



Identity, Culture & Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue, Volume 18,
Number 1-2, 2017. pp. 14 – 35. © CODESRIA, ICES. ISSN
2051-2914

CONTESTED IDENTITY: THE AHMADIYYA COMMUNITY OF BANGLADESH

Aminur Raheem*

Abstract

Les musulmans ahmadis – ou ahmadis – du Bangladesh font partie d'une communauté religieuse née dans la Péninsule, sous l'Inde britannique, à la fin du XIX^e siècle et qui s'est étendue à l'échelle mondiale. Bien que des milieux influents parmi les populations musulmanes traditionnelles de nombreux pays du sous-continent et au-delà refusent de les accepter comme musulmans, les membres de la communauté ahmadis sont de vrais musulmans sunnites dans la tradition du prophète Mahomet. En réalité, les croyances et les pratiques des Ahmadiis sont étroitement liées à celles des principaux musulmans sunnites, même s'il existe certaines différences auxquelles de nombreux chefs religieux orthodoxes s'opposent. Cependant, la persécution politique contre les Ahmadiis est un phénomène relativement récent qui ne peut pas être expliqué uniquement en terme de différences de croyances et de pratiques. Au lieu de cela, comme je le ferai valoir dans le présent document dans le contexte du Bangladesh, la marginalisation sociale et politique des Ahmadiyyas et les campagnes visant à les déclarer non musulmans doivent être comprises dans le contexte de niveaux national, régional et mondial.

The Ahmadiyya Muslims – or Ahmadis – of Bangladesh are part of a religious community that originated in the Punjab region under British India at the end of the 19th century, and is dispersed globally at present. Although influential quarters from among 'mainstream' Muslim populations in many countries in the subcontinent and beyond refuse to accept them as Muslims, members of the Ahmadiyya community insist that they are true Muslims, and that they too are Sunni in the sense of following sunnah or the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad.

* Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University. Email: aminurraheem@gmail.com.

The beliefs and practices of the Ahmadis do in fact have close affinity with that of the mainstream Sunni Muslims in most respects, though there are also some differences that many orthodox religious leaders have been opposed to from the beginning. However, political persecution of the Ahmadis is a relatively recent phenomenon that cannot be solely explained in terms of differences of beliefs and practices. Instead, as I will argue in this paper in the context of Bangladesh, the social and political marginalization of the Ahmadiyyas, and growing demands to declare them to be 'non-Muslims', have to be understood in the context of wider trends operating at national, regional and global levels.

In Bangladesh, the Ahmadiyya Muslims (or 'Qadianis' as they are known more commonly, with derogatory connotations) presently constitute a highly marginalized religious community that is estimated to have some 100,000 followers. Organized attempts to have them officially declared to be 'non-Muslims' has been continuing in this country since the late 1980s. The quarters making such demands did not just stop at calling for state interference to declare the Ahmadiyya a community as 'non-Muslim', but they also initiated organized campaigns of verbal attacks, social exclusion and even physical violence against the Ahmadis. Amidst a rising trend of such hostilities, the Ahmadiyya Muslims of Bangladesh have experienced multiple dimensions of identity crisis and marginalization at various levels, ranging from local communities to the state. Though the state has not declared the Ahmadiyya community to be 'non-Muslim' as demanded by some active elements from within the mainstream Sunni Muslim community of the country, law enforcement authorities have often been perceived as having acted in a biased manner against the embattled religious minority. In this context, in this paper the nature of marginality of the Ahmadiyya Muslims living in Bangladesh is examined in relation to the state, social processes of identity formation and marginalization, and other relevant factors. We begin with a brief overview of the relevant historical background, starting with the emergence of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and some of the major events that signalled a rise of hostilities towards the Ahmadis in the subcontinent generally, and in Bangladesh in particular. After this descriptive section, we try to analyze the rising tide of anti-Ahmadiyya socio political orchestrations in Bangladesh in relation to broader trends operating in Bangladesh and beyond. In this context, we pay special attention to how Bangladesh came to be increasingly perceived and represented as a 'Muslim' country, and the associated social and political ramifications that this process has had, particularly in terms of increasing marginalization of the Ahmadiyya community of the country.

