

A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari *tariqa* and its followers

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This article introduces the Maijbhandari Sufi brotherhood, perhaps one of the most important spiritual groupings in today's Bangladesh. Maijbhandari origins, leadership and shrines are briefly described, and the rootedness of the movement in the country's agrarian history is suggested. The roles of oral and musical performance, as well as buffalo sacrifice, as major ritual forms and practices are discussed and analysed in some depth. The article underlines the centrality of pir veneration and its associated Sufi ideation in Bangladeshi culture as well as in the country's religious politics.

I

Multivocality in Bangladeshi Islam

Recent trends in scholarship on Islamic cultures have focused on the many ways that claims to 'being Muslim' are asserted, expressed and

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Acknowledgements: Research for this article was made possible by a senior fellowship from the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies and a sabbatical leave from Oakland University, for both of which I am most grateful. I was especially fortunate in having the assistance of a University of Dhaka colleague who arranged my visit to Maijbhandar and other Maijbhandari sites and shared with me his extensive experience and first-hand knowledge of the movement. He is best left unnamed, but I am forever in his debt. I have benefited greatly from discussions of the Maijbhandari movement with Professors Manzurul Mannan of the Independent University of Bangladesh and Hans Harder of the University of Halle. Both of them offered important corrections to and suggestions for improvement of earlier versions of this article. I also thank Dr Selim Jahangir, who kindly helped me contact Maijbhandari followers in Dhaka and freely shared his own insights into the movement. I, however, am solely responsible for all statements of fact and interpretation, and none of these colleagues should be associated with any errors or perceptibly controversial interpretations some might find herein.

Contributions to Indian sociology (n.s.) 40, 1 (2006)
SAGE Publications New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London
DOI: 10.1177/006996670504000101

contested. Bangladesh, no less than other Islamic societies, displays a range of Muslim voices (or ‘multivocality’ [Wilce 1998]) and offers a rich setting in which to observe the negotiation of multiple religious identities to which Katherine Pratt Ewing (1997, 1998) has called our attention.

It is true that Bangladeshi Islam has of late displayed an authoritarian and militant face. But the recent high-profile visibility of literalist and political Islam in Bangladesh tends to obscure deeply rooted, alternative manifestations of Muslim belief and practice that are in fact more widespread. Of these, the veneration of Muslim holy men (or *pirs*) as bearers of spiritual power is undoubtedly the most ubiquitous. The phenomenon has largely gone unnoticed, except as a bit of esoterica, by academic students of Bangladeshi society and, it seems, is regarded by some among the Bangladeshi elite, both religious and secular, as an embarrassing anachronism. Deprecation of *pir* adulation was reinforced during the colonial period, in order to marginalise and subordinate indigenous traditions of spiritual belief and conduct which the then rulers had found threatening to the social, as Ewing (1997: 41–90) has shown at some length. However, despite such disdain, very many, perhaps even a large majority, of Bangladeshi Muslims from across the entire urban–rural and socioeconomic spectrum accept the legitimacy of some holy men, if not as workers of miracles and purveyors of magical cures, then at least as sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance. Many, if not most, visit the graveside shrines (*mazar*) of *pirs*, some at least occasionally, many often, and an untold number rather regularly, throughout their lives (Banu 1992; Begum and Ahmed 1990). So popular is this phenomenon that, in contrast to their colonial precursors, post-colonial leaders have found it convenient to accommodate to *pirs* and their followings. Former president H.M. Ershad and his coterie, who made frequent, highly publicised visits to the most famous living Bangladeshi holy man, the *pir* of Atroshi, provide the most salient such example; Ershad even used the occasion of a major commemorative event in 1988 at Atroshi to announce his intention to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh (Mills 1992: 202).

The historical importance of Sufism in Bengal has been well noted (see, for example, Haq 1975; Latif 1993) and the role of Sufi saints in the construction and propagation of Bengali Islam has been the subject of important studies by Richard Eaton (1994) and Asim Roy (1983, 1996: 100–20). But only a few recent and highly welcome studies by social scientists have documented the present-day ubiquity and vitality of saint veneration and its centrality to Bangladeshi culture. Notably, these include

the study by Begum and Ahmed of a Dhaka shrine (1990), Gardner's extended discussion of saint veneration in Sylhet (1995: 228–68; 2001), Mills' studies of the Atroshti *pir* (1992, 1998), and Mannan's (n.d.) in-depth analysis of the phenomenology of *pirs* and the belief structures in which their presence is embedded, to all of which Ellickson (2004) has recently added some welcome detail. There has also emerged some scholarly interest in the presence of a well-established school of Islamic mysticism (or *tariqa*) in Bangladesh that is of relatively recent origin and has attained a large, far-flung following, and whose spiritual centre is located in the Chittagong District village of Maijbandar. Selim Jahangir (1999) has provided a major, non-hagiographical contribution to the study of the movement, and an Indologist with a special interest in Bengali religion, Hans Harder, has done an extensive field study of the Maijbandari movement, especially its musical traditions, which is awaiting publication (Harder 2000).

This article seeks to make a contribution to this research, my own association with which has its roots in a fond and memorable experience of the Maijbandari Sufi movement in the 1960s, when my interest in the anthropology of Bangladesh began. Though not pursued during later research visits to the country, my interest in the Maijbandaris remained and eventually led to a serious, if preliminary, ethnographic inquiry in late 1999, the results of which, along with some theoretically relevant reflections, I wish to set forth here. Throughout 1967 and into 1968, I spent many Thursday evenings attending the musical gatherings (*mahphil*) of a small group of followers of the Maijbandari *tariqa*, to which an unknown, but undoubtedly large, number of Bangladeshis claim some measure of adherence. From a composite of my recollections of those evenings, aided by a few notes and tape recordings I made at the time, I reproduce a brief account of what these gatherings were like.

A local Maijbandari *mahphil*

Comilla, 1967: Abdur Rahman, the rickshaw puller, sits in the middle of the circle. A gaunt, graying man with intense, flashing eyes, he cradles a *dotara*,¹ the mandolin-like instrument that often accompanies

¹ Bengali words are spelled as in the *Bangla Academy Bengali–English dictionary* (Ali et al. 1994), following a modified standard transliteration to permit ease of pronunciation. In the case of standard Islamic terms, the Arabic form is used throughout where possible, following the spellings in Trimmingham's (1998) glossary.

performances of indigenous Bengali music. Next to him, a world-worn pushcart driver plucks his *ektara*, so called for the single string with which it emits pulsing monotones to back up a song. Others in the group, also nondescript urban labourers with rural roots, provide percussion with little more than blocks of wood which, when struck, produce sharp, resonating, rhythmic clicks, or with palm-sized brass cymbals that, clashed together by cupped hands, sound muted, muffled clinks. This rhythmic ensemble, miraculously, does not drown out Abdur Rahman's melodic lyrics as he belts out, in solo fashion, yet another in his seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of tunes, loud, clear, never missing a beat or note. '*Ami nouka, tumi majhi*', goes the refrain, 'I am the boat, you the boatman', implying, 'take me where you will'. As his voice rises in intensity, moving from moderate to rapid tempo, others in the stuffy little room respond to the music with the chanting of the name of Allah, all in mesmerising unison: 'Allah-hu, Allah-hu, Allah-hu...'. At the height of the music's intensity, some rise to sway and rock in an attempt to dance. A few teeter to a near-fall, to be caught by their fellows, themselves only slightly less enraptured, before hitting the floor. Others, including Rafiq, our host, seem to withdraw inside themselves, impervious to the near cacophony around them. I find myself being drawn irresistibly into the ecstatic atmosphere, enveloped helplessly by its sound and fury. Later, in the early morning hours of the sabbath Friday, we share a parting ritual of tea and sweets before dispersing into the oncoming dawn. Ambling along the banks of the Gumti River in the warmth of the rising sun, my friend Rafiq turns to me and smiles. 'I feel that if I am to die,' he says softly, 'let it be now.'

