



An Ethnography on the Maizbhandar: Locating within Cultural, Religious and Political Dimensions

A thesis presented by

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Abstract

With the rise of modernity and worldwide expansion of secularism as the principle of most of the modern states, many presumed that religion and its corollaries will become irrelevant by the twentieth century. But right at the turn of the past century, the world suddenly started to experience violent events that were decisively identified as the expression of religious antagonism. For various reasons such as altered power structure in the Middle Eastern countries, rise of so called 'terrorist' attacks etc., advent of state-sponsored secularism, Islam became the center of discussion world-wide. This newly emerged dynamic has created tensions and struggles between religious groups in new ways. The politics of survival, thus, became an important consideration and challenge within this altered context. With this particular global and regional scenario framing the backdrop, this paper is principally interested in studying a particular religious group called the *Maizbhandari*. Maizbhandar claims to be a Sufi group, situated in a village of the Chittagong division. In this paper, I zero in on the urgency and dynamics of survival as felt and enacted by the institution of Maizbhandar. (?) I argue that Maizbhandaris' concern with survival centers on a continuous effort to establish themselves as an indigenous version of Sufi Islam while claiming authenticity by drawing a direct connection to the Prophet Muhammad's family drawing a direct connection to Muhammad's family. In order to illustrate my argument, I have organized the analysis in two sections. In the first section, I analyzed the reasoning and justifications that frame them as the only indigenous Sufi tradition in Bengal. Such reasoning are grounded in acts that allow Maizbhandar to have a local following and importance on one hand, and a resemblance with the Baul culture and association with the nation and state politics, on the other. The concept of body and the supernatural activities of the Pirs cut across

both the sections because these two function in both ways- serving claims of indigeneity and supporting the aspiration and epithet of being authentically Islamic.

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Gratitude for Mr. Manzurul Mannan who is currently working as an Associate Professor of Anthropology in Independent University, Bangladesh. He has very close attachment with the Maizbhandar sharif for a very long time. He is also coming up with a paper on the same field. For me, he and his insights are like tunnels to enter the Maizbhandar.

During the fieldwork I met a good number of people in Maizbhandar for interviews and consultation. Among them, it is worth mentioning two names prior to the rest. Mohammad Shawkat and Mr. Babul have helped me throughout the work from their own interest and provided me with a lot of important information and analysis that are directly included in the paper. Both of them spent a lot of their valuable time and patiently cooperated with me. It is definitely my luck that I found them. These few sentences only insufficiently show my debt to them.

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Introduction

Why this topic?

In today's world, religion has gained a special salience as an issue that manifests in many different kinds of debates and contestations across familial, local and transnational borders. At the heart of many of these debates lies the issue of diversity¹. So, religion seemed the most important issue to work on. But religious conflict is not my prime focus. Rather, broadly, I had religious diversity in my mind. At this point, it is worth knowing that Chittagong probably poses the most diversified amalgamation of various religious groups than the other parts of Bangladesh. Even, within the Muslim community, it shows the presence of numerous Islamic groups and sects. So, I did not have to think much before selecting a religious group in Chittagong as a case for understanding of diversity for the ethnography. In choosing this topic, the decline of *mazar* as a

¹ There are several thousand news and writings on these issues. Online link of three newspaper excerpts on the relevant issues are here:

<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-magazine-attack>

<http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/620443/Woman-in-veil-interviewed-on-French-TV-sparks-outrage-Paris-attacks>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/jan/08/lebanon-precipice-proxy-war-shias-sunnis-iran-saudi-arabia-isis>

public discourse with the rise of Wahhabism had a great influence. It can be exemplified in an extract of a feature published in The Guardian where it is expressed how Wahhabism, in its wake its demolishing the traditions that are considered as 'idolatry' in historical/religious sites. It refers to Irfan al-Alawi, executive director of the UK-based Islamic Heritage Research Foundation in the context of destruction of heritage in Mecca in the time of Hajj:

“Alawi describes the imminent arrival of yet more seven-star hotels even closer to the mosque than the al-Bait clocktower, as well as proposals to develop Jabal Khandama, on the hills to the east, which will likely see the erasure of the site where the prophet Muhammad was born. Alawi says this wilful destruction of Islamic heritage is no accident: it is driven by state-endorsed wahhabism, the hardline interpretation of Islam that perceives historical sites as encouraging sinful idolatry. So anything that relates to the prophet could be in the bulldozer's sights.”²

Now, not all the Islamic groups appeared feasible for my project because, first of all, in this globalized world, it is difficult to locate any human group, not only the religious ones, within a specific boundary where an ethnography can be conducted. This could be much easier in the time of Franz Boas or Margaret Mead because in their times- a hundred year back- the world was not 'global' as it is today. So in this regard, comparing the groups that claim to represent Islam, a *mazar* seemed comparatively convenient as a field for ethnography. Besides, working with all the Islamic groups is too vast for a four-month research project. But discussing a few other groups that are relevant to the topic will be done in this paper. One question may arise that how can one draw the lines between the Islamic groups in Bangladesh? Very broadly, there are the Sunnis, the Shia, the Ahmadiyya community etc. All the groups are in constant competition to

² <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/23/mecca-architecture-hajj1>

disprove the validity and vitality of the other's claim for 'real' Islam. Moreover, there are numerous sub-divisions within the large groups- especially within the Sunni sect. There are four major *madhabs* (school of thought) within the Sunni- Hanafi, Hanbali, Maleki, Shafe'i. There are divisions with the Shias too- Ismaili, Twelver etc. Apart from the theological or ideological blocks, the difference is more crucially articulated in terms of cultural practice, rituals and political position. So, it is also difficult to identify the cultural boundaries within the groups. Identifying the cultural practices, rituals and political consciousness of a religious group within its locale and in its claim to 'authenticity of Islam', I thought a *mazar* (*shrine consisting of one or more Saints' grave*) would be a great platform. The problem of drawing lines holds equally true for the *mazar* complex. Adherents of Maizbhandar may want to eschew their identity as a mere mazar phenomena, and claim a religious appeal and spiritual consciousness that goes way beyond what is often scoffed as unthinking grave veneration. Thus, there will always be this problem of identification, but the endeavor for understanding a few aspects of the Maizbhandar seemed manageable for a four-month thesis project. A saint's contested position in Islam and their role in certain domains of society also made me interested in choosing this task. Alyson Callan raised relevant discussion drawing from Landell- Mills:

"The saint in Islam occupies somewhat contradictory position. Although Islam's monotheism and egalitarian ethos militate against worship of mortal beings, some Muslims have argued that the saint's role is necessary in bridging the gap between the people and the sacred. In the absence of a formal system of ordination within Islam, the saint plays a vital intermediary role, serving as the human embodiment of a faceless god" (Callan, 2008)

In Maizbhandar, this is exactly what is done by the Pirs (saints) for their disciples. They actually represent God to the masses with all their divine attitudes and attributes. They might not acknowledge this as worshipping the saints; rather it is a mere devotion to those through whom the God Himself reaches the disciples.

Preparing the ground

Understanding the Maizbhandar comprehensively is impossible, at least from this effort over a short-time. So, necessity arises to confine the discussion within specific topics. Besides, the description, discussion, analysis should touch different aspects of the Maizbhandar for reaching a better understanding of this religious group. Nuances of the ideological-philosophical structure and the complex relationship of this structure with people's perception need to be carefully handled. Along with this, the description of origin of the Maizbhandar must occupy a part in the paper. This will provide necessary key to understanding the rest.

There are thousands of songs found in old Maizbhandari literature, lyrical books, CDs and in different media. The history of these songs is almost as old as the history of Maizbhandari *tariqa* itself. It is said that Maizbhandari songs are not intended for mere recreation. These songs have specific purpose and spiritual significance & meaning. Through these songs the ideology finds its expression. Throughout the paper, the songs will be referred to in various discussions because songs are the most popular art form in the Maizbhandar as well as an illustration of the Maizbhandari ideology. The concept of the body in Maizbhandar philosophy (especially as expressed through the songs) will constitute a considerable portion of my analysis too. I will

demonstrate how their notion of body is integral to establishing to Prophet Muhammad's family, and thereby authenticity in Islam.

Assessing the dimensions of Maizbhandar within the surrounding locality as well as the nation will help define the relation and interaction of the Maizbhandar and the Pirs with the local life and national politics. This is important because a particular typology/ imagination of ideal Pir and *mazars* are continuously created through social interaction. The political consciousness and politics of representation of the *mazar* and Pir will be added to this too. One part of this paper will be occupied by an outline of the comparative position of the Maizbhandar with the other streams of Islamic groups with regard to their ideological differences along with the historicity of the differences, if possible.

The word Pir, despite the meaning it carries, usually portrays someone who has some supernatural power (*Keramot*). These projected and perceived powers mystify the Pirs and the *mazars*. My fieldwork does not get me to explain the *keramot* scientifically and this is not what this work is intended for. Rather the social influences of such activities, the contextual analysis for those and the change in pattern of *keramot* are some points that I will focus on. To analyze the changes in pattern of the *keramots* is a comparative project where there will be comparison between the *keramots* exposed by prominent Maizbhandari Pirs of different times.

