the burqa than what was seen in the Dhaka High Court shrine.

In Fatikchari, women's morality and etiquette are placed in high regard in line with community rules that emphasize modesty. This modesty was placed in their manner of speaking, manner of behavior, and how they addressed their elders. This is also reinforced within the workplaces as well. Depending on the family, some women in Fatikchari had equal rights to pursue an education, to work in public places such as schools and offices, and to run their own businesses. However, many women there still do not have as much access to resources as upper-class women and women of all classes in Dhaka. The Maizbhandar manzils, through their social activities, are trying to increase this access for the rural women of their community. The status of "good woman" is given to those who are successfully able to accomplish their moral ideals, education, career, and religion. We will look at two cases that use the public sphere in two different ways to provide women with the ability to handle leadership qualities within a guarded limit. Closer inspection revealed that the Maizbhandar community was much more intimate and integrated, which the other Shrines lacked. All the people observed described a feeling of comfort and peace in connection to their participation in the Maizbhandari tariqa. They had a sense of shared sensibilities regarding etiquette, proper behavior, honor, and faith. Therefore, even if the women, in general, were under a

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patriarchal authority, the women I had the privilege to interview were much "freer" in spirit and liked the fact that they had a space where they could gather and participate in their own way.

## An Afternoon with Safiya of Maizbhandar

Safiya Aunty was married off when she was 15 years old. Now 35, she is a mother of two children and a homemaker. She became pregnant with her first child in 2005, but her child passed away a few days later after being born. This caused her to go through a traumatic episode. Distraught and mentally and physically broken, she took her husband to Baba. After her audience with Baba at the Ahmadiyya manzil of Maizbhandar, Safiya Aunty kept coming back, and, eventually, both she and her husband took bayat under the baba. After a few years, she gave birth to a daughter and brought the baby to Baba so that he could bless her. This story is not the only reason she became a devoted follower; she recounted that she went through many small and major turmoils and that baba helped her in each of them. She believes she was able to overcome all these travails thanks to Baba's protection and guidance. Even when he could not solve the problem itself, his advice became the mental strength that helped her persevere. In recent years, she has become an active volunteer at the shrine. The women volunteers of the Maizbhandari tariqa help arrange activities for the women, and during important festivals, they become guides and people of contact for women devotees.

Safiya Aunty works with 50 other women. During mass gatherings on special occasions, for example, during sema nights, which happen every Wednesday or Thursday of each month, Safiya Aunty and other women in the team guide the women into the assigned

place and rooms. They are separated from men. The men have their own gathering place or sometimes sit outside in the courtyard under the open sky. Sema normally occurs late at night and goes on for long hours. Safiya Aunty keeps checking on women to see if they are okay and makes sure order is maintained. Team members also escort women to the bathrooms and help calm down any women who may go into a trance-like state due to the influence of sema music. She explained that everyone's response to sema music is different. Most just sit there and maybe move their head or do a zikr-like movement, while others start moving and shaking their body vigorously, and yet others shake their head and beat their chest. She called, reaching the state of coming under trance, "tularashi." Some women faint from exhaustion or need to be wrapped up in clothes to calm them down. Safiya Aunty and the other women in charge tend to them and also make sure their clothes are readjusted and are not indecent. Safiya Aunty says that she does not like it when women experience these states and says that, even though some women cannot control their response, it is one of the things that gives mazar a bad reputation and is why some people say that people dance obscenely in mazars and that they are not places for Muslims.

Safiya Aunty also helps during the time when groups of women are ready to receive their bayat. She makes sure that they have properly performed their ablutions, recited the mandatory surahs, and are truly prepared to take it. She then helps them get into their long green cloak-like hijab and escorts them across the courtyard toward baba's throne. The volunteers hold a long backcloth over the women who are to be initiated as they walk. Their families are usually around them as well. Baba first sees the women and then the men who are there to receive bayat. Safiya Aunty says that she loves working as a volunteer and helping out at major events. The shrine tends to get extremely crowded and requires many

people to control everything. Safiya Aunty proudly said that she feels like she has been blessed to have been given the opportunity to help out. Because of this, she comes to the mazar weekly and is connected to the wider community. She has also been very vocal to people who are against mazar veneration and tries to publicly defend it whenever she can.

