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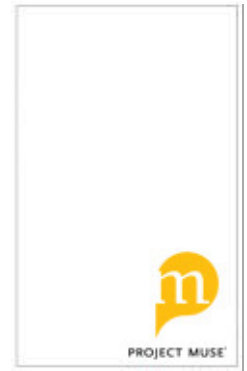
Sufi Pluralism in Bangladesh: The Case of the  
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Sarwar Alam

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# Sufi Pluralism in Bangladesh: The Case of the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa

Sarwar Alam\*

(I)

The following statement was made by one of the devotees of Maizbhandariyya Tariqa of Bangladesh: “I have been familiar with *Maizbhandar Sharif* for about 23 years, but I have been attached to it for about the past 12 years. I first heard the name of Shahanshah Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari in 1985/86. During the year 1987, I attended his birthday celebration (*Khoshroz Sharif*) with the intention of just socializing and eating, but I ended up catching a glimpse of him. I visited the place again with one of my friends in 1991. I went there around ten or eleven o’clock at night. I ate *tabarruk* (blessed food) and went to the fifth floor of the guesthouse, where I slept on a bamboo mat with a brick under my head. I woke up the next morning and walked around on the main street of the *Dargah Sharif*, where I enjoyed the morning breeze and felt something in my heart....I felt from my soul an attachment to the Maizbhandar Sharif; and I cried....Everything of mine becomes tranquil when I go there. Everything in me...I mean, how to say, I just simply do not feel the urge to ever return home.”

During an in-depth interview, he expressed the process of his interiorization of experience as a devotee as well as of his faith in the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa. This article discusses the influence of Sufism, especially the Maizbhandari Sufis in Bangladesh, in developing a harmonious and pluralistic society.

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\*Sarwar Alam received his doctorate in Public Policy at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, in 2006. Before moving to the United States, he served in the Civil Service of Bangladesh. He has been a postdoctoral fellow in the department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia since 2007.



The population of Bangladesh is 135 million, out of which 88 percent is Muslim, making Bangladesh the third largest Muslim country in the world. Most scholars believe that the majority of the population embraced Islam through the influence of the *Sufis* (mystics, holy men);<sup>1</sup> but also through the influence of non-Sufi preachers. Both the urban and rural societies in Bangladesh contain four overlapping Islamic traditions: (i) an accommodationist and tolerant tradition of coexistence of different faiths that influence one another on a religio-cultural basis under the influence of Sufis and *Pirs* (spiritual preceptor); (ii) a scripturally literalist and socially active Islamic tradition derived from the influence of revivalist reform movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; (iii) a modern Islamist tradition mostly derived from radical and militant Islamist political parties and organizations; and (iv) a secularized and modernist tradition of Islam derived from the European education introduced by the British colonial rulers.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the non-Sufi Sunni Islamic tradition, Sufi ideologies of different traditions have a great influence upon the daily lives of most Bangladeshi Muslims. Like in the early days of Islam on the Bengal frontier, Sufis still maintain important connections between Islam and the masses. In fact, a large majority of Bangladeshi Muslims perceives Sufis as sources of their spiritual wisdom and guidance<sup>3</sup> and their *khanqahs* and *dargahs* are the nerve centers of Muslim society.<sup>4</sup>

Like in many other Muslim countries, Sufism is a contested phenomenon in Bangladesh. One of the oldest stereotypes in Islam is the eternal conflict between the legalist and mystic.<sup>5</sup> This is partly because the core idea of Sufism, “*ma’rifā*” (gnosis or mystical knowledge), does not appear in the

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<sup>1</sup>Anisuzzaman, *Muslim-manash o Bangla Shahitya [Muslim-intellect and Bengali Literature]*, third edition (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Muktaadhara, 1983), 25; Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), 260; Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (Down to A. D. 1538)*, second edition (Chittagong, Bangladesh: Baitush Sharaf Islamic Research Institute, 1985), 185.

<sup>2</sup>Sarwar Alam, *ForDomestic Use Only: Muslim Women’s Perception of Power and Powerlessness in a Bangladesh Village* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2006), 81.

<sup>3</sup>Peter J. Bertocci (2002), “Form and Variation in Maizbhandari Sufism.” Available at <http://www.sunniravvi.org/Data/Jan%202005/Bertocci.doc> retrieved on May 31, 2007

<sup>4</sup>Karim 1985, 185

<sup>5</sup>Vincent J. Cornell, “Faḳīh Versus Faqīr in Marinid Morocco: Epistemological Dimensions of a Polemic,” in Frederick De Jong & Bernd Radtke (eds.) *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1999, pp. 207-224), 207.



Qur'an or in any prominent prophetic report or Hadith.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, it has been argued that South Asian Sufism is a form of folk Islam, or syncretic religion.<sup>7</sup> Revivalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries preached against Sufi practices in order to establish "normative" Islam, although, ironically, some of the reformists themselves were linked with Sufi orders.