My attendance at these events was largely recreational, and I took no detailed notes on my observations, as popular religion was not the focus of my research at the time. But the sincere piety so displayed could not fail to impress me, and I found myself attending as often as I could, with no pretense at scholarly investigation. So self-contained did it seem that the connection of this group to a larger Sufi movement was not particularly apparent to me at first. The organiser of the weekly *mahphil* was my friend Rafiq, the manager of a local bank branch where I held an account, a genial, corpulent man whom one would not suspect of a spiritual bent of mind. Regulars included several other middle-class professionals, government administrators and an engineer. But the largest number in attendance were men from nearby villages who worked at hard, menial

jobs in the town. What seemed to draw these men together week after week was not only the lively intensity of the musical performance, but also a larger sense of genuine communion with something in themselves and in each other. Though their everyday lives would not overlap, except tangentially, and even then in markedly hierarchical settings, the ease with which they seemed to engage with one another during these *mahphils* was impressive, evoking the *communitas* to which Victor Turner (1969: 78–104) has called our attention in describing ‘antistructural’ liminality in social life.

The massiveness of this movement was brought home to me when, after many years away from it, I visited its centre on a major ritual occasion. What I witnessed and summarise below was remarkably similar to Mills’s account (1992: 214–36) of the *Atroshi urs* (a Persian word denoting a commemoration of the death anniversary of a saint; in Bengali: *uras*, *oras*). Such large-scale events truly dramatise the widespread appeal of the *Maijbhandari* movement.

A national commemoration event

Maijbhandar, October 1999: I join thousands of people gathered a dozen kilometres north of the city of Chittagong for the annual *khosroj sharif* (birthday commemoration) of Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Golamur Rahman, who lived from 1865 to 1937. More popularly known as Baba Bhandari among those who revere his memory, Golamur Rahman is one of five holy men whose lives and teachings form the dynastic and spiritual core of the *Maijbhandari tariqa*. During this three-day event, I daresay all of those present in *Maijbhandar* will visit one, more likely several, if not many, of the forty or so shrines, ranging from simple graves to more elaborate tombs and mausolea, that have cropped up ever since the village began to acquire prominence as the spiritual centre of the *Maijbhandari tariqa* over a century ago.

The five-story pucca guest house where I am staying is packed, with people camping on its roof and in its corridors. Every available open space has been commandeered to accommodate the crowds. Temporary awnings on bamboo poles have been set up both in the centre and at the periphery of the shrine complex, and these are fully occupied by masses of people, mostly villagers from the look of them. Whole families have literally bivouacked for the duration, including men, women and children of all ages. A huge canteen-style restaurant

has been erected in tent-fashion in order to provide cheap food and drink to the visitors who would otherwise be subjected to extortionate prices by the many other shops and restaurants in the locality.

All day and late into the night, the narrow streets are crammed with people, and moving efficiently is impossible. There is a constant milling in and out of all of the various shrines as people approach the graves of the saints to engage in various forms of adoration and supplication. Musical performances, song and dance, in the groups densely scattered around the holy site, start spontaneously every afternoon and continue late into the night. In a similarly sporadic yet never-ending fashion, beribboned and tasselled water buffaloes are paraded through the narrow, crowded streets by the members of groups donating the animals. They are often accompanied by a marching brass band whose blaring induces some in the assembled throng to attempt ecstatic dance. The lumbering, patient beasts are led from shrine to shrine, to be offered to and receive the blessings of each of the *pirs* the group wishes to propitiate, and finally to a makeshift corral at the edge of the shrine complex where they will await slaughter. There the animals find respite from their long march before providing *tabarruk* (Bengali: *tabarrak*), blessed food, for the thousands present at the culminating ceremony.

The formal commemoration of Golamur Rahman takes place at around 1 A.M. Throngs of devotees, mostly men in white traditional (*kurta-pajama*) dress and wearing conventional Muslim skull caps (*tupi*), fill the courtyard in front of the main administration building (*manjil*). No doubt in the muddy tent shelters at its periphery the hosts of villagers are in rapt attention as well. Some two dozen young *murids* (initiates or disciples) are crowded onto the *manjil's* porch, in front of the anteroom. There, in a niche-like spot designated as a *mihrab* (and thus denoting the *qibla* or direction of Mecca), seated on a mat (his *tom* or 'throne') next to the *khat* (cot) where the founder of the Maijbhandari *tariqa* is said to have sat and meditated, the current reigning *pir* greets visitors and, on this night, sanctifies the ceremony which, however, he does not conduct. It is simple enough: a *maulana* (learned cleric) leads the assembled masses in performance of *milad*, the chanting of the names of saints, and a longish *dhikr* (Bengali: *jikir*), the repetitive, rapid-fire utterance of the *kalimah* (declaration of faith) and the name of Allah. At its end, those nearest to the *pir* rush forward to touch his feet, kiss the *tom* and receive his blessing.

He responds efficiently with a quick caress of the shoulders of all who reach him, doing so patiently for all those who desire his blessing and have come before him. At the very end, two young would-be initiates come before the *pir*, seeking his permission to become his disciples. After a few quick questions he dismisses one; not sincere enough, it seems. The other he accepts, exhorting the youth to be ever faithful to the *shari'a* and, reminding him how the *dhikr* is to be done, enjoins upon him its vigorous daily performance.² By now, the *khosroj sharif* having ended, the crowds are beginning to disperse, having taken their *tabbaruk* of buffalo meat. The next morning, the momentary emptiness of the courtyard, the silence of the open fields and the paucity of devotees at the shrines will seem eerie and anticlimactic—until, of course, the next commemoration in a few months' time.

II

The major figures, their shrines and their contested silsila

There is no way of knowing how many Bangladeshis call themselves followers of the Maijbhandari *pirs* and participate in one or more of the Maijbhandari brotherhood's activities. The movement certainly has a very wide following in southern Bangladesh, where accounts of Sufi saints' activities go back half-a-dozen centuries, especially in Chittagong (Ellickson 2004; Haq 1975). My observations in Maijbhandar convince me that the movement has a huge rural following, and I met several dignified yet humbly sincere believers who were introduced as leaders of Maijbhandari groups in their villages. But this is not a cultic congregation of unwashed ruralites. Its past and current leaders were and are well-educated men, and both in Maijbhandar itself as well as in Dhaka one meets Maijbhandaris who are accomplished professionals and successful businessmen. This should not be surprising. The Maijbhandaris draw their members from the same mass following across all lines of social class.

