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**Politics of Islam, the State, and
the Contested Cultural Identity**
Ulama's Activism in Postcolonial Bangladesh

Humayun Kabir
Hiroshima University



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Introduction

In the wake of the heightened proliferation of modern mass education and communication technologies, the religious institutions, ideas, and practices of Muslims have not only faced immense challenges but have also transformed in a way that could successfully broaden their audience in relation to the changing circumstances of modernity (e.g. Eickelman 1992; Robinson 1993a; Eickelman and Anderson 1997, 1999, 2003). Neither modernity nor the power of secularity could demean the role of Islam in our contemporary modern world (Salvatore 2006). Rather, the increasing voices and active participation of Muslim religious protagonists in the public sphere have regenerated the meaning and importance of Islam in public life in many Muslim societies.

The ‘new religious intellectuals’,¹ the ‘Muslim modernists’,² the traditional Muslim religious scholars trained in *Madrasas* (traditional Islamic religious schools), who are widely known as *Ulama* (plural of *Alim*; Islamic learned man), and the Muslim ideologues, who are often dubbed ‘Islamists’, are concerned not only about their own ascendancy as arbiters of Islam, but also about the regeneration of the Islamic ethos and mores in modern social and cultural life. In this situation, “being Muslim’ acquires more political significance in the modern world than participation in other religious traditions because of the self-conscious identification of the believers with their religious tradition’ (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 39).

¹ The ‘new religious intellectuals’ are the products of mass higher education and they promote an objectified Islam in many Muslim societies (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 43-44).

² Similar to the notion of ‘new religious intellectuals’, the term ‘Muslim modernists’ refers to those Muslims ‘who have been educated in modern Western (or Westernised) institutions of learning and have sought to rethink or adapt Muslim practices, institutions, and discourses in light of both what they take to be “true” Islam—as opposed to how the Islamic tradition has evolved in history—and of how they see the challenges and opportunities of modernity’ (Zaman 2005: 82, fn. 1; see also Zaman 2002: 3-11).

This article attempts to depict how the question of ‘being Muslim’ and a collective sense of ‘Muslim-ness’ in various social and cultural articulations have become important aspects of the politics of Islam among many religious apologists and protagonists, especially among those who are trained in religious education and envision a cultural conformity in concordance with Islamic doctrines. This paper illustrates the contested aspects of Bengali Muslims’ identity in contemporary Bangladesh, in which the *Ulama* play a profound role in engendering the debate over Bengali Muslims’ cultural articulation in public life. By promoting the discourse of an ‘authentic’ or more orthodox sense of Islam in social and cultural life through the mobilization of Islamic activism, the *Ulama* challenge the ethno-cultural-linguistic identity of the ‘Bangalee’ (Bengali) as well as other liberal aspects of Bengali Muslims’ cultural lives, partly because of their recent social and political transformation and partly because of the dual nature of the state; which fails to provide a clear synthesis of local Bengali culture and Islam. This paper also delineates that the impact of colonization and modernization on forming the consciousness of ‘Muslim-ness’ has had a profound effect on the forging of Bengali Muslims’ identity in contemporary Bangladesh.

Islam and the Cultural Contradiction

In a quest for a collective identity, Muslims in Bangladesh have been witnessing historically unrelenting cultural tension and ambivalence (Ahmed 1983, 1988, 1996). Several historical backdrops have compounded and complicated the nature of the cultural contradiction that persists in Bengali Muslims’ lives: the process of the assimilation of Islam in local culture, the upsurge of reformist-revivalist movements that opted for the implication of orthodox Islam in Bengali culture, and the political transformation marked by Western intrusion and the birth of a nation-state. All

these aspects are interlinked, which facilitates religious regeneration as well as contestation between Islam and the local cultural tradition that is informed by different periods of political subjugation and condescension.

Contestation between ‘Authentic’ and ‘Syncretistic’ Islam

Islam as a religion and a way of life is internally fraught with many tensions and differentiations, although it is very often portrayed as a unified code of life with some essential features, mostly by its apologists and protagonists. Historian of religion, Graham (1993: 495), suggests that though Islam is based on tradition, it is not possible to single out any monolithic tradition of Islam because it encompasses various ‘Islams’ from various places. Like many other Muslim societies, Islam in Bangladesh ‘has taken many forms and has assimilated values and symbols not always in conformity with Quranic ideals and precepts’ (Ahmed 1988: 115). Although the early thirteenth century is widely considered the beginning of the era of Islamization in Bengal, owing to the political invasion by Turkish-descended Muslim commander, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, mass conversion occurred in later periods, especially during the Mughal reign (1526–1707). In the East Bengal region of the Indian subcontinent (present-day Bangladesh), ‘Islam creatively evolved into an ideology of “world-construction”—an ideology of forest clearing and agrarian expansion’ (Eaton 1993: 266-67). Although Islam was gaining roots in the socioeconomic changes of Bengal frontiers, its doctrines, precepts, and tenets were alien to the Bengali masses because they did not have any knowledge of the Quran or the sacred language. Similar to the case of Islam in Indonesia, which absorbed different traits of Indic metaphysical theories and shared a great deal with the Southeast Asian folk religion (Geertz 1968: 11, 13), Islam in Bengal was embodied ‘in a syncretistic frame of

reference' (Roy 1983: 7). It became 'an amalgam of Buddhist, Hindu, and local syncretistic practices, combined with Sufi-inspired Islam and Shia practices', which 'transformed the cultural world of a Bengali Muslim and his vision of a religion, and gave birth to what may be described as the Bengali Muslim sub-culture' (Ahmed 1983:v).

Through the synchronization process, Islam in Bengal was embodied as a regionally-informed Muslim culture that was contested at the social and cultural levels in at least two contexts. The first was the social cleavage between *Asraf* (singular *Sharif*; noble) and *Atraf* (Bengali connotation of *Ajlaf*; low or mean people). The *Asraf* people were the foreign descendents who immigrated to Bengal mainly from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Persia, Arabia, and northern India. They distinguished their 'racial superiority' and social and cultural exclusiveness from the converted native Bengali Muslim masses, primarily by claiming their close relationship with Islam (Ahmed 1996:8, 10). They considered the *Atraf* to be 'lower' people who converted to Islam mainly from the lower class of Hinduism. The cultural and religious orientations of these Muslim elites, which included Muslim soldiers, administrators, educated urban Sufis, and *Ulama*, were manifested through their literary works, mainly in Persian, Arabic, and Urdu; the Muslim elites also rejected the local language as their own medium (Eaton 1993: 99-100; Roy 1983: 65, 67).