> They can take my life away, but I cannot leave mazar. Where I come from, I have had so many problems and barriers. I have been freed from all of it. If we cannot come on Saturday or miss a Saturday, we feel like going mad. Do you know how addiction works? What the addicts face when they cannot take drugs, we face that want if we cannot come to the shrine. We are addicted. If we see the face of our baba, then the pain I was feeling inside evaporates. If we step into the land of Maizbhandar Darbar, peace spreads all over our bodies. Our heart's sadness and pain all of it become bearable.

Volunteering at the shrine is seen as an act of self-fulfillment, as a way of receiving baraka, and something that is acceptable and good in the eyes of the community. Women like Safiya Aunty, who had a difficult childhood and early marriage, do not get access to proper education; therefore, they do not tend to get access to work at public organizations or offices. The shrine spaces give them access to work in a professional setting and the feeling of accomplishment of giving something back in exchange for the blessings they have received. Safiya Aunty also noted that it is a blessed work where you work for Allah and get to maintain your prayers and piety as well.

## Into the Path of Light: A Haq Manzil Concern

Looking through my resources of the Maizbhandari order, I came across one of their projects titled "Alor pothe" (Into the Path of Light), a series of monthly seminars run by the Haq manzil of Maizbhandari. The Maizbhandari has three official manzils (houses): Ahmadiyya, Haq, and Rahmaniya[50]. During my fieldwork, even though I visited the Ziul Haq shrine, I did not explicitly do research there or talk to any of the representatives. I focused wholly on Ahmadullah Maizbhandari as the scope of this research project allowed. However, after coming back to Canada, I continued to follow up with my participants, one of whom was less a participant than a friend and guide whom I became acquainted with during fieldwork. She mentioned that she knew a person who went to these seminars. I got to know Rabiya, and through Rabiya, I met the general coordinator and personal assistant of the SZHM trust managing director, Tahmid Jamal. From whom, I was able to get an idea behind the creation of "Alor Pothe."

Alor Pothe women's organization was created sometime in 2012. Initially, there was no name given to this, and after a series of such meetings, in 2013, the name "alor pothe'' meaning "in the path of light," was later selected. The baba of the manzil and his team noticed that an alarming number of cases and complaints[51] by women had to do with injustices, especially by aged mothers who were being cheated out of their will by their sons or relatives. In almost all the cases, these perpetrators used religion and the "divine law" and cited the Quran, or rather misinterpreted or twisted it out of proportion, saying that women,

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[50] For a detailed account of the structure of the Maizbhandari tariqa please refer to Chapter 2 and the references provided there.

[51] The complaints are referred to as foriyods (foriyadi-the one who brings complaints). Foriyad literally translates to requests being made.

according to this and that rule, are not entitled legally according to Islamic law, for example, to hold lands, and so according to the divine law belongs to the said perpetrator. As such fallacies were rampant across the town, the SZHM trust decided to organize a learning opportunity and to deliver the right messages as per Islam and the Quran so that the girls, women, and mothers would know when they were being lied to. Jamal Uncle, during our discussion, referred to all women as "our mothers" as a form of respect and love and explained that even though Bangladesh has made considerable progress in education, technology, and a general increase in the standard of living, many women of older generations, and today's generation as well are behind because of the environment and the society's ingrained patriarchal values towards women, which still treat them as second-class in society. They have minimum rights to decision-making, be it academic or religious, they have less access to public space, and most women depend on their partners for household income. This makes it easier for the men of their family to have a strict hold over the women and manipulate and groom them as they wish. Of course, this is not the entire representation of Fatikchari but is specifically the case for women who fell victim to injustices, regardless of whether they were from a well-to-do family or lower-income family, although the majority was from the latter. The core idea of the seminars started with the vision that well-versed women themselves would lead the seminars. However, since there are few women students in Islam and far fewer volunteers than male students, most of the students and lecturers end up being men.

This is not the only such organization; the families of Maizbhandar organize various seminars and group discussions on all kinds of matters. Another recent talk was titled "Islam o Nari Sufi," "Islam and Women Sufi." The general and commonly accepted idea by many is

that women cannot be religious leaders. To debunk such ideas, the session talked about how women, for example, Prophet Muhammad's wives and daughters, were leaders in their own way. By having open discussions of such matters, they want to present the true meanings of Islam and hopefully break many of the misconceptions and myths of what Islam stands for. This also has to do with following a tariqa and practicing Islamic mysticism, which, for many other groups, is seen as an "exaggeration." The sessions are not only for Muslim women but are also attended by women from other religions as well.