A brief history of the Ahmadiyya Muslims in Bangladesh

The emergence of the Ahmadiyya community dates back to a messianic movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), who was born in Qadian, a small town that is now situated inside the Indian state of Punjab. Available historical accounts (e.g. Khan 2015) suggest that this movement, which came to be known as Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, was both revivalist and reformist in nature, at least in so far as conceived by its founder. However, some of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's prophetic claims proved to be controversial from the beginning not only from the point of view of orthodox Islamic scholars, but also from that of the adherents of other religions. In stating the nature of this controversy briefly, Khan (2015:1) writes:

Ahmadis claim that their community was founded by the second coming of Jesus Christ, who was sent to the world by God to reform society in advance of the final judgment. This belief has shaped the development of the Ahmadiyya movement and has framed questions of legitimacy surrounding its interpretations of Islam as it continues to spread throughout the world. The transnational scope of the movement today has enabled this controversy to have lasting repercussions for conceptions of Muslim identity worldwide by helping many Muslims delineate what contemporary Islam is not.

Having been founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Ludhiana, India on March 23, 1889 through the allegiance of 40 followers who believed in the claims made by the revivalist leader, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat began to attract followers in other parts of the subcontinent as well, and is said to have some 10,000 branches or local communities of Ahmadiyyas around the globe in present. After the Ahmadis were officially declared to be non-Muslims in Pakistan, its main leadership relocated to England, where the movement presently has its headquarters.

In what is Bangladesh today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat began to attract a few followers by the first decade of the 1900s, and began to gain momentum by 1912 when a spiritual leader named Moulana Syed Muhammad Abdul Wahed, of Brahmanbaria, joined the movement. He initiated the formation of the first organization of Ahmadis in this part of the subcontinent upon instructions from the center of the movement. At present, members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat of Bangladesh are

found in different parts of the country, including Dhaka and its outskirts, Brahmanbaria, Khulna, Shatkhira, and Panchagarh. Within Bangladesh, the headquarters of the community has been located in Dhaka since the 1950s. At present, the Ahmadiyya community of Bangladesh is reported to consist of 103 locally organized Jamaats, which carried out different activities of their communities under the leadership of local Amirs who are elected with approval from the leadership of the national Jamaat. The community also utilizes three age grade based organizations for males, and one organization for women, for carrying out different activities. Financially, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat relies on contributions from members who are said to donate one sixteenth of their incomes towards common funds, which are put to use for community affairs and for welfare of members if and as needed. As in other parts of the world, annual religious gatherings known as Salana Jalsa, organized both locally and centrally, constitute an important religious event for the Ahmadiyya community of Bangladesh. While central Salana Jalsas were organized in Brahmanbaria from 1917-1949, from 1950 onwards these events have been organized in Dhaka. However, in recent years, the Ahmadis of Bangladesh have faced obstacles in organizing these annual gatherings in different parts of the country.

In the subcontinent as a whole, although opposition to the Ahmadiyya movement was observed from the outset, organized acts of violence against its followers were not very common during the period of British colonial rule. However, after Pakistan was created on the basis of Muslim nationalism, notions about 'proper' Islam took on increasing political significance in the new state. It was in this context that in 1953, in the western wing of Pakistan, violent anti-Ahmadiyya riots broke out. Eventually, through a constitutional amendment undertaken in 1974, and a presidential ordinance in 1984, the Ahmadis were officially declared to be non-Muslim in Pakistan. In Bangladesh, however, organized hostilities towards the Ahmadis were rarely observed before the late 1980s. During the entire Pakistan period (1947-1971), only one single anti-Ahmadiyya incident, which took place in Brahmanbaria in 1963, is said to have been recorded in the eastern wing that would later emerge as independent Bangladesh (Hasan 2011:74). Following independence in 1971, the rise of anti-Ahmadiyya hostilities in Bangladesh mainly took place during the late 1980s, when developments at home as well as abroad influenced the turn of events within the country. We will describe and analyze these factors more fully in relevant sections below.

The changing nature of the state, religion in politics, and democracy in Bangladesh

One of the most populous countries of the world, Bangladesh is a nation with a Muslim majority population. According to the census of 2011 (GOB 2015), out of a total population of over 144 million, 90.4% of Bangladeshis were Muslim. However, at the time of independence in 1971, it was Bengali nationalism – as opposed to Muslim identity that was more important within the state of Pakistan – that had acted as a major driving force behind the emergence of Bangladesh as the new nation-state. Nonetheless, soon after independence, specifically during the period from 1975–1990, Islam re-emerged as an increasingly important factor in national politics of Bangladesh and as a defining feature of the state.

