



A SUFI MOVEMENT IN MODERN BANGLADESH

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Prologue

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*, the mandolin-like instrument that often accompanies performances of indigenous Bengali music. Next to him, a world-worn pushcart driver plucks his *ektara*, so-called for the single string from which it emits pulsing monotones in backing up a song. Others in the group, also nondescript urban laborers of rural vintage, 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, however, 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 mesmerizing unison: “*Allah-hu, Allah-hu, Allah-hu . . .*” At the height of the music’s intensity, some rise to 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 disbursing 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 said softly, “let it be now.”

Between late 1966 and early 1968, I was a graduate student doing field research for an anthropology dissertation in the then East Pakistan, today’s Bangladesh. During much of that period, I spent many Thursday evenings attending the musical gatherings (*mahphil*) of a small group of followers of the Majibhandari *Tariqa* (a Sufi order or brotherhood), to which an unknown, but undoubtedly myriad, number of Bangladeshis claim some measure of adherence. The prologue with which I began this essay is a composite of my recollections of those evenings, aided by a few notes and tape recordings I made at the time. So self-contained did it seem that the connection of this group to a broad Sufi movement was not particularly apparent to me at first. Indeed, this introduction to the Majibhandaris took place during my first year in (what would become) Bangladesh, where I was doing research for my doctoral dissertation. The acquaintance was totally happenstance, for my research was not on Bengali religion, and I did not have a major interest in or, for that matter,

more than a rudimentary knowledge of, Islam. Suffice it to say that I had literally stumbled onto the little group of spiritual revelers while wandering one night around the provincial town where I was based and was invited into their midst.

The organizer of the weekly *mahphil* had turned out to be my friend Rafiq, the manager of a local bank branch where I held an account, a genial man whom one would never suspect of having a spiritual bone in his corpulent body. Regulars included several other middle class professionals, government administrators and an engineer. But the largest number in attendance were, as I have suggested, men from the nearby villages who worked at hard, menial jobs in the town to make ends meet. What seemed to draw these men together week after week was not only the lively intensity of the musical performance, but additionally 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 settings that would be markedly hierarchical, the ease with which they seemed here to engage with one another was impressive. I found myself attending as often as I could, with no pretense at scholarly investigation, although the idea that I might some day make the Maijbhandari movement the object of more serious study gradually formed in my mind.

The weekly gatherings of my Maijbhandari friends were not then, nor would they be now, exceptionable occurrences in today's Bangladesh. Biographical, anthropological and survey research data indicate that many, perhaps even a large majority, of Bangladeshi Muslims, including people across the entire urban-rural and socioeconomic spectrum, accept the legitimacy of at least 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 not a few regularly, throughout their lives. Bangladeshi politicians from the top down have advertised their allegiance to well known *pirs*, as in the much noted ex-

ample of a former president and his coterie, who made highly publicized visits to one of the most famous living Bangladeshi holy men at the time.

In the Heartland

Maijbhandar: October 1999. I join thousands of Bangladeshis gathered some twenty miles north of the city of Chittagong, for the annual *khosroj sharif*, or 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, or *pirs*, 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 or many, of the some forty shrines, ranging from simply graves to more elaborate tombs and mausolea, devoted to a veritable panoply of real or imagined holy men, that have cropped up ever since the village began to acquire prominence as the spiritual center of the Maijbhandari *tariqa* over a century ago. The five-story *pucca* guest house (*mehmankhana*) where I am staying is packed, with people camping on its roofs and in its corridors, and every available open space has been commandeered to accommodate the crowds. Temporary awnings on bamboo poles have been set up in both the center and periphery of the entire shrine complex, and these are fully occupied by masses of people, mostly villagers from the look of them, whole families literally camped out 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 food and drink at cheap rates to the visitors who would otherwise be subjected to extortionate prices by the many other shops and restaurants in the locality.