According to Rabiya, Islam is a lifestyle rather than just a religion. Rabiya is a college teacher and has been attending these seminars for many years now. Growing up, she did not understand the need to visit a saint's tomb because, for her, praying in her room was enough. Near the end of her undergraduate education, she started frequenting various events that the Maizbhadaris organized. These events had to do with self-improvement, professional training that would help individuals in the job markets, and various other self-help trainings, all with emphasis on the Islam they uphold and want the people of Fatikchari to uphold that is important on the self, love, spiritually and reading the Quran and Hadiths in that vein.

## Demarcated Freedom: A New Meaning to the Public Sphere in Muslim Shrines

The intention behind the different accounts provided here was to provide a glimpse of the various ways in which shrine spaces are being utilized. One thing that I realized is that too much emphasis on the shrine and the tomb of the saint will keep us from looking at the organization as a whole. The places described here are much more than just guardians of the

saint's tomb. The shrines have regular mosques that are twice as big as regular mosques. Daily prayers regularly bring in people whose priority is praying. The committee is much more focused on communal activities such as running madrasahs, organizing events, providing daily meals, and running their accounts along with organizing each of the shrine's important festivities.

Each shrine space helps the devotees and visitors according to their needs. Let me bring in my original arguments that shrines are public spaces that give a certain kind of access to women that they do not find in any other public places. Their opportunities here are different from what they might find in women's spaces in mosques, workplaces, and homes. A shrine acts as a place of refuge, a place to pray, a place to meditate, a place to seek privacy, and a place to engage in community activities. The volunteers at the Maizbhandari shrine get experience in organizing, setting up, and running events, managing accounts, and learning their religion.

During the Ramadan of 2023, I frequently visited one of the mosques in Edmonton. I noticed a large group of women from various ethnicities working together as volunteers. They would prepare the *iftar* (the sundown meal that breaks the fast), distribute it, and then clean up afterward. I started helping them out whenever they needed an extra hand in cleaning. The women would often bring their children, and after Taraweeh (the extended nightly ritual prayer only performed during Ramadan), they would leave with their husbands, who would wait outside after coming out from the men's side. This reminded me of Safiya Aunty and the volunteers who would, on a daily basis, volunteer like this for various events. This transnational view of volunteering and working with Muslim women in Edmonton, Fatickchari, Sylhet, and Dhaka made me realize that volunteering is part of self-

fulfillment and receiving *barkat,* but I want to add that it is also about being involved in some way. Kayikci (2020) noted that, though Muslim women volunteer to organize social groups and build a Muslim community, helping out in religious events may originate out of the individualistic intention (*niyya/niyot*) of doing good but that such acts evolve into social acts (Kayikci 2020). The involvement in something and doing something through their own decisions gives a form of agentive satisfaction individually, but that satisfaction occurs partly because it happened in a social public realm that involved other individuals. The community group that I was invited to join in Edmonton hosted recreational activities that young Muslim women could partake in. There is another separate one for men as well. I participated in a recent hike at the Whitemud River Valley and was able to learn about the different activities that they have organized, starting from outdoor painting, snow tubing, and even camping. These activities are organized by volunteer Muslim women who hold various jobs of their own. Volunteering among Muslim women has become a secure way not just to build and keep together a community but also to take hold of a situation and organize fun activities, which is the opposite of how Muslim women are stereotyped.

The women's groups in Edmonton, the women's religious meetings, the *sohbet* (discussions), and volunteering that Kayikci (2020) highlighted, and the upper-class Muslim women's Quran reading groups and get-togethers that Haq and Rashid (2008) focused on are examples of women who were already in a secured zone with relatively high socioeconomic status. The women volunteers in shrines, however, often are not from well-to-do families, so these volunteering opportunities are not just about receiving *baraka* but also a safer way for them to get access to recreational activities that otherwise would not have been available. Most women are often busy running their households and taking care

of their in-laws while cooking three meals a day, not to mention tending to their husbands or being victims of abuse. The women who work in offices or labor jobs and even college students have a safe environment where they can volunteer comfortably while being able to keep their *iman* (faith).

