

**Creating “Good Muslims”:  
*Qawmi madrasa* Schooling in a Rural Town of Bangladesh**

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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**To my parents**  
**Dr. Ruhul Amin Bhuiyan and Mrs. Rabeya Khatoon**

## Abstract

This thesis is about the processes and practices that underpin everyday life in a Bangladeshi *qawmi madrasa*, a rather contentious faith-based Islamic schooling system that is very popular among the rural poor. Based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork that took place in Biswanath, a rural town in northeastern Bangladesh, this thesis focuses specifically on the processes that are considered by the *qawmi madrasa* system to be crucial for the creation of a ‘good Muslim’ persona. The thesis is, therefore, primarily about a particular form of (religious) schooling and (religious) identity formation processes in rural Bangladesh.

This study describes a wide range of issues, traditions, and practices embedded within the *qawmi madrasa* system. The economic and social dynamics of the locality have also been observed closely, as these are directly linked with and influenced by the centrality of Islam in the life of the people. The protagonists of this system believe that every Muslim requires authentic Islamic schooling in order to become a ‘good Muslim’. Essential to the construction of the ‘good Muslim’ within the *qawmi madrasa* system therefore lies the assumption that this type of schooling is transformative in nature. Hence, my analysis highlights the centrality of the believer’s body and suggests that for the successful construction of a Muslim persona it is the Islamic orthopraxy, rather than the orthodoxy, that they (learners) receive here most of their faith schoolings on.

Central to such orthopraxy is *Sunnah* (ritual and non-ritual actions approved by the Prophet), which is reinforced and inculcated by the wider community of adults (parents, teachers) into learners by systematically addressing and synchronizing various qualities and expectations through the schooling process. Loyalty is one such quality that both the *qawmi* protagonists and the wider society believe is infusible. Loyalty towards the moral and social order is thought to be achievable through both moral and corporal discipline. Hence, accustoming one’s body and mind to the knowledge of *adab* (manner) constitutes the fundamental knowledge of all within this system. In other words, in this study I suggest that the *qawmi madrasa* system is a system of schooling where *adab* signifies not

only the moral but also the political identity of a person. However, an ideal Muslim persona or an approved Muslim body's construction within this context also rests on religious beliefs (*iman*) and deeds (*amal*).

In Bangladesh the *qawmi madrasa* system is categorized as an ultra orthodox Islamic schooling system on the basis of its stance for authentic and scripture based Islam. However, as I will demonstrate, in reality, the system is sustained by both accommodating many secular expectations of the people and by compromising many of its stances.

## Table of Content

<b>Acknowledgement</b>	11
<b>Glossary of Selected terms</b>	13
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	23
1.1 <i>Qawmi madrasa</i> and some relevant issues	24
1.2 The rise of Islam in Bangladeshi polity and Islamic education	29
1.3 Islamic education, its elements, and <i>madrasa</i>	35
1.4 <i>Qawmi madrasa</i> and its anthropological relevance	38
1.5 On field and fieldwork	40
1.6 Structure of Study	45
<b>Chapter Two: The forces of change and the <i>qawmi madrasa</i></b>	48
Section 1	50
2.1 The context	50
2.2 <i>Jamian</i> responses to reform	52
2.3 Infrastructural development, proliferation of educational institute	56
2.4 <i>Lodging-mastery</i>	58
Section 2: Impact of the state's involvement in religious affairs and institutions	59
2.5 <i>Eid-e-Miladunnaby</i> and the <i>aliya madrasa</i> issues	61
Section 3	64
2.6 Looking within: <i>Jamians</i> during the State of Emergency	64
2.7 Secret grievances	67
2.8 Power struggle	70
2.9 Conclusion	74

<b>Chapter Three: The political economy of Bishwanath</b>	75
Section 1: <i>Londoni</i> money and the centrality of consumption	77
3.1 Symbols of development	77
3.2 Consuming the landscape	79
3.3 Households and the pattern of consumption	83
Section 2: Land and its socio-political implications in Bishwanath	85
3.4 Land disputes and mitigation	85
3.5 Economic value of land	87
Section 3: Intermediaries, extortion and the dynamics of power around land	91
3.6 The regime of secrecy within the economy of extortion	91
3.7 The actors and dynamics of land deal	93
Section 4: Economy of charity and the <i>Jamia</i> of Bishwanath	96
3.8 The clients and patrons of the economy of charity	97
3.9 Charity as a religious means to achieve a personal benefit	100
3.10 Conclusion	103
<b>Chapter Four: Understanding the <i>line</i></b>	104
4.1 (a) The underlying motif	106
4.1 (b) The <i>line</i>	106
Section 1: The <i>behavioural</i> aspect of <i>line</i> :	108
4.2 Mr. Ali's <i>line</i>	109
4.3 Mr. Ali's choices	113
4.4 Munna's <i>line</i>	115
Section 2:	118

4.5 The <i>connection</i> and <i>orientation</i> aspects of <i>line</i> : <i>Jamia's line</i>	118
4.6 Learning <i>line</i> in everyday context	122
4.7 <i>Khadim</i>	123
4.8 <i>Qu'tar</i>	129
4.9 Conclusion	134
<b>Chapter Five: <i>Adab</i> and the Muslim body</b>	135
5.1 <i>Jamia</i> , <i>Jamians</i> , and the body's Muslim show	137
5.2 Ways of learning <i>adab</i> !	139
5.3 Khan's story	142
Section 1: The <i>adab</i> of the body's surface	145
5.4 The 'look' of the Muslim body	145
5.5 Realizing the 'good look' in <i>Jamia</i>	147
5.6 The symbolisms in the hair cutting	149
Section 2: The <i>adab</i> of the body's action	152
5.7 Body's secular actions	153
5.8 Body's inadequate actions	156
5.9 Conclusion	161
<b>Chapter Six: <i>Iman</i> and <i>Amal</i></b>	163
6.1 (a) <i>Amal</i> and <i>iman</i>	164
6.1 (b) Centrality of <i>iman</i> and <i>Jamian</i> mission	167
6.2 Learning to "believing": What is learnt?	171
6.3 The initiation	173
6.4 The <i>iman</i> -schooling	176

6.4 (a) “Aamantu billahi... (I believe in Allah..)”	176
6.4 (b) “Wa Malaikatihi...(His Angels...)”	178
6.4 (c) “Wa Kutubihi...( His Books...)”	180
6.4 (d) “Wa Rasulihi...(His Messengers...)”	181
6.4 (e) “Wal Yawmil Aakheri...(The Day of Judgement...)”	182
6.4 (f) “Wal Qadri Khirehi Wa Shar’rehi...(that Fate good and bad is given..)”	183
6.4 (g) “Wa..Bawsee Bawdal Mawat...(the life after death...)”	184
6.5 Coming to terms with a time	185
6.6 Conclusion:	190
<b>Chapter Seven: Learning to be “good” Muslims</b>	192
7.1 On Institutional policy and pedagogical techniques	193
7.2 A day in the <i>Jamia</i>	196
7.3 Mohammad Intiaz: The “good” Muslim	205
7.4 Kamran: The in the <i>line</i> type	210
7.5 Monwar: The <i>be-line</i> and <i>be-adab</i> type	216
7.6 Conclusion	222
<b>Chapter Eight: Summary and Conclusion</b>	224
<b>Bibliography</b>	229
<b>Appendix 1</b>	243
<b>Appendix 2</b>	246
<b>Appendix 3</b>	247
<b>Appendix 4</b>	250
<b>Appendix 5</b>	253



**Appendix 6**

254

**Appendix 7**

259

## List of Maps and plates

Map 1: Political map of the South Asia	29
Map 2: Political map of Bangladesh	30
Map 3: Sylhet district and Bishwanath upazila in maps	51
Plate 1: A demolished Bishwanath <i>madrassa</i> during the emergency	65
Plate 2: The brick walls and cane fences are taking over	81
Plate 3: A <i>Londoni</i> house in the middle of a paddy field	89
Plate 4: A large <i>jamaat</i> spills into the courtyard without disrupting the <i>qu'tars</i>	129
Plate 5: Men prior to a <i>Ju'ma</i> at the <i>Jamia</i> mosque	146
Plate 6: A typical Bishwanath tea-stall with a TV mounted refrigerator	188
Plate 7: One of the packed <i>ibtedai</i> (primary) classes of <i>Jamia</i>	198
Plate 8: A group of students are having their midday meal together	202
Plate 9: <i>Jamia</i> students attending the annual examination	219

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## **Glossary of Selected Terms**

*Adab*: Manner

*Ajan*: Prayer call

*Akal*: Understanding/maturity/sensibility/wisdom.

*Al-batin or bateni*: Something that is hidden or concealed, esoteric

*Alim*: Islamic scholar, also refers to the higher secondary degree/level under *Aliya* system

*Amal*: Deed or action

*Asar*: The afternoon prayer

*Ashol*: Genuine

*Awrami*: Foolishness

*Baki*: Credit

*Barakat*: Blessings.

*Baromishaly*: A mixture of twelve ingredients

*Bauls*: Mystics of Bengal

*Be-adabi*: Ill-mannered, bigheadedness

*Be-line*: Not in the *line*

*Bibad*: Dispute

*Bich'na*: Bedding

*Bidat*: Innovation

*Boro kichu*: Someone big, successful

*Bosti*: Slum

*Bujh*: Understanding, insight, maturity, knowledge, intelligence, etc.

*Chaap*: Pressure

*Chanda*: Collection

*Chandabaz*: Extortionists

*Chokkor*: Stroll

*Dakhil*: Secondary

*Dalal*: Intermediary

*Dan-baksho*: Donation box

*Deen*: The Islamic way of life

*Desh*: Country

*Doa*: Supplication

*Dhoftor*: Office

*Dokholdari*: Occupancy

*Dunya*: The materialistic world

*Eid*: Muslim festival

*Eid-e-Miladunnaby*: The commemoration of the Prophet's birth and death anniversary

*Esha*: Evening prayer

*Fakir*: Beggar but here it stands for ecstatic Sufi or Sufi mendicant

*Fazr*: Morning prayer

*Fiqh*: Jurisprudence

*Hadia*: Gift

*Hadith*: Prophetic sayings

*Hafiz-e-Qur'an*: A person who mastered and memorized the *Qur'an*

*Hifzokhana*: *Qur'an* memorization centre

*Hajj*: Pilgrimage to Macca

*Hijrat*: Migration, refers to the migration of the Prophet Mohammad

*Hotai vhai-bon*: Half-siblings

*Hutbar*: Market days

*Ibtedia*: Primary

*Ich'cha*: Willingness, intension, motivation, drive, etc

*Iftar*: The evening meal when Muslims break their fast

*Ilm*: Knowledge

*Imam*: Prayer leader

*Iman*: Faith

*Jalsha*: Conference

*Jamaat*: Congregation

*Jati*: Kin, family, sex, religion, species, race, etc.

*Jiin*: *Qur'an* mentions of this being made of fire.

*Ju'ma*: Obligatory Friday afternoon congregational prayer

*Kalimah*: Testimony

*Khadim*: One who serves a superior someone voluntarily



*Khadim Ul Islam*: Servants of Islam

*Khani*: Feast

*Khas*: Government land

*Khoroch*: Expenses

*Khubi unnoto*: Very developed

*Kiare*: 0.3 Acres

*Kitab*: Holy Books/books

*Koin'na*: Bride

*Lillah*: Alms

*Londoni*: One who lives in the UK or from a family that has members in the UK

*Madhab*: *Sunni legal school*

*Maghrib*: Dusk prayer

*Maidaan-e-Hashr*: Field of Resurrection

*Manush*: Human

*Mawlana*: A title given to a person respected for religious learning

*Mazar*: Shrine

*Miswak*: Toothbrush made from the twigs of the *Salvadora persica* tree

*Muaz 'zin*: Prayer caller

*Muhtamim*: Principal or chief

*Munazat*: Supplication

*Murrub 'bi*: Patron or elderly person

*Murshid*: Sufi master who guides disciples

*Nabi*: Prophet

*Naeb-e-Muhtamim*: Vice-Principal

*Naeb-e-Talimat*: Education secretary

*Neta*: Leader

*Niyaat*: Bad intention

*Nokol*: Fake

*Noteboi*: A type of book that provides student with ready-made solutions, answers, etc.

*Obaddhota*: Disobedience

*Ostad-Khadim*: Master-disciple

*Paan*: Especial prepared betel leaf

*Paka kotha*: Solid word

*Pir*: Muslim holy man or a Sufi master.

*Puja*: Worshipping

*Qafia*: Secondary

*Qad'r*: Fate

*Qiyamat*: The Day of Judgement

*Qu'tar*: Line or row

*Rahmat*: Mercy, clemency, compassion, etc.

*Ramadan*: The month of fasting

*Rasool*: Apostle

*Refugee*: Migrant individual or family who moved into Bishwanath for livelihoods

*Sadachar*: Moral education

*Salat*: Five daily prayers

*Salat al Fadar*: Morning prayer

*Sarf*: Seven

*Sawab*: Recompense, reward, etc

*Sawm*: Fasting

*Shadhinota*: Freedom

*Shagred*: Student

*Shaikh*: Spiritual teacher

*Shaitan'er Ibadati*: Worshiping the evil/Satan

*Shariah*: Islamic law

*Shi'a*: One of the two major branches of Islam. Followers of Ali, the fourth Caliph

*Shik'kha*: Secular education/education

*Shirik*: Association with God

*Shor'he Jam'ei*: Higher secondary

*Shovab choritro*: Habit

*Shudkhor*: Usurer

*Sravan*: Second month of Bengali rainy season

*Sunnah*: The living habits and religious actions lived and approved by of the Prophet and his companions.

*Sunni*: The largest branch of Islam based on Sunnah

*Sura*: Chapter

*Taka*: Name of Bangladeshi currency

*Taliban*: Students

*Taqdeer*: Fate

*Tasawuf*: Spirituality

*Tawba*: Repentance

*Tawheed*: Testifying

*Ulama*: Islamic scholars

*Ummah*: Community of Muslims

*Valaghor*: Good lineage

*Vangani*: Breaking

*Vondo*: Hypocrite

*Vut*: Ghost

*Waju*: Ablution

Waqf: Religious revenue system

*Zeheen*: Acumen

*Zahiri*: To show, manifest, present, etc.

*Zakat*: Poor rate

*Zohar*: Early afternoon prayer

## Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is a study of a particular type of Islamic school system, in the prosperous rural town of Bishwanath in the district of Sylhet in the northeast of Bangladesh. It is an attempt to understand the processes by which puritanical Islamic beliefs and practices are both being transmitted by and taken in by the proponents of this Islamic school, and how these processes contribute to the transformation of the young learners and adult believers into “good Muslims.”

The specific concerns of this thesis have been shaped by the observed obsession with the body, its management, and presentation in relation to religious belief and practice within this schooling system, known as *qawmi madrasa*. The *qawmi madrasa* system has been rapidly proliferating throughout rural Bangladesh since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The focus herein is on the centrality of the body in the projection of one’s faith in Islam; it is against this backdrop which I have conducted my research in a *qawmi madrasa*.

For over a century the *qawmi madrasa* has been common feature of Bangladesh’s educational landscape; however it did not receive much attention from research and policy making communities prior to the events of September of 2001. It bears admitting that this very first anthropologically informed ethnographic research of the Bangladeshi *qawmi madrasa* system would not have been undertaken if the system had not received prominence for all the wrong reasons.

In January of 2007, I started my fieldwork with the teachers and children of the primary section of a *qawmi madrasa*, aiming to study the processes associated with teaching and learning religious strictures. However, the focus, both physical and topical, soon needed to be readjusted and expanded beyond the primary section and even beyond the *madrasa*. After a little over fifteen months of fieldwork, I ended up with an amalgamation of data that contains a number of layers. The core is made of the regime of strictures centring on the Muslim body, its management and performances. The layer of arguments that make both knowledge and schooling vital for the preservation and inculcation of the religious

traditions surround this. These are both interlinked with wider socio-political issues that concern and influence this *madrasa* both directly and indirectly. From the beginning of my fieldwork, this small rural religious school presented me with numerous challenges intellectually that I found myself ill equipped to deal with. Hence, the major issues that this thesis will try to address in relation with the creation of “good Muslim” are the nature of this ideological schooling and schooling around the Muslim body’s piety practices.

### 1.1 *Qawmi madrasa* and some relevant issues

The main task that the *madrasa* is meant to perform, according to its *ulema* (Islamic scholars), is the proper transmission of religious knowledge. The *ulema* (sing: *alim*) argue that as the *Qur’anic* and Prophetic texts are the authority for Muslims, the *madrasas* are to preserve it and to transmit it to the next generation for the good of the community of Muslims. According to the *ulema*, for the reproduction of a normative Islamic tradition, the need for religious schooling for the mass of the society is crucial; something that the following chapters of this thesis will investigate thoroughly. However, the following discussion will attempt to present some of the historical links, organizational features and contested issues regarding this *madrasa* system.

The Arabic word *madrasa* signifies two meanings: primarily it stands for any school; secondarily it stands for a special school that instructs only religious knowledge based on the *Qur’an* (Muslim holy book), *Hadith* (Prophetic sayings), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), *Shariah* (Islamic law), et cetera. In the Subcontinent, where the *madrasa* system has a glorious past<sup>1</sup>, the word commonly refers to the latter.

Unlike in India and Pakistan, there exists two forms of *madrasa* (plural: *madāris*) in Bangladesh. One is the *aliya madrasa*<sup>2</sup>, which is regulated by the state and teaches

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<sup>1</sup> The history of *madrasa* in the Subcontinent dates back to the establishment of Delhi Sultanate (Muslim dynasties) in 1206. Its main function was to train personnel for government services. Its curriculum was customized to cater administrative needs of the Muslim rulers. See Metcalf B. ed. (2009) and Robinson F. (2001) for detailed historical account.

<sup>2</sup> This *madrasa* system was first established in Calcutta under the British rule in 1781. Therefore, it was also known as *Calcutta madrasa*. It was the first state-managed institution of British India. The aim of this



secular subjects along with the religious ones. The other is *qawmi madrasa*<sup>3</sup>, which is independent of state regulation and mainly teaches religious subjects. This research will focus on the *qawmi madrasa* system only.

Bangladesh's *qawmi madrasa* system has historical links with and is the offspring of the famous north Indian *madrasa* called the *Dar ul-Ulum of Deoband*<sup>4</sup>. A group of Bengali *Deobandi* scholars established the first *qawmi madrasa* in Bangladesh in the southern port city of Chittagong in 1901<sup>5</sup>. Hence, this *madrasa* system is also known as *Deobandi madrasa*. However, in Bangladesh many people use terms like *Wahabi* and *Kharijia*<sup>6</sup> to refer to the *qawmi madrasa* system.

*Dar ul-Ulum of Deoband*'s mission was to produce a new generation of reformists who would keep scriptural Islam dear to them and would break free of the many non-Islamic practices that the Muslims of India had become so accustomed to: i.e. tomb worshipping, celebration of the anniversaries of saints, et cetera. In the long history of Muslim rule in India this was probably the first time that religious scholars felt the need to establish a religious school that would generate learned practitioners who would cleanse the Muslim community of all sorts of innovations (*bidat*) rather than pursuing worldly careers. This inward and unique journey of Islamic revival was first envisioned by the scholar Shah

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*madrasa* was to supply clerks for colonial offices and courts to interpret Muslim laws. It taught *Dars-i-Nizami* (the traditional *madrasa* curriculum of the Subcontinent) besides secular subjects. After 1947 the *madrasa* was relocated to Dhaka, in the then East Pakistan, where it grew insignificantly until 1971. Since 1978, with the establishment of Bangladesh *Madrasa* Education Board, the system expanded dramatically under a state sponsored *madrasa* reform program that not only brought secular subjects to the forefront of its curriculum but also introduced systematic incentives to modernize it (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2006). According to a 2005 Bangladesh government education statistics, there were 9,200 *aliya madrasas* operating all over the country. *Aliya madrasa* degrees are government recognized.

<sup>3</sup> *Qawm* is an Arabic protean term used in Afghanistan to refer to any form of solidarity. It may be based on kinship, residence or occupation. It is sometimes referred to as one's "tribe", sometimes as one's community. According to my informants the word *qawmi* refers to "of the community or nation of Muslims".

<sup>4</sup> The *Dar ul-Ulum of Deoband* is the most prestigious Islamic university of the Subcontinent (Lintner 2004, 417). It was established in an old mosque in Deoband a little over a decade after the 1857 anti-British uprising. It is located in the district of Saharanpur, 147 km north of New Delhi, India. Most of the founding fathers of this institution actively participated in the 1857 *Sepoy* mutiny, which is otherwise known as India's First War of Independence.

<sup>5</sup> *Dar ul-Ulum Moinul Islam Hathazari* is the first and most prestigious of all *qawmi madrasas* in Bangladesh.

<sup>6</sup> Most probably both *Wahabi* and *Kharijia* terms are associated with the famous anti-British *Fara'idiyya* and *Wahhabi* movements of the Bengali Muslim peasantries and artisans.

Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762) and a hundred-years later realized by the founding fathers of *Deoband madrasa*; prompted, however, by the brutal repression that ensued from the quelling of the *Sepoy* mutiny of 1857 by the British rulers. The birth of *Deoband madrasa* in 1866 coincided with an abolition of both state patronage of and the system of religious revenue (*waqf*) for all Muslim religious schools of India due to their part in the mutiny. In that uncertain and hostile environment the founders of *Deoband madrasa* turn their gazes away from the elite Muslims<sup>7</sup> and sought to create a clientele among ordinary, lower-class and caste Muslims. This population would eventually become its launching pad simultaneously being the patron and the client of the system. The idea of opening up and getting involved with masses was unprecedented in the history of *madrasa* and became a model henceforth. Thus, for the first time in the history, Deoband along with other contemporary religious movements provided the lower class Indian Muslim with a sense of belonging to a corporate Muslim identity (Alam 2006, 179).

The turning away from the patronage of elite Muslims by the *Deoband madrasa* in conjunction with the economic and political embargo gradually gave this *madrasa* system a pro-poor character. This pro-poor feature of the *Dar ul-Ulum* along with its syllabus, literature and method of instruction are just a few features that the present day Bangladeshi *qawmi madrasa* system tries its best to replicate, at least on the surface. Underneath, however, this system is not at all an apolitical, homogeneous religious institution only; rather it is marked by rivalry and squabbling among its many leaders<sup>8</sup> and institutions.

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<sup>7</sup> The founders of *Deoband madrasa* had to do this as the princely grants were becoming increasingly insecure. Metcalf (1978, 114 - 115) explains that princes of the states of Hyderabad, Bhopal, Rampur, and large landlords of United Provinces dispensed their wealth for religious causes. However, it was not as substantial as the days of Mughal rule and was dwindling rapidly at the aftermath of the mutiny. Therefore, the *ulema* sought annual pledges from their supporters, encouraged single gifts in both cash and kind, organized proceeds from the selling of animal hides collected during the *Eid* (Muslim festival) sacrifice, encouraged the *zakat* (poor rate) giving, et cetera. Thus, they built a network of donors that not only formed a base for financial support but also a base for disseminating *Deobandi* teachings.

<sup>8</sup> This is manifested in the fact that the innumerable *qawmi madrasas* that are operating all over the country are regulated by no less than 13 self-styled regional or national regulatory bodies revolving around a specific large *madrasa* or a leader.

In order to give the *qawmi madrasa* system some homogeneity, political strength, and to remain free from state's control, the leadership established a board by the name of *Wafaq ul Madaris Al Arabia* in 1987<sup>9</sup>. This remains the largest and most prominent of all *qawmi madrasa* boards operating in Bangladesh with 9000 member *madrasas* registered with it (Banu 2007, 16). However, the exact figure of *qawmi madrasas* operating in Bangladesh remains an elusive issue. A national Bengali daily the *Prothom Alo* (2006), citing a document of the *Wafaq ul Madaris Al Arabia*, reported that the number of madrasa is 15,250 with 1,857,500 students and 132,150 teachers<sup>10</sup>. Quoting the General Secretary of the *Wafaq ul Madaris Al Arabia*, the report said that a similar number of *madrasas* are operating outside this board's jurisdiction. Asadullah et al. (2009) in a recent draft report on Bangladeshi *madrasas*, prepared for the World Bank, cite three sources where the number discrepancy is astounding and hence supports its elusiveness. According to their first source (Mercer et al. 2006) Asadullah et al. (2009) cite the number as 8,000; according to the second source (Sattar 2004) it is 4,000; and finally the most dramatic figure that they cite is 64,000 from an expert's testimony (Ahmed 2005) prepared for the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on 'Combating Terrorism through Education.'

The financial autonomy of the institution is an additional important feature of the *Der ul-Ulum of Deoband* that needs mentioning here. Metcalf (1978, 114 - 115) described that five out of the eight founding principle of this *madrasa* concerned the financial issues of the *madrasa*. Their aim was to provide a guide for fund raising and managing the day to day financial issues of the *madrasa* effectively, widely, transparently, humbly and ethically; even in the face of any hardship. Such commitment and integrity in the day to day financial deals of a *madrasa*, however, is a practice yet to be fully replicated by the present day *qawmi madrasas* of Bangladesh. In this regard it demands mentioning that, the *Prothom Alo* (2006) reports, citing a financial report prepared by the *Wafaq ul Madaris Al Arabia*, that the annual expenditure in the sector would worth 3 billion Taka

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<sup>9</sup> Unlike the *aliya madrasa* system none of the *Wafaq ul Madaris Al Arabia* or the *qawmi madrasa* degrees are government recognized, something its proponents consider dearly important for their social and economic mobility.

<sup>10</sup> The largest Bengali Daily of Bangladesh, *Prothom Alo*, published a series of reports on the *qawmi madrasa* system between April 3 and 7 of 2006.

(the Bangladesh currency) or approximately 44.75 million USD (in 2006, 1 USD = 67.02 Taka). The newspaper also reported that apart from public and foreign donations most of these *madrasas* have fixed income coming from the following sources: land holdings, commercial properties, stocks, saving funds, rent, profit, and even interests generated by the funds kept with the major commercial banks. Such financial practices, once again, stand sharply in contrast with the following founding principle of the *Dar ul-Ulum of Deoband*:

*As long as the madrasa has no fixed sources of income, it will, God willing, operate as desired. And if it gain any fixed income, like jāgīr holdings, factories, trading interests or pledges from nobles, then the madrasa will lose the fear and hope which inspire submission to God and will lose His hidden help. Disputes will begin among the workers. In matters of income and buildings...let there be a sort of deprivation. (Metcalf 1978, 115)*

Owing to all the above mentioned characteristics that include its ideological orientation, pedagogic techniques, history, current trends the *qawmi madrasa* system has been repeatedly criticized for being ‘backward’ and conservative. Recently a link has been established between these *madrasa* and the rise of Islamic militancy in the region (ICG report 2006, ACHR review 2005, Griswold 2005, Riaz 2005, Kennedy 2004, Lintner 2004, CRS report for congress 2003, Bandyopadhyay 2002, Haqqani 2002, Sikand 2001)<sup>11</sup>. It is worth remembering that this *madrasa* system primarily operates in relatively impoverished rural regions and works among the children and adults of poor rural agriculturalist backgrounds. This research is also, therefore, about the economically and politically marginal mass of religious students who enrol with the *qawmi madrasas* to become “good Muslims.” Considering all, in the next section I will present a close account of Bangladesh’s political history to better contextualize the socio-political

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<sup>11</sup> Usikylä (2000, 16) observes that until 1990s most anthropological and sociological studies in Bangladesh were driven by donor interests, and development discourses. Keeping that in mind we see a new trend has emerged within the same framework with more focus on the “Islamist” aspect of Bangladeshi identity since 2001 (cf. Riaz 2004, Shehabuddin 2008).

impetuses behind the *madrasa* system, especially behind the successful proliferation of *qawmi madrasas* system.

## 1.2 The rise of Islam in Bangladeshi polity and Islamic education



Map 1: Political map of the South Asia<sup>12</sup>.

Bangladesh is a small country of only 1, 47,570 square kilometre but the 8<sup>th</sup> largest in terms of its population, which was 144.6 million in 2004 (Statistical Pocket Book 2009). According to the 2001 census, 90% of the people were Muslim<sup>13</sup> and over 98% people

<sup>12</sup> Source: <http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/world/asia/index2.html>

<sup>13</sup> According to the 1981 census Muslim were 86.7%, Hindu 12.1%; however, 2001 census shows around 3% increase (89.58%) in Muslim population and around 3% decrease in Hindu population (9.4%).



identity in relation with their religious belief. However, the Muslim identity of the Bengali people seems to be no lesser an issue than language, secularism, and Bengali nationalism in the realization of an independent state in 1971 (cf. Khan 1985, Islam 1981, Rajan 1972). Presumably, because of that, soon after the independence, Islam started to re-assert itself over the secular polity of Bangladesh. In the following discussion, I will draw an outline of that development to see how Islam's re-emergence in the realm of country's polity left a mark on its education sector.

I will begin this discussion by highlighting a dispute concerning a decision to remove a certain subject from the national curriculum to show how successive governments, since independence, handled the issue. This example of dispute is picked up from Mohsin (2004, 472 - 477), who also provides us with a brief account of changes introduced by the governments in the country's polity between 1972 and 1990 in relation to their treatment of Islam.

The dispute arose during the Mujib government<sup>16</sup> (1972-1975), the first democratically elected government of Bangladesh, which initially (wrongly) showcased the independence of Bangladesh as a secular revolution. In 1972, its education commission recommended that the government withdraw the obligatory status of a subject called *Islamiat* (Islamic religious education) from the middle school (Year 6 and 7) curriculum since it was first introduced by the pro-Islamic Pakistan state. However, the commission hide the findings of a survey that it carried out, prior to the delivery of its recommendations, to elicit public opinion over the separation of religion from education. Citing Talukder Maniruzzaman (1990), Mohsin (2004) inform us that in the survey only 21 percent people supported such change while 79 percent opined that religious education should be an integral part of general education. Nevertheless, the recommendation remains unimplemented and the subject untouched. It is worth mentioning in this regard

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of two separate nation states, India and Pakistan, based on religion; and finally in 1971 one new identity with the emergence of Bangladesh; a secular nation state of a predominantly Muslim people ( cf. Ghosh 1993, Islam 1981, Khan 1976, 1985, Mohsin 2004)

<sup>16</sup> Mujib is the shorthand for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He is popularly known as *Bongobondho* for his undisputed leadership in the independent movement of Bangladesh. He formed the first parliamentary government of the independent Bangladesh and became the first Prime Minister of it.

that it was the constitution of newly independent Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, that first relegated Islam from the polity<sup>17</sup>. Mujib was wrongly convinced that the bloody independence from Pakistan was enough to marginalize Islam in favour of secularism<sup>18</sup>. Regrettably, the *Awami Ulema League*, his party's Islamic wing, first protested against it. As the demand for a reversal of the secularist decision mounted higher within and outside of his party's forum Mujib had to act. He did not change the constitution but declared a general amnesty to those who collaborated with the Pakistan army in 1971. He revived the already abolished Islamic Academy and upgraded that to a foundation. He also restored religious broadcasts on radio and television, prohibited serving alcoholic beverages to Muslims in private clubs, attended an Islamic summit conference in Pakistan, accorded diplomatic recognition to Pakistan and became one of the founding members of the Islamic Development Bank (Ghosh 1993, Haque and Akhter 1987, Khan 1983, 1976, Mohsin 2004). However, On the 15 August of 1975, only three and half years from becoming the Prime Minister, Mujib was killed and his government was overthrown in a bloody coup d'état. It would not be fair to state that his earlier anti-Islamic stance was the cause of his downfall but a link can be established between these two when Major Dalim, one of the leaders of the coup, announced over the state radio that, “..[T]he armed forces had taken over and changed the country's name from the *People's Republic of Bangladesh to the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh*<sup>19</sup>.”

On the 7 November 1975 the then army chief Major General Ziaur Rahman took over the power with another bloody coup and ruled the country until his assassination in 1981. By a proclamation in 1977, the Zia government dropped the principle of secularism from the constitution and replaced it with “absolute faith and trust in the Allah Almighty”

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<sup>17</sup> In the preamble paragraph 2 of the constitution accepted “Bengali nationalism,” “socialism,” “democracy,” and “secularism” as the state's principles. These four were basically the constituent parts of a new ideology called the *Mujibism* that was later incorporated in the constitution (Khan 1976, 111).

<sup>18</sup> Article 12 of the 1972 constitution states that, the principle of secularism shall be realized by the elimination of: communalism in all forms, the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion, the abuse of religion for political purpose, any discrimination against or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion. Article 38, paragraph 2 of the constitution further states: no person shall have the right to form or be a member or otherwise take part in the activities of, any communal or other association or union, which in the name or on the basis of any religion has for its object, or pursues a political purpose (Mohsin 2004, 470 - 471).

<sup>19</sup> See, TIME magazine's Asia edition, August 25, 1975 issue for further details on the events of surround the coup.



(Ahmeed and Nazneen 1990, 795). To project his Islam friendly stance he withdrew the ban that Mujib imposed on all the Islamic political parties, established closer ties with Islamic states, established a religious affairs ministry, and introduced many symbolic measures in the day-to-day running of state affairs (Ghosh 1993, Lintner 2004). In the education sector, the Zia government made the *Islamiyat* a compulsory subject for all Muslim students, from Primary to middle level, and successfully initiated reform in the *aliya madrasa* sector. His government established the Madrasa Education Board and introduced financial incentives to modernize this sector.

After Zia's death another army chief General Ershad ruled the country for nine years. Ershad brought numerous symbolic changes and moved firmly towards Islamic nationalism. In 1983, his government introduced Arabic as a compulsory subject for the students in primary and middle school. In 1988, he amended the constitution and made Islam the state religion of Bangladesh (Lintner 2004, 414). He moved weekly holidays from Sunday to Friday, frequented between mosques, shrines, and Muslim holy places in Saudi Arabia, changed the name of Red Cross into Red Crescent, introduced *zakat* (poor rate) fund to raise money for poor people in line with the teachings of Islam. During his rule, the country experienced a surge in the number of Islamic political parties and revival of a radical Islamic party called the *jamaat-i-Islami of Bangladesh* (Banu 1992, Hashmi 2004). The Ershad government encouraged and sponsored *madrasa* education; placing it on par with the corresponding level of mainstream secular education. It was during this period that two of the *aliya madrasa* degrees received government recognition (Banu 2007). According to Ahmeed and Nazneen (1990, 798), in 1976 there was 1,830 *madrasas* and 291,191 *madrasa* students, by 1988 the number of *madrasa* rose to 2,700 and *madrasa* student to 541,500. Ershad wanted to establish a mosque-centered society in Bangladesh (Mohsin 2004, 476) but failed to realize that fully. In the December of 1990, he was deposed, convicted and jailed.

General Ershad's departure paved the way for the beginning of a new political era, ongoing since 1991 and marked by Islam and Islamic parties playing an influential role in an electoral democracy that continues to face minor upheavals. Many holy men or *sufi*

masters, known as *pir*, have entered into the national political arena and Islam grew much militant (Hashmi 2004, ICG report 2006, Lintner 2004). Both secular and Islamic parties are stretching their influence among the students of both forms of *madrasas*. International Crisis Group reports (2006, 13-14), citing the *Bangladesh Economic Review* (2001 - 2005), that between 2001 and 2005 the *madrasa* sector grew by 22.22 percent whereas the general (secular) education sector grew only by 9.74 percent. The number of teacher in the *madrasa* sector grew by 16.52 percent and in the general (secular) education sector by 12.27 percent. The number of student has grown by 10.12 percent and 8.64 percent in the *madrasa* and secular education sector respectively.

Internationally, such growth was first registered by the media in December of 1990 when Muslim hooligans attacked Hindus in many places in Bangladesh in response to the demolition of *Babri* mosque of Ayodhya, India (Ghosh 1993, 706-707). Later, focus was on the chanting of death threats to the controversial feminist author Taslima Nasreen (Rashiduzzaman 1994, 974) and on the persecution of poor rural women in the name of Islamic justice (Shehabuddin 1999, 1011-1044). Ransacking NGO run programs (Rashiduzzaman 1994, 985-986) as well as deadly bomb attacks targeting courts of law, cinemas, secular rallies, cultural events, and in one instance a church were all signs of emerging militant Islam in Bangladesh (cf. Alam 1998, ACHR review 2005, Griswold 2005, Hashmi 2004, ICG report 2006, Lintner 2004).

In order to situate the *qawmi madrasa* system within this context we must recognize here that while the Islamization of Bangladesh's polity and society, as described above, has facilitated the growth of *madrasa* education, however, it can never be the only factor that gave rise to the boom<sup>20</sup>. Interestingly, the growth in this sector is always compared with the general (secular) educational sector's growth (cf. ICG report 2006). The critiques of *madrasa* education fail to acknowledge that the cost associated with founding and operating a *madrasa* is far less than establishing a general (secular) school. Further, they tend to forget the historical realities that the predominantly Muslim Bangladesh has

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<sup>20</sup> Riaz (2006) argues that apart from the rise of political Islam and Islamization of Bangladeshi society the growth of *madrasa* is directly related with lack of funding in general (secular) education sector, changes in state ideology, changes in global politics, and Bangladesh's increased interaction with global economy.

always maintained a large number of mosques and *madrasas* due to their symbolic importance (Ahmed and Nazneen: 1990: 798).

An important feature of *madrasa* education in Bangladesh often left unmentioned and unappreciated is the changes that it has internalized during the last three decades in terms of ““indigenization<sup>21</sup>” of Islam and Islamic scholarship and their de-linking from their North Indian Islamic wellsprings” (Ahmad: 2004, 112). This quote is not meant to highlight *qawmi madrasa* system as a response to the people’s idea of education or schooling but rather that the steps taken by the *madrasa* system towards “indigenization” as a positive projection of the peoples’ perception and demand for education in critical times. In the following section I, therefore, will try to explore the ideas surrounding Islamic religious education, their relevance, and relationship with *madrasa*.

### **1.3 Islamic education, its elements, and *madrasa***

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that Islam is a perilous issue for anyone who governs Bangladesh, irrespective of political philosophy. This risk is further exacerbated when we try to understand what exactly the phrase “Islamic education” means in the predominantly *Sunni*<sup>22</sup> Bangladesh where the state and its apparatuses are secular. Two inherent features of *Sunni* Islam make it impossible to formulate a universally acceptable Islamic education system in Bangladesh. The first feature is the centrality of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* in Islam. In other words, the text based feature of the religion where Muslims believe that only the learned ones (*ulema*) are able to give correct interpretation of the sacred texts. The second feature is a lack of a central religious authority; unlike the clergy in the *Shi’a*<sup>23</sup> Islam or the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. This explains why

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<sup>21</sup>By indigenization of Islam Ahmed (2004) probably meant the changes that were introduced in line with general educational demand and style that prevails in Bangladesh. Since 1972 Bengali has been made a compulsory subject up to the year 8 level in *qawmi madrasa* system. Subjects such as politics, economics, and history have been added. English became compulsory in the primary section. Comparative religion has been added in some instances. Bureaucratization of admission and administrative procedures are being undertaken.

<sup>22</sup> The word *Sunni* literally means people of the tradition and it derived from the word *Sunnah* or the ways of the Prophet. It is the largest branch of Islam. It has four legal schools (*madhab*): *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi’i*, and *Hanbali*. Muslim people of Bangladesh are *Sunni* Muslims of *Hanafi madhab*.

<sup>23</sup> One of the two major branches of Islam, followers of Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam.

there are 13 separate boards for *qawmi madrasas* instead of one, and gives us a clue about why the system is expanding unabatedly. It may also tell us why traditional Islamic political parties perform badly in every election. What exactly then constitutes Islamic education in Bangladesh? To find an answer to this one must look first at the constituent features of *Sunni* Islam.

Jan-Peter Hartung (2006: 18-19), based on the above mentioned two critical features of *Sunni* Islam, suggests that orthodoxy does not fit within *Sunni* Islam as it does in *Shi'a* Islam and Catholicism as the *Qur'anic* concept of Man and prophetology have no place for it. Rather, the *Qur'an* ordained religious practices matters most for the *Sunnis*. Hence, according to Hartung *Sunni* Islam is an 'orthopraxy'<sup>24</sup>, meaning its constituent feature is practices that are well established and recognized by all. Therefore, such practices (religious) also constitute Islamic education in Bangladesh. To further illuminate the issue surrounding practices one can turn to Eickelman's (1998 [1981]) proposal.

According to Eickelman, Islamic practice is constituted by three elements: time, scale, and internal debate. By time he meant *the historical contexts in which given practices are introduced and interpreted*. By scale *the extent to which given practices or traditions are universalistic or particularistic, deriving their strength from highly localized factors*. And, the internal debate is over "*correct*" traditions, a dimension that focuses attention on existing power relations within and impinging on particular societies (ibid: 255).

Irrespective of the setting, instruction on religious practices comes ultimately from one source and that source is text. According to Lambek (1990, 23), texts are always silent until they become enunciated, cited, read, referred, and interpreted in a socially relevant way. He gives an example from Muslims in Mayotte [Madagascar] where he was told that "*an illegitimate child is not simply one whose parents were not legally married, but whose parents did not utter the Bismilla upon beginning the act of procreation.*" In the Islamic world everything begins by the reading or writing of the verse *Bismillāhi Ar-*

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<sup>24</sup> As mentioned in the footnote no. 21 the word *Sunni* comes from the Arabic word *sunna*, meaning the ways of the Prophet. It refers to appropriate ways or manners of acting approved and introduced by the Prophet and the Pious Elders.

*Raḥmān Ar-Raḥīm* (In the name of God, Most Gracious, and Most Merciful) and this pious utterance of the *Qur'an* frames all mundane activities, encapsulates them in sacred order and invests them with morality (ibid). Hence, for Lambek (ibid) the important issues to be addressed in studying Islam are – *how texts are used, by whom, when recourse is made to textual authority, and what kinds of entailments such action bring.* This again reminds us of Eickelman's three elements. For Lambek, Islam has to be viewed in practice and not only in structure to understand it. This study therefore, will treat the Islamic education that the *qawmi madrasas* disseminate in Bangladesh as a pedagogic project of localized twenty first century *Sunni* orthopraxy.

*Madrasa*'s, historically, gives schooling in religious knowledge. It imparts religious texts and trains the learners in performative techniques, so appropriate performance manifest correct knowledge through day-to-day piety practices, which constitute a “moral person.” Hence, the creation of this “moral person” is vital for the *madrasas* as it ensures the continuation of the tradition (Waardenburg 1965: 96). According to the *qawmi madrasa ulema*, individuals, irrespective of their social standing, continuously re-produce correct religious tradition based on the knowledge and schooling that they receive in the *madrasas*.

Schooling in Islamic knowledge and Islamic religious education as a whole stresses the need for the correct understanding of the *Qur'an*. Muslims believe that the *Qur'an*'s teachings are vital for the successful continuation of the community of believers. The *Qur'an* as the “words of God,” therefore, demands reading, knowing, and reciting as well as assistive studies. This is one of the reasons why the text and, by extension, memorization and repetition of the text {*Qur'anic*}, is so important in *madrasa* schooling.

The Prophet's life is the ultimate standard that every Muslim is to try to emulate, hence, the collection, interpretation, preservation, and reproduction of his sayings and practices constitute immensely valuable Islamic knowledge. Therefore, with his death when the direct communication between ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ of the revelation ceased, the need

for the *ulūm al-hadīth* or sciences of the Prophet's tradition emerged. This discipline was engaged in the collection, arrangement and investigation of the reliability of the traditions and their transmitters. From here developed the science of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its methodology (*usūl al-fiqh*). The Arabic language, *tafsir* (science of interpreting the *Qur'an*), and *ilm al-hadith* (knowledge of the saying and deeds of the Prophet); *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) along with *Kalam* (rational theology) and *tasawwuf* (mystical knowledge) formed the core of early Islamic educational system. Waardenburg (1965: 97) asserts that all of these branches are meant to better elaborate and interpret the Islamic way of life (*deen*) for the successful continuity of the community. The receivers of this knowledge know Islam and consequently are believed to be good Muslims, too. Thus, Prophet Muhammad's death virtually demanded the institution of *madrassa*, which created the class of *ulama*, a functional group whose task was the administration and dissemination of religious knowledge.

#### **1.4 *Qawmi madrasa* and its anthropological relevance**

Thus far, this chapter has attempted to give a general overview of the *qawmi madrasa* system in Bangladesh, its history, socio-political status, pedagogical contents, and relevance as a popular vehicle for Islamic knowledge. As previously mentioned, the birth of modern form of *madrassa* system became obvious after the Prophet's death to conserve both the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* as well as to remain committed to their teachings, which constitute the core of Islamic education. The aim of this *madrassa* is to create a "moral person" through the dissemination of "correct" Islamic knowledge based on the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. Consequently, the success of this education depends not on the production of a "graduate Muslim" person but in the creation of the "good Muslim" persona that epitomizes the essences of Islamic education.

Islamic education in this way continues beyond *madrassa*. Anthropological understanding supports such a view, Levinson and Holland (1996, 2) assert that education is a continuous and life long process that includes far more than the narrow program of formal training by which members of a society can be identified as more, or less

knowledgeable. According to Middleton (1976: xiii), education's main concern in any society is the inculcation and understanding of its cultural symbols, moral values, sanctions and cosmological beliefs.

In contemporary Bangladesh, education broadly refers to literacy-based formal schooling, focused on institutionalized learning to get a certificate, to acquire a job. This formal literacy-based schooling was once closely associated with learning the technical, physical, and vocational aspects of a task in a controlled "out of context" situation, which was also believed to be a Western trait. On the other hand, informal education was associated with education that takes place "in context" and was thought of as a predominantly non-Western trait (cf. Strauss 1984, 195). However, anthropology through its encounter with distinct societies distinguishes schooling as a cultural specific project (Borofsky 1987) where literacy is not a precondition (Akinasso 1992) and heavily criticized such formal/ informal dichotomy for being ethnocentric (Akinasso 1992, Lave 1982, Strauss 1984).

In the context of this research the formal/informal dichotomy of education, however, will remain alive. Following Akinasso (1992, 77-81), the *qawmi madrasa* system is actually a formal learning system given that it has been organized deliberately to transmit Islamic knowledge where learning is decontextualized and institutionalized. Institutionalized learning entails a place of learning that is the *madrasa* (school) where *ostads* (teachers/masters) replace parents (familiar figures), discipline is maintained (in the form of rules, regulations, conventions), and capital invested.

For that reason, this study is about formal education and more specifically about a particular type of schooling. Moreover, by studying this particular school attention will be drawn to the educational realities faced by the peripheral members of a society. Any form of schooling, Western or non-Western, which is suppose to generate "educated individuals" for the good of the society, in any form or shape, needs to be studied closely in order to understand the meanings it generates, the purpose it serves, and the changes it

withstands. Nevertheless, this is a non-conventional school and below I highlight some of the main reasons that prompted my interest in this particular type of schooling:

- *Qawmi madrasa*'s ideological focus, on creating a "good Muslim", but also its pedagogic techniques provisioned for free through a countrywide network with easy accessibility, simple management, and basic administrative structure are perfectly compatible with an agriculturalist people's needs.
- *Qawmi madrasa*'s popularity among the rural mass and its reputation as "the school for poor people," "the school with no future," "the school for beggars," and as "the breeding ground for terrorists", et cetera.
- *Qawmi madrasa*'s reputation as a backward and conservative schooling system;, also for being considered as a "harmful" and "misfit" system operating simultaneously in parallel but in opposition with the governments' educational goals. And finally,
- The pressure, both direct and indirect, exhorted on the *qawmi madrasa* system to accommodate secular subjects, to modernize its curriculum, and to improve the schooling environment.

### **1.5 On field and fieldwork**

The fieldwork was conducted in a small rural town by the name of Bishwanath between 2007 and 2008. To protect the privacy of the people and the place I have renamed them all except Bishwanath. This exception was made to strengthen my data on the area, its people, and economy following Kate Gardner's (1990, 1995) extensive work on international migration based around the population in this area. It is one of the *upazila* (sub-district) of Sylhet district, about 230 kilometers northeast of Dhaka. Due to its long history of international migration, this is a rich area like most other parts of the district of Sylhet (ibid). People from this region mainly migrate to the Middle East and the United Kingdom. Today, 95% of the Bangladeshi community of Britain is of Sylheti origin. Thus, its history of migration to the United Kingdom is much older and has much deeper influence over the region's economy than rest of the Bangladesh (cf. Adams 1987,



Choudhury 1993, Gardner 2000), a fact that we will encounter many times through out this thesis.

In the afternoon of 18 January 2007, Hasan Khan and I entered into the *Jamia*<sup>25</sup>. Hasan Khan is a friend who introduced me to the *Jamia* and brought me there on that day to meet the authorities and discuss the possibilities of conducting my fieldwork there. *Jamia* is the shorthand form for the *qawmi madrasa* where I subsequently managed to conduct my research for the slightly more than fifteen months that followed.

The fieldwork coincided with a state of emergency that was imposed on the 11 of January 2007. When on the 24 of April 2008 I concluded my fieldwork, the state of emergency was still there. Therefore, it would not be wrong to assume that this particular political event had left some mark on my research. One such mark was the economic hardship that I had observed in the *madrasa* through out that period. This was the outcome of the emergency's stance against corruption, which had sent the local political elites to prison or underground to avoid imprisonment. As we shall see in Chapter 3, for the day to day running of the *Jamia madrasa* its authorities heavily rely on the donations they regularly receive from these elites. Hence, it was difficult for the *madrasa* and its members, whom I will call from now on the *Jamians*, to sustain while those elites are on the run.

Bishwanath was not initially where I planned on doing this research. Most importantly, prior to leaving for Bangladesh I was certain that I would be able to negotiate access to one of the many *qawmi madrasas* operating all over the country that I read and hear about. However, after arriving in Dhaka my ideas changed. On my own, I contacted five *madrasas*, all were situated in Dhaka-adjacent towns, but one after another, all instead of rejecting me, asked for more time to decide. All of them, interestingly, told me something like the members of the governing body of the *madrasa* “are very busy and

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<sup>25</sup> Apart from the name of the upazila Bishwanath, where this study took place, all names of locations and persons of this thesis are pseudonyms. I simply choose to do this in order to protect the anonymity of the institution and individuals who not only made me feel at home but also shared their lives with me. Whenever necessary, I changed the narrative and analytic details surrounding individuals, events, and circumstances to make things unrecognizable.

*they do not know what to do or what to say to you!*” From this, it was clear that I was never going to find a field site without help from some connections.

Eventually, one of my family members introduced me to a newspaperman by the name of Hasan Khan, mentioned above, and it was through this man that I first stepped into my field site. In the Chapter 5 we shall learn more about my *madrasa* graduate journalist friend Hasan Khan, but for now it would suffice to say that without his enthusiasm and assistance it would have been impossible for me to access any *qawmi madrasa*.

However, it took me another six weeks to get final confirmation to start my work. Prior to that, even, like the other Dhaka *madrastas*’, this one was also delaying my entry on the ground that all of the members of the *madrasa*’s governing body were not convinced by my case. Meanwhile, at least twice a week, almost every week, I was commuting the distance between Dhaka and Bishwanath, sometimes alone and sometimes with Hasan Khan, to convince those who were yet to be convinced.

In the process, I became close to a Mufti Mir, the then education secretary (*Naeb-e-Talimat*) of the *madrasa*, and a group of young teachers, who eventually informed me that a number of influential members of the governing body did not want to see me here but they (these young *ulema*) do. As we shall see in Chapter 5, these young *ulema* under the leadership of Mufti Mir were backing my cause from the very beginning. Hence, they gave me the idea to contact the local MP (Member of the Parliament) and to ask him to assist me. The problem was to get to the MP, who was also underground to avoid imprisonment.