Methodology

At the very beginning, an ethnographer's duty is to acquire the ability to identify and define his own position with reference to the group he studies. Knowing own beliefs and biasness, social position, political consciousness helps clarify the relation between the ethnographer and the

community. Apparently, reflexivity is what the ethnographer needs to acknowledge. In almost all the cases the thought 'I am going to study or research on that group of people' signifies the differential power relation between the two parties. Such hierarchies give the researcher certain privileges resulting from his/her economic standing, social class, education background etc. In my work, I have observed few contrasts in this regard. One is my own background as an urban resident contrasting with a lot of the rural people of Maizbhandar who never visited Dhaka or even Chittagong city. So, what Maizbhandari Pirs says and what they predominantly experience in their locality- means everything for them. That is why the *Orosh Sharif* in Maizbhandar is the biggest event in their lives, even more important than Eid or other festivals. In my work, this observation helped me understand this completely different world view. Another contrast is with my family's perception of Islam as articulated principally in daily five-times prayer, fasting, performing pilgrimage (hajj) etc. whereas in Maizbhandar, these are not denied, but there is the presence of a new entity- a Pir- which is, in contrary, not at all accepted. So, along with these, a lot of other contrasts between my own subjective position and the people with whom I was engaged as an ethnographer helped me understand new social dynamics and world views.

Understanding the Maizbhandar with reference to its philosophy, history, social interaction, changes and comparative position within a specific social domain is definitely a complex process. So, it has to be done with the help of multiple techniques. In terms of methodology of fieldwork, I relied mostly on interviews of people who are actively engaged with the shrine for a long time. Among them, I sat with three of them several times and had casual interactions and conversations with 4/5 more. All of them were men because in all of the Maizbhandari houses, there were separate places for the women *khadims*/ devotees where the entrance of men was restricted. This method of having formal/ informal conversations helped me a lot to understand

the Maizbhandar to a larger extent. A part of this can also be named as collection of oral history. This was very useful for me because not everything of Maizbhandari history can be found in the available literature and it is also not possible for this project to cover all the texts. So, the narration of the people plays a vital role in this paper. Collecting information from secondary sources has been another very crucial task in this paper. For a better and clearer perception of Maizbhandari philosophy, history and ideological position, this method was necessary. Along with these, participant observation and informal discussion with people visiting the shrine and living around it are two other methods that I have depended upon while staying in the field. It is imperative for the ethnographer to observe closely what the people do. Why they do is the question that comes right after it. Those two techniques helped me find answers to these two questions. All these methods provide the ethnographer with observations and data. Ethnographer's sole duty is to organize and analyze the data in such a way that it leads to particular findings. Findings may include cultural meanings associated with the practice or ritual, social influences, changes etcetera. On a basic note, ethnography is about observing and finding a cultural pattern or logic of the community that it studies. It accommodates social interactions, participants' behavior and actions, and also may be the perceptions. Sometimes, perception of the participant parallels with that of the ethnographer, sometimes not. But an ethnographer's duty is to accumulate and connect all of what he gets. In terms of observation in the field, Scott Reeves's 'nine observational dimensions' can provide guidance while reading this paper: space (physical layout of the place), actor (ranges of people involved), act (single actions people undertake), activity (a set of related activities that occur), object (the physical things that are present), event (activities that people carry out), time (the sequencing of event that occur), goal

(things that people are trying to accomplish), and feeling (emotions felt and expressed). (Reeves, 2008).

Ethnographers must be careful to work on all these tools of observation. Attempt to include these tools is part of an effort to make the analysis holistic and all-encompassing. Along with the observational perfection, the contemporary trend of ethnography or anthropological research should grab the attention of the ethnographer. The early twentieth century style of ethnography practiced by Malinowski and others does not have relevance in present day world. An isolated, detached group of people is surely irrelevant to imagine. Static condition of almost any culture is outdated. Cultures are constantly influenced by each other. An ethnographer must be able to identify the embedded formula of this exchange. Awareness of the politics of relation between cultures deserves attention too. One must closely observe this making and breaking of culture. So, in this era- globalized and interconnected- ethnography has taken new dimensions. That is why taking help from secondary sources, looking for the relation with global order of religion and politics, approaching in a cross-disciplinary manner are given priority in this work. It surely was difficult, but, needless to say, very necessary. At this point, we need to realize the fact that no research or ethnography can make a final statement on the subject. A 'result/finding' does not form the ultimate truth. Culture, society, and community- these are like moving fluids. All of these are always in the process of continuous evolution. Thus, no ethnography is able to express the complete or final essence. It can merely be seen as a piece of photo from a camera roll. So is this work. It does not pretend to present a "holistics" picture of Maizbhandar, but assesses some of its truth claims weaving shifted through the realities that mark the distance and difference between the ethnographer and informants, and finally woven into some global and political

happenings that devotees and Pirs may not necessarily reflect on in the immediacy of their practice. (?)

History in Brief-Maizbhandar and the Saints³

The adherents of Maizbhandari philosophy consider this as a Sufi tradition of Islam. It is evident in all of the Maizbhandari texts. So, before proceeding to the brief illustration of the history of Maizbhandar and its Saints, it seems relevant to pick up an extract from Richard Eaton's *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* where he provided a definition of Sufi that was found in archaeological records and connects presence of Sufism with arrival of Islam in this land:

"The earliest-known Muslim inscription in Bengal concerns a group of such immigrant Sufis. Written on a stone tablet found in Birbhum District and dated July 29, 1221, just seventeen years after Muhammad Bakhtiyar's conquest, the inscription records the construction of a Sufi lodge (khānaqāh) by a man described as a faqīr—that is, a Sufi—and the son of a native of Maragha in northwestern Iran. The building was not meant for his faqīr alone, but for a group of Sufis (ahl-i suffa) "who all the while abide in the presence of the Exalted Allah and occupy themselves in the remembrance of the Exalted Allah." (Eaton, 1993)

The Maizbhandar does not have a history as long as the Sufi presence in the Bengal but it has a long history of nearly one and a half century. But to understand the root of Maizbhandar, its history should at least be dragged back to the 18th century when the predecessors of the Founding saint Syed Ahmadullah had settled in Azimnagar, a village near to Maizbhandar. In Azimnagar, Syed Ahmadullah's father Motiullah was appointed as an Imam in the local mosque.

³ All the data of this part are taken from 'Gausul Azam Maizbhandarir Jiboni O Keramot' by Syed Delawar Hossain Maizbhandari and 'Shahanshah Ziaul Huq Maizbhandari' by Syed Mohammad Amirul Islam.

Later, he shifted from Azimnagar to the present location of Maizbhandar. To make it clear, Maizbhandar is actually the name of the village. Following the tradition of adding the name of the place after the pir or scholar's name (such as *Bayezid Bostami*- from Bostam; *Abdul Kadir Gilani*- from Gilan etc.), Ahmadullah and the following Pirs and Khalifas became familiar as 'Maizbhandari'. And the *tariqa* or order was named as Maizbhandari *tariqa*. The central and most important figure Saint Ahmadullah (gawt al-a'azam/ Gausul Azam lit. Greatest Help) was born in the Maizbhandar in Fatikchhari, Chittagong. He was born in 1826. He has finished his preliminary education in the local school and then, in 1842, travelled to Calcutta (Kolkata Alia Madrasah) for higher education. After completing his study, he worked as Kazi (Judge) in Jessore District from 1851 to 1852. Then he returned to Kolkata to engage in education related profession in a Madrasah. During his stay in Kolkata, he received spiritual 'baiyat'/'laal' (passing the spiritual power of a *tariqa*) from Abu Shagma Mohammad Saleh Al Kaderi Lahoree. This man is said to be the member of Abdul Qadir Gilani's lineage and the representative (খেলাফতপ্রাপ্ত) of *Qaderiya tariqa*. In 1857, hearing the news of his father's death, Syed Ahmadullah came back to his own village. For next few years Ahmadullah was in the process of pursuing a spiritual journey after which he was unveiled to people as the Saint with extreme supernatural power and spiritual knowledge. This was the inauguration of the Maizbhandari *tariqa* as we currently know. Ahmadullah is followed by few other influential saints in Maizbhandar's history such as Syed Golamur Rahman Maizbhandari, Delawar Hossain Maizbhandari, Ziaul Huq Maizbhandari and Shafiul Bashir Maizbhandari- all of them are related to Ahmadullah. These saints had their own unique style of spreading 'baiyat'. None of them are alive now. But in each of their houses (*manjil*), there is one Sajjadanashin Pir (the Pir's descendant who acts as the head of the house and its management and he is also considered as a

Pir). The current Sajjadanashin Pir of Ahmadiyya *manjil* is Syed Emdadul Huq and Syed Hassan Maizbhandari of Huq manjil (house of Ziaul Huq).