Adepts of the Maijbhandari *tariqa* consider its founder, Gausulazam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah (1826–1906), to be descended directly from followers of the line of the Sufi saint Abdul Qader Jilani (1077–1127)

² On the *pir-murid* relationship and the place of *dhikr* therein, see the lucid and informative essay by Mohammad Ajmal (1989). Mills (1992: 145–48) describes a similar initiation at Atroshi.

and thus, of course, of the Qadiriya Order of Sufism associated with Abdul Qader. Qadiri holy men, they believe, were sent as *imams* or *qadis* to Delhi and from there to the city of Gaur, in its heyday the capital of Bengal. One of these emissaries is said to have migrated to Chittagong in 1575 and, several generations later, a scion of his ensconced himself in the village of Maijbhandar. Gausulazam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah was the latter's descendant.³ After education in local schools and *madrasas*, Ahmad Ullah received higher Islamic learning in the Calcutta Auliya Madrassa, after which he served for a time as a *qadi* in Jessore, then returned to Calcutta where he taught for several years in another major Islamic school. During this period he came into spiritual contact with and took *bai'a* (Bengali: *bayet*), the disciple's oath of allegiance, to a north Indian saint who was visiting Calcutta. It was this saint from whom he would ultimately receive the Qadiriya spiritual mantle; this was in addition to the familial association with the order he had acquired by birth. Returning to his home village of Maijbhandar, Ahmad Ullah began a life of preaching, the performance of miracles and the establishment of what would become the Maijbhandari *tariqa*, or 'brotherhood', a genuinely indigenous Sufi-inspired movement in eastern Bengal (Bhuiya 1994; Jahangir 1999: 59–88).

The Maijbhandar holy shrine complex (*darbar sharif*, the 'saintly court' at which the *pirs* hold sway) today encompasses an area of approximately 6 square kilometers (Jahangir 1999: 53). Although this once-undistinguished farming village is now the site of some forty shrines of real, imagined or concocted saints, only the sacred mausolea (*raoja sharif*) of the four commonly recognised Maijbhandari *pirs* are considered legitimate holy places by the founder Ahmad Ullah's descendants and their followers. Next to three of the mausolea are located the buildings which house the residential quarters and administrative organisations (*manjil*) associated with three of the *pirs*; and the management of the large, complex spiritual, social and financial enterprises that have grown up around the Maijbhandari movement.

The mausolea in which the physical remains and memories of these four men are enshrined constitute par excellence the material objects—the 'hardware', as Mills (1998: 32) puts it—that 'extend [their] physical

³ Hagiographic accounts are offered by Rasul 1994 (pp. 38–42) and Bhuiya 1994. See also Jahangir 1999 (pp. 31–45).

presence' and 'provide the solid matter for the construction of [their] sanctity'. These shrines display considerable variation in form.⁴ The central mausoleum is that of Maijbhandari founder Ahmad Ullah, who first enunciated the movement's basic doctrines and laid out its ritual forms. His resting place is (or was, at the time of my visit) a white-walled, blue-fringed mosque-like structure that strikes one as particularly ornate. The second of the Maijbhandari *pirs*, at least chronologically, Golamur Rahman (1865–1937), was the nephew of Ahmad Ullah and recognized by his uncle as 'the rose of my garden' (Rasul 1994: 44). Perhaps the most retiring of the *pirs*, Golamur Rahman is said from childhood onward to have possessed remarkable spiritual gifts. He lived a life devoid of 'sorrows, desires, worldly attachments and unrestrained passions, ... tutored by Allah himself', thereby accomplishing *fana* (union with the divine) at its end (ibid.: 45). Perhaps befitting a life of such simplicity, yet of towering achievement, his mausoleum is more imposing than that of Ahmad Ullah, and less externally decorative, its white walls subdued by its large, auspiciously-coloured green dome. Both these shrines otherwise reflect, at least to the untutored eye, standard mosque architecture, with their domes, arched entryways and windows, and multiple minarets.

In contrast, the smallest and simplest of the shrines is that of Delwar Hossain (1893–1982), Ahmad Ullah's grandson and chronologically the third of the Maijbhandari *pirs*. By all accounts the most austere of them, Delwar Hossain, with the passing of Ahmad Ullah, acceded to both spiritual and temporal leadership of the *tariqa* and held it until his death in 1982. Perhaps also the most 'intellectual' of the Maijbhandari *pirs*, he is remembered for his scholarly bent and known especially for his written works developing Ahmad Ullah's ideas and expounding the movement's theosophy, or the 'Maijbhandari School of Thought', as it is regularly called. The external modesty of his shrine perhaps reflects his disdain for the material world and is thus in keeping with his conduct in life. But its interior is uniquely remarkable. In the other shrines, the canopied tombs of the saints, though centrally positioned, are removed from immediate public proximity by glass barriers and must be venerated from a respectful distance. In the small inner sanctum of the Delwar Hossain

⁴ As of this writing, photographs of the mausolea of the four major Maijbhandari *pirs* may be seen at the movement's website: www.sufimaizbhandar.org. That of Ahmad Ullah, reconstructed since the research for this paper was done, is shown on the site; the others shown are as described in the text.

shrine, however, the raised graves of the saint and his wife, placed side by side, lie exposed and unprotected, and devotees can kneel directly in front and on two sides. The graves, backed by a white wall on which excerpts from the saint's writings are displayed in Bangla for the edification of the worshipfully assembled, lie under no canopy. Rather, both are topped with live green grass, lovingly tended to ensure perpetual renewal. This is because, according to a commonly offered account, Delwar Hossain instructed his followers that they should not 'make *raoja* [mausoleum] with *minar* [turret] on my grave. Bury me 'neath the green grass of nature;' it is quoted here from a rendition by the hagiographer Rasul (1994: 48). 'He was buried accordingly', Rasul goes on to state, surely more with ambiguity than with intended irony, '[and] no Pucca Raoja [*sic*] was made on his grave' (ibid.). Thus, the saint's wishes were followed, in letter if not wholly in spirit. There is no towering dome, no canopy, and just two turrets at the entry. But his devotees also have what they seek by way of his palpable presence at a holy site, as they kneel before the gray marble graves, shrouded by green grass and representing, as one Maijbhandari devotee put it to me, a continuation of the saint's spirit and of life itself.