In this article I shall focus on one of the Sufi orders of Bangladesh, the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa, "to which an unknown, but undoubtedly myriad number, of Bangladeshis claim some measure of adherence."<sup>8</sup> This order transgresses the common standard of normative Islam established by the *ulama* (scholars) at least in two ways: (a) it admits as members not only Muslims, but also people from other faiths; (b) it gives precedence to ethics over rituals. One of the distinct characteristics of this order is that it accommodates the two most dominant Sufi orders of South Asia, the Qadiriyya and the Chishtiyya, together.<sup>9</sup> I shall also discuss how the accommodative nature of this Sufi order is an integral part of Bengali culture. In addition, I shall discuss the importance of this Sufi order in building a civil society in contrast to the activities of radical Islamists, who are against the practices of the Sufis and their followers in upholding as well as propagating the Islamic faith.

## (II)

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BENGALI SUFISM

Present-day Bangladesh officially came under Muslim rule in the early thirteenth century CE, after the invasion of Bengal in 1204 by a Turkish general Ikhtyar Uddin Muhammad bin Bakhtyar Khalji.<sup>10</sup> Available historical artifacts show that the people of Bengal, especially in the coastal areas of the region, were introduced to Islamic traditions before the Turkish

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<sup>6</sup>Ahmet T. Karamustafa, in the "Preface" of *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology*, trans. & ed. John Renard (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), xi.

<sup>7</sup>For details, see Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition of Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup>Bertocci 2002.

<sup>9</sup>Similar situation occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Morocco when *Jazuliyya* order made doctrinal connection with the *Shadhiliyya* and *Qadiriyya* orders. See for details Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 175.

<sup>10</sup>For details, see Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).



invasion.<sup>11</sup> Arabic names of some localities of Chittagong have led some scholars to speculate that people of the coastal regions of Bengal were familiar with Islamic traditions long before the arrival of Bakhtyar Khalji. Arab traders had visited the coastal areas as early as the eighth century CE.<sup>12</sup> In addition, historical evidence shows that some Sufis visited and settled in other parts of Bengal before the Muslim invasion. People embraced Islam following the examples of simplicity, egalitarianism, and notions of brotherhood these holy men established.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to the coming of Islam, Hinduism (*Sanatana Dharma*), *Jainism*, and *Buddhism* dominated the socio-religious and cultural milieu of Bengal.<sup>14</sup> In describing this cultural milieu, Richard Eaton maintains, “Characterized either by an egalitarian agrarian society organized around Buddhist monastic institutions or by a hierarchically ordered agrarian society presided over by Brahman priests, Sanskrit civilization in both its Buddhist and its Brahmanic forms had moved down the Gangesic Plain and into the Bengal delta many centuries before Muhammad Bakhtiyar’s coup of 1204.”<sup>15</sup> Eaton (1993) observes that it was the Sufis who played vital roles in mass conversion by engaging themselves in forest clearing and land reclamation as well as by their reputation for charisma. In describing the authority of the Sufis, Eaton argues that between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, the authority of the charismatic Sufis in Bengal rested on three overlapping bases: their connection with the forest, their connection with the supernatural world, and their connection with mosques by which they were believed to institutionalize the cult of Islam. Thus, Islamization involved a displacement of local superhuman agencies by Islamic ones. Eaton also observes that the common elements in the perceptions of superhuman agencies of both indigenous and Islamic cosmologies helped the Sufis become accepted in the Hindu and Buddhist communities. Allah was perceived as the high God followed by

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<sup>11</sup>Syed Murtaza Ali, *Saints of East Pakistan* (Dacca, East Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1.

<sup>12</sup>For detail, see Tofael Ahmed, *Jugey Jugey Bangladesh* [Bangladesh in Different Eras] (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Nawroze Kitabistan, 1992), 38-39; Syed Ali Ahsan, *Bangla Sahitter Itihas: Adi Parbo* [History of Bengali Literature: Ancient Phase] (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Shilpataru Prakashani, 1998), 6, 17; Syed Murtaza Ali 1971, 1.

<sup>13</sup>Karim 1985, 46.

<sup>14</sup>Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parbo* [History of Bengalis: Ancient Phase] (Calcutta, India: Book Emporium, 1949, corresponding Bengali calendar year was 1356), 288-289, 520-521, 603-605.

<sup>15</sup>Eaton 1993, xxiii.



superhuman agents such as the Prophet Muhammad at the upper end of the spiritual hierarchy and various *Pirs* (spiritual preceptors), with their charismatic powers, at the lower end. According to Eaton, this hierarchy was so similar to the indigenous non-Muslim people that they did not perceive Islam as an alien belief system. He contends that the involvement of Sufis along with the ruler's policy of expanding arable land, made Islam synonymous with agrarian growth. Thus, Islam was perceived culturally by the locals as a civilization-building ideology, not as an alien tradition.<sup>16</sup>

However, in reviewing the state of Sufism in the Bengali context, some scholars draw different conclusions. They maintain that as Sufism spread in India, it gradually lost its original Qur'anic flavor by assimilating many Indian philosophical ideas. But they also maintain, "Growth of cordiality and unity between the Hindus and the Muslims of Bengal is one of the great achievements that the Sufis accomplished in this country."<sup>17</sup> The accommodationist character of Bengali Islam continued until the coming of Islamic revivalist movements in the nineteenth century.