Defining & Introducing the Maizbhandar

Since the initiation of Maizbhandar it has acquired multiple dimensions which must be elucidated for their underlying principles. But before that, we need to be aware of the fact that establishing these definitions is a complicated task because of, mainly, two reasons. Number one- Maizbhandar accommodates a huge number of diverse people and for them Maizbhandar does not hold a singular identity. A singular identity prevents new devotees from coming into the Maizbhandari fold.. Though Maizbhandari philosophy has some sort of commonality in everyone's perception of this community, but still it has quantitative differences to exhibit. My fieldwork in Maizbhandar premises forces me to elaborate this point to further extent. One informant of mine (not mentioning the name) holds the belief that the ideology or philosophy of Maizbhandar has to be implemented through the functions of a state. For him, working for the state and the betterment of the people is the way to achieve divine goal. The way for accomplishing the divine duty is not the same for another informant. On a different note, he understands the Maizbhandar by 'love'. He is extremely influenced by the Maizbhandari music. His grasp on Maizbhandari philosophy is derived from the Maizbhandari songs. None of these two informants follow the rigorous ritual system prescribed by the dominant Islamic *shariah*-such as Salah (daily prayer). But they do not refuse to accept these as the fundamental practices of Islam, rather find their belonging to Maizbhandar in their own way. But there are many people

for whom performing the sharia rituals is the primary step to achieving the divine goal. These are multiple and sometimes overlapping motivations that bring devotees and followers to the place. So, for this diversity, it becomes difficult to form a single definition of Maizbhandar from the perspective of the people attached with it. Number two- Maizbhandar is difficult to define also because of its textual diversity. That is particularly because of this paper's limited access to and references from the Maizbhandari texts. There are some basic texts of Maizbhandar that the current thesis couldn't pull its attention to because of insufficient grasp on the language of those texts (Persian, Urdu etc.) and inadequate time for the work.

However, keeping these drawbacks of analysis in mind, it can be stated that the dimensions of Maizbhandar are manifold. First of all, Maizbhandar is an institution. From the discussion of its philosophy, we come to know that it has one or more specific purposes/ objectives. One objective is the attempt to establish 'Towhid e Adyan' (ধর্মসাম্য) where it is believed that all the religions have equal status and a common belief in the oneness of god (Hossain, S. D. 2000). Also, the core principles of every religion- such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism- is believed to be the same in Maizbhandari ideology. Maizbhandari texts explain religion and religious figures (Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ and the Prophets of Islam) as the revolutionary and progressive forces in the context of economic exploitation of their own times⁴. Another objective is to establish right for every creature- Haqqul Ibad (হক্কুল ইবাদ). For them, love for all the creatures is the way to bring peace in the world (Hossain, S. D. 2000). As an institution, Maizbhandar has a set of rules too. They have rituals like *sijdah* (touching one's forehead on the ground with respect), daily or weekly arrangement of *sema* (gathering for spiritual song) and *milad mahfil* (religious gathering on particular occasions where prescribed

⁴ Page 13, 'Bangladesher Shadhinota Shongram O Muktijuddhe Maizbhandar Dorbar Sahrif'

tasks e.g. praising the Prophet through orchestral songs are performed), arranging *orosh* (death anniversary) and *khoshroj sharif* (birth anniversary) on a regular basis, giving *baiyat* to new followers etc. The process of taking *baiyat* is very diverse. It does not have specific rules or guidelines. The Pirs themselves set the rules for passing it or follow the rules prescribed by their ancestors. In Huq *manjil*, what I have seen is that the devotees have to, first of all, enlist their names on the register books that are available in the regional administrative branches. Then on the following Friday (this is the day when the current Pir usually visits the shrine), after the Friday (*jumma*) prayer, all of them gather in front of the Pir's chamber and repeat what the Pir utters. It may consist of extracts from the Quran, particular *dua* or some instructions to conduct their lives. Differences are observed in other houses. Anyone visiting the shrine has to maintain some obligatory tasks such as touching the ground by hands while entering into the shrine or performing *sijdah* (touching forehead on the ground to show respect), not showing their back to the shrines, to light candles to wish for something, walking barefoot in the *mazar* premises. Some obligations are compulsory and some are optional. These obligations and rituals might not be written or scripted anywhere but are maintained as cultural practices in Maizbhandar. Very organically, these cultural practices are becoming institutionalized. One fact to notice, in the process of institutionalizing and forming a particular genre of religious practice and belief, Maizbhandar, to certain extent, declares some ideological oppositions on a broad scale. Idolatry (পৌত্তলিকতাবাদ), atheism (নাস্তিকতাবাদ), religious fundamentalism (মৌলবাদ) are some of these. These are necessarily some important elements for construction of identity of the Maizbhandar. This identity is another dimension of Maizbhandar. With the support of all those institutionalized beliefs and cultural practices, Maizbhandar is simultaneously creating an identity for itself and for its followers. It is apparent in taking the title 'Maizbhandari' after someone's name. It is

applicable for the Pirs, *Khalifas* and the *Murids* (followers who take *baiyat*). For the *murids*, it is not only religious or institutional distinguisher, bearing this title also increase their social capital and advances the prestige position, at least in the surrounding territory.

Maizbhandar is a movement (social and religious) too. It will not do justice to them if it is called a movement for Islamization. This is not something that can be considered as the inception of Maizbhandar- especially of its initiator Syed Ahmadullah. Rather, Islamization contrasts with ‘*Tawhid e Adyan*’ that lies at the core of Maizbhandari philosophy because Islamization underlies proselytisation that seeks to convert people from other religions to Islam. One story needs to be recounted here. Once a Buddhist man came to Ahmadullah and requested him to make him ‘Muslim’. But Ahmadullah refused to do so and told him to stay in his own religion and said that he’ll be treated as a Muslim anyway.

“ধনঞ্জয় নামে তাঁহার এক বৌদ্ধধর্মাবলম্বী ভক্ত, জাহেরী জবানীতে ইসলাম ধর্মে দীক্ষিত হইতে চাহিলে তিনি বলিয়াছিলেন- তুমি তোমার ধর্মে থাক আমি তোমাকে মুসলমান করিলাম।” (Hossain, S.D. 2000)

Maizbhandar as a social movement found its primary location in the context of Colonial rule. There are evidences of this in Maizbhandari texts.

“হজরত গাউসুল আজম মাইজভাণ্ডারীর (কঃ) (জন্ম ১৮২৬ খ্রিঃ) জীবনকালে এ দেশ রাজনৈতিকভাবে ছিল ব্রিটিশের উপনিবেশ ও অধীন। পরাধীন জাতি হিসেবে আমরা আমাদের সকল স্বকীয়তা হারাতে বসেছিলাম। সাংস্কৃতিক ক্ষেত্রেও আমরা দেশজ লৌকিক সংস্কৃতিকে অবজ্ঞা করতে অভ্যস্ত হয়ে উঠছিলাম।... জমিদার মহাজনদের শোষণ জর্জরিত গ্রামের মানুষ কেবল বৈষয়িক দিক থেকেই বঞ্চিত ছিলনা, বিনোদনের দিক থেকেও ছিল বঞ্চিত। কৃপমণ্ডুকতা, অশ্লীলতা ও ভাঁড়ামি ছাড়া বিনোদনের অন্য কোন সুস্থ ও শিষ্ট মাধ্যম ছিলনা।” (Alam, M. 2014)

So, it seems that to some extents the Maizbhandari ideology draws a boundary between ‘good culture’ and ‘bad culture’- a dichotomy that is claimed in this text to be created by the colonial

rulers which differentiated the urban and rural population. So, it is a movement for cultural reformation in the rural areas of Fatikchhari and adjacent places. But this aspect of the Maizbhandar is not as extensive and rigorous as the *Faraizi* or other movements in this region. Faraizi and other contemporary movements in the Indian subcontinent had considered the colonial authority as the prime rival (reference mainuddin khan, rafiuddin nahmed). The conservative religious approach of the Faraizi's played a role in that. Maizbhandari Pirs took a stance against the colonial rulers to some extent, but that was never their only point of attention. Their relative openness to religious diversity prevented them from narrowing the spectrum to only the colonial rule. At least no records of such activities are found on the texts that I could reach. This is a movement in terms of the global condition (as they claim) in time of initiation (Chowdhury, A.M. 2012). The function of Maizbhandar as a movement persists to this days too. The Pirs of Maizbhandar were not supposed to spread the message by going to other places because Syed Ahmadullah- the proponent of Maizbhandari tariqa- compared Maizbhandar with river. As river does not go to people but people visits river for water. But they are spreading the message even beyond the national boundary. Through this missionary approach of the Maizbhandari Pirs, it is necessarily transcending the previously allocated territoriality.