Luckily for me, other people talked with the MP on my behalf, who in turn eventually called the elderly Principal (*Muhtamim*) and politely “ordered” him to allow my access as soon as possible. It was like a coup d’état for those young *ulema* and soon after that phone call the *Jamian* administration contacted me and welcomed me to start my fieldwork whenever I wished. However, indirectly the authorities told Hasan Khan to ask

me to help the institution with some donation, which I eventually did on several occasions observing the hardship of the students.

Once in the *madrasa*, my immediate concern was to ensure that people within the *madrasa* took to my presence as normally as soon as possible. This was an awareness of the surrounding, of the people and of myself in relation to them that I developed by regularly going there and spending time with the young *ulema*. Hence, I had to initiate, with a lot of encouragement from my friends in the *madrasa*, the beginning of a transformative process starting with not shaving my beard, changing the way I dressed, and going to the mosques five times a day. These actions certainly helped me to feel a bit less out of place and I could clearly sense most of the *Jamians* enjoying my desperation to fit in, though they were appreciative of what I was doing in terms of *adab* (manner) at least.

Everyone in the *Jamia*, irrespective of age and status, always addressed me by *apni*, which is a respectable and formal pronoun. The relationship with many in the *Jamia* did become very close but respect and formality never lost their ways to sentiments, which otherwise would have been seen as *be-adabi* (ill mannered). In the daily communication, I was addressed as *sir* by most though a handful of senior *ulema* who did not want me there would call me *PhD shab*, which is a slightly sarcastic way of addressing someone.

I explained to my close friends in the *Jamia* many times what exactly I was doing there, so I told them to help me to learn everything that they have learnt already, so that I can be a good Muslim, too. Hence, they were teaching me all the time. All of them were instrumental in instructing me how to dress, how to address, how to sit inside a mosque, how to drink, eat, walk, pray, et cetera, everything that is related to *adab*. While, with the passing of the time I was also doing things for my *Jamian* friends. I was going out with the groups of teachers and students to collect donation from the market shops regularly. Sometimes, children were coming to me to help them with their homework. Teachers and senior students were coming to seek help with their English, as many of them decided to make full use of my presence. I was often translating leaflets, pamphlets, et cetera into

English for the *madrasa* to send to the UK for fundraising purposes. People were coming to me with letters, mostly visa rejection letters, which they recently received from the UK High Commission, and some were even coming to ask remedies for their various physical and mental illnesses. Through all these interactions and participations, my presence was gradually becoming a feature of the *madrasa*.

As I was consciously transforming myself, at least on the surface of the body, I found out interesting things happening to me every time I visited Dhaka, too. My parents are very religious and my father has a beard but still he found my facial hair and Islamic dress very disturbing. My 6-year-old daughter often complained about my beard and so-called Islamic dress, too. On one occasion, I was invited by a college time friend of mine to have *iftar* (evening meal when Muslim break their fast) with him during one *Ramadan* (the month of fasting) in one of the five-star hotels of the city. It was a privilege and I gladly accepted it. However, upon arriving there I sensed that our beards, skullcaps, and less fashionable Islamic dresses were not something that fit into that environment. To prove me correct when we entered into one of the half-full restaurants of the hotel, after a full body search, the manager immediately stopped us at the door and then without asking us anything he escorted us to a completely empty and isolated space to have our *iftar* there. When asked the reasons for this isolation the man told us that he thinks we would not feel comfortable among that kind of “less-pious” crowd. On many occasions, I was stopped for body searching even before boarding a bus. Some of my “too liberal” colleagues also started to avoid me concluding that I must be an enlisted *jamaat-i-Islami*<sup>26</sup> (JI) activist. All these encounters and experiences were good for me as I was able to see the way *madrasa* students are looked upon by the general, more privileged people of the society.

My room in the *Jamia*'s eastern block was open to everybody until very late. Most of my discussion and conversation with my friends took place here. Almost every evening around half past nine, five or six of us would gather around my small stove on the floor to have tea from the local tea gardens of Sylhet and to chitchat about everything on the face

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<sup>26</sup> JI is the most prominent Islamist political party in the Bangladeshi electoral democracy.

of earth. This is where I collected most of my data from, and established most of my effective networks from within and outside of the *madrassa*. *Jamia* mosque was another place where after the dusk prayer (*Maghrib*) I used to wait patiently to have a little conversation with some of the senior *ulema*. Sometimes, they would invite me into their rooms for a tea and then allowed me to leave after many cups of tea. Besides, all these relaxed sittings I spent time observing and talking to both teachers and learners inside the classes during school time. In the beginning, I had recorded a number of conversations but soon found out that people do not like the method much. Further, putting everything in writing from the record is another horrendous task given the lack of electricity, time, and silence that constitute my life in the *Jamia*.

## **1.6 Structure of Study**

Chapter Two will look at the various forces that are forcing changes on the *Jamians* in contemporary Bangladesh. The main questions that this chapter asks are, therefore, what these people perceive of these changes and how they react to them. Here we will observe and analyze the nature of the relationship that the *Jamia qawmi madrasa* has been maintaining at present with the contemporary Bangladeshi state, society and with their various ambitions, policies, and institutions.

Chapter Three will examine how the economic wealth of Bishwanath, which revolves around remittance practices, helps the powerful to maximize their power and prestige within the system. Interestingly, it will also tell us that the system that favours the powerful, by default, has been forging a mutually benefiting relationship with a less well-off *Jamia*. The chapter develops over four sections. Each follows the footprints of the *Londoni* money to examine the ways it both shapes the realities of Bishwanath and is shaped by the realities of Bishwanath.

In the Chapter Four, the concept of *line* as a quality that parents and the *madrassa* authorities believe that children have to have in order for them to become an ideal personality whom everyone will refer to as a “good Muslim” even prior to calling him a

good *Alim* or a *Hafiz* will be examined. Here the chapter will highlight the idea of loyalty and we shall see that this idea does not contradict the notion of the ‘line’, but instead strengthens the concept and its authority. We will find the *Jamian* notion of *line* and its discourses are operational at three separate but interrelated levels, namely behaviour or discipline (both individual and organizational), association or network (individual and social), and orientation or *qu’tar* (moral and political).

Chapter Five will present the notion of *adab*; examining how its discourses operate exclusively and primarily on one level, which is the individual body’s manner (moral and political). The notion of *adab*, extricates its meaning directly from the *Qur’an* and the Prophetic (*Sunnah*) knowledge bases. Importantly, the concept of *adab* contributes immensely here to improving our understanding of the operating dynamics of the *qawmi madrasa* system.

Chapter Six will address the quality of faith (*iman*) and action (*amal*) of the “good” Muslim centring on the concept of *iman*, again according to the *Jamian* interpretations. Both of these notions along with the notion of *adab* will be argued here as defining factors for the *Jamian* schooling towards the production of a “good Muslim” persona. The above discussion has touched upon three issues that concern the *Jamians* most in the context of *iman*-schooling: first, establishing *iman*’s inseparability from *amal*, second, emphasizing the public display of *iman* by doing *amal*, and third, strengthening *iman* among the Muslims for diminishing non-Islamic elements from its moral and physical body.

In the Chapter Seven, the final of the ethnographic chapters, we provide an outline on the *Jamian* policy and pedagogic trends. It will also illustrate a typical day in the *Jamia*, combining both formal and informal dimensions continuously. Finally, the chapter will highlight and examine the profiles of three young learners to hear what their stories tell us about themselves within the process of learning to becoming a “good” Muslim.

Chapter Eight concludes this thesis by summarizing main findings. It highlights broader ideological, social, economical, and political impetuses behind the Muslim identity formation process within the *qawmi madrasa* system.

## Chapter Two: The forces of change and the *qawmi madrasa*

Islam, the countryside, and agriculture are the three major aspects of life for the people of Bangladesh<sup>27</sup>. Within that, the *qawmi madrasa* system fits perfectly, both as physical and symbolic entity. Physically, *qawmi madrasas* not only provide much needed schooling to the marginal rural masses but also give them a spiritual shelter (see Ahamed and Nazneen: 1990, Hartung: 2006, Uddin: 2006). Symbolically, similar to that community of rural dwellers that it caters for, and as discussed in the introductory chapter, these *madrasas* are mere reminiscence of a tradition that holds a marginal status within this relatively young nation state's political landscape. A relevant example of this is the fact that *qawmi madrasa* degrees are not acceptable for jobs outside *madrasas* and mosques. (Banu 2007, 27). The *Ulema* community in Bangladesh consider such a non-recognized state and lowly status bestowed on their system of schooling to be politically motivated and a legacy of colonialism.

Both *Jamian* students and teachers that I have discussed this topic with register this strongly as a discrimination against the *qawmi madrasa* system as a whole. Two contrasting issues came up most prominently when they gave me their reasons for choosing the *qawmi madrasa* system over the state sponsored systems of education. The first was religion and the second was economics.

*Jamian* students always tell me that they come here (to *Jamia*) to master the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (Prophet's tradition) in order to become a 'good Muslim' as well as an *alim* or Islamic scholar. This choice, however, is rarely an individual one, as most of them tell me that their family, especially the father or uncle, were firmly behind their decision. They sincerely believe that the knowledge from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* is the *ashol* (genuine) kind. The all agree that for every Muslim *ashol* is essential to have and that, as illustrated by a Year 14 student, Mohammad Zakir's comment,

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<sup>27</sup> See, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Bangladesh Census Results at a Glance (uploaded on 05 July 2007), [http://www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/census/bang\\_atg.pdf](http://www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/census/bang_atg.pdf). According to the report the country is predominantly Muslim (89.58% people are Muslim); that the bulk of the population is rural (the proportion of the country's rural households is 76.32%); and that agriculture is the main source of income for more than half of them (51.63%)



*“Those who are neglectful of Islamic teachings and ethos will become the most ignored on the Day of Judgment and afterwards.”*

This comment actually reflects more on their negative sentiment towards the state sponsored education system, which they call the *general line*<sup>28</sup>. Ironically, they know that only through this *general line* can people actually access the wider job market, a reality that irks them the most.

The *Jamians* are generally aware of the powerful materialist impetus, i.e. a salaried job, which the *general line* (of education) is capable of providing to its clients at the end of their schooling. For this and many other real possibilities of losing out to the *general line*, the *Jamians* tend to vilify that education system as a negative transformative force of modernity<sup>29</sup> that idealizes and imitates Western ways; indeed, this system is seen as being a product of that itself.

The *Jamian ulema* do not call their system ‘modern’, which in this context often refers to teaching sciences, English, et cetera., having university graduates as teachers and preparing students for secular jobs. Moreover, they are happy that no one considers *qawmi* system as modern either. However, they stress that the Muslim schools like theirs are delivering the *ashol* or genuine knowledge and reject most of the *general line* as *nokol* or fake, devoid of Islamic knowledge. For this reason, they reject any proposal to modernize it in relation to the *general line*, which is by default *nokol*. However, in the course of this chapter, we will see that a demand for the *general line* (of education) is

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<sup>28</sup> This *general line* of education or *pora-likha* (education) refers exclusively to secular knowledge, which is also referred to as *modern* and *worldly* (*dunya*). This *general line*, as mentioned above, and according to the *Jamian* commonly held view, is neglectful of the Islamic way of life or *din* of the people of this country. The following comment made by a *Mawlana* Abdus Sabur, a *Jamian alim*, simply amplifies such a feeling -

*“In this country the qawmi madrasas preserve and transmit the Qur’an, which is nothing but Allah’s words, the ashol gaiyan (genuine knowledge), ...all the other forms of pora-likha (education) are invented by man, derived from its limited experiences of world, hence transmits gaiyan (knowledge) that is imagined, manufactured, worldly (dunyavi), and therefore essentially unreal (obastob) and false (nokol)...”*

<sup>29</sup> To the *Jamians*, modernity is giving man too much control over its surrounds and over itself, which is eventually weakening his belief in Allah. Hence, it is threatening the religion.

always there among the *Jamian* students, which contradicts the position that they generally uphold in the name of Islam.

In reality though, we will see that the modern schooling system is not the only transformative aspect of contemporary Bangladesh that the *Jamians* are challenging. Rather many other issues are flooding this institution and forcing changes upon it. The main questions of this chapter are, therefore, what these people perceive of these changes and how they react to them. Accordingly, this chapter will observe and analyze the nature of the relationship that the *Jamia qawmi madrasa* has been maintaining at present with the government of Bangladesh and its various ambitions, policies, and institutions. The first section of this chapter provides a figurative account of Bishwanath, the context of this study. Then it looks at the variety of *Jamian* responses to changes, both in terms of a proposal for change and change as a looming reality. The second section is on *Jamians'* responses to the secularization policies and programmes, where the state is installing its version of Islam and fuelling a direct competition in the religious realm. Finally, the third section will expose some internal conflicts that the institution is experiencing as an outcome of its encounters with changes that are taking both internally and externally.

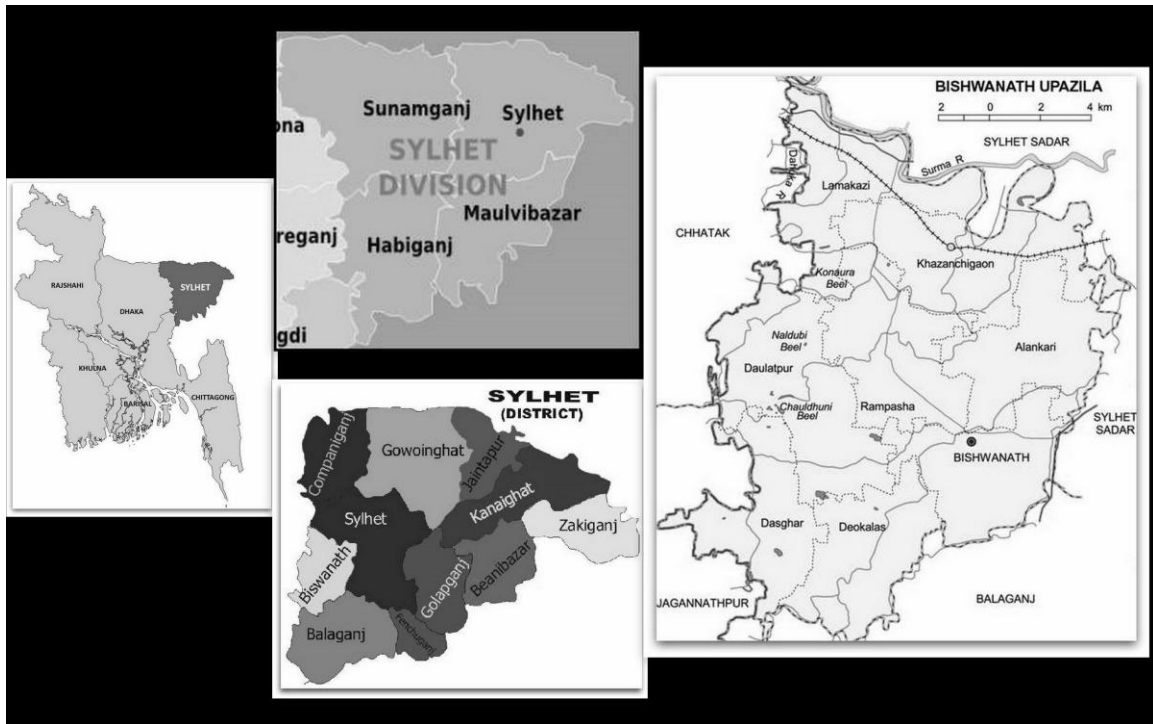
## **Section 1:**

### **2.1 The context**

Bishwanath *upazila*, where *Jamia* is located, is a small rural administrative centre under the north-eastern District of Sylhet. According to the 2001 Bangladesh census it has a population of 189,720 of which 95920 is male and 93800 is female. With 126 primary schools, 29 high schools, 35 *madrasas*, and 3 colleges Bishwanath's literacy rate is 38.47%, which is far behind the national average of 55%. In Bishwanath 95% people are Muslim and the rest are Hindu. Bishwanath has 346 mosques and 11 Hindu temples.

The main occupations of the local people are agriculture 31.99%, agricultural labourer 16.83%, commerce 11.85%, fishing 5.14%, property renting 10.46%, service 4.11%,

wage labourer 3.37% and others 16.25% (cf. Upazila Administration 2006, Banglapedia). However, the place is famous for its London connection through international migration and known as a *Londoni*<sup>30</sup> area. Economically, this is one of the wealthiest *upazilas* in Bangladesh. The road infrastructure of this area is excellent and it takes around 20 - 30 minutes to travel to Sylhet, the administrative headquarter of the district.



Map 3: Sylhet district and Bishwanath upazila in maps<sup>31</sup>.

As mentioned above, the *upazila* houses 35 *madrassas* of which *Jamia* is just one. A local *alim* started this *madrasa* in the middle of the last century. The *alim* was trained from the country's oldest *qawmi madrasa* the *Dar ul-Ulum Moinul Islam* of Chittagong. The *madrasa* compound houses several blocks of multi-storeyed buildings and a two-storied mosque, it is located inside a bustling market centre of Bishwanath. According to the

<sup>30</sup> Here the word *Londoni* refers to *from London*. However, in Bishwanath *Londoni* is the one who either lives in the UK or belongs to a family that has members in the UK. Generally, it also implies that these families or individuals rely on the money that come from the UK sent by the families living there, live extravagantly and usually do nothing.

<sup>31</sup> Source: Banglapedia ([http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/B\\_0538.HTM](http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/B_0538.HTM)) and Sylhet City Corporation (<http://www.sylhetcitycorporation.org/sylhet/geography>).

*madrasa* authorities, it houses around 300 residential students year round and disseminates schooling to another 600 to 700 students ranging from Year 1 to masters level.

## **2.2 *Jamian* responses to reform**

Before entering into the main discussion the reader should be reminded that the major cause of disagreement exposing further differences between the government of Bangladesh and *qawmi madrasa* system in Bangladesh is the issue of modernization of *madrasa*. As mentioned earlier, the causes of these differences in opinion, according to the *ulema*, are rooted in the colonial past where this system was rather systematically relegated to the margins as a system of education. Regrettably, for the *ulema*, neither during the Pakistan era, the Islamic nation state, nor in the present Bangladesh, the secular nation state, have people in power showed any inclination towards preserving the sanctity of this system. Rather, a large section of elites and mainstream media believe and advocate that the *qawmi* system needs to be “modernized” in order to improve the quality of education that it delivers. On the other hand, the protagonists of the *qawmi madrasa* system strongly oppose such an argument mainly on the ground that this essentially faith-based schooling requires no reform, no modernization, no intervention, and no subjugation in the name of incorporation into a state-sponsored schooling system that is essentially secular. The tension between those in favour and those opposed to modernisation will be considered in this section. This will give us a glimpse of the inabilities of the *qawmi* leaders to protect their schools from various powerful influences.

Prior to my entry into the world of *Jamia* I was aware of the attitude of the mainstream Bangladeshi media towards the *qawmi madrasa* system. It is predominantly negative but often disguised as a concern for modernizing the system and for mainstreaming it<sup>32</sup>. Hence, during the early days of my entry into the field I kept looking for the *Jamian* responses to such arguments. *Jamian* students gave me the following responses when I

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<sup>32</sup> See, the internet edition of highest circulated Bangladeshi English daily The Daily Star’s 3 September 2006 editorial at [www.thedailystar.net/2006/09/03/d60903020320.htm](http://www.thedailystar.net/2006/09/03/d60903020320.htm).

presented the issue of modernizing their *madrasa*, which also provided insight into their take on the concept of modernization as they translate it concretely in the form of resources that are capable of meeting their immediate needs.

‘Modernizing *madrasa* education’ for the students of Year nine to Year twelve means, “...Continuous training in English language beyond current level of class seven and introducing courses on computer literacy...”. They argued that English and computer literacy is necessary for anyone for securing a well paid job, information and skills that they have not been given by the *Jamia ulema*, but that the desire for has come from the outside. This clearly demonstrates that they have up-to-date knowledge on the basic qualifications that the job market requires. However, they also express their disappointment with the chances of having this much change in the near future, given the prevailing mindset, resource, and mission of the *Jamian* authorities. They by no means put lesser value on the knowledge that they gain from *Jamia*; as shall be seen later on. However, they do expect a little insight from their authorities in recognizing the value those two subjects can add to their lives, which they believe, in the long run will increase the influence of Islam in the society.

Interestingly, students of the three most senior classes, Year 13, 14, and 15, associate modernization more closely with the improvement of existing physical structures of the *madrasa*. Initially, I thought that this group would be most loudly in favour of modernization since they are about to face the harsh reality of joblessness. However, what I found instead is very interesting as majority of these students have degrees from the *aliya madrasa* system that are government recognized, an issue that will be discussed more in detail later on in this section. For this group, modernization means improved academic facilities, i.e. better living arrangements, better food, more books in the library for borrowing, more teaching staff, et cetera. They also agree with the previous group that English and computer literacy will give *qawmi* students some edge in the job market, but this should come without disturbing the existing syllabi and come after improving the overall teaching and learning experience. It is understandable that after spending 12 to 15 years within this system they would not be able to advocate any change that would

ultimately destabilize the system. Given the poor households that they represent, and given the poverty-stricken institute that they spend the whole of their student life, it is not surprising that they articulate modernization in terms of having better food, better living arrangement, available reading materials, et cetera.

However, I found a number of students from Year 9 to Year 15, more practically and more in tune with the mainstream media, argue in favour of those changes that would give *qawmi madrasa* degrees the much needed state recognition. These students are the ones who are about to enrol into the *aliya* or are currently enrolled. Interestingly, this group think that most of the changes need for this system to gain recognition would not be achievable prior to government recognition. This technically means that the government has to give the recognition first then the demanded changes would follow.

This demonstrates how an important section of *Jamia*'s student body tackles the issue of reform in favour of modernizing their institution. They are interested in reforms that would enhance their possibilities in the real world but would not require much compromise in terms of the *madrasa*'s traditional curriculum. All three of the groups believe that such a change is possible only if their future is the main concern for both the *madrasa* authorities and the state. Rather self-critically, most of the students recognize the three following points as the biggest impediments on the way of modernizing their institution: first, a lack of consensus among all the *qawmi madrasa* boards<sup>33</sup>; second, egotistic leadership; and third, the weak economic and social standing of these *madrasas*.

When I raised the same issue with the teachers, who receive a salary between 1800 Taka to 2500 Taka<sup>34</sup> per month, they found it bitterly amusing. As one teacher comments: “*Modernize everything but let us live first!*” One allegorically stated his thoughts on ideas that the state pass on to them as modern,

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<sup>33</sup> Thirteen *qawmi madrasa* boards are functioning all over Bangladesh.

<sup>34</sup> Taka is Bangladeshi currency. In 2007, 1 British Pound = 130 Taka (approximately). In government primary schools a senior teacher receives close to 50 British Pound per month as salary. However, his main source of income is private tuition and from there he can easily earn a few times more than his original salary.

*“Modernizing Muslim institutions is like stripping them of their religious tradition, like encouraging a lady to take off her covering in the public. They call for opening up, which is no less insulting than asking someone dignified to uncover...this modernity is all about intimidating, all about stripping our society...”*

It is very clear that while most of the students understand modernization as a positive project in relation to their system’s quality improvement, one group of teachers, who are mostly senior, out rightly reject the concept due to the threat that they perceive that it poses to Islam. Modernization, therefore, carries a negative meaning to some of the *Jamians*. The poor quality schooling, future uncertainty, financial insecurity, and above all low social standing compared to the other individuals who have received formal schooling infused such bitterness among the *Jamian* teachers. Some young teachers, however, are self critical and welcome constructive changes for improving the prospect of the system that delivers qualifications that practically have no demand outside the world of mosques and *madrasas*. In order to stop this trend, these people think that the *qawmi* students’ should be given the chance to pick up some skills that they can use afterwards to sustain themselves.

In reality though, many reforms are taking place within the *qawmi madrasa* system that are remaining unnoticed to the world due to the lack of systematic record keeping both by the *madrasa* authorities and by the state. For example, the first effort in favour of upgrading the curriculum of *qawmi madrasa* system was marked by the establishment of the *Assam Provincial Deeni-Edraye Talim* in 1924 in the then East Bengal and Assam provinces of the British India. Then, with the establishment of the *Wafaq ul Madaris Al Arabia* (*Qawmi madrasa* Board) as recently as in 1978 (Riaz, 2008, 218), the new nation state of Bangladesh initiated some changes. Interestingly, the post 9/11 reform advocates that portray the *qawmi madrasa* system as a change-resistant phenomenon and demand its modernization have never highlighted these efforts. For instance, the language of instruction, which for the *qawmi* system is Urdu, has been losing its prominence to

Bengali since the war of independence in the 1971<sup>35</sup>. Today, not only are most of its lessons and examinations in Bengali, but subjects like mathematics, English, Bengali, geography, history and science have also become part of its standard curriculum up through Year 8 (in *Jamia* it is up till the Year 7). My experience in *Jamia* also confirms that these *madradas* regularly run vocational courses for computers, sewing, carpentry, welding and metal works, et cetera, depending on the availability of funds. *Jamian* authorities believe that the counting, reading, and writing lessons that the students receive in the first seven years of their *madrasa* schooling are enough for meeting many practical needs, such as reading an important document, managing financial transactions, writing a loan application, or even filing a complaint against someone, et cetera.

The facts presented above demonstrate that many among the *Jamian* teachers and students in one way or another seriously consider the issue of reform or modernization even though they are unwilling to change everything overnight. Interestingly, it is seldom due to the direct pressures from the state that they make adjustments; rather it is more often that indirect pressure results in change. One such force of change is the development of physical infrastructures. The discussion that follows will examine how such changes are affecting the *Jamia* of Bishwanath.

### **2.3 Infrastructural development, proliferation of educational institute, and *Jamia***

*“Jamia is losing bright students and teachers to the Dhaka-Sylhet highways!”*

This remark made by a *Mawlana*<sup>36</sup> *Shajid Ahmad* best illustrates the impact that the developed road and transport infrastructure is having on the *Jamia*. Traditionally, the Sylhet region is one of the most popular destination among the internal migrants due to its riches, which are fuelled by the homewards remittance flow from the UK, USA and

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<sup>35</sup> Banu’s (2007, 22) argument regarding *qawmi madrasa*’s inclination towards the Urdu language is plausible as she points out that this is firstly due to the historical link with the Darul Ulum Deoband of Uttar Pradesh, which is the heartland of the Urdu language. Secondly, much of the South Asian scholarship on Islam is in Urdu, and thirdly, many of the senior Bangladeshi *ulema* are trained at the top Islamic institutions of the Uttar Pradesh. However, Urdu has lost much of its significance in a post-independence Bangladesh where role and influence of Bengali language is in eternal ascendancy.

<sup>36</sup> A title given to a person respected for religious learning.



the Middle East (Abrar 2000, Adams 1987, Choudhury 1993, Gardner 1995, 2002). The business and administrative centre of Sylhet is a relatively small town but it houses many old, large, and reputed *madrasas* that are continuously pulling learned *ulema* and bright students from all corners of the Sylhet division as well as from far beyond its boundaries. Today, it takes only half an hour by bus for one to get to Sylhet town centre from Bishwanath, which for *Jamia* means losing prospective local students en masse. Most worrying of all is that the moving students are also diverting a significant amount of the funds that the *Jamia* and other similar institutions use to raise from the local communities as donations. In practice, the *qawmi madrasa* system survives on these sorts of donations. As indicated by the above remark, *Mawlana Shajid Ahmad* was actually condemning such development that is gradually and negatively affecting not only his institution but also his livelihood.

In relation to the *Jamia* such development has a reverse side that is manifested in the following two ways. The first one is that the better road infrastructure means local entrepreneurs can bring in building materials and construction labourers more easily and cost effectively, which eventually contributes to the growth of the number of schools in Bishwanath and the surrounding areas. This naturally intensifies the pressure over the already strained financial situation of the *Jamia*. The second is that due to the above-mentioned growth in the construction sector as well as in the education sector, poor people, families, and students are migrating into this area for enhanced livelihood options and better education from other deprived regions of the country. Thus, the *Jamia* is not running out of students but rather becoming an institution for children from poorer backgrounds. At an individual level, the traditional and previously widely available arrangement of the *lodging-mastery*<sup>37</sup> is becoming increasingly difficult for the students of the *Jamia* to obtain. All these changes confirm that infrastructural development is affecting the *Jamians* both individually and collectively. In the following paragraphs, the aim is to establish this in more detail to show how a seeming small issue deeply affecting

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<sup>37</sup> *Lodging-mastery* is a local expression that stands for the job of lodging master. This is an arrangement made mainly between a household and a student where the student offers free tuition to the children of the household in return for food and board. It is rather hard work as I learned from some of the students' experiences. In some households, one has to help as many as 10 children with their studies besides assisting the family with many of its household chores.

the whole system, which works as a bridge between the *madrasa* and the wider community.

#### **2.4 Lodging-mastery**

As mentioned before, most of the *Jamian* students come from economically deprived areas, an issue discussed in more in detail in Chapter 3, which deals with the Bishwanath's economy. Primarily, they arrive here for the opportunities that Bishwanath offers them in terms of livelihoods but also for the wide range of options that are available for one to pursue his or her schooling. This includes the opportunity to choose any of the educational institutions of their liking besides having the opportunity for a *lodging-mastery*. There is still a constant demand for lodging masters in the area; however, it is no longer easy to get nor easy to manage for a *qawmi madrasa* student.

Firstly, it is impossible for any of the migrant students to secure a *lodging-mastery* in this area without the consent and assistance of the *Jamia* authorities. Only a very bright student or a very poor student will be offered a place at the *Jamia's* boarding if there is one. If there is none to offer then the authorities will seek help from the local teaching staff or local students or members of the *madrasa* management committee. Those people will then organize a place for the new student through their personal networks. This student automatically works as an agent for the *madrasa* in that household. His main task is to ensure that the adult members of the household are involved with the various programs and activities of the *madrasa* and funds it regularly. In this way, the households that accept a *Jamia* student as a lodging master gradually become a patron of the institution. For a long time small and medium rural *qawmi madrasas* have been sustaining themselves on the successful installation of the lodging master concept throughout their operational areas but that scenario is rapidly changing. In Bishwanath, especially for *Jamia*, the demand for its students as lodging masters has been decreasing for the last few years. A trend that is exacerbating its financial worries is linked to the increase of educational institution in the local area.

In August of 2007, the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* (Vice-Principal) of *Jamia* expressed his worries that the monthly collection from donors is declining rapidly. One reason for such a decline, he thinks, is the decline of the number of households that they had previously reached through their lodging master students. The simple and most plausible reasoning by the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* is due to the changing local reality, directly linked with the growth in the number of functional educational institutions. According to him, officially, there were 35 different independent and state funded *madrasas* running in the Bishwanath area alone, though the number could be much higher unofficially. Interestingly more than 20 of these were not there only 10 years ago. The *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*'s main worry is not only about running out of donors but running out of students, too. In his words,

*“If the current trend continues then in 2 to 3 years time every hamlet of Bishwanath will have at least one educational institute of its own. This means, people will just stop sending their children to madrasas like ours. This means, they will give donations to their own madrasas only. This also means, our students will no longer be required as lodging masters in their areas....”*

*Naeb-e-Muhtamim*'s concern is genuine. These new *madrasas* are already having a negative impact on *Jamia*'s traditional support base. The nonreligious educational sector is also large in terms of numbers. Most of these are private and are better in terms of infrastructural quality, teacher's quality, and administration. Guardians now have more than one choice and are becoming choosier over the nature and quality of schooling that they want their children to have. In the case of private tuition, most of the parents from well-off households are delegating that responsibility to skilled teachers or to coaching centres. In every possible way these developments are making *lodging-mastery* in rich households an unthinkable possibility for a migrant, low-skilled, *qawmi madrasa* student.

In other words, at the macro level, infrastructural development that resulted in the expansion of both transport and educational facilities has improved the quality of life for some individuals but simultaneously damaged the *Jamians* and similar *madrasas*.

Measures by the state to improve the quality of life of its citizens rather unintentionally restricted *Jamia* by diverting and depriving it of necessary resources. Nevertheless, what happens to *Jamia* when the modern state, with its growing efficiency and increasing power, enters into various realms of public life that it had never entered so decisively before, i.e. religion, and in the process emerged as a competitor for the *Jamia*? In the following discussion, we will examine *Jamia* within that scenario.

## **Section 2:**

### **Impact of the state's involvement in religious affairs and institutions**

The state of Bangladesh, in its 1972 constitution made it clear that it would keep religion separate from the state. Scholars found this declaration to be artificial, given the historical realities of the nation (Huque and Akhter 1987). It did not take long for the first government of the state to come to terms with that reality and remove itself from the constitution's secularist pledge, at least in practice. Soon also, the state found strong impetus for investing in the Islamic education system and specifically in *aliya madrasa* system<sup>38</sup> (Banu 2007). The relationship that has developed between the state and the *aliya* system since has made this system one of the largest within the state's education sector and still expanding strongly with the help from the donor communities; especially after the terrorist attacks on September of 2001.

On the other hand, due to historic and ideological reasons, as discussed in the introduction of the thesis, the state of Bangladesh has never found *qawmi* system amenable to its sponsorship. Yet amazingly, with the support from the people at the grassroots, this system has been surviving for a long time (ibid). This section, therefore, shall examine the coping strategies of *Jamia* as it competes with challenges that are directly coming from the state. We shall first examine *Jamia*'s response to a state sponsored religious event and from there the focus shall shift onto the interesting nature

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<sup>38</sup> The *aliya* system is an Islamic educational institute that delivers a mixed curriculum of both secular and religious subjects receives regular and substantial government funding and confers degrees that have government recognition.

of relationship that the *Jamia* is having with a local state sponsored religious school (*aliya madrasa*).

### **2.5 *Eid-e-Miladunnaby* and the *aliya madrasa* issues**

The Government of Bangladesh officially celebrates *Eid-e-Miladunnaby* to commemorate the birth and death of the Prophet Mohammad. On that day, a state organization called the Islamic Foundation<sup>39</sup> organizes various events across the country. The state sponsors events like Islamic book fairs, workshops, discussions, debates, competitions, and spectacular processions to display its Islamic identity. By organizing the *Eid-e-Miladunnaby* with pomp, the ruling parties establish that they are Islam-friendly. Dignitaries from diplomatic outposts of Islamic countries in Bangladesh, along with both local and foreign Islamic scholars are all invited. Moreover, government bureaucrats participate, and state sponsored *aliya madrasas* mobilize to make the day a success.

At a local level, in the lower level of civil administrative points like Bishwanath *upazila*, at minimum a procession is organised to mark the event. Accordingly, on the 20th of March 2008, during the last phase of my fieldwork, while the *Bishwanath Upazila Nirbahi Office* (UNO; the office of the head of local civil administration) was getting ready for the event, the newly appointed *Naeb-e-Talimat*<sup>40</sup> of *Jamia*, *Mawlana Faruq Rahman*, was preparing a letter requesting the UNO to cancel the event. He argued in the letter that Islam neither asked nor encouraged the Muslims to celebrate the Prophet's birth and death day in such an extravagant way. Then he called this state sponsored *Eid-e-Miladunnaby* an innovation (*bidat*) that for the sake of maintaining Islam's purity must be stopped; therefore, the authority should revise its decision of going forward with it the following day.

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<sup>39</sup> The Islamic Foundation is an autonomous body under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

<sup>40</sup> *Naeb-e-Talimat* is equivalent of student secretary.

I came to know about the letter from one of the teachers who strongly felt that this form of protest was too mild. For him, such a protest was meant only to keep the Muslim clean in terms of his own conscience but fails to stop those who are systematically distorting the religion. My good friend and informant, the young *Mawlana* Abdur Rob, a teacher and son of one of the founders of this *madrassa*, also found this action by the *madrassa* authorities, specifically by *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman, quite comical. *Mawlana* Abdur Rob says,

*“This is a comical gesture on our part simply because we are seeking justice to someone who we consider as unjust! Naturally, to it the letter would seem like a joke!”*

Many more of the teachers supported *Mawlana* Rob’s position. They expressed the desire to confront the procession directly the following day. Interestingly, I saw none going into the *madrassa* office to share these thoughts with the administration and none tried to stop the *Naeb-e-Talimat* who heading out to the TNO’s office to convey his message to the state’s local representative. Upon his return, I enquired about the reasons he believed that he was doing the right thing to which he gave the following reply:

*“I did that because I thought of it as the correct thing to do in accordance with the Prophet’s direction or Sunnah. Are we not supposed to make it certain that the message reaches to the ears of the wrong doers? By this letter, we did that and we did it in a very peaceful manner. Something, I know that many people here are not very happy about. However, my suggestion to those unhappy lots would be nothing but to assess honestly how much power that they hold to force the state to follow their wishes. We could have ignored the whole thing but we didn’t because we can’t afford to compromise with our own religious beliefs and teachings.”*

The following afternoon a big *Miladunnaby*<sup>41</sup> procession march passed the *Jamia*. None from the *Jamia* tried to stop it. It was not a holiday yet interestingly at least half of the student from the secondary section onwards did not turn up to the *madrasa*. Later I came to know that most of the absentees took part in that procession. However, the next day classes were full again and, it seemed that no one among the authorities remembered what happened the day before!

To my surprise, I observed that neither the *madrasa* authorities are confronting the absent students nor the absent students are admitting their participation in the procession. It gave rise to two questions in my mind. Firstly, why did students of an institution that ideologically disagrees with the concept of *Miladunnaby* take part in the *Miladunnaby* procession? Secondly, why did the authorities ignore such a serious breach?

A few days later, I received some valuable insight regarding these issues from a group of senior students. The students confided to me that many *Jamian* students, from the secondary level upwards, are also students of the nearby *aliya madrasa*<sup>42</sup>. According to them, every year almost all the students of *Jamia's Qafia* (secondary) Year and *Shor'he Jam'ei* (higher secondary) Year register with the local *aliya madrasa* to attend the national level *Dakhil* (secondary) and *Alim* (higher secondary) examinations because, unlike the *qawmi madrasa* exams, these degrees are state approved<sup>43</sup>. As students of *aliya* they are obliged to celebrate and to participate in the *Miladunnaby* programs. According to them, *Aliya madrasas* are given the responsibility by the UNO office to make the *Miladunnaby* procession a success. Hence, *aliya* authorities make the participation mandatory for its students. According to these informants, this is an open secret and

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<sup>41</sup> The commemoration of the Prophet's birth and death anniversary

<sup>42</sup> This small fact has global significance if we take into account what this double enrollment issue does to the issue of recording authentic data on the number of students in these two systems.

<sup>43</sup> A *madrasa* student with a good result in the *Alim* Year, which is the Higher Secondary Certificate or HSC Examination equivalent, can enter into the mainstream public universities for further education. With this degree, he can also apply for lower level government jobs. On the other hand, *qawmi* degrees are not approved therefore they neither can enter into a university nor can compete for a better job. Hence, it is crucial for a secondary or higher secondary level *qawmi* student to try to get the *aliya* degrees if such opportunity arises. With its numerous and diverse educational institutions Bishwanath actually gives such an opportunity to all the migrant students who arrive here to improve their life.

*Jamian* authorities never attach any ideological issues with it to antagonize its students. They think that the lower value of the *qawmi* degree is an issue that the *Jamia* and its students have already resolved in silence.

This discussion demonstrates that *Jamia* as a religious entity is situated at the bottom stratum of the local power hierarchy. However, on the *Eid-e-Miladunnaby* issue its request letter to the UNO to scrap the program was highly symbolic. By this, the *Jamia* serves the state with a political response that not only clearly states its ideological position but also indicates its superior religious position. Interestingly, it does not react in the same manner when it sees its boys are linking with the *aliya madrasa*, one of the successful projects of the state to modernise the Islamic education system. Thus, it is not only approving but also assisting its students in securing a degree that has worldly value. This pragmatism on the part of the *Jamia* clearly demonstrates three important things – first, it recognizes that a government-approved degree is valuable; second, it encourages and supports its students in obtaining the degrees, at least by assuming a passive role; and third, it is capable of responding to modern challenges without seeking refuge in ideology only. However, firm belief in Divinity, the basis of Islamic theology, is seen to be crucial when *Jamians* collectively experience distress.

### **Section 3:**

#### **2.6 Looking within: *Jamians* during the State of Emergency**

For practical considerations, I had never asked the *Jamians* to show me their day-to-day income and expenditure accounts. However, at an early stage into the field I found out that the *madrasa* is in a terrible state, financially. This financial hardship arrived abruptly with the imposition of a state of emergency on the 11 January 2007<sup>44</sup>. The state of

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<sup>44</sup> The Member of the Parliament from the Bishwanath area along with the top echelon of the powerful and wealthy people of the area suddenly vanished from the locality following the then global trend that prevailed in every corner of Bangladesh. Some were picked up by the administration on corruption charges, some escaped arrest by leaving Bangladesh altogether or by hiding within the country. Civil and military administration, under the leadership of a military backed caretaker government of 15 individuals, started to run the state. See the introduction of this thesis for a more detail discussion on this state of emergency.



emergency, which had the support of the international donor community and military, lasted close to two years, between 11 of January 2007 and 17 of December 2008<sup>45</sup>. The then chief of Bangladesh military compared it with a salvage operation and the country with a derailed train<sup>46</sup>.



Plate 1: A demolished Bishwanath *madrassa* during the emergency.

The emergency was marked by the imprisonment of all top political leaders, a crackdown on corruption, and by the demolition of all unauthorized settlements<sup>47</sup>. The new government's attitude towards corruption created a leadership vacuum across the country. For the *Jamia*, which lives plainly on charity given out by powerful locals (see also Chapter 3), such political upheaval had severely disruptive effects both externally and

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<sup>45</sup> See AsiaNews.it report, "State of emergency lifted to pave the way for elections in Bangladesh," for a summarized version of events surrounding the emergency.

<sup>46</sup> "We need a heavy crane to put the train back on the track--and strength of the people is the crane. Once you can put the train on the track, it will move smoothly," The Bangladesh army chief Genral Moeen commented the above while reflecting on some harsh truth about the then trend of politics, politicians in a meeting on the 7 February 2007. See, The Daily Star, February 7, 2007, 5(957) or <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/02/09/d7020901011.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> See BBC webpage for the report entitled, "Many targets of anti-corruption drive," at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/6441179.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6441179.stm).

internally. Internally, here refers to the more private side of the *madrasa* that concerns its administration and management.

Since January 2007, largely because of the fallout from this state of emergency, the *Jamians* have been handling the day-to-day running of the *madrasa* much less efficiently. This situation began with a sudden drop in daily, weekly, and monthly *collection*<sup>48</sup>. *Collection* comes through both as cash and kind on a daily basis in four major ways. First, like every religious institution, *Jamia* also has several *dan-baksho* (donation box) or *chanda baksho* installed near the three main entrances and also beside the mosque entrances. Both passer-bys and prayer-goers drop change into those boxes regularly. Second, every Wednesday and Sunday, during the weekly *hutbar* or market days' *madrasa* students and teachers walk around the bazaars holding small donation boxes in their grips. Both shoppers and traders give generously. Third, during those two *hutbars* before obligatory midday, afternoon, dusk, and evening prayers, and again before the obligatory Friday midday prayers both students and *dan-bakshos* silently travel between the prayer lines (*Qu'tar*) as the congregation fill those up with small coins. Forth, a kind of collection arrives to the *madrasa* in the form of unhusked rice, vegetables, livestock, et cetera. The *madrasa*'s kitchen and other miscellaneous needs are met largely by this *collection* on a day-to-day basis.

In the beginning, *Jamian* authorities considered it one of those yearly bad patches when *collection* plunges for a few weeks and then swings back to normal. However, by the middle of the third month (April 2007), the trend started to give the authorities a big scare as the hike in the price of food and other essentials<sup>49</sup> had been making the condition worse. By May of 2007, I heard that senior teachers were privately arranging their meals from outside the *madrasa* kitchen. It was both because the meals from the *madrasa* kitchen were no longer edible and because the kitchen could no longer feed the whole of the *madrasa*. Most of the senior boarding students also arranged food from the outside. To cope with the situation the *madrasa* authorities stopped taking any new students,

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<sup>48</sup> *Collection* is the English word that replaced the age-old word *chanda*, which means collecting donations.

<sup>49</sup> For a glimpse on this, see the Reuters report at <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-30200920071028>.

encouraged many to go home long before the *Ramadan* (started in the second week of September of 2007), and many students left the *madrasa* voluntarily. Many among the teachers and students in the *Jamia* interpreted all these as worrying signs for their *madrasa*'s future compared with other local *madrasas*'.

Interestingly, where there are clear-cut connections between the situation at *Jamia* and issues related to modernity, infrastructural development, and the state's intervention in religious spheres, many among the *Jamians*, especially the ones who are not directly running the *madrasa*, have looked for the causes of the current problem within the confines of the *madrasa* itself. The following section will try to understand some of the tensions that this approach is generating among the *Jamians* who are most strongly affected by the peculiarity of this situation.

## **2.7 Secret grievances**

As mentioned above, these *Jamians* think that the source of the current trouble rests within the *Jamia* itself. They tend to interpret the lack of *collection* and decrease in the number of students not as the result of the state of emergency but, as one *Mawlana* Amir Hossain puts it, as “*Due to the state of the belief of the Jamian leaders!*” For them, the source of all these newly arrived hardships can be traced back to the *Jamian* leadership who, according to these *Jamians*, lack adequate faith (*iman*), deed (*amal*), and demeanor (*adab*) for upholding Islam in a society that is fast losing it. These *Jamians* often use strong religious terms, as mentioned in the previous sentence, and invoke historical comparisons between institutions and individuals to make their points. Their interpretation is presented in more detail below in order to understand their ways of making sense of this situation.

By the beginning of April of 2007, one thing became clear to me; most of the *Jamians* who were not native of Bishwanath, and even some of the native junior teachers holding peripheral positions within the *Jamia*, were strongly but secretly railing against those who run the *madrasa*. Actually, it was this particular group that backed my entry into this

*madrasa* initially and during this period of hardship, that sentiment gained further momentum. A number of distressed *Jamians* clandestinely expressed their displeasure with the ways the authorities, especially the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*, were running the *madrasa* during this tough time. It was during one such week when the kitchen almost ran out of food for days, only serving very thin *dal* (lentil soup) and rice of discardable quality, that *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad, the main teacher of the primary section, stepped into my room with his plate of rice and *dal* extending it towards me he said -

*“How do you gulp this?”*

I looked up to him maintaining the silence, which made him say more,

*“But I can’t eat this anymore! It is true that I am poor, like most of us here, but there has to have some limit of being treated like that way. They can simply forget about me, something I don’t get bothered by much, but then they should at least think of these children in whose name people give donations to this madrasa. Why can’t they be given a little bit of food that is edible? This quality of food they even don’t give to their cattle. But, with this they want us to teach the children Islam and want the children to defend Islam some day? Sorry, that’s not going to happen”*

His comments clearly portray the way he sees the *Jamia* as divided between two groups – the handful of rich, who run it, and plenty of poor, who represent it. Later he also told me that he had not been paid for the last six months<sup>50</sup>. The previous afternoon he had visited the office to recover some of his money but the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* told him to return the following week. He told me that it would have been impossible for him to survive without proper food and money if he had not engaged himself as a private tutor in two homes. According to *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* is unfit to run this

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<sup>50</sup> At that point, with an exception of only one senior and influential teacher, no other member of the teaching staffs had received their monthly salaries for an average of 6 months.

*madrasa* because he is too timid, laid back, indecisive, and detached from the plights of his teachers and students.

Similar complains with more serious twists were raised by *Mawlana* Amir Hossain, a local of the area and junior section teacher of the *madrasa*. According to him,

*“Our Naeb-e-Muhtamim trims his beard regularly, something that the Islam that we know about, we teach about, and tell others to follow does not approve. Once he told us that he feels ashamed to go door-to-door to ask donation for the madrasa! Upon hearing that we all felt ashamed for him! He doesn’t have the power of faith in Allah and that is why he can’t think that asking donation to run a madrasa is not about asking money for him or us but asking money for Allah and Allah’s way! He always encourages the pupils to perform doa (invocation) after every dawn prayer to improve Jamia’s condition but he often skips that prayer, which all of us see but don’t say anything about...”*

*Jamian* air is ripe with many similar complaints directed against the individuals who currently hold important positions within the *madrasa*. According to this disenchanted lot, the current leaders of the *madrasa* are leaders simply because,

*“This is Bishwanath. Here money talks. They are Bishwanathis. They have Londoni money and power. So, they run the show. It has nothing to do with Islam...”*

Hence, over this financial hardship issue, I found that the ideological rift is clear, deep, and ever widening within the *madrasa* between its native heads and the rest. The following example will suffice for now to highlight how deeply some feel that the *Jamia* is compromising its ideological stances over some individuals’ petty material interests.

After his death, the late *Mawlana*, father of the current *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*, was buried in the *Jamia* ground. Except in the urban centres, large graveyards are rare in the rest of the country where family or families designate a patch of their private land to bury their deceased instead. Interestingly, *Jamia* was neither a family property nor a graveyard, yet by burying late *Mawlana* in its ground, the critics of this decision say, the powerful *Jamians* established a family's control over this institution. Such an act, according to those critics, serves not the interest of Islam but the interest of those who are using Islam for personal benefits. These critiques also stress that this does not reflect the late *Mawlana*'s life long practices, ideals, and views of Islam. Most seriously, according to the Islamic ideals that the *qawmi madrasa* people subscribe to, this well maintained grave, as these critiques say, is slowly becoming a place of worship for some in the area.

It is important to note that the *Jamia*, as a torch-bearing institute of Deobandi tradition, strongly opposes all forms of innovation (*bidat*) in Islam, of which grave worshipping is one of the gravest amongst many others. These critics of the *Jamian*'s current leadership directly point at the grave of the late *Mawlana* and allege that the *Jamia* is promoting un-Islamic practices surrounding the grave of a good Muslim who, while he was alive fought for everything that a good Muslim stands for. According to them, the current leaders are ideologically so bankrupt that they could not resist the opportunity of using a dead body to achieve their worldly goals. For these disenchanted *Jamians* this kind of compromise with their ideals is a far more serious an issue than the threats that financial hardship, competition from other institutions, or lack of students can jointly create for the *qawmi madrasa* system. Like *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad and Amir Hossain, these disenchanted individuals also shared many of the grievances with me. However, within the *Jamia* of Bishwanath the discrepancy of power is so vast between the powerful patrons and the rest that none had ever dared to raise a single of these accusations in public.

## **2.8 Power struggle**

Hardship, hopelessness, and resentment are the three words that can best capture the state of *Jamia* during the period of fieldwork, something that also had an effect on me as I was

lodging there. However, at no point through my many interactions with the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* did I personally find him indifferent towards the plight of the *Jamians*. Various sources close to me among the native Bishwanathis within the *Jamia* informed me that the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* could not afford to make any silly mistakes that could strengthen his secret enemies active within the top patrons of his *madrassa*. Hence, according to this group, those who oppose him or accuse him of being of weak-faith, weak in action, and weak-mannered are actually serving those who want to take full control of the *madrassa* by ousting him. Unfortunately, I found it methodologically impossible to get that far into the *Jamian* inner life to prove or disprove a conspiracy that not only resides in the past of the people of the area but also was inseparable from other political, economical or ideological aspects. However, people here still cannot avoid comparing the son (*Naeb-e-Muhtamim*) with the late father, and during this time of difficulties such comparisons are ever increasing. Some invoke such comparisons to show the ideological slip reigning within the *madrassa* and to suggest the right way out from it; some seek personal benefits out of this, and some reject such comparisons as mere provocation. Whatever it is, until the present time the facts speak for themselves, the father was more pious as an individual than his son and was more successful as the head of this *madrassa*, too.