One of these was the *Fara'idi* movement, which began as a puritanical movement against the Hindu rites and rituals among the Muslims but soon emerged as a protest movement against Hindu landlords as well as British rule in Bengal.<sup>18</sup> Two other movements, known as *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya* and *Tayuni*, were also reformist, but *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya* (and also the *Fara'idi*) was more radical in nature. Like the *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya* of Morocco, the Indian *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya* was also a reformist movement with an inclination to Sufism.<sup>19</sup> The adherents of this movement were also loosely known as the Wahhabis in India. But it is argued that there was no apparent relationship between Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia and so-called Wahhabism of India.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, among these reform movements, only *Fara'idi* and *Tayuni* were most active in the then East Bengal. However, after the demise of these two movements, another movement known as Tablighi Jama'at arrived on the scene and aimed at

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<sup>16</sup>Eaton 1993, 310.

<sup>17</sup>See for details, Haq 1975, 287.

<sup>18</sup>Muinuddin Ahmad Khan states that Haji Shari'at Allah was initiated into Qadiriyya order, *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal* (1818-1906) (Karachi, Pakistan Historical Society, 1965), lxxviii, 17; also see Khan, "Muslim Freedom Movements," in S. Islam (ed.) *History of Bangladesh*, second edition, three vols. (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997, pp. 3:187-214), 213.

<sup>19</sup>For details, see Cornell, 1998, 199-229.

<sup>20</sup>Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 250; also see Khan 1965.



purifying Islamic practices.<sup>21</sup> These revivalist and puritanical movements deepened Islamic consciousness as well as shaped present-day Bengali Muslim customs and institutions.<sup>22</sup> Bangladesh has the largest organization of Tablighi Jama'at in the Muslim world and its annual *ijtima*, or congregation, is the second largest gathering of Muslims after the annual *hajj* in Mecca.

More recent Islamist activists are also against sufi practices in Bangladesh. Organizations such as *Harkatul Jihad*, *Jamaatul Mujahideen*, *Hizbut Tawhid*, and *Jagrata Muslim Janata* (the Awakened Muslim Masses of Bangladesh), are opposed to venerating the dargah (shrine) of any Sufi or Pir. Some of the activists of these organizations are veterans of the Afghan war and are also influenced by the *Wahhabi* ideology of Saudi Arabia. The bombings of the *dargahs* of Shah Jalal (d. 1347 CE) in Sylhet<sup>23</sup> on January 12, 2004 and of Faila Paglar Mela in Taingail<sup>24</sup> on January 17, 2003 are two examples of their active opposition to Sufi practices in Bangladesh. The *Wahhabi*-influenced Islamists perceive worship at shrines of Pirs as *shirk* (associating partners with Allah). Without considering the historical context and spirit of Islam in Bengal, they follow a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and declare Jihad (holy war) against those who are against them.

### (III)

#### THE MAIZBHANDARIYYA TARIQA AND ITS TEACHINGS

Gausul Azam Shah Sufi Hazrat Maulana Ahmad Ullah (1826-1906) was the founder of the Maizbhandariyya Order. Three other leading Sufis of this Order were Shah Sufi Hazrat Syed Gholamur Rahman (1865-1937), Shah Sufi Hazrat Syed Delaor Husayn (1892-1982), and Hazrat Shahanshah Syed Ziaul Haque (1928-1988). Maizbhandari Shaykhs are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and are followers of Qadiriyya Sufi lineage.<sup>25</sup> Their forefathers arrived in Bengal from Delhi in 1575 CE and settled in the region of Chitagong. Hazrat Ahmad Ullah's father Maulana Syed

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<sup>21</sup>Syed Delaor Husayn Maizbhandari, *Belayet-e-Mutlaka*, eighth edition (Chittagong, Bangladesh: Anjuman-e-Mottabe'in-e-Gaus-e-Maizbhandari, 2001), 40

<sup>22</sup>For details, see Bertocci, "Islam and Social Construction of the Bangladesh Countryside," in R. Ahmed (ed.), *Understanding the Bengal Muslims: Interpretative Essays* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 71-85), 79.

<sup>23</sup>For details, see *Star Weekend Magazine*, Vol. 4, Issue 60, August 26, 2005. Available at <http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2005/08/04/cover.htm> (accessed 24 April 2007).

<sup>24</sup>For details, see *Weekly Holiday* January 24, 2003, available at <http://www.weeklyholiday.net/240103/mis.html> (accessed 28 April 2007).

<sup>25</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 40.



Matiullah moved to Maizbhandar, a village of Fatikchhari sub-district.<sup>26</sup> The Maizbhandari Order takes its name from this village.