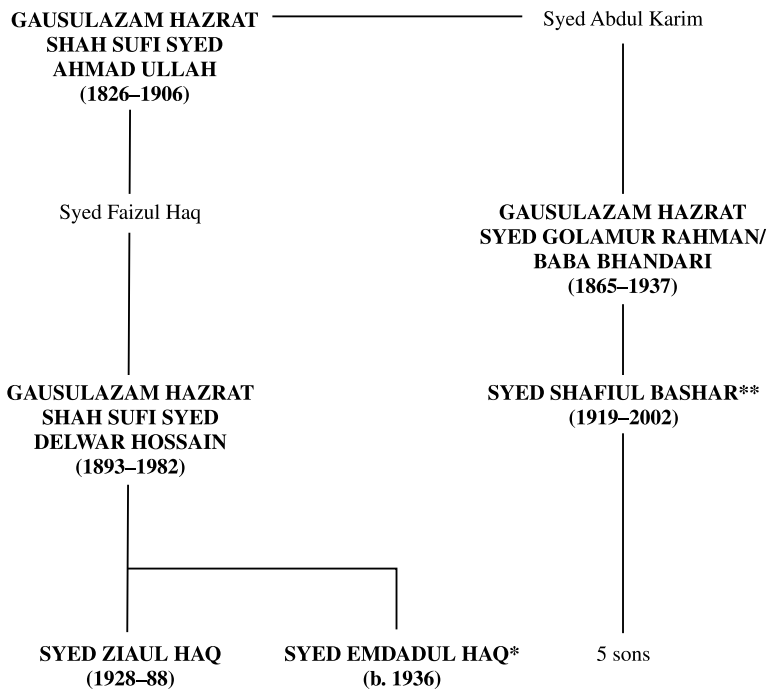
Delwar Hossain had five sons, the eldest of whom, Ziaul Haq (1928–88), was an ecstatic charismat, reverentially known by his often quite fervent followers for the performance of miracles (*keramat*). Many of these followers are still alive and have given both written (e.g., Rasul 1994 and Islam 1992) and oral testimony to Ziaul Haq's spiritual accomplishments. If Delwar Hossain's grave is arresting in its unique simplicity, Ziaul Haq's is the most spectacular of Maijbhandar's *raoja sharif*. Among the tallest of the shrines at Maijbhandar, it is the least conventionally Islamic in architectural style, and distinctively modern in design. Its white, gracefully curved single lotus-shaped dome stretches into the sky with an élan that evokes the forceful impact of Ziaul Haq's personality. The lotus motif draws, of course, upon a symbol of great historicity, shared by many faith traditions, and thus serves to emphasise Maijbhandari eclecticism. Next only, perhaps, to the shrine of Ahmad Ullah, that of Ziaul Haq is the most often reproduced in photographs of the Maijbhandar complex. Its designer was Alamgir Kabir, a prominent Bangladeshi architect who, as it happened, died not long after completion of the shrine. The event of his passing is regarded by some followers of Ziaul Haq as a *keramat*, miraculous, in that the architect's demise would prevent him from exceeding what they consider his greatest masterpiece, embodying the power and spirit of their beloved *pir*.

The mausolea in which the tombs and memories of these four men are enshrined provide ample evidence that each in his own way is regarded by a significant body of followers as a genuine saint. Although living *pirs* generate their own appeal on the basis of their individual discourses, demeanour and deeds, they depend also on retaining the charisma of their forbears. Thus, who is bequeathed the mantle of spiritual authority can be a matter of contestation. Among the Maijbhandaris there are at least two major rival lines of spiritual authority (or *silsilas*), the Ahmadiya (Ahmad Ullah's direct descendants) and the Rahmaniya (descendants of Golamur Rahman), and these *silsilas* run the main (and rival) administrative organisations (*manjil*) of the movement (see Figure 1). Followers of both *silsilas* reverently acknowledge the founding role of Gausulazam Ahmad Ullah himself, but the question of who legitimately should wear the mantle of leadership bequeathed by him depends upon acceptance of one or the other of the following two accounts. One group argues that Ahmad Ullah turned to his grandson, Delwar Hossain, to carry on both spiritual and temporal leadership of the *tariqa*. As noted above, this Delwar Hossain died in 1982. His eldest son, the ecstatic Ziaul Haq, showed no interest, according to his followers, in exercising *tariqat* or the formal management of the *tariqa*. Instead, he actively encouraged passage of the mantle of leadership in 1982 to his brother, Emdadul Haq (the third son of Delwar Hossain), who is the current *sajjadanashin* (temporal head) of the Ahmadiya Manjil. However, followers of Ziaul Haq tend to look to his son, Mohammed Hasan, for authority and leadership of their particular emerging sub-branch of Maijbhandaris. The other major line stems from Golamur Rahman, the nephew of Ahmad Ullah, whose followers believe that he inherited the spiritual authority from Ahmad Ullah and, in turn, passed it on to his fourth son, Shafiul Bashar (1919–2002). The recently deceased Shafiul Bashar was also *sajjadanashin* or head of the Rahmaniya Manjil; his family has been energetic in propagating the saintly charisma of the Rahmaniya line throughout the country, and one or more of his sons may emerge as his successor(s). Other relatives of Shafiul Bashar are also said to be *pirs* with significant followings.

Emdadul Haq is the supreme head (*sajjadanashin*) of the Ahmadiya Manjil, and with his remaining three brothers directs the *anjuman* ('central committee') of the organisation. It is worth noting that Emdadul Haq worked for twenty years as a bank official before acceding to the spiritual leadership of the order. His younger brother, Didarul Haq, is a medical doctor who for years has served as a consultant to a major international

pharmaceutical firm; Shahidul Haq, the youngest, has an MA in Bengali. In the forthcoming generation of Ahmadiya Manjil leaders, that is, the sons of Ziaul Haq and Emdadul Haq, one holds a Master's degree and, the other is an MA candidate. The same is true of what I could learn of the Rahmaniya Manjil: among the sons of Shafiul Bashar are to be found sophisticated businessmen and one former Member of Parliament. Thus, in addition to the spiritual authority and charisma they have inherited, the Majibhandari *pirs* and those immediately assisting them bring a high measure of formal, non-religious education to the leadership task in both the main branches, as well as considerable secular, worldly (including bureaucratic and political) experience.

Figure 1
Majibhandari Tariqa Silsila: Simplified Sketch



Source: Genealogical Data Adapted from Jahangir 1999 (p. 140) and Islam n.d.

Notes: Bold capitals indicate *pirs* with substantial followings. *Current *sajjadanashin* of the Gausiya Ahmadiya Manjil. ***Sajjadanashin* of the Gausiya Rahmaniya Manjil until his recent death.

And there is much for them to administer. The opulent shrines need constant maintenance, there is a profitable store associated with the operation of the Ahmadiya Manjil itself, and the Maijbandari operation puts out publications and audiocassettes for its followers and potential recruits. The logistics of managing the nine or more commemorative events held annually and attended by thousands of people require tremendous organisational effort. Needless to say, the financial resources involved in all of this must be immense, although this is not an aspect of the movement that I tried to investigate in any detail. Judging from the open flow of cash at the event I witnessed and the income sources alluded to above, the Maijbandari enterprise would appear to have a huge financial dimension. Indeed, this seems to be true of all the large-scale *mazar* operations in Bangladesh that I had occasion to visit and observe.

III

Ritual practices and hints of the Maijbandari past

The founders of the Maijbandari *tariqa* developed a fairly elaborate ‘Seven Step’ (*sapta paddhati*) methodology for the attainment of their view of spiritual perfection, and every basic written description of it that I have seen alludes to this doctrine reverently as the ‘Maijbandari School of Thought’ (see, for example, Islam 1992: 58–62; Jahangir 1999: 46–48; Rasul 1994: 42–43), describing it as a unique contribution to the world’s body of spiritual knowledge. In the Maijbandari system, the devotees are to focus first on three stages in which the distractions of everyday existence are diminished in impact and their capacity to impede spiritual development is ‘absorbed’ or ‘dissolved’—as implied in the Arabic term for these stages, *fana* (Bengali: *phana*). In the first stage, one concentrates on self-discipline and development of spiritual awareness (*phana anil khalak*). From this stage, devotees proceed to a second (*phana anil haoya*), in which release is sought from ordinary activities which fruitlessly consume them, so that they may move on to the third stage (*phana anil erada*) in which gradual surrender to the will of Allah becomes possible as a goal. Once the disciplines at each of these stages are mastered, devotees move to the last four stages, in which the temptations which ensnare the soul are ‘put to death’, as it were. At the fourth stage one seeks the ‘white death’ (*moute abayaj/shada mritu*) of the appetites through self-control, involving fasting and the moderation of consumption in general. In the fifth stage, the ‘black death’ (*moute achhaoyad/kalo mritu*) of defensiveness and vindictiveness in human relations, of rage

and vengeful feelings, is courted by the willingness to engage in dialogue and accept constructive criticism of one's actions by others; and in the sixth, the stage of 'red death' (*moute ahmarlilal mritu*), one strives to conquer decisively the powerful impulses of greed and lust. Devotees who have reached this point move finally to the seventh stage of the 'green death' (*moute akhjar/shobuj mritu*), at which, thanks to the mastery of all the prior steps, their lives are simplified and their minds prepared to contemplate and receive the presence and love of Allah.