The position of the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* is below the position of *Muhtamim* (Principal), which is interestingly not under attack here, not because of the fact that the current *Muhtamim* is a very able person, but simply because of the fact that he is not. The proponents of the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* do not want an able person to hold the post of *Muhtamim* as that could ultimately pose a threat for the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*'s future. Even though the position of *Muhtamim* is officially the highest authority, it was not given to an able person after the death of the late *Mawlana*. This was out of consideration for the fact that removing that person could be difficult by the time the young *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* would be ready to take the control of the *madrassa*. We clearly get to two things from this: first, until that point one group, consists of relatives and friends of *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*'s father, among the powerful patrons of *Jamia* are successfully backing the young *Naeb-e-*

*Muhtamim*; and second, they are doing this simply because they want the *madrasa* to remain under the leadership of their family.

In 2005, after the death of the late *Mawlana*, the decision to give his young son the responsibilities of the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*'s position of *Jamia*, was supported by everyone in the *madrasa* management committee. The support continued for over a year before a rift appeared; the support weakened further as the general election neared. My informants in the *Jamia* told me that a major rift appeared between the *madrasa*'s main patrons over the issue of rallying the *Jamian* support base behind one of the two major political parties of the country. Here the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* first lost the blessings of some local elites by expressing his position in opposition to theirs'. This confirms that for a little taste of the state power no one can remain passive or neutral, not even the people of a rural *qawmi madrasa* who publicly disapprove of democracy and secularism. From that point onwards, things have been getting harder for the young *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*; more so since the imposition of the state of emergency, as most of his patrons too had to flee to avoid imprisonment. Interestingly, on the surface of the *Jamia* no sign can be found of this power struggle as both of the parties stayed low and supported each other's back to overcome the unique political circumstances of the time.

Both of the groups argue concertedly that the thinning of *collection* and the decreasing student enrolment are results of the present political environment of the country from which the *Jamia* cannot escape. According to the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*,

*“Local level initiatives or individual leadership can no longer help us out from this mass as the nature, breadth, and origin of these issues are much widespread, complex, and non-local. Only thing that we could do in this situation is to pray to Allah for His mercy.”*

He does not stop his arguments there but, as mentioned in section 1 of this chapter, points to the impact of the issues related to modernization, i.e. overall infrastructural



development, the state's increasing investment in the education sector, et cetera., for the fall in *collection* and number of student.

Upon talking to a number of *Jamians* close to the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* I found out that, ignoring the aforementioned ideological issues and the internal power struggle, these people directly blame the state of emergency as the main force behind their hardship. According to them, many in the *Jamia* are incapable of conceiving the full extent of the damage that this particular political development is causing to *Jamia* and Islam in general. In this regard, they mentioned the surveillance that the state has imposed on the *qawmi madrasas* by clandestinely monitoring its financial transactions, by asking to provide all its students with identity cards, and by monitoring the movements of its leaders, et cetera. They also highlighted the fact that usually after the *boro* and *aman*<sup>51</sup> harvest the *Jamia* receive a substantial amount of donation in cash and kind from the local community, which did not arrive in 2007 as both of the crops failed. Further, as mentioned earlier, the new political situation coincided with a global food price hike that only intensified the hardship of the *Jamians*. However, they also accepted that the *madrasa* committee's shifted priority to the female only *madrasa* had also drained a substantial amount of resources from the *Jamia*. Considering all of these together, as an inter-related mass, they assert that the *Jamians* should understand that the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* could do nothing to improve their plights.

This section demonstrated that *Jamia* as an Islamic school is not an entity that epitomises everything Islamic, which the *Jamians* themselves are aware of. Hence, to highlight this particular aspect of *Jamia* this section exposes some of those existing but hidden ideological-slips, rifts, and power discrepancies that are characteristic of *Jamia* of Bishwanath. The importance of this chapter rests in the fact that the challenges that the forces of change are posing at the Madnia are not always coming from the outside but also evolving internally, due to its aforementioned characteristics in relation with the events that are taking place externally.

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<sup>51</sup> *Boro* and *Aman* are two of the major rice crops that the Bangladeshi farmers plant, grow, and harvest respectively between November and March and March/April and November/December every year.

## 2.9 Conclusion:

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the reactions of the *Jamians*, as the proponents of *qawmi madrasa*, in their interactions with ideas, structures, institutions, people, and events that they typically come to construe as “modern.” The Bangladeshi state has been presented as the most powerful agent of modernity and development, which proposes or forces changes on the others, a view that the *Jamians* historically subscribe to. The difference between the state and itself, as observed here by the *Jamians*, is one of power, which is vast, as the state and its apparatus back processes that are modern but the *Jamians*, according to the state, do not. Therefore, this chapter is about the *Jamian* perception of the modernity as they experience it as a negative force at the level of their everyday realities.

During the first few months of this fieldwork, most of the *Jamians* seemed to me to be seriously unreasonable individuals. I found them not only disgruntled towards so many things in today’s world that I hold as good but also toward their own selves, too. However, with the passing of time and by being among them, learning to understand their ways better, my perceptions about the *Jamians* have changed and I came to accept their grievances, angers, and paranoia as normal. Many of these feelings, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, are essentially coming from the hopelessly peripheral status that most of these *Jamians* hold within the political economy of Bishwanath, as well as the country, to which I now turn.

### Chapter Three: The political economy of Bishwanath

Bishwanath is one of the most prosperous sub-districts (*upazilas*) in the country. Locals of Bishwanath, like the people from other parts of the district of Sylhet, have been migrating to the United Kingdom since the early parts of last century (Adams 1987, Gardner 1995). Literature on migration shows that the home-connection of these migrants remains vital, not only for their families but also for the overall economy of the country<sup>52</sup> (Abrar ed. 2000, Afsar 2000, Osella ed. 2004, Rao 2009). This chapter will examine the influence of remitted money on the district's economy, which relies in part on consumption driven by remittances, and on the economic activity of those who receive these funds<sup>53</sup> (Abrar 2000, Adams 1987, Choudhury 1993, Gardner 2002).

Specific focus in this chapter is on the experience and perspective of one particular informant, Mr. Taher of Bishwanath, whose consumption patterns are representative of how the money is eventually used. Through his example we will also be able to examine the direct and indirect links that these funds establish between various social actors, i.e. *Londonis*, *refugee*<sup>54</sup>, *Jamian*, et cetera, within Bishwanath. Apart from the economic aspects, this discussion will touch upon the wider issues of the influence that the remittance economy is having on the moral and social world of the *Jamia madrasa* as well as the local Muslim population.

Further, the chapter will also focus on the relationship between the *Londonis* and the *refugees*, groups who are located, respectively, at the centre and margin of the local

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<sup>52</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Bangladeshi workers had remitted over \$30 billion between 1976 and 2002 (Bruyn and Kuddus, 2005). On 4 November 2009, citing a Bangladesh Central Bank report, the leading Bangladeshi English newspaper, the Daily Star stated that in 2009 650,000 migrant workers took foreign jobs. This is 33 per cent lower than the previous year when a total 969,000 people went abroad with jobs. The report also stated that Saudi Arabia is the largest source of remittance (\$2.9 billion) followed by UAE (\$1.8 billion). Only in 2009, 461,000 workers have immigrated to the gulf. ([http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/print\\_news.php?nid=112608](http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/print_news.php?nid=112608)).

<sup>53</sup> According to a report on 7 November 2009 in the country's leading English daily, the Daily Star, between July and October of 2009 alone, Bangladesh recorded a remittance inflow of \$3.61 billion. Pointing to the global recession the report says that *our workers are saving and sending more money home for the future safety of their near and dear ones* ([http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/print\\_news.php?nid=112949](http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/print_news.php?nid=112949)).

<sup>54</sup> A *refugee* is the popularly used local term that refers to an individual or a family who has migrated to this area mainly for livelihood reasons. The term has negative connotation yet frequently used.

economy, and are attached to each other in complex ways. For example, the expatriate members of the *Londoni* families send money primarily for their home families to spend on anything from giving alms to buying land. Most of the *Londoni* families receive regular contributions from their foreign-based members, apart from the income that their property and other resources already generate. This allows the home families to spend extravagantly on good food, brand clothing, the latest mobiles, new houses, and further expanding landed properties or to up keep the already accumulated properties. Members of the *Londoni* class aggressively compete with each other for the prime plots of land, where they do not grow crops but rather build large houses, shops or markets. Unlike those from lower classes, women from this class do not need to work for a living. Moreover, their children are better fed, better dressed, and either go to a better school or receive better tuition at home<sup>55</sup>.

The *refugee* class, on the other hand, migrated to this area for a better livelihood. *Refugee* men earn their living not only by tilling *Londoni* land and building the *Londoni* houses, but also by guarding said land and houses from other powerful encroachers. In this sense, *refugee* men provide the much needed ‘manpower’ that upholds *Londoni* land, the ultimate symbol of *Londoni* power and prestige within this society. *Refugee* women earn a living by working as house workers, kitchen helpers, or by begging and scavenging. *Refugee* children help their parents at home and outside; the economically worse off ones beg and scavenge around the bazaar areas. Most *refugee* families cannot afford to send their children to school and only a few go either to the NGO-run non-formal schools or to *qawmi madrasas* like the *Jamia*. Against this backdrop, we will see that the economic wealth of Bishwanath, which revolves around remittance practices, helps the powerful to maximize their power and prestige within the system. Interestingly though, here we also find that the system that favours the powerful, by default, has been forging a mutually benefiting relationship with a less well-off *Jamia* and the *Jamians*.

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<sup>55</sup> These practices do not mean that they are academically great achievers. There may be a link between remittance based wealth and a high dropout rate in this part of the country. As Moinuddin Ahmed, a school teacher from Biswanath explains at <http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2008/11/04/cover.htm>: “Many young men in Sylhet don't really have to work very hard for a living, they just wait for the remittance to arrive. When I ask children in my class what they want to be when they grow up, they say doctor or engineer. But after they're about 15, they all want to go to London. ... As a result the dropout rate is very high.”

This chapter develops over four sections. Each follows the footprints of the *Londoni* money to examine the ways it both shapes the realities of Bishwanath and are shaped by them. In the first section, we shall see that the local economy is essentially consumption-oriented and the manner in which this is transforming the physical, social, political, and economic landscape of the area dramatically. While agriculture and agricultural land have lost their appeal among the *Londonis*, land remains highly valued as both a material and symbolic commodity among the wealthy Bishwanathis. Therefore, in the second section, we shall focus on land as a commodity around which the economy of Bishwanath revolves. The third section will discuss the influence of the intermediaries that the *Londoni* money has created. This section will focus on extortion as a method that the intermediaries use. The fourth and final section will examine the idea of charity, around which the *Londonis* and *refugees* have developed a mutually beneficial relationship.

## **Section 1: *Londoni* money and the centrality of consumption**

### **3.1 Symbols of development**

The rich of Bishwanath are proud of their *Londoni* title and are proud of their wealth. They argue that Bishwanath is very developed compared with many other rural towns of Bangladesh. To prove this they point at their large houses, apartment complexes, shopping and party centres with escalators, underground parking facilities, private banks, ATM booths, cafés, restaurants, et cetera. In reality, most of these so-called modern set ups, both residential and commercial, remain empty year around and for years at a time. A distant relative or a trustworthy person, often a *refugee* family, guards the property on behalf of a *Londoni* family from burglary, vandalism and untrustworthy neighbours' encroachment.

Judging only by the sight of these large structures, I would have never discovered how badly the lack of basic services like water, electricity and gas are hurting the locals. These symbols of wealth are without power most of the time because the country is

capable of giving electricity facilities to only 47% of its population<sup>56</sup>. Likewise, the water supply system does not work properly<sup>57</sup>. Most of the households here use kerosene, wood, dry cow dung et cetera, instead of gas as the area has yet to come under the national gas network. Because the town and region lack such basic infrastructure, the prices of almost all daily necessities are higher in Bishwanath compared to the Sylhet city and other parts of the country. Shop owners charge a premium on the actual price of most items to recover the cost that they incur for running diesel generators to keep their business going. Some people, mostly *refugees* and other non-local classes, blame Bishwanath's wealth for this price hike and shrewd customers often travel an extra 20 km to the Sylhet city, the district headquarters, to buy their necessities at relatively reasonable prices.

*Refugee* families - those who are flocking from low-lying, rice-producing, economically under-developed areas - also consider Bishwanath as a *khubi unnoto* (very developed) place. This is a place where the labour-intensive construction work never stops. This creates opportunities for refugee families to earn livelihoods through non-agricultural work requiring very little expertise, i.e. land filling, land digging, brick carrying, brick breaking, mixing, iron rod bending, et cetera. Many small-scale industries, such as wood, metal, glass, brick, cement, et cetera, that are directly linked with building construction work, also create many job opportunities for the *refugees* in and around Bishwanath. To support these workers, many of the property owners build on-site tin houses. Such structures can withstand heat and rain better than the *refugees'* own rural homes, and include a common sanitary latrine, tube well, cooking facilities, et cetera. Moreover, once completed, a construction site becomes a source for further income and shelter for a *refugee* family if they manage to secure the caretaker's job.

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<sup>56</sup> Source: Board of Investment Bangladesh. URL: <http://www.boi.gov.bd/key-sectors/power-industry>.

<sup>57</sup> Data on Bishwanath is not available in this regard. However, a 2007 Asian Development Bank (ADB) report on Dhaka's water supply quality highlights that within the city of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, consumers get water for only 2-4 hours during a day. Situation in Bishwanath is similar.

The above-mentioned factors have been prompting large numbers of destitute people, labelled as *refugee*, to migrate into this area<sup>58</sup> (Gardner 1990, 1995, Osella ed. 2004). Similarly, the high concentration of non-local students and teachers in the *Jamia*, which I shall highlight here later, is not an isolated trend. In the following section, however, we shall look at the negative role that the wealth of the locals is playing in eroding the physical and social landscape of Bishwanath

### 3.2 Consuming the landscape

During my fieldwork days in Bishwanath I went for a walk after every morning prayer. One February morning about a year into fieldwork, on my way back to the *madrasa*, I met a middle-aged man by the name of Taher. The insistent Mr. Taher took me by the hands to have a cup of tea with him. Once inside his drawing room, he offered me to sit near the north-facing window and raised himself on the bed next to it. Soon a man entered into the room with two cups of tea and a plate of salted biscuits mounted on a colourful melamine tray. The man first greeted both of us with a loud *Assalam-o-Alaikum* (Islamic greeting) then placed the tray on a chair and carried it in between Mr. Taher and me. Mr. Taher spoke with the man's departure,

*“He is our chakor<sup>59</sup> (servant), very good boy and very hard working. He is a refugee. About two or three years ago during one harvesting season, he came*

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<sup>58</sup> Undoubtedly, the huge amount of remittance has always had a positive impact on the country's overall economic performances. However, since the mid-80s, the country's export-oriented manufacturing industries are playing a larger role in bringing valuable foreign currencies as export earnings (Kabeer 2000). Garments, textile, pharmaceuticals, leather, and agro-based various industries flourished more successfully under a relatively stable political condition and due to a favourable market condition that was prevailing until recently in the developed world. Since the early 1990s, due largely to this early export oriented industrial sector's success, political stability, strong remittance inflow and favourable market conditions in the West prompted a construction and service sector boom as well in the country. Along with all these successes, both of the successive governments and NGOs together achieved many of their targets in the fields of health, education, and agriculture. Governments and private sectors heavily invested in infrastructural development that revolutionized the road and transport sector altogether. All of these eventually pulled a large number of workers from the rural areas in the urban and manufacturing centres of the country. As a result we see the proportion of Bangladesh's population living in cities grew from 7.6 per cent in the 1971 to 18.0 per cent in the 1996 and the UN has projected it to rise to 41 per cent by the year 2030 (cf. Brennan 1999).

<sup>59</sup> The urban, educated, and middle class Bangladeshis rarely use the term *chakor* because of its derogatory nature. However, the rural elite, in this case someone like Mr. Taher, can unashamedly use such a term.

*here to work as a day labourer for us. Since then he is staying with us and does not want to go back to his home district anymore.”*

Mr. Taher likes to talk, which was good for both of us. This was the first opportunity for me to listen to someone who is at the same time local, unrelated (to my *madrassa* world), and an outsider (non-*Jamian*) - a completely new experience. Mr. Taher is a *Londoni* who has accumulated much of his wealth by investing money that his London based half-brothers send him. On this particular morning, he was narrating the changes that he came across in his lifetime. He was describing how different the area was in his childhood and youth compared to the present day. Here, I quote at length, as it illustrates the kind of transformation that the area has undergone in the past generation:

*“...Now when the water comes it does not want to go away. Look around - there are buildings, roads, and boundary walls everywhere! All waters – simple rainwater, monsoon water, and floodwater – all trapped! Moreover, it stays as long as the sun does not drink it all up! Dead water! People who throw their nets with the hope of getting some fish rarely get anything good! The river Basia used to submerge the vast stretches of paddy fields overnight but then used to get back to normal in no times! It was fun! In evenings when we could see and hear the water rising - children, young, old – both men and women would land on the fields with fish traps, nets and lanterns in hands to fish in that quickly receding water. It was exciting! However, days are changing and people are changing too! Water still rises, some of the refugees go out and fish in the dark but we stay in the comfort of our homes with eyes glued into the television. Children are not excited by the sight and sound of the rising river, they are all too busy with either their studies or with TVs! They know that this water is not in hurry and sometimes a nuisance on their way to school the next morning...!”*

Pointing towards a space between a jumble of houses and boundary walls, he was trying to show me the best fishing spots - where he and his friends used to fish while dodging



school on many afternoons. I could sense the emotion in the voice but could not see the space that he was trying to show.



Plate 2: The brick walls and cane fences are taking over.

On that dry and cold winter morning, my eyes failed to trace Mr. Taher’s water-inundated Bishwanath through his window. However, dots of rather low lying and unattended fields were there and amongst those were islands of raised plots, of various sizes and shapes. Brick walls – short and tall - engulf most of the plots, some of which had rather new, large houses in various stages of completion. At places, some of the plot islands were approximately two meters taller than the adjoining Bishwanath – Lamakazi road. Mr. Taher explains the height,

*“Because the owner wanted to make sure that his plot is standing securely above the last flood plain, as if the water would not be able to rise beyond that in the coming years!”*

Pointing at the low dotted fields between these artificial islands, Mr. Taher continues,

*“People can no longer till those because they remain water logged for most of the time of the year. For agriculture these are completely unfit. However, [they are] highly valuable for building houses, something that only a Londoni would be to afford”.*

Thus, the landscape is transforming dramatically on both sides of almost all the important roads that are leading towards the Bishwanath centre from various adjoining towns, villages, and market centres. Low-lying agricultural plots are diminishing and in those places are emerging mansions or bungalow type houses. Land prices are on a dramatic rise and, according to Mr. Taher,

*“There is no way one can even think of buying a piece of land in the Bishwanath proper without being too rich.”*

Still, Mr. Taher and locals like him would not stop seeing such changes in positive light. This changing landscape as well as the changing attitude towards land and livelihood of the locals has been the defining feature of this area’s economy. For someone like the middle aged Mr. Taher, such changes invoke some poignant emotions. However, it is also evident from his following comment that he is quite proud of having the power to initiate such a change:

*“Bishwanath is the home for anyone who is originally from here. Constructing a nice house in one’s home country is therefore very normal and a very good practice and we wish more and more people should do the same all over the Bangladesh. Because it shows that the person has lots of feelings for his desh(country).”*

People here are not only calling such transformation of land a good practice but also finding signs of affection for home! In the following section, Mr. Taher’s household will serve as an example of a *Londoni* family’s consumption pattern and represents the prevalent pattern of household consumption of the *Londoni* class. The remitted money

that this class vigorously spends on consumption is an important aspect of the local economy.

### 3.3 Households and the pattern of consumption

Mr. Taher's original home is approximately 2 kilometres north of the house where these conversations took place. According to Mr. Taher no one lives there any longer. About fifteen years ago, his family filled and raised one portion of their paddy field by the side of the Bishwanath – Lamakazi road, in the current location. In this piece of raised land, they built a couple of structures, traditionally called *chouchala*<sup>60</sup>. Since then the family has been living here and this has become their new home or *notun bari*. He made it very clear though that he is not a caretaker but the real owner of this property.

Mr. Taher is the only child from his father's second marriage and both of the parents are long dead. All five of his half-siblings (*hotai vhai-bon*) are permanently living in the Bradford and Luton areas in the UK. Mr. Taher has a large family, four daughters and two sons, and he hopes that the sons will go to the UK in the near future with the help of his London-based family. In the absence of the *Londoni* siblings, he takes care of all the landed properties and businesses that belong to them. In return, the *Londoni* siblings take care of him and his family's financial matters.

Recipients of the remitted money mainly spend it to meet their routine consumption needs<sup>61</sup>. For example, Mr. Taher's siblings send money throughout the year for the family to meet all kinds of shopping expenses (*bazaar khoroch*). During the *Eids*<sup>62</sup> Mr. Taher

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<sup>60</sup> *Chouchala* refers to a house structure where the tin roof has four tilted sides. Its wall can be made of mud, brick, or tin; and the floor is of either mud or cement.

<sup>61</sup> A number of studies (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2001; Afsar, 2003) show that the major share of the remittance is used to meet the most primary consumption needs as food and clothing. They also say that once these basic needs of a family are met the surplus is invested into land. People purchase lands, and build and repair homes with it. After these, the remittance's third highest use is the repayment of loans that initially made the migration possible. Around 4 per cent of the remitted money goes to meet educational needs and the rest goes in arranging migration for other family members, in social ceremonies such as weddings, and even funding the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

<sup>62</sup> There are two *Eids* in the Islamic calendar - *Eid ul Fiter* and *Eid ul Azha*. These are the biggest and most important Muslim festivals.

receives extra cash as a gift to buy new clothes for the family members, cows for sacrificial slaughter, and to pay the poor rate (*Zakat*) that his siblings are obliged to distribute among local destitute families. According to Mr. Taher,

*“In London they don’t get poor Muslims to give Zakat to because there everyone is so rich! There the government does not allow Muslims to sacrifice any cow or goat according to the Islamic rules. Therefore, everyone sends Zakat money home to Bangladesh to give among the poor during the Ramadan as well as to buy animals for the boro Eid<sup>63</sup>. ”*

Apart from the regular shopping expanses and festival costs, the UK families always send extra money to home to carry out various religious and secular duties on behalf of themselves or the whole of the family. Among the religious duties, the annual *doa* (supplication) is very important; it is done by almost all religious minded Bengali Muslims for the peace of departed souls as well as for the prosperity of the family<sup>64</sup>. The family that arranges such a *doa* session normally invites all the near and distant relatives, friends and neighbours to join. The session, especially the *khani* or feast, is also open to the beggars and for the very poor people of the area and small amounts of cash are given as alms to the destitute.

One or more *doa* sessions, much smaller and hassle free in scale, are also commonly arranged in mosques and *madrasas* if someone in the UK is ill, in trouble, or about to embark upon something as a humble request for Allah’s blessings and protections. Organizing any of these public or private *doa* sessions always involves flashing out a

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<sup>63</sup> Here *boro Eid* literally means the big *Eid*, which is the *Eid ul Azha*.

<sup>64</sup> Such annual *doa* usually includes a *Qur’an khatam*, *milad*, and *khani* or *shinni*. *Qur’an khatam* is a specialized session that involves one complete reading of the whole of the *Qur’an* during the day of *doa*. For a single person this is an impossible task, therefore, a group of people do it collectively and this group always consists of *madrasa* teachers and students. The *milad* is also a highly religious session led by an *Alim* who delivers various teachings of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* to an audience of Muslim devotees. At the end of it, the *Alim* leads a collective supplication. The *khani* or feast follows immediately after the *milad*. The food that is served during the *khani* is known as *shinni*, therefore, some call this part of the *doa* session simply *shinni*.

substantial amount of money from the family's coffers, ranging between hundreds of thousands to one thousand Taka (1GBP = +/-130 Taka in 2007 ).

Sometimes Mr. Taher also asks for extra cash to meet personal emergencies. One such recent emergency was medical –

*“Three months ago doctors in Sylhet found stones inside my gallbladder. They said I need immediate operation. I got very afraid. Money was a matter but more was my life. I consulted with the family people in the UK. They told me - money is no problem, you go to Dhaka for treatment, we will pay. I was so relieved! It cost me 1, 37,000 Taka (Bangladesh currency) and they paid it all for me. I am completely fit now.”*

The money that families and individuals send back home has a transformational power that is not only changes everyday consumption pattern of the *Londoni* families but also livelihoods and the landscape of the area. The above account was an example of how a fraction of the *Londoni* money is spent for consumption purposes. The lion's share of the remitted money goes into procuring new land and settling land-related dispute mitigation. Both of these are very complex issues in Bishwanath where land has paramount symbolic significance and is scarce. The following section, therefore, will examine issues centring on land and its close relationship with remitted money to understand this important aspect of Bishwanath's economy.

## **Section 2: Land and its socio-political implications in Bishwanath**

### **3.4 Land disputes and mitigation**

Land purchase, maintenance, and dispute mitigation are the most important services that the remitted money performs for a *Londoni* family. Serious of all is the mitigation of various land disputes. Most common feature of such disputes concerns the boundaries between neighbours. Given the current demand for land, it is natural that unmarked and

unguarded plots of lands are the most vulnerable amongst all the landed properties that the *Londonis* buy here. Moreover, forceful eviction of the proprietor from his property is also common. Depending on the land-grabber's power and notoriety, mitigating a dispute can be a very expensive business. In order to recover the land from the grabber one needs to mobilize large amounts of cash and approach the court, police, local elites, the land office, and some intermediaries concertedly and promptly. However, people generally attempt to settle such incidents with the help of intermediaries while keeping the court, police, and land office at bay because involving them means draining oneself of time, money, and other valuable resources.

Mr. Taher shared with me several such experiences where someone claimed the ownership of their family's plots by producing fake legal documents and forcefully evicting their caretakers. In each case, the family fought legally in order to re-establish their rights over what legally belonged to them. However, Mr. Taher admitted that he had caused more harm to himself than good by bringing these issues to the court. The police arrested him on a number of occasions for alleged involvement in blackmailing, vandalism, terrorism, et cetera. They went as far as framing him on more than one occasion; most of the times he escaped by simply bribing them. In each incident, the extended family had to negotiate on behalf of Mr. Taher, either with the opponents or with the police to free him and to remove his name from their final investigation report (FIR). These negotiations entail substantial bribes or 'compensation' that Mr. Taher's family were able to pay. While Mr. Taher was able to negotiate his way out of these situations, there are many instances where the real owners had to leave their plots for as they had neither the financial backing nor the power necessary to fight back. This 'power' is political and primarily derives from within the community and from one's position within it. Mr. Taher also receives money from the UK for clearing all the government taxes on the properties held by the family. He also regularly hires and fires the individuals and families who cultivate the land as rented farmers, as well as the caretakers for each of the plots of land that he feels under threat.

While I had no reason to doubt Mr. Taher's version and perspective, my *madrassa* friends told me a different story about Mr. Taher. According to them, Mr. Taher is a *shudkhor* (usurer) and *dalal* (intermediary), which are both highly derogatory terms. They call him *shudkhor* as it is an open secret that he provides local needy families with high interest loans and exploits them whichever ways he likes. The term *dalal* means broker or intermediary in a very negative sense. When asked why they call him a *dalal*, my friends gave me a version that contradicts Mr. Alwald's,

*“His colonies are full of day labourers, in this area he is one of the main suppliers of cheap land labourers. Once the harvesting season is over, he supplies these people to road and house construction firms even beyond Bishwanath. He is very cunning and a great exploiter. From time to time, he uses them as his muscles, too...”*

The further we proceed in this chapter, the more Mr. Taher's role as a *Londoni* will become pertinent for the discussion of Bishwanath's economy. In the discussion that follows, an account of Mr. Taher's properties is relevant as it shows his contribution in transforming local agricultural lands for the highest profit, power, and prestige – an account that contradicts his earlier longing for preserving it.

### **3.5 Economic value of land**

Today, jointly with his *Londoni* siblings, Mr. Taher owns seven and half acres of land scattered around the Biswanath sub-district. They inherited 3 acres and the rest was purchased over the years by the expatriate siblings. According to him, the lion's share of the inherited land is around their former village home and consists of rice growing lands. However, along with his current house, all of their highly valuable pieces of land are around the Bishwanath center.

Around 70 per cent of the land is single-crop, where they grow paddy, 10 per cent is double-cropped, and the rest are housing plots. The whole of the agricultural land is

rented out among the less well off kin of Mr. Taher's and his siblings' families on a sharecropping basis. The prime plots that are awaiting construction were once paddy fields too, but are now surrounded by tall brick walls and transformed into four different colonies<sup>65</sup>. These colonies house an average of 150-200 people year round and many more during the harvesting seasons. Mr. Taher tells me that almost all of his tenants are *refugees*. Average rent is 200 taka per month for an approximately 15 square meter space and access to tube wells for water, two sanitary latrines, and a washing space. In each of the colonies, tenants can use electricity for an additional payment. Two round-the-clock caretakers manage all four of Mr. Taher's colonies.

Besides the rice-fields and colonies, Mr. Taher's family owns a large plot of land with four ponds in it where they commercially farm fish and grow vegetables year round. Further, between the year 2001 and 2004 they purchased eight shops in two of the large shopping complexes in each of the Bishwanath's two bazaars. All the shops now have tenants. He told me that the money that they had invested to buy these shops is returning slowly in the form of rents. For the time being, therefore, they do not want to buy any more shops; instead, they are planning to build a market on one of their Bishwanath plots. Mr. Taher told me that he enjoys managing their properties even though the job is not an easy one when it involves unpleasant hassles. More surprisingly, he thinks that they need more land and he is constantly collecting information on potential plots and their owners. However, he also says,

*“...We have been trying to buy a bit more land around this area for the past two years. My brothers and their children are ready to pay the highest price. However, no one seems willing to sale!”*

Mr. Taher's family is a considerably wealthy family in Bishwanath, given all the land that they possess, the money that they receive from the UK, and the money that they earn from their shops, fish farm, and colonies. Therefore, with absolute surprise I ask Mr. Taher for what purpose they want to procure more land.

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<sup>65</sup> The English word *colony* refers to slum or *bosti* in Bishwanath.



In response, he first tried to hide the economic side of it and told me,

*“These are for the future. All of my Londoni brothers will return one day. Then every one of them will need at least a plot for each of them that are big enough to build a nice house with a pond and enough open space around for flower garden.”*



Plate 3: A *Londoni* house in the middle of a paddy field.

However, when I put forward that the return seems very unlikely to me, Mr. Taher ultimately opens ups,

*“Dear brother! Here land is like gold, even more valuable than that! Even if they do not return, still it is good to have these for their children’s future. They will get a huge return compared with the price that they had paid for buying it. With that money, they would be able to open up a new business for*

*their children or would be able to buy a new house in the UK. Land value is not going to fall in this area for sure.”*

Part of the reason why “*land is like gold*” rests in the symbolic values that people attach to it. According to Mr. Taher, however, land is actually changing hands all the time here but under much secrecy, which will be elaborated below. According to him, secrecy is important

*“Because there are too many parties to appease – government officials, land office, tax office, touts, police, professional extortionists (chandabaz), local political leaders (netas), et cetera.”*

This ultimately opens up a completely new window besides the above-described consumption and land centred life of the *Londonis*, which runs by intermediaries and through extortion. Here I quote Mr. Taher again,

*“... Both the potential seller and buyer are in trouble if news of the deal leaks out before the parties seal it. Therefore, people living in London, Dubai, Saudi or Qatar often reach a verbal agreement over the deal and complete the payment over there among themselves then people like me do the official bit and take care the rest of the troubles. No matter what, here at home, a huge sum of money goes to the pockets of various kinds of extortionists from the point of official registration of the deal until the final handing and taking over of the land is completed.”*

In a resource constraint society where land has immense material and symbolic value, secrecy is simultaneously a tool and technique for the competitors. Hence, the following section will attempt to look into the intricacies associated with land purchase to establish that the intermediaries and extortion have come about as a natural response to the consumption and demand for land that the remittance driven economy has been fuelling in the area.

### Section 3: Intermediaries, extortion and the dynamics of power around land holding

#### 3.6 The regime of secrecy within the economy of extortion

Secrecy is necessary at the initial stage of land acquisition up to the ‘solid word’ (*paka kotha*) stage between the parties. According to Mr. Taher and others,

*“Land transaction requires as much secrecy as a marriage deal does.”*

This is a stark reminder that in principle Mr. Taher still subscribes to a value system that treats land and marriage as key routes to power and prestige. He continues,

*“Here people can’t stand other people’s unnoti (rise, in the sense of upward mobility), because they fear that everyone is going to be better off than them! Forget about the enemies, even relatives can turn against such deals and can sabotage out of sheer jealousy.”*

Here he is talking about a brute competition and jealousy that prevails both openly and secretly even amongst kin where everyone is keen to foil every opportunity that may place one member of the group in a little better off situation over the others. The kind of sabotage that aborts a potential deal between two parties is called *breaking* (*vangani*). In every instance damaging facts or fabricated claims will come in the fore to jeopardize a potential deal.

The analogy between land and marriage is very apt here. To sabotage a marriage, an individual’s moral character and habits (*shovab choritro*) becomes the first casualties, for a marriage to collapse the following statement is sufficient – *meye’er/chele’er shovab choritro valo na* (the bride/groom is characterless) because she/he has a romantic past<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup>Bishwanath is not much of an exception in relation to other rural areas of Bangladesh where families extract resources through land acquisition and marriage relations (cf. Gardner 2006).

Whether such an allegation holds any merit or not is no one's concern but the circulation of the rumour is enough to kill the deal. Even full-fledged marriages break over such alleged liaisons.

To sabotage a land deal, real or fictitious stories of *bibad* (dispute) regarding the ownership of the land are passed on to the potential buyer. My friends in Bishwanath say that family enemies sabotage marriage<sup>67</sup> deals out of jealousy, and that land deals break down because of the fierce competition. However, sometimes the two are interconnected. To illustrate, take the example of a local man named Mia who, along with his family, were always certain that a London-based uncle (*mama*, or maternal uncle) would choose Mia for one of his *Londoni* daughters. In order to solidify such a potential of marriage, Mia's family educated him in the *madrassa* system to please the pious *mama*. After Mia's graduation, his mother sent the proposal to her brother to take her son for one of his daughters. The brother, Mia's uncle, accepted it with a condition that the prospective bride be given the land along with the house that Mia's family own in Bishwanath centre, as a proof of her future security. It was a blow for Mia's family, they withdrew from the deal, and eventually Mia's mother publicly declared that she disowns the brother! Already bitter from a long period of joblessness, Mia grew more frustrated by this breakdown. By the time I was preparing to leave Bishwanath, I found Mia and his family were busy campaigning against his *mama* and his family. Here, Mia's family is a perfect example of those 'jealous' relatives who were once potential candidates in the marriage market but failed to stay in the competition. Losing out made them more determined to

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<sup>67</sup> My observation and data show that in Bishwanath, marriage deals do not collapse due to jealousy only, especially when one of the parties involved is a *Londoni*. Demand for a *Londoni koinna* (bride) is very high here by those who want to send their sons to London and people aggressively compete over such a bride. The general trend in the country is that the bride's family pays the groom the dowry in the marriage, which is not Islamic. However, I know of one marriage deal that reversed the trend, followed the Islamic norm, and the groom's family paid the dowry instead! The groom's family paid a piece of land as dowry in lieu of cash. The market value of that particular land in 2008 was 17, 00,000.00 Taka or around 13,000 British Pound (£1=130 ). My friends told me that this is a going price for a British citizen bride. One justification given for this reversing of the common trend, in favour of the Islamic one, is as given by Mufti Mir, "It is for the future security of the bride, just in case the groom decides to leave this bride after becoming a UK citizen!" It was on this particular ground Mia's *mama* (maternal uncle) refused to give his *Londoni* daughter into marriage with Mia.

use every opportunity to sabotage any marriage deal for the *mama*'s daughters. For the time being, the *mama* is in a difficult situation but the bickering continues.

Rich individuals like Mr. Taher, who need more land to generate profit, power and prestige, are constantly in touch with certain types of people that hold important information on land - for instance, the staff at the government's land office in Bishwanath. According to Mr. Taher, the purpose of stories of disputes<sup>68</sup> is to devalue the property, as well as to fend off the prospective buyer. If a buyer is very powerful then this tactic will not work, however, if the buyer is newly rich but lacks social influence, connections and power, than dispute stories as well as direct and indirect threats work effectively. The transaction is mostly smooth when both of the parties are equally rich, powerful, and willing to enter into such an exchange, which is rare. It is also common for a powerful, prospective buyer, or in other words for an extortionist, to force an unwilling and less powerful landowner to sell his land for less money. The following section will expose the actors and dynamics of secrecy that are involved in the various phases of a land deal.

### **3.7 The actors and dynamics of land deal**

*Extort by any means* is the principle that dictates the rules here, especially regarding land deals. Nearly every land deal follows an identical path over a number of phases where many types of actors become involved with the process naturally. One such actor is an intermediary; people call this individual *dalal* (a derogatory term) behind their backs. Parties involved in the deal cannot normally avoid dominance of intermediaries and eventually succumb to most of their financial demands if they are not well connected or powerful locally.

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<sup>68</sup> Stories of disputes can be of many kinds. For example, i) story of division over the inherited land of the prospective seller, or ii) story that the seller is illegally holding the land, or iii) the land's borderlines are disputed, or iv) the land's registration and records are false, or v) the land is an 'enemy' property hence *khas* (government land). Before the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Hindu landowners owned all the large land estates of East Bengal, which is today's Bangladesh. After the partition, most of these landowners left for India. In the 1950s, the Pakistan Government declared this land to be 'enemy' property and made it *khas* or government land. Of course, the government can make a land *khas* in many ways, but in every case, *khas* land is an insecure land that can be reclaimed by its original owners (cf. Jansen G. 1987).

**The first phase** of a land deal involves a government's office (the *Upzila vumi or Sub-district land office*) that exclusively deals with land related issues. In this office, the prospective buyer receives first hand and valuable information on the land that he is planning to buy. The information includes the prospective plot's latest revenue status, exact location, exact size, real ownership, owners of the neighbouring land plots, and neighbours' ownership status, et cetera. This office is always busy and crowded with people (some of whom are government employees and some of whom are not) who know a lot about local land. Irrespective of the employment status, people in this office secretly work for a handful of local elites. *Dalals* sell information regarding local land to those who need such knowledge.

A *dalal's* main task is updating their bosses on potential land transactions that might take place in the area. They sell the same information to several potential buyers (like Mr. Taher), and to other intermediaries situated in the government's sub-registry office, in the district court, and in the local administration - especially in the police force. They also inform the owners of the bordering plots about the potential transaction and about the buyer. The same information they again drop at the doors of the known local extortionists for a lump sum. Mr. Taher says,

*“Dalals have all the local power brokers under their network. When people are naively thinking that they have just bought all the ‘secrets’ of a land amidst water tight ‘secrecy’ by appeasing these dalals with money on that very moment, they are actually just entering into a world where extortion is the law and extortionists rule.”*

**The second phase** of the process, which concerns striking the deal, starts when a prospective buyer and an eager seller agree over the price of the plot. This phase takes place primarily at the government's sub-registry office and at the district court. This phase is all about the vast legal paperwork that seals the deal. Transacting parties spend a large sum on bribing all the officials involved to complete this complex paperwork phase.

Once the deal becomes legal on paper, another round of money vanishes in the form of *baksheesh* (tips), as if the transacting parties are spending this out of the joy of closing the deal successfully! One reason for being so compliant to all the hassles is that the process assists them in dodging a vast amount of tax by officially registering a far lower transactional price than the real one. The real market value of a 1 *kiare* (1 *kiare* = 0.3 acres) plot can be as high as ten million Taka around the Bishwanath centre (see Gardner 2006), which is approximately 50 times more than the government's approved price. Officers cannot put the real price on the official documents, as this would prove that they have violated government's directives on the area's land price. This type of 'collaboration' between government officials and the general public, particularly in land transactions, is damaging the overall economy in two ways: first, the country's treasury is losing large sums of revenue; and second, the amount that is not in the legal documents becomes illegal and black through this transaction.

**The third phase** of the process, the final phase, begins once the parties receive all the official approvals. This is the real test for both parties. At this point each of the intermediaries knows that the seller of the land has received a huge sum of 'black' money from this transaction. Hence, the seller becomes an easy prey at the hands of the professional extortionists, comprised of police officers and politicians. On the other hand, the buyer of the land has to establish his ownership or *dokholdari* (occupancy) on his new property. However, before he can physically reach there, news may come to him that a third party has occupied his land. Once this occurs, the seller is threatened with grave legal consequences for possessing large sums of 'black' money, and the occupier will produce false documents and claim ownership of the land that the legitimate buyer has just bought. These methods of extortion are well known and the parties, both buyer and seller, will always employ a contingency plan once faced with such situations.

According to Mr. Taher, setting a *murrub'bi*<sup>69</sup> (patron) for overseeing the whole deal is the most effective plan that should be ready and in place before entering into such transactions. He suggests that:

*“If the plot is inside the prime area then one should try to contact the most powerful political figure of the area by using any form of connection available. A dalal is always handy in this situation.”*

However, my personal experience suggests that apart from the local power base one can always seek patronage from highly placed government officials in the civil bureaucracy, administration, military, et cetera. In each case, the *murrub'bi* has to find the deal lucrative for him, too. The process is the same even the land is peripheral and cheap - one always needs a *murrub'bi*. An individual like Mr. Taher, who assumes the position of *murrub'bi* for many, at times needs *murrub'bi* of his own, too. In any land deal in Bishwanath, individuals of various social standings, work either as a *dalal* or as a *murrub'bi* to chip the maximum benefit out from the main parties involved. Interestingly, inside a land deal it is often hard to distinguish the difference between a *dalal* and a *murrub'bi*.

In the preceding discussion, the *Londoni* Mr. Taher's economic interests, involvements, and activities were examined to see the ways remittances had shaped not only his life but that of the whole area. We also saw how, in the process, the Bishwanathis shaped the meaning and power of the remitted money. In the next section, therefore, the issue of charity, where Bishwanath's *Londonis* also direct their remittance money, to exhort their influence will be discussed.

#### **Section 4: Economy of charity and the *Jamia* of Bishwanath**

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<sup>69</sup> The word *murrub'bi* generally refers to elderly people but in this context to a patron, who holds a lot of power to handle land-related issues in favour of his client.



This section will examine how deeply Bishwanath's remittance, managed by the *Londoni* class, has penetrated into the moral life of the community. In order to do that the nature of direct and indirect links that this remitted money establishes between various social actors within the overall political economy of the area, within which *Jamia* itself represents just one aspect will be focused. Keeping these two important issues in mind, this section will examine the lives of the people of *Jamia* and people close to *Jamia* in order to demonstrate how the various economic aspects of Bishwanath influence their life and in the process the whole of a religious establishment. The first part of this section will highlight the two economic axes of Bishwanath, *Londoni* and *refugee*, and their role and relationships centred on charitable giving. The second part touches on sensitive issues surrounding the manner in which charity in Bishwanath has been used by some *Londonis*, on one hand, to help their clients and, on the other hand, to help themselves rather questionably.

### **3.8 The clients and patrons of the economy of charity**

Most of the teachers and students of *Jamia* come from homes that fall under a particular stratum in the rural Bangladesh's political economy. This stratum's general features are income and food insecurity, uncertain livelihood, frequent migration<sup>70</sup>, and a state of total powerlessness – in other words, almost the opposite of people like Mr. Taher. These families have few choices, and sending children to the *madrasas* is simply a subsistence technique. In Bishwanath, these people are known as *refugees*.

Large numbers of refugees arrive here for work as day labourers to avoid destitution. Forming a network of connection with an established member of the community can help

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<sup>70</sup> Migration is an important feature of *Jamia*. In the *ibtedia* (primary) section, 120 children out of 150 are from the *refugee* class. The second largest section of this *madrasa* is the *Hifzokhana* (*Qur'an* memorization centre), where 38 students out of 45 are non-local, and around 50 per cent of them are *refugee*. All 35 of the students of the Year 15 are non-local as well. In the rest of the *madrasa*, between Year 4 and Year 14, only 17 are locals. Similarly, the majority of the teachers are non-local, as are the two *Muaz'zins*, and the whole of the kitchen team. However, all members of the *madrasa* management committee are locals. Two of the highest posts – Principal (*Muhtamim*) and Vice-Principal (*Naeb-e-Muhtamim*) are also occupied by locals, as well as the post of *Imam*.

ease the initial difficulties of securing a job or establishing a home. To illustrate this process, I take Year 7 student Monwar's family as an example. Monwar's family moved out of a disaster-prone Southern district of Bangladesh after the devastating flood of 1998. With the advice from his brother-in-law, who was ideologically associated with the *Jamian's* late Head, Monwar's father arrived in Bishwanath and eventually was given a *Muaz'zin's* (prayer caller) job in the *Jamian* mosque. Over the last 10 years, with the support from the late Head and later from his friends and associates, Monwar's family has escaped utter destitution. Today all six of the family's children are receiving various levels and kinds of *madrassa* education. The mother is working as cook cum teacher at *Jamia's* female *madrassa* and the father is running a small tea-stall near *Jamia*. Helal, their eldest son and a Year 14 student of *Jamia*, contributes to the family's earnings by adding 5000 to 7000 Taka yearly that he receives from *Londoni* families as alms (*lillah*), poor rate (*zakat*), gift (*hadia*), and from invocation (*doa*) sessions. The *Jamia* and its supportive network backed by the money that it receives primarily in the form of donation, has helped and is still helping to improve this family's condition. Certainly, there are factors including the availability of jobs and concentration of rich people in Bishwanath that have played an important role but the *Jamia's* relationship with the family has been the most decisive one.

In a traditional rural town like Bishwanath, a basic form of social support is always available, beginning with the surrounding local mosques and *madrassas*, as we have seen in Monwar's case. The *Imam* of a mosque usually holds good connections; if he is unable to extend those, then the *Muaz'zins* (the prayer caller) can suggest one or two things in this matter. Apart from these two people, the mosque itself is the best place for meeting powerful local individuals. In *Jamia* on a number of occasions, I have seen strangers and travellers (*musafirs*) receiving food and shelter from its mosque. For a young migrant, *qawmi madrasas* as well as mosques are the best entry points for receiving this kind of temporary aid and, indeed, for settling down more permanently in a locality.

In Bishwanath, rich and powerful *Londoni* men, locally known as *Murrub'bis*, are the main patron of the local mosques, *madrassas*, and *refugees*. However, a *refugee* in

Bishwanath, as Monwar's case demonstrated, irrespective of his or her age, sex, and occupation, must have a patron who is capable of guiding her/him in this economy.

In this regard, the following example has relevance. An individual by the name of Hasan came to Bishwanath as a *madrasa* student; after completing many years of education from *Jamia* and another local *qawmi madrasa* he is now working at a medicine shop as a sales man. While it is true that Bishwanath's economy has the power to provide him with a job, he is performing badly both socially and economically compared with many of his contemporaries who are working in the local *madrasas* or mosques. One reason that he identified as his failing to get a *madrasa* job was a falling out with the authorities of both of the *madrasas*. In both cases, he left the *madrasas* without the authorities' consent, which enraged them and damaged his network within the *madrasas*.

*Londonis* in Bishwanath - in other words the patrons of many religious and secular institutions - seldom send their children to *madrasas* like *Jamia*. Instead, they donate cash so that the *madrasa* can run and in return only expect that the poor pupils of the *madrasa* will pray for them. Upon hearing one such request from a rich local man, *Mawlana Khaled* whispered into my ear,

“*Is he trying to buy blessings? Planning to bribe Allah through charity?*”

Khaled's comment is rather cynical, given the financial situation in which *madrasas* like *Jamia* find itself (see Chapter 2); without such donors not only the *Jamia* but also the families that send their children to *Jamia* would not sustain themselves. Even though I came to learn that in *Jamia* teachers are ill paid and often paid irregularly, yet in a rich area like Bishwanath they sustain through giving private tuitions, *doa* (invocation) sessions, and receiving alms, poor rate, gifts, et cetera from the locals. Hasan, who prematurely ended his relationship with his former *madrasa*, thus naturally finds it difficult to sustain.

Patrons of religious institutions donate money, land, and gold for building and maintaining mosques, *madrasas*, and shrines all over the country, all year round. In Bishwanath, after the easing of the state of emergency, the lion's share of the more than 4000000 Taka that *Jamia* received as donations came from the pockets of these *Londoni* patrons. As an example, individuals like Mr. Taher, besides donating good sums of money during every Ramadan and also on other occasions, would organize at least three *doa* sessions with the help of *Jamian ulama* for his family. This means that between 15,000 and 20,000 Taka in cash would travel from a *Londoni* to the *Jamia*. Most of the money that the *madrasa* receives as donations (*dan*), as gift (*hadia*), for conducting various *doa* (invocation) sessions for private individuals, as fees from students, and as rent from its market shops, is then spent to meet the very basic, everyday needs of its pupils and staffs.

The month of Ramadan is the peak time for all the rich people who want to donate, in various forms, both to show-off and to seek blessings of the poor. All well-known wealthy and powerful people, ranging from extortionists, usurers, *dalals*, businessmen, contractors (government suppliers), politicians, and civil servants, generously contribute to their local *madrasas* and mosques during the Ramadan and festival seasons. Pious individuals among the *refugees* also participate in this 'competition,' more for blessings and less for showing-off, by donating rice, vegetables, fruits, cattle, ducks, roosters, and – last but not least - their children. As one father from the Bishwanath's *refugee* background declared, in this way he is

*“I dedicate this son of mine for the service of Islam!”*

However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, due to a rise in the numbers of such institutions in Bishwanath and all over the country, the amount of donations that the *Jamia* is receiving is thinning when compared with the amount it used to receive 10 years ago.

### **3.9 Charity as a religious means to achieve a personal benefit**

In spite of *Jamia*'s annual income and the apparent generosity of local people, it is not always an individual's personal religious belief that convinces him to donate to or even establish religious institutions. Sometimes, a *madrassa* like the *Jamia* come into being or take certain actions due to the influence that powerful individuals exert over it. In an economy where a handful control most of the resources and power, a weak institution like the *Jamia* has little say but to serve those powerful individuals' material interests to remain afloat. In the following discussion, I will give two examples to demonstrate incidents where first, a gift was pledged as a donation but was actually intended to mobilize the support of the *madrassa* and its power base to serve someone's non-religious purpose; and where the *Jamia*'s sensitive religious position was exploited to use government land for personal benefits.

In the first instance, we will see how local elite for his personal interest hijacked a religious tradition of making a pledge and donating something to a mosque or *madrassa*. During the last ten days of the month of Ramadan, in accordance with the tradition of the mosques of the country, *Jamia* also arranges a charity session after the *tarwawi* prayer (special evening prayer for the month of Ramadan only). Members of the congregation (*jamaat*), which consists of all the patrons and clients of the *madrassa*, pledge to the *Imam* a gift for the *madrassa* or the mosque. At the end of the session, the *Imam* will typically read out the names of the donors and the amount of their pledges, praising and thanking them for their contributions.

