Religiosity/ Spirituality and Mental Health

A Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

Religion has always been a source of spiritual guidance and reassurance for the followers because of the moral template it provides. However, with the advancement of science and technology, people have slowly drifted away from religion today. Despite the separation of religion from state in "secular" countries like Bangladesh, there is still an implicit presence of religion in the public spheres. But even so, in the newer generations, an increasing trend of neglect towards spirituality is noticeable.

Since religion/ spirituality is always put against "secularism" or modernity, the current generation leans toward scientific and "logical" explanations instead of relying on theistic explanations to understand the world. But even so, there are groups of people in society who still actively choose to practice their faith among their non-religious counterparts. This undoubtedly sidelines the people who are pious and strict followers of religion since they're increasingly losing people they could connect to on similar grounds. This in turn, impacts the mental health of the sidelined people since making sense of the world around them in relation to their beliefs becomes difficult. The treatment these people receive for their faith and inclination towards spiritual guidance instead of "logical explanations" is quite similar if not the same as experiencing culture shock in a completely new environment. This triggers the feeling of helplessness and isolation among the pious and they start feeling like an outsider in their own communities.

As a result, in this research, I would like to look at the struggles spiritual people are facing in a society where there is a disjuncture between spirituality and other ways of life. For this, I conducted interviews with female university students from public and private universities in Bangladesh, who has experienced similar experiences of seclusion. From this data, I tried to derive the impacts it has on the lives of these people, especially their mental health and sense of belonging since faith

and spirituality play an important part in building an individual's character and morale. Understanding the way these people navigate and make sense of the "secular" world around them is the main motive. As a result, my main research questions are - what is "spirituality" to the contemporary young adults of Bangladeshi society, how modern secular society is affecting their spirituality and in turn, how this is impacting their mental health.

Although my hypothesis is that spiritual people have been feeling threatened and unwelcome in today's non-spiritual society, upon closer inspection it became evident that these people aren't always "victims" of the situation. Rather there are certain categories of pious people who are able to combat the prejudices and hold their ground. They continue to navigate their worldview through the lens of religion even if their views may not completely align with the people around them. Although these people are very few in number as of yet and there are social factors like class and hierarchy involved that allow them greater privileges, these individuals who are fighting for the right to exercise their faiths freely do exist and are creating a space for themselves in society.

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CHAPTER1: INTRODUCTION

Religion has always been a source of spiritual guidance and reassurance for the followers because of the moral template it provides. Although the adoption of religion had more to do with "social" elements rather than theological, with time it became an integral part of building society and regulating people. However, with the advancement of science and technology, people have slowly drifted away from religion today. Despite the separation of religion from state in "secular" countries like Bangladesh, there is still an implicit presence of religion in the public spheres. But even so, in the newer generations, an increasing trend of neglect towards spirituality is noticeable. This undoubtedly sidelines the people who are pious and strict followers of religion since they're increasingly losing people they could connect to on similar grounds.

Historically speaking, the concept of "Secularism" emerged from a western standpoint that was focused on separating the church from the state. Eventually, as this became a marker for "modernity" and started being adopted by the rest of the world, the original concept got mixed with the specific cultural and geopolitical contexts, eventually leading to the emergence of different kinds of secularism. Currently, the widely understood meaning of secularism is the separation of religion from the public sphere while individuals carry on with their religious or spiritual beliefs without hindering others.

Since religion/ spirituality (R/S) is seen as an antithesis of modernity, the new "modern" generation leans toward scientific and "logical"/rational" explanations instead of relying on theistic explanations. But even so, there are groups of people in society who still actively choose to practice their faith among their nonreligious counterparts. While this results in the coercion or subjugation

of these groups because of their differences from the rest of the crowd, it also results in them experiencing a culture shock. This undoubtedly impacts the mental health of the sidelined people since they're experiencing a hard time trying to fit into modern society while keeping their faith and beliefs intact. The treatment these pious people are receiving for their faith and inclination towards spiritual guidance instead of "logical explanations" is quite similar if not the same as experiencing culture shock in a completely new environment. This triggers the feeling of helplessness and isolation among the pious and they start feeling like an outsider in their own communities. The feeling of isolation may further stimulate other mental health problems like depression and anxiety.