The Maijbhandari Seven Step programme would appear to correspond broadly with traditional, well-known Sufi mystical and theosophical notions (c.f. Schimmel 1975: 98–186; Trimmingham 1998: 133–65), and in that regard it seems unexceptional. But, while genuine *pirs*, including no doubt the *sajjadanashins* themselves, may indeed have attained the self-mastery that the system aims at, no ordinary Maijbhandari enthusiast I have gotten to know at all well claims to have submitted to the rigorous physical, ethical and spiritual discipline that the Seven Steps would appear to require. Indeed, I doubt that the masses of people to whom the *tariqa* appeals are drawn to such rigours and austerities. A number of other attributes and activities are the more likely factors accounting for the movement's wide attraction.

The Maijbhandaris are proud of what they see as their ritual eclecticism. Although claiming a lineal link to the Qadiriya Order, founder Ahmad Ullah is said to have drawn liberally from the ritual practices of other orders in order to attract followers. According to Selim Jahangir (1999: 46–49), indeed, the Maijbhandari *tariqa* reflects a melding of several of the Sufi orders that have been historically prominent in India—notably the Qadiriya and Chistiya Orders—in order to create a new, distinctly Bengali *tariqa* which would mesh well with indigenous Bengali religious traditions.

From the Chistis in particular, it is claimed, Ahmad Ullah drew the practice of permitting musical performance as a mode of worship. And, indeed, Bruce Lawrence (1983: 73–74) confirms that, in India, *sama*, the use of musical performance, 'assumed a unique significance as the integrating modus operandi of the Chisti silsilah' from Delhi Sultanate times on through the Mughal era, with the Chistis insisting that *sama* was 'an essential component of spiritual discipline ... incumbent on all Sufis'. The Chisti commentators whom Lawrence cites were aware that music could lead the spiritual novice down the path of sensual pleasure, and thus astray. But as a group they accepted the utility of *sama* in inducing in the Sufi adept an incipient ecstatic state (*tawajud*), possibly in

sustaining higher levels of ecstasy (*wajd*) and even, some argued, in reaching the final stage of ‘finding [oneself in God]’ (ibid.: 79; see also Qureshi 1995 and Schimmel 1975: 178–86; for an Egyptian example, Waugh 1989).

As noted above, musical performance is often the centrepiece of local Maijbandari *mahphils* and constitutes a major factor in the movement’s appeal. In Maijbandari performances, spontaneous and extended out-pourings of song are accompanied by indigenous instruments, notably the *dotara* or *ektara* when available and typically with the percussive thumping of the *dhol*. But the absence of these acoustic aids is no impediment to the highly rhythmic and melodic vocal enthusiasm which can make the performances emotionally infectious and lead some of those present to meditative withdrawal or near-ecstatic states. In the first century after its inception, the Maijbandari movement is said to have produced hundreds of published songs, representing to the ears of the initiated a distinctive lyrical tradition (the ‘*maijbandari gan*’) within the genre of indigenous Bengali religious music as a whole (see Jahangir 1999: 179–212). The large Maijbandari musical repertoire is available on audiocassette and can be readily purchased in major urban centres.

Maijbandari music may not correspond to *sama* in the classical sense, however, as the latter has a formality, formulaic procedure and exclusiveness of audience and/or participation that is rarely, if ever, present in Maijbandari *mahphils*. Some Maijbandari performances reflect possible kinship in setting, rhythm, tone and style with *qawwali*, the standard, and quite elaborate, Sufi *sama* tradition of north India and Pakistan. According to Qureshi (1995: 59), the sole function of *qawwali* in both theory and practice is ‘the presentation of musical poetry in order to arouse mystical emotion in an assembly of listeners with spiritual needs that are both diverse and changing’. But Qureshi’s detailed and comprehensive study suggests that the degree of formality of performance structure and accompanying socio-religious hierarchy in the ‘*qawwali* occasion’ contrasts markedly with the spontaneous enthusiasm and egalitarian participation one typically observes in Maijbandari musical assemblies.

Moreover, the melodies and rhythms of *maijbandari gan* appeal to broad popular tastes and their lyrics appear to give voice to spiritual concerns in ways that ordinary people can understand. As made clear by Hans Harder’s (2000) discussion of the songs of Abdul Gafur Hali (‘Mad Gafur’), one of the best-known Maijbandari composers, the lyrics of Maijbandari songs evoke many of the core beliefs and much of the

theosophical outlook of the movement, as well as its challenge to more conventional forms of Islam. In the songs, Maijbandar and its *tariqa* are seen as the meeting place of Prophet and *pirs*; all religious distinctions dissolve; the lover and the beloved can be united. The metaphor of the boat journey is used for the spiritual quest. Harder also underlines unmistakable associations between the Maijbandari musical tradition and other well-known indigenous Bengali musical genres, such as *baul*, *bhatiali* and the like. Bengali Hindu religious traditions also stress musical performance, and the fact that Romesh Sil, a Hindu, is considered to be among the greatest of Maijbandari composers is constantly mentioned by Maijbandaris who wish to emphasise the ecumenism and liberality of their *tariqa*.

Music aside, other kinds of standard ritual performance that Maijbandaris share with Arab, Persian and Indic Sufi traditions are the *milad mahphil* and the *dhikr*. The *dhikr* is ‘the most crucial ritual’ in the Sufi tradition (Waugh 1989: 6). In it, one ‘remembers’ Allah through the formulaic repetition of His name for extended periods of time.⁵ The purpose of *dhikr* is to produce concentration on the godhead and the corresponding diminishment of self required to enhance the worshipper’s spiritual awareness. This can lead, with the right discipline, to mystical union with the divine (that is, *fana*; for a finely nuanced discussion of *dhikr* see Waugh 1989: 6–18). As I have witnessed it in Bangladesh, the performance of *dhikr* typically involves a slow cadence of ‘*Allah-hu*’ which gradually intensifies in speed at the same time as the verbalisation diminishes to an increasingly rapid utterance, simply, of the sacred sound, ‘*hu, hu, hu...*’ (or ‘He, He, He’; i.e., ‘He is Allah, the One and Only’). In small groups that I have observed, many of those present can, via this method, seemingly attain a mildly meditative state of awareness. Indeed, the genius of *dhikr* in raising spiritual awareness would seem to lie in the ease with which anyone can engage in it and the potentially hypnotic effect it can have in human groups when collectively performed. In massive gatherings, such as that of the thousands present at the culmination ceremony of Golamur Rahman’s *khosroj sharif* where the *dhikr* was performed, this effect on individuals is less likely to be seen. But the power of collective performance, uniting individuals with their fellows in forceful, mesmerisingly repetitive, religious utterance, must be one of

⁵ So great is the efficacy of *dhikr* that in some sects, for instance the Zikri Baluch of southwestern Pakistan studied by Pastner (1978: 235n), ‘a compendium of chants’ has replaced the Qur’an as the holy book and provides the basis for the group’s central ritual.

the appeals of *dhikr* to those seeking some kind of spiritual solace and at least temporary forgetfulness of self. *Dhikr* is often preceded by a *milad mahphil*, in which a group of worshippers repetitively chant the names and praises of the relevant saint, together with the first line of the *kalimah* or statement of faith (*la ilaha il-Allah*). This ritual act can be performed alone and often is at some shrines I have visited, or as a preparatory activity to the *dhikr* itself (on *milad*, see also Mills 1992: 233–34).