The motivations behind volunteering in religious spaces vary depending on the woman, but the satisfaction felt afterward is visibly seen among all. Moreover, the place itself and the environment affect this satisfaction as well. Volunteering in Sylhet mazar is much more accessible to men than to women. The structure of the Sylhet mazar is huge and is operated in stages; therefore, some of the volunteering, even for the women's space, is done by men volunteers, such as guiding or instructing women to move from the small space to another building during prayers because the space cannot hold that many visitors. In contrast, the community in Fatikchari has built up a system where women can participate in numerous activities, and the volunteering experience there, in a sense, becomes part of their pious journey. After receiving the bayat and becoming the saint's student, some see volunteering as a necessary next step. Through this, they can learn and relearn their ways as well. Safiya Aunty talked about how getting into a trance-like frenzy is looked down upon, gives shrines a bad reputation, and is un-Islamic. Therefore, the change that is continuing and the changes that the Maizbhandar aims to bring about have transformed local knowledge as well.

The decision to be active in their community, be it in Dhaka, Sylhet, Chattagram, or Fatikchari, for these women who are from a much-disadvantaged background, is not part of being Muslim but rather something they do because of it. They chose to volunteer and engage in the public in their own ways because they saw volunteering through the lens of their faith,

an activity filled with *barkat*. In turn, shrine spaces are made much more meaningful than just being places of veneration because of the multiple ways they become a refuge for many people, including non-Muslims. The gendered participation in shrines is not something that constrains women but rather is something that is preferred by these women and provides them a unique place where they can exercise their pious subjectivity privately within the masculine public realm.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

Changes appear in stages, and changes, over time, occur in every aspect of life and society. This is inevitable. However, changes do not appear out of a vacuum but progress as intended and, in many cases, unintended. The rapid changes that globalization and modernity brought have had effects on many aspects of life, including religion and how it is practiced. The reformist ideology that claims a single correct reading of the Quran, which must be followed as closely and correctly as possible, is not the problem. The problem is the political uprising that came with it. It was the judgment followed by belittlement and blind denial by local political parties armed with reformist ideologists who justified their actions as part of a jihad that became the problem. Their influence was, in turn, influenced by foreign reform and revival movements. This is not to say that South Asia cannot accommodate reformist ideology and follow an orthodox Islamic lifestyle. On the contrary, reformist movements such as the Deobandi and Tablighi movements have been happening in South Asia since the start of British rule. It is that when we only focus on changing customs and practices in line with a foreign reformist ideology like Salafism and Wahhabism, we make those particular movements the only "correct movement" or the only way of practicing Islam. Validation is unintentionally and intentionally given to a particular movement while automatically pushing all the ways of knowing Islam to the periphery of Islam. Deeb (2011) illustrated this as the process of authenticating one interpretation of Islam, "authenticated Islam," which automatically devalues other interpretations.

What happens then is that a single definition of Islam becomes popularized. Islam becomes everything that "orthodox" Islam[52] is as understood by leading reformists. The discourse around the Anthropology of religion has highlighted that religion is difficult to define. Geertz (1973) attempted to define religion as a "cultural system" with the formula that religion be seen as

> (1) a system of symbols that act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1973, 90).

Asad (1983), however, discussed the problems with trying to define religion[53] and instead began by "asking what are the historical conditions (movements, classes, institutions, ideologies) necessary for the existence of particular religious practices and discourses" (Asad 1983, 252). Because it is difficult to define religion, the reformist quest for universalizing Islam under one system of understanding, therefore, is one of the dangers of the movement. Islam is better approached within the study of the Anthropology of Islam as a "discursive tradition" (Asad 1986, 397). This allows for a deeper understanding of the way

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[52] I would like to reiterate that the term "orthodox" is only used as it is used by people who identify as orthodox Muslims. It needs to be clarified that the normative use of the term orthodox automatically implies there are unorthodox or incorrect ways of being Muslims (Asad 1986; Chatterjee 1993; Hill 2021)

[53] Asad (1986) questions, if religious symbols are considered *"vehicles for meaning,"* how can meaning be established independently of the *"form of life in which they are used?"*. If symbols are *"signatures of a sacred text,"* how can we know what they imply unless we take into account the social disciplines that ensure the right interpretation of these texts? which is why Asad stresses that no religious symbols or actions can be understood without reference to non-religious symbols and historical ties present within that context. He does not propose that the meanings of religious symbols cannot be found in social phenomena, but he does claim that these symbols'" existence is the result of many historical incidents. Moreover, to Asad, looking at religion as a *"belief system"* and saying that the symbols make it *"uniquely realistic"* suggests that in another perspective it is unreal and not realistic.