On one such evening, a distinguished local man pledged a plot of land to the *madrassa* for the service of Islam. A pledge like that would not only be a great thing for the *madrassa* and the community of Muslims as a whole; the generosity of this kind of pledge would also be very surprising for most people, and enhance the donor's social profile in the process. In reality, those in power often pledge such generous gifts to people and institutions prior to an election. However, the people would also always interpret such pledges, whether they are eventually met or unmet, as having an ulterior motive. In this instance, people soon found out that the pledged land was actually a disputed piece of land that the distinguished man wanted to get rid of from his portfolio. By pledging the

land to an institution that is not only representative of the community's religious identity but also has a genuine support base within it, the donor attempted to buy the institution's support to create a stalemate. The purpose was either to eliminate competition over the land if the dispute concerns other claimants or to jeopardize the land's recovery project, if this was originally a government's property or *khas* (government) that this person was unlawfully using. Involving a religious institution ultimately makes the issue extremely sensitive for anyone who wants to take it away. Situations can be so awkward that even if the court gives its verdict in favour of the claimants or others, to whom it rightfully belongs, it would remain a very sensitive issue until or unless the religious elements remove themselves from it unilaterally.

*Jamians* recognize this sort of behaviour as unacceptable for a Muslim. Yet powerful people continue to behave in this way and *Jamians* continue to decline such pledges politely. However, the second example will demonstrate that it can do little when one of its own patrons pulls it to that direction. This example concerns the large piece of land that is situated between *Jamia's* main entrance and the main local road that is used unlawfully and irreligiously through renting it to a plant nursery for an insignificant amount. Upon investigation, I came to learn that the land officially belongs to no one, which automatically makes it a *khas* land. However, by bribing concerned government offices one of the *Jamia's* patrons is keeping this land under *Jamia's* control as if the *Jamia* is holding it to run the nursery. Interestingly, the owner of the nursery is not the *madrasa* but one of the brothers of one of the members of the *madrasa's* management committee! The *madrasa* is just serving an influential individual's interest. Here, we have to keep in mind that none of the members of the *madrasa's* management committee belongs to the *refugee* class. However, some *Jamians*, including the non-local teachers, find the involvement of *Jamia* in this type of illegal activity despicable.

It bears repeating that Bishwanath society has two clearly demarked faces - *Londoni* and *refugee*, very rich and very poor, local and non-local, landowners and landless, exploiters and exploited. However, the same Bishwanath's economy has many faces. Here I have highlighted four of them: consumption, land, extortion and charity. In this last section of

the chapter, I attempted to demonstrate how the local community of *Londoni* and *refugee* revolves around *Jamian*-centred charity, where charity is less about religion and more about flexing one's muscle of influence.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

The purpose of the chapter was to highlight the power of remittance in the political economy of Bishwanath. Here we have seen how it is fuelling consumption, which is dramatically shaping the physical, social, political, and economic landscape of the area as well as being shaped by those changes. The most important aspect this discussion highlights is the centrality of remittance, which is underpinned by many centres and many circles of power - emerging, vanishing, competing, and collaborating over profit, power, and prestige. Hence, knowing what Mr. Taher really is - a *murrub'bi* or a *dalal* - is as difficult here as explaining what *Jamia* stands for in the Bishwanath or who is a good Muslim and who is not in that context.

Grounded in the discussion of both the previous and present chapters we find an ideologically weak, politically marginal, and economically dependent *Jamia* that is, as will be illustrated in the following chapters, propagating notions of the 'ideal Muslim' while simultaneously asserting Islam on individual, society, and the state. It is in these weak, marginal, and dependent qualities of *Jamia*, as will be argued later in this thesis, which lay the recipe of success of the *qawmi madrasa* system in Bangladesh.

The next chapter will focus on the relationship between *Jamia* as a school and individuals as students and carers. This concept is known among the *Jamians* as *line*, and presents a model for approved behaviour, necessary connection, and a sense of belonging in relation to both the world and religion.

## Chapter Four: Understanding the *line*

On a monsoon-drenched evening of *Sravan*<sup>71</sup>, trapped inside the *madrassa* mosque after the *Maghrib* (dusk prayer), I was talking to a group of men, amongst whom were six *refugee* fathers involved in various wage earning activities within this study area, who each had one or more sons attending various *madrasas*. It was not a planned talk; instead, the monsoon and darkness, due to a power cut, aided it into becoming a full-fledged discussion. We discussed schooling, something that most of them primarily and freely perceived as an important means for a better future. They also emphasized that school should be a place where children will not only learn skills but *adab* (manner), too.

These men showed resistance to recalling a single example that defends the virtues of the secular schooling system, which was somewhat shocking. Secular school, for these men, is merely a source for learning, reading, writing, and counting, in other words, for getting by on a day-to-day basis. According to them, parents who send children to the secular schools are aware that they have a very slim chance of completing secondary schooling, let alone beyond. Thus, to them, leaving aside one's day-to-day household responsibilities for the sake of (secular) school-related tasks is almost as unacceptable as wasting time by strolling around the bazaar or in the playground. The term that they use for describing this type of negative behaviour is *shadhinota* (freedom), which in this context implies disobedience (*obaddhota*) instead.

To these fathers of Bishwanath, time wasting is a problem that arises from the child's disobedience, which they believe the secular school system promotes. As a result, as we shall see in the first section of this chapter, a father withdraws his son from a secular school to curb his rising disobedience. With few exceptions most of the *refugee* parents choose *madrassa* education over secular schools firstly because of the household's economic constraints' and secondly because of all the negative stories and experiences of secular education. A critical evaluation of the secular education and schooling system,

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<sup>71</sup> According to Bengali calendar this is the first month of the rainy season, which starts from the middle of July.



parenthesized and italicized below, emerged from the responses of these *refugee* fathers who defend the decisions behind sending their children to *madrastas*,

*“We hear that shik’kha (secular education) is for all and good for all, but that’s not true. We can see that it is not for people like us who cannot even earn enough to live by today alone...We hear it is free but go and check, it is not. We hear shik’kha is for the future, may be that is not true either, because then our children will have no future. So many lies in it cannot make it true! Therefore, what is the point of having it?”*

These devout Muslim fathers wish that whatever their children become would be beneficial for the whole family. Not a single man thought that rights over one’s acquired skill is meant, exclusively, for one’s own benefit; rather Allah gives it fundamentally, for the benefit of the whole family. Therefore, they hope that one day their *madrassa*-going children will be able to become *Alim* or *Hafiz-e-Qur’an* (a person who mastered and memorized the *Qur’an*). As noted by one of the fathers -

*“The demand for a good Hafiz, or a good Alim is very high in the society and they earn quite good too. Once they manage to ‘find a line’, there is no looking back.”*

The *line* that one needs to be successful, according to the father here, is the main theme of this chapter. I will examine here the *line* as a quality that parents and the *madrassa* authorities believe that children have to have in order for them to become an ideal person; whom everyone will refer to as a ‘good Muslim’, even prior to calling him a good *Alim* or a *Hafiz*. Here, it is important to note that the English word *line*, like many other English words with their meanings intact, has long been part of spoken Bengali. Prior to this examination, I will briefly consider another highly relevant issue, embedded in the local context, which concerns the idea of loyalty. As we shall see, this idea does not contradict the notion of the ‘line’, but instead strengthens the concept and its authority.

#### 4.1 (a) The underlying motif

From an early age Bengali society, irrespective of religion, teaches its young members that *Ma Bape'r pa'er niche shontan'er behesto*, which literally means *one's heaven lies beneath her/his parents' feet*. The notion is so popular among Bengali Muslim parents that they want schools and *madradas* to instil this belief into their children.

According to most of the *Jamian* adults, unconditional obedience is imperative for the collective elevation of a deprived family. It teaches many Islamic ideals to its students including the ideals of safeguarding the status of the parents. For a resource-constrained father, therefore, *madrada* is very attractive as it provides the most desirable form of schooling, especially, for the most undisciplined and worthless children. It is not entirely because it is inexpensiveness, according to these fathers, but also because it instils parental loyalty in the children. Sending useless sons to *madradas* is a popular corrective measure taken by many parents in order to avert abandonment in their old age by the sons. One father's remark is significant in this regard,

*“A child who gives no ear to his parents' or family's needs and demands can never be considered as a good child; his knowledge has no worth.”*

This chapter is therefore concerned with showing the ways disadvantaged families and *Jamians* are empowering each other to establish loyalty in children so that they can serve their parents and families. The first section will present a detailed discussion on the first type of *line* briefly described above and the second section will present the last two types of *lines*. The chapter begins with a general discussion about the concept of *line* itself.

#### 4.1 (b) The *line*

In this chapter, we shall thus encounter three types of *lines*. The first *line* is the one that the parents consider best for their children to grow up as useful and loyal, which we shall consider as the *behavioural* aspect of line. The second *line* is the *Ostad-Khadim line*

(master-servant) that resembles a master-disciple model within the teacher-student-parents relationship in the *Jamian* context. This we shall consider as the *connection* aspects of *line*. The third and final *line* instils a sense of orientation into a person in relation to both world and religion, which in the *Jamian* context is transmitted primarily under the guise of religious performance; hence, we shall call it the *qu'tar* (the row that worshippers form and follow to perform an obligatory prayer) aspect of *line*.

As mentioned previously, discipline is biggest preoccupation for most of the parents and it plays an important role when they decide to send children to *madrasas*. Durkheim (1961) observed the importance of discipline in relation to school education as it is linked with the moral life of the nation. In every imaginable situation *Jamians*, especially inside the *madrasa* premises, keep themselves aware of the concept of *line*. *Madrasa* teachers are aware of their role as disciplinarians, which is primarily about producing a nation of devout Muslims both bodily and spiritually<sup>72</sup>.

*Jamian* teachers categorize pupils into two types, one is in the *line* type the other one is out of *line*, popularly known as *be-line* (one that lacks the *line*). *Line* is, as I have understood it, mainly about rules and the importance of following those rules. Primarily, the belief is that a child who is in the *line* will blindly believe in his guardians. This underlying parental demand, for a loyal son or daughter is expressed, often disguisedly, by stating that they have dedicated their sons (/daughters) for the service of Islam. The *Madrasa* is therefore a place where children are sent to learn the ways of serving Islam, of which duties towards the parents is one. *Line* is also and mostly, according to my informants, perceived as something that has a starting point and an end, almost like a straight line or path, which may start with emptiness but gradually fill up with all the goodness of a virtuous Muslim. By enrolling a child into the *madrasa* the Bengali Muslim families initiate a tripartite bond where parents of the child, along with the *madrasa* authorities, assume new roles in relation to the child. In other words, the parents and *madrasa* become mutually approving partners in this project of creating a good

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<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, a similar preoccupation with discipline is observed in the concept of *Sadachar* (moral education) in schools that propagate Hindu nationalist ideology in India (Froerer 2007)

Muslim. In this way not only the *madrasa* teacher and the child but also the child, the *madrasa*, and the family become connected with each other.

Many of the pupils at the *madrasa* are aware of their role, which is subservient in nature and situated at the receiving end within this disciplining regime, and they maintain themselves closely *in the line*. Many, so young that they have little or no awareness of their role, work hard to imitate or follow those who seem to be *in the line*. In the *Jamian* context *in the line* means an unconditional submission to the rules, wills, and teachings that it sets out for its learners. Conversely, there is the type of pupil who is *not in the line*. To explain this type the *Jamian ulema* introduce two important mental qualities: *bujh* and *ich'cha*. The *bujh* refers to a wide range of qualities, such as understanding, insight, maturity, knowledge, intelligence, et cetera, and *ich'cha* refers to willingness, intension, motivation, drive, et cetera. According to these *ulema* when someone is *not in the line* she or he actually represents a mental state that lacks either the *bujh* or the *ich'cha* to do what is expected of her or him. For this type, discipline is primarily about receiving physical pain through punishments and learning to accept that, unconditionally. Unconditional acceptance of pain is a mark of one's *ich'cha* to change his type and it tells that someone is willing to *step into the line*. However, in order to find out the true colour of one's *ich'cha* and one's *bujh* even those who belong to the *line* require monitoring. Irrespective of one's type, (s)he who enters into this school is obliged to comply with its system; whether (s)he has *bujh* or *ich'cha*, (s)he has no other options but to collaborate. This will become clearer in the ethnographic account that follows.

### **Section 1: The behavioural aspect of line:**

All the teachers in the *Ibtedai* (Primary) section know Munna as a mischievous pupil. He resides in the *madrasa's* boarding school yet he regularly skips classes, and prayers, and has already developed a reputation for his out-of-*madrasa* activities that are detrimental for the *madrasa's* reputation. The following discussion, will clearly lay out why, after all these menaces, the *Jamia* authorities turned a blind eye and ignored his behaviour for such a long time.

Besides Munna, his father, Mr Ali, has also become a menace for the *madrassa*'s reputation. Munna's teachers describe the father as "one of a kind" who is making both Munna's and the teachers' jobs difficult by closely monitoring his son's day-to-day schooling. Finally, after Munna's involvement in two incidents of snatching and stealing, the *madrassa* authorities were left with little room to sit idly. Eventually, the *madrassa* wanted to get rid of Munna, and in the process his father, by asking both to discuss among themselves a solution that would save the *madrassa* from further disrepute. In doing so, the *madrassa* authorities stepped away from the discussion and took a neutral position. Such neutrality is deliberate, according to the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim* (Vice-Principal),

*"Getting involved into this mess will not serve the madrasa with anything other than bad names. We see it as personal and between the cynical father and his unruly son only. None of them is in the line. The whole situation would have been avoided if they had taken the appropriate measures that were available to them since the beginning."*

The *Jamian ulema* and teachers think that both Munna and his father came to the *Jamia* with their own agendas and undermined the *Jamian* agenda. At the top of Mr Ali's agendas was to discipline Munna; in order to realize that he brought Munna to *Jamia*. To Mr. Ali, *Jamia*'s main attraction was its lax administration and location, both of which he took advantage of. In the following discussion, therefore, we will examine Mr. Ali's, Munna's, and *Jamia*'s involvement in making Munna's *line* schooling a success.

#### **4.2 Mr. Ali's *line***

Munna's father, Mr. Ali is an electrician by profession. He studied until year eight. Before starting to work independently, he spent many years moving from one workshop to another, from one *ostad* (*guru*/master) to another, to learn the trade. Today he is rather successful in his trade and people here now know him as a good electrician, as they call

him *electrician vhai* (electrician brother) or *electrician shab* (Mr. Electrician) instead of *Ali vhai* or *Ali shab*.

However, Mr. Ali still regrets his school leaving decision. According to him, he took that decision because he was naïve (lacked *bujh* or mental maturity), lacked a guide, and was undisciplined. Therefore, as a father, he does not want Munna to go *be-line* (out of the line). He strongly believes that it is necessary for Munna to stay in the *line* to become educated and to become someone successful (*boro kichu*)

For Mr. Ali *line* is essential for the success of education and education for him is,

*“All about school, teachers, books, memorization, exams, results, certificates, and finally a job...”*

According to him sports, music, drama, reading out-books (non-academic), watching movies and TV, time passing by mingling with friends, chatting up people or by wondering around the bazaars, are all detrimental and bad influences for education. Thus, no school should allow its pupils to indulge in these as they take a child away from his line or course.

He has become so obsessed with keeping Munna in the *line* that a year and half ago, not only did he change Munna’s school but he also picked a completely new form of schooling. Munna was one of the best pupils in the Year 5 of a government primary school but just because he was developing a “*nesha* (addiction) for sports” his father thought, “*He needs to be saved from this addiction,*” and hence, he became a *qawmi madrasa* student. Mr. Ali says that the decision came out of his sheer frustration with the school as it was sitting idly while “*my son was going out of control.*” He continues that Munna was becoming disobedient because of the school,

*“He was becoming disrespectful and disobedient of us (his parents), wasn’t assisting his mother or other adults when I am not around, and spending more and more time with friends in the playgrounds or market places.”*

NMB: How was he disrespectful?

*“He was not listening to anyone! His grandfather, uncles, mother, and I told him repeatedly to not to go out to play once back from school. He will not listen. We told him not hang around the bazaar during school breaks, he would not listen! Ignoring one’s Murrub’bi (guardian) is a very disrespectful behaviour...”*

NMB: Now, how was he not assisting his mother?

*“The same way! By simply ignoring her! For example, he will disobey his mother if sometimes she asks him to take the cattle out to the field for grazing, or take care of his little sisters while she is busy in the kitchen, etc...”*

NMB: But all these can be detrimental for his studies?

*“Tell me, how if someone listens to the family elders and assists the parents, can this be detrimental for his studies? Teacher at the school tell us the same: when he does badly in the exam, they complain all the time that we keep him too busy with chores! This is not true! They see nothing wrong either in themselves or in the freedom that they allow these children! Anytime you go we will see children playing in the school’s field. Why children are out of their classes when they are supposed to be in? Because, the teacher skipped his class today, he is sick! You go to bazaar in the middle of the day you will see children in uniform hanging around the tea stalls! Ask them, what are you doing here during the class time? They will say that they are there to fetch tea, betel, or cigarette for their teachers! Sometimes, half of the year finishes even*

*without opening the first page of a book because there are not enough teachers to cover all the classrooms and subjects! Now you tell me which one is the worse for one's education! Listening to your well-wishers or going to schools that do not care!"*

Here Mr. Ali is presenting us with the real picture of a rural primary school that he accuses of failing his son's "education". He also presents his position in favour of children's active participation in the day-to-day household chores not only as normal but also legitimate. Moreover, he did not mention explicitly the importance of value teachings but according to his understanding of education it is not about picking up negative attributes such as: disrespect, disobedience, irresponsibility, care-freeness, selfishness, et cetera.

An almost identical, and rather generalized, view is prevalent among the *madrasa* educated and educators regarding secular schooling, whereby they accuse these schools of promoting negative virtues like irresponsible behaviour, disloyalty, and lack of respect towards elders. However, the argument that the *Jamian ulema* presents in this regard is,

*"When education is plainly about gaining knowledge to accumulate worldly wealth and power then that education slaves for such a world that values no morality..."*

This resonates with the *ashol/nokol* (genuine/false) dichotomy that we examined in Chapter 2 and will return to in the following chapters.

From the above discussion, however, it is clear that Mr. Ali's concern is with *line* and not so much with an academic education. Further, we learn Mr. Ali's ideas on the *line* and *be-line*, according to which, *line* is simultaneously unquestionable obedience towards authority and authority's unparallel control over the subject, and *be-line* is anything that disrupts or challenges this status. *Line*, in other words, is a condition, without which neither education nor schooling can be of any use for the pupils. On this definition of the



*line*, here we see that the *Jamia* and Mr. Ali stand shoulder to shoulder in demeaning secular education and the secular schooling system. However, soon we will see that, as an institution, the interpretations of *line* that the *Jamia* advocates are neither serving Mr. Ali nor his son's purposes.

### 4.3 Mr. Ali's choices

There are clearly some important reasons why parents like my informants prefer the *madrasa* to the secular school system. Firstly, all secular schools are organized and operated under the ministry, directorate, and boards of education of the Government of Bangladesh; therefore, they are national in their characteristics. Hence, the less educated and less well-off rural parents describe the secular schooling system as distant, at times even scarily cold, and as belonging to an uncomfortable territory. In contrast, according to the same parents, the *madrasa* is a local and community based enterprise with a clearly spelled out moral agenda that the community understands, accepts, and generates.

Secondly, it is less complex bureaucratically and more participatory; financially it is more dependent on the local community's donations, and it aids and encourages more direct and informal interaction between the parents and itself. Thirdly, for the rural masses, the *madrasa* is the next level of home schooling that upholds, supplements, and carries out the same moral values that most of the Muslim households in rural Bangladesh have great faith in. Sometimes this perception of the *madrasa*, as an extension of the Muslim household, gives the parents an impetus for entrusting it and its teachers with many of the parental authorities over their children, with the very hope that this would help transform their children into a submissive lot forever.

Mr. Ali chose a *qawmi madrasa* after pulling Munna out of a secular school simply because he believes that the secular schools do not care to inculcate loyalty among their pupils. On top of this, he also believes that *qawmi madrasas* are very strict and are very good at disciplining children like Munna, who is already travelling on the *be-line*. Quite naturally, therefore, after removing Munna from the secular school, bringing him back to

the *line* became Mr Ali's biggest challenge. However, unlike many fathers, Mr. Ali has shown unwillingness in entrusting *Jamia* with Munna's guardianship. He remained steadfast in his belief that his own supervision, even when the son is living away from home, is vital in this regard. In order to ensure the best of both parental authority and school's authority, Mr. Ali chose the *Jamia* over some of the well-reputed and strict *madrasas* of the district. A well-reputed *madrasa* would not allow him to access his son as frequently as the *Jamia* does. His argument is,

*“In many respects, boro madrasagula (well reputed and large madrasas) copy the schools. Teachers there would also look down upon me based on my occupation as an electric mistiri (mere electrician). However, here many of the teachers are like me, bideshi (foreign, non-local), and shadharon manush (literally it means public but here it is indicative of underprivileged class position). They give me proper honour....”*

In relation to the above comment, it should be added that Mr. Ali thinks that most of the secular schoolteachers enjoy too much liberty (*beshi shadhin*), are less accountable, and are indifferent towards the community that they serve. Such perceptions are so widespread in the area that even a healthy level of interpersonal communication between the schoolteachers and the community is often not enough for the parents to keep blaming the teachers for promoting *be-adabi* (impolite, ill mannered, et cetera.) among their children.

By choosing this *madrasa*, therefore, Mr. Ali knowingly compromised quality in favour of a slice of control over his son's schooling. As mentioned before, control plays an important role in Mr. Ali's concept of *line*. Besides, he admits that the decision in favour of this particular *madrasa* is an economic one also, which largely concerns the well-being of his whole family. For a number of years, due to a construction boom, this area has been providing him with regular employment and stable income that he did not want to disrupt by sending Munna to a faraway place. Therefore, Munna's enrolment in this *madrasa* conveniently fits within his economic considerations, which is a common

feature of the lives of many migrants living in this area, as featured in Chapter 3 and later on in Chapter 7.

Mr. Ali had always expected that the system would deliver some form of punishment for the sake of disciplining Munna. He also had a strong faith in the transformative nature of punishment and believed that painful bodily punishment can bring the spoiled ones back to the *line*. In other words, corporal punishment can induce *bujh* or understanding as well as *ich'cha* or motivation, as one of the *Jamian ulema* asserts,

*“All the beating marks that one receives on one’s body from his Ostad’s canes will go to heaven. These are blessings.... Such memories of shashti (punishment) will stop him from repeating the wrong also...”*

#### **4.4 Munna’s line**

It is for all of these reasons that on a July morning of 2006, in order to pull Munna back to the line, Mr. Ali enrolled his *be-line* son into the *Jamia*. In the process, he literally uprooted Munna from his primary school, its playground, year five classroom and mates, home, loving grandparents, mother, and younger siblings. Sharing his pain and frustration with me, Munna tells me that he likes almost nothing about his life and schooling in the *Jamia* -

*“The classroom floor is dirty and one has to sit on that for the whole day, sometimes a young one might excrete during the class and the class would continue after a quick cleaning. Teachers are cane flunking. Lessons are about learning to perform Salat (five daily prayers), beliefs, suras (Qur’anic verses), etc. properly. In classes like Bengali, English and math, where all the books are elementary, I get the chance of showing off my skills but no one cares about those. I strongly detest Arabic and Urdu! Everything is difficult here and everything demands a lot of attention! After the classes, life in the boarding is much worse –no fun is allowed, the quality of food is extremely*

*poor, teachers' are around all the time, mates are behind each other's back looking for a fault, almost everyone from every corner is keeping an eye on everyone else..."*

The overall environment of this *madrasa*, as described above, is already a punishment itself, and a ban on all form of sporting activities only intensified his sufferings. Munna continues his narration,

*"Our teachers tell us that the body is only for Allah's ibadat (worship), playing football and cricket is Shaitan'er ibadati (worshipping the evil/Satan)."*

Therefore, the proper body management is a priority here as well as personal hygiene and cleanliness for Allah's satisfaction in order to be blessed. He continues,

*"Alas! Have a look into our toilets! They are extremely dirty! Look at our bathrooms. You will find that their water is unclean, no clean place for one to wash the cloths, long queues in front of the bathrooms often leave many pupils like me with no choice but to skip showers for days; yet everyone here is very serious about purity and demands cleanliness all the time..."*

Living in the midst of all these controls and confusion, Munna was becoming desperate to find a way out,

*"No freedom, always the fear of making wrong and getting caught ... as if all of us are inside a huge classroom and don't have an idea on when this will come to an end..."*

To some extent, the last statement is a fact as his mates and he were residing in a room under the supervision of a resident teacher that transforms itself into a classroom every morning (see Chapter 7 where I narrate 'a day in the life of the *madrasa*'). In addition, every evening his father was visiting the *madrasa* to check on him. That had really

pushed him to the edge. It was so much for his nerve that he used to behave erratically. However, the tension started to subside at some point with special arrangements between his father and the *madrasa*. According to Munna,

*“First couple of months it was extremely unbearable. I used to cry a lot and fight a lot. Then, some of my boarding mates and ostads (teachers) would try to calm me down. They would call my father. Father would come pretty quickly and would take me to the nearby bazaar, sometimes he would give me some money to spend or would buy me some biscuits or cakes. He would allow me to talk to my mother and little sister on his mobile at times. But I was never allowed to go home so I ran away a number of times. That worked! My father made a special arrangement with the dhoftor (madrasa office) that had allowed me to stay away from the boarding during the weekly holidays. This means I would run out of the madrasa immediately after the Thursday classes and would not return before Saturday at 8 o’clock, just before the classes sit. During this leave from the madrasa I would only go back to my father’s place to eat, rest and to prepare my lessons but rest of it I would spend playing and wandering around the area. With this arrangement life started to get a bit tolerable now...”*

Even though such an arrangement brought some peace to Munna and others around him, it didn’t last long as new and more serious troubles began to emerge. Empowered with the newly retained freedom, Munna soon developed a network of friends outside the *madrasa* with whom he started to pass time by skipping classes. Mr. Ali’s well-wishers started to bring news to him and *Madrasa*’s to the *madrasa* office (*dhoftor*) concerning Munna’s deeds. Soon, he became a well-known face once again. The walls of leniency agreed upon between his father and the office started to close down on him. The office scrapped the arrangement with his father and started to issue fines and punishments for all of Munna’s unacceptable actions.

However, these were not enough to deter him from behaving more desperately. On several instances, he physically attacked his boarding mates, inside and outside the *madrasa*, who were collaborating with his father. His father stopped giving the pocket money, which did not stop him from eating on credit (*baki*) at the restaurants or at the tea stalls. Eventually those places stopped serving him, too. Then one-day things simply got out of hand when he snatched a pack of biscuit from a tea stall. Eventually, the owner complained at the office. The office arranged a special meeting, where in the presence of many, one *Jamian* staff blamed him for all the lost scraps from the *madrasa*'s building sites. All the complaints against him eventually proved to be true, Mr. Ali received firm instruction to settle all the monetary disputes immediately, and both son and father were told off. Interestingly, however, the *madrasa* did not expel Munna. Instead, it advised the father to reconsider sending his son back to his old school again. In the end, Munna left *Jamia* and is currently attending a primary school very close to it; again, Mr. Ali's economic considerations coincided with his decision of keeping Munna close to him to keep Munna on the *line*.

From the above discussion, we see that Munna successfully resisted his new schooling while his father's agendas regarding him are collapsing. On the other hand, *Jamia* failed to alter their behaviour. Below, we shall examine, therefore, the *connection/networking* aspect of the concept of *line* to form a complete picture of where everything went wrong in the above scenario.

## **Section 2:**

### **4.5 The *connection* and *orientation* aspects of *line*: *Jamia's line***

One important issue needs to be addressed here in relation to Mr. Ali's experiment with his son's education and schooling. This concerns the idea of being in the line but in a completely different context. According to Munna's class teacher,

*“Mr. Ali didn’t follow the right line since the beginning...He was out of the line.” Then he continues explaining, “Everyone has to follow a line, which is already there, to be successful in pursuing a goal. He never asked any of us to look after his son! A father’s responsibility does not end just by sending the child to us. He has to step aside and we were supposed to step in, but he had never given us that power of authority (khomota) to act!”*

*Qawmi madrasas* are open to accept anyone and that is traditionally how these *madrasas* create bonds with the community. Still a *line* (of connection) of some sort is important in order to create an imagined bond of unity and mutual dependency between the parties. Those who lack such a *connection* or *line* would try to create one immediately, especially a father who is leaving his son in a shockingly different environment, as we have already heard in Munna’s narration. However, Mr. Ali never followed this *line* neither to presume an imagined bond with the *madrasa*, nor to secure a smooth transition for Munna. In this context, a *line* actually represents a human connection that establishes a bond.

The standard and well-established practice of *connection* building is informal but effective in the *Jamia*. Anyone who is leaving a child should transfer some of the authorities of guardianship to a *Jamian* or someone close to a *Jamian*. This guardian or *murrub’bi* thereby assumes the position of a patron and extends various supports to the child.

Hence, the *madrasa* authorities encourage the guardians to talk to the head teachers of classes, known as class-teacher, about this prior to leaving the child on its own. This is a subtle traction for those who have not yet managed to establish a *line*. In these circumstances, a *line* between the class-teacher and a new child in his class establishes if the child’s guardian politely seek that. For an example a father can say,

*“Sir! The child has no one here, so please take him as a khadim (one who serves a superior someone voluntarily) and do whatever you feel would be good for him to do, you are his mother, and you are his father...”*

In response to such an approach, the teachers usually agree to take the child as *khadim*. After establishing that bit, the child would be asked to do the following,

*“Obey your teacher, here he is your everyone, always stay close to him, serve him and if there is a problem tell to him ....”*

Depending on the guardian’s ability, money changes hands from guardian to new *murrub’bi* for meeting certain expenses of the child. This handing over of the expenses is symbolic and is a secret feature of this whole transaction that enhances the quality of the *connection*. Irrespective of the amount that changes hands in this process, the exchange finally completes (or creates) a *line* here. To sum up the process, it is not only handing over responsibilities of a child but also a process of transferring power of authority from one end to another. This *line* or the process of establishing a connection with an institution is vital for creating a safety net around a child that is just entering into the system. Here the guardians welcome their role as clients, keeping the long-term wellbeing of their children in mind, a rule that – as we have seen above - Mr. Ali failed to appreciate.

After enrolling and securing a place in the *madrasa*’s boarding school for a monthly fee of 200 Taka, Mr. Ali left Munna all by himself without initiating any *line* with the class-teacher. For every newcomer, especially for someone unwilling like Munna, the *line* is the least painful way of adjusting with the system. Hence, the arrogant and *be-line* father Mr. Ali, as the teachers call him, left Munna to deal with a new way of schooling completely unprotected. As a result, Munna’s downfall was obvious and, according to the teachers, it was mostly due to his father’s foolishness (*awrami*). In the beginning, Mr. Ali was happy with the way the *madrasa* allowed unlimited access to his son. Nevertheless, the more he took advantage of that opportunity the more the teachers started to distance themselves from both father and son, something that he never noticed!



As described earlier, Mr. Ali had learned his trade by being under many *ostads* (masters), who were institutions themselves. In the master-centred informal learning environments, to be successful, a transfer of guardianship is a key norm. In Mr. Ali's case, he had to learn his electrician's trade under masters who had assumed his guardianship. Later, at the beginning of his professional life, many different forms of associations became vital for the success of his business. His career trajectory is a proof of the way *line* works and it very clearly says that Mr. Ali is not only aware of it but also produced by it. However, for Munna he is breaking the rules of a system that is very similar to his own past encounters with master-centred system, even though the learning is of a different kind and taking place in a different environment. The school relentlessly encourages parents to delegate some form of guardianship of the child onto it to make the schooling a success. However, Mr. Ali continuously denied the *madrassa* of this simply because he enrolled Munna to re-establish a *line* that suits his own purposes most and not a *line* that the *Jamian's* teach. It is for this reason that he says,

*"I always wanted to make him an engineer, not a miashab (madrassa graduate)...But if he wants to become a mia shab then I will leave him at Allah's wish."*

Hence, even though he is respectful towards Munna's teachers, he has ignored all the hints regarding transferring Munna's guardianship to them. Similarly, while most of the parents lined up for patronages at the doors of their sons' respective teachers, Mr. Ali stayed away. His open assertion of "*boarding and tuition fees should be enough...*" for Munna's schooling is for many *Jamians* "*wrong thinking.*" According to those *Jamians*,

*"Mr. Ali, himself was unwilling to maintain a line (line'e line'e cholta chain na), which was the biggest impediment in instilling any kinds line in his son."*

It is precisely this tug of war between Mr. Ali and the *Jamia* over Munna's guardianship, coupled with their diametrically different interests with *line* that has contributed to the straining of their relationship.

#### 4.6 Learning *line* in everyday context

In the preceding ethnography we have seen how the politics of social networking, which is presented here as the *connection* aspect of *line*, plays a decisive role when it is invested in successfully inculcating moral *lines* into a child. This old, well-established and complex social process involves multi-directional negotiations between individuals and dominant social institutions as well as discourses. *Line* as presented above is a form of cultural capital too, which is inherent in the societal processes. It is there for one to grab, yet individuals like Mr. Ali tend to act defiantly, thereby reaffirming its power again.

The *line* that represents the intersection of cultural capital with political, economical and social implications - i.e. as represented in the ethnography above in the *Jamia's* case, which insists upon delegating parental authority for creating a patron-client bond between the *madrassa* and parents, between the teachers and pupils - has a different moral character than the idea of the moral *line* that the Islamic scriptures uphold. This ideological discrepancy is seen between the first kind of *line* presented in the following section in terms of the role *khadim*, which is a pragmatic construction, and the second kind of *line* discussed in the subsequent section, under *qu'tar*, which is about maintaining moral order. As we shall see, in spite of this discrepancy, both kinds of *lines* work in harmony with the common goal of keeping the socio-political status quo of Bishwanath intact.

Within the everyday, in or out of classroom, in more or less formal contexts, pupils receive lessons in the *Jamia* that justify the rationale and power of *line*. In the following discussion, I will present two such out-of-class situations that train children about the *line* within the *Jamia*. One such out-of-class and informal situation is the role of *khadim* that almost every *madrassa* pupil assumes besides his role as a young learner. This is a known category in the wider Bangladeshi Muslim society and in this *madrassa's* context binds the teacher (*ostad*) with the student (*shagred*) on a personal level. The other out-of-class but formal situation that trains children in the *line* is the law of *qu'tar* (row) inside the

prayer *jamaat* (congregation). This rule is religious performance oriented, yet it has a symbolic power that travels beyond that context and addresses the self within the social.

Both of these provide broader insight into the *connection* aspect of the *Jamian line*. However, in the first instance of *khadim*, the *connection* aspect of *line* contains the tripartite relationship between the student, *madrasa*, and parents; whereas in the second instance of *qu'tar*, the orientation of the *self* in relation to the religious performance, represents learning to know where one stands in relation to others. Hence, both of these aspects are vital for the success of any *line*-centred schooling. In the following discussion, I will elaborate ethnographically that *line* is a form of cultural capital that the *Jamia* here teaches its pupils through its *khadim* and *qu'tar* aspects.

#### **4.7 *Khadim***

The main principle of the *Jamian line* – the expectation that parents assume the client's role within a patron-client relationship with the *Jamia*, and that labelled Munna and Mr. Ali as *be-line* - has never been used against *Mawlana* Reza Ahmed, the son of the late Mr. Alam. The late Mr. Alam, a cattle trader<sup>73</sup> and owner of a large amount of cultivable land, was one of the founding fathers of the *Jamia* and his family continues to heavily contribute towards the day-to-day running of this *madrasa*.

*Mawlana* Reza, one of the junior *Jamian* teachers, recalls and continues to feel badly about one particular crime, among many, that he had committed when he was in Year 9 in this *madrasa*. He thinks that he lacked understanding (*bujh*) in those days and believes that due to his father's very high social position he was unstoppable and accountable to none. During that intense time of his life, one of the most respectable teachers of the *madrasa* had confronted him over some of his misdeeds. Young Reza did not anticipate such a confrontation and in the middle of that nasty argument, he slapped the teacher a couple of times and then fled from the *madrasa*. However, that was not very out of

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<sup>73</sup> A few of my sources told me that elite locals of Bishwanath, traditionally and until the start of mass migration towards London, were cattle traders. Outsiders of this area often ridicule Bishwanath locals for their association with cattle trading, which traditionally marked as low class profession in rural Bangladesh.

character, as the *Jamians* already knew him as a *pagla* (insane) and *matha gorom* (hot headed) boy, and that reputation along with his father's had saved him from a serious punishment. He only had to offer an apology to the teacher and the teacher accepted that!

What this story illustrates is not what *Jamians* generally refer to as *line*. In the *Jamian* version of *line*, *Jamia* is the patron and the parents of the pupils are the clients. However, here we see the reversal of that perspective, whereby a 16-year-old Reza escapes punishment due to his family's background, which eventually topples the *Jamia* from the role of the patron. Three differences have become clear after juxtaposing the examples of Munna and Reza, which constitute the basis for measuring who is the patron in this particular version of *line* in the relationship with the *Jamia*. First, with respect to Reza and the *Jamia*'s relationship, Reza assumes patron's position, by default, as he represents someone who is not only a *Jamia* insider but also one of its founders; he is local and powerful as an elite. In contrast, Munna assumes the position of a client simply because he is not a *Jamia* insider, not even local, and son of a mere electrician<sup>74</sup>. However, the shrewdest of the *Jamians* tend to repress such a finding and try to present a religiously coated *line*, not a worldly one, where power is the basis.

According to this religiously coated version of the *Jamian line* the *madrassa* remains the patron forever because of its closeness to almighty Allah. *Ulema* say,

*“Even though Allah is the patron of the entire universe He supports the believers only and not those who seek patronage from wealth and worldly powers. In that sense, rich and powerful people like the late Mr. Alam can never be our patrons. On the contrary, for invoking Allah's mercy and blessing for all the sins that they have committed over their life they will always need us and in that way they will always remain as clients to us.”*

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<sup>74</sup> This example clearly reinforces the status of *refugees* or non-locals within the political-economic of Bishwanath as well as *Jamia*'s as presented in the Chapter 3.

To them - Allah is the patron, *Jamia* is the client or servant (*khadim*) and by serving Islam, the *madrasa* is actually serving Allah. Hence, people like the late Mr. Alam who donates to mosques and *madrasas*, *Imams* (prayer leader), *jamaat* (the prayer congregation), *ostads* (*teacher*), parents who send their children to *madrasa*, and *taliban* (students) are all *Khadim Ul Islam* (servants of Islam). All in one way or another serve Allah and in the process serve one another as well. In other words, all the believers who practice the principles of Islam, according to this Islam-heavy explanation, are maintaining the *line*.

However, not all of the clients defend such types of patronage in those terms. Moreover, it is not intended to suggest that the whole idea of creating and maintaining a patron-client relationship is an exploitative one; rather for many, it is a bare necessity in this context, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. Poor *madrasa* teachers, like those poor fathers who bring their children to the *madrasas*, also desperately seek patronage from local elites, as do the unemployed *madrasa* graduates.

Let's take *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad as an example, who gives private tuition to children from a number of rich and influential families. The father of one of his students is a very influential local entrepreneur and the General Secretary of the *Jamia's* management committee. By getting closer to this person, *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad is now one of the leaders among the young teachers. There are many like him, who are non-local and cannot survive with the amount of salary that they receive for a month of hard work<sup>75</sup>. Therefore, it is quite common to have teachers secretly competing with each other to impress those of their pupils who come from rich local houses. The aim is to secure a *tuitiony* (refers to giving tuition) or a *lodging mastery*<sup>76</sup>. These kinds of opportunities gradually take some closer to the local power structure. How often they actually receive

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<sup>75</sup> Abu Ahmad with three and half years of work experience receives a meagre 1800 Taka per month, which is less than 18 UK Pound. Most sadly, though, at one point during my fieldwork he had to wait five long months to be paid. According to my knowledge only one person, a reputed *Hadith* (tradition of the Prophet) teacher, regularly receives 5000 Taka as salary, which is the highest salary of this *madrasa*. Not because of that this teacher maintains a good connection with the *madrasa* administration but because the *madrasa* needs such a person to attract students in the advance classes.

<sup>76</sup> See the discussion on *lodging mastery* in the Chapter 2.

substantial support from those in power is a questionable fact but the perception of proximity that such access emanates is sufficient to create a sense of security<sup>77</sup>.

Similarly, a poor father leaves the *madrassa* with the same feeling of security when he manages to post his son as a *khadim* with any of the *madrassa* teachers. Almost all the teachers in *Jamia* have more than one *khadim* whose duty it is to perform various chores for one's master. As was described earlier, poor fathers are aware of this reality yet assume that in return for his services the teachers and eventually the *madrassa* will take care of their sons. It is worth noting that most of the non-local *Jamia* teachers bring their own *khadims* with them from back home. These children are either close relatives or neighbour's children, given to them by the families along with guardianship authority for various unknown reasons. Still, they assume guardianships for new students if they find that the boy is originally coming from his area or district, or the family's economic condition is relatively better.

Teachers also tend to look for *khadims* among the students he directly teaches. Such searches only take place in the mid and advance level classes. Again, personal considerations dictate such search. At that level, students may also show an inclination towards a particular teacher and try to please him so that the teacher chooses him as a *khadim*. I have seen many senior students competing among each other to please *Sheikh ul Hadith* (the teacher of the tradition of the Prophet) *Mawlana* Yusuf Ali. He is quite famous and resides in the *madrassa* premises with one of his sons, a Year 12 student by the name of Nur al Deen, and now has no fixed *Khadim* as Nur al Deen is there to assist him. Once Nur al Deen told me that, the students not only try to please his father but also him to get close to the *Sheikh ul Hadith* for his "blessings." According to some other *madrassa* insiders,

*"These blessings can be seen and touched in the form of a job, a chance to know other influential people or even a marriage."*

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<sup>77</sup> The issue of teachers' patronage and engagement with outside power sources is an important issue that rather regrettably, I have not managed to explore more deeply than this.

Failing to satisfy an *ostad* can cost one his role as a *khadim*. Hence, guardians usually bombard their sons with reminders of their duties towards their *ostad* before leaving them in the *Jamia*. Most important of their duties, as these children are reminded of all the time, is to please their *ostads* whenever and wherever possible. For an example, during a 40 to 45 minutes long class some teachers might send one or more of the students at least a couple of times to fetch some *paan* (betel leaf preparation) for him from other teachers or the *madrasa* adjacent shops. Alternatively, after entering into the class some of the teachers might say to the pupils, “*Would you not give me a cup of tea today?*” Immediately, several hands will rise to serve. Often the teacher would choose one from them and would give some money for tea as well as for *paan*. Sometimes, a pupil would buy some *paan* or tea from his pocket and the teacher would happily accept it as this kind of gesture is expected and seen as polite. However, my teacher friends advised that they pay the student back if he is known to be very poor. Students also confirmed that such acts are spontaneous as they do it for blessings and out of indebtedness towards the teachers.

This urge for blessing and feeling of indebtedness are two important qualities that students should develop in time towards their *ostads*. As one student states,

*“These are the signs by which teachers manage to judge us.”*

A teacher backs up the student’s comment with the following,

*“Such gestures tell a lot! This shows how in the face of various adversities a child is trying its best to maintain the line. Such politeness and such gestures are only possible when a person is successfully balanced between the power of his *bujh* and *ich’cha*. Children need blessings to achieve that.”*

Someone in the *madrassa* told me that for a senior student, such blessings come in material forms, whereas for the little ones the blessing comes in the form of various positive qualities, i.e. politeness as mentioned in the above statement.

I have never seen a *khadim* less than 10 year old. It is common to find teachers washing clothes, feeding, putting medicine and giving baths to their very young companions. However, the opposite is also common when *khadims* take turns and continuously nurse their very ill *ostad*. It is a norm here that *khadims* receive extra tuitions from their *ostads*. I know one *ostad* who arranged an excellent marriage for his *khadim* with a *Londoni koin'na* (a bride from London) and sold one of his cattle to fund a gold locket for the bride as a gift. Such examples are very common where these two people become closer than their blood relatives do. Several marriages took place between the families of these two persons based on their relationships.

However, there is another side of this story. The number of local students is insignificant in *Jamia* yet they receive noticeably different treatment. For example, students from wealthy families never perform chores for their teachers. Among the junior and middle level local students, especially the wealthy ones, no one ever had to assume the role of a *khadim*. They are in the position to secure “blessings” without the assistance of their *ostads*.

In the preceding discussion, I tried to demonstrate the concept of *line* through the role of *khadim*, which is by its practical nature informal and non-religious. It enables the student, over the course of time, to learn to build and maintain the right type of network required for one’s earthly and other worldly benefits. However, it does not universally generate the same meaning or benefit for everyone irrespective of socio-economic standing; rather it is prone to exploitation and extremely non-spiritual construction in nature.

The discussion that follows will demonstrate how the construction of *qu'tar*, which is a very formal, highly performative, religious construction, adds a completely different dimension into the idea of the *line*. This particular construction assists one to internalize,



through repetitive practices, the centrality of respect and responsibility towards elders and the community that congregate for prayers. This sense of respect and responsibility is the *line* that one learns to recognize both bodily and emotionally inside *jamaat* in the *Jamia*. This is not something only to perform regularly but also to perfect and protect for the spiritual benefits of this life and the life after.

#### 4.8 *Qu'tar*



Plate 4: A large *jamaat* spills into the courtyard without disrupting the *qu'tars*.

Mosque has a central role in the life of every Bangladeshi Muslim and it is most true for those who are living in the rural areas. Pious Muslims try to attend all five daily prayers inside a mosque with the *jamaat* (congregation) under the leadership of the *Imam*. Both mosque and *Imam* are inseparable and influential institutions for Muslims.

Like many other large Bangladeshi *madrasas* this particular *madrasa* also houses a relatively large mosque inside its premises, where along with all the teachers and students a good number of the public also regularly attend prayers. The whole *madrasa* goes into short breaks for prayers during the weekdays and those who are attending classes are expected to join the *jamaats*. Every day during the *madrasa* terms, all who reside inside the *madrasa*, both the boarding students and the teachers, are expected<sup>78</sup> to perform all of the five prayers together. Pupils receive no grading or reward for this, but it constitutes the most important component of Islamic learning. Such out-of-classroom schooling is not only about performing an obligatory religious rite but also about instilling a habit of praying with the *jamaat*. Congregations are always made up of several rows or straight lines, called *qu'tar*, of closely standing worshipers. Children as young as seven years are encouraged to attend the *jamaat* but they congregate in the outermost of the *qu'tars*.

When the time of the prayer nears, the *Imam* stands to take his position in front of all who are present and the whole of the *jamaat* takes position thereafter. Many of the young men will wait for a few more moments to look around for older people, allowing them to take the positions in the front *qu'tars*. The first two or three *qu'tars* in a *jamaat* are traditionally kept open for the most seniors among the worshipers. Even after all the *qu'tars* are ready to start the prayer people are seen looking sideways and behind from where they stand to make sure that they are not standing in front of a person who is relatively senior to them. If a senior happens to be standing behind a *qu'tar* where a younger person is standing but failed to notice the senior someone would immediately bring this to the young man's attention and he would then offer his place to the senior man. Most of these observations - searching, giving up right places for the right kinds of people, and repositioning oneself - take place between the moments from the *Imam's* taking position and his initiation of the prayer, which can hardly take more than a minute or two.

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<sup>78</sup> In practice, very young ones are often exempt, but most strikingly not all the teachers and other staff who reside inside the *madrasa* attend prayers regularly, especially the dawn prayer (*Salat al Fadar*), this trend became a big issue which will be described in the following chapter on *Adab* (manner).

Such offering of one's place is not only a sign of respect towards the relatively senior one standing behind but also obviously a sign of *adab* (good manner), which is a result of good education, as we shall see in the next chapter. Many extend thanks in return and respectfully decline such offers. However, such respectful decline would have been seldom accepted by the one who offered it. Quick and sporadic scenes of people changing places are common during those short moments before the prayer where the right type of persons from several *qu'tars* would be seen virtually pulled and pushed towards the places that are appropriate for them to stand. Such exchanges are well meant and commonplace in every *jamaat*, but the intensity of such exchanges is much higher inside smaller community mosques, like this one, where the *jamaat* is primarily composed of people from the same community that have been congregating together for a long time and on a regular basis. This is also a sign of prevailing community cohesion where members develop the ability for knowing who is who over time through actively engaging with one another in many other spheres of life.

However, there were also many such instances where this simple law of the line (*qu'tar*) was violated, often unintentionally, by young pupils. I have seen ten and twelve year-old boys who were reprimanded, caned, and pulled by their ears for standing in the front *qu'tars*, in front of more senior individuals. Similarly, I have seen much older pupils and members of the public being confronted and ridiculed for failing to maintain the law. The reason these individuals are in the wrong place is, according to this *law of line*, simply that they do not yet know who they are and who the others around them are. Such knowledge cannot be gained in a day and therefore children are especially encouraged to keep attending all the prayers with the *jamaat* regularly. This is seen as a complementary and parallel system of learning about one's self and one's place in the world.

The following is a small piece from my field notes describing an incident that took place during one December afternoon prayer (*Salat al Asar*). It highlights firstly how individuals and the *jamaat* as a whole act against such violation, and secondly how it has given me a valuable insight into myself –

*One Mufti Harun, new in this madrasa, entered into the mosque to attend the afternoon jamaat a bit late. Yet he found a place beside me to sit, which is only three rows away from the Imam. At first, we did not notice each other but soon we did, smiled and exchanged Salam.*

*The jamaat was big and in that winter afternoon, it was generating the much needed warmth. Soon Mufti Harun noticed the three young men sitting in the qu'tar before us. He looked at me with questions in the forehead. I shrugged at him rather indecisively.*

*By their clean shaved faces and clothes, I was certain that the men were not from around here, yet was expecting them to follow the rules of the line, which is universal. However, these three young men showed no sign of leaving their places even when the Imam took his position to lead the jamaat.*

*I was keeping an eye on them but avoiding their eyes and could see that others were doing the same, some even staring. At that point, I realized that none of the three young men was aware of all the curious eyes behind their backs.*

*I already had spent ten months living in the madrasa, and was therefore a familiar face around the place. Pupils in the jamaats here often very cordially offer me a space if they notice me standing or sitting in a back qu'tar. Sometimes I accept their offer, sometimes I decline with thanks and push someone senior instead to fill the space up, which is permissible.*

*Suddenly I was struck by a seemingly unpleasant worry that was telling me that - none of these men will offer me a place in their qu'tar! But then, I asked myself, "So what, why am I feeling agitated!?" Almost on that very moment, an equally agitated Mufti Harun, as if he had just finished reading my mind, muttered into my ears, "What's wrong with these boys?" Then looking towards the other side of his shoulder, addressing no one in particular, he*

*spoke rather loudly, “Who are they? Who do they think they are? Would you like to finish your prayers leaving the murrub’bis (elders or seniors) facing your back?”*

*A few more angry voices joined immediately and started to shout at the three men. The Imam stopped and tried to understand the reason and location of the trouble.*

*The whole jamaat turned into a complete chaos within moments as I was trying to calm Mufti Harun down in vain. By the time everyone managed to come back to their senses we saw the three puzzled and humiliated figures leaving the mosque without taking part into the jamaat and without saying anything in protest. Later I came to know that they were not local and just arrived here to work for a surveyor company to measure the breadth of the local roads....*

Interestingly, upon hearing about the incident my friend *Mawlan* Abu Ahmad later told me that according to the teachings of Islam neither the reaction of the *jamaat* nor the response of the three men to that was correct. When I was later reflecting on this incident one thing puzzled me - moments before the public outburst a similar kind of emotion generated a strange sense of deprivation within me. I was feeling annoyed as if someone is not giving me my due respect, which I have achieved over the last ten months, by living there within the *Jamia* and by regularly attending the *jamaat*.