A common feature of Muslim saint-veneration in Bangladesh, readily seen at any shrine, is the offering of a gift (*hadiya*) to the *pir*, and, in hoped-for receipt of the *pir*'s blessing, or *tabarruk*, thereby to partake of the *pir*'s power (see Trimmingham 1998: 311ff). Gifts to *pirs* may be given in many forms, one of which is any ritually acceptable (*halal*) food product. The costlier it is, and the larger the quantity provided, presumably the greater the satisfaction of the *pir* and both the spiritual and social standing of the giver. Many regard provision of food for the feasts at the great commemorative events, such as the *urs* and *khosroj sharif* (death and birth commemorations) as especially meritorious, and such was obviously the case at the *khosroj sharif* of Golamur Rahman that I observed.⁶

Some Maijbhandaris consider the offering of water buffaloes to be another of Ahmad Ullah's innovations, and indeed, it may be unique to Maijbhandar. Mills' (1992: 214–36) extended description of the Atroshi *urs*, for example, which mirrors my observation at Maijbhandar in many respects, mentions cows and some camels, but not buffaloes, among the animals offered to the *pir*. One can only speculate about the reasons for Maijbhandari distinctiveness in this regard. One reason commonly offered by Maijbhandaris is that Ahmad Ullah recognised the false and potentially corrupting relationship between the costliness of the food prestation and the supposed spiritual benefits it was expected to confer. Thus, he discouraged the temptation of his largely poor peasant followers to offer prohibitively expensive beef cattle on such occasions. Rather, he urged those inclined to provide a large food animal as a gift to the *pir* to substitute a water buffalo (*mahish*) instead. Of course, the economy of such a substitution is obvious, insofar as water buffaloes provide far more meat per animal than do other, more costly, cattle offerings, but buffaloes are not inexpensive gifts. On the eve of the final ceremony of the *khosroj sharif* of Golamur Rahman, I visited the corral where the animals whose

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of *tabarruk*, see Kurin 1983; Mills (1992: 226–31) discusses similar exchanges at the Atroshi *urs*.

parade I have described were kept prior to slaughter. I was told that thirty-nine buffaloes had by then been assembled; they struck me as magnificent, healthy specimens, worth on average the equivalent of US\$250 (at the time of research, nearly two-thirds of the per capita income in Bangladesh). By the time of the culminating ceremony, I estimate that some fifty buffaloes had been slaughtered, skinned, butchered, and their flesh diced into edible morsels, in a highly efficient processing operation involving a large number of volunteers, to make curried buffalo meat to feed the massive crowd of worshippers and leave each with *tabarruk* to take home.

Matters of 'spiritual economy' aside, the sacrificial centrality of the water buffalo in Maijbhandari commemorative ritual calls to mind its similar, and clearly much older, role in Hindu cults of the goddess, which Madeleine Biardeau (1984) has illuminatingly discussed. Celebration of the victory of the goddess in the form of Durga as *devi-mahishasuramardini*, slayer of the buffalo demon, is the culmination of the annual Navratri rite cycle witnessed in many parts of India, in Bengal no less spectacularly than anywhere else. Buffalo sacrifice symbolised the goddess' victory over Mahishasura, the buffalo demon, and thus, of course, of good over evil. As Biardeau says (1984: 1), at the village level 'it seem[ed] to be the only [ritual] which [brought] together the whole village'. With respect to that unifying function, I note that the collective consumption of *tabarruk* from the sacrifice of the water buffaloes at the culminating ceremony of the *khosroj sharif* of Golamur Rahman was the only activity that all those present were united in performing.

It is, of course, tempting to regard Maijbhandari water buffalo sacrifice as a crude appropriation of the practice from Hindu goddess veneration. And, indeed, insofar as medieval indigenous East Bengali religion appears to have been an amalgam of spiritual beliefs and practices that we tend today to essentialise and differentiate as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' in content, such a conjecture might well be justified (see Roy 1983 and Haq 1975: 317–67). However, there are specifically 'Sufi' rationales for the practice. One such has been offered by my colleague Professor Manzurul Mannan, who has a long and intimate familiarity with Maijbhandar and who suggests that, for Maijbhandari adepts, the sacrifice of the water buffalo symbolises the taming of 'wildness'. The black-coloured beast, he argues, is associated with the fifth step of the Maijbhandari Seven Step methodology of spiritual salvation, discussed above—that of *kalo mritu*, the

‘black death’, at which stage the devotee (*murid*) moves toward self-purification by submitting to the severest criticism by others. The subjection of the self to criticism aids in self-correction, and helps devotees to emerge from their sinful states and learn to avoid re-entry into that abyss. It enables spiritual empowerment and thus prepares devotees to approach Allah. If this line of analysis is valid, it is easy to see how the literal sacrifice of the powerful buffalo in Maijbhandari ritual enacts the *murids*’ taming and conquest of the ‘black beast’ within themselves and prepares them to move toward the divine presence. The sacrifice also ‘conveys thanks to the Creator for saving the Sufi from possible faults’ (Manzurul Mannan, personal communication, 25 December 2001).

Water buffalo sacrifice may also derive from the agrarian roots of rural Bengali Islam that Richard Eaton (1994) has documented so well. Eaton links Islamic religious institutionalisation with the gradual transformation of the once heavily forested land of Bengal into fertile farms, led by peasant entrepreneurs, among whom *mullahs* and *pirs* actively propagated both paddy fields and piety throughout the countryside. Eaton ends his account, however, at 1760, nearly a century before the origin of the Maijbhandari movement in the mid-1800s, and so it cannot directly help us in tracing the origins of this quite modern movement.

Eaton’s book contains, nonetheless, tantalising mention of a Hindu landlord’s grant, in 1705, of ‘17.5 acres of jungle land for the construction and support of a village mosque’ in Fatikchari Thana, where the village of Maijbhandar is located (Eaton 1994: 252). This fact by itself does not justify the conclusion that Maijbhandar itself was a place of prominence by the time of Ahmad Ullah’s birth. But the Perso-Bangla name of the place—‘middle camp’ or ‘central storehouse’, to offer a couple of rough glosses—suggests that it may have had greater administrative or trade-related importance than an ordinary village. Thus, Maijbhandar might have been a local centre of commerce and government some time before it became, for the devotees of its most exalted son, the ‘heart of God’s dwelling among men’ (Harder 2000: 4). One can think of less likely places from which a local saint might arise to found a spiritual movement and shrine complex which would one day draw thousands to its annual cycle of celebrations and remembrances.

But more germane may be Eaton’s follow-up account of ‘the rooting of Islam in Bengal’ in the final stage of the conversion process (Eaton 1994: 268–303). He argues that the hegemonic ‘displacement of [earlier]

Bengali superhuman agencies from the local cosmology and their replacement by Islamic ones' was accomplished during the 19th century, 'when waves of Islamic reform movements ... swept over the Bengali countryside' (ibid.: 281–82). In this he affirms the well-established view that Muslim revivalism was one of the main driving forces behind the consolidation of Islam in modern East Bengal. Noting that the Maijbhandari movement dates from the 1850s at its earliest, when Ahmad Ullah returned to his home village and began his preaching and performance of miracles, we might ask how a Sufi movement could establish itself and thrive during a period of 'waves of Islamic reform movements' of precisely the sort most inimical toward Sufi ideas and practices.