Islam is known, practiced, and evolved within the existing power of the context and history. However, Hill (2016) has cautioned that although "discursive tradition" has been groundbreaking within the study of Islam, it is important not to take it as a definition of Islam. Hence, having a single way of approaching Islam, which is what various reformists are trying to do, will always create a divide among various Muslim states and communities, even among reformists as well, because Salafi reform and Deobandi reform are two different reforms that vehemently reject one another. However, in Bangladesh, there are some groups that follow a mixed reform movement, and in such groups, there is no clear indication of what specific movement they follow. Their opinions are influenced by a mix of different leaders of different reform movements.

The influences of foreign reformism in current Bangladesh have now been intermingled with native reformism to some extent. This reformism has far deeper consequences than simply creating religious unrest. If we recall Naina aunty's state, we can see that the constant changes that are happening that have no proper trajectory are leaving an epistemological divide between her and, as she puts it, the "modern way of knowing Islam." However, there is no single modern way of knowing or conceiving Islam. Reformism and revivalism themselves, as we know them, are modern phenomena, and their focus on redefining the self as Muslim is part of modernity itself. The refinement of the self and the concept of "individuality" is a part of the capitalistic modern phenomenon (Turner 1988). The refinement of the self is also seen within the women studied here. As much as it is part of ethical self-refinement for reformers (as shown by Mahmood 2005), it is also part of the so-called "traditional" Sufi-oriented practices that still prevail. The visibility of public piety in terms of the way of dressing has already been changed. Many would now opt for hijab if

not full veiling. Julekha and many others follow strict veiling and face coverage through the niqab as well while following saints. Therefore, reformism itself cannot be brought under a strict umbrella, and those who follow saints and venerate shrines cannot be thought of as anti-reformers. The reality is much more diverse and complex.

Furthermore, the rapid changes within the practice of Islam in Bangladesh and elsewhere globally due to reformism are limiting access to the aspects that shrine venerators, especially women, had some semblance of control over. In this specific context, we remember the stories of Naina Aunty, Hanifa, and Shokhina Aunty, to name a few. We see how each one of them coped with the difficulties of their life created by the outward forces of their own society. Mithila Aunty was fighting an expensive lawsuit without any form of support, and the only thing she had control over was having the relief of stress through zikrs and through the shrines and her saint, all of which contributed to her unfaltering faith in Allah. Attempts to reform shrine veneration out of existence are therefore not just about reforming the practice and updating the way of practicing Islam to another level (as many within reformist ideology tend to think) but about erasing a certain practice that takes away these modes of everyday control which have no immediate—and perhaps future—replacement.

Another important factor is the practice of making *manots* (vows) and *niyots* (intentions). In South Asia especially, this practice transcends religion. It is not only about asking for help or a coping mechanism for problems they have no control over but also a way of accepting fate. Whatever may come, the individual has made a vow, and now it is up to fate. Raj and Harman (2006) conceptualize the importance of vows as a "dialogical dynamic function" (253) and show how making vows in a saint's shrine or in front of one's guru or

baba creates a public manifestation that, in turn, creates a unity between the internal, made within oneself, with the external, the rituals that go through while making the vows. A sacred spiritual and transactional exchange happens during vow making, promises involving giving and returning. Uddin (2006) highlights how, in the rapidly changing context of Muslim shrines, making vows by tying threads or any other external activity is prohibited because it is seen as idolatrous. The Dhaka High Court Mazar and the Maizbhandari Mazar have explicitly forbidden the public ritualistic aspect of vows. High Court Mazar has posters plastered on its walls cautioning against prostration and tying threads as part of making vows. Vows within the shrines are made every day, whether through public and visible acts or privately through silent prayer. Therefore, the rapid changes affected vow-making in Muslim shrines. The outward rituals are decreasing while the inward is being contested because it is creating fear within some devotees over whether they are committing shirk or not.