All day and especially late into the night, the narrow streets are crammed with people, and moving efficiently is impossible. There is 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 small, sometimes large, groups scattered everywhere throughout the holy site, are spontaneous and continuous every afternoon and they, too, are heard late into the night. In a similarly sporadic, yet never-ending fashion, water buffaloes are paraded through the narrow, crowded streets, each beribboned and tasseled, by the members of groups donating the animal, 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. (At times when near the triumphant passing of a buffalo and its exhilarated donors, I am reminded of Hemingway's description, in *The Sun Also Rises*, of the running of the bulls at Pamplona, feeling as never before the rush of excitement and wild danger those passages of his were written to evoke.) There the animals find respite from their long march before providing *tabarrak* or blessed food for the thousands present at the culminating ceremony.

The formal act of 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*), crowd the courtyard in front of the main administration building (*manjil*), and no doubt in the muddy tent shelters at its periphery the hosts of village people are in

rapt attention as well. Some two dozen young *murids* (initiates or disciples) are crowded on to 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 mat—his *tom* or “throne”—next to the *khat* (cot) where the founder of the Majjbhandari *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: *jkir*), 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 (*murid*). After a few quick questions he dismisses one; not sincere enough, it seems. From 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 the new *murid* its vigorous daily performance.

By now, the *khosroj sharif* having ended, the crowds are beginning to disperse, having taken their *tabbarak* 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.

Origins and Leadership Structure

Adepts of the Maijbhandari *tariqa* consider its founder, Gausulazam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah, whose life spanned eighty years from 1826 down to 1906, to be descended directly from followers of the line of the Sufi saint Abdul Qader Jilani (1077–1127) and thus, of course, associated with the Qadiriya Order of Sufism associated with Abdul Qader's name. Qadiri holy men, they believe, were sent as *imams* or *qadis* to Delhi and from there to the city of Gaur in its heyday as capital of Bengal. One of these emissaries is said to have migrated to Chittagong in 1575, and, subsequently, a scion of the latter ensconced himself in the village of Maijbhandar several generations onward. Gausulazam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah was his descendant. After education in local schools and *madrassas*, 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*, the disciple's oath of allegiance, to a famous Sufi saint who was visiting Calcutta, from whom he would ultimately receive the Qadiriya spiritual mantle, 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.

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. My observations in Maijbhandar provide ample evidence that the movement has a huge rural following, and I met several impres-

sively dignified and humbly sincere believers who were introduced as leaders—*khalifas*, they are called—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.

The Maijbhandar holy shrine complex (*darbar sharif*) encompasses an area of approximately 3.6 square miles (for a view of its shrines, visit the movement's web site at <www.maizbhandar.com>). Although, as noted, 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 recognized Maijbhandari *pirs* are considered legitimate holy places by founder Ahmad Ullah's descendants and their followers. Nearby three of the mausolea are located the buildings or *manjil* which house the residential quarters and administrative organizations 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 central shrine is the Gausiya Ahmadiya Manjil dedicated to founding father Ahmad Ullah. The Gausiya Rahman Manjil is near the tomb of Golamur Rahman, who was Ahmad Ullah's nephew. The third shrine-cum-administration complex is the Gausiya Haq Manjil, with the architecturally modern mausoleum in which the most recently deceased of the Maijbhandari *pirs*, Ziaul Haq, is buried, next to the far more modest tomb of his father, Delwar Hossain (1893–1982), who was Ahmad Ullah's grandson.

All four are regarded as genuine saints. Today, many Maijbhandaris follow Emdadul Haq, a great-grandson of Ahmad Ullah Maijbhandari, as the current leader of the movement who assumed his position as the current living Maijbhandari *pir* (accepted as the sole such by his followers) from his father

in 1983. Syed Emdadul Haq is the supreme head (*sajjada-nishin*) of the Gausiya Ahmadiya Manjil, and with his remaining three brothers directs the *anjuman* or “central committee” of the organization. It is much 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 Unilever; Shahidul Huq, the youngest has an M.A. in Bengali. Thus, in addition to the spiritual authority and charisma they have inherited, these men bring a high measure of formal, non-religious education to the leadership task, and considerable secular, worldly (including bureaucratic) experience.