Maizbhandar can also be considered as a school of thought which constitutes a particular system of knowledge or belief. It is constantly performing the task of producing knowledge and constructing a belief system. As a metaphoric song of Ramesh Shil illustrated this concept-

“চলরে মন ত্বরায় যাই, বিলম্বের আর সময় নাই
 গাউসুল আজম মাইজভাগুরী ইশকুল খুইলাছে.
 আবাল বৃদ্ধ নরনারী, করে সব হুরাহুরি, নাম করে রেজিষ্টারী ভর্তি হতেছে”⁵

⁵Page 152, 'Jikire Maola'

Maizbhandar might not prescribe a completely new belief system but it is unique in the sense that it compiles different sets of beliefs or Sufi orders. It is a compilation of *Quadiriya tariqa*⁶ in terms of religious practice and performance, *Chishtiyya tariqa*⁷ in terms of introducing sema mahfil, *Moulobia (Mevlevia) tariqa*⁸ and the *Malamia tariqa* for following the ‘seven methods for controlling instinct’ (নফস নিয়ন্ত্রণে সপ্ত পদ্ধতি অবলম্বন). In any ways, it claims to be the only indigenous/ local Sufi *tariqa* in Bangladesh. In his book 'Maizbhandari Dorshon: Utpotti, Bikash O Bisheshotto' (Maizbhandari Philosophy: Evolution, Expansion and Specialities) Professor Muhammad Abdul Mannan Chowdhury describes Maizbhandari *tariqa* as a Sufi stream only which contains the components of local culture such as Baul music, songs of the boatmen etc. that are found in Bengal⁹. Hans Harder makes it more precise:

“Often it is claimed to be the only indigenous *tariqa* in Bangladesh” (Harder, H. 2011)

This can be marked as an attempt of finding its contextuality in this region. What constitutes their claim for being a Sufi *tariqa* is enforcing the existence of ‘Ilm e Ludni’/ বাতেনি জ্ঞান (knowledge of the unknown)- the knowledge of *tariqat*, *haqiqat* and *marifat* (the advanced stages of knowledge believed in Sufi tradition)- as opposed to জাহেরি জ্ঞান (knowledge of sharia). These points will be elaborated in the discussion of authenticity in later parts of this paper. Because debate on *bateni* and *jaheri* knowledge leads to the contentious position between Sufi and non-Sufi or Maizbhandar and Wahhabi philosophy.

⁶ The Qadiri Sufi *tariqa* is the Sufi order founded by Shaykh Abdul-Qadir Jilani, a very blessed Shaykh who lived in the 12th century C.E. in Baghdad (<http://www.haqq.com.au/~salam/sufilinks/>)

⁷ The Chishti *tariqa* is one of the major *turuq* in Pakistan and India. This branch of the Chishti *tariqa* is under the guidance of Shaykh Hakim Abu Abdullah Moinuddin Chishti (<http://www.haqq.com.au/~salam/sufilinks/>)

⁸ The Mevlevi Sufi *tariqa* is the Sufi order that was founded by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi. These are the famous "whirling dervishes" of Turkey (<http://www.haqq.com.au/~salam/sufilinks/>)

⁹ Page 260, 'Maizbhandari Dorshon: Utpotti, Bikash O Bisheshotto' (Maizbhandari Philosophy: Evolution, Expansion and Specialities)- Professor Muhammad Abdul Mannan Chowdhury

Analysis: The Politics of Survival

Part A: Forming the assertion of *Indigenous Sufi tradition*

[The Question of Authenticity- on the local context]

How does Maizbhandar aspire to and claim authenticity in their locality and for the country overall? In terms of some cultural practices in Bangladesh, one might notice that Maizbhandar is closer to the Shias owed to some signs of culture and religiosity such as repeatedly referring to Ali and Imam Hossain¹⁰. *Mazar* visitation is also one of the vital cultural practices of the Shias. But the Shia- Sunni contention is not the space where the Maizbhandaris can be located. With reference to Islamic theology, Maizbhandar iconizes Abu Bakr for *shariah* and Ali for *haqiqat* or *Ilm-e-Ludni* (knowledge that transcends the perception of ordinary people and comes after completion of *shariat*). Both the categories are equally important in Maizbhandari ideology as *haqiqat* is unattainable without completion of the level of *shariah*. In terms of system of prayer, *azan* and other traits, locating the Maizbhandari tradition into Sunni category will not be wrong too. But Maizbhandar themselves do not seem to be concerned about this debate although probably they will locate themselves in the Sunni category. That can be located more clearly within the sub-divisions of Islam. Before going there, we need to keep in mind that the cultural traits, religiosity, ideology, forms of interpretation- all these elements altogether define these barriers of sub-divisions in Islam.

¹⁰ It has a connection to the history of shrine visitation of Imam Husayn in Karbala. As it is found in *al-islam.org*: "Believers remember that name with sorrow and distress, for they remember the history of the master of all martyrs, Imam Husayn, peace be upon him, and his sacrifice for Islam. The wave of visitors never stopped coming to Karbala, from the time the Umayyad and Abbaside caliphs prevented the construction of the shrines to the time the believers were able to build the precinct, despite the hardships and difficulties imposed on them." (<http://www.al-islam.org/history-shrines/history-shrine-imam-husayn-ibn-ali-ibn-abi-talib>)

So, which are the groups that contrast with Maizbhandar on the contest for authenticity of Islam? One who stays there in Maizbhandar premises for few days or attentively participates on the public talks, must notice that the word ‘*Wahhabi*’ is frequently uttered usually with the expression of anger or disgust. On the very first note, the contention between them is to be understood in terms of Maizbhandar’s core element to define religion and God- that core element is love/ ‘প্রেম’ (অর্গলমুক্ত ঐশী প্রেমবাদ- spiritual love with no limit). As it is depicted in a song:

“পিরিতি অমূল্য নিধি, প্রেম জানেনা মূর্থ জন
প্রেম জানে মোর মাইজভাগুরী, রসনিধি মাগুলা ধন।”¹¹

Love for god, ‘*murshid*’, Pir, Muhammad and creatures of God. But the Wahhabi and other traditions are based on the fear of punishment in hell and aspiration for heaven. Generally, those who do not support the *mazar* culture and consider the practices as sin (*gunah*) or innovations (*bidah*) are acknowledged as Wahhabis. More precisely, the followers of Abdul Wahhab Najdi (proponent of Wahhabi movement) who are against building and visiting *mazar* and consider *orosh*, *milad-mahfil* as *shirk* and *bidah* are Wahhabis. In Bangladesh, intrusion of Wahhabi ideologies can be traced back to the beginning of 19th century and initiation of Maizbhandari tariqa is in around mid and late 19th century. Both the ideologies are fairly contemporary. But the Wahhabi influence and expansion has acquired more global character. Wahhabi influenced Saudi kingdom functions as the sponsor of this ideology. A brief elaboration of the relationship between Abdul Wahhab and Saudi Family is as follows:

“The political and cultural environment of contemporary Saudi Arabia has been influenced by a religious movement that began in central Arabia in the mid-eighteenth

¹¹ The song is written by Maolana Bajlul Karim MondakinI. Collected from the lyrics book named ‘Jikire Maola’ published by Ashekane Gausia Huq Bhandari.

century. This movement, commonly known as the Wahhabi movement, grew out of the scholarship and preaching of Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab, a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence who had studied in Mesopotamia and the Hijaz before returning to his native Najd to preach his message of Islamic reform. Muhammad I bn Abd al Wahhab was concerned with the way the people of Najd engaged in practices he considered polytheistic, such as praying to saints; making pilgrimages to tombs and special mosques; venerating trees, caves, and stones; and using votive and sacrificial offerings. He was also concerned by what he viewed as a laxity in adhering to Islamic law and in performing religious devotions, such as indifference to the plight of widows and orphans, adultery, lack of attention to obligatory prayers, and failure to allocate shares of inheritance fairly to women. When Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab began to preach against these breaches of Islamic laws, he characterized customary practices as jahiliya, the same term used to describe the ignorance of Arabians before the Prophet. Initially, his preaching encountered opposition, but he eventually came under the protection of a local chieftain named Muhammad ibn Saud, with whom he formed an alliance. The endurance of the Wahhabi movement's influence may be attributed to the close association between the founder of the movement and the politically powerful Al Saud in southern Najd.”¹²

That is what seems objectionable in Maizbhandar as well. To quote from Dr. Selim Jahangir-

“বাঙালী মুসলমানের শেকড় সন্ধানের প্রশ্নে যে বিষয়টি বারবার উচ্চারিত হয়, তা হল আবহমান বাংলার মাটি ও মানুষের সাথে তাদের চিন্তাগত দূরত্ব, চেতনাগত ফারাক; মধ্যপ্রাচ্যের সংস্কৃতির প্রতি তাঁদের জীবনবিচ্ছিন্ন মাত্রাতিরিক্ত আসক্তি”

(Jahangir, S. 2012)

Here Dr. Jahangir draws our attention to the detachment of Bengali Muslims from the traditional Bengali culture which he argues is the result of the overwhelming respect for and attraction to the Middle Eastern practice. An additional but relevant dimension is found in Harder’s writing as he draws from Katy Gardner’s description of religious development in Sylhet-

¹² <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/loc/sa/wahhabi.htm>

“...work migrants with newly acquired foreign notions of Mecca- centered and largely reformist Islam are causing the decline of certain types of Shrine and pir veneration”
(Harder, H. 2011)