In seeking an answer to this question, one can readily imagine that Sufi shrines like that of Maijbhandar played an important role in consolidating along Muslim lines the spiritual loyalties of East Bengali peasants whose religious practice had already long been an amalgam of magico-mystical elements drawn from Sufism and Vaishnavism (see Roy 1983). In a more recent work, Eaton (2001) extends his argument to suggest that a *pir-mazar* (saint-and-shrine) Islamic ideology tied to the virtues of farming⁷ may have been pivotal in weaning large numbers of low-caste Hindu—or, we might say, 'proto-Hindu'—cultivators to the Muslim fold all along the Bengal frontier; rather in the same manner, as Eaton (1989) has earlier shown, as the Punjabi shrine of Baba Farid drew Hindu Jats to the Muslim fold. The role of *pirs* in the process of Islamisation has been given similar emphasis by Asim Roy (1996: 104), who states: 'Pirification [*sic*] seems to provide the most significant clue to the process of Islamisation of the Bengal masses, as well as the only connecting thread linking Islam and the vast masses of rural converts.'

I suggest that Maijbhandari founder Ahmad Ullah may be seen as one of these '*pir* mediators'. His eclectic spiritual message, and the musico-poetic form in which it so often came, seem likely to have secured him a following among peasants who were 'Muslims' and 'Hindus' in a purely nominal sense at best. Moreover, the message's appeal to rural people might well have been reinforced by the enshrinement of the water buffalo as a major sacrificial animal. This placid, humble bovine is, of course, the premier draught animal of the Bengal peasantry. It is occasionally celebrated by elites as a symbol of the Bengali nation. In art, for instance,

⁷ I join Eaton in relying on John Thorp's (1978) account of Bengali Muslim peasant ideation in which the Prophet Adam is modeled as 'the First Farmer', and the ideal Muslim is a landowner and master cultivator.

a famous work by the revered Bangladeshi painter Zainal Abedin shows a farmer and his buffalo joined together in a monumental struggle against the forces of nature. In literature, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's famous story, *Mahish*, makes the buffalo of the title emblematic of sacrifice and love. Thus a link is forged between the Maijbhandari *tariqa*, the agrarian past in which the seeds of Bengali Islam were sown, and the modern nation of Bangladesh, whose mythic projections evoke dreamy, expansive landscapes of green and gold.

IV

Maijbhandaris in the city

While the Maijbhandari *tariqa*'s central shrine is in rural Chittagong, and its network extends across southern Bangladesh, the movement also has some representation in more northerly urban areas, including Dhaka. Major personalities in the Rahmaniya group reside in the nation's capital, and an outreach location in the name of its then-reigning *pir*, Syed Shafiul Bashar, was in evidence next to a popular shrine in the Mirpur area of Dhaka that I frequented in 1999. The Rahmaniya group maintains a Dhaka centre where *dhikr/mahphil* performances are held on Thursday nights and which the current Rahmaniya *pir*, Syed Emdadul Haq, visits twice yearly to take the *bai'a* of new *murids*. And followers of Ziaul Haq, many of them businessmen, established themselves as a group in Dhaka in the early 1990s, not long after his death. The group does not meet regularly, but its members try to arrange a 'seminar' once a year at which spiritual themes of interest are addressed. On occasion they also hold commemorative gatherings at which, once again, the rituals of *dhikr* performance followed by musical celebration are in evidence. These *mahphils*, while sporadic and a bit more formal in set-up, replicate the modes of worship and celebration characteristic of other Maijbhandari gatherings that I have attended.

A commemoration of Ziaul Haq

Dhaka 1999, the High Court shrine. October 31, the final day of the *urs* of the saint Sharifuddin Chisti. The large field on the east side of the High Court compound has been transformed into a sea of awnings, divided into perhaps three or four dozen stalls, rented by the many groups participating in the *urs*. Several rows of tables, tea stalls and

other refreshment facilities clutter the area, as do mobile ice cream and other snack vendors.

At the *urs* of a major holy man, many of the groups gathered for the commemoration ceremony come additionally to remember their own *pir*, who may have no connection with the saint whose *mazar* hosts the event. Thus, the holy aura of the latter exerts a kind of spiritual multiplier effect, permitting amplification of voices celebrating other *pirs*, local, regional or even ‘national’ as the case may be. Indeed, I have come not to witness the commemorative rites for Sharifuddin Chisti, but rather to join a group of devotees (*bhaktas*) of Ziaul Haq, whose followers are scattered far beyond his lotus-domed *mazar* in Maijbhandar. One of this group’s leaders, a businessman (here simply called Ahmad), has generously invited me to join their celebration. Ahmad is a small man with a neat, short beard; balding, he allows the gray of his thinning hair to show. His friendly smile is genuinely welcoming, but throughout the evening his face will occasionally betray worry and care. It turns out that Ahmad has shouldered the larger share of the burden in arranging this event, including most of the considerable expense that it will entail. But so great is his love of Ziaul Haq that the cost of this conclave is no trouble.

He first encountered the saint in 1981, he says, at a time of great personal and financial distress—he does not go into details—and became an instant *bhakta* of this luminous personality. Ziaul Haq, he says, ‘solved’ his problems, and Ahmad has been faithful in his devotion to the *pir* ever since.

By around 9.30 P.M., a fairly large group of men—only two or three adult women, Ahmad’s relations, will be present as part of the group throughout the evening—has begun to congregate in the stall. A banner proclaiming this spot to be for devotees of Ziaul Haq has been draped at the rear, and these people, many middle-class professionals among them, have all come to affirm their spiritual allegiance to the holy man. Ahmad is seated at the centre of the gathering in front of an *ashan*, a rectangular, box-like mini-altar, perhaps half a meter high, some 50–60 cm in width, and around 20 cm deep, on which white candles and incense sticks (*agarbati*) are continuously burned, and food offerings will be piled as the evening wears on. The word *ashan* denotes a ‘seat’ of ritual or symbolic import, as in *rajashan*, ‘seat of the king’, or throne. Here, as at so many of the small gatherings I have become used to seeing at shrines in Dhaka, the *ashan* is the seat of the *pir*, literally denoting his presence among those assembled

in his name. An *ashan* is thus crucial in facilitating devotees' access to their *pir* in such settings. Ahmad 'owns' this one, keeps it in his home, and produces it whenever this particular group of Ziaul Haq's *bhaktas* comes together.

Not long after my arrival, Ahmad excuses himself and leaves. He returns within a half-hour, driving a car to the front of the stall, from which he is helped to unload two large kettles filled with food. Prepared by Ahmad's wife, there are perhaps a hundred or more individually-filled small plastic bags containing beef *biryani*, with the meat deboned—a laborious but well-thought-out preparation which anticipates the problem of refuse disposal in this setting. The little packets are dispensed to all assembled, and so Ahmad, having marshalled his family in an impressive, carefully considered logistical feat, has been able to feed his brother devotees fully and with style.