Some of the main reasons behind the turns of events noted above are relatively well-known: e.g. appealing to religion was a ploy by military regimes that sought legitimacy for their rules; and the main Islamist political party of the country, Jamaat-i-Islami, which had opposed the independence of Bangladesh, was able to regroup and gain increasing influence in national politics under new regimes since the second half of the 1970s (Naher 2011, Jahangir 1990, 2002). Here it may be mentioned that although secularism was adopted as one of the founding principles of the Bangladesh through its constitution of 1972, it had been dropped in 1977 and would not be restored until 2010, when the Supreme Court of the country declared past measures to remove it illegal. However, when the constitution was amended with the re-insertion of secularism as one of the founding principles, the amended constitution also kept Islam as the state religion, which was adopted in 1988. This may be seen as an indication of a growing acceptance of the common tendency within Bangladesh and beyond to represent the country as a 'Muslim' country.

Now, the growing emphasis on the 'Islamic' dimension of the nation-state has had different consequences. To many, this is seen as going against the 'secularist' orientation of the state as many hoped for. To others, this amounted to political marginalization of the non-Muslim religious minorities of the country. However, the adoption of Islam as the state religion has also had the effect of bringing to the political center dominant voices and views that promote a rather homogenous conception of Islam, and in the process, has ended up marginalizing forms of Islam that are considered to be either not 'proper' or outside of the

'mainstream'. It was in this context that groups that view the Ahmadiyya community to be heretics or non-Muslims came to raise their voices in national politics of Bangladesh. What was particularly disturbing was the fact that at one point, some Islamists parties that were part of a ruling coalition, were believed to be behind a violent campaign launched against the Ahmadiyya community.

It may be mentioned that among Bengali Muslims, the overwhelming majority may be classified as 'Sunnis'. However, although there are some 'Shia' Muslims as well, unlike in some other parts of the world, the Shia-Sunni divide has rarely become a political issue in Bangladesh. For most Bengali Muslims, being 'Sunni' and being 'Muslim' may be considered as more or less the same. However, as noted in passing earlier, the Ahmadi too seem themselves as being 'real Sunnis', in the sense of practicing the Islamic tradition founded by the prophet Muhammad.

Contrary to attempts to promote dominant and homogeneous conceptions of a certain kind of Islamic identity for the majority of Bangladeshis, we know that historically, following Islam or being Muslim has not meant adhering to any fixed set of beliefs and practices. This is as true for Bengali Muslims as in other parts of the world (Ahmed 1981, cf. Eaton 1993). In the history of the Bengal region, debates and arguments over different interpretations or strands of Islam may be observed in different times and contexts (as in terms of identities of Muslims of humble/local origins vs. Muslims of aristocratic/exogenous descent; Shia vs. Sunni, Bengali Muslim vs. non-Bengali Muslims). Considering such realities, we have to acknowledge that the meaning of Islam and of being a Muslim have not been the same to all or in different times, a fact that is still more or less true today. Thus the dichotomy between 'mainstream' (Sunni) Muslims and Ahmadiyya Muslims that came to be emphasized in Bangladesh in recent times need to be understood in the backdrop of the relevant historical background as well as contemporarily realities. In this regard, other forms of dichotomies – e.g. separation between religious and secular domains or conceptions – have to be taken into account as well.

On the question of the role of religion in politics and public life, it has been argued that conception of religion and politics as belonging to separate domains (private and public respectively) is a highly Western development, which emerged as part of the modernization project of the West. This is actually a form of cultural hegemony, the façade of which begins to break down once the state begins to take an open stance,

either directly or indirectly, on the question of particular sets of religious beliefs and practices (Asad 1993). In Bangladesh, according to the constitution, the state is bound to ensure the security of every citizen living within its borders, and on the other hand, every citizen has the right to follow their own religious beliefs and practices. Constitutionally, Bangladesh is a secular democracy where the Ahmadiyya Muslims too are free to believe in and practice a form of religion that they consider to be Islam. The government has a duty to protect this right of the members of the Ahmadiyya community. However, in the face of repeated calls by some quarters to have the Ahmadis to be declared as 'non- Muslims', even though no government has accommodated such demands yet, when the members of this community are told by law enforcement officials to refrain from observing certain rituals in the name of public safety, then we have to question whether the government or the state is performing its role as it should. Such questions become more inevitable in the context of tendencies such as already noted, when some Islamist parties that were part of the government in the past, were believed to have been part of the violent campaigns against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh. The following observations, in particular, raised many questions:

- Passive and ineffective role of the law enforcement agencies during the attacks on Ahmadiyya mosques.
- After the eruption of violence, members of the Ahmadiyya community being advised to remain calm, and expression of 'sympathy' towards the sentiments of the majority.