In the process of my fieldwork in those ten months up to this incident, I had consciously brought many changes into my body and demeanour in accordance with the simple and minimalist life that I was living inside this rural *madrasa*. This conscious self-transformation generated a new kind of identity that I become attached to in the process. I came to recognize this for the first time on that December afternoon. I have also recognized the immense power that such a conscious decision possesses unconsciously. This is the outcome of a complex process, which, one *Jamian alim* explained to me as a

resultant force of *bujh* (insight/understanding) blended with *ich'cha* (intention/motivation) that directs one to seek the *line*.

#### 4.9 Conclusion:

At the onset of this chapter, we heard men stating their reasons for *giving* their children to *madrasas*, which is to make them useful for the future. Given the weak socio-economic position of these men, their sons, and the *Jamia* we find it essential to investigate the methods that they use to realize their goal. Hence, this chapter was the first step of that investigation where we explored the concept of *line*.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, was to highlight some of the basic features of *Jamian* schooling that the *Jamians* consider essential for successfully transmitting religious knowledge. Here we see how the colloquial *line*, as an amalgamation of powerful notions, receives a deeper meaning within a schooling process in inculcating discipline and loyalty into its pupils.

However, according to the *Jamian ulema* the success of any or all the three aspects of *line*, i.e. behaviour, connection, orientation, depend on the student's (or the child's) two mental qualities that they call: *bujh*<sup>79</sup> and *ich'cha*<sup>80</sup>. These categories are not fixed but possess unlimited capacity for expansion and vary vastly from person to person. *Ulema* explain in this regard,

*“These qualities also require discipline and loyalty but of a different kind, something that only the teachings of Islamic way of life can deliver.”*

Hence, in the following chapter we shall focus further closely on individuals and explore the influence that the concept of *Adab* (manner) creates on them.

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<sup>79</sup> *Bujh* refers to understanding, insight, maturity, knowledge, intelligence, et cetera.

<sup>80</sup> *Ich'cha* refers to willingness, intension, motivation, drive, et cetera.

## Chapter Five: *Adab* and the Muslim body

*It is very common in the Jamia to hear and see teachers routinely asking, encouraging, and on many occasions reprimanding pupils for attending the prayers on time, in the mosque, and with the jamaat. Apart from the Fazr (first prayer of the day), during the summer and monsoon (May-September) of 2007, I found out that Asar (third prayer of the day) is the other salat<sup>81</sup> that is especially difficult to attend on time. One specific reason that made that salat difficult for me to attend was the timing of its beginning, which was somewhere around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, that regularly clashed with the finishing of our afternoon meal. This means, like many of the children who routinely failed to show up at the beginning of the salat, I too made it my habit to join with the jamaat a little late. However, in every instance, and not to miss the jamaat completely, like many of the children, I regularly crossed the distance of the inner yard, between the mosque and my room, very hurriedly.*

*Then one of those hot and humid evenings as I was strolling inside the inner yard to catch some cool breeze, a senior Mawlana by the name of Shahabuddin Nagori approached me. After some petty conversation, the very polite Mawlana asked me to try to attend all the salat with the jamaat and to join the jamaat before it starts to pray. He then very clearly but politely spelled out the suggestion to not to rush to catch the jamaat if I think that it has already started. Because the Sunnah<sup>82</sup> says, according to him, that Muslims should approach the mosque in a calm, quite, and peaceful manner with the sincerest of intentions in heart to perform the salat perfectly. By this, with no intention of embarrassing me, I was told that rushing to catch the*

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<sup>81</sup> *Salat* refers to five daily prayers, singular is *salah* or *namaj*.

<sup>82</sup> Prophetic practices, or *Sunnah*, of the Prophet includes statements and actions of the Prophet, as well as acts performed in his presence that he had tacitly approved. *Ulema* talk about two kinds of *Sunnah* - *Sunnat-e-Muakkadah* and *Sunnat-e-Ghair-Muakkadah*. The first one is the emphasized practice of the Prophet, e.g. keeping beard. He who fulfils it will earn reward but will be condemned if it is abandoned. The second type is a kind of non-emphasized but praiseworthy practice and ignoring is undesirable, e.g. not rushing into a mosque to join a *jamaat*.

*jamaat is inappropriate; therefore, it should be avoided before making it a habit.*

The above account demonstrates that performing the simplest of actions appropriately is highly recommended by the *Jamians*. They believe that doing things appropriately constitutes a ‘good manner’, which derives from one’s sense of obligation, knowledge, and training. Good manner, therefore, is considered here as the most essential Islamic quality that every good Muslim should have. According to the *Jamians*, it also enables a good Muslim to consider every aspect of life as religious.

It is perhaps for this reason that the *Jamian ulema* say, *Islam is our life and everything within that is like worship to us*. Hence, compartmentalizing the life of a Muslim into religious and non-religious is both irreligious and irrelevant for them; yet for the non-*Jamians*, it is natural to question the practicability of a life that can only be religious. In order to free the general Muslim population from such a dilemma the *ulema* argue that only *madrastas* like the *Jamia* are capable of delivering a learning experience that does not divide one’s life between religious and secular categories.

Central to the *qawmi madrasa*’s schooling, according to the *Jamian ulema*, is imparting knowledge of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* and cultivating piety. At the core of this piety resides the corporeal body; especially its presentation through appearance and action. *Ulema* here believe that only through training on *adab*, or good manner, can a Muslim become pious and his body mirror his belief, both externally (*line*) and internally (*bujh and ich’cha*)

The word *adab* has another popular meaning that refers to literature; for example according to the *Jamian* curriculum the Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu literatures are respectively *Arabic adab*, *Farsi adab* and *Urdu adab*. Interestingly, all of this literature contains stories and articles exclusively on moral standards, ideal behaviour, good manners, et cetera. Apart from that, the word *adab* literally refers to good manner both in the *Jamia* and all over the Islamic world. In South Asian Islam, *adab* is the basis for all



correct knowledge and behaviour that constitute a good Muslim. It also refers to discipline, training, good breeding, fine-tuning, et cetera (see Metcalf, 1984).

In the previous chapter we saw that the *Jamian* notion of *line* and its discourse are operational at three separate but interrelated levels, namely behaviour or discipline (both individual and organizational), association or network (individual and social), and orientation or *qu'tar* (moral and political). This chapter will show that the notion of *adab* and its discourses operate exclusively in the context of madrasa, and primarily on the level of individual body's manner (moral and political). Knowledge is central for both of the concepts and their related discourses, but the sources and types of knowledge that they extricate meanings from are different. Therefore, although the notion of *line*, for this particular context, is seemingly dictated by strict Islamic knowledge, in reality it is not exclusively from the *Qur'an* or the *Sunnah* (The way of the Prophet, religious actions approved by the Prophet). As has been demonstrated, it extricates meanings from the existing power relationships that a particular locality's history, society, economics, and politics emanate. On the other hand, the notion of *adab* and schooling on *adab*, examined in this chapter, extricates its meaning primarily from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. Importantly, both *line* and *adab* better our understandings about the operating dynamics of the *qawmi madrasa* system.

The body's moral manners, or in other words manners associated with worshipping contexts, are not what this chapter is going to tackle. Rather it will examine the *adab* of the body's non-worshipping contexts, which I call here the political *adab* because of its centrality in the Muslim identity formation process. The ensuing discussion, will develop over two separate sections that the *Jamians* consider central for the 'good' and 'not good' Muslim identity formation processes. This is based on a *Jamian* body theory that regards the body's surface separately from the body's actions in relation to the concept of *adab*. Prior to those discussions, I will examine, ethnographically, my early encounters with the notion of *adab* among the *Jamians* and within the *Jamia*.

## **5.1 *Jamia*, *Jamians*, and the body's Muslim show**

On 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2007, accompanied by a journalist and former *madrassa* graduate by the name of Hasan Khan, I made my first trip to the *Jamia*. The aim of this trip was to meet the *Jamia* authorities to explain my research and to ask their permission for conducting it there. Khan had organized this meeting.

On our way, Khan categorically told me that in order to be able to work there I would have to present myself in a particular way. He used the word *zahir* and *zahiri* to mean the show and the acts of showing, respectively, which sounded almost like a performance to me. The term *zahiri* will be discussed more in detail in the following chapter on *Iman* and *Amal*. However, for now it will suffice to say that my success, as Khan suggested, would completely rest on convincing *Jamians*, through such demonstrations, that I am a ‘good Muslim’. Here, five times of daily prayer and fasting in the month of Ramadan are viewed as vital as emulating the ways the *Jamians* take care of their dress, appearance, and movements to support their good Muslim claims.

The Arabic word *zahiri* literally means the apparent, the obvious, or something that cannot escape a gaze, and it also stands for an expression like exteriority, public projection, show, show-off, proof, et cetera. Khan told me,

“*zahiri is an approach or strategy or way of showing something to someone.*”

By this, he was suggesting that for the *Jamians*, to take me in, I should highlight (*zahir*) my *Muslimness* most prominently. However, he never mentioned directly that such highlighting is not possible through five daily prayers and fasting in the month of Ramadan alone; rather one must incorporate a large number of Islamic signs, symbols, and actions on oneself. This was something I came to learn later and gradually.

According to the *Jamians*, a good Muslim is the one whose outfit, appearance, words, and actions radiate the *adab*. For instance, a good Muslim avoids silk and red coloured dresses, whereas the ‘not good’ one does not avoid those. Similarly, the good Muslim

does not trim or cut his beard, but the not good one does<sup>83</sup>. The good Muslim always greets but the not good Muslim pays no heed. The good one always shares his drinks and food with others but the not good does not. The good one holds the glass between both palms and drinks from it while seated and the not good either pays no attention to such manners or fails to perform these *Sunnah* (Prophetic manner) completely. These are only a handful of examples of *adab* that cannot be learned at once; rather, through relentless instruction, observation, practice, and repetition these become habits. Lapidus (1984), following the fourteenth century's politician and historian Ibn Khaldun's famous book *Muqaddima*, shows how *adab* is actually more than habit and closely resembles the Latin concept of *habitus*, which is imagined something close to a corporal quality and rooted in the soul. In relation to the current discussion, then, the concept of *adab* reminds us of Mauss's (1973) techniques of the body as well as Bourdieu (1977) generative process.

## 5.2 Ways of learning *adab*

It was for a combination of these reasons that *Mufti* Mir, the then education secretary of the *Jamia madrasa*, was in no hurry to believe everything about me that came out of Khan's mouth during our first meeting, something that the man himself told me long after I settled down there and after we developed a rapport. On that day, he even provided Khan with the wrong impression that the authorities will meet us shortly within our arrival. In reality, he and the others had decided to keep us waiting for a full night in order to check me (and my *adab*) out prior to presenting me to the top figures of the *madrasa*. Therefore, according to their plan, sometime after dusk *Mufti* Mir finally broke the news that the meeting would not be taking place on that evening anymore but on the following afternoon, instead.

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<sup>83</sup> In *Jamia*, like other *qawmi madrasas*, students are expected to grow their beards when they come of age. Shaving, trimming and styling of beard is completely unacceptable according to the concept of *adab*. In Chapter 2, I mentioned that the *Jamian Naeb-e-Muhtamim* (Vice-Principal) is seen as violating the approved rules of comportment by trimming his beard. On several occasions, a number of senior *ulama* have instructed the vice-principal to refrain from such a practice but he did not comply. Many among the teaching staff have expressed their concern over the issue, "If we fail to uphold *adab* then who will these children turn to?" One teacher is so bemused that he doesn't understand how to confront two of the year eleven students who he thinks are trimming their beard, "What would I say if they ask about our *Naeb-e-Muhtamim's* beard? I have no answer!"

Left with no choice of getting back to the Sylhet town, we had to accept *Mufti Mir*'s offer to stay with him for that night. I had accepted the offer gladly because I saw it as an opportunity for getting to know *Mufti Mir* informally. In the end, I received more than I had asked for! Firstly, it gave me the chance to present my research to a relatively young audience that, to my surprise, gladly welcomed it and expressed their eagerness to assist me. Secondly, along with *Mufti Mir*, some of the young resident teachers who came to meet and greet me there became extremely instrumental as friends later. However, as *Mufti Mir* had his own ideas regarding having us as his guests, he had appointed two of his *Khadims* (helpers) to be at our service; in actuality they were assigned to spy on my *adab*. At the time, both Khan and I were unaware that *Mufti Mir* and his team were keeping an account of all that I was doing, the way I was doing it, and all that I was saying.

During that night *Mufti Mir* and his team found out about my deficiencies as a Muslim, which they kept as a secret from me for a long time. Surprisingly though, despite my poor 'Muslim-show', they decided to back my case instead of rejecting it. The reason, given much later, was in fact my identity: namely, my London connection without being a *Londoni*. The team of young *ulema* led by *Mufti Mir* interestingly envisaged that my identity had potential on two fronts. First, it had the potential for attracting and mobilizing prospective supporters for the *qawmi madrasa* from my urban, secular, educated background. Second, it had the potential for enhancing the *Jamia*'s status among all the other competing *qawmi madrasas* of the area.

However, permission to stay and conduct research at this institution remained uncertain until the next afternoon when I had to address a large audience where thirteen of the key *Jamians* were present. This distinguished audience was not only listening to me but also examining me keenly. Immediately after the presentation, for example, a comment was made regarding my wristbands that I thought had no relation with my research. The comment was a half-suggestion and half-condition, as one of the thirteen men made it clear that I should consider removing them, as the fashion is inappropriate and is a *Hindu* tradition. Until that point, the only inappropriate aspect of my appearance that I was fully

aware of was my beardless face; I had never weighed the potential for damage that a small wristband could carry. Hence, as I was about to make a blunder by explaining my wristbands, Khan intervened and rather apologetically told the audience that ‘the researcher (myself) lacks the proper knowledge regarding many of the appropriate and pure Islamic manners but is very willing to learn those, so, removing wristbands wouldn’t be a problem at all’. Thanks to a few more such smart interventions from Khan, *Mufti Mir* and his team of young *ulema*, who I came to know only the previous evening, strongly backed my research proposal, and the distinguished *Jamians* expressed no serious reservation against it.

Since the very first day, my experience with the *Jamians* and their preoccupation with the notion of good manner or *adab* were both shocking and enlightening. However, that experience was immensely valuable, as I was embarrassing them openly with my naïveté about what it meant to be a ‘good Muslim’. Following Khan’s and other well wishers’ suggestions, I was able to avoid turning my work and stay in the *Jamia* into a complete misery for all. Surprisingly, my friend Khan, who for a long time I had considered as a good Muslim and an expert in *adab*, did not manage to sail very far with the *Jamian* notion of *adab*. The following account of Khan will illustrate how, why, and what went wrong with his identity as a ‘good Muslim’ and presumed *adab*.

Before going into Khan’s story, I wish to reiterate that *adab*, according to the *Jamian ulema*, is about performing, managing, and presenting all kinds of bodily movements according to the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*. However, in the early days of my fieldwork I had wrongly assumed that *adab* and *zahiri* (*presenting*) are two separate elements of a Muslim persona. In addition to that, before understanding much about the *Jamian* dichotomy of good/not-good Muslim, I branded Khan as a good Muslim, too. The basis for such a conclusion lies, partially, in all sorts of popular urban stereotypes<sup>84</sup> related to *madrassa*-educated individuals, and partially on Khan himself, who had boasted about his close link with the *qawmi madrasa* system. Nevertheless, Khan’s *madrassa* connection,

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<sup>84</sup> Print and the electronic media portray people from a *madrassa* background as suffering from an inferiority complex manifested by talkativeness, pretentiousness, et cetera, which I accepted for a long time.

his role in convincing the *Jamians* to put up with me, his sudden departure from the scene along with his own *madrassa* past, his present professional life, and on the basis of all these his self-presentation, are all essential for the untangling of this particular account of *adab*.

### 5.3 Khan's story

Like many of the *qawmi madrassa* students, Khan pursued bachelor level studies under the *aliya madrassa* system for its government-approved certificate courses (see Chapter 2 for related discussion). In the end, this certificate had helped him to enter into the secular job market. Prior to that, two other factors helped to shape his aspirations. According to him, the first one was the influence of the Bengali language that he had taken up as his language of instruction instead of Urdu or Arabic; and the second was his interest in writing letters, comments, or articles for local newspapers. Following his graduation, therefore, and unlike his compatriots, instead of committing himself to *deeni khidmat*<sup>85</sup> he looked for other types of jobs and eventually found an insignificant job with a small national daily.

Within the next two years, Khan switched jobs twice and finally landed a job as a reporter in Dhaka with a frontrunner pro-nationalist daily. Although thrilled at the opportunity, his luck did not favour him for long. Within less than a year of employment at this newspaper, he was laid off suddenly for his political views, which were gradually shifting towards the liberal side of nationalist politics. During this short-lived reporting career, his reports drew attention for their content, which was Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh, and for their in-depth nature.

I met the well-dressed and chatty Khan a couple of weeks after he had been laid off. On that first meeting, he had proudly presented himself as the first Bangladeshi *qawmi*-graduated journalist, a statement that I had heard him repeat on many occasions later. A mutually known individual from whom I sought help after repeatedly failing to secure a field site had arranged our meeting; asking Khan to help me in securing an entry into one

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<sup>85</sup> Literally, the expression *deeni khidmat* means serving the religion, but when used by the *madrassa* graduates it specifically refers to becoming a *madrassa* teacher.

of his known *madrasas*. Khan not only assured me that he could help me on that particular day, but also kept his word. In this connection, he also mentioned that many of the leading Islamic figures of the country, especially all the leaders of the *qawmi madrasa* system, are proud of his *madrasa* past and admire him for his professional achievements. As we will see, this was not only an exaggeration but also an incorrect assumption on Khan's part.

About six months into my fieldwork, harsh words regarding Khan started to find their ways to me. I began to hear serious criticism from within the *madrasa* regarding Khan's manner. Three of the most serious criticisms were regarding Khan's beard (his facial appearance), his choice of garments (the manner of his dress), and finally the way he handles certain actions (the body's performances). Khan's close friend, *Mufti Mir*, the education secretary whom we met earlier, eventually fell out with Khan during that time; he later expressed his serious disapproval of the ways Khan was presenting himself to the public.

Khan and I were regularly in touch throughout the first six months of the fieldwork, but the connection gradually and mutually faded from that point onwards. Meanwhile, Khan managed to find another job in a new newspaper but became too involved with an NGO project of his own. I tried to contact him when upsetting news regarding him started to reach me. However, he was nowhere to be found; indeed, it seemed as if he had been consciously trying to avoid me during this time. Friends told me that he had left the job at the newspaper to give more time to the NGO, but that too failed to take off as he, along with some of his friends, had been accused of misappropriating general members' savings funds. More seriously, some of the *Jamians* were accusing Khan of breaking their trust as well as that of many poor *madrasa* graduates' of the region. Sadly, amidst all the accusations, news arrived from Dhaka that Khan had been hospitalized twice for mental breakdown. Soon, the *Jamians* circulated this news as a perfect example of punishment that awaits the believers if they fail to uphold their beliefs properly. In chapter 2, I already demonstrated a similar type of approach that some of the *Jamians* took towards the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*'s beard trimming habit.

*Jamian Ulema* treated the sad news as a moral victory for Islam over everything that represents modern and un-Islamic. No one ever complained against Khan's pious practices, as he had always carried these out with utmost sincerity. However, as mentioned above, people relentlessly complained against his presentation of the self as a "modern-man" who downplayed the *adab* of appearances and practices. Therefore, Khan was wrong in assuming that the *Jamians* were proud of his achievements. Rather because of his trimmed beard, fondness for t-shirts<sup>86</sup>, or disregard for the approved manners in non-worshiping situations, the *Jamians* were ashamed of him and considered him a great sinner.

This example of Khan's *adab* is a complex one given the fact that Khan, even after boasting about his connection with the *madrassa*, had firstly by taking up a radically unrelated profession thus changing the normal course of the life of a *madrassa* graduate. Secondly, by changing his outlook he separated himself further from the traditional world of the *madrassas*. His transformation from a mere *Alim* to a "modern-man" has undoubtedly undermined the power of *adab* and as an outcome of all that threatened an age-old system that is already, as we have seen in Chapter 2, too strained facing many such threats. In such a circumstance, this example is signifying that the concept of *adab* is the only tool that the *Jamians* possess, that has the symbolic power to question the quality of Khan's *Muslimness*.

Upon saying that, in this chapter we see that the lone concept of *adab* has two overlapping and complementary aspects. The first one is moral and exclusively Islamic, and stresses *adab*'s centrality in the life of a Muslim; the second one is political and is

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<sup>86</sup> Any kinds of dress reflect one's sense of *adab*. Western style cloths are completely forbidden for the *qawmi* students; instead, they must wear an 'Islamic' dress – a long *Kurta* (a loose colourless shirt), loose *pajamas* and skullcap. However, in *Jamia* the local students from well to do families again tend not to comply with this dress code. They often wear bright polyester, cotton, or silk *kurta* with embroidery on the chest and the cuff areas along with tailor made matching *pajamas* that are not too loose and not too tight (instead of a white loose *pajama*). Moreover, their skullcaps are always embroidered, colourful, and often expensive. I have seen one student in Western cloths once during a *madrassa* holiday and know one student from the *hifzo* section (the section where student memorize the *Qur'an*) whose father told me that one of his son's conditions, before enrolling here, was that he will not wear the *madrassa* dress at home. None of the cases is isolated, as a number of students from the year seven have told me that they usually wear 'normal' cloths at home. Most of the young teachers ignore such violations of dress code but some senior teachers react angrily, occasionally.



instrumental in the promotion and construction of an ideal Muslim persona, as we saw in the previous chapter on *line*. In the following sections, this political aspect is examined further as it is fundamental for the continuation of the *qawmi* schooling system. The political aspect of *adab* functions separately on an individual's body, as according to my observation the presentation of the body's surface is one that is about the management of the dress and appearance (e.g., the non-worshipping actions of the body). The other function of *adab* is the management of the body's actions or deeds, associated with worship. The Islamic concept for the latter is *amal*, which is very important in the *Jamia* and is discussed in the following chapter in conjunction with the concept of *iman* or faith.

### **Section 1: The *adab* of the body's surface**

As noted above, this discussion is about the political aspect of *adab* and concerns the surface of the Muslim body. Here we will focus on the way the *Jamians* typically use the expression of “good look” to refer to *adab* and its influences on the body's surface. The section will examine a *Jamian* theory of the body that considers the surface of the individual body as an ideological space that can be turned into a Muslim body by corresponding and regulating it with *adab*. To see how such a theory is reinforced in the everyday schooling context, the *Jamian*'s theory of birth will also be examined thereafter.

### **5.4 The ‘look’ of the Muslim body**

Every Friday, couple of thousand men congregate at the *Jamia* mosque to perform the obligatory afternoon congregational prayer, known as the *Ju'ma*. Men who attend this prayer tend to wear their best clothes, which the Bangladeshi people treat as “Islamic” dress. This kind of dress consists of an embroidered skullcap along with a well ironed but loose-fitting long sleeve dress, known as the *punjabi*, and matching *pajama* or skirt like traditional garment, called a *lungi*. Turning up for this weekly religious event properly and regularly is at once a proclamation of one's membership in the community of the pious Muslim as well as a good opportunity for meeting those friends or families who one does not otherwise meet or greet during the rest of the week.

Once the congregation finally ends, groups of acquaintances head for the nearby tea stalls or restaurants for a cup of tea or a betel nut. If one observes closely, one can easily register mutual praises on how ‘genuinely’ one presents oneself as a Muslim according to the physical topography of his particular Islamic dress or ‘look’. In most cases, these comments are light-hearted, reciprocal, and are signs of politeness; it is common practice among Bengali Muslim men of the same age.



Plate 5: Men prior to a *Ju'ma* at the *Jamia* mosque.

In spite of the light-hearted nature of these comments, the effort that one gives to *looking good* is valued highly in the *Jamia*. People here believe and see such effort as a sign of the closeness that one has been forging with Islam, with its standard practices, and one's real-life circumstances. A successful merger of all three of these, according to a *Jamia* teacher is “*Very a difficult thing in today's world to achieve*”; yet the effort that the *madrassa's* pupils give in the face of these worldly all-encompassing forces is considered

by the *Jamians* as blessings for the whole of the *ummah*<sup>87</sup>. It is against this backdrop that I now turn to the next section to argue that the discourses of ‘looking good’ actually constitute the political aspect of *adab*, which, as mentioned above, provides the *Jamians* with a guideline for how to transform the surface of the Muslim body into an ideological tool.

### 5.5 Realizing the ‘good look’ in *Jamia*

The *Jamia* has a theory of the body, according to my *Jamian* friend *Mufti Mir*,

*“An ideal body is a result of prolonged, regulated, monitored, and repeated corrective body-measures (i.e. management of its body hair, body fluid, limbs, etc).”*

For it to be successful, the *Jamians* say that all these measures have to be guided by the *ulema* and have to be derived from the teachings of the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*. In short, it is the notion of *adab* that ultimately influences the nature of man. In the following paragraphs, I will present the *Jamian* discourses surrounding hair as an example of how a mundane practice of cutting it or keeping it is becoming associated with another ideology-heavy discourse regarding the body’s appropriate presentation and place in the world.

Shawwal, the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic calendar<sup>88</sup>, marks the beginning of a new academic session each year in the *madrasas*. All new students of the *Jamia*, except those in the three most senior classes, are obliged to cut their hair very short on this occasion. One of the resident teachers of the *Jamia*’s boarding school, *Mawlana Saiful Islam*, is responsible for making sure that all new students, especially the young ones, have the appropriate haircut. After the trimming session, to encourage and praise pupils with their

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<sup>87</sup> The term *ummah* considers that all the Muslims of the world belong to one community.

<sup>88</sup> Islamic calendar is known as *Hijri* calendar. This is a lunar calendar consists of 12 months in a year of 354 or 355 days. The month of *Shawwal* started in the Middle of October in 2007, in the beginning of October in 2008, and around the end of the second week of September in 2010.

new look the teacher often jovially proclaims – *Ma sha’a Allah or the God has willed it! You look beautiful now!* For a young newcomer, conceiving such a beginning to their educational lives in terms of God’s will can be bemusing enough! Yet this is only the beginning of a process where many such bodily regulations will be applied, systematically, to shape the boys’ bodies for situations that are both ritual and every day.

While this process is very interesting and extremely important to the manner in which a young *madrassa* student is groomed to become a good Muslim, I was actually more intrigued by the exemption of the three older classes from this “*Keep it very short*” policy and asked *Mawlana* Saiful Islam, the aforesaid resident teacher, the explanation behind this. He said –

MSI: Our Prophet had long hair, so they can follow that.

Q: Why cannot the others!

MSI: There are many kinds of the others here – the beginners are one kind, the newcomers are one, the juniors are one, et cetera. ...

According to him, these students are ‘*not ready yet*’ (*toiri hoe nai*). They are still ‘*under construction*’, and most of them lack the *adab* necessary for embracing Islam in every aspect of life. He somewhat lightly added that,

*“If we allow their hair to grow longer then it is most likely that they will spend more time with a Mirror on their lap than a book, preferably in front of it than in front of their teacher. They will try to alter many aspects of their look to fit the image of a popular movie star; they will find their true images unattractive; they will fail to appreciate the look of a pious self that reminds us of our beloved prophet’s way of life. Once one reaches to that point - rescuing him from there is always going to be a very hard task!”*

As discussed above, the body is central in the process of becoming a good Muslim. But what are the reasons for believing that the senior students are safe from such outside

temptations? What protects them from the trap that the mirror poses for the younger students? *Mawlana Saiful Islam*'s response was to confirm that,

*“Yes, some of them are still vulnerable. Yet you have to understand the fact behind my belief in the older ones is simply because of their long-standing relationship with our system of schooling, for at least twelve years or more for most of them! They are sticking to this form of education [and its demands and restrictions] in the face of many adversities. They survived and decided to travel the rest of the path. At this stage even if some of them spend more time with the Mirror than they should then that might do more good to them than harm, because from this stage onwards they should look good too.”*

He argues that by being here for such a long time under the guidance of the learned *ulema* and by relentlessly repeating the core Islamic teachings of *adab* these pupils have not only become habituated in good manners but also become good looking, too. Now, as they enter their final years in the *madrasa*, it is time for them to hone this *adab* both outwardly and inwardly. Constant maintenance of their ‘good look’, or in other words managing the surface of their corporeal self is, therefore, vital because *Jamians* not only perceive these bodies as ideal but also produce them for the consumption of the Muslim masses as an ideological tool. This socially constructed body, therefore, is actually a political construction where good manner or *adab* is exclusively about the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah*. The following ethnography will demonstrate how the mundane act of hair cutting is interpreted by the *Jamians* as an ideological mission.

## **5.6 The symbolisms in the hair cutting**

The *Mandians* explained the relation between short hair and early *madrasa* years in various ways. In tandem with the *Mawlana Saiful Islam*'s explanation, given above, most of these explanations are associated with personal hygiene, equality, unity, and above all with *adab*, except one. This rather exceptional explanation, again given by *Mawlana Saiful Islam*, equates the hair cutting practice with the birth of a child and its initiation

ceremony of *aqeeqah*<sup>89</sup>, which according to the *Sunnah* should be performed, on the seventh day after the birth, for every child who is born into a Muslim family. The *Mawlana* carries on explaining,

*“Entry into the madrasa is similar to a birth....like the parents of a newborn it is our job to perform the aqeeqah for him. By cutting the hair, at least, we are separating him from the life before madrasa”*. Then with a smile he concludes, *“If we could then we would have performed the other acts of the ceremony also....”*

By this, he refers to the often-associated pomp with which the well-off parents' celebrate this occasion. The main features of the *aqeeqah* ceremony are comprised of shaving the seven-day-old child's head, slaughtering one cow or two goats if it is a boy child and one goat if it is a girl, and giving a proper Islamic name to the child. The word *aqeeqah* literally means cutting and shredding, hence all these acts represent a symbolic pay off for the birth of the child. It is worthwhile mentioning that the *aqeeqah* has a Christian equivalent known as baptism, as both are rite ceremonies that accept a child as a member of their respective communities of believers (cf. Bloch 1991, Turner 1969, Van Gennep 1960)

By evoking a parallel between the act of hair cutting and an important religious rite, in this context marking the beginning of a *madrasa* year, what *Mawlana Saiful Islam* is trying to do is symbolically reconstruct the life prior to the entry into the *madrasa* as a life yet to be born. Almost echoing here Van Gennep's (1960) rite of passage features, the registration for entry into the *madrasa* is the act of birth or the preliminary phase, the cutting of hair prior to the beginning of the *madrasa* session is the liminal phase and the beginning of the schooling physically is the postliminal phase. All these transform someone into a legitimate member of the family (of believers), no longer deprived from the virtue of divine blessings. Interestingly, the beginning of the educational year and the

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<sup>89</sup> The word *aqeeqah* literally means severing that ceremoniously marks the birth of a Muslim child. The ritual of the ceremony involves cutting of the newborn's skull hair and slaughtering of an animal or two for a feast to celebrate the occasion.

act of almost ritualized cutting of hair coincide with the slaughtering of a cow or a number of goats to serve everyone with better quality food and the changing of the names of the newly enrolled students, whose names are either incorrectly spelled or inappropriate for a Muslim to have. These apparently unrelated activities of hair cutting, animal slaughtering, and giving or amending names actually are all very nicely connected when examined collectively in this context.

After discussing this with a number of pupils, both old and new, I discovered that, none of them had ever captured this symbolically charged side of the cutting of their hair. Moreover, when I asked why these children were not told and why they had to have a mass-*aqeeqah* in such a veiled form, *Mawlana Saiful Islam*'s response was,

*“They won’t understand this because they haven’t developed the bujh or akal (refers to mental maturity or understanding) for that...”*

Referring to *al-Bukhari*<sup>90</sup>, one of the most influential collectors and compilers of the traditions of the Prophet, *Mawlana Saiful Islam* presented me with a theory of birth that clarifies *Jamia ulema*'s reasons for constituting this *aqeeqah* as a means of marking the beginning of a transformation in the life of the children –

*“Every child born on this earth is born as a Muslim. It is his parents who then convert him into their religion - Jewish, Christian, or other. Once this boy (pointing at a student) has managed to arrive in the Jamia it is our responsibility now to infuse Islam in him. .... We cut his hair, we give him a beautiful Islamic name from one of the 99 names of Allah, provide him with halal<sup>91</sup> food, teach him the Qur’an, teach him the Sunnah, and teach him all kinds of adab, and above all install in him both craving and fear for Allah... He becomes who he was at the time of his birth.”*

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<sup>90</sup> Al-Bukhari or Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810-870) is the compiler of the most trusted book on the traditions and sayings of the Prophet.

<sup>91</sup> The term *halal* in *Jamia*'s context refers to the Islam approved ways of collection and preparation of certain food items.

In this passage above, we see the *Mawlana* brilliantly capturing the essence of *qawmi madrasa* schooling, which is all about nurturing, creating, *re-creating*, transforming, and copying the ideal Muslim persona. To become an Islamic scholar (*alim*) one has to enter into a *madrasa*. After spending years in reading, learning, understanding and memorizing various essential Islamic texts under the skilful guidance of learned teachers one finally passes out from the *madrasa*. The reader is reminded that it is not just the scholarly knowledge that one must acquire from here; rather one has to acquire the ‘good look,’ too, based exclusively on the *adab*. It is, therefore, common for the *Jamians* to deny the “good Muslim” claim of many *ulemas* based on their religious knowledge alone, as Khan’s story clearly demonstrated. Such form of denial occurs, irrespective of one’s academic achievement, when an individual’s overall demeanour fails to demonstrate that the *adab* of his body’s actions is in harmony with the *adab* of his body’s surface. For the *Jamians*, therefore, to be considered ‘good’ as a Muslim depends completely on the *adab* of his body’s look and action.

## **Section 2: The *adab* of the body’s action**

For anyone to be considered as a good Muslim, be it a *Mawlana* or not, it is essential that *adab* has to be demonstrated (*zahir*) not through appearance alone but also through detailed practices, be it a word or an action, either religious or secular. As Ira Lapidus (in Metcalf 1984: 9) argues, the concept of *adab* is not simply the knowledge of the correct behaviour but it is the fruit of the inner self of the knower. Hence, knowing, doing, and being are all about becoming one complete person that the *Jamians* call a ‘good Muslim’.

In the previous sections, discussions centred on the *adab* of the body, which concerns the management, training, and behaviour of its surface. Like the surface of a person’s body, the body’s actions are also not separable entities from each other; nor are they separate from all the physical, psychological, and social elements that constitute a human being. Therefore, the *adab* of the *Jamian* body’s action is examined here for all its emotional



and dispositional influences in relation to the knowledge and insight it receives through the Islamic schooling.

The *adab* of the body's action, which is the second (political) aspect of the concept of *adab* noted above, will be examined in this section under two separate parts. In the first of the two parts, we will try to determine the individual's *Muslimness* based on the *adab* of the body's actions, where actions are seemingly secular in nature but the context is not. Thereafter, in the second part of this section, we will highlight the points that the *Jamians* make against the non-trained body of a self-proclaimed Islamic personality for its inadequacies. In relation to this, we will also see how the *Jamians* defend the need and validity of *madrassa*-schooling. These two sections together will conclude this discussion on *adab* of the body's action by suggesting that an anthropological study of a *Jamia* Muslim man is actually the study of a Muslim body.

### **5.7 Body's secular actions**

Mosque is the most important space where people not only perform prayers individually and collectively but repeatedly receive reminders on the appropriate etiquette that guards the sanctity of the space. Upon stepping into the *Jamia* mosque<sup>92</sup> people would see several notices pasted on its walls saying – “Do not talk loudly” and “Switch your mobiles off”. I believe the later one is a recent phenomenon. It is a huge problem as either people tend not to notice the notices or they simply do not know how to read them. As a result, in the middle of an obligatory prayer, the mosque's sombre air can fill with the tune of a popular Hindi or Bengali song from someone's pocket. Almost immediately after the conclusion of the prayer people, especially the elderly will start to shout from all directions towards all the directions of the sound, the young ones will start to talk and giggle, and volleys of comments of various kinds will be exchanged between the worshipers from every corner of the mosque to the other corners. All these noises made by the worshipers following the disruptive ring-tone are all violating the *adab* of the

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<sup>92</sup> I am calling it *Jamia* mosque as it has no other name and people, both insiders and outsiders call it either the *madrassa* mosque or the *Jamia* mosque.

noise inside the mosque; however, in this situation people are behaving in a way as if the first ring-tone noise is the only one that deserves the admonition.

*Jamians* consider that such a short spell of disruption to be a good learning experience, especially for those outsiders who know and care little about the manners either of the mosque or of the noise. Besides these non-*Jamian* outsiders, the very young learners of the *madrasa* usually cause some disruptions by talking, giggling, running, and playing during the time of prayers. However, senior students and teachers immediately deal with these, usually corporally. *Madaninas* acknowledge this vivacious nature of the young learners as natural and so children, especially the very young ones, are always encouraged to either stand with the outermost line of the *jamaat* or pray by forming a *jamaat* of their own in the veranda on the north side of the main prayer hall, parallel with the main *jamaat*. Some see this arrangement as a *bid'a*, or innovation, that violates both the *adab* of the *jamaat* and the *salat*; but on the ground of maintaining peace and the sanctity of the mosque, many support this segregation.

For those present in the *Jamia* premises, it is semi-official rule that they will perform all the prayers collectively in the *jamaat*, especially the *Fazr* (dawn) and the *Esha* (evening). Regular performance of *salat* with the *jamaat* makes a Muslim visible. Absence or irregular presence also makes a Muslim visible, but in a negative way. Absence is interpreted here as lack of piety, insincerity, and most seriously, a manifestation of weak belief. Absence also means acting inappropriately, which is a bad manner or *be-adabi*. Hence, failing to attend *salat* with the *jamaat*, for any reason other than serious physical condition, while one is present within the *Jamia*, is unacceptable and damaging for a person who belongs to this place.

*Salat* is a form of worship that a 'good Muslim' is obliged to perform sincerely five times daily throughout ones entire life span. In other words, it is a religious duty that demands fulfilling by doing, which is *amal* or body's religious action (see Chapter 5). It is expected of every Muslim that he or she should not only fulfil the *amal* of *salat* regularly in the mosque with the *jamaat* but also will attend it by reaching the mosque calmly, with

ample time in hand, following the *adab* of body's action, as the ethnography from the two opening paragraphs of this chapter tried to illustrate.

Children between the age of 8 and 10 are considered too young to attend the *Fazr salat* regularly, especially if the weather behaves unfavourably. However, at one point during my fieldwork I noticed that a number of teachers and staff were regularly skipping it. At the end of 2007, the newly selected student secretary of *Jamia*, *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman, directly cracked down on all forms of disorder and indiscipline that he found were *becoming normal and fashionable* among many of the *Jamians*. *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman, a veteran teacher in his sixties, publicly took a very hard line against all of those who were intentionally skipping the *Fazr*. His first target was the immediate past student secretary of *Jamia* and my close friend, *Mufti* Mir, along with some of the young *ulema*.

In the beginning of his campaign, *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman started by standing in the middle of the inner yard immediately after the *Fazr* and then cursing and criticizing loudly without naming any of those who failed to show up for the *salat*. The method soon worked as senior pupils of Year 14 and 15 started to attend it regularly. However, *Mufti* Mir and his young *ulema* colleagues continued to ignore *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman. This indifference on the part of the teachers made him so angry that to humiliate those *salat*-evading teachers at the end of every *Fazr* prayer he started to bang their doors loudly. On one such morning, *Mufti* Mir confronted *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman and politely explained the reason for his missing the *Fazr jamaat*, which was due to a medical condition related to chronic sleep deprivation. The explanation, however, failed to soften *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman, who strongly believed that,

*“The teachers, by their actions, set standard for the pupils to follow, hence it is necessary that they should always comply with the rules that they think appropriate for their pupils.”*

This particular belief on the teacher's moral standing led him to conclude that those of the teachers failing to uphold the standards that they themselves set should quit educating

pupils in this *madrasas* altogether. The vice-principal of the *madrasa* tried to intervene on behalf of the embarrassed and agitated teachers, but all efforts failed, as *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman declared,

*“Over this matter I need no one’s consent, consultation, or support but the Qur’anic and the Prophetic ones only! I have consulted those and am fully aware of the fact that I am doing right and doing it correctly!”*

There is no doubt that according to the dictates of Islam *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman’s argument is legitimate. However, in terms of the *adab* of the body’s action, which is one of the core features of the *Jamian* schooling, all those extreme emotions demonstrated by *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman through cursing, screaming, and door banging are illegitimate. Even though he is a *Hadith* (Prophetic sayings) expert and ‘good looking’ in terms of body’s appearances, his uncontrollable rage signals that the *adab* has not yet managed to reign in his inner self. Apprehensive as they are of his temper, the *Jamians* strongly think that *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman is sending wrong messages to the pupils regarding Islamic dictates and *adab*.

It is true that *Jamians* disapprove of *Mawlana* Faruq Rahman’s rage but they respect him as a teacher for his knowledge and sincerity, as an administrator for his justice and insight, and as a Muslim for his piety. They say that under the supervision of the *shaikh(s)* (spiritual teacher) of his kind and their wise teachings from the *kitab(s)* (spiritual books), *adab* is infused into the heart and body of the Muslim child. Both *shaikh* and *kitab* are essential for the successful construction of a Muslim self, which remains incomplete if any of these two is missing from the process. In this final section of the chapter, we will examine *Jamia*’s encounter with one such Islamic personality who had never received any *madrasa*-schooling but now runs several of them and lectures around on Islam and ironically on *adab*.

## **5.8 Body’s inadequate actions**

To begin, here I present a number of different forms of advice that this Islamic personality gave to the pupils while he was addressing them. All of these bits of advice were regarding the Prophetic manners, as the lecture was about Prophet's day-to-day life and living, which one should follow during all time, both publicly and privately:

*“A good Muslim should walk very humbly. His gaze has to be fixed on the ground while walking. His face should be slightly bent towards the ground too, and he should always walk on the right side of the road that he is facing. When one puts on the garment, the right sleeve or right leg should enter into it first, and when removing any clothes from the body, the left hand and the left leg should come out of it first. The same way - one should step into a mosque with the right foot first and step out of it with the left foot first. However, left foot first must enter into a toilet and right foot first for exiting....”*

According to this *Mawlana*, (the *Jamians* initially introduced him to the audience by this term, and this is the form of address that I use here), *the right is always better than the left and entry into a 'good space' is better than coming out of it*. As a Muslim, I cannot remember any point in my life prior to *Jamia* where I had really bothered myself with the virtues of the right from the left. However, by this point I had already spent close to a year with the *Jamians*, who are very *adab*-sensitive. In addition, and as mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, *adab* is the first serious *Jamian* notion that I came across, and I really had to work on it in order to continue my research there. Hence, the fear of a potential manner-slip and its disastrous implications eventually made me very *adab*-sensitive, too. Dreadfully, as the following ethnography will demonstrate, the non-*madrassa* educated *Mawlana* could not avoid one or two occasions of manner-slips within his very brief stopover.

The *Mawlana* arrived in this area from Dhaka to attend an Islamic *jalsha* (conference), only the previous evening. On his way back to Dhaka he stopped by the *Jamia* to meet and greet the teachers and students. This type of visit is highly appreciated, encouraged and quite commonplace in the inner circle of *madrassas*, and usually takes place during

the dry and wintry months of the year. Therefore, such a visit was expected. He had contacted the vice-principal of *Jamia* beforehand and expressed his interest to join them in one of the afternoon prayers. This does not categorically mean only taking part in a prayer, but more than that: networking among the *madrasas* and scholars, delivering interesting ideas and developments in relation to the teaching of Islam and *madrasa* world, and eating rich food, et cetera. Therefore, the *Jamians* were getting ready to receive the *Mawlana* very wholeheartedly.

A little after 2 pm, an impressive golden Toyota Voxy multi-purpose vehicle (MVP) drove the *Mawlana* into the *Jamia* premises with four other men inside<sup>93</sup>. When he got out of the car, the people inside the *Jamia* got very excited by his sight. I heard several people loudly chanting two of the most commonly used Arabic expressions – *Subhan'Allah* (Glory to God!) and *Allahu Akbar* (God is Greatest!). The all white-clad *Mawlana* Abu Zafar (his name in full), a tall man in his 60s, of very light complexion with a long white beard, by his appearance and gesture magically transformed the mundane *Jamia* people into a zealous Muslim crowd. His dress, face, moves, and overall comportment were until that point radiating the best of the *adab*.

Around 3.30 pm, all teachers and pupils present in the *madrasa* assembled to hear the *Mawlana's* lecture in the third floor of the south building. Before his lecture, four of the *Jamia's* senior teachers addressed the assembly, where they raised many contemporary political and social issues for discussion. Before the *Mawlana's* lecture, one of his associates spoke on his life and work and thanked the *Jamia* for having them there. In the course of that introduction, he unintentionally dropped the bomb that revealed that the *Mawlana* had no previous *madrasa* education, which was utterly shocking for all those who were present; instead, the *Mawlana* had received a MA degree from the University of Dhaka. Here it is very important for us to remember that everyone in the *Jamia* knows, learns, and believes that higher Islamic *ilm* (knowledge) can only be achieved by

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<sup>93</sup> Brand new vehicle are very common in this area, however, such pomp is always linked with *Londoni* people and money. Therefore, when the generally poor *Jamian* see one of their type also ride such a luxurious and new car they feel very happy and to some extent victorious even; as the crowd's response to the sight of the car proves.

studying in a *qawmi madrasa* from the beginning until the end. After such an introduction, an inescapable stroke of darkness emerged on many senior faces. The *Mawlana* then stood up and delivered his lecture where he only touched on some of the elementary issues, as quoted above, which related to the ways one should walk, talk, wear, eat, and drink according to the *Sunnah*. However, many seem to have found both his past educational background and his lecture completely disappointing. Soon after praying the *Asar* (the afternoon prayer) with the *Jamian jamaat*, the *Mawlana* and his companions drove out of the *madrasa* – this time with very few *Jamians* to see them off.

I then approached *Mawlana* Shajidul Hasan, a senior teacher of the *Jamia*, for his comments on the lecture, to which he replied the following –

*“The information was very useful indeed for the new and young pupils of the Jamia. However, not for most of the others who gathered there to hear something motivational and charged. Now, what is there to expect from a Mawlana like him!”*

*Mawlana* Shajidul Hasan’s concluding remark sums up the feelings that were almost unanimously expressed by the *Jamians* toward the visiting *Mawlana*. His remarks also partially explain the low turnout and the lack of enthusiasm among senior teachers and students to see the visiting *Mawlana* off properly. Later, my friend *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad’s comments on the visiting *Mawlana* were sufficient to see why the departure was so low-key compared with the jubilant entry –

*“Look, there is nothing wrong in the fact that he has no formal madrasa degree. A person can always receive ‘ilm (the knowledge) from various sources at any stage of his life. Islam encourages that very highly. Yet there is a big difference between becoming knowledgeable about correct Islamic practices and way of life, and becoming a Mawlana. Why has he never objected to the word Mawlana when people addressed him by that? I guess he doesn’t know the meaning of it or he is a fake – in either way it is sufficient for*

*us to conclude that he is neither a Mawlana nor even a Muslim, he is an impostor!”*

Actually, *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad has every right to feel offended by the hijacking of a revered title that can only be bestowed after withstanding a very long and tough schooling experience. *Jamians* often equate their entry into the *madrasa* with *Hijrat*<sup>94</sup> and their endurance of the toughness of this schooling process with *Jihad*<sup>95</sup>. By the use of such strong religious terms, it is obvious for anyone to see how invaluable the *Jamians* consider this whole experience of their pursuit of knowledge. For a young learner, becoming one of the *Jamians* is all about successfully enduring a long and painful process of transformation that includes enduring many years of harsh and difficult schooling away from home, experiencing constant poverty, food deprivation, basic material insufficiency, frequent migration, and having the very clear knowledge that a bleak future is awaiting. However, once through it all, they will receive a title like *Alim* or *Mawlana* or *Mawlavi* prefixed with their name. Every one of the students, from secondary onwards, dreamed of one day being called by one of the aforementioned titles when I asked them how different their life would be once finished!

Therefore, *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad’s sentiment is justifiably representative of all the *Jamians* who do not want to see their title go to any impostor who has never been to a *madrasa*. The reason *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad gave for calling the visiting *Mawlana* an impostor are as follows –

*“When his team and he was given the food to eat he didn’t bother to share the food from his plate with anyone eating along with him; besides there were children all around the place but he neither asked any of them to sit with him to eat nor even asked whether these children had their food or not! He completely ignored everyone around him even the children! If he had ever*

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<sup>94</sup> *Hijrat* means migration, but it specifically refers to the migration of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions from Mecca to Madina in 622 A.D. to escape *Quraish* execution. When the *Jamians* refer to this, they mean to convey the hardship of the life in the *madrasa* away from family and friends.

<sup>95</sup> The term *Jihad* denotes the hardship that the *Jamians* endure by choosing to earn the Islamic knowledge in a *qawmi madrasa* setting, marked by poverty, self-exile, struggles, et cetera.



*received any of the teachings on adab then he could have never acted so barbarically.... Finally, by allowing his companions to massage his shoulders, thighs, and calves in front of hundreds of pupils and teachers what kind of a practical lesson on adab that he delivered there for us to emulate! This person not only has no knowledge of real Islam but also completely disrespectful of his hosts! What a cursed and disgraced man he is!”*

This narrative by *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad clearly demonstrates that this impostor of a *Mawlana* is completely untrained in the *adab* of the body’s action, which are situated at the centre of the qualities of any *Mawlana*’s or good Muslim’s. *Jamians* strongly believe, as mentioned in the beginning of this section also, that acquiring any amount of *adab* is possible for any individual only when that knowledge is made available for understanding completely, for learning diligently, for practicing relentlessly and for a long time, among similar others, and under the guidance of the learned *ulema*. According to these “conditions for learning,” the *madrasa* is the only place where such knowledge is available for an individual’s moral development. It is precisely the lack of such *madrasa*-based schooling that has made this visiting *Mawlana* a *be-adab*, hence not a good Muslim and hence an impostor.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

*Adab* defines the identity of a Muslim. The famous historian and specialist on South Asian Islam, Barbara Dale Metcalf, writes, “*The concept of adab proves to be a key to central religious concepts of South Asian Islam*” (1984, 3). It is a very extensive term and derives exclusively from the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* (the Prophetic traditions), which is about proper knowledge and training on faith (*iman*), deeds (*amal*), and law (*sharia*). The purpose of this chapter, therefore, was to capture some of the features of the notion of *adab* that make it such an extensive and benchmark religious concept for the *Jamians* and their system of schooling.

From the onset, I have made it clear that this chapter is about the body's centrality in *adab*, *Jamians* preoccupation with *adab*, and *adab* as the identity maker and marker. In essence, the chapter dealt with two elements: the body and *adab* simultaneously and in conjunction with each other. The body and its relationship with *adab* was addressed here following a *Jamian* idea that I call the *Jamian* theory of body, where the concept of *adab* marks the body on two levels – surface and action; or in other words, the presentations of the body and the performances of the body. Hence, the chapter developed over two separate sections under the respective titles of *adab* of body's surface and *adab* of body's action. Both of the sections highlighted body, *adab*, and identity as three competing, complimentary, and overlapping elements of *Muslimness* that the *Jamians* refer to by many names, including “pious,” “good looking,” “genuine,” “*Alim*,” “*Mawlana*,” “good Muslim,” et cetera.