Although the social dichotomy of *Asraf* and *Atraf* had close links to ethnic origins and occupational divisions of class (Eaton 1993: 99-101), the cultural barriers associated with this dichotomy were predicated on a sharp distinction between pristine and localised Muslim cultural links with Islam. The converted rural Bengali Muslim masses were not as 'authentic' and equal as the *Asraf* were. From the late sixteenth century onward, the religious-cultural orientations of

Asraf Muslims began to intermingle with Bengali culture through intermarriage and place of birth, and over the course of time, the *Asraf-Atraf* dichotomy began to dissolve. In later periods, many *Asraf* people accepted the local language as their medium for the propagation of Islam among the non-*Asraf* Muslim masses (Uddin 2006: 26, 28).

Although the proliferation and propagation of Islam flourished through literary works in local languages, Bengali Muslims remained local and syncretistic in their religious-cultural orientation, which was fiercely criticized in the nineteenth century, primarily by Islamic revivalist-reformist movements in Bengal. In this respect, the *Ulama* played a profound role in urging the Muslims to follow 'the orthodox way of life as they interpreted it, insisting upon a literal application of the Quran and *Sunnah* (tradition of the prophet), and rejecting all compromises with local custom' (Ahmed 1988: 115).

Colonial Subjugation and the Emerging Sense of 'Muslim-ness'

Anthropologist Geertz (1968: 65; emphasis original) explained that colonial domination in Indonesia and Morocco produced 'oppositional' and 'scripturalist' Islam; not only against 'Western' intrusion, but also against the classical religious tradition of these countries. Before colonisation, as Geertz argued, 'men had been Muslims as a matter of circumstance' but in the colonial period 'they were, increasingly, Muslims as a matter of policy'. By the same token, colonial subjugation made deep inroads into shaping the perception of Muslims in relation to their religion in the Indian subcontinent. Their religious regeneration was aimed not only at 'Western' intrusion but at those Muslims who failed to maintain their religious-cultural lives in accordance with orthodox tenets of Islam. They became self-conscious 'about the fate of their faith and culture' and about their 'Islamic tradition for guidance as to how

they should proceed' in being 'true' Muslims (Robinson 1993b: xx). The absence of a Westernised middle class and the lack of knowledge about the social, political, economic, and technological consequences of colonial power led many Muslims, especially the *Ulama*, to view their decline in power in terms of religious degeneration (Banu 1992: 33).

Although colonial categorisation and construction had important implications for the development of a sense of faith-based community among the colonial subjects (Pandey 2006), the impact of reformist movements facilitated Muslims 'to focus on the communal group as the basic unit of representation rather than the individual' (Robinson 1993b: xxi). As philosopher Bilgrami (1992: 832) contends, Islam as a fundamental commitment 'has recognizable historical sources and has a vital function in a people's struggle to achieve a sense of identity and self-respect in the face of that history and the perceptions formed by it'; thus, the development of a sense of 'Muslim-ness' in the subcontinent was tied to the historical narratives of colonisation.

Within this wider context of historical legacy, the regionally-informed Bengali Muslim culture faced challenges and contestation from various offshoots of Islamic revivalist-reformist movements. The reformist augmentation began to emerge in the seventeenth century, initially with an attempt to bring the Indian Sufi tradition closer to the role model of prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*). For instance, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) and Shah Waliullah Dihlawi (1703-1762), the two great early Sufi reformers, sought to eliminate all of the components of Islamic practices that did not conform to the prophetic role model (Buehler 1998: 68, 72). The reformist thoughts and ideas of these two Sufi scholars materialized in the foundation of the Darul Uloom Deoband *Madrasa* in 1867, which is widely known for its transnational reformist appeal (see Faruqi

1963; Metcalf 1982, 2002; Reetz 2007). I have shown elsewhere that the reformist appeal of Deoband had reached Bangladesh through the founding of Deobandi *Madrasas* in the early twentieth century. These *Madrasas* produced and reproduced local Deobandi *Ulama*, who denounce all other denominations of Islam that do not maintain the Deobandi interpretation, which prefers an emphasis on the Quran, the prophetic tradition, and the medieval Islamic legal tradition (Kabir 2009a, 2009b). With essential similarities to Deoband, many other reformist offshoots attempted to supplant the local forms of Bengali Islam. For instance, the *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyah* (the path of Muhammad), a movement greatly influenced by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (1786-1831) of northern India which sought the re-establishment of Muslim rule in India by waging *Jihad* (holy war) against the colonial power, had a great influence in Bengal (Ahmed 1996: 39; Metcalf 1982: 68-71). The Taiyuni, and the Faraizi movements had gained much ascendancy in Bengal, like the Tariqa, seeking to repeal all non-Islamic accretions, localised practices, innovations, and 'Hinduized' customs among Bengali Muslims (Banu 1992: 35-42; Ahmed 1996: 39-105; Uddin 2006: 41-76).

In all of these reformist movements, the religious-educated Muslims, especially the *Ulama* and the rural *Mullah* (religious-educated man), played profound roles in Bengal (Ahmed 1996). Historian Roy (1983: xvi) contended that the cumulative effect of these reformist movements created a chasm between 'Bengali' and 'Islamic' identities among Bengali Muslims, who 'became increasingly aware of the beliefs and practices then current in the Arab heartland' and 'attempted to integrate those beliefs and practices into their identity as Muslims' (Eaton 1994: 283).

Contesting Nationalism: ‘Bengali-ness’ or ‘Muslim-ness’?

The cultural contradiction between ‘Bangale’ (Bengali) and ‘Islamic’ was ramified in two historical sets of political transformations: first, the separation of India and Pakistan (including East Bengal) on the basis of religious nationalism in 1947, and second, the denial of religious nationalism by the Bengali masses, which spearheaded the formation of the nation-state of Bangladesh on the basis of ethno-linguistic identity. This contested facet of nationalism was the manifestation of a deep cultural contradiction that was historically inherited, as we have discussed above, and was complicated further by the rise of communal antagonism as well as regionally-informed cultural motivation. Islamic revivalist-reformist movements, which engendered a sense of ‘Muslim-ness’, had a positive effect on the rise of religious nationalism, but it was not only the *Ulama* who favoured the separation of the subcontinent based on religion-based communities such as Muslim and Hindu. Rather, the Western-educated urban Muslim and Hindu intellectuals and political elites transformed the secular-spirited Indian nationalism into a communally-informed nationalism as manifested in their ideological persuasion and political practice (see Chatterji 1994; Datta 1999). The *Ulama*, who look at the Muslims’ socio-economic and political deterioration in terms of religious degeneration and who struggled for the proliferation of religious culture, found the emerging religious nationalism justifiable, although many of them rejected the ‘Islam-based’ state principally by negating the relationship between Islam and nationalism.³

In Bengal, many Muslims translated their political consciousness in terms of religious nationalism, since a sense of ‘Muslim-ness’

³ Many Deobandi *Ulama* rejected the formation of an Islam-based state. One celebrated Deobandi *Alim* who rejected it was Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957). See Madani (2005).

had already developed owing to the *Ulama's* role in successfully proliferating the appeal of reformist Islam and the growing discourses of communal ideology. The Muslims in Bengal joined in the struggle of the Muslims of upper India in order to bridge the gap between themselves and the Hindus in terms of power and privileges; hence, religion became a unifying factor for them. The formation of India and Pakistan in 1947 was the manifestation of such religious nationalism.