So, they have the wider ground to establish the claim for authenticity. Maizbhandar, as a representative of overall mazar culture is an effort to create a response to that. There is another link to this scenario which will make it easier to understand the conflict. In colonial India, the Deoband Madrasah was established with an influence of the Wahhabi ideology and, in contrast to this, Syed Ahmadullah received higher education in Calcutta Alia Madrasah which was established by the colonial administration. So, these two large educational institutions for Muslims managed to formulate the dichotomy from the beginning. In Bangladesh we have *Kaomi* Madrasah influenced by the Deobandi tradition. As it is explained in ‘Tohfa e Eid e Miladunnabi’:

“...এই উপমহাদেশে ভারতে ওহাবী আকিদা বিশ্বাসী কিছু ভ্রান্ত আকিদার মাওলানাদের সাহায্যে একটি মাদ্রাসা প্রতিষ্ঠা করে তার নাম রাখে দেওবন্দ অর্থাৎ- শয়তানের স্থান।”¹³

Ideologically these Madrasahs are against the cultural practices such as mazar visitation, touching the ground with forehead to show respect to the Pirs etc. As a consequence, Maizbhandar have become an opposition to them. In the same ground of such differentiation, there are some other ideological oppositions to Maizbhandar. *Hefazot e Islam* is one of those. This religious organization which evolved in Hathazari Madrasah (near to Fatikchhari) has recently gained a political salience. Geographical closeness of these groups has increased the tension and ideological distance between them. These contentious relations can be understood

¹³Collected from ‘Tohfaye Eid e Miladunnabi’ published by Jomote Ashekane Awliya Bangladesh, Page 9.

from some news excerpts¹⁴. Ahle Sunnah and Ahle Hadith conflict is the reflection of such contention. Maizbhandar Sharif locates itself beside Ahle Sunnah and in opposition to Ahle Hadith. In the end, it is necessary to remember that state power and politics are the most influential catalysts that can push any one of those parties engaged in the fight for authenticity to the frontline, to the dominant position. But, in the present context of Bangladesh, it is more important for the government to establish their identity as secular. So, the issue of determining a particular ideology as authentic remains unresolved. But for political gain, government patronizes both.

[Situating in the Locus- *finding adherence with people*]

This is inarguably true that the connection with the people is the strength and driving force of the Maizbhandar and that is why it needs careful analytical consideration. This undeniable fact made Maizbhandar extremely significant in the political, social and religious context of Bangladesh. There are half-a-dozen *mazars* (রওজা শরীফ, হুজরা শরীফ) of major saints including Syed Ahmadullah (গাউসুল আজম), Golamur Rahman (বাবা ভাণ্ডারী), Shafiul Bashar and Ziaul Huq (বাবাজান ক্বেলা) and some more *mazars* of other saints, their *murids*, *khalifas* and *khadims*. Throughout the year, the respective *mazar* authority arranges *orosh*/ ওরশ শরীফ (death anniversary) and *khushruj*/ খোশরোজ শরীফ (birth anniversary). The biggest *orosh* takes place in 23rd January- that is the *orosh* of Syed Ahmadullah Maizbhandari. The whole Hathajari-Najirhat road remains blocked during these programs and the same happens in every year.

¹⁴ http://oldsite.dailyjanakantha.com/news_view.php?nc=27&dd=2013-11-25&ni=155697
<http://archive.ittefaq.com.bd/index.php?ref=MjBfMTFfMDRfMTNfMV8yXzFfODMxNTE=>

Another example of this connection of Maizbhandar with people is the sudden gathering of people in the 1980's, when the then President Gen. Ershad declared to acquire the family estates of Maizbhandar to make those '*waqf*' estates. To show resistance against this decision, Syed Nazibul Bashar- one member of the Maizbhandari family- arranged an open conference in Dhaka. On that rainy day, such a huge number of people were gathered in the conference that the government was forced to change the decision and keep it as it was. Later, Nazibul Bashar became a Member of Parliament from Bangladesh Tarikat Federation under Awami League government. So, these are only few of such examples of the extreme popularity of Maizbhandar. There might be doubt that this is the third largest congregation in the world (as there is no statistical evidence), but such gathering of people on a regular basis is really very rare at least in Bangladesh. Another religious congregation that takes place every year is the Biswa Ijtimia in Tongi, Dhaka. It is really troublesome to compare between these gatherings in terms of the number of participants, but the Maizbhandar phenomenon deserves extra attention because of the religious diversity of the participating population. The people participating in the Biswa Ijtimia or the people attending the largest Eid ul Fitr prayer in Sholakia (in Kishorganj district) or even the people gathered in 'Hefajat e Islam's movement (in 5th may, 2012 in Dhaka) are all Muslims. But the *orosh* festival in Maizbhandar draws the participation of people from all kinds of religious backgrounds- at least from the major ones. That is possible mostly because of the relative openness of their philosophy and activities.

Now, the question is why this connection of Maizbhandari tradition is so strong with the people? There are lots of *mazars* in Bangladesh but none of those could engage such a great number of populations. One key to explain this phenomenon, drawing from Hans Harder, can be the type of Pir in Maizbhandar. Harder mentions about two types of Pir- one is ঠাণ্ডাপীর (*thanda pir*- the Pir

is dead and lineage is not continued) and the other is গরম পীর (*gorom pir*- alive and active in spreading *baiyat*, lineage is continued) (Harder, H. 2011). *Thanda Pir* indicates a Saint who has passed away and someone else from his lineage (*shajara*) did not follow in the line of his ancestor. Thus the disciples regularly maintained by the *khadims* and visited by the followers and other people but there is no one to spread ‘*baiyat*’. In contrast, *gorom pir* is someone who is active on the chain of sainthood and spreads ‘*baiyat*’ on a regular basis. As Harder found, there are only two *mazars* of *groom pir* in Chittagong- one is the Mirzakhil and another is the Maizbhandar. Now, Maizbhandar has more than one active lines of sainthood and each of those saints spreads the ‘*baiyat*’ in their own way. Alongside, the Pir of Mirzakhil had himself acknowledged the supremacy of Syed Ahmadullah- the founder of Maizbhandar. So, these factors altogether form one explanation of Maizbhandar’s success in terms of engaging people. Syed Ahmadullah’s strategy to mold the cultural practices of Maizbhandari *tariqa* (order) and the way to engage people is another influential element in this regard. He understood the appeal of music to the people and induced the Chishtiyya tradition of *sema mahfil*. The *sema* songs are so effective to spread the philosophical messages of this *tariqa*. Writing songs by the Pirs themselves are very rare incidents (I came to know about only one which was written by Shafiul Bashar Maizbhandari) but all of them encouraged this practice. Syed Ahmadullah’s decision to introduce cultural elements of the local Hindus is relevant in this discussion. He introduced the ঢোল as one of the basic musical instruments for performing *sema* which was mostly used by the lower caste Hindus of that time.¹⁵ Such strategic decisions were very effective to incorporate the people from other religions too.

¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Manzurul Mannan

Openness (an argument that is related to the previous one) of the Maizbhandari philosophy (it is applicable for other *mazar* and Sufi practices too) is another reason for Maizbhandar's immense popularity. Islamization/ preaching Islam was not the approach taken by Ahmadullah which could make it harder for the people from other religions to incorporate with this newer concept. Being not-so-attentive to textual rigidity is another part of this feature of Maizbhandar. Relative freedom for religious performances also does play important role in this scenario. Except some recently imposed restrictions such as separate prayer section for male and female, Maizbhandar shrine complex is equally open for both the male and female visitors. Within their allocated territory, both the groups can perform the rituals to some extent. These features of Maizbhandar that boosted the connection with mass people (people from all sorts of background) are supported by the wider distribution of activities throughout the nation and beyond. The wide network of '*khanka*' and '*daira*' (regional centers) is a sign of that distribution. Production of bulk amount of texts is another key to understand this popularity. These texts are published under the sponsorship of the mazar authorities- the Huq Manjil is the most active among these authorities. These texts are usually written by academics and intellectuals. The texts effectively attract the educated section of society which, eventually, results in increasing the diversity and strength of Maizbhandar. One last feature of Maizbhandar movement that helps answer the question on its popularity is the strategic-systematic changes in the Pir's activities. The Pirs could successfully understand the need for change in saintly attitude and activities in accordance with the change of social trend. These changes came as the people's common understanding and ways of understanding a subject matter have changed. Thus Maizbhandar's connection to people of the region are grounded in not one, but a multitude of factors.