Hazrat Ahmad Ullah, graduated from the *Alia madrasa* in Calcutta, then the capital of British India. Later, he left the position of *Qadi* of Jessore district and held a teaching position in a madrasa in Mitia Buruz in West Bengal. During that time he met the descendant and Khalifa of the Qadiriyya Order Sheikh Syed Abu Shahama Muhammad Saleh Qadiri Lahori, who initiated him into the Qadiriyya Order.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, Hazrat Ahmad Ullah returned to his native village of Maizbhandar, where he blended the doctrines and practices of other Sufi orders, especially the Chishtiyya, along with those of his own Qadiriyya order in introducing the Maizbhandariyya Path. He professed a moral code that was integrated within the limits of the Shari'a and the changing demands of the times. He called his new moral order *Mutlaka-e-Ahmadi* (the "Unfettered Ahmadi Order") or the order of unchained divine love.<sup>28</sup> Maizbhandari Sufis claim that the famous Andalusian Shaykh Ibn Arabi (d. 1240 CE) predicted the arrival of Hazrat Maulana Ahmad Ullah and his order.<sup>29</sup>

The aims and objectives of the Maizbhandariyya Sufi Order are as follows: (1) achieving nearness to God by abandoning mundane self-interests; (2) establishing universal ideals of religious-equality by minimizing religious conflicts in the world; (3) motivating humankind toward a true and just life; (4) encouraging humane attributes; (5) ensuring mundane and spiritual well-being; (6) attaining God through love; and (7) establishing personal and social peace by restraining all kinds of moral erosion. To achieve these objectives, one should observe the following rules: (1) to believe in the unity of God and complete submission to God; (2) to restrain from activities that are contrary to Qur'an and Sunna; (3) to follow all the directives of the Qur'an and Hadith; (4) to depend in God's sovereignty completely; (5) to follow the lights of knowledge of the saints or holy men; (6) to abandon superstitions and blind beliefs; and (7) to attain a good character.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 40.

<sup>27</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 41.

<sup>28</sup>Muhammad Abdul Mannan Chowdhury, *Maizbhandari Darshan: Utpatti, Bikash o Bisheshatta* [Maizbhandari Philosophy: Origin, Development and Characteristics] (Chittagong, Bangladesh: Anjuman-e-Mottabe'in-e-Gaus-e-Maizbhandari, 2002), 8.

<sup>29</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 35.

<sup>30</sup>Chowdhury 2002, 9-10.



The Maizbhandariyya Tariqa combines three spiritual streams: the Qadiriyya, the Chishtiyya, and the Khidhiriyya.<sup>31</sup> The first stream suggests performing of *dhikr* (invocation) to purify the soul. The second stream suggests the performance *sama* (devotional song) as a form of prayer. The third is the Khidhiriyya stream, named after the Prophet Khidhir, which focuses on the secret and mysterious laws of nature. Officially part of the Qadiriyya order, the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa integrates *telawat-e-ozud* or seven kinds of *dhikr* (invocation) from the Qadiriyya order with its *usul-e-sab'a* or seven fundamentals of restraint.<sup>32</sup> To achieve his objectives, the *salik* or wayfarer is recommended to observe both of these practices, in addition to fasting and regular prayer.

(A) *Telawat-e-ozud*: One of the aims of the Maizbhandari *dhikr* is to create a mind capable of searching for knowledge. While performing *dhikr*, the *salik* imagines the reflection of the word Allah over his face, thus enlightening and imbuing himself with the Divine lights and attributes. There are seven layers of the human ego or *nafs*. The nature of each *dhikr* depends upon the nature of each *nafs*. To gain control over these seven layers of *nafs* there are seven layers of *dhikr*:

- (1) *al-nafs al-ammara* (the Imperious Mind). This is an instigating stage, where the mind is inclined to commit evil deeds. This stage refers to the visible world, consisting of the instincts of jealousy, bickering, artificiality, and anger that indulge human beings in eating, drinking, merrymaking, and having illicit sex. To get rid of this *nafs*, the *salik* meditates on the thought “May my visible world be immersed in [God’s] strength” while at the same time performing *dhikr* by uttering “*La ilaha illallah*” (There is no god but Allah). The *salik* utters this *dhikr* 100,000 times.
- (2) *al-nafs al-lawwama* (the Reproving Mind). At this stage the devotee gains a partial control over his mind by expressing repentance for his misdeeds and seeks refuge in Allah, which ultimately help create *’ishq* or love of God in him. At this stage, following the directives of the spiritual guide, the devotee utters word “Allah” 78,000 times.

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<sup>31</sup>For details, see [http://www.sufimaizbhandar.org/maizbhandari\\_school\\_of\\_thought.htm](http://www.sufimaizbhandar.org/maizbhandari_school_of_thought.htm) (accessed 29 April 2007).

<sup>32</sup>Chowdhury 2002, 7.