In this research, I would like to look at the struggles spiritual people are facing in a society where there is a disjuncture between spirituality and other ways of life. For this, I will mainly conduct interviews among the affluent middle-class young adults who have gone through similar experiences of seclusion for their religious faith. For example, I will be interviewing people with strong spiritual or religious beliefs, girls who choose to wear hijab even among the modern crowds and people who have to face a whole new environment in their undergraduate or higher studies. From these data I will try to derive the impacts it has on the lives of these people, especially their mental health and sense of belonging since faith and spirituality play an important part in building an individual's character and morale. Therefore, my main research questions are - what does "spirituality" mean to the contemporary young adults of Bangladeshi society? How modern secular society is affecting their spirituality? And finally, how is this impacting their mental health?

CHAPTER 2: FRAMEWORK

The "secular" model of governance has spread throughout the world like wildfire as a necessary step toward modernisation. But "secularism" is a very murky term. According to Charles Taylor, secularism is the separation of religion from state and this also happens to be the widely accepted definition of the term. However, according to Hirschkind (2011), to date, the proper in-depth analysis of "secular" is missing since it's nearly impossible to pinpoint a "secular bodily ethics". But the simplest and most widespread understanding of secularism is "a distancing from religion or faith", especially because of the influence of modernity and "rational" scientific explanations. But over the past 20 years, this definition has been challenged and critiqued by scholars as Secularism no longer entails only the separation of church from state. This is even more evident with the modern state's increasing involvement in regulating religious institutions. This happens to such an extent that the state is given the power to dictate what is and isn't the proper way of following a religion. Hence, the state becomes the mediator in the religious projects of creating a "compliant society" (Mahmood, 2012).

Defining secularism isn't very simple and straightforward. As Casanova (2009) states, conceptually studying the "secular" prior to "Secularism" is very important. A good deal of concepts and practices together formed "the secular" which in turn, shaped the definitions of "Secularism". In accordance with Asad (2003), secularism isn't merely the separation of religion from government. It also plays an important role in enacting a political medium with redefined differentiating practices of the individuals that are articulated through social categories like class, gender or religion. Asad draws from Charles Taylor's theories of "Modern nation as imagined

communities" and says that - Secularism acts as a tool to unify the various differences of people in order to build a nation-state by making "citizenship" the primary identifier of an individual.

Bourdieu's theory of "habitus" plays an important role here. Through habitus, cultural settings and conditions are established and reproduced. The internalized structures of habitus influence the way an individual perceives the world. And in turn, they become "subjects" who reinforce and reproduce the habitus. Cultural habituses shape our worldly responses and also our political decision in a heterogeneous society (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977).

Bangladesh also declared itself to be Secular after the 1972 constitution, although even today, the dominant religion (Islam) still controls governance. Meaning despite the secular stance we take; the implicit presence of religion has been prevalent in our public sphere. However, in the 21'st century, as modernization and globalization have been reaching new heights, the current generation has been increasingly driven away from religion or spirituality. This shows that secularism doesn't mean the absence of religion, rather they are the two sides of the same coin. Asad and Hirschkind both saw "Secularism" as a different expression of "modernity".