[Situating in the Locus-*With Relation to Other Sufi Streams and Baul Culture*]

Maizbhandari *tariqa* derives their basic system of thought and cultural practices from other Sufi traditions, I have already discussed, declaring their position within this larger Sufistic tradition. But Sufism is unable to bear a singular identity. Sufism is multidimensional and multifaceted. This region of South Asia, specifically Bangladesh, accommodates more than one community which claim themselves as Sufi believers and Maizbhandar has its own unique Sufistic tradition and functions- at least to them. Any sort of ideology- be it political, religious or any other- absorbs some of the cultural elements from its surroundings. After a considerable time period, that tradition might be reshaped by the influence of the host culture to such an extent that it becomes a part and parcel of the host culture. It is always risky to look for a distinguishing line between two parallel existing cultural and religious traditions. It becomes difficult to differentiate the intruder body from host body. Which one to call the indigenous and which one to call foreign- this dilemma is hard to resolve. However, the Maizbhandar community claims itself as the only indigenous Sufi tradition of this region. So, it is crucial for us to know to which points the lines are drawn by the Maizbhandaris. Considering the birth and dwelling place of the founding Saint Syed Ahmadullah, this *tariqa* is of an indigenous birth. As most of the Maizbhandari texts are written in Bengali, so it can be considered indigenous in terms of language too. But some questions still persist. The basic / core texts of Maizbhandar are written in Persian language and Urdu ('Aina e Bari' by Abdul Gani Kanchanpuri, 'Tohfatul Akhiyar' etc.) which are written in times of Syed Ahmadullah in the late 19th century. Writing in Bengali is actually a later addition- few decades after Ahmadullah's death. Writing books and articles in Bengali was initiated by Delawar Hossain Maizbhandari (অছিঁয়ে গাউসুল আজম)- the grandson of Syed Ahmadullah (গাউসুল আজম). In terms of geographical location and characteristics,

Chittagong is closer to Burma (Myanmar) than the rest of Bangladesh. Also, Chittagong is not included in the Bengal delta.

“It is located to the East of the Delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra and geographically belongs to the Burmese mainland rather than to Bengal proper”

(Harder, H. 2011).

Geographic and Demographic identity of Chittagong is more Arakanese than Bengali. It is the colonial decision that located these places within certain national boundaries. So, someone may assert that the Maizbhandari tradition is indigenous in the broader scale of South Asia, not particularly Bangladesh. But even if this assertion is true, as we’ve argued previously, after such a long period of one and a half century it is hard to come to a conclusion whether it is an indigenous formulation or foreign intrusion. Though this discussion is not centered on the debate whether it is an indigenous tradition or not, rather, it is an attempt to understand the issue of proclaimed indigenusness through the elaboration of this debate. The relation of Maizbhandar with other Sufi traditions and baul/ folk traditions requires careful consideration. Maizbhandar has derived its parts from the Sufi tariqas that are available in this region and beyond- the Chishtiyya, Quadiriya, Moulobia, Malamia etcetera. Maizbhandar also has significant similarities with *baul/ murshidi/ marfoti* tradition in terms of its philosophy and songs. It is evident especially in the songs. Songs are the most important medium for the expression of *murshidi- marfoti* belief and, similarly, songs are treated as a form of prayer in Maizbhandar.

[Situating in the Locus- *In terms of Nation and State Politics*]

In the early stages of the Maizbhandar, it found its location in a contrastive position with the colonial regime. They had to define their position in terms of colonial administration that was accused of creating economic discrimination, sense of cultural superiority and ethnic opposition. First two points were recognized on the light of ethnic identity- seeing the colonizers as a threat to ‘বাঙালী জাতিসত্তা’ (Bengali Ethnic identity) . Unlike other religious communities, Maizbhandar seems to be focused more on the regional identity rather than the religious one. So, finding their position in response to the oppressive nature of British colonial rule assisted them to get closer to the local population. Maizbhandari texts claim to be associated with the event of ‘বঙ্গভঙ্গ’ (first partition of Bengal) too.

“সৈয়দ আহমদ উল্লাহ মাইজভাণ্ডারী প্রায়শঃ বলতেন, সিয়াসতকে (প্রশাসন) আমি পূর্ব দিকে নিয়ে আসব । বাস্তবে তার প্রতিফলন ১৯০৫ খ্রিষ্টাব্দে ঘটে। ব্রিটিশ সরকার বৃহত্তর বঙ্গপ্রদেশ ভেঙ্গে পূর্ববঙ্গ ও আসাম নিয়ে একটি স্বতন্ত্র প্রদেশ গঠন করেন।” (Hossain, S. D. 2000)

The philosophy of Islamic state is associated with their ideological position on nation state. They allocate space for ‘Haqqul Ibad’ (right for every creature) at the center of their thinking on the nation-state.¹⁶ Along with this, an inception for Bangladesh (*Mulk e Bangala*) as a separate nation state was inaugurated in Maizbhandar much before 1947. Here, the ‘mystic’ ability of the Maizbhandari Saints found its expression through the political anticipation of a state. So, Maizbhandar’s engagement on a political scale is associated with both the ethnic identity of the people and their national/political identity. This engagement is distributed in mostly three ways. These three ways are- active participation (in state politics and political events such as the

¹⁶ Page 24, ‘Bangladesher Swadhinota Shongram O Muktizuddhe Maizbhandar Dorbar Sharif’ by Mohammad Mahmbubul Alam.

liberation war), giving suggestions to the political leaders and simply offering ‘*dua*’ (blessings). These three ways are evident in the depiction of Maizbhandar’s participation in the 1971 liberation war. In the following periods of liberation war, there is a lot of dimensions added to this relation between the Maizbhandar and state politics. One member of the Maizbhandari sainthood- Nazibul Bashar being a Member of Parliament is one dimension. Certainly, it added diversity to Maizbhandari tradition and slightly altered the relation between these two bodies- Maizbhandar and the state. The biggest political names have added much to this dimension. Almost all the popular political leaders of Bangladesh have visited the Maizbhandar and directly engaged themselves in many ways. Maizbhandaris present this point with the evidences such as Sk. Mujib and Sk. Hasina’s involvement and dialogue with Maizbhandari Pirs and AK Fazlul Huq’s statement on the Maizbhandar etc. So, what do these incidents signify? These incidents prove that religion has never lost its appeal to the politics in Bangladesh. It is an effective catalyst of politics in this region, as we see in India and even in the entire global politics. Furthermore, it is this kind of Sufi thinking with its philosophy that pushed for a particular kind of nation and national struggle at certain moments in history. Similar scenario is observed in Pakistan where there is an ambition for building a sense of one nation through the effort of finding a proper Islam:

“Today in Pakistan, after many years of reformist activity, there is a wide range of opinions about which activities fall within the boundaries of proper Islam and which fall outside, despite many efforts to articulate an Islam that would draw all Pakistanis together as a nation.” (Ewing, 1997)

It also signifies that mazar is not only a rural phenomenon. It is no more confined within the cultural territory of the rural- agricultural population. Rather, it pervades multiple spaces and significant in the context of urban population too.

Simultaneous exposition of regional-religious identity is an interesting factor to notice in Maizbhandar. In terms of religiosity, cultural practices and even in the texts, an attempt to maintain a balance between these two identities is observed. It is true from the perspective of Bangladeshi politics too. But one reverse flow can also be identified. In the recent development of secular politics, the *mazar* culture is not so frequently talked about, although it has a strong influence over a large number of people. In the process of constructing a specific identity of the state and maintaining a resemblance with the global direction of politics, the *mazar* cultures, like Maizbhandar, are allocated with a tiny space inside the state. The space for them to function shrinks as the state wants to prove itself as a secular one.

[Concept of Body- *grounded as an indigenous form of scholarship*]

Theory of body (দেহতত্ত্ব) as a genre of knowledge originated and is fairly unique to Indian subcontinent, particularly Bengal. It found its expression in various forms of literature including songs. There are theories where human body is seen as the reflection of God himself. These theories are evident in various *Baul*, *Vaishnava* and other genres of philosophical developments in this region. Probably because of interaction with those folk traditions and as many of the Maizbhandari songwriters are basically *baul*, *fakir* and folk singers, Maizbhandari has considerable contribution to the theory of body in the local context. Also, in many Sufi traditions, particular types of body movement are important part of their practice. So, influence

from global Sufi orders is also not deniable. Use of breath can be one example in this case. This concept of breathing (দম) is illustrated in a song written by Maolana Hadi (a remarkable personality in Maizbhandari history):

‘দমে দমে জপরে মন লা ইলাহা ইল্লাল্লাহ, ঘটে ঘটে রাখ জারী লা ইলাহা ইল্লাল্লাহ’

To understand concept of body in Maizbhandari philosophy, we need to start from the significance of sex/ intercourse. The final stage of intercourse experiences the fullest expression of human feelings. So, it is the time and position where the knowledge (= sperm) is shared. According to this philosophy, sperm is what bears knowledge. There are three elements in sperm- অদি/ pre-cum (that cleans the path for smooth transport of sperm), মজি/ cum (that carries the sperm) and মণি/ sperm (the core/ substance that carries knowledge and mental features of a man). the first two are believed to be related to and produced by particular food habit of a man and influenced by the surrounding environment that he lives within. But sperm (মণি) is created from the mind and nature¹⁷. So, here it poses a logic why বংশ/lineage is so important in Maizbhandari philosophy. As sperm is equivalent to knowledge, he, who is connected to that, shares the knowledge of his ancestor too. From texts we get that Syed Ahmadullah was placed from his father’s head to his mother’s womb:

“একদা এক শুভ মুহুর্তে হযরত সৈয়দ মতিউল্লাহ সাহেবের ‘মস্তক’ হইতে হযরত গাউসুল আজম তাঁহার জননী বিবি খায়েরুন্নেছা সাহেবার পবিত্র উদরে স্থান গ্রহণ করেন”
(Hossain, S. D. 2000)

Controlling the bodily demands is also undeniably important in this philosophy. In the concept of ‘seven methods’ (উসুল এ সাব’আ/ সপ্তপদ্ধতি), there is the mention of four types of ‘death’ of human instincts. Two of those are related to bodily restrain. The ‘white death’ is accomplished

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. Babul from the Huq manjil

through fasting (lesser intake of food in body) and the ‘red death’ is accomplished through refraining from sexual demands.