- (3) *al-nafs al-mulhima* (the Inspiratory Mind). This stage refers to the world of ruh, or soul. At this stage the devotee develops a close relationship with Allah, and loves Allah free of any other desire. It is thus a stage of divine blessing. At this stage the devotee utters word “*hu*” (Arabic huwwa, “He”) 44, 000 times. This ultimately helps efface the ego of the devotee.
- (4) *al-nafs al-mutma’iyya* (The Peaceful Mind). This is a stage of satisfaction. This stage refers to a mystical world comprising a compassionate desire for union with God. At this stage, following the directives of the guide, the devotee performs the *dhikr* by uttering “*Ya Hiyo*” (“O Eternal”) 20, 000 times.
- (5) *Rajia* (Dominance of the Divine Will). This stage refers to *mokam-e-lahut* or the Stage of Infinity. At this stage, following the directives of the guide, the devotee mediates “O God, enlighten me with your light” and performs *dhikr* by uttering the word “*wahdahu*” (“His Oneness”) 30, 000 times.
- (6) *Morjia* (Contentment in God). This refers to a Godly inspired, and prejudice-free stage. In this stage, the devotee recites “*Ya Azizu*” (“O Great One”) 40, 000 times.
- (7) *Kamela* (Completeness). This refers to the stage where the devotee reflects Godly qualities in himself. This stage generates universal love in human mind. At this stage the devotee also reaches the stage of *makam-e-wahadat*, or seeing the One in everything. At this stage the devotee performs *dhikr* by remembering the word “*wa a’budu*” (“I worship”) 10, 000 times.

(B) *Usul-e-sab’a* (the Seven Fundamentals) refers to the ways of restraining bad instincts in order to achieve and sustain good instincts. Hazrat Ahmad Ullah introduced these fundamentals, also called *Sapta Paddhati*, “Seven Paths,” to achieve the ideals and objectives of the Order. The *Sapta Paddhati* is divided into two parts: (i) *Fana-e-salasa* (The Three Annihilation), and (ii) *Maut-e-arba’* (The Four Deaths).<sup>33</sup>

The practice of *Fana-e-salasa* (The Three Annihilation) is comprised of the following:

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<sup>33</sup>Husayn Maizbhandari 2001, 69.



- (1) *Fana anil khalk* (Annihilation of Humanity) means the practice of self-reliance; not to expect any favors from others or not to keep any such desire in mind,
- (2) *Fana anil hawa* (Annihilation of Desire) means avoidance of unnecessary things, and avoidance of unnecessary activities and utterances in order to make life easy and free of difficulties.
- (3) *Fana anil erada* (Annihilation of Will) means giving preference to the will of Allah and surrendering personal will or desire in Allah's will.

*Maut-e-arba'* (The Four Deaths)<sup>34</sup> have four components:

- (1) *Maut-e-abiya* (White Death). This is achieved through the practice of fasting and abstinence, which enlightens the mind.
- (2) *Maut-e-aswad* (Black Death). This is achieved through opening oneself to criticism or censures of enemies. This is because criticism and censure help correct a person's faults, which leads the person to repent and beg the mercy of Allah.
- (3) *Maut-e-ahmar* (Red Death). This is achieved through emancipation from sexual impulses and lust; accomplishing this ensures a person's attainment of the status of a perfect saint.
- (4) *Maut-e-akhjar* (Green death). This is achieved by leading a simple life. It helps eradicate lust and desire, and generates Divine love in the mind.

The founder of Maizbhandariyya Order, Hazrat Ahmad Allah, professed that no one—not even a non-believer—should give up his or her own religious practices in order to follow Maizbhandariyya Path.<sup>35</sup> He gave preference to the morality of religion in general over the Shari'a.<sup>36</sup> Disregarding caste, creed and religious affiliation, he believed in complete freedom and individuality with regard to the remembrance of God.<sup>37</sup> As the

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<sup>34</sup>Four deaths appeared in Qushayri. For details see Reynold A. Nicholson, "A Historical Enquiry Concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism, with a List of Definitions of the Terms 'Sufi' and 'Tasawwuf,' Arranged Chronologically." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38(1906): 303-348, 324.

<sup>35</sup>Chowdhury 2002, 22.

<sup>36</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 81.

<sup>37</sup>Chowdhury 2002, 22, and Maizbhandari 2001, 81.



Qur'an says, "Whithersoever Ye turn, there is the Presence of God" (2:115). Love of God and eradicating religious conflicts is another important aspect of his philosophy,<sup>38</sup> as the Qur'an suggests for avoiding chaos and oppression (2:191) and division (3:105). By adhering to the universal principles of the Qur'an, such as verses 2:62 (those who believe shall be rewarded), 2:85 (do not believe in part of the Book and reject the rest), 2:112 (whoever submits his whole self to God will get his reward), 29:69 (those who strive in God's cause will be guided to God's Paths), 46:13 (those who say God as their Lord and remain firm on that Path shall have no fear or grieve), the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa attempts to unite the humankind on moral grounds.<sup>39</sup> Its doctrine states that there are differences in religions, but fundamentally, all religions are the same.<sup>40</sup> It teaches that a prayer that cannot instigate divine love is not a proper prayer. Regardless of religious traditions, a prayer that initiates divine love is a real *salat*, or prayer, and this is the key to minimizing religious conflicts. Different nations have different ways of praying, but one of the fundamentals of all true religion is to prevent the erosion of values among humanity and to develop a human race with a noble character.<sup>41</sup> The Tariqa accepts the diversity of faiths and opposes compulsion, as it is revealed in the Qur'an 22:40 (Did not God check one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure) and 2:256 (Let there be no compulsion in religion). Hazrat Ahmad Allah, founder of the order, did not encourage his non-Muslim devotees to change their religious traditions. When Dhananjay, a Buddhist, wanted to become Muslim, he told him, "I made you Muslim, but you stay in your religion."<sup>42</sup>

The Maizbhandariyya Sufi Order also introduced the notion of "*achar dharma*," or ideal mannerism based on the spirit of religion. Because in addition to the verses 2:62, 2:85, 2:112, 2:113, the Qur'an also advocates respect for another's faith. The following verses are example of this kind: 4:136 (believing in the Prophets before Muhammad, and Books before the Qur'an), 4:152 (no differences between any of the Prophets), 4:162 (reward for those who believe in what has been revealed to them and what was revealed before them), and 3:19 (punishment for those who dissent the Books through envy of each other).