Although spirituality and religiosity are mostly seen as synonyms, there are rather concrete distinctions between the two. The founder of interpretive anthropology - Clifford Geertz described religion as a cultural system. It is a historical transmission of patterns and conceptions through symbols, that influence a person's everyday life starting from food habits to the way they view the world (Geertz, 1973). Religion acts as a guideline or blueprint that advocates how people should live. During times of distress, religion provides a theological "shelter". Peter Berger (1990),

describes this as the "sacred canopy". He believed that religion provided Universal meaning, a homeless mind and a "sacred canopy". The sacred canopy is a layer of protection that shields the individuals from uncertainties by helping them make sense of the world through a religious lens. However, with the process of secularization, the attributes of religion have been lost in society. While Religion has become more institutional and consists of traditional beliefs and cultural practices and is mostly regulated in groups, spirituality is more personal and intimate since it is seen as a search of meaning, truth and values from within (Kao et al., 2020). Religiosity/ Spirituality facilitates a person's hope and give them a sense of purpose, as a result, mental wellbeing has always had a deep connection with spirituality. When traced back a few years, mental health struggles have always been associated with the religious or spiritual domain. Drifting away from religion or demonic possessions is to date seen as an explanation for mental illnesses in many smaller parts of our country. Hence the connection between mental wellbeing and spirituality is pretty common. However, the contemporary modern generation of our country has increasingly been driven away from religion. This may be due to the expansion of a "secular mindset" where people tend to think being non-religious is a sign of modernity and is more acceptable.

However, just like secularism, the concept of "modernity" is just as hazy. As Asad (2003) says, "modernity" doesn't have a clear and coherent definition. It is rather a project that the people in power seek to achieve by institutionalizing a number of principles like secularism. Hence, modernity is more of a "political-economic project" that the West is imposing on the rest of the world. Since the idea of progress and development is subjective, the concept of modernity should

be the same. But the world relies on the west's blueprint of "modernity" and "secularism" since they're the people in power who get to dictate the definitions.

The trends of religious revival in our country can affect the people and become a reason for people to become a non-believer (Schielke, 2012). There are many believers living along with the non-believers, but many of them live unconventional and impious lives - raising an abundance of questions and doubts in the minds of believers and non-believers both. Hence, Schielke (2012) suggests looking at non-religiosity not as a product of western secularism, but as an intimate moral discontent with the existing idea of religion.

Moreover, the constant implicit hybridisation of politics with religion or using religion as a political tool of social control leads to political chaos. This results in a loss of interest in both politics and spirituality among youths. But the declining trend in spirituality in our youths is pervasive around me.

Even among this growing population of non-religious/spiritual youths, there still remains a group of individuals who have retained their beliefs amidst the secular environment they're living in. And although there have been many works about the non-believers in a religious environment like Samuli Schielke's "Being a Non-Believer in a time of Islamic Revival", there is a lack of studies done on the believers in a population where the number of non-believers is also growing. This creates certain anxieties among the believers or the people who identify themselves in the gray area because "acceptance" becomes an issue if the people around you have different ideologies. Hence, I want to look at this group in the Bangladeshi context and analyse them with reference to Samia Huq's works on female university students in Dhaka, and also her works on the Quranic

Dawa circles to see how these people are trying to retain their position in society (Huq, 2021; Huq, 2014).

In her article, Huq (2021) talks about the "cultural Islamization" going on in Bangladesh and the effect it leaves on the lives of female University students. Moving away from the secular fear of extremism, she looks at how these women owned up to their agency amidst the complex politics surrounded by religion and state.