Since organized campaigns to have the Ahmadiyya community to be declared as non-Muslim began around 1987, numerous incidents of violent attacks – leading to deaths, injuries and destruction of mosques and homes – also took place and governments under different regimes were found short of offering full support to Ahmadis that they are entitled as citizens of Bangladesh as well as in terms of their human rights. If we analyze various incidents of anti-Ahmadiyya attacks that have taken place over more than two decades since the late 1980s, we have to conclude that steps taken by law enforcement agencies under different governments did not suggest that the state was prepared to protect the religious freedoms and practices of all communities. On the question of the religious beliefs and practices of the Ahmadiyya community in particular, agencies of the state continued to send various signals

indicating that they were not prepared to give equal considerations to the sentiments and sensibilities of all segments of the population, and that the biases and prejudices of the 'majority' mattered in law enforcement. In this context, the question of how far the state would go in upholding abstract ideas of equal rights for all citizens or human rights is a matter that remains to be tested on the ground. In reality, no country, not even a state that defines itself as a secular democracy, can fully ensure tolerance of all forms religious or other forms of diversity. In this context, the following observation made by Asad (2003:8) is pertinent:

A secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its objective is always to regulate violence.

Viewed from the kinds of perspectives indicated by the brief quote above, it becomes necessary to examine the theoretical frameworks that are implicit in the way matters such as the marginalization and persecution of the Ahmadiis are commonly discussed. In this context, it may be noted that such matters are often addressed in the context of the discourse of human rights and equality of all citizens before the law. In such cases, the questions that are raised are usually of the following kind: "Are the Ahmadiis being treated as equal with others in terms of human rights standards or their rights as citizens?" However, for us, it may be useful to take a deeper look at the matter by posing different questions such as the following: "Who decides that all citizens have equal rights and what is the nature and extent of the notion of 'equal rights'?" Instead of treating the constitution as given, the second type of question helps us to examine the very language that is used in framing laws in liberal democracies, how citizens relate to notions of rights, and how such matters are related to wider issues of social inclusion/exclusion that are present in daily life practices (Das and Poole 2004:13). In examining the predicament faced by a minority group such as the Ahmadiyya community, it is important to look beyond what is written into the constitution, and how the state can strengthen its position by going beyond written laws and drawing upon inherent biases towards dominant or majority groups. As stated by Asad, "it is this alien authority and not the written rule itself that constitutes the law of the state" (quoted in Das and Poole 2004:287). In case of the Bangladesh, it is not difficult to see what Asad means by the 'alien authority' of the state. At any rate, as far as marginalized and embattled communities like the Ahmadiyya Jamaat are concerned, agencies of the state rely less on written laws, and more on the biases and wishes of dominant groups.

Anti-Ahmadiyya agitations: Broader trends in South Asia and beyond

When organized hostilities against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh began to draw public attention in the late 1980s, one of the organizations found to be leading the campaign was the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement, which was affiliated with/inspired by a similarly named movement that emerged in Pakistan. It may be mentioned that since the period of British rule, two organizations that were at the forefront of the opposition to the Ahmadiyya movement in the subcontinent were Majlis-e Ahrar-e Islam (Ahrar in short) and Jamaat-e-Islami. Originally founded in British India by Syed Ata Ullah Shah Bukhari and Abu Ala Maududi respectively, both the organizations were originally opposed to the idea of Pakistan as a separate state for Indian Muslims, but when Pakistan was created, both the leader relocated to the new state. Despite some differences, both organizations were actively opposed to the Ahmadiyya community. In 1952, Maududi wrote a book on the 'Qadiani Problem' which was seen as having been a major source of an anti-Ahmadiyya campaign that eventually led to violent riots in 1953, bringing about martial law in Punjab at that time. Subsequently, a military tribunal sentenced Maududi to death, although this was not carried out in the end. Following the anti-Ahmadiyya riots of 1953, when Majlis-e Ahrar-e Islam was banned in 1954, some members of this organization regrouped under a newly named organization called Alami Majlis-e-Tahaffuz-e-Khatm-e-Nubuwwat to operate worldwide against the Ahmadis (cf. Khan 2015:152). This movement, along with political efforts of the Jamaat-i-Islami, led the government of Julfikar Ali Bhutto to declare the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaatasa 'non-Muslim' minority group through a constitutional amendment undertaken in 1974 (Saeed 2007). Later, General Ziaul Huq passed an ordinance in 1984, imposing further restrictions on the Ahmadiyya community's self-identification and religious practice (for details, see Talbot 2005, Ali 2002 and Kaushik 1996).