Although religion functioned as a unifying factor for the political transformation of East Bengal, which later became a part of Pakistan, its failure to accommodate the ethno-cultural and regional distinctiveness of the region led to the emergence of a new sense of nationalism and identity among the Bengali people. 'Just as the religious identity supported the creation of a separate state, so too did the linguistic identity later support the creation of a new nation' (Uddin 2006: 116). The West Pakistani political and intellectual elites believed that the 'Muslim-ness' of the Bengali people was very unlike their Muslim culture, primarily alleging that Bengali Muslims' cultural practices and customs shared a great deal with the Bengali Hindus, an allegation also put forward earlier by the reformist *Ulama*. The proscription of singing "Rabindra Sangeet" (the music composed by Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore) in East Pakistan by West Pakistan was an illustration of an endeavour whose aim was to culturally separate Bengali Muslims from the influence of Bengali Hindus and 'to promote a Bengali Muslim cultural integration with West Pakistani Muslim culture' (Uddin 2006: 134).

The regionally-informed Bengali Muslims' cultural contradiction with West Pakistan emerged in a sharp distinction when Urdu, the language of many West Pakistanis and of northern Indian Muslims,

was declared as the lingua franca of all of Pakistan, including Bengal. The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, justified the establishment of Urdu as the state language by primarily associating it with Islamic tradition and identity. According to him, Urdu was ‘a language that, more than any other provincial language, embodies the best that is in Islamic culture and Muslim tradition and is nearest to the languages used in other Islamic countries’ (Chakrabarti 2000: 48, cited in Uddin 2006: 125). Efforts to declare Urdu the state language of the Bengali people led to the emergence of an ethno-linguistic-cultural sense of identity. Several Bengali protesters sacrificed their lives in 1952 in a protest against the West Pakistani effort to implement Urdu as the state language. In this situation, ‘religious symbols were superseded by linguistic and cultural ones; new yearnings led to re-assertion of regional identity and the consequent break-up of Pakistan’ (Ahmed 1996: 190).

This decreasing salience of religion influenced the emergence of secular and non-communal organisations beginning in the 1950s. Even the Muslim *Awami* (People) League, the political party formed in 1949 as a parallel to the ruling party of Pakistan, dropped the word ‘Muslim’ from its name. This signalled a shift of nationalist politics from religion to language (Kabir 1995: 147). Although this non-communal, secular, and ethno-linguistic nationalistic spirit cemented the secession of East Bengal from Pakistan in 1971, religion re-emerged as a central state-ideology in post-independent Bangladesh.

Politics of Islam, the State, and the Identity Dilemma

The tension between ethno-linguistic identity (Bengali) and Islam remained unresolved in the post-Independent era in Bangladesh. During the period of West Pakistani rule (1947-71), the Bengali people had already ‘invented’ their linguistic-cultural identity, which

they linked to their struggle for economic and political rights against the West Pakistani political elites (Uddin 2006: 124-44). This shift of political and cultural consciousness was framed in four state principles—secularism, democracy, socialism, and nationalism—in the first constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 (Kabir 1995: 182). Although secularism was declared a state principle and the role of religion in politics was restricted, ‘the Bangladeshi state in its early days failed to address the latent tension between the idea of secularism and the role of Islam in society’ (Riaz 2009: 81). *Dharma rapekhsata*, the Bengali term for secularism, literally means ‘religious neutrality’, unlike the notion of Western secularism⁴ (Kabir 1995: 189, fn. 10). The Bengali people who closely associated their identity with Islam, such as the *Ulama* and the Islamists, very often interpreted this ‘religious neutrality’ in terms of irreligiousness or obliteration of religion from the life of the people. This context also influenced the founding leader of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was also the first ruler of independent Bangladesh, to articulate his ‘Muslim-ness’ in public meetings, though paradoxically he promoted religious tolerance and secular spirit as state policy.⁵

The basis of Bangalee (Bengali) nationalism as promoted by Mujib was, as stipulated in Article 9 of the Constitution, founded on ‘the unity and solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the War of Independence’ (Kabir 1995: 190). This naïve definition of Bengali nationalism could not clearly address the different ethnic

⁴ For greater discussion on the nature of secularism in the West and in the South Asian context, see Bhargava (1998).

⁵ One of the instances of his state policy was proscribing the Muslim greetings on state-owned radio and television stations. For further details about Mujib’s articulation of Islamic symbols in public life and state policy for religious tolerance, see Riaz (2004: 28-34) and Kabir (1995: 186-95).

and tribal minorities, which contained more than sixty variations. Nor it could address the distinction between the Bengali-speaking people of Bangladesh and India. The vague nature of secularism and the contradiction between Bengali culture and Islam engendered, after the coup d'état that resulted in the assassination of Mujib in 1975, another contradictory facet of national identity; 'Bangladeshi'. Many *Ulama* and Islamists from different Islamic political parties found Bangladeshi nationalism to be an expression of Muslim nationalism (Uddin 2006: 138; Kabir 1995: 200).

President Ziaur Rahman, known as Zia (reign: 1977-81), the military ruler and founder of a major political party (Bangladesh Nationalist Party, or BNP), 'invented' the notion of Bangladeshi nationalism in 1978 on the basis of seven principles: 'territory; people, irrespective of religion; Bengali language; culture; economic life; religion; and the legacy of the 1971 liberation war'. Zia's definition of Bangladeshi nationalism was self-contradictory, since it incorporated both religious neutrality and religious-bias 'people, irrespective of religion' and 'religion'—in his interpretation of Bangladeshi nationalism (Kabir 1995: 199). Zia's invention of Bangladeshi nationalism aimed to popularise and legitimise his military rule among those Bengali Muslims who deemed that Muslim culture should be a primordial marker of national identity and who were seeking a regional distinction based on the nation-state feeling of Bangladesh. These phenomena served to make a distinction between the people of Bangladesh and the people of West Bengal of India, who are not only nationally divided but also religiously separated.