While the conservatism of religion is seen to shackle women's agencies, it isn't much different when it comes to secularism. As Huq (2021), points out, during the war, the secular nature of the birongonas was used mostly as an image of middle-class aesthetic. And this trend has been carried on to date as we see in the case of female garment workers and their notions about "veiling". Their secular agency lies in balancing between domesticity and interiorized religiosity ("moner purdah" above physical veiling). Such diffused practices of secularism and religiosity lead to the creation of newer practices through internal self-differentiation (Hirschkind, 2011). This kind of practice is evident from Huq's work on the Quranic reading circles in Dhaka, where Islamic questions were discussed among women. Even when women weren't as present in the public sphere, especially in terms of religious public appearance, these affluent cosmopolitan women situated piety above politics (Huq, 2014). This is one of the phenomena I'll be looking into, as I try to see how my interlocutors retain their piety and make sense of the "secular" world around them. Moreover, the connections between R/S and cultural shock, and mental wellbeing aren't as talked about in the South Asian context, therefore I will be looking at the mental health impacts these people are facing because of how might be mostly seen as an outcast and in turn secluded.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The reason I am invested in this topic is that I have witnessed a few of my own friends going through similar anxieties. As a result, among the 6 interlocutors, 2 were from my peer groups. The other interlocutors were sought through Facebook where I requested people with similar experiences to come forward and volunteer. My thesis is an exploratory study since it tries to navigate how individuals are dealing with and making sense of the world around them. It is based on qualitative methods which include data from interviews to understand the interlocutor's perspectives in depth. Over the course of 1 week, interviews were conducted in person and lasted around 45 minutes to 1 hour. It wasn't possible to meet with 3 of my interlocutors given the time constraint, hence the interviews with Tazin, Halima and Afia were conducted through google meet. I had the interview questions prepared beforehand but I let the interlocutors guide the interview through their narratives while I came up with follow up questions.

Secondary research has also been conducted to come up with the theoretical framework I based my research on and to find relevant literature to guide my research. I used articles by Talal Asad, Jose Casanova, Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood to understand the concept of Secularism. Moreover, I used Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger's articles to understand concepts of religion. Samia Huq's work on the dawa circle and female university students in Dhaka also helped guide my research.

The research locale was constrained amidst Dhaka and the interlocutors belonged to the dominant religious group. My research was mainly women-centric and the interlocutors were students or graduates of both public and private universities. Since some of the interlocuters wished to remain

anonymous, I'll be using pseudo names to keep their identities private. The interviews were recorded with consent and are only accessible to me. These recordings were later transcribed and coded according to my research questions to help me analyse the trends and themes. The demographics of my interlocutors are in the table below –

Name	Age	Origin	Current Educational Institution
Fahmida	26	Dhaka	Public University
Ishmam	24	Chittagong	Private University
Halima	21	Jessore	Private University
Tazin	22	Dhaka	Public University
Afia	26	Dhaka	Private University
Fariha	22	Thakurgaon	Private University

Although my interlocutors were born and brought up in different settings, they are all currently settled in Dhaka. Major discrepancies aren't as noticeable in the experiences of the interlocutors based on the type of universities they have studied in. However, the kind of educational and general environment they grew up in exposed them to slightly different experiences.

Each and every interview was fascinating and insightful. I got to know different perspectives and gathered different insights regarding people's experiences of religion and secularism. However, the rigid time frame might limit my research since I had to opt for a smaller number of interlocutors. This may cause data bias and a lack of nuance in my analysis. On top of that, since

I'm working with the dominant religion only, the same kind of framework can't be applied to the narratives of minorities as their experiences will undoubtedly be different.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

A. Understanding religion and spirituality

I started my interviews by trying to get a clear sense of what my respondents believed "religion" or "spirituality is and whether the two are interchangeable. To this, a common response was that they believed religion was subjective and a very personal thing. To at least 3 of my interlocutors, the concept of "religion" solely revolved around the practices they saw at home since childhood, which was Islamic. Hence, the idea of other religions existing or even the separation of spirituality and religion came about way later in their lives, only when they started looking deeper into their beliefs and trend is quite common, especially in our country. "I always saw my parents and relatives praying and fasting and at a time I thought this was something that everyone does, that was the norm. And if someone doesn't follow any of these codes, they'd go to Jahannam" said Afia

According to them, religion acted as a set of guidelines that helped them go on with their lives. While 4 out of the 6 respondents differentiated religiosity to be quite distinct from spirituality, 2 of them believed that religion and spirituality go hand in hand. As Ishmam stated - "Since my religion is Islam, my practices in everyday life shadow the sayings of Islam. I tend to make my choices and decisions based on the sayings of my religion. And to be honest, religion and spirituality are the same, I don't see them as separate. I know spirituality is intimate and very personal, but my spirituality comes to me based on the way I follow Islam, so they're the same."