[‘*Keramot*’- functioning on the local ground]

One of the most crucial things that need to be discussed about Maizbhandar is the ‘keramot’. Keramot can be explained as the supernatural activities that are shown occasionally by the Pirs/ Awliyas. This is the major component of their charismatic characteristics or sainthood that is used to identify them as Pir (saint) which is attributed with divinity. A similar connotation can be found in Max Weber’s definition of *charisma*:

*“The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary”*¹⁸

The supernatural activities performed directly by the Pirs, their prophetic messages, ability to see what is happening in other places- all are included in the list of ‘keramot’. Showing keramot is not unique to Maizbhandar though. In more or less all the regions of Bangladesh, this culture of showing supernatural power is available and usually associated with Muslim Pirs and Awliyas. There are hundreds of thousands of stories and legends found in every corner of Bangladesh. There are popular stories of Saint Shah Jalal, Shah Poran in Sylhet, Bayzid Bostami, Sultanul Awliya, Pani Shah in Chittagong, Dewanbaghi Hujur, Rajarbagh Hujur in Dhaka, Khan

¹⁸ Chapter 8, *The Trickster and the Paranormal* by George P. Hansen Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2001

Jahan Ali in Bagerhat and a lot more. Not only in Bangladesh, these legends are found in other parts of the globe too and especially in the places like India and Pakistan where the influx of Muslim Pir or Saint was the most. For example, there are popular stories of Nizamuddin Awliya of Delhi where he defeated a Hindu king by using his super power. There are also the stories of Qalandar Shah in Punjab of Pakistan. So, the super human performances of the Saints are closely entangled with the life of the people in subcontinent. Maizbhandar of Chittagong is a great exposition of this. It is true that the loads of legends related to these supernatural deeds are significant in the culture of these regions and it is true for overall mazar tradition as well. But the root of this tradition is connected to the Persian and old Islamic tradition of the Arabs because all these Saints have visited this area from Persian and Arabic territories. With the advent of Islam and its preachers, the Perso-Arabic cultural traits have also entered this region. There were practices of this kind here in Indian subcontinent too- like practices of the '*tantrik*'. But these practices have some considerable dissimilarity with the one we are concerned about. There is a long history of *keramot* in the Islamic texts and also in the pre-Islamic texts of the other prophets such as Khijir, Sulaiman and Yousuf et al. Not only them, there are at least one or more stories of '*keramot*' performed by all the known prophets of Abrahamic religions. One story of such activity performed by Muhammad is that of dividing the moon into two parts. Sulaiman was famous for his ability to communicate with the animals and birds. Scholars in Sulaiman's darbar as well were able to perform such acts. For the Maizbhandar, in the discussion of '*keramot*', prophet Khijir is probably the most important figure. He has been mentioned repeatedly in the Maizbhandari texts for his supernatural ability shown to Moses. Texts of the Abrahamic religions or the religious practices that are evolved from Persia and Arab are extremely rich with these sorts of stories.

Now, for this paper, the most necessary task in this part is to articulate *keramot* in the context of and connection with local social conditions. For the *keramots*, as exhibited in the traditions like Maizbhandar, it can be stated that these are mostly ‘Islamic’ in tradition but ‘local’ in character. This statement risks a fall into the trap of defining the terms ‘Islamic’ and ‘local’, so, to avoid this trap, the only thing can be done is to keep the terms within inverted commas. But, as the local form or characteristics of *keramot* will further come into discussion, it is required to explain the extents to which ‘local’ is proclaimed in this paper. The *keramots* are local in terms of the agriculture of this area surrounding the Maizbhandar, the ecological and environmental structure, economic and social demand of the local people and the socio cultural changes that involve the people. On a larger spectrum, the connection of agriculture with the influx of Islam and Sufistic traditions are evident in Eaton’s exploration, as he writes:

“In the eastern delta, where settled agrarian life was far less advanced than in the west in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Islam more than other culture systems became identified with a developing agrarian social order”. (Eaton, 1993)

Before going to this discussion in details, some points are worth mentioning. These will provide the tools to understand the dynamic relation of the *keramot* in the local context. First of all, it is necessary to note that the *keramot* has been the element that mystifies and exoticizes the Pirs/ Saints those are out of the perception of mass people. This is something that cannot be fully understood. These make them divine figures and place them far from the masses. But interestingly, this is one of the elements that connect the Pirs most frequently with the people. These two apparently contrasting features of distance and nearness together constitute the charisma that produces and are produced by *keramot*. None of the features exceeds the other in terms of functionality. It mystifies the Saints because it pushes them to a certain height where

they become someone ‘beyond questions’ to a large portion of people. It also exoticizes the Pirs to another group of people who claim to have ‘scientific sensibility’- preferably the educated urban community. But they too feel the connection sometimes. One will notice a considerable number of urban middle and upper class attendants and even people like University professors there in the Maizbhandari premise. So, this *keramot* plays this dual role for a varied and large number of people- especially in the context of Chittagong. Secondly, the superhuman activities performed by the Maizbhandari saints are currently situated at the juncture of two opposing possibilities. One is the possibility that the stories will acquire a mythological character and will be part of folk tales. This will happen if the growth of previously mentioned scientific sensibility of people rises. Another is the truth building capacity. This is also possible because of the increasing number of Maizbhandari texts that are being produced by the different authorities of Maizbhandar and their altered strategy of spreading ‘baiyat’. This bulk amount of texts, incredible number of believers and spatial distribution of Maizbhandari ideology may possess the necessary ‘power’ or strength to establish these as truth. The direction of socio-cultural changes in the regional and global platform will decide whether these will become myths or will be established as truths.

Now, how have the *keramots* taken local form? How can we analyze the contextuality of *keramot*? For the answers, we need to look at these performed by the Maizbhandari saints and the changes that have taken place over the decades. The founder of Maizbhandari order Gausul Azam Syed Ahmadullah had shown *keramots* which are indicative of the then social, agricultural, geographical and economic situation of the place. In his time, the surrounding place was mostly dense jungle and it was in a transition period of transforming from jungle area to agricultural lands. So, there are evidences of *keramot* such as rescuing a man from a tiger in the

jungle, protecting paddy fields and cane fields from wild beasts, taking vows from tigers and other animals etc. He also changed his power in changing the direction of a stream, influencing sea water, rescuing a follower from drowning into the sea. These can be related to the fact that Chittagong is a harbor city and the largest portion of the population depends on the sea for their livelihood. Providing medication for various incurable diseases and blessing people with child (male child in almost all the cases) are the most frequently performed *keramots*. All these represent the particular social context and demands of that particular time. For example, there are lots of *keramots* regarding performing Hajj. In around the 19th century, people started going to perform hajj from this region. But most of the people were not solvent enough to visit Mecca. Transport and communication problem was also an issue to consider. So, there were many *keramots* that sent someone magically to Mecca or returning someone home in just few seconds etc.

Part B: Drawing a global importance- *entitlement of 'original' Islam*

[The Question of Authenticity- *for a connection with global/ 'original' Islam*]

Maizbhandar is also relevant in the analysis of the religious unrest that has been persistent for last few years¹⁹. The Maizbhandari Saints and their allies have their own point of view about these violent activities²⁰. In the public discourses, what continues is the probe- what 'real'/ 'authentic' Islam is and if Islam does support violence or not. In explaining Islam, Talal Asad

¹⁹ <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/Qadri/29814495>

²⁰ <http://www.manobkantha.com/2013/05/10/120238.html>

defines Islam as a 'tradition' and he discusses about the notion of a 'correct model' that gives direction to that tradition or praxis:

"The discourses in which the teaching is done, in which the correct teaching is done, in which the correct performance or practice is defined and learned, are intrinsic in all Islamic practices. It is therefore somewhat misleading to suggest, as some sociologists have done, that it is orthopraxy not orthodoxy, rituals not doctrine, that matters in Islam. It is misleading because such a contention ignores the centrality of the notion of "the correct model" to which an instituted practice-including ritual-ought to conform, a model conveyed in authoritative formulas in Islamic traditions as in others". (Asad, 1986)

The basis of almost all the cases of religious conflicts is the dispute around this "correct model" of Islam. Maizbhandari Pirs, in their conferences, repeatedly inform their position against violent activities. But that is not important here. What I strived to know about is their articulation on the issue of authenticity of Islam. Maizbhandar's relative openness to and greater acceptance of religions provides sort of a utopian imagination. But they have their outlines which confines them within certain ideological boundary. So, authenticity is Maizbhandar's concern too.