In Pakistan, the political persecution of the Ahmadiyya community under active state support may be seen as part of a more general trend of appealing to 'Islam' by the rulers, including the military governments, to legitimize and consolidate their hold on power. Parallel developments may be observed in the context of Bangladesh, for example in having Islam declared, constitutionally, as the state religion in 1988 under the rule of General Ershad. It was also no coincidence that organizations such as the Khatme Nabuwat Movement became active since the late 1980s

through anti-Ahmadiyya agitations in different parts of Bangladesh, and through calls to have the Ahmadiyya community of the country to be officially declared as non-Muslim.

In Bangladesh, the Khatme Nabuwat movement began their activities in 1987 by voicing demands to have the Ahmadis declared as 'Non-Muslims', and through the forceful takeover of six Ahmadiyya mosques in Brahmanbaria during the same year. Later, in 1992, they organized attacks against Ahmadiyya community at a residential area in Khulna. It may be mentioned that it was the same year when there was a huge nation-wide outcry as a court ruling granted citizenship rights in Bangladesh to the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami Golam Azam. In that context, the rise of anti-Ahmadiyya hostilities within the country may be seen as an attempt by different Islamist groups, including the Khatme Nabuwat movement and possibly Jamaat-e-Islami as well, to assert themselves further in national politics. Against this backdrop, the followers of the Khatme Nabuwat movement carried out violent attacks against the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat at their headquarters in Dhaka on October 29, 1992, injuring some 35 Ahmadis, and burning down their library that contained 40,000 books. These acts of violence were discussed in the then National Parliament, but no firm action was taken by the government against the perpetrators.

The Khatme Nabuwat movement and other anti-Ahmadi forces of Bangladesh became quite active again around the years from 2003 – 2005, which fell under the period when a four party alliance which included the Jamaat-e-Islami was in power. Attacks on Ahmadiyya Muslims of Bangladesh carried out during this period included a conference in Dhaka in January 2003, when the Khatme Nabuwat movement reiterated their demand to have the Ahmadis declared as 'Non-Muslims'. Violent attacks against Ahmadiyya mosques and members of the community were launched in Dhaka and in other parts of the country as well. In October 2003, two local leaders of the Ahmadiyya community in Jessore were killed as a result of violent attacks. It was alleged that a local leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami directed this attack. Then, in 2004, the government banned all the publications of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat by bowing the demands made by some of the alliance members or their affiliates. Then, in 2005, after attacks carried out against a local Ahmadiyya community and their mosques in Satkhira, a signboard with the following announcement (in Bangla) was hung in front of the targeted mosques:

This is a Qadiani place of worship. Do not enter here assuming that this is a Muslim mosque.

The rise of hostilities towards the Ahmadiyya community during the above-mentioned period helps one to understand the political environment of Bangladesh at that time. Of the two Islamist political parties that were part of the alliance government, one known as the Islamic Joint Alliance (led by Fazlul Huq Amini) was overtly active in anti-Ahmadiyya movements; as for the other party, namely Jamaat-e-Islami, which was part of the ruling alliance, its central leaders had claimed that they were not involved in anti-Ahmadiyya agitations, but their local leaders were often found to have been behind such activities either directly or indirectly. In any case, as a matter of strategy, it is important to note that in Pakistan, anti-Ahmadiyya campaigns proved to be useful in expanding the political base of the Jamaat-e-Islami. It is safe to assume that parties with similar historical roots or ideological orientations may have sought to pursue similar strategies in Bangladesh as well.