Nonetheless, religion acts as a code of conduct that helps them not to go into any "extremes" as Fahmida says, and makes life decisions easier.

When asked about the degree of religiosity, almost all of them considered themselves to be moderately religious. Two of the interlocuters refrained from labelling themselves as "strongly" religious since they believed there was a lot more Islam asks them to follow, that they haven't been able to adapt to. While for Ishmam, not being able to commit to "nikab" and refrain from having non-mahram friends was a matter of concern that she's been trying to work on, Halima and Tazin believed their attire was modest enough according to Islam as long as they covered themselves up properly. And having non-mahram friends was also not a big deal going against their religious beliefs since it wasn't really possible or even feasible in a society like ours where almost everything is co-education. Because of how it is seen as a mandatory requirement to follow certain strict teachings of Islam (wearing hijab, praying five times), four of my interlocutors identified themselves as more on the "spiritual" side than religious because of their belief in God was still present despite the "inability" to follow every rule stated by the religion. Fahmida and Afia both believed that their "imaan" is what matters at the end of the day, and they know they have it unimpaired, even if people question their level of faith. They've mostly gotten used to it and created their own space amidst the two extremes of believer and non-believer in the "gray area". I believe, their experiences resemble most of the youth today, who have a lot of questions regarding religion but don't get enough answers so they remain in the gray area. But as Afia says - "It is good to question your faith, then you know why you have it. Though too much of anything isn't good and you should try clearing your doubts staying within limits".

Religion as an institution has been a great tool to control or regulate people by working at the very roots of their being. Hence, religion today isn't an individual institution but rather gets mixed with politics and culture as well. Many of the religious practices we see are mostly cultural. For example, the way Bangladeshis celebrate Eid varies from the way Pakistanis or Arabs may celebrate Eid, though some core practices remain the same. When people look closely, it is easy to notice the cultural diffusion Religion has gone through, and my interlocutors too mentioned this quite a few times. In her interview, Afia pointed out - "There's a lot of things in Islam that is very easy to follow, but at the same time when it's easy to follow it becomes questionable. People make it seem like if it's not hard to do or hard to achieve, it isn't "Islamic" enough and in turn, is wrong. Moreover, I feel like some things can be so simple that they're just boring." This statement was very intriguing to me and I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by "boring". "So, if we see the recent event i.e., shab-e-baraat, whether the concept of this night is believed by some Muslims and not by others, the main thing we do on this night is praying. We make sweets, and celebrate it with firecrackers. It basically is a smaller version of Eid to us. But in reality, there's no rule regarding celebrating this night like this, it all is just cultural and is something that spices up the "boring" aspect of religion. There are many more examples like this" she said. And this example very clearly shows the cultural influence of Islam and how the intermixing of culture and Islam has become so intrinsic and is specific to different regions.

B. Influence of secularism on Religion/Spirituality

As mentioned earlier, Secularism is a very murky term and not everyone understands what it connotes. This results in the creation of newer definitions of secularism at least in the minds of the people. When asked what my interlocutors thought about secularism, they gave similar answers stating that - secularism didn't necessarily mean not practicing religion at all in the public sphere, it meant respecting the differences. As a theory, they thought that secularism was the best. But the implication of its policies, in reality, wasn't the same, resulting in a disjuncture between the definition it connoted originally (separation of religion from the state) and the policies laid out by the Government. As Halima points out, Secularism is a "political policy" that the state uses to not involve religion in politics since they seem to manipulate one another. And for Fariha, - "it's more about not looking at people through the lens of religion since that always brings in biases. When we judge people on the basis of religion, more than right or wrong we judge their actions or personality on the basis of the religious groups they are a part of."

The emergence of Religion has undoubtedly changed the way people think and live, and most religions endorse peace among their followers. But Fahmida points out how the mixing of humans and religion also resulted in something she calls "Concept hijacking". "I believe Religion changes the inherently selfish nature of people because of the way we practice it. But when humans mix with religion, with time they start bending its true meaning and "concept hijacking."