The newly arrived *bhaktas* have brought heaps of apples and bananas. These are loaded on top of the *ashan*, nearly crowding off the candles and *agarbati* that are incessantly lit, consumed and replaced. Later, the fruit will be cut up and distributed as *tabarruk*. A man with the dress and demeanour of a local *mullah* arrives and begins to intone prayer-like utterances, which move the group into a *milad*, then on to the *dhikr*. The sequence moves—I capitalise to indicate cadence—from '*la ilaha IL Allah*', to '*IL Allah*', then just to '*Allah, Allah, Allah...*'. For some reason the '*hu*' ending to which a *dhikr* is often reduced does not form part of the repetitive pattern in this group. The *dhikr* completed, singers begin to arrive. The first appears to be a professional musician, hair cut in the 'page-boy' fashion worn by the famous religious mendicant-musicians known as Bauls. Next to me someone quips that this fellow must be a '*nagar [city] Baul*', the sarcasm intended to suggest that the man is one of many in Dhaka alleged to impersonate and trade on the fame of this traditionally rural group of folk musicians, making the rounds of the shrines and events to earn their living as 'Baul' performers. This one plays the *ektara* and has brought a harmonium player, a percussionist with just one of a *tabla* set, and a man who clicks the little wood blocks. But their singing strikes me as somewhat anaemic and disappointing. One group of singers after another comes and goes in what becomes a blur amid the all-enveloping cacophony—devotees jammed together on the slightly elevated, groaning dais, onlookers pushing at the edge of the stall as intent as if they are watching a drama unfold. The tight

devotional intensity I recall from my first experiences with Maijbhandari *mahphils* in Comilla seems far removed from this chaos. The only stand-out performance, at around 3 A.M., is offered by a woman violinist who is also a professional singer, and her two accompanists on the harmonium and *dhol* (a drum). She has a strong, clear voice whose ring manages to overcome all competing sounds, and exudes a sincere dedication to both the lyrical and spiritual dimensions of her art. Things continue in this manner until just before dawn, when they begin to wind down. Occasionally flower petals are strewn over all assembled, and, twice, a man paid for the purpose shows up to wave smoky incense (*dhup-dhuna*) over the devotees, nearly asphyxiating all and sundry. At various points participants join in a song; some get up to dance, a few doffing their *panjabi* shirts while doing so. Through it all, Ahmad sits in front of his *ashan* in a posture of meditation. He never rises and never sings, seeming content, rather, to remain deep within the recesses of his self.

Dawn at last provides the cue for closure. The fruit adorning the heavily laden *ashan* is cut up and distributed as *tabarruk* to each and all. By now the indigents, some of them spectacularly deformed or deranged, who frequent shrines and show up like desperate locusts at events such as these, are on the scene, hoping that part of the *tabarruk* will be passed out to them. None are maltreated or thrust away; rather, all are patiently given a pittance, a morsel of the sacred food, and gradually fade away. The sleep-famished devotees, too, one by one, take their leave, stopping momentarily to thank Ahmad for making the gathering possible. He is now alert, attentive to the duties of a host, and as smilingly gracious as when we first met. He is uncertain as to when and where his little band of *bhaktas* will meet next. But to unite them again soon in adoration of their *pir* and spiritual protector, Ziaul Haq, is, it seems, his duty, his pleasure, and his respite.

V *Reflections*

The widespread veneration of *pirs* is one of several perpetually competing versions of Islamic belief and practice in Bangladesh. As noted at the outset of this essay, pirism appeals to a broad spectrum of people, including some among the otherwise minimally observant and many who are conventionally orthodox in their outward expression of faith. Pirism meets

its greatest resistance, however, from those whose fervour is embodied in spiritualist revival movements, such as the *tablighi* (readily found in Bangladesh), and from others whose devotion to Islam demands political activism in seeking an Islamic state wherein strict adherence to the *shari'a* would be instituted as the legal order. It is from groups of the latter that Sufi-derived, magico-mystical movements like the Majibhandari face the greatest challenge to their legitimacy, since for *shari'a*-focused Muslims they represent a confrontation with Islamist versions of orthodoxy. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the worship of saints has long been contested by the formally pious, from Abdul Wahhab in 18th-century Arabia to the revivalists in 19th-century East Bengal. These two streams of Islam appear to have remained in vigorous opposition everywhere in the Muslim world for quite some time. Thus, the Sufi stream in Bangladeshi culture that Majibhandar exemplifies is a key source of institutional resistance to the militant thrust of literalist Islamism, and this may help to account for the lack of truly broad political appeal that Bangladeshi Islamists have had to date.

It remains to be seen whether this competition will continue as it has for so long. In her instructive discussions of *pir* veneration in Sylhet, Katy Gardner (1995: 228–68; 2001) argues that traditional allegiance to *pirs* as purveyors of miracles was being gradually undermined as the Sylheti migrant families she studied acquired both wealth and a more pietistic orientation to Islam from their sojourns abroad. Upon their return to Bangladesh, she asserts, they aimed to transform both the narratives of the great saints of the past and the conduct of their would-be emulators in the present to reflect and embody ritually conformist visions of what Islam should be.

There is some evidence that this globalisation of a *shari'a*-oriented Islam has begun to have an impact on the Majibhandaris, even though they are primarily found in the nation's south, a region not as yet well connected with the outside world. In contrast to the founder generation whose members never made the *haj*, key members of the present Majibhandari leadership have gone on the pilgrimage and, one is told, other frequent visits to Mecca. It may not be surprising, therefore, that since the research for this paper was conducted, the elaborate shrine of Ahmad Ullah has been razed, and its replacement built to a design which depicts or somehow evokes the pages of the Qur'an (Manzurul Mannan, personal communication, 3 November 2003). This is in keeping with the view of the movement's current leadership that the movement should be seen as compliant with *shari'a*. Thus, Gardner's observations may well

be right, and one wonders what this says about the future of Bangladeshi Islam's 'multivocality' and whether, by reduction of the form and variation which gives the Majbhandari *tariqa* so much of its intrinsic appeal, the movement itself will be diminished.

Yet one is loath to accept the inevitability of such an outcome. In all of its social, political and economic dimensions, the *pir-murid-mazar* complex lies at the heart of Bangladeshi culture, and movements of this sort provide genuine vehicles of spiritual expression for very many people in Bangladesh. The Majbhandari *tariqa* draws both leadership and subaltern participation from across the social spectrum, including the highly-educated men who direct its activities from their *manjil* headquarters in Majbhandar, the businessmen and service professionals who organise local urban groups of devotees, and the ordinary farmers who people its widely-dispersed rural outposts. Bangladeshi elites and bewildered foreign visitors to the country are often tempted to dismiss the phenomenon of *pir* veneration as at best a spectacle of superstition on the part of the ignorant or at worst as a conspiracy to fleece the gullible on the part of charlatans posing as holy men. No doubt some self-styled *pirs* are 'touts'—to use a favourite Bangladeshi epithet—and many vulnerable souls may be taken in by their blandishments. But the charisma of genuine holy men, the aura of their shrines and the hope delivered by their teachings serve as lifelines for a host of ordinary people, just as the carnival element in musical, dance and oratorical performance that enlivens commemorative festivals like those I have described, and is the nightly fare of *mazars* everywhere, supplies diversion and entertainment for myriad folk whose daytimes are devoid of hope or pleasure. In the face of pressures to bow to the primacy of canon and the homogenisation of observance, the key to the self-preservation of Majbhandari and other Sufi versions of Bangladeshi Islam may well lie in their power to entertain, to overwhelm and to inspire.

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