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<sup>38</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 112.

<sup>39</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 57-60.

<sup>40</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 13.

<sup>41</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 90-91.

<sup>42</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 81.



#### (IV)

### CONTENDING ARGUMENTS

Both Sufis and their non-Sufi reformist opponents use the Qur'an and Sunna to justify their positions. The reformists' main argument against Sufism is that it is not consistent with the monotheistic tradition of Islam; it spreads heterodoxy and polytheism. However, Sufis claim that numerous verses in the Qur'an refer to saints (*awliya*) and their roles in promoting monotheism and establishing a moral society. They especially refer to the following two Qur'anic verses as establishing their legitimacy as well as authority: "Obey God, and obey the Apostle, and those charged with authority among you" (4:59); and "Verily, on the friends of God (*awliya Allah*) there is no fear, nor shall they grieve" (10:62). It is argued that "Just as God has no end, likewise there is no end to the understanding of His Word. The saints understand only to the degree that God Most High has opened their hearts to the understanding of His Word."<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, most Sufi practice is grounded in ethics and morality, as "the practical aspect of Sufism may be viewed under the category of ethics," because "the term Sufi was in fact mostly used to signify an ethical ideal that was variously conveyed by many definitions."<sup>44</sup> Generally, the development of a moral movement is not the primary objective of Sufism; rather, it is a consequence of the ideals practiced by the Sufis.

It appears that the Maizbhandariyya Order gives preference to ethics and morality over formal rituals, which is probably one of the most important characteristics of this order, as well as one of the most distinguishing differences from other Sufi Paths. It also appears that the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa aims to reform social cohesiveness by creating an opportunity for dialogue - an attempt to establish peace and harmony and to unite humankind on the basis of morals and ethics. It believes that by promoting negotiation and dialogue, a sense of social harmony can be maintained in the society. According to Syed Muhammad Hasan,

We should maintain a fine balance between everything. By not allowing excessiveness and by not crossing the limit we can maintain that balance. It is also the teaching of Islam that is called *siratul mustaqim* - middle path. Maintaining this fine balance is one of the characteristics of Gausul Azam Maizbhandari...he asked everyone to practice ideal manners and ethics.

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<sup>43</sup>Carl Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1999), 5.

<sup>44</sup>Ernst 1999, 118.



Both field interviews and the writings of Maizbhandari Sufis testify that that this Path focuses on the spirit, not the formalities of religion. For these Sufis, the spirit of Islam calls for harmony both among human beings and between human beings and their environment. As Syed Muhammad Hasan says,

To remind them that as a Muslim you have to perform your overall responsibilities, to remind them to practice, to remind that we have responsibilities on earth, on ecology, and as a whole, to motivate humankind toward the Oneness of Allah, to inspire humankind toward the love of God and the Prophet—this is what Maizbhandariyya Tariqa is all about.

Religious intolerance and extremism are on the rise in Bangladesh since the early 1990s.<sup>45</sup> Extremist religious organizations, motivated by the *Wahhabi* ideologies, bombed secular festivals, religious gatherings of the minority communities, and shrines. These terrorist activities have created tensions between the followers of these organizations and the ordinary people. The Maizbhandariyya Sufis take a clear stand against religious extremism. They discourage religious extremism of any sort. In his interview, Syed Muhammad Hasan stated:

We sometimes slaughter religion in the name of religion; say, by a suicide bomb attack, which is completely prohibited in Islam. Those who are doing these types of slaughter may be doing so out of religious or nationalistic motives, or even out of a feeling of deprivation. We, that is, those who are authority in Islam, should say that this is not the right solution. Jihad does not mean committing suicide....Suicide bombing is popular nowadays. Suicide bombers are even considered heroes, but this is against the basic tenets of Islam. I am not saying that there is no oppression or story behind this type of activity, but one of its consequences is that it creates a diversion. It shifts attention from establishing Islam socially. Instead of establishing the greatness of Islam, these suicidal bombings are creating diversions, false impressions...that is how Islam is becoming synonymous with terrorism, which is not the basic spirit of Islam.