She goes on to elaborate what she means with an example - "When we talk about women's attire or talking about women's freedom, there are always people who are for or against the stance. But often the things either group says or preaches aren't things they truly believe. They merely use the

concepts as a social ladder and use whatever suits them. And if secularism is used in this way to only gain moral/ political grounds, it's only a misuse of the term" she says.

The ideologies we grow up with, be it religious or not, impact the way we make choices even if it's implicit. Consequently, no matter how "open-minded" or "secular" one may claim to be, traces of the ideas that were fed to us since childhood always remain or vice-e-versa. As a result, when asked whether their religion and its disunion with their environment affects their friendship choices, all my interlocutors agreed that the decision wasn't something they consciously made. But otherwise, it didn't matter most of the time. This shows how their habitus shaped the way they reacted to their surroundings. However, for Ishmam, following the codes of Islam mattered strictly, and not being able to refrain from having non-mahram friends because of the co-ed environment she grew up in was a problem she has been trying to fix. On the other hand, Halima didn't think too much about having non-mahram friends; instead, had friends belonging to the LGBTQ community as well. She believed that disrespecting any of these people isn't a part of her religion, and so she chooses to maintain peace regardless of the differences.

While the choice of treating others based on their beliefs lies in our own hands, it doesn't go the same way the other way around. All 6 of my interlocutors have faced some sort of differential treatment, because of their faith. While identifying as a Muslim and not following every single rule labels them as derailed or not "Muslim enough", being too practising also labels them as "too serious". In Fariha's experience - "When I was trying to explore the questions I had regarding religion, especially about the discrimination it brings along, people thought of me as deviant. When I would do things my own way, people always told me to fix the way I did things in a way that

would line up with my religion. And if I would refuse, they'd instantly tag me with labels and say things like "Meye toh kharap hoye gese" or "Meye Jahannam e jabe". Halima too shared her experience during school when people used to think of her as extremely religious and as a result "some different kind of human". "This one time, a friend was waving at me before she left for home and I waved back. The person beside me got so shocked and asked me "You wave at people as well?!". And I just couldn't stop myself from bursting out in laughter because of how stupid the question was." This kind of prejudice is very common especially among Muslims who wear hijab and Audri and Ishmam (both hijabi's) talked about similar experiences. "The way I wear my clothes, I don't like wearing too fitting clothes even if I'm not wearing a burkha and I refrain from western clothing. If I wear my orna covering up my whole body, just because I'm comfortable in it, friends would say I look like an "aunty" and too old, I wasn't cool enough." Ishmam said.

Judgment based on appearance and ascribed status is inevitable in our society, but most of the time, my interlocutors choose to ignore it and not get affected by it. However, apart from the negative aspects of it, Ishmam talks about the good kind of preconceived notions she went through. For example, the immediate tag of being a "good girl" or "modest" if a girl wears a hijab or covers properly is very common among the elder people. Hence, if she would stand beside a group of people who weren't covering their bodies as she does, people would instantly consider them as derailed and her as modest. Although this is not technically the right thing to do and might not be logical, it has worked in her favor.

C. Impact on mental wellbeing and the sense of belonging

Because of the "sacred canopy", religion acts as a shelter for the followers during times of crisis, as stated by Berger (1990). It gives hope and "someone" or "something" to rely on. Regardless of the level of religiosity, all my interlocutors mentioned praying as a getaway from pain or sorrow. As Afia said - "Even not believing is a faith in itself, and I am just choosing to believe in something" Because when I get frustrated or am in need of hope, I have something to fall back on or even someone to blame in the sense that "Allah is making this happen". However, practicing religion is becoming increasingly difficult in our society. Afia shared an experience to back this statement up where she and a friend of hers went to a club to party with some of their friends. It was mostly a social get-together for them and they were refraining from drinking since their prayers wouldn't be accepted for 40 days if they drank. But they weren't able to say it out loud to anyone. "Even mentioning namaz or religion in a setting where everyone is enjoying themselves and doing what they want seemed like a sin, so we just sat quietly as long as we could and tried enjoying the company," she said.