Several constitutional amendments made by Zia—such as replacing 'secularism' with 'absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah' and stipulating that it was 'the basis of all actions', inserting the Islamic phrase

Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) above the preamble of the constitution, and changing ‘Bangalee’ nationalism to ‘Bangladeshi’ nationalism—signalled the ways in which Islam emerged as a central state-ideology in Bangladesh (Riaz 2004: 34-35; Kabir 1995: 198-99). Zia’s policy, which attempted to popularise and legitimise his political mission through the constant use of Islamic idioms, icons, and symbols in the political and cultural discourse of Bangladesh, supported the emergence of the *Ulama* as important social and political actors in Bangladeshi public life. Zia’s formalisation endeavour for *Madrasa* education facilitated the *Ulama*’s participation in public sectors through the establishment of a separate directory for *Madrasas* in the Ministry of Education in 1977 and the foundation of a separate board (Madrasa Education Board) in 1978 (Riaz 2004: 36). At that time, the *Madrasa* sector received increasing state patronisation (Kabir 1995: 201).

President Zia’s close collaboration with the *Ulama* and the Islamists caused him to take a position in favour of Islamic education. His cabinet and newly established political party (BNP) comprised many *Ulama* and Islamists, even those who took an anti-liberation stance in the Independence War against West Pakistan (Riaz 2004: 36). For instance, Maulana Abdul Mannan, an alleged collaborator of Pakistan during the liberation war of Bangladesh and also founder of a pro-Islamic daily, the *Inquilab*, and former president of the Jami’atul Madarisin (Association of Aliya or state-aided Madrasa Teachers), became a minister in Zia’s cabinet (Riaz 2004: 36, 37). Due to this close association with the Islamists and the *Ulama*, Zia made *Islamiyat*, a subject of Islamic lessons, mandatory for Muslim students up to grade eight in modern general schools (Riaz 2004: 36). The West Pakistani ruler introduced the same course in 1961 to promote Muslim culture among the students in undivided Pakistan

(Ali 1983: 172). With the help of Middle Eastern countries, Zia established the first public Islamic University (now known as Khustia Islamic University) in 1979 (Ali 1983: 202).

President Ershad, Zia's successor, continued to maintain the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism. Soon after assuming power, he announced the new education policy, which recommended Arabic as a compulsory subject in the primary and secondary education curriculum; this did not succeed, however, because of the strong opposition and protests of students and secular intelligentsia. Ershad also attempted to build a close connection with the Islamists and the *Ulama* in order to secure his political legitimacy from the religion-based institutions and political parties. He began to visit the sites of *Pirs* (spiritual preceptors) and secured *Pir*-based followers' support. In order to broaden his support by exploiting the sentiments of religion, Ershad declared Islam the state religion in 1988; a long-cherished demand of the Islamic political parties. With this declaration, Ershad put forward the Islamising mission of Zia and his Bangladeshi nationalism. The legitimized incorporation of Islam into constitutional measures and state policy during the two military rulers' regimes in Bangladesh broadened the purview of the social and political outcry of the *Ulama* and the Islamists.

Social and Political Transformation of the Ulama

The *Ulama* are known to be 'men of religious learning', who function for the preservation and transmission of Islamic religious knowledge in Muslim societies. In early Islamic periods, they 'included an enormous range of people, from the jurist who worried constantly about the details of Islamic law to the shopkeeper who spent one afternoon a week memorizing and transmitting a few traditions'. These people 'earned their living in the same way as others

around them—as merchants, landlords, craftsmen, and so forth’ (Mottahedeh 1985: 231). The *Ulama* were not ‘officially part of the political structure of the caliphate’; yet, they had a strong influence on the Muslim political dynasty (Esposito and Voll 2001: 8). For instance, the *Ulama* in the Indian subcontinent were attached to the Muslim court during the Muslim reign. They also developed various political activities in the colonial subcontinent (see Qureshi 1974).

Recent studies suggest that the proliferation of print technology, mass education, and above all modernisation in many Muslim societies broke the monopoly of the *Ulama* as sole arbiters of Islamic knowledge (Eickelman 1992; Eickelman and Anderson 1997, 2003; Robinson 1993a, 2000: 66-104; Esposito and Voll 2001: 14-16). ‘The impact of education and of the new ideas slowly but inexorably broke this monopoly; by the end of the nineteenth century a new intelligentsia had emerged’ (Sharabi 1970: 3 cf. Esposito and Voll 2001: 12). Modernisation and Westernisation have impacted the intellectual traditions of Muslim societies in at least three ways: the emergence of ‘secular intellectuals’, the weakening of traditional *Ulama* authority, and the emergence of a new type of Muslim intellectuals—‘the modern Muslim activist intellectuals’. These activist intellectuals ‘were unable to believe the traditional *Ulama* but were also unwilling to accept the secularist positions of the Westernizers’ (Esposito and Voll 2001: 16, 20).

The *Ulama* have gone through significant social and political transformations in recent decades in Bangladesh. The formalisation of their primary social and religious institution—the *Madrasa*—beginning in 1980 has facilitated their increasing participation in the public sphere. The state-patronised formalisation endeavour for *Madrasas* was the manifestation of an Islam-friendly political culture and

practices, as discussed earlier. The reformed state-aided *Madrasas*, which are known as “Aliya”, produce a class of religiously trained Muslims who are also acquainted with modern subject knowledge. These *Madrasas*, therefore, lead to the emergence of those Muslims whose cognitive universes are based on dual knowledge—religious and modern. Considering the reform scheme of Al-Azhar in Egypt, Zeghal (1999) revealed how the mixture of religious and modern knowledge brought many *Ulama* of Al-Azhar into the fold of a ‘bricolage’, who could share similar vocabularies and discourses with those modern Islamic intellectuals and ‘Islamists’ who trained at modern universities. By the same token, the formalisation scheme of the *Madrasas* in Bangladesh also produced a class of educated Muslims who are able to articulate the discourses of Islam through different social and religious platforms and forums.