Another aspect of this order is that none of the Shaykhs aggressively propagates the teachings of the order. Syed Muhammad Hasan, reminded us that if one's house is burning, he should take care of his house first, before he says a prayer. Its moderate and accommodative appeal attracts people into becoming its followers. Maizbhandariyya Sufis establish their credibility first by demonstrating and practicing their expressed ideals by themselves. Mainstream Islam in South Asia, "could not, despite its strong

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<sup>45</sup>For details, see A.M.M. Shawkat Ali, *Faces of Terrorism in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: The University Press Limited, 2006), and also Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (New York: Routledge, 2008).



egalitarianism, avoid the social imprint of caste,”<sup>46</sup> but the Maizbhandariyya Sufi ideals of humanism, love, and fraternity transcend narrowly defined communal or class boundaries. They do not believe that Muslims are the only believers of a true religion and encourage their followers to recognize and respect others’ faiths as revealed in the Qur’an 2:62 (mentioned above), and 22:34. In verse 22:34, the Qur’an says, “To every people did We appoint rites (of sacrifice), that they might celebrate the name of God over the sustenance He gave them from animals (fit for food). But your God is One God: Submit then your wills to Him (in Islam): and give thou the good news to those who humble themselves,—.”

Although the Maizbhandariyya Sufi Order is orthodox in observing the basic rituals of Islamic tradition, its doctrines are distinct in many respects from those of exoteric Islamic practice. Examples of the differences include the notion of love, the relation between the Sufis and their devotees, the use of music (*sama*), the performance of extensive *dhikr*, and the respect and tolerance for other faiths. Respect for other faiths is reflected in the writings of Hazrat Delaor Husayn, one of the Shaykhs of this Tariqa, who highly praised Gautam Buddha. During the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, when one of his devotees called for the destruction of Israel, Husayn asked him, “Are [Israelis] not creatures of Allah too?” He concluded by saying that the solution to the Palestinian crisis would come through coexistence with and recognition of Israel, not through war.<sup>47</sup>

The Maizbhandariyya Tariqa is flexible enough to accommodate people of other traditions and faiths in its fold. The Maizbhandariyya Tariqa welcomes everybody—even those who are not Muslims. Despite its adherence to the practice of Shari’a, the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa does not require its adherents to abandon their own religious practices. Syed Muhammad Hasan says,

Followers of other Tariqas can come here and pray according to their Tariqa; and they will receive fayd (divine effulgence) from here. This Tariqa allows that. We perceive Maizbhandar as a platform; it is more accommodative, which you would not find in other Orders. As a devotee, if you go or initiate into some other Tariqa, you have to follow their rules in performing *dhikr*. I believe that this Tariqa is more accommodative. That is why people are attracted to this Tariqa...they may not think very consciously about it, but they have an attraction toward Maizbhandar...they may be followers of other Tariqas, yet they respect this Tariqa.

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<sup>46</sup>Sugata Bose, and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 33.

<sup>47</sup>Jamal Ahmad Sikder, *Shahanshah Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari (K.)*, Sixth Edition (Chittagong, Bangladesh: Gausia Haque Manzil, 2005), 76.



As mentioned earlier, it teaches that the goal of every religion is the same: the closeness to God. It teaches that humankind can be united on the basis of common morality.<sup>48</sup> This is how the Maizbhandari *pirs* try to create a common platform of dialogue from which one can rationally judge the beliefs of another and thus avoid social conflict. The appeal of this inclusive and universalistic ideal attracts people of other faiths to the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa. Some of the best-known composers of Maizbhandari *sama* songs are not Muslim. These include Kabial Romesh Sheel, Monmohan Dutta, Eisan, Vijoy Das, and Roy Bhuban.<sup>49</sup>

It is observed that the followers look upon the Maizbhandari Sufi masters not only for their salvation in the hereafter, but also for the problems they face in their mundane lives. It is believed that the Sufi masters can take care of their devotees' problems, even when they are dead. Thus, seeing the Sufi master when he is alive and venerating the mausoleum when he is dead has great importance in a devotee's life. In this regard one of the scholars contends, "The pir, in ways similar to the prophet, also teaches the 'correct path' and may have particular spiritual powers of healing and performing other miracles. And when he dies, he crosses over into another category of powerful spiritual beings who continue to act in the physical and social world."<sup>50</sup> One of the Maizbhandari devotees stated to me,

Around two weeks ago, Dada (one of the representatives or Khalifas) was talking about how *Bara Pir Sahib* (Abdul Qadir Jilani, founder of the Qadiriyya Tariqa) used to deliver a sermon after the prayer in Baghdad. There is a book about it. However, the inhabitants of Baghdad, his followers, asked him what would happen to them. In response to their question Bara Pir Sahib stated, "I would rescue the inhabitants of Baghdad on the Day of Judgment." Referring to that event, devotees asked Gausul Azam Maizbhandari what he would do for them. He stated, "I would rescue not only those who attended my *Darbar* (court), but also those who passed through my *Darbar*—this side of the *Darbar* is Nanupur and the other side of the *Darbar* is Babu Nagar—I would rescue anybody on the Day of Judgment who visited his brother-in-law's house at Babu Nagar from Nanupur through my *Darbar* and returned to his own house through my *Darbar*."

This conviction in the Sufi master's ability helps devotees follow the ideals preached by the Sufi master, which, in this case, develops a harmonious community based on *akhlaq* or ethics; a community that tolerates and respects the followers of other creeds and faiths. This

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<sup>48</sup>Maizbhandari 2001, 60.

<sup>49</sup>Chowdhury 2002, 60.