On top of that, most of my interlocutors expressed their anxiety about speaking up about their faith from the fear of judgment or bias. Fariha said - "You see I don't really tell this to anyone but I've been to hajj but I refrain from disclosing it because of reasons you're obviously seeing I suppose. My parents have never imposed anything on me, I've even seen people who impose hijab on their children because parents have been to hajj. Even during hajj when I was 19, I remember people getting shocked because I came for hajj so early since their main question was "would I be able to retain my hajj", and this question confused me a lot. What they meant by it was doing hijab,

praying 5 times and all that, they were concerned if I would be able to do all that from such a young age. My peers would think I changed and became too serious, while the elders would fear that I wouldn't be able to stay properly religious. And all of this was majorly scrutinized since then, which is why I prefer not to say anything about it to anyone."

Tazin and Halima both talked about how people inherently blackout their personality as a whole right after they see that they wear a hijab or are practicing Muslims. And this was the case for all 6 of them. For 4 of them, this had affected their mental health during childhood as they went through different treatment from classmates and people from their surroundings. What was worse was that they weren't even allowed to question the reason behind such treatment, as questioning their faith would be "questioning their imaan". But as they grew up, they got used to it and started caring less about it. This kind of treatment obviously didn't only come from the non-religious people, but from their own communities as well. In fact, the remarks of the people from their own communities were harsher. Religiosity has a spectrum and people fall into different areas of it. Given the current hotchpotch of religion and secularism in our country, there's a huge number of youths who lie in the "grey area" of religiosity/spirituality since they're still trying to find answers and clear their doubts. And I believe these people are the ones who go through more scrutiny. Out of the 6 interlocutors I talked to, 3 of them fall in the grey area while the other three refrain from considering themselves "very" religious for having supposed lackings. These people who fall in the grey area not only receive backlash from the religious but non-religious as well. Since they're too religious for the non-religious and vice versa. Fariha, Fahmida and Audri all went through the same situations where their faith was questioned for not meeting up to the standard of "properly religious". But they still kept their faith intact although this was difficult during their teens when the thought of neglecting their faith crossed their minds. "If I don't know everything about Islam,

I'm a hypocrite and apparently an atheist deep within. The religious sentiment I show is just a facade. And if I'm not conservative and restrictive like "traditional" Muslims are, I'm not a proper Muslim. These are the kinds of things I've had to heard about because the concept of existing in the middle of being a Muslim and liberal just doesn't go hand in hand for people," said Fahmida. Such experiences are bound to sideline people and make them feel secluded. And although my interlocutors didn't talk about any serious mental health impact, the feeling of not belonging was prevalent and impacted the way they chose to socialise with people further on.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

As a result of the religious revivals during the time of secularism, confusion has been created in the minds of the people. Despite showcasing a secular constitution, religion is used as a tool by the people in power. In the end, it all comes down to who has more power and authority and getting involved in the majoritarian religious sentiments helps with grabbing more public support/occupying a position of power. This mixing of Religion and Spirituality with politics along with the cultural form of religion/ spirituality we see has changed its true essence. This disjuncture between R/S and society has created a gray area where most youths have been caught up in. And since religion or spirituality can never be unmediated, it's ingrained in our society. But this grey area is rarely acknowledged since it doesn't make sense to most people. They're either allowed to be a believer and that too a strong one or you aren't a believer. When putting this in contrast with Peter Berger's theory of the sacred canopy, I think that the helplessness and uncertainty that comes with the "Homeless mind" is something that people want to avoid. Hence, lying in the protective shield of the sacred canopy helps to maintain a balance. But the current "secular" world has also been under the protection of sacred canopy, but the difference is that they find meaning and

rationality through scientific explanations rather than theistic ones. And that is seen as the "logical" and modern thing to do.