Nevertheless, the *Ulama* who are trained in more traditional *Madrasas*—which are known as *Quomi* (from *qaum*, nation) *Madrasas* and which did not participate in the state’s reform scheme due to their preference for maintaining traditional Islamic course curriculum without incorporating many modern subjects—have also emerged as important socio-religious and political actors in contemporary Bangladesh. As I have shown elsewhere, many of them are indoctrinated with the nineteenth century revivalist appeal of Islam, such as Deoband, and are concerned about the implication of ‘authentic’ Islam, which could lead to ‘othering’ other denominational groups of Islam whom they consider ‘inauthentic’ (Kabir 2009b). Although the educational attainment of these *Ulama* is not formally recognised by the state, many of them are successful in promoting Islam through their social and religious endeavours. They have strong influence among their followers, who are associated with *Quomi Madrasas*.

In post-independent Bangladesh, the increasing articulation of Islam in public life and the legitimised incorporation of Islamic idioms and values in state policy have had a double impact on transforming the social and political behaviours of the *Ulama*. First, this has facilitated the emergence of an increasing number of socio-religious organisations, many of which are composed with the *Ulama*'s participation. Second, the emergence of Islam as a central state-ideology also instigates the *Ulama*'s increasing participation in politics in different political forms. Regarding the former, Bangladesh has experienced the emergence of numerous socio-religious organisations in the post-independent era, such as the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh (IFB), Bangladesh Masjid Mission (Bangladesh Mosque Mission), Islam Pracher Samity (The Society for Propagation of Islam), Bangladesh Jamiatul Madarisin (Association for Aliya Madrasa Teachers), the Quranic Society, and so forth (Osmany 1992: 138). All of these organisations are concerned with preaching the Islamic way of life in terms of Islamic doctrine and precepts. For instance, IFB, a state-patronised institution with branches in nearly all districts of the country, manages mosques, provides training to *Imams* (prayer leaders), maintains an Islamic calendar, and promotes Islamic culture through publication. The case of Jami'atul Madarisin (JM) is also exemplary here. This organisation, founded in 1937, has been functioning to secure the interest of Aliya *Madrasa* education and the *Ulama* who work there. Although it is an association of more than 200,000 Aliya *Madrasa* teachers,⁶ it very often functions as a platform of public religious spheres through which the voices of the *Ulama* are to be heard. This organisation received state support

⁶ According to an interview with Maulana Shibbir Ahmad Momtaji, Secretary-General, Bangladesh Jami'atul Madarisin, Dhaka, 20 March, 2008.

in post-independent Bangladesh. Maulana Abdul Mannan, a close confidant of Zia's government, was one of the founding members of JM. The emergence of different socio-religious organisations brought about opportunities for the *Ulama*, who have become more vocal about the implication of Islamic tenets, customs, and practices in Bangladeshi social life.

From the mid-1970s onward, Bangladesh has witnessed a transformation in the political behaviours of the *Ulama*. Zia's political liberalisation policy influenced many *Ulama* in their participation in political activities.⁷ Under the Act of Political Parties Registration (PPR), promulgated in July 1976, many political parties began to re-emerge and different Islamic parties began to launch activities. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which was known for its anti-liberation stance, launched political activities under the banner of a newly named party—the Islamic Democratic League (IDL) (Riaz 2004: 36-37). Zia 'enabled the Islamists to become constitutionally legitimate political actors in Bangladesh' (Riaz 2004: 37).

One of the significant political transformations was the emergence of different Islamic political parties that functioned beyond the predominant pale of the political activities of the JI. The traditional *Ulama* educated in *Quomi Madrasas* began to emerge as important political actors in Zia's regime. For instance, Maulana Muhammad Habibullah Hafezzi Huzur, a noted *Alim* who earned his advanced religious training from the Deoband *Madrassa* and who served as a teacher in one of the largest *Quomi Madrasas* (Jami'a Islamia Yunusia,

⁷ Sheikh Mujib introduced the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) as the one and only national political party by proscribing all other parties in 1975. This party was the political amalgamation of the Awami League, the party that led the liberation war, and the Krishak Sramik Party; which advocated state socialism. After the death of Mujib, Zia allowed the political activities of all parties, even the Islam-based ones, which were disbanded in the Mujib era. For this reason, Zia is credited by his followers as the initiator of a 'multi-party democracy'.

in his hometown of Brahmanbaria),⁸ became an important political actor in the early 1980s. He contested the country's presidential election in 1981, securing third place,⁹ and later founded an Islamic political party, Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon (Bangladesh Caliphate Movement).

Following Hafezzi Huzur, many Deobandi *Ulama* have emerged in public life in later periods; they founded various Islamic political parties and eventually the entire picture of Islamism in Bangladesh became more diversified and fragmented. For instance, Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini from the town of Brahmanbaria, founding director of a large *Quomi Madrasa* in Dhaka and a Deobandi *Alim*, emerged in the political landscape as an active and vocal Islamist in the late 1980s. Shaikhul Hadith Allama Azizul Haq, a Deobandi *Alim*, a former teacher at the Jami'a Yunusia Madrasa of Brahmanbaria, and the director of a large *Quomi Madrasa* in Dhaka, also emerged on the scene of the battle for Islamism in Bangladesh through the foundation of his Islamic political party; Bangladesh Khilafat Majlis (Bangladesh Caliphate Party). In 1990, Islami Oikya Jote (Islamic United Front, IOJ), a coalition of seven factions of Islamic parties, evolved as one of the alternative forces of Islamism beyond the predominant JI in Bangladesh. Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini became the chief of IOJ, which became an idealist-orthodox forum for Islamic political parties envisioned for the establishment of Islamic polity modelled upon the Caliphate.

⁸ Interview with Mufti Nurullah, *Muhtamim* (director) of Jami'a Islamia Yunusia Madrasa, Brahmanbaria, September, 2004.

⁹ For further details about the 1981 presidential election, see Khan (1982).

The Islamism propounded by the JI and the *Quomi Ulama*-based Islamic political parties, such as IOJ, has influenced the nature of politics even in democratic regimes (1990-present) in Bangladesh.¹⁰ The Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), which had strong support among the ‘secular intellectuals’ for its promotion of secular ideals and Bengali nationalism, created an opposition political coalition with the JI against the BNP reign (1991-1996). Later, the BNP, which is more congenial towards Islamic political parties, formed a coalition government with the JI and IOJ (2001-2006). Although their influence was nominal in terms of electoral success, the growing political role of the *Ulama* popularised Islam as a legitimate component of political parties. Before the general election in 2008, the BAL made a five-point deal with the Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis (Bangladesh Forum for Caliphate (BKM), which engendered enormous criticism among the left-wing allied political parties of the BAL and among other religious communities.