And there is much for them to administer. The opulent shrine itself must need constant maintenance, there is a profitable store associated with the operation of the *manjil* itself, and the Majbhandari operation puts out a fair number of publications and audiotapes for its followers and potential recruits. Judging from what I observed at the *khosroj sharif* of Golamur Rahman, the logistics of managing the nine or more commemorative events held annually and attended by an uncountable number of thousands of people requires tremendous organizational effort. Needless to say, the financial resources involved in all of this must be immense. Judging from the open flow of cash that anyone attending the event I witnessed can observe, the Majbhandari enterprise is a huge business, like many other massive institutions that have grown out of the religious impulse the world over. Indeed, this seems so with respect to all of the large scale *mazar* operations in Bangladesh, some of which I visited I had occasion to observe in some depth.

Ritual Practices and Hints of the Majbhandari Past

The founders of the Majbhandari *tariqa* developed a fairly elaborate “Seven Step” (*sapta paddati*) methodology for the at-

tainment of their view of spiritual perfection, and any basic written description of it that I have seen always alludes to this doctrine reverently as the “Maijbhandari School of Thought,” alleging it to be a unique contribution to the world’s body of spiritual knowledge. The extent to which the “*Maijbhandari School*” differs from traditional and well known Sufi mystical and theosophical notions is a subject that I would leave to scholars far better equipped than I to evaluate. But no 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, and I doubt that the masses of people to whom the *tariqa* appeals would drawn to the rigors of any such self-discipline. A number of other attributes and activities are the more likely factors accounting for the movement’s wide attraction.

The Maijbandaris are proud of what they see is 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 Bangladeshi scholars who are familiar with the movement, the Maijbhandari *tariqa* reflects a melding a 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, the claim is, Ahmad Ullah drew the practice of permitting musical performance as a mode of worship. As noted in these pages, the latter often is the centerpiece of local Maijbhandari gatherings (*mahphil*), and, I submit, constitutes a major factor in the movement’s appeal. Spontaneous and extended outpourings of song, accompanied by indigenous instruments, notably the *dotara* or *ektara* when available, 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. Over more than a century since its inception, the Majbhandari movement is said to have produced hundreds of published songs, representing to the ears of the initiated a distinctive lyrical tradition within the genre of indigenous Bengali religious music as a whole. The large Majbhandari musical repertoire is available on audiotape and readily purchased in major urban centers. No doubt their melodies and rhythms appeal to broad popular tastes and their lyrics appear to give voice to spiritual concerns in ways that many ordinary people can understand. The lyrics of Majbhandari 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 them, Majbhandar and its *tariqa* are seen as the meeting place of both prophet and *pirs*, in Majbhandar all religious distinctions dissolve, through Majbhandar can the lover and the beloved be united, and the metaphor of the boat journey is analogized to spiritual quest. There are, of course, unmistakable associations between the Majbhandari musical tradition and other well known indigenous Bengali musical genres. Bengali Hindu religious traditions also stress musical performance, and the fact that one of the greatest of Majbhandari composers was a Hindu, is constantly mentioned by Majbhandaris who wish to emphasize the ecumenism and liberality of their *tariqa*.

Majbhandaris sometimes claim that Ahmad Ullah's "innovation" of permitting music at religious gatherings had a key role in spreading the phenomenon of musical performance among Muslim mystics in Bangladesh. It is certainly so that on a visit to any major shrine that draws consistently large crowds in Bangladesh, especially on Thursday nights before the onset of the Muslim day of congregational prayer, one is treated to a variety of spontaneous musical performances by artists who play and sing their songs for pay and/or for the pleasure of it. But it seems unlikely that employment of music and dance as spiritual modalities originated at Majbhandar. Islam has always utilized music for religious purposes and the Qur'an itself was at one time recited to tunes of secular songs.