In the previous chapter on *line* we identified three secular politico-ideological impetuses, i.e., behaviour, association, and orientation, that the *qawmi* schooling system draws much of its resources from for operating and justifying its mission. Almost with the same goal in mind, in this chapter on *adab* we have explored the concept, which is deeply rooted in religion, or its politico-ideological vitality behind *Jamian* existence. In the following chapter, I will explore how the religious concepts of *iman* (faith) and *amal* (action) also underpin this system. Finally, the exploratory discussions that will develop over the concepts of *adab*, *amal* and *iman* will constitute the essence for understanding the underlying dynamics of the *Jamian* schooling system.

In short, the chapter clearly illustrated that inside *Jamia*, or any *qawmi madrasa* for that matter, any Muslim's body is an ideologically active “Islamic” construction, both as a subject and as an object in the eyes of its owner and others. Hence, by systematically imparting knowledge and rigorously implementing practices on the body's *adab*, *Jamia's* schooling about creating, reforming, and labelling Muslims and their bodies. By schooling individuals systematically on *adab* or *body techniques*, an expression I borrow from Mauss (1979: 97), *Jamia* is thus transforming the individual's dress, face, hair, limbs, tone, speech, gesture, and posture into a proper representative of a good Muslim.

## Chapter Six: *Iman* and *Amal*

In the previous chapter I examined the approved manner of a “good” Muslim surrounding the concept of *adab*. The purpose of this chapter is to address the quality of faith (*iman*) and action (*amal*) of a “good” Muslim centring on the concept of *iman*, according to the *Jamian* interpretation. It is important to remember that in the history of Islam the concept of *iman* is a controversial subject (see appendix 4), which is no less an issue in today’s complex world as we shall see here. All three of the *adab*, *iman* and *amal* notions which define the *Jamian* schooling towards the production of a “good” Muslim persona, are universal Islamic concepts but are bound up with local realities, separate yet inseparable from each other in the process. In order to achieve our goal, which is not theological, we will examine the manifested aspects of *iman* and *amal* only.

By manifested aspect I refer to the notion *zahiri*<sup>96</sup> (expressed as a noun) or *zahir* (as a verb), as used by the *Jamians*, which conveys the public representations or exteriorities of a person or a concept (see appendix 5). This is a very important notion and central for determining one’s *Muslimness*. As presented before, from the very onset of my fieldwork the *Jamians* made me conscious of it (see Chapter 5). It works as a depository of references and provides the basic information on who is a “good” Muslim and who is not. Throughout my fieldwork, this expression and associated ideas helped me to assimilate, gradually, into the life of the *madrasa*.

In the previous chapter, we discussed the ways the *Jamians* judge, as well as produce, *Muslimness* based on the *adab* of the body’s surface and action. They clearly distinguish

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<sup>96</sup> The opposite of *zahiri* is *Al-batin* or *bateni*. *Batani* literally stands for “that which is hidden or concealed”, and refers to one of the 99 names of Allah. It is the inner meaning and reality behind all existence. It may also refer to the unseen world of Angels and genies as described in the *Qur’an*. This term is popular in Alevisim, Ismailism, and Sufisim. Those who subscribe to this often include esoteric or mystic meanings in the interpretation of *Qur’an*. It is worth mentioning that there exists little dispute among Muslims that *Qur’an* has hidden meanings, yet who possesses such knowledge to extract meanings from it is a matter of great debate. The Sunni Islamic scholars, therefore, do not accept Sufi Islam’s inclination towards esoteric meanings and interpretations of *Qur’an*. Before my first meeting, one of the *madrasa* gatekeepers had categorically told me that he is more concerned by my look and comportment than by my *Batani* attributes as a Muslim, whereas the other gatekeepers are probably looking at those more closely. As explained later, my inward belief and inclination towards Islam is important but has no value to them as long as I do not leave those open for the public to see.

between the Muslims in the path of Islam, i.e. themselves, and Muslims not in the path of Islam, i.e. rest of the society. It is their belief that, a “good” Muslim cannot separate life between secular and religious or non-Islamic and Islamic since Islam completes his entity. Hence, the *Jamians* emphasize that a “good” Muslim must project his *Muslimness* before everything else,

*“He has only one identity, which is Muslim, and he belongs to only one nation that is Islam.”*

According to them, a “good” Muslim has to perform, both privately and publicly, and has to observe all the duties that the “five pillars” of Islam entail and propose. These “five pillars” of Islam are: first, testifying (*Tawheed*), second, praying (*Salat*), third, fasting<sup>97</sup> in Ramadan (*Sawm*), fourth, doing charity<sup>98</sup> (*Zakat*), and fifth, performing pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca, if one has that (primarily financial) ability. In the next section, I will briefly highlight the way the *Jamians* explain the concept of *amal* and *iman*

### **6.1 (a) *Amal* and *iman***

For the *Jamians*, performing and observing all of these religious duties following the best manner (*adab*) that the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* endorse is call *amal*; it is the proof of one’s piety (see appendix 6 for the performance of salah). The *Qur’an* and *Hadith*, on numerous occasions promised and described extravagant rewards for the pious Muslims in the Paradise; here I quote the *Qur’an* for one such,

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<sup>97</sup> *Sawm* is the Arabic word for fasting but in Bangladesh, people rarely use this word; instead, they use the Farsi word, which is *roja*. According to the Islamic calendar, it is in the whole month of Ramadan that Muslims offer obligatory fast. However, following the Prophet’s tradition, any pious individual can fast on every Monday and Thursday and on many other occasions.

<sup>98</sup> *Zakat* stands for alms giving, charity, or the poor-rate (see Chapter 3). Muslims in Bangladesh and in other places use the word to a specific kind of once-in-a-year charity besides all that they spend in other forms of charity and alms giving. Each year the Islamic *Shariah* (law) wing of the Bangladesh government’s religious affairs ministry officially publishes the yearly rate for *zakat*. The rate is typically based on the current market value of gold, silver, currency, land, and other valuables that individuals hold as asset.

“Here is a picture of the Garden promised to the pious: rivers of water forever pure, rivers of milk forever fresh, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, rivers of honey clarified and pure, [all] flow in it; there they find fruit of every kind, and they will find forgiveness from their Lord. How can this be compared to the fate of those stuck in the Fire, given boiling water to drink that tears their bowels?” (47:15)<sup>99</sup>

Therefore, once in the *Jamia* the first schooling that the young learners receive on Islam revolves around the three *amal*, e.g. *Tawheed*, *Salat* and *Sawm*. For them *Zakat* and *Hajj* are not obligatory as these two are directly linked with one’s economic circumstances. Indeed, these may never be obligatory, given the economic background that they are from and the probable future economic trajectory that they might follow. For their parents or for adults in general, *Zakat* and *Hajj* become obligatory only when the economic condition permits them to perform them. After receiving the detailed knowledge on the “five pillars”, one is obliged to carry on doing *amal* on these for the rest of one’s life. Metaphorically speaking, these then become the core source or spiritual-mine for all *amal* that one can accumulate in a life time; just like the following saying of a *Jamian alim*,

“The more you do (*amal*), the more you earn (benefit in the form of *sawab*<sup>100</sup>, *rahmat*<sup>101</sup>, *barakat*<sup>102</sup>).”

For a young learner the process of learning *amal* is eternal. Scholars and teachers keep pounding the learners with the intricacies of *amal*, which concern the practical and doctrinal teachings of Islam both related and beyond the five major *amal* as mentioned above (see appendix 7). According to them, the whole process of becoming an *alim* is itself an *amal* in its entirety. Everything within that entirety has to follow the order and manner suggested in the holy books and showed, told, and taught by one’s mentor for receiving maximum merits or *benefits* from Allah.

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<sup>99</sup> See the *Qur’an* (22:33, 37:48, 43: 71,73, 44:53,54, 52:20,24 55:15, 56, 58, 68, 76, 56: 17,21,36, 76:19, 78:31, ) by Haleem (2004) for above references on Paradise and rewards that await there for the pious.

<sup>100</sup> *Sawab* is the Arabic for recompense, reward, et cetera.

<sup>101</sup> *Rahmat* is the Arabic for mercy, clemency, compassion, et cetera.

<sup>102</sup> *Barakat* is the Arabic for blessings.

According to the *Jamians*, the issue of earning *benefit*<sup>103</sup> is crucial in any context for every Muslim. Hence, the learners receive frequent reminders from the *ulema* to remain wakeful to not to miss the *amal* if they want to mount up *benefits*. The signs that one is receiving or not receiving *benefits* are many. For example, a pious, well-mannered learner's excellent academic performance confirms for the *Jamians* that, he is not only stacking up benefits (*sawab*) for the next life through his *amal* but also receiving back, already in this world, some of it in the form of *rahmat* (compassion) and *barakat* (blessings) from Allah. In contrast, one who is successful but lacks piety and proper manner is certainly not receiving the *benefits* from Allah. As the *Jamians* say, the reason for not receiving *benefit* is either one's *bujh* (will) or one's *ich'cha* (understanding), or both. *Jamian ulama* say, *benefit* comes directly from Allah but it has a relationship with the individual learner's *bujh* or *akal* (understanding/maturity/sensibility/wisdom) and *ich'cha* or *niyaat* (will power or desire/determination/intention/willingness)<sup>104</sup>. Lacking of any sorts into any of the *bujh* and *ich'cha* or both can cause *amal* to falter, which ultimately deprive one from *benefits*. *Jamians* say that the power of one's *bujh* and *ich'cha* lies in one's *iman*; hence the increase or decrease of *iman*, increases or decreases of one or both of the *bujh* and *ich'cha*. An individual's *iman* increases when the *benefits* from Allah started to reach her or him.

*Jamian ulema* introduced me to the notion that they call *chaap* or pressure to emphasize the importance of *bujh* and *ich'cha* and their association with *iman* behind every learner's success in this schooling. According to them, there are many types of *chaaps* that a learner comes under from the point he enters into a *madrasa*, however, the most important two come from two opposing directions – the *deen* (the Islamic way of life) and the *dunya* (the materialistic world). The *deen* pressures him to master its codes and conventions and the *dunya* pulls him to its directions. The learner, lonely with his *bujh*

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<sup>103</sup> *Jamians* often use one *Hadith* to narrate the significance of *benefit*, which I translate here: When one intends to do any good deed, one already collect one *sawab* (benefit), for the intention only. In addition, when he accomplishes that deed then he receive 10 to 700 times and even beyond that as *benefits*. When he intends to do any bad deed but does not do it then he gets one benefit for not doing it. When he commits one bad deed then he accumulate only one penalty for that.

<sup>104</sup> See Chapter 4 for a brief discussion of the terms *bujh* and *ich'cha*.

and *ich'cha* only, sees these two competing forces fight over the control of his body and mind. In such a critical stage enters the *ulema* to rescue the learner by infusing the faculty of *bujh* and *ich'cha* with *iman*, which gives them a sense of direction. As a response to this intervention, some learners stay and emulate their *ulema* closely in perfecting the *deen*; and some drift around or give it up completely for the *dunya*. By perfecting the *deen* one becomes a good Muslim. Here *deen* depends on one's *amal*, and *amal* depends on one's *iman*. In the following section, the central position of the concept of *iman*, in this context, will be revisited briefly before entering into the main discussion.

### 6.1 (b) Centrality of *iman* and *Jamian* mission

*Jamians* understand *iman* as the fundamental quality of man that, in its prime, fills up the heart of a Muslim with the,

*“Thoughts of Allah only and all the time, which his deeds zahir...”*

According to them,

*“The state of mind that contains iman in its prime is the source of all best niyaat (pious intention), amal, and adab, which signify that the person is a good Muslim<sup>105</sup>.”*

Possibly because of this fascination for a best quality *iman*, the *Jamians* tend to interpret some apparently outward and “worldly” actions as *amal* and give those more admiration and attention than they truly deserve. For example, any Muslim can become a “good Muslim” overnight, in the eyes of the *Jamians*, by enrolling his son in the *Jamia* and anyone can jeopardise his *Muslimness* by pulling his son out of it. Similarly, all the mosque-goers are better Muslims, according to them, than those who do not go. Here it

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<sup>105</sup> The notion *iman* is based on seven (some interpret as six) articles, known as *Iman-e-Mufassil: I have faith in Allah and His Angels, His Books and His Messengers, and the Day of Judgement and that all good and evil and fate is from Almighty Allah and it is sure that there will be resurrection after death*. There also exists a short form known as *Iman-e-Mujmal: I have faith in Allah as He is known by His Names and attributes and I accept all His commands*.

would seem that the *ulama* are simply judging the quality of one's *Muslimness* based on one's action and not on one's belief. However, they justify their stand by weighing the possible consequence that an action can have on the whole of the Muslim community or *umma*. Therefore, the action that would serve against the interest of Islam is a bad action or as they call it a *bod amal*,

“*Bod amal* (bad action) always come from *bod niyaat* (bad intention), and both come from a non-*imandar* (*imandar* literally means a person of *iman*)<sup>106</sup>.”

This means, even though theoretically *iman* is the base of the heart and all *amal* come from there, in practice people judge one's *iman* based on the *amal* that one does. Therefore, doing *amal* in public is important, something that the *Jamian* schooling encourages.

The question arises here: what happens to those of the Muslims who are judged as “not good” based only on their *amal*? In response, *Jamian ulema* stress that the status of “not good” is not a permanent one and can be elevated to the level of “good” and even beyond if one wishes to do so for the interest of the Muslim *umma*. Remember that the *Jamians* consider themselves as vanguards of Islam in Bangladesh. It is therefore their (*ulema*) responsibility, as *Jamians* believe, to rescue Bangladeshi Muslims from practicing Islam incorrectly<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup>The vernacular expression is *be-iman*, something that the *ulema* rarely use. It is important to note here that in the history of Islam this is the classic way of categorizing and distinguishing the “faithless” (*be-iman*) among the “faithful” (*iman*). The famous theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (1263 - 1328) stresses that it was over the meaning of the word *iman* that the first Muslim community broke into sects and factions and began to call one another ‘infidels’, which happened immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the 632 AD. For more see appendix no. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Eighteenth century reformer Shah Wali Allah (1703-1762) is an inspirational figure for the *Jamians* who had identified intrusion of non-Islamic and indigenous traditions as a big reason for the Muslim downfall. Following him, therefore, the *Jamians* stress on correct performance and maintain distance from any practice that they consider as indigenous intrusion. See, Metcalf ed. 2009 for Shah Wali Allah's influence on later day reformists.



These *madrassa* and their *ulema* operate mainly in rural Bangladesh, where Muslims are traditionally inclined to *Pir*<sup>108</sup>, *Fakir*<sup>109</sup>, *Murshid*<sup>110</sup> and *Mazars* or shrines<sup>111</sup>. *Jamians* ruefully call it *baromishaly* (mixed) Islam, because it is *full of bid'a* (an Arabic expression that means the act of innovation)<sup>112</sup>. This is, however, typical Bengali Islam<sup>113</sup>, which is a synthesis of Islam and age-old agrarian ethos influenced by *Vaishnavism*<sup>114</sup> and *Baulism*<sup>115</sup>: in other words, an offshoot of various Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi Islamic traditions that skips, changes, and improvises many Islamic performances that the *Jamians*, as *Sunni* orthodox practitioners, hold dear.

In one's everyday practice and demeanour, the residue of this synthesis that surface naturally (and are visible) is what the *ulema* want to see diminishing from the Muslim body for good. For example, many rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death use non-Islamic symbols and practices that *ulema* call Hindu tradition. The presence and influences of these residues is, according to the *Jamian ulema*,

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<sup>108</sup> The Persian word *Pir* in Bangladesh stands for Muslim holy man or a Sufi master.

<sup>109</sup> *Fakir* usually refers to beggar but here it stands for ecstatic/tantric Sufi or Sufi mendicant.

<sup>110</sup> *Murshid* refers to Sufi master who guides disciples.

<sup>111</sup> Ellickson (2002) examines the contemporary religious trend in Bangladesh and shows how a conservative form of Islam that distaste *Pir* and *Mazar* centred Islam is making inroads among Muslims in rural Bangladesh.

<sup>112</sup> While *baromishaly* denotes the mixed nature of something, literally it denotes a mixture of twelve ingredients. Scholars (Ralph Nicholas 2001, Peter Bertocci 2001) argue that the conversion to Islam took shape in the Bengal delta over several generations as an extended process of cultural change where Bengali Muslims share with non-Muslim Bengalis many of the cultural practices and cosmologies that *ulema* from all ages see as *bid'a* or innovation. Ralph Nicholas (ibid) argues that it is through this shared tradition that Islam won the hearts of the people of Bengal's hinterland. However, Bengal's Islam did not win the heart of more scripture-centred Muslims. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, according to Muhammad Shah (2001), these *ulema* are the ones who have been trying hard to flush the Bengali elements out of this Islam and bring it more in line with the *Sharia*-centred Islam.

<sup>113</sup> See Nicholas (2001) for mutual interchange of religious symbols and practices among rural Muslim and *Vaishnavas* in the Bengal; and Mills (1992) PhD thesis for the appeal of *Pir* in Bangladesh.

<sup>114</sup> *Vaishnavism* is a tradition of historic Vedic religion. Its followers classify it as a monotheistic tradition where all prayers are directed towards Lord *Vishnu*. Historically in Bengal, *Vaishnavism* is known as *Gaudiya* or *Chaitanya Vaishnavism*. The *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* is also known for its devotional worship (*bhakti*) of *Radha* and *Krishna* (cf. Dimock 1991[1966]).

<sup>115</sup> *Bauls* are mystics of Bengal, a very heterogeneous group that consists of the members of both *Vaishnavas* and Sufi Muslims. These people are identified by their dress and musical instrument as well as musical tradition. Not much is known of their origin, and while they constitute a tiny fraction of the Bengali population their influence on the Bengalis is considerable (cf. Openshaw 2002). In 2005, the tradition was included in the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

*“Stopping Muslims of this country from leading a life that is truly Islamic.”*

Which does not mean that Muslims from this particular societal background are hopeless; rather the hope for the *ulema* lay in the fact that these people are quite happy about their Muslim identity. For the *ulema*, this is exactly where they expect these Muslims to “act like Muslims”, as one of them commented,

*“One should show minimum level of humility towards one’s own identity as long as one introduces oneself as a Muslim.”*

In this regard, even pretension becomes a praiseworthy *amal* and is a sign of humility that, the *ulema* believe, will help Islam, Muslims, and even the person who is pretending. One learned *Mawlana* Kashim suggests,

*“At least publicly one should work hard to conceal that part of his self which has lacking in Islam... Instead, he should zahir more the bit of Islam that his heart is still conserving.”*

According to this view, the public display of *amal* is good and recommended for everyone and, even more so, for those who are deficient of *iman* and *amal*. A Muslim, as the *ulema* say, when declines to *zahir* his *Muslimness*, becomes “not good” automatically because he declines to respect his coreligionists. *Mawlana* Kashim of *Jamia* points at one other group of Muslims that also is “not good” and he calls them *vondo* (hypocrite) because this group *zahir* finely tuned Islamic performances, practices and manners for their personal gains only. This group, unlike those who are advised by the *ulema* to pretend, pretends for worldly benefits only. According to him, the *Mawlana* who came to visit the *madrassa* is a perfect example of a *vondo* Muslim (see Chapter 5). By offering prayers and performances to fulfil personal goals only, *Mawlana* Kashim says,

*“One invokes association with Allah, which is called Shirik<sup>116</sup>, the gravest of all sins that Muslim can possibly commit.”*

The above discussion has touched upon three issues that concern the *Jamians* most in the context of *iman*-schooling: first, establishing *iman*'s inseparability from *amal*, second, emphasizing the public display of *iman* by doing *amal*, and third, strengthening *iman* among the Muslims for diminishing non-Islamic elements from its moral and physical body. If put into practice, all of these three together constitute, as the *Jamian ulema* believe, the perfect condition for the production of a “good” Muslim persona in the contemporary Bangladeshi society. However, in the following discussion we will focus mainly on the *iman*-schooling, by which I refer to the ways *Jamia* transmit the teachings of *iman*, to see how far they are from achieving that goal.

## **6.2 Learning to “believing”: What is learnt?**

Islam generally imposes religious practices on children from the age of seven. *Jamians* also persistently pursue this goal, yet they recognize that children even as old as 10, 11 or 12 do not possess sophisticated enough *bujh* (wisdom) or *ich'cha* (willpower) necessary for grasping the needs and meanings of all that they learn or practice as Muslims. How do the *ulema* then argue in favour of both the method of their teaching and the content that they teach?

As mentioned in the previous chapter on *adab*, the *Jamian ulama* believe that *iman* is an intrinsic and primordial quality of every human child irrespective of his or her family's religious affiliation. They believe that children have no choice over their religious identity, as expressed more explicitly by one of the *ulama*,

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<sup>116</sup> *Shirik* refers to worshiping other than Allah and is an unforgivable sin. *Jamian ulema* believe that all major religions except Islam encourage this kind of association. *Jamians* are against anthropomorphism or attributing human qualities to Allah or Allah's qualities onto humans, or worshiping something or someone beside Allah.

*“All children are born as Muslims but then they become what they become by the wishes and ways of life of their parents and families.”*

The theory that *every child is born a Muslim* corresponds to the idea that it is not the family or lineage of the child that matters but the *iman* of the child, which is inherent and ever present. *Ulama* believe that in order to invigorate the primordial *iman*, which the child inherits at birth, the child requires an *Islamic knowledge environment (deen'i gaan'er poribesh)* that only the *qawmi madrasa* system can deliver. Here, the *ulema* stress, the essence of the holy *Qur'an*, and *Sunnah* (Prophetic traditions) fill the hearts of the child and it responds to it by the grace of Allah. The motto of this schooling, as described by a teacher, is, *“Don't work on the head; work on the heart of a child.”* Hence, from the very beginning it ensures that every child receives as much schooling as possible on *iman* so that he becomes a malleable learner of Islam in the end.

During the early years of *madrasa*, the young learners learn that *iman* is at the heart of Islam; other Muslims in various non-*madrasa* contexts also receive the same knowledge. However, the difference that marks this knowing is that in the *madrasa* young learners are learning that *iman* is both believing and doing at same time. In other words, believing is simultaneously testifying by tongue and testifying through action. Hence, it certainly requires action (*amal*) of both the heart and the limbs. According to an *alim*, young learners receive rigorous schooling on some seventy-seven of such belief-actions (see appendix 1). These seventy-seven eventually cover all aspects of the five pillars of Islam. Of these, the first one is *Kalimah* or testifying by one's heart and tongue that, *“There is no god but Allah, and Mohammad is Allah's messenger”* and the last one is the removal of a harmful object from the road by using one's limbs.

In the following section, we shall focus on the statement of *iman* exclusively in the *Jamia's Islamic knowledge environment*. This schooling eventually challenges many of the beliefs and practices that the young learners receive at home as Bengali Muslims. According to the *ulema*, during this initial phase of schooling, the children for the first time encounter an *authentic* form of Islam that starts overwriting the residues, as

mentioned earlier, of a *baromishaly* Islam. According to the *Jamian ulema*, success of overwriting those residues depends on initiating the child into the pure form of Islam first. Hence, in the next section, prior to discussing *iman*, we shall examine how such an initiation takes place. Here we will see how in the process of explaining the classical Islamic texts to the learners *Jamian* teachers are not only situating the Hindu community and their belief systems as an oppositional other but also equating various urban celebrations and national celebrations with Hindu rituals (see below).

### 6.3 The initiation

The first of the five pillars of Islam is *Tawheed* or the doctrine of Oneness (see appendix 2). On this, the children receive their first lesson in the *Jamia*<sup>117</sup>. In the following chapter, we shall learn about the methods that the *Jamian ulema* employ in the classroom to school these children. It is not only these five *Kalimahs* that students learn during the first couple of years; they also memorize the (seven) articles of the declaration of faith or *iman* in both of its forms<sup>118</sup>. In practice, children actually memorize both forms of the declaration of faith immediately after memorizing the first two *Kalimahs*. The reason that *iman* comes second to the first two *Kalimas*, even after being the central concept of this schooling system, is explained below by one of teachers of the *ibtedai* (primary) section,

“By reciting *Kalimahs*, especially the first two, one surrenders to Allah and becomes a Muslim. And after becoming Muslim one should establish oneself on the path of faith, which is *iman*, in order to become a *mu'min*...”

Here, therefore, we observe that the *Jamians* assume that the learners were yet to be Muslims and the first two *Kalimas* initiate them into Islam, reminds us of the explanation

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<sup>117</sup> *Tawheed* consists of five testimonies or *Kalimahs* (literally means ‘the phrase’). The first testimony is the phrase of Oneness and Purity (*Kalimah Tawheed* and *Tayyibah*); second, is the phrase of Testimony (*Kalimah Shahadat*), third the phrase of Glory (*Kalimah Tamjeed*), fourth is the phrase of Unity (*Kalimah Tawheed*), and the fifth is the phrase of Disapproval (*Kalimah Radde-Kufr*). Children usually memorize all five of them by the second year into their *madrassa* education. In the third year, many will even learn to write all five of them in Arabic straight from their memory.

<sup>118</sup> First form is the *Iman-e-Mufassil* (the essential declaration of faith or *iman*) and the second form is *Iman-e-Mujmal* (the summary declaration of faith).

that the *ulema* give for the mass hair cutting practice (see Chapter 5). Testifying the purity and oneness of God is relevant prior engaging one's heart and body into believing it, which does make sense given that many *ulema* here literally believe that their mission is to establish Islam in the hearts of the Muslim namesakes.

At the time of teaching the first two *Kalimahs*, and eventually during all five of them, teachers illustrate the importance of the *Kalimah* messages by routinely asking young learners whether they have ever watched Hindus performing their *Puja*<sup>119</sup> (worship). The discussion then concentrates on the major differences between these two *jatis*<sup>120</sup> and how Muslims are a better people than Hindus are<sup>121</sup>. One major issue, out of the two most prominent ones highlighted in this discussion is that - Hindus have thirty-three million Gods and Goddesses where we, the Muslims, have only one - Allah. In the following comment made by a teacher regarding the *Puja* for Goddess *Durga* we see that he is not only highlighting the differences but also ridiculing it,

*“Hindus create their God and Goddesses from mud, then worship it, and then throw it into the water. How helpless their Gods and Goddesses are!”*

Children enjoy such derision in their innocence and laugh out aloud. This is an age when these children think that Hindu is a negative word, truer still for those who go to *madrasas*. Teachers even use the word Hindu to humiliate those who fail to memorize the *Kalimahs* perfectly; thus, it is common to hear, *“What's wrong with you! Do you want to remain a Hindu?”*

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<sup>119</sup> *Puja* is the religious ceremony where devotees show reverence to a certain deity (cf. Fuller 2004 [1992]). This is a complex ritual but the core to all *Puja* is the idea of “exchange” where offerings are made to powerful deities with the expectation that blessings will come in return. Hindu communities all over the Subcontinent perform many large *Pujas* throughout the year; of these, for the Bengali Hindus community, the largest is the *puja* of the Goddess *Durga*.

<sup>120</sup> The word *jati* as Van Schendel (1981, 292) understands stands for exclusive groups in Bangladesh with clear divisions between we and they. Rozario (2001, 42) says it is commonly stands for caste but Bengalis use it to state kin, family, sex, and religion. Bertocci (2001, 72-76) sees that for rural Bengali Muslims it is a distinct human community based on belief and code. However, in the above context, it is clearly highlighting exclusive groups with clear divisions between we and they based on belief and code.

<sup>121</sup> Fuller (2004[1992], 270) finds a similar trend among the Hindu nationalists of India who equates Muslims with demons. In the Subcontinent, the tension between Hindus and Muslims has a long and bloody history that runs deep in the both communities' psyche, especially in Bengal. The pre-1947 Bengal, both eastern and western parts, was an extremely volatile place in that regard (cf. Chatterjee 1999).

The other important issue, which is to some extent a private one but is associated with Hinduism in the society, is an uncircumcised penis (Hindus do not circumcise). Children receive encouragement from the teachers to circumcise as soon as possible. It is common among children to not to consider oneself a *full* Muslim, even after learning to recite the *Kalimahs* perfectly, unless one is circumcised. By mocking other people's God and belittling other people's body the teachers are strengthening *iman* in the hearts and the bodies of the young learners. Hence, in the process of earning *iman* in the heart and on the body, the *Jamian* children are also learning about the boundaries that exist between them and a particular other, the Hindus in this context (Barth 1969, Leach 1954).

It is not only these two features of Hindu religion that the teachers discuss in detail during this phase; they also clearly mark a number of other practices, performances and views as *Hinduani* (Hindu way), modern, and non-Islamic and ask young learners to be mindful of those. Traditionally Bengali Muslims show respect to the elders by touching their feet, what they call *salam* but is somewhat equivalent to the Hindu feet touching tradition of *pranam*. *Jamian ulema* categorically call that *salam* a Hindu practice and strongly discourage it. Young learners can touch the feet of their parents', if they wish to do so out of respect, by squatting with a straight back and upright head and by gazing away from the feet. Bowing and prostrating with a descended gaze is only for Allah and performed while one is praying, hence, no one else warrants such a reverence. If one violates this ruling it amounts to direct association (*skirk*) with Allah, a sin that He will never forgive.

Similarly, *ulema* prohibits shrine visiting, saint worshipping, certain birth, death, and marriage rites; which are registered by many scholars (cf. Blanchet 1984, Gardner 1995, Kotalova 1993, Uusikylä 2000) as typical practice of the Bengali Muslim, or, as Eaton (2001:28) calls it, the 'Bengali style of Islamic piety'. Among the popular, relatively new, urban and modern practices, celebrating birthdays, marriage anniversary, death anniversary, mother's day, father's day, and Valentine's days are strongly discouraged and ridiculed. No one from the *Jamia* visits the national cemeteries or memorials to commemorate the martyrs of the nation or to celebrate victory of the nation on various

national days because they consider such practices as close as a *Puja* can be for the Hindus. It is obligatory for every educational institute to hoist the national flag and to play or to sing the national anthem, yet this occurred only twice during my stay, during the period when a state of emergency was imposed. All these practices, highly symbolic markers of what a “good” Muslim is not, are viewed as pagan and sinful, and threaten the Purity and Oneness that the *Kalimahs* testify.

From the following discussion, we shall see that, for the *Jamians*, the declaration of faith (*Iman-e-Mufassil*) is not only a continuation of the Testimonies (of Oneness) but also a reinforcement of the boundaries that it sets around the constituent Muslims by its ethnocentric interpretation of *iman*.

#### **6.4 The *iman*-schooling**

The articles that constitute the declaration of *iman*, the *Iman-e-Mufassil*, states,

*“I believe in Allah (i), His Angels (ii), His Books (iii), His Messengers (iv), in the Day of Judgement (v), and that Fate good and bad is given by Allah (vi), and the life after death (vii)”.*

In *Jamia*, everyone knows this declaration; every child learns this by heart in both Arabic and Bengali; and every part of it is explained to them bit by bit. In this section, I will first illustrate those explanations to show why and how these are actually boundary-markers and thus are relevant for understanding the *Jamian* notion of “good” Muslim. Accordingly, in the last section I will examine an example of the restrictions that is characteristic of a “good” Muslim, as the *Jamian ulema* highlight it, in order to understand why *Jamians* think it is important to have and to show how in reality it is impossible to have.

##### **6.4 (a) “Aamantu billahi... (I believe in Allah..)”**



The first article of faith declares belief in Allah by saying, *Aamantu billahi* or *I believe in Allah*, which is a simple statement. However, the statement turns into a hazard when the question arises whether the believer truly believes in Allah and the rest of the declaration. Hence, the *ulema* tell us to look into the *amal* of the believer (*imandar*), “*Amal will testify one’s iman.*” However, a young learner, who is neither bothered by who believes and who does not, or who has *amal* and who does not, is a problem for the *Jamian ulema*. According to the *ulema*, these are important distinctions for knowing who is “good” and who is “not good” among the Muslims. Hence, the aim of *iman*-schooling is to address this issue in particular.

In this regard, the first article of faith, “*I believe in Allah...*” is the point to address the difference that there are many among us who do not believe in Allah even though they say ‘I believe’. The teacher then describes the signs of a Muslim namesake and of a “good” Muslim,

*“A non-believer does not do amal. He does not pray, does not recite Qur’an, does not fast, does not pay Zakat, does not perform Hajj.... He trims his beard, does not respect pardha, wears trouser that touches the ground... He sings, listens to music, watches cinema, visit shrines, obeys Pir, does not respect ulema, does not listen to his parents, does not look after them,...so on and so forth.... On the other hand, a genuine Muslim upholds all the five pillars of Islam, never compromises his iman, sincere about his amal, excellent in adab...He is the blessed, and all of you should strive to be like him...”*

The teacher warns them of invoking any association with Allah as well as this is the act of *shirik*. According to the teacher, every Muslim should know who the Almighty is, who the most powerful is, who we turn to seek protection from all the evils and from all the distresses, to whom we should bow, prostrate, and thank for everything. He tells,

*“When we fall sick if we believe that doctors and medicine will cure us...then we are doing shirik, when we have no food if we believe that the village chairman will feed us....then we are doing shirik, when we believe money will solve all our problem.. then we are doing shirik, when we believe Bangladesh’s Prime Minister is the most powerful...then we are doing shirik...Remember! A “good” Muslim does not do shirk...”*

Then the teacher teaches the young learners some remedies for avoiding Allah’s wrath if such evil thoughts enter into their hearts,

*“Say naujubillah min zalik (We seek refuge in Allah, protect us from evil) or astaghfirullah (We ask Allah for forgiveness) 1, 3, 5 or 7 times...Allah is the most merciful. He will forgive you.”*

These are the words of repentance (*tawba*) that people generally utter, either loudly or silently, after something that they had not originally intended to do, say, or think. Such *tawbas* guard against any forms of transgression that might enrage Allah. Soon the young learners learn to use such expressions correctly where the situation demands, besides gradually picking up all that they learn in this session about signs of one’s *Muslimness*.

#### **6.4 (b) “Wa Malaikatihi...(His Angels...)”**

Following the tradition and method of *madrassa* schooling children first memorize the names of major Angels and then learn about their instrumental position in carrying out Allah’s orders. There are eight most prominent among numerous Angels that a Muslim child memorizes and learns about at a very early stage. They are taught that Angels are made of light and are invisible to our eyes. I have seen teachers describing the attributes of these four Angels while children are listening fixedly with dropped jaws:

*“.....Two of them reside all the time on your shoulders, the Kiraaman on the right and the Kaatibeen on the left. The right shoulder’s Angel records all your*

*good deeds and good intentions similarly the left shoulder's Angel records all your bad deeds and intentions...and two are waiting for you in the grave, the Munkar and Nakeer... they will ask you three questions once you are there...Be careful! If you can't answer those then you are in trouble! There is a very little time left...because we do not know when we will die or how long we will live...So, learn hurriedly, don't waste time hanging around like the urchins! Only a good Muslim not any urchin will be able to answer those...So do you want to be a good Muslim? An imandar<sup>122</sup> Muslim? An amaldar (who does amal regularly and sincerely) Muslim?"*

Young learners loudly express their desire to the last three questions by saying, "YES!" It is not only the fear of the Angels waiting inside the grave but also the fear of *Kaatibeen*, the Angel of the left shoulder, which the teachers exploit to direct the learners towards certain behaviours. These are highly praised behaviours and marked as *nek amal* (good deeds); for instance, sitting attentively in the classroom, listening to the teachers, maintaining order, et cetera.

While learning about the Angels, some children would ask about other mysterious beings such as *vut* (ghost) and *jiin*. The teachers often go off track explaining the nature and features of *jiin* but dismisses *vut* as none existent Hindu fabrication. According to the *Jamians*, *jiin* is a *jati*<sup>123</sup> like the *manush* (human) *jati* but made of fire and resides in a parallel world. The encounter between *jiin* and *manush* is common inside a Hindu homestead, near a temple, an isolated silent place, underneath a large old tree; in a time near dusk and during the prayer calls (*Ajan*), and finally in a state when one's body is unclean. *Jiin jati* also consists of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, et cetera. The Hindu *jiin* often attacks Muslim men and women when they fail to maintain certain restriction associated with their own body, place, and time. Then they share their stories of personal encounters of such kinds with the already terrified young listeners.

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<sup>122</sup> This implies that there are Muslims who do not have *iman*.

<sup>123</sup> Here *Jati* refers to species or race.

In one such session, I came to learn about two students of the *hifzo* section (*Qur'an* memorization section) from the previous year whom the *madrassa* authorities had to release because they were possessed by two Muslim *jiins*. *Jamians* demand that Muslim *jiins* are usually good and in this case, under interrogation from some learned *ulema*, these two admitted that their reason for entering *Jamia* was simply to memorize the *Qur'an*. They possessed the boys when one of the boys was passing by the bazaar's toilet area and the other one was unclean. However, their presence in the bodies of these two students made the boys behave so abnormally that people around them not only noticed the changes but also became fearful of them. According to the teacher, these two *jiins* were of very aggressive nature even though they were Muslims.

Stories like these would give goose bumps to the whole of the class, but there are messages in them telling the young audience what not to do to avoid these unpleasant kinds of company. The teacher would then teach them a potent *doa*<sup>124</sup> (invocation), the methods for using it, as well as tip them on personal hygiene and avoidance of certain place and time as mentioned above. Interestingly, the use of the Angels and *jiin* plays important roles in the life of the young learners' as these two beings draw some limits around them that requires constant maintenance through believing (*iman*) and practicing (*amal*) religious edicts.

#### **6.4 (c) “Wa Kutubihi...( His Books...)”**

The third article of faith schools children in the name of the four major Books: *Tawrat* (Torah), *Zabur* (Psalms), *Injil* (Gospel) and the *Qur'an*. They learn briefly about revelation. Teachers tell stories on other influential apostles of Allah and their present day followers mainly the Jews and Christians. They were categorically told that the two are no longer believers because they denied Mohammad and Islam therefore a good Muslim will not take these two as friends. Here, they also come to know that, “*Apart from the holy Qur'an all the other Books have lost their novelty and the holy Qur'an is*

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<sup>124</sup> If one thinks that a *jinn* is attacking him then he should read *I seek refuge in Allah from you* three times and then he should say, *May Allah curse you to the full*.

*the final Book of Allah that He has promised to safeguard*". As an extension of this comment, and as a backing to that, the teacher will tell them about the *Hifz*o section of the *madrasa* where students memorize the whole *Qur'an*. They will be told that since the Prophet's death this tradition has kept the Muslim holy book alive and free from all corruption, "*Which is a Miracle of Allah*". The children learn that not only memorizing any part of the *Qur'an* is a great *amal* but so is the reading of any part. By that time, off course, and in parallel to this they are already learning about the *salat* (five daily prayers) that requires memorizing many short chapters (*sura*) from the *Qur'an*.

Interestingly, the preoccupation with Allah's promise of safeguarding the purity of the *Qur'an* is so big and so literally taken here that no young learner can touch or carry it fearing that he has not yet reached the stage to understand what is pure and what is not. However, the *Qaeda* or the book for the beginners that teaches the basics of the Arabic language, which is necessary for reading the *Qur'an*, is something that they can carry but only upon ritually cleaning themselves and tightly holding it on the chest. Similarly, around 75 per cent of the classroom-time in the *Jamia's ibtedai* (primary) section is dedicated to learning *Qur'anic* texts in Arabic clearly and correctly. This preoccupation with the purity of the *Qur'an* has almost achieved worship like status among these Muslims; one liberal Bengali Muslim thinker in the 1930s equated it with *Qur'an puja* or *Qur'an worshipping* (cf. Khan 2001), a tradition that the *Jamians* are relentlessly reproducing.

#### **6.4 (d) "Wa Rasulihi...(His Messengers...)"**

The fourth article of faith is about the *Rasool*<sup>125</sup> and *Nabi*<sup>126</sup>, or the messengers. This is a lesson mixed with *Qur'anic* stories and history of Islam. Children come to know about the first messenger Adam and last messenger Muhammad. The creation of human kind is explained in theological terms and the explanations are unquestioningly accepted, as they constitute one's belief. The life of the Prophet Mohammad is always central and

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<sup>125</sup> *Rasool* is the messenger who received a new Divine Law and Book from Allah.

<sup>126</sup> *Nabi* is the messenger, also sent by Allah, but without a book and a Divine Law; he follows the *Rasool* before him.

highlighted, as well as that of his companions even though they are not messengers. Apart from Mohammad, only Abraham and Ishmael are given precedence in *Jamia*'s reading of messengers. The reason in defence of this incongruity is that the others are important but lack relevance for the schooling in Islam. On the other hand, companions are highly important and even companions of the companions and their followers simply because they maintained the chain of authenticity of the *Qur'an*, *the Islamic way of life (Deen Islam)*, *the Shariah*<sup>127</sup>, and *the Sunnah*. *Jamia*, as a religious school, presents itself to the young learners as situated within that chain of conservation and transmission of the Islamic way of life.

#### 6.4 (e) “Wal Yawmil Aakheri...(The Day of Judgement...)”

The fifth article of *iman* is *Qiyamat* or the Day of Judgement; the teacher tells the learners,

*“The universe will come to an end on a Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> of Moharram (the first month of Islamic calendar) as Almighty Allah will order the Archangel Israfael to blow his Trumpet, who has been waiting for that order since eternity.”*

The teachers then carry on with the eschatology of the *Qiyamat*,

*“...The earth will shake violently, mountains will fly like cotton flakes over our head, the sun will come extremely closer, moon will crash, stars will lose their shine and the whole universe will collapse!”*

Learners believe in *Qiyamat* because the teacher tells them that, for a “good” Muslim with strong *iman* and vast *amal*, it is not the end but the start of a new beginning that will never end. However, it is not in the “what will happen” part of the eschatology but in the

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<sup>127</sup> Literally means way or path and refers to the legal framework of Islam that regulates all aspects of a Muslim's life.

sign of its imminence that the *Jamian ulema* indirectly serve a caution for these young learners of *iman*,

*“Children will disobey their parents and will not respect them.”*

*“They will not keep promises.”*

*“They will become very fond of music, dance, et cetera.”*

*“They will speak negatively about their forefathers.”*

*“Illiterates will rule the world”*

The signs clearly distress the learners but hope remains high as they are told that it will not happen so long as there remains any *alim* or a single “good” Muslim.

#### **6.4 (f) “Wal Qadri Khirehi Wa Shar’rehi...(that Fate good and bad is given..)”**

The sixth article is about *Qad’r*, which is popularly known as the *Taqdeer* or fate. Children are told during this lesson that it was wish of Allah and not that of their parents or guardians that brought them to *Jamia*. They learn that even a single leaf does not move without His permission. Everything is predestined in this universe, hence, accept what you are, who you are, where you are and try to be thankful for everything that you have. Even be thankful for all pain, sorrow, and hardship because with those, *“Allah is actually testing your iman.”*

I still cannot comprehend a technique of knowing how much the 7, 8, 10 or 12-years-old learner can grasp the notion of fate. However, during those classes, no child would raise a question regarding the subject, as if by that they would violate the boundaries of *iman* that the schooling is setting around them.

The teacher, sometimes, in an attempt to engage the learners with the issue, instead of presenting the subject more intelligibly, asks,

*“Does anyone know the name of our next best student?”*

Children look empty, dumbfounded, and look over their shoulders or sideways; they are clearly suspicious about the motive of the question. Then after reading those faces for next 30 seconds, the teacher continues,

*The answer is - you do not know... Nevertheless, you can guess only, but no one can say a name for sure! Why is that? Because, we cannot know these things. But, what we don't is what Allah knows and He is already supporting that child...!"*

Here the teacher would once again almost obviously introduce the benefit of *amal* by saying that,

*"Like your iman your Taqdeer is also inscribed on you even before your birth. With the passing of time if we do not take good care of our iman then it loses its strength. But by doing amal we can regain the lost iman...similarly if you do amal, and only by sincere amal, you would be able to change your fate...."*

It is important to note that besides all the *iman* schooling, young learners are also receiving schooling on *salat*, which is a rigorous body centred *amal* and one of the most emphasized *amal* in the *Jamia*. Hence, when they are told to do *amal* to increase their *iman*, to delay the *Qiyamat*, and to change their fate, throughout the whole of the *madrasa* schooling process, learners ranging from Year 2 to Year 15 directly interpret that as *salat*. It is this particular *amal*, the *amal* of *salat*, that becomes the most potent of all *amal* for the *Jamians*' in their *iman* and Islam schooling.

#### **6.4 (g) "Wa..Bawsee Bawdal Mawat...(the life after death...)"**

The last article of faith is the belief that all the dead will rise after the *Qiyamat* day and face the Judgement in the Field of Resurrection (*Maidaan-e-Hashr*), which the teacher usually discusses with the Day of Judgement or the fifth article. Allah the Almighty will



judge everyone, primarily based on the quality of the *iman* and both the quality and the quantity of the *amal*. Then only the “good” Muslim will be rewarded in Paradise.

### 6.5 Coming to terms with a time

The young learners, in the process of learning about Allah’s attributes are told, “*Never think of displeasing Him!*” The list of such “never-dos” grows hopelessly long as the learner grows older. Here, I present only one such “never-do” as an example to show what the *Jamians* can really do about it.

This example is regarding the use and production of all forms of image. From the beginning, young learners in *Jamia* are strongly discouraged in drawing<sup>128</sup>, because Islam prohibits the production of images of living things. Therefore, learners in *Jamia* do not draw human figures, birds, or other creatures but draw flowers and landscapes, instead. Accordingly, no one here would ever admit that he draws anything that even slightly resembles a human, just in case that simple act of admission enrages Allah the Almighty. Naturally, for the same reason the *madrasa* textbooks also contain no human image and just a few images of other living things to meet the learning needs only.

However, the young learner can see that apart from prohibiting his drawings the *madrasa* can do very little to stop the flood of images from entering into the *madrasa*<sup>129</sup>. For example, photography is one form of image making that with the proliferation of modern technologies like mobile phones, personal computers, copier machines and printers is no longer a novelty, even in rural areas. With the availability of camera phones that take both moving and still photographs, photography is a popular past time, at least clandestinely among the *Jamians*. However, senior *ulema* of *Jamia* consider photographing the human image to be *guunah* (sin) or an act of transgression apart from

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<sup>128</sup> Commonly known as *art* (the same as the English word art but it specifically means the act of drawing).

<sup>129</sup> The majority of such images are promotional, printed and circulated on papers in the form of posters and handbills. Some hang as huge tin billboards mounted on huge iron frames, some as permanent tin or neon signboards above the doors of every shop in the bazaars, some media agencies even hire the boundary walls of the roadside houses and then hand paint adverts of their clients. Not to mention in this long list of sources and forms of images how big and important role that the print (newspapers, magazines) and electronic (TV channels, radio) medias are playing.

for meeting certain necessities. One even sees it as a threat for the Muslim women's *pardha*<sup>130</sup> system. According to this *alim*,

“... *But, taking pictures for fun is not permissible at all. One example of the effect that photo has on Muslims like us is, it is eventually collapsing the pardha system and people are becoming shameless. Photos made it easy for men to possess pictures of women who are completely unrelated and women possess unrelated men's pictures, too!*”

Based on the argument of transgression, a group in *Jamia* categorically told me not to take photos of them and the students. However, on the ground of meeting my work related necessities, others and even some of those who publicly opposed my use of camera helped me to photograph the classrooms, young learners, teachers, *jamaat*, and many other living objects within the *madrassa*.

The *Jamian ulema* raised the argument of transgression, once again, in relation to the widespread use of human images (especially of women) in print and electronic medium. They condemn media for being unethical and irresponsible. Many here believe that media's use of human images, especially the female body, is plainly a profit-driven Western plot that, if not stopped, will eventually destroy the Bangladeshi society by promoting a culture of *free-sex*. *Jamians* describe the intense competition among the country's leading media houses as *vagrant dogs quarrelling*.

On the promotion of *free-sex*, their view is historically grounded as they see a clear connection between the women-centred development policies and practices of the Bangladesh state funded by the West and the role that the media plays in that<sup>131</sup>. Based

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<sup>130</sup> *Purdha* literally means veil. In Bangladesh's context, it indicates the clear separation between the private and the public and more specifically seclusion of the woman's body and space.

<sup>131</sup> See Appendix 3 for the summary of a long discussion that I have had with a number of *Jamians*, consisting of both scholars and young teachers, which captured their interpretations and understandings of the issue of “development” that they consider completely “woman” centred. This account of events is of their own but, indeed, based on history of developmental initiatives and policies that somehow affected their lives, too. Here they talk about a “they” of whom NGOs are only one party. There are others in the group of whom there are those (cultural, political, economical) elites both of Bangladeshi and foreign

on their interpretation, the *ulema* are certain that in the name of modernity and development this vulgar image centred media is popularizing the culture of *free-sex* among the Muslims of this country. Hence, primarily on the ground of obscenity, for the *shameless* and provocative use of images, students are not allowed to read newspapers or magazines.

However, the prohibition on the newspapers has almost no effect on their students. The *madrassa* office acts against its own policy and subscribes to two local daily newspapers in order to remain up-to-date over a tall order of issues relevant to it. Besides these two locals, a handful of teachers regularly bring various national dailies into the premises that the boarding students eventually skim through whenever they get a chance. It does not hurt them much if they cannot; because, at the other end of the bazaar, one or two *Jamia* students are always present within the small crowd that is ever circling the local newspaper vendor for the latest news. It is also common to find students from all the adjoining *madrasas*, schools, and colleges paying visits to a small privately run local library to read the major dailies. I have found out that most of the students who I know can easily identify almost all the famous sports (cricketers, tennis players) and film stars (mostly Hindi film stars) by their images.

Like newspapers, moving images are considered by the *ulema* as dangerous and they forbid watching both television and cinema. However, this ban also does not work as young *ulema* themselves have confided to me about their liking for the popular TV variety shows. Students, with whom I often interacted, seldom miss the opportunities to watch various sports and magazine programs. Some are regular viewers of the popular Friday afternoon movie shows at the state run Bangladesh Television (BTV)<sup>132</sup>. They told

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origins that represent the modern, secular or religiously neutral forces of the society. Many of them are Muslims but carefully avoid Islam. One *Mawlana* jokingly says, "If you ask them why do they still hold to their Islamic or Arabic names they will say: because it is for the love of my parents or grandparents. These are namesake Muslims, their Muslim names are not to be confused with Islam!"

<sup>132</sup> Bishwanath has no cinema hall and the nearest hall is in the Sylhet town. Some of my teacher friends told me that they always use "disguise" to go to a cinema hall, which means wearing "normal" outfits like shirt, trouser, and shoes or trainer, et cetera. They never go anywhere near the cinema halls in the Sylhet town and only visit one when they travel to a different district and always buy the ticket for the evening shows. *Madrassa* students also never visit a cinema hall dressed in their traditional Islamic cloths because that would result into inviting ridicules from the general viewers beside being complained against at their

me that they watch TVs at their lodging houses, at friends' places, and even at the tea-stalls if none of the above is available. In the Bishwanath bazaar, TV works as bait for barbershops, restaurants, groceries, small tea-stalls to lure customers.



Plate 6: A typical Bishwanath tea-stall with a TV mounted refrigerator.

One February afternoon of 2008, Anwar, a student of Year 11, while watching TV and having a tea at a local tea-stall saw in the news that the Bangladesh's number one film hero Manna died of heart attack. He rushed backed to the *madrasa* to share the news with others and eventually it reached me, too. It was a big news story but I could not comprehend its weight until the following morning when I found teachers at the *madrasa*'s office leaning over five national dailies, instead of the regular two. Tarek, my 11-year-old *khadim* told me that a good number of newspapers containing images and features on Manna were also smuggled into the premises by senior boarding students.

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*madrasas*, which surly entail severe punishment and even being thrown out form the *madrasa*. Apart from visiting cinema halls and within TV, both teachers and students admitted that they watch films in DVDs, too.