The BKM, a faction of IOJ, would be in favour of the BAL in the election on the condition that the BAL would meet their demands if it attained power. According to this deal, the demands of the BKM were: no law against the Quranic values, *Sunnah* (prophetic tradition), and *Sharia* (Islamic law) shall be passed; official recognition of the *Quomi Madrasas*; enacting laws to acknowledge the Prophet Muhammad as the ultimate Prophet; and enacting laws to allow certified *Ulama* to issue *Fatwa* (verdicts based on Islamic

¹⁰ The military rulers—Zia and Ershad—ruled the country from 1977 to the end of 1990, a period marked by severe political turmoil. The two major political parties, the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, began to take power through parliamentary elections in 1991, although the non-elected Interim Government was constitutionally empowered to take power for three months after elections. In 2006, the Interim Government was in crisis due to the political unrest of the two major political rivals, which lasted for more than two years before the election of 2006 was finally held at the end of 2008. This Interim Government is widely considered to be an army-backed government.

law).¹¹ Although the BAL could not maintain the political deal with the BKM owing to vilification by the left-wing political parties, the ‘secular intellectuals’, and the leaders of other religious communities¹², the party pledged in its Election Manifesto that ‘Laws repugnant to Quran and *Sunnah* shall not be made’.¹³

The social and political transformation of the *Ulama* in contemporary Bangladesh suggests that the *Ulama* are still important interlocutors for understanding the re-assertion of Islam in modern Muslim societies. Although studies reveal that mass education, proliferation of communication technologies, and modernisation hit the *Ulama* hard by undermining their monopolised authority to transmit and interpret the knowledge of Islam, the contemporary social and political context could facilitate the grounding of their self-instrumentality in a new fashion. Such self-instrumentality is often manifested through the *Ulama*’s activism, even in contentious forms, which attempts to implant Islamic values in the social and cultural lives of the people, as we will see in the following section.

Islamic Activism and the *Ulama*

Islamic activism is neither fully political nor apolitical, although it has significant political implications; ‘it is existential’ (Hashem 2006: 25). Scholars consider it to be similar to all other social movements, which ‘mobilise’ Islam through networking and ideological framing against particular political and social contexts (see Wiktorowicz 2004; Wickham 2002). Islamic activism is the way through which ‘the *Ulama* continue to enlarge their audiences, to shape debates on the meaning and place of Islam in public life, and to lead activist

¹¹ ‘AL-Bigots Electoral Deal Stuns All.’ In *Daily Star*, 25 December, 2006, Dhaka.

¹² ‘AL’s deal with Bigots against Liberation War spirit.’ In *Daily Star*, 28 December, 2006, Dhaka.

¹³ Article 21.3, Election Manifesto of Bangladesh Awami League-2008: A Charter for Change, [English version], available at <http://www.albd.org/autoalbd/index.php> (accessed 30 May, 2009).

movements in pursuit of their ideals' (Zaman 2002: 191). The social and political transformations of the *Ulama* in Bangladesh, as we have seen, has opened up their concerted effort for Islamic activism, which pursues the generation of discourses about Islamic ideals and their implications in social and cultural life.

Mobilizing Islam against NGOs' Free-mixing Values

The case of activism that I will illustrate here is based on a confrontation between a national NGO, namely Proshika, and the urban *Ulama* of the *Quomi Madrasas* in the district town of Brahmanbaria. This contentious activism took place during the second week of December, 1998. Although I was not physically present at the time of the incident, my discussion here is grounded on several textual documents, such as newspaper clippings, brochures, leaflets, and books. I also conducted conversations and interviews with various people—including the *Ulama* in this area—during several phases of my fieldwork, during 2004–2008, which facilitated my analysis.

Brahmanbaria, as a small district town, is distinguished for the strong presence of the *Ulama*, primarily owing to the proliferation of *Quomi Madrasas* in the area. This area has also received wide media attention for some recent Islamic activism against the rights of the *Ulama* to practice *Fatwa*.¹⁴ One of the largest and oldest *Quomi Madrasas*, Jami'a Islamia Yunusia, was founded in the heart of the town in 1914 by a Deobandi alim of India, Maulana Abu Taher Muhammad Yunus, after whom the *Madrasa* was named. This *Madrasa* has a private board called *Edarae Talimia* (the educational district), with which 69 *Quomi*

¹⁴ In a case where the High Court division declared that practicing *Fatwa* in any form was illegal and against Constitutional law, many *Ulama*, including the Islamists and their followers, protested vehemently against the verdict, which caused a clash between the law-enforcing agencies of the state and the protesters. This case was portrayed in all national dailies from 3 to 8 February, 2001.

Madrasas from all over the country are affiliated.¹⁵ The *Ulama* of this *Madrasa* are indoctrinated with the Deobandi interpretation of Islam, a reformist and idealist notion. The *Madrasa* and its followers are concerned about the implication of ‘authentic’ Islam and are, therefore, very much opposed to other sects, especially the Ahmadi Muslims¹⁶ and the *Pir*-based Barelwi Muslim followers (Kabir 2009b). Many local Deobandi *Ulama* who earned their advanced religious degrees from Deoband joined this *Madrasa* in order to promote an orthodox trend of Islam. The noted Deobandi *Ulama* were Maulana Hafezzi Huzur, Maulana Tazul Islam, Maulana Sirajul Islam (d. 2006), Mufti Muhammad Nurullah (d. 2009), and many more. All of them were concerned about the implication of the Deobandi tenets of Islam, and the Yunusia *Madrasa* functioned as the primary institution for propagating Islam in that area. Over the course of time it became a local Deobandi tradition of *Madrasas*, which has a strong influence on all other *Madrasas*¹⁷ and on the local Muslim community as well.

The strong presence of the *Ulama* and the proliferation of an orthodox sense of Islam through *Quomi Madrasa* networks in Brahmanbaria formed the background to the contestation between the *Ulama* and one NGO’s endeavours to arrange a fair for its women clients in 1998. NGOs initially began to emerge as a humanitarian movement in post-independent Bangladesh,¹⁸ but have now become a ‘modernizing force’ intended to bring the rural poor, especially

¹⁵ Interview with Mufti Nurullah, *Muhtamim*, Jamia Islamia Yunusia, September 2004.

¹⁶ All mainstream Muslims are strongly antithetical to the Ahmadis, owing to their belief in the prophecy of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1840-1908). See Friedmann (1999).

¹⁷ In the Brahmanbaria municipal area, there are 36 *Madrasas* and 24 general schools and educational institutions. Of the 36 *Madrasas*, two are *Aliya* (state-aided reformed *Madrasas*) and the remaining 34 are *Quomi*, of which many are patronized and supported by Yunusia *Madrasa*.