In this thesis, I have attempted Sehlikoglu's (2009) epistemological approach to view saintly devotion and shrine veneration through the lens of both the piety turn and of everyday Islam. I have looked at different ways of practicing piety that contrast with how piety is understood in reformist ideology. Through a historical review of shrines, saints, and reform movements in Bangladesh, I approached the lasting effects created by reformist movements as creating an obstruction within the epistemology of Islam among the women shrine venerators and their Bengali Muslim identity overall. Moreover, I have highlighted how shrine veneration, through both public space and its ritualistic elements, has provided and keeps providing its devotees, specifically women, with spiritual strength that helps them in many aspects of their lives. It provides them with opportunities for public engagement,

techniques for self-refinement, coping mechanisms, miraculous events, spiritual healing, and a place within the community structure.

In the larger context, the study of shrines in Bangladesh, with special emphasis on ordinary individuals in the current context, exemplifies the changing structure within the study of spirituality and Islam that emphasizes the 'self.' The emphasis on divine love in shrines is further enhanced not only through ritualistic prayer and zikrs but ripples over in ordinary aspects as well. Singing, for example, is seen as one of the purest ways to spiritual awakening by the Maizbhandaris. Mejbha Sir, a teacher, devotee, and research fellow of Ahmadiyya Maizbhandari Darul Irfan Research Institute, pointed out to me that music is inherently part of the mystical journey. He sang the lines of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's "I Glimpse of You Now and Then."

Tell me how to attain you.

To keep you within my sight

Where will I find so much love, O Lord?

To give you a place in my heart

Can I dare to?

If you are not kind, who can dare?

If you do not come yourself

Who can keep you in their heart?[54]

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[54] Song- Majhe Majhe Tobo Dekha Pai (I Glimpse You Now and Then) by Rabindranath Tagore, Translated by: Rumela Sengupta, 2012).

He explains that, though this song is famously seen as a love song between two humans, it can also be seen as a song by a devotee yearning to see his Creator. Tagore was a Hindu, yet his songs are very dear to Maizbhandari and many other Muslims. Mejbah Sir wanted to emphasize that love and Creator is not restricted to only Muslims—that it is a vast realm and can only be understood in context. In Maizbhandari, Hindu devotees and devotees from any religion are always welcome and appreciated because, for them, what matters is the spiritual connection, and there are no limits to that connection.

# Chapter 6: Photo Diary



Figure 6.1: A devotee meeting her baba in Maizbhandar (Photo and face shown with permission)



Figure 6.2: Prayer beads at a stall in Maizbhandar mazar sharif

Figure 6.3: A mazar in Fatikchari village

Figure 6.4: Candles lit under a tree in the courtyard of Highcourt Mazar

Figure 6.5: Children in Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif watching pigeons

6.6: The Sacred Jalali pigeons, Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif

Figure 6.7: Women in munajat, Shah Jalal Mazar Sharif

Figure 6.8: A fakir stopping and paying respect to the graves of the khadim family on his way, Shah Poran Mazar Sharif

Figure 6.9: A family feeding the sacred turtles in Bayezid Bostami Mazar

Figure 6.10: The asthana where Bostami was said to hold religious meetings

Figure 6.11: Devotees in veneration, Shahjalal Mazar Sharif



Figure 6.12: A mantle in front of an unknown small shrine

Figure 6.13: Khadim and pir Farid Mia of Shah Poran Mazar Sharif

Figure 6.14: A smiling baby goat in front of a khanqah



Figure 6.15: Another goat seeking to be a friend, Shah Poran Mazar Sharif pond

Figure 6.16: A Maizbhandari devotee showing around their khanqah in Sylhet

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Figure 6.17: A Pond in front of a mazar

Figure 6.18: Another mazar in Fatikchari village. A yellow donation box is seen in front of the entrance gate. A devotee is seen inside, bowing down in front of the entrance of the tomb.

Figure 6.19: A store in the dargah lane of Bayezid Mazar Sharif

Figure 6.20: An ancient worn-out gate in the Dargah Mollah of Shah Jalal Mazar from the Mughal times

Figure 6.21: Mama and her kitten, Dhaka Highcourt Mazar

Thank you.

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