Later when Manna's burial prayer turned out to be one of the largest one in the country's recent memory I heard one *Jamian* saying,

*“The Almighty might pardon the man because so many Muslims raised their hands in prayer and cried for him in their supplication even after knowing that he lived a life of sin.”*

However, one of the *ulema* reacted to the comment by saying,

*“Allah is the greatest of the judges. We do not know what will happen to Manna...Anyways, he will have to endure punishment for all his deeds that send many people astray!”*

This reflects the *ulema* sentiment towards the entertainment industry. Interestingly, no one debated whether Manna was a “good” Muslim or not. However, one of the *Jamian ulema* gives the reason for not involving Islam in this by saying,

*“His profession and lifestyle as an entertainer already made such a debate unnecessary for us when he was alive and now after his death no such debate will help him either...We should rather seek forgiveness for him and for ourselves, too, because as a Muslim we failed to show him the path. And, Allah will not forgive us for failing in our responsibilities...”*

The focus here has completely shifted – *Jamians* showed no interest in judging him rather they showed all the goodwill to help him by praying heavily for his departed soul. Through intensely invoking Allah for His blessings and forgiveness, many wanted to appease Him and save Manna from His wrath. I know many in *Jamia* secretly performed special supplications for Manna and specifically prayed for his early and easy release from the torments of the grave.

The issue that I have highlighted here is neither to evaluate the *Muslimness* of a dead actor, already one of the most disgraceful professions in the eyes of the *ulema*, nor to demonstrate the power of image, pointed out by the *ulema* as morally corrupting. Here the example of image is a metaphoric one that represents the modernity that the *Jamians ulema* are trying to come to terms with. Moreover, it would seem that sticking closely to religious beliefs and practices and observing those authentically is nearly impossible in modern times, apparently even in this rural town.

## **6.6 Conclusion:**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the core ideology of *Jamian* schooling, which is *iman*, to see what role it plays in the creation of “good” Muslims. Here the concept of *iman* was examined together with its relationship with *amal* as I understood that the concepts are inseparable for *iman* to be meaningful. Unlike *adab*, which was essentially an Islamic concept that concerns *iman*, *amal* and *sharia* (law, with which we did not engage directly) (cf. Metcalf 1984), *iman* is more secular and depending on individual’s *bujh* and *ich’che* the *ulema* attach meanings to it, from sources outside of Islam even, both to preserve and to inculcate the religion in the society.

The effectiveness of the *Jamian* schooling, therefore, theoretically depends on the notion of both *line* (see Chapter Four), and *iman*, where *line* depends on the quality of individual’s *bujh* and *ich’cha*, and the quality of *iman* that the *Jamians* promote through their *iman*, *amal*, and *adab* schoolings dictates the quality of individual’s *bujh* and *ich’cha*. However, in reality, as we have ethnographically demonstrated here with the example of various forms of images, the implementation of authentic Islamic practice is no longer possible. Interestingly, and maybe precisely because of that, the *Jamians’* preoccupation with *adab* (manner) is a recent phenomenon where its focus had to be removed from the social infrastructures and placed on to the individual body’s surface and action.

In all their relevance all three of the notions are erecting boundaries surrounding a tradition that is Islamic but situated in *Jamia* of Bishwanath and represented by the *Jamians*; both of whom are embedded in the realities of a particular society and in its particular history. Therefore, I would conclude here that the *Jamian* schooling is actually promulgating a tradition that they have been “constructing” using religious codes, symbols, rituals and history. The next chapter will place this locally embedded Islamic school, the *Jamia*, besides its individual learner’s history, achievement, and aspiration to examine how much they represent each other.

## Chapter Seven: Learning to be “good” Muslims

The last three chapters of this thesis have tried to sketch out the four building blocks or concepts involved in the construction of a “good” Muslim persona and the ways they facilitate the transmission of knowledge. These concepts are *iman*, *amal*, *adab* and *line*. In the discussion of Chapter 6, the concepts *iman* and *amal* are placed at the centre of this construction and considered respectively and interchangeably as symbolic and cultural forms of capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986: 252) that all “good” Muslims have to have. Here, my use of the term capital refers to Bourdieu’s notion, which refers to ‘all goods, material and symbolic, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 178).

The concept of *iman* for a Muslim, as understood by the *Jamians*, is strengthened through pious practices or *amal* that inevitably concerns the concept of *adab* (manner). Chapter Five demonstrated that the concept of *adab* is also a powerful form of cultural capital in Bourdieu’s sense, given the long and detailed training that is required to perfect it. However, according to the *Jamians*, every Muslim must have some form of economic and social capital in order to acquire perfect *iman*, *amal*, and *adab* for the process of becoming a “good” Muslim to start. The concept of *line*, as illustrated in Chapter Four, thus fulfils such a demand by supplying young learners with either one of the following four or all four types of capital in the form of: discipline (cultural), network (social and economic), and orientation (cultural and symbolic). To further illustrate the making of a “good” Muslim, therefore, the *Jamia* is presented as one of the main parties that are institutionally helping young Muslim learners to accumulate such forms of capital.

Hence, the chapter will examine the profiles of three young learners to hear what their stories tell us about themselves within the process of learning to become a “good” Muslim in *Jamian* terms. Imtiaz, Monwar, and Kamran are the three young learners, aged between 11 and 14, who are presented here as representatives of the kind of experiences, aspirations, and social and economic backgrounds that are commonly found at the *Jamia*. They also broadly represent three major categories of children that constitute the bulk of



the pupils of this *madrasa*: i.e., boarding based, family based, lodging based. Finally, I have chosen them to represent the three major traits that one finds among the students of this *madrasa*, in terms of age, ability, experience, and educational commitments.

Before focusing on these three profiles, the chapter begins by giving an outline on its policy and pedagogic trend, with consideration given to its formal<sup>133</sup> and specialized<sup>134</sup> aspects. This is followed by a closer look at a typical day in the *Jamia*, where the schooling is observed and illustrated as it is taking place, combining both formal and informal dimensions continuously (cf. Akinnaso 1992: 78).

### **7.1 On Institutional policy and pedagogical techniques**

*Qawmi madrasas*, like the *Jamia*, generally enrol any number of students to any of its classes year round even though there is an annual in-take time. Every Muslim child or adult has the right to this education, if he wishes to have it, and normally no *qawmi madrasa* would deny an individual that. Besides, more students mean more community involvement, widening of the *madrasa*'s support base, and finally, greater solvencies. Hence, *madrasas* like the *Jamia* cannot afford to stick to an annual in-take policy at a time when the number of *madrasas* in the area is ever increasing in (see Chapter 2), resulting in an intense competition over an ever-decreasing number of students. In this kind of situation, it not only keeps its admission office open all year but also asks its teachers and students to recruit as many students as possible and from anywhere.

Hence, as a rational consequence of that open door policy, which is directly linked with the existence of the *madrasa*, the *Jamia* has to adapt an approach whereby its final exam

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<sup>133</sup> Akinnaso (1992: 77-81), citing Irvine (1979), tells us that formal learning is systematically and specifiable way organized learning. It has some common characteristics irrespective of time and space, which are: first, organized deliberately to transmit special kinds of knowledge; second, learning is decontextualized; third, institutionalized. Institutionalization has several consequences, first, place of learning becomes a school; second, teacher replaces familiar figures; third, establishment of rules, regulations, and conventions; fourth, requires huge capital investment.

<sup>134</sup> Specialized knowledge is a form of knowledge that is transmitted through formal learning as opposed to practical knowledge that is transmitted in informal contexts through participation in events and through experience (ibid: 81-82).

results will not affect the students' elevations from one Year to the next. In order to keep the students interested in the system and to fight the high dropout rate the 'promotion for all' approach gives struggling students from destitute economic backgrounds an opportunity to stay among peers and stay within the schooling system. This knowledge – that no matter how badly one performs in the annual exam it will not be a reason for one's expulsion from the school is therefore a hugely positive financial and psychological impetus that the pupils possess, particularly in comparison to other exam-result-based schooling systems.

Like other *qawmi madrasas*, *Jamia* also follows the curriculum of the *Darul Ulum Deoband*, which is the 17<sup>th</sup> century's *Dars-i-Nizami*<sup>135</sup> curriculum. This curriculum covers broadly the areas of Islamic law (*Shariah*), jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), and traditional Islamic spirituality (*Tasawuf*). Apart from the *Qur'an*, Arabic literature, and Arabic grammar, all the books of the *Dars-i-Nizami* are either in Urdu or in the Farsi language<sup>136</sup>. Since the formation of the Bangladesh state in 1971, Bengali has gradually become the main language of instruction in the *qawmi madrasas* all over the Bangladesh; teachers today lecture in Bengali in almost all of the *madrasas*, and pupils use Bengali in all the examinations that their own *madrasas* arrange as well as in the centralized board examinations. However, classical Urdu, Farsi and Arabic are still part of the syllabus and take substantial amount of teaching and learning time.

Muslims generally consider themselves as "people of book" (Eickelman 1992), which indicates that valuable knowledge is fixed and memorizable. Hence, in *Jamia*, learning takes place mostly by rote, following a pedagogical tradition common in other parts of the Subcontinent (cf. Alam 2006, Sikand 2005). This method generally corresponds closely to the rest of the country's schooling systems, both secular and non-secular. In

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<sup>135</sup> The curriculum was designed by Mullā Nizām ad-Dīn (d. 1748), which had an inclination towards the rational religious sciences than the transmitted ones. Deoband adopted it and then later reversed that emphasis (cf. Alam 2006: 192).

<sup>136</sup> Farsi was the language for the *Dars-i-Nizami* curriculum, because it was catering civil servants for the *Mughal* (1556-1858) administration. The *Darul Ulum Deoband*, on the other hand, took up Urdu language for being in the heartland of the language as well as for its symbolic association with the identity of Indian Muslims. However, the *qawmi madrasa* system in Bangladesh, as the progeny of the above mentioned traditions yet to replace all of its source texts written in Farsi, Urdu, and Arabic by Bengali.

addition, teaching and teachers' inputs - especially in the *ibtedai* or primary section - involve holding a cane in the left grip, a chalk in between the right index and thumb, and relentless shouting. These three together make a teacher look like a teacher and make him the most effective tool that simultaneously delivers knowledge, confirms its reception, and in the process maintains order inside a classroom. No other teaching aid is required to run a classroom here. At the receiving end, however, according to one's financial ability, the pupils are equipped with textbooks, pen/pencil, paper, chalk, duster, and most importantly with a slate.

Teacher student coordination is excellent in terms of giving and receiving lessons. Whatever the teacher writes on the board is copied immediately on the slate and accompanied with loud repetition. Such loud repetition confirms correct transmission. It also enforces the authority of the teacher (cf. Berkey 1992). Teachers give more attention to the memorization effort and neat handwriting than to the meanings of the texts. According to them, entertaining learners with meanings will only hinder the aim of this schooling, which is preservation of Islamic knowledge (cf. Horvatich 1994). Thus, it is a common practice here to spend the full time of the class memorizing only a single sentence.

Except the newcomers, the 'best' and the 'good' students are those who have perfected the art of memorization (cf. Eickelman 1978) and equally perfected the prescribed ways of handwriting. Interestingly, more than 90% of the 'best' students are boarders. The reason that boarding students are the 'best' seems to relate to the fact that they do not spend time tutoring as lodging masters or performing household chores for their own families. Instead, these children have the free time for perfecting their memory.

From this discussion, we learn about *Jamian* "open-to-all" and "promotion-for-all" policies. For those who enrol here, this fluidity and expediency is a good and attractive proposition, given the poor socio-economic background they usually come from. In the following discussion, we shall experience further fluidity that makes this type of madras unique as an educational institution.

## 7.2 A day in the *Jamia*

The timing of the *Fazr* (the first prayer of a day) determines the beginning of the day here. Attending *Fazr* is compulsory for all except those who are below 8-years of age. At the sound of the *Azan* (prayer call), students leave bed, perform *waju* (ablution), and join the *jamaat*. Immediately, after the prayer students leave the prayer hall and congregate into two rows facing each other inside the mosque veranda. A senior teacher then positions himself at the centre of the one end of the rows to lead the morning *doa* (invocation) session, which is a loud collective recitation of one of the *Qur'anic* chapters (*surah*).

The teacher always tells the student which one of the *surahs* to recite and at the end leads a *munazat*<sup>137</sup> (supplication). Islam does not sanction this kind of a session and it is more of an innovation that serves two purposes though: first, making early morning recitation a habit; and second, developing a habit for supplication whereby one starts the day by reflecting and asking forgiveness, protection, and blessings from Allah. According to the *Naeb-e-Muhtamim*,

*“This session delivers the children with a consciousness that Allah is with them and whatever that they do throughout the day have a bearing on their relationship with Allah. In the evening, they do it once again to thank Allah and to ask blessing for the days ahead. These sessions, give them a line, keep them on the straight path, and strengthening their iman...”*

The morning session is usually 15 to 20 minutes long. However, depending on various conditions<sup>138</sup>, this may last up to an hour. At the end of it, boys go back to their

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<sup>137</sup>*Munazat* literally means supplication for repentance of sins, which is an optional aspect of any Islamic intercession (*doa*) when the worshipper raise both of her or his palms close to the chest and engage in a pledge to and praise of Allah.

<sup>138</sup> A long *du'a* session is almost obvious if the day is auspicious. In addition, such long sessions are common prior to a big examination or prior to an event that is important for the *madrassa*.

respective resting places within the premises and are free to take a little rest, to go out for a walk, or to prepare their lessons until the classes begin.

*Jamian* authorities say that for the successful memorization of the *Qur'an*, students require continuous guidance and monitoring from their *ostad*, which is unachievable without a fully residential schooling facility (cf. Alam 2006). Hence, the *hifzo* (the *Qur'an* memorization) section is the only section in the *Jamia* that has a fixed space with its own toilet and bathroom facilities. Here students and *ostads* sleep, eat, and devote themselves in the service of *Qur'an* only. All the other sections, classes, and boarding arrangements, as I have observed during my fieldwork, are constantly moving from one room to another between four of the buildings of the *madrasa*. The excuses given to justify such frequent shifts was firstly, to accommodate various development works that are taking place within the *madrasa*; and secondly, to ensure the maximum utilization of the limited space to cope with the constantly fluctuating number of students. Therefore, authorities shift classes/sections between smaller and larger spaces and use them both as classrooms and boarding facilities throughout the year. As a result, no fixed boarding space exists for most of the *Jamian* students as well as for those of their teachers. In order to maximise the use of space and to maintain order, students from the same Year, same level, and even from same section often share one single room between themselves.

For practical reasons, the so-called boarding contains no bed and all students sleep on the floor on their own *bich'na* or bedding<sup>139</sup>. For the teachers only, *madrasa* provide a *khat* (cot or a narrow bed), but again no bedding. No one has a fixed place to spread out the bedding at night. During the first eight months of my fieldwork, I was sharing the same corridor, toilet, and bath with students of the *ibtedai* section. Apart from some extremely hot evenings, I had never seen any competition among the boys over places under the ceiling fans or near the windows.

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<sup>139</sup> This bedding consists of a thin cotton mattress, pillow, bedcover, blanket, and a mosquito net. Bedding is one's personal property, and extremely rarely the *madrasa* supplies one.

By eight o'clock each morning all the *bich'nas* are gone, folded and stashed aside in one corner of the room. The space then fast becomes a classroom for over 50 children for the rest of the day. Classroom by day and living room by night is the way *Jamia* ensures the most efficient use of its space. Once the room is free from all bedding, the boarders divide it into two columns, using all sixteen benches in eight rows. This creates a passage for the teachers to move freely among the pupils during the lessons.



Plate 7: One of the packed *ibtedai* (primary) classes of *Jamia*.

Teachers get chairs to sit inside the classroom in this section only. Traditionally teachers sit among their pupils on the floor on a cane mat or rug or on a thin mattress and the pupils form a crescent shape or three arms of a square or two parallel lines centring him. Such a seating pattern usually allows all to sit equally close to the teachers and to each other. According to the *Jamian* teachers, this creates a closeness or bond between teachers and pupils, as well as between the pupils themselves. However, keeping the issue of discipline in mind the authorities break the tradition in this section. He explains,

*“These are all first timers, very young, and majority of them attend madrasa from nearby homes where parents do not care to discipline them... Once here, they can no longer enjoy that freedom and start to see the Azraayl (the Archangel of Death) in us! Hence, every morning, upon sensing the time their tantrums begin...! Eventually the guardians manage to bundle them off to their classes; however, wailing takes long to subside and in the process affects the rest of the class and the adjacent classes, too. In order to maintain discipline, therefore, here we no longer sit on the floor and use chairs instead to sit tall and to keep an eye on all...”*

After an hour and half into the lessons, at 9.30 am, the *ibtedai* section goes to a half an hour recess. This recess coincides with the first mealtime of the day<sup>140</sup>. Since there is no separate dining space<sup>141</sup>, some bring the food into their classroom and some have theirs in and around the large inner yard. Of course, all dine inside if it is too hot or if it is raining outside.

During this recess, the borders of this room would take turns to stay inside to guard their belongings. At 10 o'clock, classes resume for around three hours until the mosque calls for the past-noon prayer or the *Zohar*. Again, the youngest boarders of the room, who can skip the prayer, stay as guards to make sure that their belongings are safe. Upon returning from the mosque, the older boys release the younger ones and take over the duty of guarding it. Just to remind, most of the 50 students who attend classes in this room are not resident students. The resident teacher, who is in-charge of the room and who himself is a boarder of this room, selects 3 or 4 of his boys for this job. Guarding stops theft and misplacement of the belongings of the inhabitants of this room during the meal and *Zohar* breaks.

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<sup>140</sup> Rice and thin lentil soup is the meal for everyone who resides in the *madrasa*. The two items served during this meal remain the same throughout the year.

<sup>141</sup> A couple of months ahead of my departure from the *madrasa* the authority started to build an indoor kitchen-cum-dining area by converting two of the unused classrooms in the ground floor of the eastern building.

The time between the past noon prayer and afternoon meal is a time for neighbourhood exploration for some of these boys. It is more precisely a market exploration since the *madrasa* is located in the middle of a number of markets and bazaars. One of the prime attractions for them is taking a few quick rides on the newly installed escalator of the *Al-Hera*<sup>142</sup> market. In order to accomplish this target, the boys would offer their teachers or senior students their services that would involve a chore that requires going out. For example, my *khadim* Tarek will come running to my room immediately after the *Zohar* prayer to ask for a chore that usually involves going out in the bazaar, “*Sir, do you need to top-up your phone today?*” “*Do you want some more tea bags, biscuit, or kerosene for your stove?*” If one fails to get any such chore that requires going out then he will stealthily slip out of the *madrasa* anyways.

However, those who fail to get an outside chore and do not venture out stealthily will eventually be assigned some tasks to perform within the premises. A teacher always engages one or more of the students for the rest of the afternoon in sweeping the classrooms, corridors, cleaning the blackboards, cleaning the bathrooms and toilets, et cetera. In the midst of all this, pupils find time to have a bath, to wash their own clothes and utensils, to put their bedding in the sun to dry, et cetera. Most importantly, they spend the minimum time carrying out these tasks and then one by one gather inside their room to pass time in eager anticipation of the lunch. At 3.30, the lunchtime begins from the kitchen door with the loud banging of a metal dish.

The *madrasa* authorities do not allow its pupils to play games at any time since it calls games ‘satanic.’ Besides, the *ibtedai* pupils, whose school day ends two and half hours earlier than the rest of the *madrasa*, are not supposed to do anything that may disrupt the others. If they become the cause of any such disruption then both they and their teachers receive punishment. Hence, in order to maintain order, silence, and peace *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad, the head of the section, with the quiet approval from some of the young teachers

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<sup>142</sup> Named after the Meccan cave where the Prophet found solitude to meditate and where he had received his first divine revelation.



and *ulema*, secretly allows these pupils to pass their free time by playing various games within the confines of their room.

His relentless persuasion forced the *madrasa* authorities earlier to allow these kids an hour of playtime in one corner of the *madrasa*'s courtyard. Disappointingly, less than a month from its start with the appointment of a new and more puritan student secretary that liberty ceased to exist. However, teachers under the leadership of *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad, keep supporting the children secretly and assure them of further support as long as they manage to keep it quiet and secret. He even bought some miniature board games. Hence, the Year 3 boarding boys would secretly transform their room into a gaming zone while quietly and eagerly waiting for the afternoon meal.

During this period, various items like a table tennis ball, foot rule, bottle caps, marbles, ludo, old cine-magazine, et cetera., would pop up from the inside of their small tin trunks and travel bags. These are the most valued belongings for these kids, collected from everywhere and anywhere, which they guarded dearly. They would quickly congregate into groups according to their game preferences and spread over the whole of the classroom. A group of three would play a miniature cricket, using a table tennis ball and wooden foot rule on the surface of a bench. A pair would get busy with target hitting using plastic bottle caps and marbles. A group of four would sit around the ludo. Another one or two would sit on the teacher's chair and read an old newspaper or magazine in a low voice, mimicking TV newsreaders amidst a lot of low intensity giggling and hissing.

However, all the action would come to an instantaneous end with the sound of the lunchtime. Putting the games back to where they came out from, Year 3 boys armed with their melamine plates' rush to form the beginning of a queue that is going to grow longer and longer for some time to vanish at the kitchen's door at the end. Plates will then change hands soon to be returned with mountains of rice sitting on top, the discardable quality of course, the peaks covered in handful of darkish vegetable fry, sometimes a unique curry instead, rarely with a tiny piece of meat, difficult to tell its origin from the

depth of the half boiled potatoes it emerges! The hungry army of pupils would then gobble it up sitting close to the tube well to save some time from washing the plates.



Plate 8: A group of students are having their midday meal together.

Sometimes, even before finishing the meal the call for *Asar* (afternoon prayer) started to pour down from all corners of the earth<sup>143</sup>. Year 3 boys are finally in control of their room now, which means they can lock it from outside from this point onwards. One of the older boys, whose job is to make sure that the door is properly closed, handles the lock and its key. Once the room is safe, most of the boys will then go to the large water tank for ablution. Some, however, will not join in this congregation. Instead, they will sneak out of the *madrasa* and will disappear into the bazaar crowd for a *chokkor*<sup>144</sup> or

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<sup>143</sup> There are many mosques operating in the area adjacent to *Jamia* and all of them use microphones to call for the prayer. Hence, before every prayer time *azan* can be continuously heard, from every corner of the earth, for 3 to 4 minutes! It is a unique feature of Bangladeshi Islam.

<sup>144</sup> *Chokkor*, or ‘round’, is a term that the student and teachers alternately use to denote strolling around the market area with no particular purpose in mind. Ironically, *Jamia* is situated in the junction of a number of markets and bazaars but its *ulema* consider markets and bazaars as most morally corrupt places that people should ideally avoid. Therefore, ‘round’, according to these *ulema* is naturally a negative activity..

‘round.’ Sometimes they enjoy watching a game of football or cricket at a nearby school playground. Most of them return and join the *Maghrib* (the after sunset prayer) once the *ajan* is on the air. Unlike others, Imtiaz, one of the Year 3 boys that I will profile below, and his elder brother Jamal, do not wonder around during this time. Instead, they do something unique that no one in the *madrassa* does – a brief account of their activity will follow soon.

After the *Maghrib* prayer, the boys return to their room, which is now an active space of learning, only this time to a smaller scale and independent. If the electricity permits then the boys will take turns in front of the blackboard and re-enact the ways of a real classroom<sup>145</sup>. In this way these children are not only socializing themselves with the sacred texts but also socializing themselves with everything that represent this specialized schooling, i.e. good manner (*adab*), faith (*iman*), deeds (*amal*), “good” *Muslimness*, et cetera., (cf. Mead 1978[1928], Froerer 2007, James 1993, Toren 1999).

However, often the electricity fails for hours and this prep class would continue in the dark only as a loud and repetitive chorus of already memorized *Qur’anic* verses, until it’s time for the *Esha*<sup>146</sup> (the last prayer of the day). At the end of the prayer call the boys will lock their room again, cleanse themselves, and then enter into the mosque, their plates in hands. After the prayer, the whole group of boarders will sit in the evening *doa* session to recite a new chapter from the *Qur’an*. The session once again ends with a long supplication that contains praises for Almighty, repentance from sins, blessings for all the good deeds (*nek amal*), and guidance for the day ahead.

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<sup>145</sup> One of the advanced students among the boys will assume the position of teacher in these evening sessions, often with the approval from the resident teacher or from *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad. He will stand in front of the boys and then deliver a lesson as correctly as possible that the teacher taught them on that day. The rest of the class will continue to repeat it with him. After several repetitions, if he thinks that others are ready, then this student will ask one to take his position and deliver it correctly. Then one after another, the boys will stand and deliver it. In this process, everyone in the class will pick up and memorize the task accurately. This technique is most effective and widely used when they memorize a *Qur’anic* verse, or an Urdu or Arabic or an English text. The students use a similar method for writing practices, using their own slates and chalks for practice writings. The best writer moves to the blackboard and writes the text down on the board while loudly reading that out for the rest. The others repeat the process while writing it down on their slates, and then they cross check for mistakes, correct it and finally everyone gets the chance to come to the board for writing the text correctly from memory.

<sup>146</sup> The *Esha* time begins an hour after the sunset and one can perform it anytime from that point until a bit before the dawn.

After this, the boys rush out to collect the last meal from the kitchen door, which consist of the lunch leftovers. With it, they head back to their rooms. This time they first move all the benches out of the way to make enough space for all to sit on the floor and eat. Sometimes one finishes it in the middle of the courtyard - not because of the pleasant breeze or the moonlight, but because of the terrible hunger.

Rarely do any of the boys of this room study after the supper – a practice that is often discouraged by the teachers and by the endemic power cuts. Although no one enters inside a room with his shoes or sandals on, following the Prophetic practices, the boys sweep the floor clean once more prior to spreading out their bedding. Finally, the space once again assumes a different character - now a mass sleeping room where the boys can be heard talking, giggling, and telling stories in low voices until late.

The importance of the above illustration lies in the fact that it captures everything that the *madrasa* schooling stands for. It illustrates a mundane day, comprised of many mundane acts, inside the *Jamia*, which the *ulema* call an *Islamic knowledge environment*. Here knowledge corresponds with faith (*iman*) and the enhancement of *iman* knowledge needs to be preserved through the strenuous work (*amal*) of memorization (cf. Eickelman 1978, Lambek 1990). *Ulema* here propagate that this much *amal* is obligatory for every Muslim who wishes to be a “good” Muslim. Hence, every *amal* or pious performance eventually enhances the power of one’s *bujh* and *ich’cha* to be successful in receiving and conserving the sacred knowledge (*ilm*). Here, not only the *osatd* and the *Jamia* deliver memorizable knowledge but they also lay down rules in the form of *adab*, *iman*, and *amal* through which the learner participate in the process of learning. Starting and ending a day by *doing doa* (*amal*), performing all the obligatory religious rites regularly and sincerely (manifestation of both *iman* and *amal*), remaining submissive, attentive and diligent within the classroom; respectful, orderly, and helpful within the premises (manifestation of *adab*) are already the signs of a “good” Muslim in the making.

We know from Bourdieu (1984, 1990) that what was described above, under the rubric of a day in *Jamia*, is actually a microscopic illustration of the process that the *Jamians* repeat year after year that ultimately constitute the *habitus*, for every individual who is present there. Here it is important to know that the success of any pedagogic authority and its actions, according to Bourdieu, lies in the *habitus* of the individual receiver who it had created (cf. Alam 2006, 189).

In the following section, we shall examine the profiles of three learners situated within that sort of pedagogic context that the *Jamian ulema* call *Islamic knowledge environment*. The purpose here is to understand how close or how far these three boys are as three individual learners in the process of fitting into the *Jamian* paradigm of ideal Muslim persona. The distance, near or far, from the ideal type is measured by the four constituent notions of *Jamian* schooling i.e. *line*, *adab*, *iman* and *amal*, that we have already presented and analysed in previous chapters.

### **7.3 Mohammad Imtiaz: The “good” Muslim**

Mohammad Imtiaz is in Year 3. Like most of the boys here, his age is also disputed (cf. Bairagi, R., K. M. A. Aziz, M. K. Chowdhury, B. Edmonston 1982 ), yet I presume he is correct when he said, “*I am 11*”. He is a resident student and living in the boarding for the last two years. He is one of those 21 boys who share the same room that I have just narrated in the above discussion.

Two of his brothers, 7-year-old Shaheen and 13-year-old Jamal, also live in the *Jamia*. Imtiaz, and Jamal used to live together but after finishing the primary Jamal had to move into a different room with his mates. Now Shaheen and Imtiaz live together. Two of their elder sisters, Rukhsana (14) and Rihana (15), are also *madrassa* students and live in the boarding section of the female *madrassa*, which is only 15 minutes’ by foot from the *Jamia*.

Imtiaz and his siblings are not like Munna, who had serious discipline issue (see Chapter Four). According to Imtiaz,

*“We are here to become deendar (religious), to achieve (hasil) deeni ilm (Islamic knowledge) so that one day we would become alim (scholar), hafiz (the Qur’an memorizer), mufti (legal expert)...if only Allah wills.”*

However, further conversation with them and their father, Mr. Hasim, revealed that four other considerations, besides a religious one, had prompted them to choose this form of schooling. These are - the feeling of insecurity, rising living cost, decision to migrate, and the need for maximising the family’s income. Mr. Hasim then explained the security issue,

*“Our village home wasn’t a safe place for raising two of the teenaged daughters where I cannot stay all the time for livelihood reasons.”*

Additionally, he mentioned rising living costs, which are too high for a single breadwinner with a family of eight. Hence, migrating out of home and engaging children in income-generating activities became an obvious solution to the above-mentioned issues. Today, Mr. Hasim considers himself very lucky, because moving into this area resolved all of his issues neatly.

For Imtiaz’s family, migration to Bishwanath was not a new experience. Eight years ago, Mr. Hasim moved into Bishwanath along with his family for the first time. He started with a small hosiery business that soon provided him with a good and regular income, thanks to the *Londoni* money. In the early days of his business, Mr. Hasim used to ferry his merchandise in a large bamboo-cane basket from door-to-door. Later, when the business started to take off, he bought a rickshaw van and included all sorts of cosmetics, accessories, and stationeries besides the usual hosiery stuffs. Over the next five years, since their arrival here, Mr. Hasim not only did well in terms of expanding and

diversifying his business; he also managed to repossess his homestead that he once mortgaged for a business capital prior to moving out of it.

Two years ago, leaving four of the eldest children in Bishwanath, the rest of the family moved back to their village. The four of the children who stayed behind remained in Bishwanath as resident students in two of the *qawmi madrasas*, one male and one female. At the female *madrasa*, both of the daughters' boarding and schooling was free and are still free but *Jamia* charges 300 Taka (in 2008 it was equivalent to a little more than 2£ (1£ = +/-130 Bangladeshi Taka) per month for the boys. This year Shaheen joined his brothers but the monthly charge does not go up because Jamal became a full-free student.

Before moving back to village, Mr. Hasim transformed his rickshaw van into a covered van and arranged<sup>147</sup> with the *Jamian* authorities to allow Jamal and Imtiaz to run a specialized shop from it at the *madrasa's* entrance<sup>148</sup>. Since then the van is a permanent feature tied to the tall coconut tree just outside the large westward entrances of *Jamia*. Here every day between the *Asar* (afternoon) and *Maghrib* (dusk) the brothers attend to their prospective customers. Every two weeks, their father visits them with supplies and brings supplies for other small local vendors, too.

As a *Jamian*, Imtiaz has three features that made him known here: firstly, a higher level of piety that is uncommon for his age group;<sup>149</sup> secondly, his poor academic performance; and finally, his business. It is important to note that in the Year 3 most of the students are

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<sup>147</sup> The nature of the arrangement is unknown, as neither the brothers nor their father had ever mentioned anything other than benevolence of the *Jamian* elderly. However, this type of benevolence is rare, but the van has become a permanent feature of the *madrasa* entrance.

<sup>148</sup> This is a specialized shop because it only sells items that a pious Muslim would require on a day-to-day basis, i.e. items like skullcaps or *miswak* (toothbrush) made from the twigs of the Neem (*Azadirachta indica*). Other items that the shop trade include the *Qur'an*, *wazifa* (a compilation of potent *Qur'anic* chapters for reciting and meditating), rosary, attar, collyrium, amulets made of various metals, et cetera. The business is especially good during the Muslim month of Ramadan, but reasonable on Friday afternoons prior to the *Ju'ma* (obligatory collective Friday afternoon prayer) and two of the weekly market days. During the rest of the week the business is not good yet they keep it open dutifully to earn *amal* as they believe selling any of their items is a work of piety. The business is good enough, according to them, to meet the expenses that the family incurs in the process of educating them. Both of the brothers want to carry on doing this even after becoming an *alim*.

<sup>149</sup> He is one of the minorities from the year three who fasts for all 30 days during the month of *Ramadan* and is well ahead of others in performing *salat* (five daily prayers along with other obligatory, necessary, and optional ones) and other ritual obligations correctly.

yet to learn many of the intricacies attached with the performance of *salat*. However, teachers throughout these early years present the concept of *amal* mainly in terms of performing *salat* regularly and with the *jamaat*.

Imtiaz always fulfils these two conditions of *amal* – prayer with the *jamaat* and prayer in due *waqt* (time). Hence, *Jamian ulema* already consider Imtiaz as an *amaldar* (who is good at doing and acuminating *amal* through pious practices) pupil and present him as a role model for the others' to follow. Imtiaz's training in piety, specifically in *salat*, took place at home under his mother and elder sisters' supervision; later in the *Jamia*, according to him, it became more tuned, both in terms of the body's actions and in terms of the memorization of the *Qur'anic* texts. He admits that prior to coming here his stock of *surah* (chapter) and *doa* (supplication) was very limited. However, his earlier orientation with piety-schooling at home provided him with some form of a cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986) to stand apart in this crowd.

Imtiaz is ambivalent about his pious reputation. Sometimes he enjoys it but other times he does not when such praises give rise to competition among the peers and eventually turn into jealousy. Friends turn against friends and look for dirt, defect, and deficiency in each other's *adab*, *iman* and *amal*, especially in relation to *salat*. However, *Mawlana* Abu Ahmad, the head of the section, considers that this type of competition is not only good for learning but also for remaining wakeful. *Jamians* in general do not place much value in any similar competition over non-religious issues. They believe that those are irrelevant, detrimental, and worldly. Paradoxically though teachers, based on Imtiaz's examination results, predict that, "*He has no future*". Such incongruity is typical among some of the *Jamians* and reminds us of an earlier incident where the *Jamian* authorities maintained silence over its students' double enrolment practices (see Chapter 2) as an admission of the fact that the seemingly irrelevant and worldly achievement actually have some relevance for the future of their students. This also confirms that such incongruity is a manifestation of an underlying tension within the *Jamia* that the *Jamias* themselves cannot override by simply using dichotomies like religious/worldly, traditional/modern, Islam/rest, et cetera.



Some of Imtiaz's everyday classroom lessons are comprised of literacy, numeracy, and general knowledge training. These he repeats and practices amongst his fellow boarders, every evening, yet he does badly in almost all of the subjects in his class exams. According to his teachers, his language skill is bad, general knowledge is poor and numeracy is average yet they cannot explain the reasons. Still, extremely prudent Imtiaz tells me that, he has no worry with his exam results, because in order to become an *alim* excellent aptitude in Bengali, English, mathematics, or general knowledge is not obligatory. Interestingly, this perfectly matches with the message that the *Jamia* gives out its students regarding the superiority of Islamic knowledge and regarding the aim of *madrasa* education. Therefore, a very determined Imtiaz can predict a future, in which he declares,

*“I will become an alim one day, Inshallah (God willing)!”*

Imtiaz, by stressing his aim to become an Islamic scholar (*alim*) contrary to become someone “*who has a future,*” reproducing the *Jamian* paradigm of a “good” Muslim; this has a striking similarity with the students of Froerer's (2007) *Shishu Mandir* who through the regime of *Sadachar* reproduce various degrees of Hindu nationalist rhetoric at an early stage of schooling.

In spite of his piety and prudence, I have seen him praised by none of the *Jamian* adults for the business skills that are earning him a living. It appears to me as if people simply do not want to encourage this entrepreneurial boy, which is a clear move away from the Prophetic teachings where he strongly recommended business for his followers. One teacher, who thinks Imtiaz needs no recognition because he is compromising his education by becoming too involved with the business thus very meekly defends this paradox. Another teacher argues that, Imtiaz is too young to have a trained *bujh* and *ich'cha* for coping with the negative effect of money, hence he deserves indifference and not backslapping. According to this *alim*, backslapping will spoil him.

Both of the teachers, apparently concerned about Imtiaz's schooling, do not accept the fact that this income is important for the boys' family. Besides, they also fail to explain why, contrary to their prophesy, the cash that the brothers are handling for the last two years apparently failed to impose any detrimental effect on the pious practices of the both, thus far. Here I do not see Imtiaz as failing; rather I show how some see him failing. Imtiaz was highlighted based on what sorts of resources he brought into the *Jamia* and what sorts of resources that he has acquired at the end of the two years of schooling here. From the above discussion, we know that his was a migrant family, which in comparison with the Bishwanath's rich *Londonis*, is a lowly *refugee* status; however, the family has since moved back to their home village. His father has a relatively good income as the recovery of their homestead and return to home village prove. Besides, the profitable van-shop and the network among the siblings work as an extra safety net for each one of them. Imtiaz entered into the *Jamia* with an excellent home schooling in piety, too, which by the end of the second year put him in a more advanced state than his peers.

Imtiaz is already standing far ahead of many of his peers considering all these issues. He not only has economic capital but also has social capital. In terms of the concept of *line*, he is a well-behaved, well-connected, and religiously well-positioned lad. In addition, after two years of schooling he has achieved some form of a cultural capital too, by honing his pious practices. He may be a not so good student but his *iman*, *amal*, and *adab* are in an excellent state. Most importantly, he is a 'good' Muslim already, in *Jamian* terms, compared with those of the *Jamian* adults who put less value in religious learning. In the end, how "good" a Muslim that he will remain is something we cannot predict but we can clearly see that he is in the *line*. The main difference between Imtiaz and Kamran, the next of the three boys, as we shall see lies in the fact that Kamran had very little access to various types of capital; however, with hard work and intelligence, he is courting positive changes.

#### **7.4 Kamran: The in the *line* type**

Kamran is from Noakhali, a southern district close to the Bay of Bengal. This twelve-year-old is the best student from Year 6, works in a small roadside tea stall, and resides at its owner's house as a lodging master. Every evening he spends 2 to 3 hours tutoring three of the young school-going children of the tea-stall owner. Very irregularly, he receives a small remuneration for his services at home and at the tea-stall. However, the owner acts as his local *murrub'bi*<sup>150</sup> and meets all of his basic educational expenses.

Kamran's father, a mason by profession, disappeared three years ago leaving the family completely at the mercy of the mother's brothers. Kamran had just completed the fifth year of his primary schooling (secular), as the top of the class, and was about to appear in the prestigious primary scholarship examination. Unfortunately, all his hopes disappeared with the disappearance of the father. He had to quit the idea of proceeding with his schooling any further due to the family's pitiful financial state. However, his maternal uncles had enrolled him in a local *aliya madrasa* that he had to quit soon, too. In his words,

*“One month into the madrasa, when I asked one of the uncles for a small sum of money for books and some stationery, I was told to find a way of paying back the money that they have already spent on me and my siblings. From that point, madrasa was no longer an option for me rather I had to start working for their homesteads, agricultural lands, and shop... Days were very long then, it was extremely tough, but I had no choice...!”*

Luckily, the situation changed for him around two years ago when one of his mother's distant relatives pulled him out of that misery upon hearing of the family's plight. Since then he has been living in Bishwanath with that relative who later arranged for him both a place in the *Jamia* as well as the current *lodging-mastery*.

Kamran misses his family terribly, especially his mother and three of his young siblings. Both of his little sisters are still living with his mother, who has since moved back to her

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<sup>150</sup> Here *murrub'bi* refers to guardian. For more on *murrub'bi* see Chapter Three.

own home close to their grandparents' home. The only younger brother is currently living with another of his maternal uncles, a schoolteacher, because he needs him to look after his toddler. Kamran saves and sends his mother every single penny that he receives from his *murrub'bi* for his services, as well as from the *Jamia* as alms<sup>151</sup>. However, the amount is so insignificant that he cannot imagine how she manages with that.

However, like Imtiaz, Kamran is also a known face in the *Jamia*. It is not his pathetic life history, relatively small frame, or the ragged cloths that make him noticeable here but his acumen (*zeheen*), aptitude, and *adab* (manner) do. He is also known for his piety, but more so for his politeness and erudition. Besides, he is very submissive and willing to serve the teachers and other adults of the *Jamia* whenever chances arise.

Teachers often discuss such politeness and present Kamran as an example to follow. Here I quote a local teacher for the explanation that he gives for Kamran's politeness,

*“He (Kamran) may be a poor refugee, but is definitely from a valaghor<sup>152</sup>(from a good lineage). You find it in his behaviour... Especially you can blindly trust him with money....”*

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<sup>151</sup> Children from the economically less well off families' become active contributors in the day-to-day running of the households at an early age. For instance, children supply the bulk of the energy for cooking by gathering dry leaves, branches, cow dung, et cetera on a regular basis. They assist their fathers in the fields, in the woods, and in the market, and mothers in the kitchens and around the homesteads. They are the ones whose assistance is extremely important in raising chickens, ducks, goats, cows, and calves, et cetera. Families actually lose their valuable and often unrecognized economic contributions for the time their children spend away at schools that have no immediate economic value. However, in the *Jamia* I have seen that most of the children, who receive cash as gifts or alms from various sources do not spend it buying things for their own consumption. Rather they send the whole cash or purchase sweets, crisps, cloths, gardening tools, fishing traps, utensils, et cetera for their families. During the *madrassa* breaks, they visit their homes with all such gifts or give some of the essential gifts to someone from the same village to carry it to their families if they cannot visit themselves. This giving or sending of gifts or cash is always spontaneous and something that they take pride in. Siblings and friends virtually compete among themselves in sending gifts for their parents, siblings, and other members of the family. In most cases, they do not understand such practices in economic terms but do understand the value of the attached emotion in it, as they often say that such presents make their family happy and the parents and elders pray for them. For someone like Kamran the economic, emotional, and moral value of such contributions is immense as, unlike his father, this will keep him relevant and attached with the home.

<sup>152</sup> See Gardner (1990, 189-242) for a detail discussion on this who also calls it *bhalamanush*. According to her, it refers to someone who is from not only good social background but also good character, education, et cetera.

I never had to test him with money, but the many times that he had come to see me, at my room, I never managed to convince him to take a seat on my bed or on the chair. He would always prefer the floor instead and would do that as if he is showing his deepest respect towards me. It is common here for the students to remain standing until and unless an elder or teacher asks them to sit. Besides, it is then always the lowest of all places, normally on the floor, that the students prefer to sit, which is a show of respect to their teachers, *ulema*, and to me, too. Accordingly, the choice of posture and position that he takes within a space, which technically belongs to me, clearly demonstrates that he is acutely alert of his lowly standing within the space and he does not want to disrupt that status. In Foucauldian terms this is actually a manifestation of power that is operating on Kamran, a student, within an institutional framework, which is the *Jamia* (cf. Foucault 1980, 112). Bourdieu (1977), on the other hand, would call it Kamran's *habitus*, which unconsciously represents his long encounter with destitution and oppression.

In *Jamia*, a good-manner is judged through proper and sincere observation of religious practices, as elaborated both by *adab* (see Chapter 5) and *amal* (see Chapter 6). In addition to that, it is also judged through the overall comportment following both the ways of the Prophet and the approved local customary practices, which in *Jamian* context represented by the concept of *line*, as long as that does not contradict or challenge the Islamic ways. This is something the *Jamians* believe that the individual partially habituates through the socialization process and partially inherits through the superior lineage connections, as the above quotation clearly demonstrates.

Teachers consider that aptitude is a kind of power, and more specifically that aptitude is the power of the memory. In the world of Islamic learning, this power of the memory is highly valued throughout (cf. Eickelman 1978, Horvatich 1994, Lambek 1990). Knowledge and good memory, often generally understood as two sides of the same coin by many in Bangladesh, is also a *Jamian* inference reached from the fact that most of the religious performances require vast amount of memorized texts. All scriptural texts are knowledge for the *Jamians*, which is why they think the power of memory is necessary for the successful acquisition and execution of all kinds of knowledge

Enhancing one's power of memory requires rigorous practicing for a long period, which, given the very busy daily schedule of Kamran, is thought to be impossible for him to achieve. It is for this reason that his academic performance based on his exam results and overall classroom performances puzzles many in the *Jamia*. They consider that either Kamran is gifted or he has special qualities that the power of memory alone cannot explain. One such puzzled teacher thinks that Kamran might have a personal *jiin* that follows his commands and helps him in exams and in classrooms<sup>153</sup>. However, given my rather relaxed relationship with Kamran, when I directly asked him about the secrets of his successes he gave me the explanation that I quote below,

*“In this year we have ten subjects in total, of those four are – Bengali, English, mathematics, and history. Two years ago, before arriving here I had already finished five years of primary education. The primary school board uses much advance books on these subjects than what we are using here now in the sixth or even in the seventh year. We also learn to recite the holy Qur’an in this year, something that my parents’ first taught me even before starting my madrasa life. Besides, this is a common subject for every madrasa student from an early year. Therefore, I am not having any trouble with this subject either. The rest of the subjects are to do with Arabic, Urdu and Farsi (Persian) languages and their grammars. I am having Arabic and Urdu since the Year 4 in Jamia and Farsi has just been introduced in this year.”*

However, he points at the following two things that could have helped him in maintaining a lead over the rest of his classmates for the last two years,

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<sup>153</sup> Belief in *jiin* is common among the people of rural Bangladesh and especially among the people of this region, noted also by Gardner (1997) during her fieldwork in the Talukpur village of Bishwanath. According to the Islam belief system, the *Satan* is a *jiin*. The *Qur’an* mentions *jiin* in many places as well as the Prophetic traditions (*Hadith*). It is both a hated and revered character in the rural Bangladesh.

*“Firstly, I try to collect all the *noteboi*<sup>154</sup> that I would need in a new year. I usually collect them from those who are moving to the next year. Sometimes, I get some of them free and the rest I borrow for copying. I copy by hand because I do not have the money to spend for books or for photocopying them. In this way, I get an idea on a whole subject within the first couple of months of a new year. And just because of this, I know the answer ahead of my class and I can also ask question of advance nature. This surprises everyone! Secondly, I try to spend time with my books whenever I get the chance. When I fail to understand something, I try to talk to a teacher. Most of the time they help me and if they are too busy then they send me to the senior students who also always help me out. And in all these ways I manage to do good in the classroom and in the exams, too.”*

Unlike Imtiaz, Kamran arrived here under a completely different set of circumstances. In terms of economic and social capital, he had only one connection to begin with, which was the distant relative. However, he had an excellent primary education, and like Imtiaz he also received a very good home schooling in pious practices. However, based on only these three, he has not only survived this far but has also acquired a number of important forms of capital. First, he has established an effective connection and closeness with the *Jamia* and *Jamians*, who truly value his qualities. Second, through the *Jamia*, he has received entry into a number of *Londoni* homes that provide him with regular religious alms now. Third, his academic result is excellent and teachers are currently preparing him for a national level competitive exam.

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<sup>154</sup> The word *noteboi* stands for a type of book that is popularly known as notebook or guidebook in Bangladesh. It provides student with ready-made solutions, answers, and explanations that a main subject book contains. It is an illegal learning aide as the Government of Bangladesh imposed a ban on the printing, publication and writing of notebooks since the 1980s. The ban however never worked due to the practical need that these books meet. Here we can take Kamran’s comment in this regard, “*Without the help of the notebooks it is really difficult to understand the main (text) books. If we do not understand the theme of a subject then how are we to pass a test? Especially, people like us who don’t have the ability to hire a private tutor.*” In the *madrassa* context, therefore, it is extremely shameful for the authorities and the scholars to admit that very poor quality notebooks compiled by anonymous writers are not only aiding their system but also alternating classical *kitab*s (books) written or compiled by famous Muslim scholars of the Subcontinent.

His belief in the *Jamian* disciplinary regime is very deep and he considers such a regime to be very important for instilling various good qualities into an individual. Kamran wants to achieve the highest *qawmi* degree but thinks that he might try to get an *Aliya* degree also. In the *Jamia*, everyone praises little Imtiaz for his *iman* and *amal* and considers him as an epitome of “good” Muslim. Kamran is known to everyone here as a ‘in the *line*’ type of boy for his perfect embodiment of *adab*. Monwar, the third of the three, on the other hand, epitomises everything that both Imtiaz and Kamran are not.

### **7.5 Monwar: The *be-line* and *be-adab* type**

In *Jamia*, Monwar was the first and only student who approached me before I approached him. He came to borrow my audio recorder and not to chitchat. This was his way, very non-conventional, provocative, and bit shocking. Hopeless is the most modest expression that many of the *Jamian* teachers found readily available to describe him.

Monwar entered into the *Jamia* at the age of seven and left it at the end of his third year. After spending a year and half in a local English medium primary, he came back to *Jamia* and has since remained with it. He is now approximately 14 years old and attending *Jamia* from home. Monwar’s family told me that they had to bring him back to *Jamia* to cure him of his *dosh* (defect), which is the bigheadedness (*be-adabi*<sup>155</sup>) that he has contracted at the English medium school. However, after talking to Monwar I come to see that his *be-adabi* or bigheadedness became an issue only when he refused to accept the family’s decision to pulling him out of that school.

Apart from the religious instruction, parents generally mentioned discipline, financial hardship, and total destitution as the main reasons for sending children to *qawmi madrasas* (see Chapter 4). In that regard, Monwar, Kamran and Imtiaz are all equal. However, Monwar’s parents tried repeatedly to give their children secular education but always failed for economic reasons. Monwar’s mother, who has a secondary level education, says the following,

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<sup>155</sup> From *be-adab* or the lack of manner comes the word *be-adabi* or the act of bad manner.



*“Today’s primary curriculum is quite difficult even for people like me! I cannot assist the children with most of their subjects any longer. Without the help of private tuition keeping up with the school is simply impossible! We used to spend around 200 Taka (around £1.4) per month for Monwar’s private tuition, only on two subjects though. But at the end he had to quit! Because, apart from the private tutor we had to spend a huge amount on transportation, tiffin, stationeries, books, papers, examination fees, etc....”*

Yet, publicly the family not only defends its decision of pulling him out of the secular school as correct but also distances itself by blaming Monwar and the school’s lax environment for his poor performances and bigheadedness. We have seen Mr. Ali expressing a similar displeasure towards secular schooling previously (see Chapter 4). However, if we consider the mother’s statement then it is simply due to financial constraints that they had to pull Monwar out of the secular school. Scholarly studies of formal education in the global South also point at poverty as one of the key factors active behind the withdrawal of children from education (cf. Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2005a, 2005b, 2004a, 2004b, Levinson ed. 1996).

Monwar was in Year 7 at the time of our first meeting; 16 months later, at the time of my final departure, he remained in the same class. It was an exception in the *Jamia*’s “promotion for all” policy, as mentioned earlier, yet the authorities consider this as an appropriate measure for Monwar. Like Imtiaz and Kamran, Monwar is also a known figure in this *madrassa*, but completely for the wrong reasons. His exam results are poor, something he is utterly unperturbed by; he is inattentive and irregular in the classes; and his demeanour is inappropriate. All these compelled his teachers to believe that Monwar is a *be-line*, shameless (*be-shorom*) and bighead (*be-adab*).