On the other hand, exploring one's religion and trying to find answers to the unclear hazy preachings is seen as a grave crime, leaving people even more confused. Only two of my interlocutors had parents who they could go up to with questions and receive proper answers. But only very few people leave room for such questions and as a result, children grow up with an unclear perception of religion in their head which in ways, pulls them farther away from religion. As Geertz says, religion is a set of cultural practices passed down through generations, the "Islamic" practices of our country are mostly culture-specific and have various distinctions from the actual scriptures. These distinctions are rarely scrutinized by the people since it would mean "questioning Allah's sayings when in real, it's only questioning the translations of his sayings. As Asad (2003) stated, the religious texts we are provided with are very complicated and multifaceted. The way the readers translate it's meaning is very subjective and their habitus also plays a role in how they make sense of the texts. As a result, it isn't necessary that people who are publicly preaching Islamic teachings are stating facts, rather they're preaching their understanding of the Islamic texts. But unfortunately, then when a believer, wants to enlighten herself with the actual scriptures instead of the cultural preachings, they face inevitable backlash, leaving the sense of estrangement lingering.

The misrepresentation of religion by extremist groups creates even more anxiety among the youth. 3 of my interlocuters have talked about being uncomfortable in introducing themselves as religious as they feared being misunderstood as "extreme". The mixing of politics and religion has led to public violence and unrest, despite the secular claims made by our constitution. The government

trying to accommodate a different kind of Islam is what increases the secular anxiety since it's distinct from the Islam these people grow up seeing. This further pushes the religious people into the confusion of who or what to believe. Especially since the teaching they received from their religion preach peace and love while the public portrayal shows something else entirely. But questioning such behavior would only lead back to questioning their "imaan" and muslimness. And this kind of remarks is mostly passed on by the "overly" religious people more than the non-believers, although they also don't shy away from passing shrewd comments. Such behavior increases the feeling of "not belonging" and unconsciously sidelines people.

However, what matters is how these people carry their agencies regardless of all the opinionated remarks. Just like in Huq (2021)'s research we see women owning upto their agencies and situating their piety over politics, the same applies to my interlocutors as well. Regardless of what the women I interviewed faced throughout their lives because of their R/S, most of them were adamant about retaining their faith instead of caring about society. They didn't let their level of faith be determined by the unnecessary opinions of society. And despite people not finding it "cool enough" to wear hijab or refrain from doing "fun" activities that Islam prohibits, they followed their religious guidelines with pride. While there are people who break down from the cultural expectations and pressure imposed on us in the name of religion, there's also a group of people who value their faith above what is "trendy", are few, their number is increasing.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The backlash religious people face for their faith or the way they choose to carry out their beliefs is always under constant scrutiny by the people of their community and the non-believers alike. If they don't meet up to a certain threshold of religion, they're easily deemed as a "bad Muslim". And if they choose to be religious while being accepting towards everyone else, their liberalism is seen as a marker of their "secretly atheistic" mindset. As a result, fitting in society has become difficult as religiosity isn't "cool" enough for most of the younger crowds while being accepting and liberal isn't acceptable to most people from their religious groups. Hence, I tried to navigate the everyday lives of Muslim women in our society by looking into what spirituality means to the contemporary young adults of our society, how the "modern secular" society is affecting their beliefs and in turn their mental health or sense of belonging.

Although my initial assumption was that spiritual people have been feeling threatened and unwelcome in today's increasingly non-spiritual society, upon closer inspection it became evident that these people aren't always victims of the situation. Rather there are certain categories of pious people who are able to combat the prejudices and hold their ground. Although these people are very few in number as of yet and there are social factors like class and hierarchy involved that allow them greater privileges, these individuals who are fighting for the right to exercise their faiths freely do exist. This research doesn't only talk about religion/ spirituality and secularism, but the way women are asserting their places in society and making sense of the world around them at a particular time in history.

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