¹⁸ At present there are 50,997 NGOs registered under the Social Welfare Ministry. See ‘Over 23,000 NGOs’ Activities Unknown.’ *In Daily Star*, 11 July, 2009, Dhaka.

the women, out of the traditional patriarchy system by using their cheap labour in the context of economic globalisation (Karim 2004: 292). The NGOs also promote certain liberal discourses and social behaviours among rural women with a view to increase their social mobility and to fight against the deeply rooted social and familial patriarchy. This sentiment produces 'the asymmetrical power and material distinctions between them [women] and the rural clergy, and [they] have become symbols of immense resentment for the clergy who feel diminished by the NGOs' work with the poor' (Karim 2004: 300). The following assertion resembles the *Ulama's* reflection about the relation between Islam and NGOs.

Free-mixing culture between males and females is encouraged in the name of imparting education [in NGOs]. They [NGOs] are instigating the women's attitude against *Purdah* (veil). BRAC, a national NGO, is undermining the traditional rural *Dini* (Din; religion) environment by allowing women to ride bicycles and drive mopeds. In the guise of women's freedom, the NGOs are plotting a deep conspiracy for breaching the familial integrity (Tadnan 2001: 14).

In this context, when Proshika, a national NGO, was preparing to arrange a *Bijoy Mela* (victory fair) under the banner of *Trinamul Sanghathan* (Grassroots Organisation) with their women clients from 7 to 11 December, 1998, the *Ulama* of Brahmanbaria vehemently opposed it, calling the fair 'un-Islamic', since women were to be allowed to mix freely with men. The program was to be held at the Niaz Mohammad Stadium in the town. The Kawtali Jame Mosque was a very short distance from the program venue. The *Imam* of the mosque, Maulana Abdul Hafiz, told the other *Ulama* in Brahmanbaria about the program. When preparation started at the stadium, Maulana Hafiz and some of his followers protested the

program. He asserted that ‘they [the NGO] are distributing posters with women’s pictures and musical instruments. These are *Be-shariati* (against Islamic law)’. He expressed that it was unacceptable that thousands of women would attend this fair *Be-purdah*, without veils.¹⁹ Proshika wanted to make their rural women clients aware of social injustice, gender discrimination, and rural elites and clergy using traditional folk cultural forms such as folk theatre and songs. This kind of rural fair also aimed to promote such values through folk cultural forms. The *Ulama*, including Maulana Hafiz, deemed the cultural forms to be performed at the fair ‘un-Islamic’. Nevertheless, the organisers, with support from the chief development agencies, ADAB (Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh), claimed that organising the fair was a constitutional and democratic right for the women (Centre for Bangladesh Studies 2001: 15).

The discourses about the *Be-shariati* activities at the proposed fair began to proliferate among the *Ulama* circle in Brahmanbaria. In this context, the *Ulama* mobilised discourses against the fair and the Proshika. The chief *Alim*, Maulana Sirajul Islam, who was the director of Jamia Yunusia Madrasa and who was commonly known as *Boro Huzur* (The Eldest Scholar; a name symbolising reverence for his piety), issued an Islamic injunction against the fair, since it would allow free mixing between men and women, gambling, drinking, and puppet shows; all of which was deemed by the local *Ulama* to be ‘un-Islamic’ activities.²⁰ The local *Ulama* met with the District Commissioner in order to seek a legal prohibition of the program. The local administration banned the program when the *Ulama* declared that they would arrange a *Tafsirul Quran* (gathering for a Quranic sermon) in the same place for an indefinite period of time, causing a potential clash between the *Ulama* and the

¹⁹ *Daily Prothom Alo*, 6 December, 1998, cited in Centre for Bangladesh Studies (2001: 8).

²⁰ According to conversations with local people in Brahmanbaria, September 2004.

NGO. Nevertheless, the Proshika continued to vow to arrange the program, branding it as a conflict between pro-liberation and anti-liberation forces.

In this situation, the organiser changed the program format and its venue. They arranged a public gathering (*Shomabesh*) and rally at another place in the town, which was close to the location in which Yunusia *Madrassa* was located. On December 7th, 1998, a huge rally—participated in mostly by rural poor women, many of whom did not know about the *Ulama*'s opposition—attended the gathering. Soon afterward, the followers of the local *Ulama*, mostly *Quomi-Madrassa* graduates, staged a violent attack on the rally. According to an eyewitness, several participants in the rally were severely injured.²¹ In the following days, attacks were propagated on various NGO offices and the town was jeopardised. The national dailies portrayed this incident as *Moulobadi* (fundamentalists) attacking the Proshika and its clients.²² This attack, however, was not only aimed at the Proshika; rather, it was aimed at the ideas and values that the NGOs were attempting to promote among rural women. Afterward, the *Muhtamim* (director) of the Yunusia *Madrassa* acknowledged that the students of the *Madrassa* had protested against this 'un-Islamic' activity. He justified the protest and the students' attacks by saying that the NGO promoted *Be-dini* (un-Islamic) education among the Muslim people.²³

Mobilizing Islam against *Baul* Sculptures

Many *Ulama* are not only concerned about the effects of the modernisation process among Muslims, but sometimes they also

²¹ According to conversations with local people and a handout that contains the eyewitness's written statement to a Judicial Inquiry Commission that was investigating the incident's aftermath.

²² For example, see *Daily Janakantha*, 8 to 10 December, 1998, Dhaka.

²³ Interview with Mufti Nurullah, *Muhtamim*, Jami'a Islamia Yunusia *Madrassa*, September 2004, Brahmanbaria.

pose challenges to Bengali cultural mores. As we discussed earlier, Bengali-ness has been contested in the wake of an emerging sense of ‘Muslim-ness’ in Bangladesh, so the contemporary *Ulama*’s activism against Bengali cultural mores and symbols is also influenced by the inherent nature of the cultural contradiction in Bengal. In this section, I will illustrate a case of the *Ulama*’s activism in which they mobilised against the erection of *Baul* sculptures, a symbol of the Bengali people’s historical cultural tradition, in Dhaka.

The *Bauls* ‘had emerged from the broader Buddhist Sahajiya and the Vaisnava Sahajiya background and had also intermingled with the Sufi mysticism and the Bhakti movement of the medieval *Sant* mystics of northern India’ (Dasgupta 1994: 70). They are referred to as ‘a category of wandering minstrel, mystical seer, or initiate into a system of esoteric practices’ (Openshaw 1997: 20). They are widely known for their melodious mystical songs, the ‘*Baul* songs’, played on a simple musical instrument called the *Ek-tara* (one-string). *Bauls* are not associated with any world religion; rather, they believe in the Oneness of God and pursue him within their inner soul. The fusion and contact between different religious morals makes their religious tradition syncretistic (see Togawa 2008). The great Bengali *Baul*, Lalon Shah (d. 1890), a mystic poet and singer, was born in a Hindu family and searched for the universality of religions through mysticism and philosophical songs (Togawa 2008: 30). It is believed that the great modern Bengali poets, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore, were heavily influenced by the *Baul* songs (see Openshaw 1997). The *Bauls* became popular among urban educated Bengali people at the end of the nineteenth century. Modern Bengali pop songs are often infused with *Baul* songs in contemporary Bangladesh.