Monwar’s family, especially parents and *madrassa*-going elder brother, thinks the same. *Jamia*, for this family, until recently was the only solace from Monwar-headache, which is diminishing rapidly, too. Around three years ago, when Monwar returned to *Jamia*, the

family had never anticipated that their plan would collapse so wildly. Now, everyone around him is troubled by his frequent disappearances, inattentiveness, exam failures, fondness for modern dress, music, sports, camaraderie with older outside boys and thievery. He no longer wants to go back to the school they pulled him out from; neither does he want to continue with the *Jamia*. Instead, he demands that the family should send him to Malaysia. Scarcity has made him conscious of money, something he wants to earn and wants to earn now.

Monwar describes the first three years in *Jamia* as, “*My best time here.*” Because, the teachers were very nice and kind toward him, he had many friends, and most importantly, his academic performance was excellent. Then suddenly, before the beginning of the fourth year his family told him that he no longer had to go to the *Jamia* but to a new kind of school instead. By now, like every one of his *Jamian* mates, he had learned all the basics of Islam, attended *salat* regularly, and was aspiring to be a *hafiz-e-Qur’an*<sup>156</sup> someday soon. He expressed his desire to stay with the *Jamia* but the family did not give a heed. Monwar describes,

*“[The family told him instead] We want Helal (the madrasa going elder son) to become an alim and we want you to become a yono<sup>157</sup>, so it is for your future that you must go to the new school. The Yono resides in a nice house, rides nice cars, has a large office, many people serves him! So, I though why don’t I become a yono then?”*

In order to become a *yono*, Monwar had not only to leave *Jamia* but also to start afresh from the Year 1 at a local English medium primary school. Going back to Year 1 as a Year 3 pupil was the most disappointing thing that had ever happened to him. However, compensation was found in the facts that, firstly, he no longer had to study Urdu; secondly, no longer Arabic; thirdly, no more squatting on cold and dusty floors and fourth sports were no longer an evil thing to enjoy!

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<sup>156</sup> Literally, it means the guardian of the *Qur’an*, or, one who has memorized the *Qur’an* by heart.

<sup>157</sup> Yono is the corruption of the word UNO and abbreviation of *Upzill Nirbahi Officer* that denotes Sub-district Executive Officer.

Depressingly for Monwar, however, after a year and half he was pulled out from the school. This time reversing their earlier decision completely, the parents say,

*“We think it would be good for you to become a hafiz-e-Qur’an first.”*

His vehement protests did not work on the ground that his teachers at the English medium school thought that he lacked talent, he liked sports too much, he lacked ambition, he was too old to sit in a Year 2 class, and above all, he was turning into a *be-adab*. At the back of all the blame and excuses was the financial inability of the family to carry on with all the costs (which we already learned about from his mother’s above-mentioned comment).



Plate 9: *Jamia* students attending the annual examination.

*Jamia*, due to its open-door admission policy, welcomed him back and took him into the Year 5 class. However, the comeback turned into a calamity from the very beginning due to the following factors: starting six months behind the whole class, unfamiliarity with the curriculum, difficult foreign languages, old classmates but unfriendly reception, and

finally no more sports. Quite unsurprisingly, he failed to pass the Year final exam. However, he was promoted to the next class like all those who failed. It was here that all the primary signs of so-called discipline related problems had begun to emerge in the form of skipping difficult classes, skipping prayers, hanging with old school mates, hanging around the market area, et cetera.

At that point, in order to tame him, the family and the *Jamia* authorities moved him to the *hifzo* (the *Qur'an* memorization) section to memorize the *Qur'an* instead of letting him carry on in the Year 6 class. Schooling in the *hifzokhana* is traditionally rigorous but prestigious due to the special position that the *hafiz* holds in Bangladeshi society. It is a completely memory dependent endeavour that also requires a lot of energy. Hence, the *Jamians* wanted to use it with Monwar as a remedy to bring him back to the *line* (see Chapter 4). The section is a large hall room located in the third floor of the north building. Pupils and teachers of the section only occasionally come down from there to collect their food and to attend the prayers. There a day begins at 3 o'clock in the morning and finishes at 9 o'clock in the evening.

Waking up so early in the morning was very difficult for him and almost every day he received corporal punishments for being lazy and inattentive. Monwar stayed a whole year, literally in confinement, in the *hifzokhana*, but made little progress in terms of memorizing the *Qur'an*. This, eventually, convinced everyone that he lacks the virtues necessary for mastering the *Qur'an*; namely superior acumen (*zeheen*), will (*ich'cha*), understanding (*bujh*) and, finally, Allah's blessings (*rahmat*). The head of the *hifzokhana* got so fed up with Monwar that he happily let him go at the year's end. However, the *Jamian* authorities, due to their closeness with Monwar's family, kept him there and allowed him to continue in the Year 7 without considering the fact that he had virtually no aptitude necessary to cope with the load of the curriculum.

The main subject of the Year 7 class is the *sarf*. The Arabic word *sarf* stands for verbal infliction; hence, the focus of the Year is the Arabic grammatical conjugation. Year 7, according to its teachers, is one of the most difficult of the classes in the *alimyath* (the

academic route to becoming an Islamic scholar) section. In *Jamia* they even call it the *mother of all knowledge*, which means that this is the foundation for all the knowledge that will be bestowed upon the students in later years. To tackle the thickness of the syllabus successfully one *Mawlana* reflects that a pupil needs a *dog's brain* in this class,

*“Always attentive, following orders without questioning, busy memorizing everything in the syllabus! Not a year for understanding, rather understanding will arrive gradually in the later years on what one memorizes during this year.”*

Interestingly, the whole of the Year 7 was struggling, not only Monwar. As noted above, this focus on memorization is nothing new for the pupils, who are already quite used to this technique. Yet the subjects in this Year especially advanced Arabic grammar and literature, Urdu literature, Bengali grammar, and both English grammar and literature, are making the job for the whole class completely unattainable even with extensive help from the notebooks. This is, however, not the only class in *Jamia* where such a situation prevails. According to a teacher of this class, none of the Year 7 students from the previous two years had managed to pass more than six of the ten subjects in their final exams yet all were promoted to the next year. The teacher named two major reasons that have culminated into the terrible scenario of the Year 7 class: first, the promotion-for-all policy, and second there is a shortage of expert teachers in Years 4, 5 and 6. Teacher absenteeism is also common for the Year 7: as I have observed, around 30 per cent of the Year's class-hours was lost in March 2008 because of this.

Monwar stands out not only among three students highlighted above but also among many in the *Jamia*. Examples like Monwar or Munna (Chapter 4) force us to consider why *Jamia* is producing failures like these two. The profile of Monwar that given above showed that he was ill equipped given his family background, and hence, was incapable of meeting the requirements of the English medium primary school and *Jamia* too, as both are formal and specialized schools. According to Akinnaso, learners fail when

learning at the schooling (specialized) is discontinuous with everyday and practical learning (1992, 101). Akinnaso continues,

*‘These discontinuities are compounded when the school system is based on cultural and linguistics practices that are markedly different from those of the learners.’* (ibid)

This comment does not completely accommodate Monwar’s case, because in the beginning of this chapter we have shown that *Jamia* uniquely and flexibly incorporates aspects of both formal and informal schooling where Monwar was a student for three years. During those three years, he was an excellent student, something that he still treasures. However, some of his teachers think that his family’s obsession with modern education and subsequent whimsical decisions is where the reasons for his failure lie. The family’s belief in the transformative power of education ultimately resulted in a Monwar who is not only a failure by any school’s standard but also identified as a *be-adab* and *be-line*. When I left him there, I left him as someone who after 7 years of schooling has failed to acquire a single form of capital that the two others illustrated above accumulated with in a relatively short period. Here Monwar, represents only one such broken promise.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the Muslim identity formation process in a Bangladeshi rural *madrassa*. This was a culmination of three previous chapters where I narrowed down my focus on three young learners to illustrate, ethnographically, who they were prior to coming here and who they become after becoming part of this education system. It is important to note that the last three chapters had located, described, and analyzed a number of influential concepts that the members of this specialized school regularly use to approve or condemn Muslims.

The *Jamia madrasa* and its scholars (*ulema*) place high value on those of the Muslims who they consider “good.” In order for one to achieve that “goodness” one has to fulfil a

number of conditions of which the concept of *iman* (faith) is the central. Interestingly, *ulema* demand that this highest-ranking Islamic concept must have some form of physical manifestation to confirm its presence in an individual's life. Hence, the concept of deeds or *amal* comes to the fore. This concept of *amal* plainly means virtuous actions and treats all forms of virtuous actions as religiously approved and as a signature of faith. Based on this, the *ulema* of *Jamia madrasa* say that man's *iman* resides in his *amal* or the actions of the faithful are the proof of faith's existence.

Upon agreeing on this methodology of *iman*, a school like *Jamia* starts the task of producing the ideal or good Muslim persona. An *imandar*, who by the virtues of *iman* is already a good Muslim, yet *ulema* of *Jamia madrasa* demands the outward projection of her or his faith as obligatory. This is where *Jamia madrasa* and its *ulema* emphasize the importance of *adab* and outward projection of one's *Muslimness*, besides it enters as a formal institution of learning to expedite that process. *Jamia madrasa* and its *ulema*, through the systematic imposition of all the above-mentioned concepts on the young learners mind and body, constitute a formal schooling process whose ultimate outcome is a "good Muslim."

Considering the above process as the main building mechanism behind every "good" Muslim, this chapter, therefore, analyzed the profile of three young learners to understand how effectively *Jamia* and its *ulema* are influencing the make-up of their individual *habitus* (cf. Bourdieu 1977), which should be qualitatively Islamic.

## Chapter Eight: Summary and Conclusion

*Qawmi madrasas* operate primarily in rural regions and provides schooling for poor children and adults. Islam, the countryside, and agriculture are the three major features in the life of these people. They generally use the *madrasas* for their basic schooling and to some extent for the Divine blessings that it promises. Regrettably though, the sector in general and *qawmi madrasa* system in particular is seen as a menace, portrayed as backward, and characterised as militant by the country's secular polity. Still, in the face of such criticism, the system is expanding continuously. This is due in part to the Islamization of Bangladesh's polity, but also the result of the inefficiency of the state's education sector, increased interaction with global economy, and impervious clientele of rural poor. This study highlights the educational realities of these peripheral people.

Hence, it is also about a struggling rural religious school and its historical mission of preserving and transmitting the *Quranic* and Prophetic knowledge that constitute Islamic education according to the *Sunni* path. The inherent absence of a central religious authority and the centrality of sacred text have made this school indispensable in a *Sunni* society. The focal point of this thesis is, therefore, the identity politics that the *madrasa* generates spontaneously for the preservation and continuation of its brand of Islam by promoting the idea of "good Muslim." Consequently, the success of this education is measured not on the basis of how many "graduate Muslims" it has produced but rather on the basis of how many of them have been transformed into "good Muslims."

*Madrasa* students, in their late teens and above, are aware of the fact that being a "good Muslim" is not a sufficient qualification for their future. The *Jamian* elders provide their tacit acceptance of this fact; allowing students to pursue other available avenues of schooling. Moments of such silence and adjustment are painfully abundant in the life of the *Jamians*. This thesis is full of such moments and their ethnographic accounts. For example, in Chapter 2, we observe silence and moments of adjustment when: *Jamian* students enrol with the *aliya*; students and teachers leave *Jamia* either for better opportunities or to escape further deprivation; amount of donations fall as the number of



institutions increase; traditional support bases die down; internal strife for power increases, et cetera. However, the same chapter also highlights an instance of weak attempt of resistance, too in the form of a protest letter from the *Jamians* to the government's local representative (UNO) in which the state was urged to stop corrupting Islam by sponsoring an innovation like *Miladunnaby*.

Interestingly, it is not always in the secular nature of the state that the *Jamia* look for the sources of anomaly; rather it looks within itself at times and questions the status of its own belief, too. The feeling of disenchantment is present and very common within the *Jamians* towards the secular state, notions of modernity, and even towards themselves in the way they practice Islam. Perhaps owing to this sense of disenchantment, I found most of the *Jamians* very difficult to deal with, especially during the early stage of my fieldwork. I also found that they are dissatisfied with the world as well as with their selves. However, with the passing of time and by being among them I came to understand these grievances, their anger, and paranoia as natural reaction to their hopelessly peripheral status within the political economy of Bishwanath, as well as the country's.

Many of the observations in this thesis were of a secret type; issues that do not usually come out in the "public" as most of them are about ideological-slips of all sorts. However, contrary to the popular secularist perception of this *madrasa* system as "the most puritanical of Islamic schools" I found that the *Jamians* can comfortably laugh at such slips by not claiming infallibility. This is an attitude that is characteristically very *Sunni*, which admits that men can be mistaken. By putting all these silences, defeats, pain, weaknesses, resistances, squabbles together we get a *madrasa* system that can be best defined as: "the authority (moral) without power (political and economical)."

Bishwanath *upazila*'s political economy plays the most important role in defining *Jamia* in the way that I have defined it above. The consumption and extortion based economy, ruled either by the *Londonis* or by intermediaries, fuelled by remittance, demands patronage from a weak moral authority, the *Jamians*, to legitimize its continual power and hunger for prestige. Intriguingly, the masses to which the *Jamia* disseminates Islamic

knowledge to be also marginal, weak, dependent, and require its patronage. Hence, the secret of the long-life of this institution, which the secularists are so jealous of, lies in its marginal qualities, in poverty-stricken Bangladesh where the people are predominantly *Sunni* Muslim.

At the onset of this thesis, we heard working class men defending their decision to “give” their children to the *qawmi madrasas*, which is to make them “useful” for the future. This demand for “useful” children is very high amongst marginalised people, which is one other important incentive that is keeping this particular *madrasa* tradition alive. People create or look for a solution when they face a problem; likewise, *Jamia* and similar *madrasas* are at their disposal when parents identify children’s lack of obedience as the problem. Unconditional obedience is imperative for the collective elevation of a deprived family in a resource-constrained society. In order to deal with this problem both the *madrasa* and the parents work jointly by presenting children with rules, regulations, and conventions that are standard in relation to both the social world and religious world. This creates a bond between these two, which I believe they find empowering.

Once in the *madrasa*, children receive basic numeracy and literacy training besides training on pious practices, i.e. performance of *salat*, recitation of the *Qur’an*, et cetera. However, in order to preserve and transmit the *Quranic* and Prophetic knowledge, the base and focus of Islamic education, the *ulema* believe that detailed schooling on manner is required to transform any Muslim into a “good Muslim.” The Arabic term *adab* stands for manner, which is an all-encompassing term that closely corresponds with Bourdieu’s (cf. 1984) *habitus*. This *habitus* or Islamic *adab* completes its process by accommodating both the belief (*iman*) and the practices (*adab*) of *Sunni* Islam onto a Muslim person. The success of *qawmi madrasa* education is, therefore, not in the formal qualification it provides its students, but lies in the inculcation of *adab* onto them whether they pass their class examinations regularly or not. A “good Muslim” is, therefore, not only pious but also obedient and useful. It is important to remember that in the secular schools, unlike the *qawmi madrasa* system, examination results, grades, and degrees are translated into qualifications. One reason that the *uluma* give against reforming their system and

bringing it close to the state administered education system is this over stressed term of “qualification.”

The surface of the Muslim body is the primary site where the schooling on *adab* takes place and it is from the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* that Muslim extricates knowledge on *adab*. *Jamians* stress that it is only under the strict supervision of *ulema* and only inside the *madrasa*, the place designated exclusively as an “Islamic knowledge environment,” that one can receive the *ilm* (knowledge) of *adab*. *Adab* makes someone a Muslim and marks a Muslim out from the rest.

As mentioned earlier, an individual’s *adab* completes only when one acquires in-depth knowledge on the *Sunni* belief system, projects it publicly through performing practices that are obligatory, optional, sacred, and mundane. All of these are closely knitted parts of a systematic conceptualisation of the ideal Muslim persona. However, history informs us that since the inception of Islam, and especially after the death of Mohammad, the Muslim identity has been a very political and contentious issue. *Madrasas*, like the *Jamia* in the *Sunni* world, are mere continuation of that historical process. Belief or *iman* is nothing for the *Jamians* if one does not perform *amal* (deeds/practice/actions) according to the *adab* (approved). Therefore, *Jamian ulema* are not only creating “good Muslims” inside their *madrasa* but also doing that by labelling others as “not good” based on their interpretation of Islam.

When people send their children to *qawmi madrasas*, in a society where formal schools, degrees, and jobs are prestige items one has to wonder what is going wrong. In Bishwanath, it is poverty more than religion that dictates people’s educational choices. There are poorer children in this rural town, who march down to the streets to fend for themselves, formal schooling means nothing to them. However, throughout this thesis it has been shown that it is not only for religion, for formal schooling or for education *per se* that people choose to come to *Jamia*. Rather, *Jamia* as a formal school only attracts those who can see what other incentives apart from Islam and schooling it can offer.

Unlike many other rural towns of Bangladesh this area is so rich that it can afford to have *refugee* children on the streets, *refugee* families in the *colonies*, non local professionals in its schools, banks, businesses; migrant teachers and students in the *qawmi madrasas*. The *madrasas* and mosques in Bishwanath, even struggling *Jamia*, are well off in many different ways compared to other parts of Bangladesh that poor students, teachers, *Imams*, *Muaz'zins* from those parts flock in here to survive. Here, good mannered children like Kamran, Imtiaz and his siblings come because it gives them the chance to get some form of schooling. On the other hand, unruly children like Munna or Monwar are sent here to become “useful.” For a young migrant student it is just a cheap boarding facility from which to gain an *aliya* degree. For teachers like *Mawlana* Abu Tahir, it is the best place for earn some extra cash. For *Mawlana* Ahmad, it is a networking experience to create an opportunity for international migration or to securing a job in the Sylhet city. For a zealous *Mawlana* Saiful Islam, it is a launching pad for *Sunni* indoctrination. For the elderly members of the management committee it is a means to stay close to local power. Therefore, it can be said that besides a centre for higher religious learning, the *Jamia* of Bishwanath is actually a conglomeration of diverse functions, i.e. a shelter, a correction facility, a cheap boarding, a business outlet, an outpost of *Sunni* Islam, a political muscle, a springboard for next best possibility, and many more.

As an area for anthropological investigation Bangladesh's *qawmi madrasa* system is an exciting site. Regrettably, prior to this work, no anthropological or sociological study has been done in this area. Therefore, it is an original work and the room for improvement, in terms of gaining further anthropological insights and for further serious theoretical engagement, is immense. However, the insights from this study can be utilized for future research in the area of informal Islamic schooling, for understanding modern Islamic schools like the *aliya madrasa* system, for studying the political economy of any form of religious education system, or even for understanding formal/informal religious schooling under the secular education system.

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## Appendix 1

### The seventy-seven actions of *iman*

Of the seventy-seven actions of *iman* thirty are connected to heart (1-30), seven are connected to tongue (31-37), and forty are connected to body (38-77).

1. Allah exists, 2. In the beginning, nothing was there except Allah and he has created everything, 3. Angels exist, 4. All the divine books (*Kutub*) are true, 5. All the prophets of Allah are true, 6. Allah has knowledge over everything and only that which He sanctions or wishes will occur, 7. The Day of Judgement (*Qiyaamah*) is true, 8. The heaven (*Jannah*) is true, 9. The hell (*Jahannam*) is true, 10. One has to love Allah, 11. One has to love the Prophet, 12. One has to love or hate someone else solely because of Allah, 13. One has to execute all actions for religious (*deen*) reasons only, 14. One has to regret and express remorse when a sin is committed, 15. One has to fear Allah, 16. One has to have the hope for the mercy of Allah, 17. One has to be modest, 18. One has to express gratitude over a bounty or favour. 19. One has to fulfil promises, 20. One has to exercise patience (*Sabr*), 21. One has to consider oneself lower than others, 22. One has to have the mercy on all of Allah's creation, 23. One has to be content with whatever that one experiences from Allah, 24. One has to have the trust in Allah, 25. One should never boast or brag over any quality that one has, 26. One should never have malice or hatred towards anybody, 27. One should not be envious of anyone, 28. One should never become angry, 29. One should never wish harm for anyone, 30. One should not have love for the world.

31. One has to recite the *Kalimah* (the phrase of testimony), 32. One has to recite the *Qur'an*, 33. One has to acquire knowledge, 34. One has to pass on knowledge, 35. One has to make supplication (*doa*), 36. One has to perform *zikr* of Allah (Remembrance of Allah that typically involves the repetition of the names of Allah), 37. One has to abstain from the followings: saying lies, backbiting, using vulgar words, cursing, singing, etc. all that are contrary to the *Shariah* (law).

38. One has to perform ablution, take bath, and keep one's clothing clean. 39. One has to be steadfast in offering of *Salat* (five time obligatory daily prayers), 40. One has to pay *zakat* (obligatory charity for those who have the means) and *sadaqatul fitr* (charity at the end of the month long fasting), 41. One has to fast (*sawm*), 42. One has to perform the *Hajj* (Pilgrimage to Mecca), 43. One has to offer *i'tikaaf* (the act of entering into a mosque with the intention of residing there), 44. One has to move away or migrate from a place which is harmful for one's religion (*deen*), 45. One has to fulfil the vows that have been made to Allah, 46. One has to fulfil the oaths those are not sinful, 47. One has to pay the compensation (*kaffarah*) for unfulfilled oaths, 48. One has to cover those parts of one's body that are obligatory (*fard*) to cover, 49. One has to perform the act of sacrificing a livestock (*qurbaani*) in the name of Allah, 50. One has to enshroud and bury the deceased, 51. One has to repay one's debts, 52. One has to abstain from prohibited things when undertaking monetary transactions (i.e., usury, interest, etc.), 53. One should not conceal a truth that has been witnessed, 54. One has to get married when the ego (*Nafs*) desires sexual pleasure, 55. One has to make sure that the rights of those who are under one's care are fulfilled, 56. One has to provide comfort to one's parents. 57. One has to bring up one's children in the Islamic manner, 58. One should never sever relations with one's friends and relatives, 59. One has to obey one's master, 60. One has to be just to the self and the others, 61. One should never be initiated in any other way that is contrary to that of the generality of the Muslims, 62. One has to obey the ruler, given that the rulings are not contrary to the *Shariah* (law), 63. One has to make peace between two warring groups or individuals, 64. One has to assist others in all forms of noble task, 65. One has to command the good and prohibit the evil (*An Nahyi 'Anil Munkar*), 66. One has to mete out punishments according to the *Shariah* (law) if one is the ruler, 67. One has to fight the enemies of religion (*deen*) whenever such an occasion presents itself, 68. One has to fulfil one's trusts (*amaanah*), 69. One has to provide the needy ones with loans, 70. One has to look into the needs of one's neighbours, 71. One has to completely certain that one's income is clean, 72. One has to spend according to the *Shariah* (law), 73. One has to reply a greeting immediately, 74. One has to spell out loud "May Allah has mercy on you" (*Yarhamukallah*) when some other spells "All praise is due to Allah"

(*Alhamdulillah*) after sneezing, 75. One should never unjustly harm anyone, 76. One should abstain from games and amusements those are contrary to the *Shariah* (law), and 77. The road that one is using one has to remove pebbles, stones, thorns, stick etc., from it which may cause injuries to other users.

## Appendix 2

### Tawheed or the doctrine of Oneness

*Tawheed* consists of five testimonies or *Kalimahs* (literally means ‘the phrase’). The first testimony is the phrase of Oneness and Purity (*Kalimah Tawheed* and *Tayyibah*); second, is the phrase of Testimony (*Kalimah Shahadat*), third the phrase of Glory (*Kalimah Tamjeed*), fourth is the phrase of Unity (*Kalimah Tawheed*), and the fifth is the phrase of Disapproval (*Kalimah Radde-Kufr*). The phrase of Oneness and Purity states, “*There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger.*” The phrase of Testimony states, “*I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is Allah’s Worshiper and Messenger*”. The phrase of Glory says, “*Glory be to Allah. All praise be to Allah, There is none worthy of worship besides Allah. And Allah is the greatest. There is no Power and might except from Allah. The most high – The great*”. The phrase of Unity says, “*There is none worthy of worship besides Allah, who is alone, (and) He has no partner. His is the Kingdom and for Him is all praise. He gives life and causes death. In His hand is all good. And He has power over everything*”. The phrase of Disapproval states, “*O Allah! I seek protection in You from that I should not join any partner with You knowingly. I seek your forgiveness from that which I do not know. I repent from it (ignorance.) I free myself from disbelief and joining partners with You and from all sins. I submit to your will I believe and declare: There is none worthy of worship besides Allah and Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger*”.

### Appendix 3

#### ***Jamian* interpretation of development**

Immediately after the war the government, NGOs, locals and foreigners came forward with relief in this war-torn and famished country to save our life. They gave us high protein biscuits and powdered milk as relief to keep us alive. After some time when those biscuits and powder failed to stop the '74 famine, which starved 1500000 people to death, they started to blame us! They started to cry loud that Bangladeshi men are all corrupt, insensitive, they are eating everything up, and the country's women and children are dying due to that! Then, as if suddenly, they discovered that there is a way out of this huge humanitarian crisis: in order to save this new nation from a total collapse first its women's situation, especially their poor health, requires a fixing. But why Bangla women's health is so bad? They found three answers to this question: first, Bangla women bear too many children, second, they are given to marriages too early, and third, Bangla women is a lowly social class! Now, to make way for her health to regain all three of the problem must go! With this goal for paving a way to health for Bangla women in their minds, they have decided to stop women from getting pregnant first! Why? Because, it will not only return the health to the women but will also cut the biggest national risk, which is its population density and very high birth rate.

These are the ideas of the enlightened ones', who for the first time taught us that we are our biggest enemies! Our children are going to become our biggest burdens! And, our families are all un-planned families and they need to be fixed! And, we are so lucky that they already had an all-in-one magic "*rubber-bori*" solution ready to fix our women, men, and even the nation!

According to this "*rubber-bori*" solution: family planning is the answer to all these problems and it is all up to women tossing down free *boris* (contraceptive pills) and men putting on free *rubbers* (condoms) correctly! At some point along the line, besides the *rubber-bori* solution, numerous field-clinics and dispensaries started to sprout up. These

entered the scene to give a more quick and long-term fixing to both single and married, men and women. They claimed that these poor ones were actually “demanding” to become *khasis* (sterilized) to have a better future and a better health! We do not know whether they finally got those but after the operation they surly got either a *shari* (traditional female garment) or a *lungi* (traditional male garment) and a cash of 100 or 200 Taka (Current official exchange rate between Pound Sterling and Bangladesh currency Taka is 1£ = 105.23 Taka, unofficial rate is 10-15% more than this. It is difficult to find what the rate was in the 70s and 80s of the last century. Here the narration is about that particular time)!

Soon, however, they came to conclude that only *bori*, condom, and sterilization-clinics are not enough to improve women’s condition in Bangladesh! In order to bring real change and real development in the nation’s life every wife must have a say over her pregnancy and economic matters in her husband’s house. Moreover, in the parents’ home the daughter’s choices have to be met in the matters regarding her higher education and her own marriage. Now, these cannot be realized just by fixing their bodies only! So, over the years, they and their friends’ in the government and other important places made new laws that would give and protect many unknown rights to the women, made it easy for the women to get low-interest credits, made education free until a woman graduates, made available hundreds of thousand of jobs meant for the women only! Today in public, they praise each other, give and receive Nobel prizes and other honours to one another for successfully fixing Bangla women with health and power; and secretly celebrate the fixing of Bangla men, too, whom they have successfully removed from their position of power and prestige in the process.

Now everyone knows that we are a people of weak *iman*, we are Muslim namesakes, which is something that they have shown to the world by buying us with a pack of biscuits first and from there on many more times with *bori*, *rubber*, micro-credit, democracy, and finally with the Nobel peace prize! Now we have a face in the world! Nevertheless, the development is not over yet! What we are seeing around us in the form of beauty pageants, talent-hunting shows are only the beginning of the final phase of the



development where women of this country will get the final fixing – all of them will come out of families, homes, and *pardha*! The newspapers and TV channels are dedicatedly working to “free” them. Once women are free from all of their traditional obligations, the society will become free, too! Is not that going to be wonderful!

## Appendix 4

### *Iman* and the early Islamic history of political discord

In the history of Islam, *iman* or ‘belief’ (in the general sense of the word) became a hugely problematic concept immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 AD). The centre of the dispute was the *Khilafah* or Caliphate<sup>158</sup>. Famous Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyyah<sup>159</sup> (1263 - 1328) stresses its historical importance in his great work *Kitab al-Iman* (1999). He remarks that it was over the meaning of the word *iman* that the first internal discord surfaced among Muslims. Because of this, the community was divided into sects and factions and began to call one another ‘infidels’.

Following Ibn Taymiyyah’s commentary on *iman* the Japanese linguist Toshihiki Izutsu, an outstanding authority in the metaphysical and philosophical wisdom schools of Islam, treats the aforementioned discord among the community of Muslims as primarily a political one and subsequently a theological one. Izutsu (1965, 3) says that the problem became irreversible on the issue over the selection of the fourth Caliph after the death of

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<sup>158</sup> Caliphate or *Khilafah* is the first form of government inspired by Islam. Prophet Muhammad’s disciples first led it as a continuation of the political authority established by the Prophet.

<sup>159</sup> For the objective reading of the history of Islam I have chosen to quote from Ibn Taymiyyah not only for his scholarly authority but also for his *madh’hab* (school of law), which was *Hanbali*. *Hanbali* school is one of the four schools of law popular among the Sunni Muslims’ worldwide and famous for the distance that the scholars of this school maintained from the centres of power. Islamic scholars of different times and of different places consider Ibn Taymiyyah as the ‘*Sheikh al-Islam*’, a prestigious title only for those of Islamic jurists and teachers of Tradition (*Hadith*) whose verdicts reached a high level of fame and acceptance. Some of the advance level students as well as teachers from *Jamia* affirmed that they knew about him, not directly through his work but from other sources of which the history of Islamic thought is one. There are two main reasons for not knowing him directly through his work – first, he belongs to a different school of law than the Muslims of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh majority of Muslims subscribe to the *Hanafi* school. However, the second reason for not knowing him is embedded in the history of a politico-ideological conflict between the Deobandi *ulama* themselves prior to the 1947 partition of the Subcontinent and over the creation of two separate states based on religion - India and Pakistan. *Mawlana* Husayn Ahmad Madani, the then head of the Deoband *madrasa*, was against the creation of the state of Pakistan for Muslims exclusively. He argued for the unity of all religions under the “united nationalism” concept. His idea was condemned and criticized heavily by another prominent Deobandi scholar *Mawlana* Zafar Ahmad ‘Utmani. ‘Utmani’s onslaught continued for many years even after the partition. According to Qasim Zaman (2004) *Mawlana* ‘Utmani’s criticism was primarily against this concept of “united nationalism” and was based on his readings of Ibn Taymiyyah. I presume, this connection between *Mawlana* Zafar and Ibn Taymiyyah had later played a part in the total avoidance of the reading of Ibn Taymiyyah by the later days’ Deobandi style *madrasas* that *Mawlana* Madani’s supporters had established throughout the region (This is simple my presumption based on Qasim Zaman’s (2004) account).

the third Caliph Uthman (656 AD). Three competing ‘political forces’ emerged with their demand over Caliphate at that point – those who supported Ali<sup>160</sup> (this group later became known as the *Shi’a*<sup>161</sup>), those who supported Mu‘âwiyah<sup>162</sup> (this group was known as the *Umayyads*<sup>163</sup>), and those who said – *lâ hâdhâ wa-lâ dhâka* or neither this nor that (later became known as the *Khârijites*<sup>164</sup>). The Khârijites asserted that – Caliph was no longer needed and the Book of God, the holy *Qur’an*, was enough, and if there was no other way then the best qualified should be chosen from among the people – ‘*even if he be an Ethiopian slave*’.

According to Izutsu’s thesis the fundamental question of – ‘what is belief’ first arose in this historical juncture when in order to defeat and condemn both of their political opponents, the *Shi’a* and the *Umayyads*, the *Khârijites* had formulated a question based on a *Qur’anic* verse *la hukm illa lillah*<sup>165</sup> or “there is no decision but God’s”. The question was somewhat like – ‘is he who follows either Ali or Mu‘âwiyah and supports either of those two an ‘infidel’ *kafir* or a ‘believer’ *mu’min*?’ In other words, it is simply to ask – Is a man who has committed a grave sin (by transgressing the verse 47, Surah 5) still be regarded as a believer, or is he by that very fact an outright ‘infidel’? Instead of dealing with the problem of ‘belief’ they exclusively asked – ‘who is unbeliever’ to excommunicate both Ali and Mu‘âwiyah and their followers from the community of

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<sup>160</sup> Ali ibn Abi Talib (598/599 - 661) popularly know as *Imam* Ali the fourth Caliph of Islam was a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>161</sup> It is the second largest denomination of Islam after the *Sunni* Islam. It is based on *Qur’an*, and messages of the Prophet Muhammad and regards Ali as the first Imam where *Sunni* Islam regards Ali as the fourth *Imam*. It also considers Ali’s descendants successors to Muhammad, all of which are member of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the household of Muhammad. This disagreement split Muslims into *Shi’a* and *Sunni*.

<sup>162</sup> Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (602 - 680) is the first Caliph in *Ummayed* dynasty. He engaged in major civil war against the fourth and fifth Caliphs of Islam. He assumed Caliphate after Ali’s assassination and led until 680 AD.

<sup>163</sup> The *Umayyads* were an Islamic dynasty established by the caliph Muawiyah I (Mu’awiya) in 661. An earlier caliph, Uthman (r. 644-56), had been a member of the powerful *Umayyad* clan, but he was murdered and replaced by Ali. When Muawiyah, previously governor of Syria, seized the caliphate, he made the succession hereditary and thus inaugurated dynastic rule. From their capital at Damascus, the *Umayyad* caliphs ruled a vast empire, extending from Europe to India, until 750. Thereafter the line continued in Spain until 1031.

<sup>164</sup> Literally means “Those who went out.” This people were first with Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam and later deserted and assassinated him. First emerged in the late seventh century AD, concentrated in today’s southern Iraq, and are distinct from the *Sunnis* and *Shi’as*.

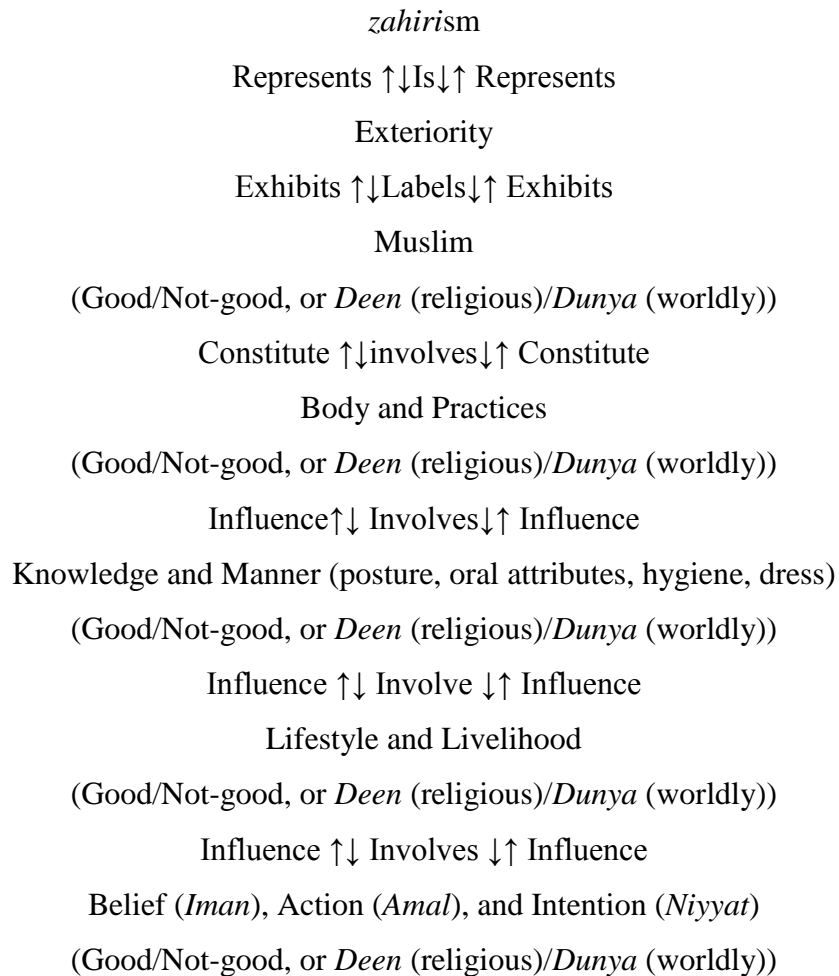
<sup>165</sup> *Surah V, 47. Let the People of the Gospel judge by that which Allah hath revealed therein. Whoso judgeth not by that which Allah hath revealed: such are evil-livers.*

Muslims. Izutsu says this Khârijites “*approach to the problem of ‘belief’ from the rear*” (ibid, 4) was simply a practical and political approach that resulted into a brutal cleansing of *kafir* Muslims from within the wider community of Muslims. However, in the history of early Islam this *Khârijites’* approach had contributed greatly towards the later day development of many more Islamic theological concepts (ibid, 8).

## Appendix 5

### *Zahirism*

In the following, I have attempted to construct a vertical structure based on my understanding of *zahirism*.



## Appendix 6

### The performance of *salah*

*Salat* denotes the five daily prayers that a ‘good Muslim’ is obliged to carry out. Performing *salat* is one of the *amal*(s) (action/deed/works) that is obligatory for every *Mu’min* Muslim and that can be secured through the offering of it five times a day. Each of the five *salat* then separately constitutes one action/deed. Each *salat* has one *Farz*, or obligatory part, and one or more *Sunnat*, or the Prophetic practice<sup>166</sup> part. Additionally, one can add *Nawfal* or optional parts to it.

Among all five *salat*, the *Esha* (the after sunset prayer) has a uniquely *Waajib* or necessary unit added within its format that is known as the *Witr* prayer. Each *Farz*, *Sunnat*, *Waajib* and *Nawfal* constitutes separate actions/deeds for the offering of each one correctly. Moreover, each daily prayer and section within it consists of up of two, three, or four obligatory (*Farz*), necessary (*Waajib*), Prophetic practices (*Sunnat*), and optional parts (*Nawfal*). Each part, in turn, constitutes a unit that is a *raka’at* in Arabic (sing. *Raka’ah*). Each of this two, three, or four *raka’at* (unit) of *salat* consists of a corresponding two, three, or four acts of bowings and prostrations. The important point here is that while each *raka’h* constitutes an action within a *salah*, each bowing and prostration within a *raka’h* is also action without which no *salah* is complete.

Moreover, there is specific and detailed instruction on what and how the intention (*niyyat*) should be made prior to the beginning of a *salat* – thus reciting that *niyyat* is again an action. The kind of posture that one should take then - is an action, which involves positioning one’s toes and one’s gaze in a particular kind of manner. Utterance of *Qur’anic* verses during the *salat* add up more action or *amal*.

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<sup>166</sup> Prophetic practices or *Sunnah* of the Prophet includes statements and actions of the Prophet as well as acts performed in his presence that he had tacitly approved. *Sunnah* is of two kinds -. *Sunnat-e-Muakkadah* and *Sunnat-e-Ghair-Muakkadah*. The first one is emphasized practice of the Prophet. He who fulfils it will earn reward but will be condemned if abandons. *Sunnat-e-Ghair-Muakkadah* or the second type is non-emphasized but praiseworthy practice and ignoring it is seen as undesirable act.

Every unit of *salah* is constituted by over 12 major actions (*amal*). First, recitation of two Qur'anic verses (hands have to be positioned in a certain way following one's school of law). Second, bowing down (specific instruction has to be followed on the posture that involves head, back, knees, arms, fingers and the gaze). Third, short and repetitive (3, 5, or 7 times) utterance of a particular verse. Fourth, back to the upright standing position with uttering a particular verse. Fifth, short upright position with utterance of a short verse. Sixth, prostration (following instruction on posture that involves both of the hands, knees, and ankles). Seventh, short and repetitive (3, 5, or 7 times) utterance of a designated verse in the fully prostrated state (following approved posture that involves positioning knees, nose, forehead, face, arms, hands, fingers, feet, toes, stomach and thighs). Eighth, sitting upright with short utterances. Ninth, short sitting (following specific instruction on the posture that involves position of back, left leg, right leg, and toes). Tenth, second prostration from sitting state. Eleventh, short and repetitive (3, 5, or 7 times) utterance of the same verse in the fully prostrated state. Twelfth, back to the upright standing position. Thus the first unit ends and the second unit of *Salah* begins.

The second unit comes next as an identical continuation of the first one. At the end of second unit instead of standing up from the second prostration the worshipper remains sited and recites two particular verses and completes the *salah* if the *salah* is consist of two units. If not, then he reads one particular verse and carry on further one or two identical units as required and the competes the *salah* finally by reciting two particular verses. It is important to mention that while standing apart from the third (if it is the dusk prayer) and fourth units of the obligatory prayers every time the worshipper recites a different *Qur'anic* chapter or verse along with the first chapter of the *Qur'an*.

Everything else is exactly the same and, as mentioned before, at the end of the second unit, if it is a two unit *salat*, then the worshiper will take a sitting position as mentioned as the ninth of the above actions. However, since it is a longer stay it gives specific instruction on the location of hands, palms, position of fingers, and gaze. At this point, he will first recite the *Tashahhud*, which compliments Allah and testifies one's firm belief in

Allah and Muhammad. One is given instruction on a sequence of movements made possible by using thumb, middle and index fingers of the right hand while reciting the *Tashahhud*. After that the worshiper recites the *Durood-e-Ibrahimi* or invocation that compliments Prophet Abraham. Upon finishing this a two unit *salat* ends with first turning the face to the right and then to the left and in both cases the worshiper fixed his eyes onto the respective shoulders with an intention of greeting the Angels by repeating – “Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah.”

In the preceding paragraph, by separating every action involved in an offering of 5 daily *salat*, which is one of the five pillars of Islam, I have tried to demonstrate that every single unit of it is a combination of actions (*amal*) arranged under detailed manners (*adab*) set by the *Qur'an* and the Prophetic traditions. I have also attempted to demonstrate, by using *salat* as an example, that firstly, it is a combination of multiple actions constituting a single action that is meant to achieve closeness with one's Creator; however, every one of the actions that constitute one large action are also necessary and beneficial for the worshipers to achieve their goal<sup>167</sup>. Secondly, *salat* is not only a good action or *amal*, but also an end result of numerous actions guided by numerous good manners or *adab*. It is a system of appropriate manners (*adab*) that ultimately constitutes a good action. By this I mean specific instruction on which way one should face, how one should stand, how one should bow, how one should prostrate, how one should sit, what one should recite, and in this way how the whole body will participate in the creation of a complete *salat*, etc. Finally, it (*salat*) constitutes a chain of multiple sequences of manner – action – manner – action. In the process, which one of the two (manner or action) initiates the chain does not matter as long as it derives from one's *iman* or faith and fulfils its requirements<sup>168</sup>. Hence a faithful Muslim must do *amal* (work, or actions of the kind described above) to establish worship; worshiping one's Creator, in turn, is a sign of piety, humility or good manner – which is a sign of a 'good Muslim'. If we consider here the performative religious practices only then a Muslim has the following options to

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<sup>167</sup> By this I mean: *Salat* = 5 daily prayers = 17 compulsory units + 3 necessary units + at least 8 to 20 units of Prophetic practices + 8 to infinite number of optional units along with every move, action and manner as described above that each unit consists of

<sup>168</sup> By this I mean – a Muslim who has faith must act according to the seven articles of faith that constitute his *iman* or faith



accumulate *amal* from: *salat*<sup>169</sup>, *sawm*<sup>170</sup>, *i'tikaaf*<sup>171</sup>, *qurbani*<sup>172</sup>, *aqueeqa*<sup>173</sup>, *hajj*<sup>174</sup>, or any act of *doa* (supplication).

Now, as I have illustrated above, every single action follows certain instructions on the kind of posture that one should take as well as verses that one should recite. These together constitute the approved manner of actions in the offering of *salat*. One has no other options but to stick with those manners that ultimately guarantee the successful execution of any action related to worship. To reiterate, there are six such compulsory (*farz*) manners of action involved in each unit (*raka'at*) of *salat* along with fourteen necessary (*waajib*) manners, twenty one Prophetic manners (*sunnat*), and five preferable (*mustahab*) manners.

As I have been already discussing *salat* therefore I am bring it as an example here once again to explain the chain that I have just mentioned. Prior to the offering of a *salat*, one has to fulfil 8 conditions. One of these 8 conditions is *waju* or ablution. Ablution purifies and cleans a body and makes it suitable for establishing or making a *salat*. It is necessary if one has not performed an obligatory bath prior to a *salat*. Becoming pure or clean is considered to be a good manner but it requires elaborate actions guided again by specific instructions based on again strict conditions that validate and constitute an ablution. Thus, the whole sequence of the process would look like the following:

*Imandar* (faithful) amass *amal* (action/deed/work) to please Allah →  
→ *Amaldar's niyaat* (intention) directs all action towards Allah →  
→ *Niyaat* is *adab* (manner) that makes one's *amal* potent →  
→ *Amal* achieved.

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<sup>169</sup> 5 daily prayers, or 1 obligatory collective prayers session on every Friday, or prayers on two Eid days, or the prayer that is especially meant for guidance prior to any important work, or any burial prayer, or especial *salat* during the Muslim month of fasting

<sup>170</sup> There are 6 types of *sawm*.

<sup>171</sup> *I'tikaaf* is the act of entering into a mosque on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of Ramadan with the intention of residing there until the 30<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>172</sup> *Qurbani* is the act of sacrificing a livestock on the day of *Eid-ul-Adha*.

<sup>173</sup> *Aqueeqa* is about sacrificing livestock for a newly born.

<sup>174</sup> *Hajj* is the pilgrimage to Mecca.

*Amal* (action) carried out with manner (*adab*) is beneficial →  
→ *Amal* without *adab* (manner) is weak *amal* →  
→ Weak *amal* signifies lack of manner (*adab*) →  
→ Weak *amal* signifies weak intention (*niyaat*) →  
→ Weak *amal*, *adab* and *niyaat* is weak *iman* (faith) →  
→ Weak *iman* (faith) is weakness in religion (*deen/dhormo*<sup>175</sup>).

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<sup>175</sup> *Dhormo* is a Sanskrit-Bengali term that the English words like religion and law can describe peripherally. It is all about everything that can be called beyond, between, and about religion and law. In that sense, it more closely corresponds with the Islamic word for way of life or *Deen*. It is worth mentioning that Islamic scholars and Islamists in Bangladesh frequently use the term *Dhormo* to transmit their understandings of the religion of Islam, too.

## Appendix 7

### An account of controversy surrounding the concept of *amal*

According to Izutsu (1965, 159-193), a split over who is a believer and who is not surrounding the concept of *iman*, which occurred after the death of the Prophet (632AD), followed by another split surrounding the concept of ‘doing’ *amal*, too. *Jahm ibn Safwan*<sup>176</sup> initiates this controversy by saying that – it (*amal*) is unnecessary. He goes on saying that *iman* is nothing but inner conviction or assent by the heart and ‘saying’ or ‘doing’ counts for nothing. In his thesis knowledge is the decisive element. He argues that *tasdiq* or assent is the plain Arabic for *iman* which does not refer to *tawhid* or monotheism in the Islamic context. In addition, in Arabic *tawhid* does not refer to work. Hence, *amal* or ‘work’ cannot be *iman*.

*Ibn Karram* among the *Karramites* says *iman* is nothing but ‘saying’ by the tongue. On the other hand, the thinker of *Mu‘tazilism*<sup>177</sup> defined *iman* in terms of ‘acts’ of obedience. One group among the *Mu‘tazilism* went to such extreme over the concept of ‘doing’ that they came to be known as the ‘threateners’ or *Wa‘idiyyah*. According to this group – *one act of disobedience will put a Muslim into the fire with the Kafirs, ....and that neglect of even one act of obedience is enough to negate a man’s iman.* (Ibid, 159-160)

The famous Shi’ite *Mu‘tazilite Al-Sharif al-Murtada* (965–1044 AD) tried to scripturally prove that one cannot be a believer without ‘doing’ and ‘doing’ does not make one enter Paradise. To counter the *Jahmites*, *Karramites*, and *Waidites* notions of *iman*, *Al-Murtada* interprets a *Hadith* narrated by *Abu Hurayra*: The Prophet once said, ‘*Whatever a man does will not make him enter the Garden, not will it rescue him from the Fire.*’

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<sup>176</sup> *Jahm* propagated that Speech of God is created and he denied every scriptural attributes of God for fear of anthropomorphism. Only attributes of God that he had accepted were: creating and power. This belief in power led him to doctrine of fatalism, called *al-jabr* (compulsion). He borrowed heavily from Greek philosophers. He was put to death in 745 AD for his views.

<sup>177</sup> A distinct Islamic school flourished in the cities of Basra and Baghdad during the 8th–10th centuries CE. This school believes that human reason is more reliable than tradition. Because of this adherents of this school tend to interpret passages of the *Qur’an* farther from their literal meanings than other Muslims.

Then someone asked the Prophet, ‘*Even you yourself, O Apostle of God?*’ He replied, ‘*Not even me! Unless God covers me up with mercy and grace.*’ Then he repeated the last sentence three times (*Shahi Bukharih*). The point that this *Hadith* was trying to make on *iman* is – even the legally responsible ones are not independent and need God. Moreover, if God cuts off man from his grace, help, and aid then man would never be able to enter the Garden and escape the Fire by his own *amal*.

*Ibn Hazm* (994-1064 AD) also argues against *Jahmites*, *Karramites*, and *Waidites* by saying that – all work of piety are *islam*, and *islam* is identical with *iman*. Therefore, all works of piety are *iman*. Nevertheless, he defends his argument more theoretically and uses linguistic observations to say that – *iman* in Arabic is never called as a *tasdiq* ‘by the heart’ that does not accompany *tasdiq* ‘by the tongue’ and vis-à-vis. Therefore, *tasdiq* and *iman* is acknowledgement of truth by both heart and tongue. Hence, *iman* is a name that covers all acts in all branches of the Sacred Law.

*Ibn Taymiyyah* elaborates on *Ibn Hazm* by emphasizing that heart and body are inseparable as no living being can do without any one of the two yet they are distinguishable from each other in both function and conception. Likewise, *iman* in the heart necessarily requires outward acts in accordance with it as these are assimilated into one. To explain further on the nature of the relation between *iman* and ‘work’ he gives an example of the outside and inside properties of a grain that are different yet regarded as one grain. According to him, “*The ‘works’ of islam are but the outside of iman. They are the ‘works’ of the body, while iman is the inside of islam and it is the ‘works’ of the heart.*”

Many *Qur’anic* references say that *iman* ‘increases’. There are also *Hadiths* that confirm such a quality in *iman*. In one famous *Hadith* the Prophet describes the woman as ‘deficient’ in both Reason (*akal*) and Religion (*deen*). When asked the meaning of it, he answered, ‘*Do you not see? Women have a certain number of days and nights* (reference to menstruation) *in which they neither perform fasting nor participate in ritual worship. This is the deficiency in Religion.*’ Now, this ‘increase’ and ‘decrease’ in *iman* gives rise

to a new problem. People ask which element of *iman* contributes in such change. For some theologians this change is essentially due to both *tasdiq* (assent) and *amal* (work), and for some it is only due to *amal*. However, all the theologians who finally arrived at the conclusion that *amal* and *iman* are inseparable also agree on the point that - people differ greatly from one another. According to *Ibn Taymiyyah* - *iman* is a strictly personal and individual affair and it (*iman*) is something peculiar to him and to him alone.