The “musical session, or *sama*’, as a (Sufi) religious practice may have been firmly established by the third century of Islam and meeting places dedicated to Sufi music and ritual dancing were present in Baghdad, the then capital of the Arab Muslim empire, by the ninth century of Islam. At its very outset the Sufi use of music and dance to accompany ritual was criticized by Muslims who frowned on mystical practices, and Bangladeshi Muslims, the Majibhandaris included, who are attracted to such Sufi modes of spiritual endeavor risk similar opprobrium from their more censorious confreres in the larger Muslim community.

Music aside, other kinds of standard ritual performance that Majibhandaris share with Arab, Persian and Indic Sufi traditions are those of the *milad maphil* and the *dhikr*. The *dhikr* is, of course, the most important ritual in the Sufi tradition, in which one “remembers” Allah through the formulaic repetition of His name for extended time periods.² The purpose of *dhikr* is to produce concentration on the godhead and the corresponding diminishment of self required to enhance the worshipers spiritual awareness, that can lead, with the right discipline, to mystical union with the divine or *fana*’. 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 same time as the verbalization diminishes to an increasingly rapid utterance, simply, of “*hu, hu, hu . . .*”. In small groups that I have observed, many of those present can via this method seemingly attain mild, temporarily altered states 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, mesmerizingly repetitive, religious utterance, must be one of the ap-

peals of *dhikr* to those seeking some kind of spiritual solace and at least temporary forgetfulness of self. *Dhikr* is often preceded by a *milad maphil*, in which a group of worshipers 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.

A common feature of Muslim saint veneration in Bangladesh, readily seen at any shrine, is the offering of food to the *pir* and the receipt of it back as blessed victual, known as *tabarrak*. *Tabarrak* may take the form of any ritually acceptable (*halal*) food product, but the more costly 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 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. Recognizing the false and potentially corrupting relationship between the costliness of the food prestation and the supposed spiritual benefits it is expected to confer, Ahmad Ullah, in what Maijbhandaris cite as another of his innovations, 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 for *tabarrak* to substitute a water buffalo (*mahis*) instead. On the eve of the final ceremony of the *khosroj sharif* of Golamur Rahman I visited the corral where the animals whose parade I describe were kept prior to slaughter. The helpful man assigned to tally of the numbers and types of animals contributed informed me that some thirty-nine buffaloes had by then been assembled; overall they struck me as magnificent, healthy specimens. I was not surprised to learn that on average they were worth the equivalent of \$250. on the market, i.e., an amount not far below that of the current per capita income of the country. By the time of

the culminating ceremony, I estimated 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 (*mahis mangsa*) to feed the massive crowd of worshipers and leave each with *tabarrak* to take home.

The sacrificial centrality of the water buffalo in Maijbhandari commemorative ritual suggests a link between the movement and the agrarian roots of rural Bengali Islam that scholars began to document nearly a decade ago. During the medieval period of Bengali history, the peasant farmers who laboriously cleared the Bengal Delta of its forests to pave the way for rice cultivation were not fully “Hindu” or “Muslim” in their religious inclination, and they had long been wedded to an amalgam of magico-mystical elements drawn from Sufi versions of Islam and Hindu Vaishnavite traditions which focus on worship of the Lord Krishna. Because shrines and the activities around them incorporate eclectically so many of these diverse elements, one can readily imagine that Sufi shrines like that of Maijbhandar performed similar functions in consolidating along Muslim lines the spiritual loyalties of East Bengali peasants who had already been attracted to the spiritual charisma of the *pirs* who were widely present in the delta areas. More recent scholarship in this field suggests further that a *pir-mazar* (saint *cum* shrine) Islamic ideology 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. The role of *pirs* in the process of Islamization has been given similar emphasis by some scholars who argue that the *pirs* were, in the Islam’s early days in Bengal, the only connecting thread linking Islam and the vast masses of rural converts.