<sup>50</sup>Joyce B. Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 179.



statement also expresses the belief of a devotee in his master the way “a corpse rests in the hands of an undertaker.”<sup>51</sup>

In addition to preaching the Islamic faith, Maizbhandariyya Sufi masters preach the service of humankind, sacrifice for others, lead a life free of internal and external conflicts, and promote a compassionate love for God and all human beings. Brotherhood in a common order, a collective consciousness, and common rituals also generate a common social identity distinct from mainstream Muslims. This loosely bonded brotherhood, which constitutes a collective pedagogical experience and a social reality, provides devotees a new outlook based on a humanistic interpretation of religion and love for all human beings. In addition, both the real and perceived relationship between a devotee and a Sufi also has a moral aspect, which is reflected in another statement of a devotee:

There is a verse in the Mathnawi Sharif of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi that says that a faithful heart is the throne (*arsh*) of Allah. There is another verse, which Dada sometimes refers to, that states that staying in front of a wali Allah for a moment is better than thousand years of hidden prayer. This is clearly written in the Mathnawi Sharif. Now the question is whether I have that pure heart or pure intention when I stand in front of him, okay? On the other hand, say the heart of the faithful, where Allah dwells. In whose heart? Who is faithful, who has sacrificed everything, who does not have a family or wealth, who is leading an ascetic life?

The above statement echoes Annemarie Schimmel, who observed:

The heart is the dwelling place of God; or it is, in other terminology, the mirror in which God reflects Himself. But this mirror has to be polished by constant asceticism and by permanent acts of loving obedience until all dust and rust have disappeared and it can reflect the primordial divine light.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to some scholars’ observation that Sufi ethics lack the attitude of social activism,<sup>53</sup> the Maizbhandariyya Tariqa is involved in several community-building activities. Examples of this kind would be the Nanupur irrigation society; the establishment of the Maizbhandari academy; the building of mosques; and the establishment of elementary and high schools, madrasas, clinics, libraries, post offices, and roads.<sup>54</sup> One

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<sup>51</sup>Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of California Press, 1975), 103.

<sup>52</sup>Schimmel 1975, 190.

<sup>53</sup>Riazul Islam, *Sufism in South Asia: Impact on Fourteenth Century Muslim Society* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2000), 351.

<sup>54</sup>Chowdhury 2002, 108.



of the Maizbhandaiyya pirs, Hazrat Delaor Husayn, was known as “Friends of the Poor” because of his generous and benevolent activities.

## (V)

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Historical evidence shows that the vast majority of the population of Bangladesh came in touch with Islam through the influence of the Sufis. They not only preached Islam, but also preached the ideals of egalitarianism, humanism, and morality in a society where people were segregated and divided among various castes. Sufi ideologies of different traditions still have great influence upon the daily lives of most Bangladeshi Muslims, although these ideologies have been challenged by puritanical revivalist movements, such as the *Wahhabis*, and Jama’at-e-Islam. However, a great number of Bangladeshi Muslims still adhere to various Sufi paths.

The Maizbhandariyya Tariqa not only preaches Islam, but also egalitarianism and morality, and thus accommodates people of various religious traditions in its fold. Hazrat Ahmad Allah, the founder of the Maizbhandariyya Order, granted admittance to the people of other faiths to this tariqa without requiring them to give up their religious practices and rituals. That is how the Maizbhandariyya shaykhs propagate the love of God, compromise through religious conflicts, stand against religious extremism, and create an atmosphere of communal harmony and interfaith dialogue.

Every year the *urs* (death celebration) of the Maizbhandariyya saints reinforces the Sufi identity of its adherents despite the debate of the validity of Sufism as an Islamic practice put forward by the *ulama* (theologians). Hundreds of thousands of people from all over Bangladesh attend the *urs* celebrations. Participants in the *urs* celebrations are not only Muslims, but are also from other religious traditions. This religio-cultural practice diminishes the gap between religious differences of the common people, and at the same time increases the probability of interfaith dialogue, building a harmonious community in a time of turmoil, disbelief, and superficiality practiced by the religious extremists. The Maizbhandariyya Sufis of Bangladesh demonstrate that they have the ability to reach people of all classes and backgrounds. Many debates about the true nature of Islam are beyond the reach of the common people, but they know that their Babas and shaykhs are within their reach and can transform and empower them. Maizbhandariyya shaykhs are perceived as the spiritual guides and healers to them during their good times and during their bad times; the Sufi



masters are not only perceived as the propagator of the faith but also the foundation of the very faith, as one of the devotees stated:

The final word about Maizbhandariyya is that it has a beginning, but it does not have an end. Shahanshah Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari once said, “Maizbhandar Sharif is an ocean.” Every ocean has its end; Bay of Bengal ends in Indian Ocean, Indian Ocean ends in Pacific Ocean, but Maizbhandar Sharif is such an ocean that does not have an end. Everything comes up here. Hazrat Gausul Azam Maizbandari once said, “That shop is better in which everything is available; I have everything here.” It is an uncontaminated ocean. Dirty water of a drain or a river becomes pure when it meets an ocean. By their blessings we sank in that ocean—I was contaminated, but I am not contaminated any more.