In the nineteenth century, Islamic reformist movements had an impact on the developing orthodox sense of ‘Muslim-ness’, as we

have discussed. During that time, the *Ulama* criticised the *Bauls* as *Be-Sharia Fakir* (anti-*Sharia Fakir*; *Bauls* are also known as *Fakir*). For instance, the Anjuman Ulama-i-Bangla (association of the *Ulama* in Bangla), an organisation formed in 1913 in Kolkata during the British reign over India which aimed to preach orthodox Islam among the Bengali Muslims, initiated a campaign against the *Bauls* of the present-day Rangpur district in Bangladesh (Datta 1999: 98). Their accusations against the *Bauls* were that they were influenced by Hindu theological orientations (Datta 1999: 98-99).

This historical backdrop has also had an impact on the *Ulama*, who consider the cults of *Baul* to be infused with Hindu religious practices. Such a negative correlation between the *Baul* cults and Islamic culture engendered a protest against the erection of five *Baul* sculptures, which included a statue of the illustrious *Baul* Lalon Shah with an *Ek-tara*, at the intersection of a road near Zia International Airport in Dhaka in October of 2008. The airport is few kilometres away from the centre of the capital city. There are several *Quomi Madrasas* and a Hajj Camp near the contiguous areas of the airport. For instance, Jami'a Babus Salam, a *Quomi Madrasa*, is located in close proximity to the airport. When the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) began to erect sculptures of five *Bauls* created by sculptor Mrinal Haque at an intersection in front of the airport as part of their beautification project, the *Ulama* from the nearby *Madrasas* and mosques protested. One of the *Ulama*, Mufti Nur Hossain Nurani, the *Ameer* (head) of the Khatme Nabuwat Andolon (Movement for the Finality of Prophethood) and *Imam* of a local mosque, began to mobilise the *Madrasa* students against the erection of the sculpture, and the local *Ulama* formed a committee, called the

‘Bimanbandar Golchottar Murti Protirodh Committee’ (Committee for the Prevention of Sculpture at the Intersection of the Airport).²⁴

The *Ulama* under the committee’s banner protested the erection of the *Baul* sculptures by exploiting the name of Islam. They claimed that human-formed sculptures were against Islam and said that they did not want Muslims, who usually use the road for their pilgrimage journey, to see the sculpture before going to Mecca. They not only demanded the removal of the human-formed *Baul* sculptures, but also the erection of a *Hajj-minar* (Hajj-tower) in the same place. When the government removed the sculptures in response to the *Ulama*’s protest, it sparked further protests among the secular-cultural Bengali people who consider the *Bauls* to be a part of their national cultural heritage. The editorial of an English daily criticised the decision to remove the sculptures and urged that their erection ‘was not a question of any deities being placed, it was not meant to ever hurt any religious sentiment but to recognise, honour, and showcase iconic figures of our rich cultural heritage’.²⁵ Many social and cultural groups and secular intellectuals from public universities wrote newspaper columns and arranged processions and protests against the *Ulama* and against the removal of the sculptures. Some cultural groups interpreted it as an assault against the freedom of creation and artistic expression; many of them demanded that the intersection be named *Lalon Chattar* (Lalon Ground).²⁶ One popular novelist wrote a literary article about the sculpture debate by illustrating several examples of the erection of statues and sculptures in other Muslim countries.²⁷ On the contrary, the pro-Islamic dailies supported the *Ulama*’s endeavour against the *Baul* sculptures. A modern Muslim intellectual and former

²⁴ ‘Removal of Sculptures Sparks Protests’. *Daily Star*, 17 October, 2008, Dhaka; Daily Prothom Alo, 16 October, 2008, Dhaka.

²⁵ Abandoning the Sculpture Project: How long will we allow religion to be misused? Editorial, *Daily Star*, 19 October, 2008, Dhaka.

²⁶ *Daily Prothom Alo*, 25 October, 2008.

²⁷ *Daily Prothom Alo*, 27 October, 2008.

professor at a public university asserted that the *Baul* cult is against Islam and does not conform to Quranic precepts. He alleged that the sexual habits and other aspects of *Baul* people were not 'civilised' and were therefore not replicable for educated gentry.²⁸ Many Islamists, especially *Quomi*-educated Islamists, supported the *Ulama* in this debate. Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini, the leader of IOJ, threatened that statues built by the Awami League would be demolished if an Islamic government were formed in the country.²⁹ This confrontation between the secular, cultural Bengali Muslims and the *Ulama* is the embodiment of a deep cultural contradiction that illuminates the uncertain ways in which Bengali Muslims' cultural link with Islam fits into the Bengali cultural tradition.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I attempted to illustrate the role of the *Ulama* in contemporary Bangladesh. Although the impact of modernisation resulted in the emergence of 'modern Muslim activist intellectuals; and weakening the role of the *Ulama*, this study suggests that the traditional *Ulama* have a profound role in the mobilisation of grassroots Islamic activism. The activism mobilised by the *Ulama* can be viewed as a response to the changing circumstances of society. The legitimised incorporation of Islam in state policy and the promotion of Islam in Bangladeshi public life facilitated the social and political transformation of the *Ulama* and engendered their political outcry. Moreover, an orthodox sense of 'Muslim-ness' among the *Ulama* is currently challenging the Bengali cultural tradition as well as the nature of Bengali nationalism. Although the notion of the Bangladeshi identity has replaced the notion of the Bengali identity, in part because of the re-emergence of Islam and in part due

²⁸ Ebne Gholam Samad. *Khachar Vetur Ochin Pakhi* [the strange bird of a cage]. In *Daily Naya Diganta*, 27 October, 2008.

²⁹ 'Statues will be Pulled Down If Islamists Come to Power'. In *Daily Star*, 18 October, 2008.

to regional distinctiveness, a sense of 'Muslim-ness' still attempts to supplant the secular and modernising forces as well as the Bengali cultural heritage. The contradictions between Bengali culture and Islam and between national identity and Islam are rooted in the recent politics of Islam, in the nature of the state, and in the absence of a clear synthesis of local culture and orthodox Islam.

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