If we are willing to see Maijbhandari founder Ahmad Ullah as a *pir* who played such a role, even in the late 19th Century, then it must have helped him in securing a peasant following, nominal Muslims and Hindus alike, attracted by his

eclectic spiritual message and the musico-poetic form in which it so often came, to enshrine as the central sacrificial animal the water buffalo. This placid, humble bovine is, of course, the premier draught animal of the Bengal peasantry, occasionally celebrated by elites as a primordial symbol of the Bengali nation, both in art, as in a famous work by the revered Bangladeshi painter Zainal Abedin, in which a farmer and his buffalo are fused as one in monumental struggle against the forces of nature, and in literature, as in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's short story, "*Mahish*," in which the buffalo of the title is emblematic of sacrifice and love. And thus a link between the Majjbhandari *tariqa*, the agrarian past in which the seeds of Bengali Islam were sown, and the modern Bangladesh nation, whose mythic projections evoke dreamy, expansive landscapes of green and gold.³

Sufis in the City

Dhaka 1999, the High Court Shrine. October 31, the final day of the *urs* or death anniversary, 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 and by the many groups participating in the *urs*. Several rows of snack 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 shrine, many of the groups who gather 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, the most recently deceased of the Maijbandari *pirs* whose wide following is flung far from his modernistic, white, lotus-domed *mazar* in rural Chittagong. One of the group's more prominent leaders, a businessman whom I will here simply call Ahmed, has generously invited me to join them in celebration of the *urs*. Ahmed is a small man with a neat, short beard; balding, he allows the gray of his thinning hair to show. His friendly smile is no doubt genuine and most welcoming, but throughout the evening his face will occasionally betray worry and care. It turns out that Ahmed 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 the 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, Ahmed's relations, will be present as part of 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. Ahmed is seated at the center of the gathering in front of an *ashan*, a box-like mini-altar, a half-meter high, perhaps, another 50 by 20 cm. in width, on which white candles and incense sticks (*agarbati*) are continuously burned, and upon which food offerings (*tabarrak*) will be piled as the evening wears on. The word *ashan* denotes a “seat” of ritual or symbolic import, as in *rajashan* or “throne, seat of, the king.” Here, as with 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. No man assuming the role of *mastan*, one “besotted of God,” and thus a personage through whom a *pir* becomes accessible to his followers, can succeed in it without this accouterment, and Ahmed “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, Ahmed excuses himself and leaves. He returns within a half hour, driving a car up to the front of the stall, from which he is helped in unloading two large kettles filled with food. Prepared by Ahmed’s wife, there are perhaps a hundred or more individually filled small plastic bags, containing beef *biriyani*, 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 Ahmed, having marshaled his family in an impressive, carefully considered logistical feat, has been able to feed his brother devotees.

The newly arrived 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, burning out, and replaced. Later the fruit will be cut up and distributed as *tabarrak*. A man with the dress and demeanor of a local *imam* arrives and begins to entone prayer-like utterances, which move the group into a *milad*, then on to the *dhikr*. The sequence moves—I underline 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 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 *urs* events to earn their living as “Baul” performers. This chap plays the *ektara* and has brought a harmonium player, a percussionist with just one of a *tabla* pair, and a man who clicks the little wood blocks. But their singing strikes me as somewhat anemic and disappointing. One group of singers after another comes and goes in what seems a blur in the all-enveloping cacophony—devotees jammed together on the slightly elevated, groaning dais, onlookers pushing at the edge of the stall, as intently as if watching a drama unfold. The tight devotional intensity I recall from my first Comilla experiences with Majjbandari *mahphils* seems far removed from this chaos. The only standout performance, around 3 a.m., is offered by woman violinist, a professional singer and her two accompanists. With a strong, clear voice, whose ring manages to overcome all competing sounds, she 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 to wave a smoky incense (*dhup-dhuna*) over the devotees appears, 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. Throughout it all, Ahmed sits in front of his *ashan*, in a posture of meditation. He never rises, 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 *tabarrak* to each and all. By now the

indigents, some of them spectacularly deranged, who frequent shrines and show up like desperate locusts at events such as these, are on the scene, hoping that part of the *tabarrak* 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 Ahmed 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.