Like other ideological streams, claim for authenticity constructs the political position of Maizbhandar which is very crucial for them as an institution and a system of thought (order/ *tariqa*). At the same time, this position automatically puts them on a conflict of philosophy and ideology with the other streams. The conflict of authenticity within Islamic sub-divisions is, to a large extent, grounded on the difference in approach to and interpretation of the holy texts- the Quran, hadith and others. Maizbhandari Pirs critiques the contemporary trend of analyzing the holy text on the basis of only the literal meanings/ scripturalist perception²¹. According to Hans Harder, orientalist scholarship also functioned as a force to promote scripturalist perception of

²¹ Mujibol Boshor Maizbhandari on an annual congregation in Dhaka at November 3, 2015

Islam in Bengal or in the subcontinent. (Harder, H. 2011) Maizbhandar's approach to the holy text is twofold- *majeji* and *haqiqi*. The two aspects of text signifies two different approaches- one is 'knowledge of action' oriented and another is 'knowledge of the unknown' oriented. This conflict based on the question of authenticity takes ground on the issue of allowing or not allowing the existence of the later approach. Broadly, these two aspects are paralleled to, respectively, *sharia* ('*Jaheri*' knowledge) and *haqiqat* ('*Batani*' knowledge). The hadith- 'আমি জ্ঞানের শহর, আলী তার দরজা' is relevant in this discussion. The Maizbhandaris interpret this 'knowledge' as 'Ilm e Ludni' (এলম ই লুদনি) and thus justifies the 'bateni' knowledge (knowledge of the unknown). So, to some extent, Maizbhandari position in this regard transcends the text. As Ramesh Shil continues the previous song:

“মাষ্টার-মাহিনা ছাড়া এলমে লুদনি পড়া
কাগজ-কলম, দোয়াত-কালির কি দরকার আছে!”

Justification of the Pirs is due to this approach and that is supported by the claim for being on the lineage of Muhammad. Ali was married to Fatima- Muhammad's daughter, and fathered Imam Hossain and Imam Hassan. Maizbhandaris claim to be descended from Zainul Abedin- son of Imam Hossain²². So, with reference to that hadith, the Maizbhandaris are the descendants of that knowledge. And this fact strengthens their claim for authenticity. Their concept of body that was discussed in the previous section is linked to this task. The logic behind this is that as the sperm is equated with knowledge, so, being the descendant of Muhammad, the Maizbhandari Pirs are the true successor of the knowledge of him too.

To strengthen the claim for authenticity, an interesting component that needs to function is the politics of representation. One part of that is the expression of universality of Maizbhandari

²² See annex for family lineage from The Prophet to Ahmadullah Maizbhandari

ideology. They constantly introduce themselves as a culturally indigenous religious system, but as it is a part of Islam and Islam is itself a global phenomenon, universal expression is of dire necessity for the Maizbhandar. As stated by Harder:

“Maizbhandar may thus appear as a very rural and local phenomenon, but to the hundreds of thousands of its devotees, it is a center of universal importance” (Harder, H. 2011)

In terms of Maizbhandari songs, evidence can be found as:

“এই সঙ্গীত দেশের সীমা পেরিয়ে এখন সুদূর ইউরোপ, আমেরিকা, আফ্রিকায়ও মাতন তুলেছে। মাইজভাণ্ডারী সঙ্গীতের তাল, সুর ও পরিবেশনশৈলী এখন ইউরোপ, আমেরিকা, আফ্রিকার সঙ্গীত পিপাসুদের কাছে এক দূর্বীর আকর্ষণ” (Alam, M. 2014)

Another way is to build the tombs/ *mazars* with affluence of architectural beauty which is true not only for Maizbhandar and the *mazars*. Architectural beauty along with some specific features such as the model of Quran at the top of the central shrine of Syed Ahmadullah; typical dome and *minar* based shrine complex and highly decorated and well protected ‘*raoja sharif*’ help create a feeling of sacredness and thus strengthen the base for authenticity. It can be considered as an attempt to establish authenticity through art and architecture.

Another two traits are the outfits and educational qualification of the saints. The dresses the Pirs usually wear- white Panjabi, white round cap (*tupi*- টুপি) along with beard in face represent as the ‘pure’ Islamic figures that are not slipped out of the ‘original’ Islamic tradition. It automatically creates an ambience of respect for the Pirs. So, they maintain the attire- what it needs to be a Pir in popular imagination. This along with their educational qualification forms a particular social class for them. So, to the public, it serves class consciousness that differentiates

the Pir from a '*pagol*' or '*fakir*' living in the *mazar*. Both the parties may have the power to *dua* (blessings). But for the first one, a certain level of respect is allocated, but what the second group gets is sympathy and fear instead. So, the representation of a Pir is also shaped and defined by the social demand.

['*Keramot*' - a turn to global sphere]

Another extremely popular Saint in Maizbhandar was Syed Ziaul Huq Maizbhandari. His time frame was around the mid twentieth century. Analysis of his *keramots* suggests us the local and global scenario of that time. His *keramots* reflect the changed global formation and changed pattern of people's needs. It is claimed in the Maizbhandari texts that he initiated a change in the global economy that is beneficial for the mass. He stopped the gravitational force for a while, ordered attack on US President Ronald Regan for his violent war strategy, and announced that his *Darbar* is the office for global affairs etc. and more. In that time, the 'local' was gradually being influenced by the global politics and war. This change merged with the change in Maizbhandari strategy of performing *keramot*. The present 'Sajjadanashin Pir' of Huq manjil brought changes in strategy too. He doesn't show any direct *keramot*, but injects the essence of his supernatural power through the social works. He does a lot of social works- arranging programs for helpless children, building orphanage, school and madrasah to provide free education so and so forth. These are done probably because of the change in the nature of demand of time. This change in strategy is indeed very useful. It ensures the participation and engagement of a lot of people including the educated class of society.

Conclusion and Additional Remarks

The beginning of Islam as an imported entity into this region is necessarily associated with Sufism and shrine culture. These can be subject to debate in religious circles with concern to its authenticity or originality of Islam, but it is a fact in the history of Islam in Bengal. But now, it is in an interesting intersection of history. At one hand, it is surely in a decline as it had lost its adherence with the agrarian system of society and is evolved merely as one of the numerous interpretations of Islam. Meaning that it no more represents the connection with the group of people as it did at an earlier time. With the changes that took place in the last couple of centuries and with the influx of newer thoughts and theories. That is probably because the newer thoughts (e.g. Wahhabism or other political articulation of Islam) are more compatible with the economic and other changes in society. It has adopted the institutional structure like the other beliefs in Islam or any other religion. So, with time, it is also adopting new strategies for persistence. Maizbhandar can easily be located in this same intersection. Devotees or disciples from varied backgrounds are the evidence of this.

So, in this historical juncture, it is essential to identify the politics adopted by the Maizbhandaris for their survival in the contest of authenticity of Islam. This paper addresses this issue through two analytical hubs where the ethnographic data and ethnographer's insights are enjoined. These two hubs constitute, first of all, the claim for being the only indigenous Sufi Islam and secondly, finding their spiritual and ancestral route to Prophet's family.

Annex:

The Spiritual Roots of Hazrat Gausul Azam Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari:

Syedul Ambiya Shafiul Mujnabeen Khatamun Nabiyeen Rahmatullil Alamin Hazrat Ahmad

Mujtaba Muhammad Mostafa Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam.

Amirul Momineen Hazrat Ali Ibn Abu Talib Karramallahu Wajhahu.

Syed us Shohada Hazrat Imam Hossain Radi'Allahu Ta'ala Anhu.

Hazrat Syed Imam Zainul Abedin Radi'Allahu Ta'ala Anhu.

Hazrat Syed Imam Muhammad Baqir Radi'Allahu Ta'ala Anhu.

Hazrat Imam Imam Jafar Sadiq Radi'Allahu Ta'ala Anhu.

Hazrat Imam Imam Musa Kazim Radi'Allahu Ta'aa Anhu.

Hazrat Imam Ali Ibn Musa Reza Radi'Allahu Ta'ala Anhu.

Hazrat Shaykh Maruf Karkhi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Sirri Saqti Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shaykh Abul Qasim Junayd Baghdadi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Abu Bakr Shibli Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shaykh Abdul Aziz Tamimi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Abul Fazal Abdul Wahid Tamimi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Abul Farah Tartusi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Maulana Abul Hasan Quraishi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Abu Saeed Mubaarak Makhzoomi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Gausul Azam Shah Sufi Syed Mohiuddin Abdul Qadir Zilani Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shaykh Shahabuddin Soharwardi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Nizamuddin Ghaznavi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Mubarak Ghaznavi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Nazmuddin Ghaznavi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Kutubuddin Rawshan Zamir Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Fazlullah Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Mahmud Qaderi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Nasir Uddin Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Takiuddin Qaderi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Nizamuddin Qaderi Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Ahlullah Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Jafar Hossainee Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Khaliluddin Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Maulana Muhammad Munayem Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Muhammad Dayem Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Ahmadullah Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Haji Shah Sufi Syed Laqiatullah Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Muhammad Saleh Lahori Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

Gausul Azam Hazrat Maulana Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari Qaddasallahu Sirrahu.

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