Reflections

Recent discussions of *pir* veneration argue that traditional allegiance to *pirs* as purveyors of miracles is being gradually undermined as rural Bangladeshis acquire greater knowledge of Islam as practiced in more “orthodox” ways. Massive numbers of Bangladeshis of recent peasant origin live and work abroad, in Britain and especially the conservative Muslim sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, where they acquire both wealth and a more pietistic orientation to Islam as practiced in the Muslim heartland and by Muslims from other cultures. Upon their return to Bangladesh, the argument goes, they 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.

That globalization may have the impact of reinforcing orthodoxy and traditionalism in this way may seem paradoxical, and this may be happening with particular vigor in the districts of Bangladesh where globalization has made its greatest inroads. But it is worth remembering that the worship of the saints has always been contested by the pious, especially with

the beginning of Muslim revitalization movements in 18th Century Arabia, continuing on down through the sweep of revivalist reformers into 19th Century East Bengal, and evident in the clash between Quranic literalists and Sufi ecstasies seen in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Muslim world today. These two strains of Islam would appear to have remained in vigorous opposition everywhere in the Muslim world for quite some time. I prefer to see veneration of *pirs* as one of several perpetually competing versions of Islamic spirituality in Bangladesh and in other Muslim cultures. For most practicing Muslims in Bangladesh, I daresay that Islam consists of faithful performance of the daily and weekly congregational prayers, proper meeting of the other standard ritual requirements of the faith and appropriate observance on the major holy days. Many Bangladeshis reflect fervor of belief embodied in a quietistic spiritual revival movement known as *Tablighi Jamat* which, originating decades ago in India, has many followers in Bangladesh. For still others devotion to Islam calls them to the political activism in seeking an Islamic state with strict adherence to the *shari'a* (Muslim law) as they understand it to be instituted as both legal and normative order. Indeed, militant Islamism of this sort is among the most visible of reformist movements in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the Muslim world, and it is from the latter that movements like the Majibhandari face the greatest challenge to their legitimacy, representing as they do a flying in the face of Islamist versions of orthodoxy. At the same time, the Sufi strain in Bangladeshi culture that Majibhandar exemplifies counterposes 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 will be clear to the reader that the very preliminary, and somewhat more formal, inquiry into the Majibhandari movement I undertook in the fall of 1999 resulted from a personal attraction to the Majibhandari mode of spiritual expression as I witnessed it first in the late 1960s. I have been quite struck by the depth and amplitude to which the Majibhandari *tariqa*, as a

religious movement, a way of life and, yes, even as a business, has penetrated Bangladeshi culture. I am also impressed by the manner in which it draws both leadership and ordinary participation from across the social spectrum, including the highly educated men who direct its activities from their *manjil* headquarters in Maijbhandar, the businessmen and service professionals who organize local urban groups of devotees, and the ordinary farmers who serve as *khalifas* in its far flung rural outposts. 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. I want to close by affirming this otherwise obvious point, because it is all too easy for many, both Bangladeshis and foreigners involved with the country, 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 favorite Bangladeshi epithet—and many vulnerable people 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 others, just as the carnival element in musical, dance and oratory performance that enlivens commemorative festivals like those I have described, and is the nightly fare of *mazars* everywhere, supplies diversion and entertainment for the many whose daytimes are devoid of hope or pleasure. I expect no decline in their vigor and can see forthcoming no diminution of their power to entertain, to overwhelm and to inspire.

NOTES

¹This paper has been edited for the *Oakland Journal* from a longer, fully documented, version to be published elsewhere. I will gladly provide copies of that version upon request. Collection of field data for this paper

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²So powerful is the efficacy of *dhikr* that in some sects “a compendium of chants” has replaced the Qur’an as the Holy Book and provides the basis for the central ritual.

³It is worth noting that in Bengali Muslim peasant myths of origin, Adam, the biblical and Qur’anic first man (also considered a prophet of Islam)is celebrated as “the First Farmer” and thus a model for the notion that the ideal Muslim is a land owner and master cultivator.