As a matter of fact, subsequent governments of Bangladesh did not prove to be proactive either in protecting the security and basic rights of the Ahmadiyya community of the country. Thus, during in 2007 when a caretaker government was in power, there was an order against holding of the annual Salana Jalsa of the Ahmadiyya Muslims on grounds of security threats. Later on, the same thing happened in two different places under a different government in 2010 and 2011 as well. In all such cases, organized anti-Ahmadiyya groups were often able to enlist the tacit approval, if not active support, of many officials as well as ordinary members of the mainstream Muslim community through active propaganda that sought to discredit the claim of the Ahmadiyya community to be 'true' Muslims. Instead, members of this embattled community were presented as dangerous 'heretics' who needed to be shunned socially as well. Given this, we review below some of the ways in which misconceptions about and dominant representations of the beliefs and practices of the Ahmadiyya Muslims were used to marginalize them in Bangladeshi society. However, before we turn to this topic, there are a couple of general observations about broader political trends that are worth noting here.

Hardening of political positions and collective identities by invoking dominant sets of religious beliefs and practices (or other areas of cultural differences) is actually part of broader trends going beyond communities of Muslims or countries in South Asia. The rise of xenophobia, including

Islamophobia, in various parts of the world, unresolved tensions between secular-religious dichotomy in different countries (e.g. in present day India), perceived failures of various forms of secularist ideas and nation-building projects, all are important contexts to keep in mind. Against this broader backdrop, one final point that may be noted about rising hostilities towards the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh is that on at least one occasion – in the form of a suicidal bomb attack on a Ahmadiyya mosque in Bagmara, Rajshai on December 25, 2015 – we have come across unverified claims about the involvement of the ‘ISIS’ as well. It is also worth noting that a suspected accomplice of the suicide bomber of Bagmara was later reported to have been killed in a ‘shootout’ with law enforcement personnel. Such incidents are part of a larger trend that has been on the rise in Bangladesh with respect to violence against a host of other targets in recent times (e.g. the killing ‘atheist bloggers’ and an LGBT activist, attacks against bauls, first ever attack on the Shia community on the eve of Ashura, not to mention numerous forms of attacks against religious and ethnic minorities of the country).

Beliefs and practices involved in the social marginalization of the Ahmadis

In terms of actual religious beliefs, one key area of opposition towards the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community by ‘mainstream’ Muslims relates to the question of whether the former accept the status of Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet, and the acceptability of the claims by the founder of the Ahmadiyya community, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, to be the Mahdi as prophesied within Islam and other religions. Some of these questions and the answers given to them are somewhat esoteric in nature, and are open to divergent interpretations for which ordinary Muslims usually look up to recognized scholars and religious leaders. In this context, while proponents of the Ahmadiyya community do not deny that there are some differences in matters of belief, they insist that they never question the authority and established status of the Prophet Muhammad, his fundamental teachings and the divine guidance revealed through him in the form of the Quraan. In this sense, they are keen to stress their own claim to be true Muslims (or ‘Sunnis’ for that matter).

Apart from divergent interpretations of some matters of Islamic religious beliefs – e.g. relating to matters of prophecy and some key concepts such as that of jihad – some of the differences between the Ahmadiyya community and mainstream Muslims of the subcontinent concerns matters

of religious practices that came to be accepted as part of Islamic tradition, e.g. customary practices relating to observance of Shab-e-Barat and rituals such as qulkhani and milaad. Religious leaders of the Ahmadiyya community dismiss many such practices as unnecessary and as mixtures of local customs with 'real Islamic practices'. On the other hand, many religious scholars of the mainstream Sunni Muslim tradition consider these practices to be legal according to the Hadith. However, as an Alem of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat of Bangladesh claimed during discussion on this matter, nowadays many erudite scholars of the mainstream Sunni Muslim groups too are critical of many such practices.

Generally speaking, within the 'mainstream' Muslims in Bangladesh, who consider themselves to be Sunni, ordinary people as well as religious scholars expressed some commonly held views, such as the following, about the Ahmadiyya community:

- Ahmadis do not believe that Prophet Muhammad was the Last Prophet.
- Ahmadis say their prayers by facing a different direction than that used by other Muslims.
- The Ahmadiyya community lure its members with promises of benefits and privileges.
- Ahmadis watch television in their mosques.
- Ahmadis do not observe the Shab-e-Barat.

Our observations indicate that perceptions and representations such as those noted above are propagated actively as means of organizing propaganda and violent attacks against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh. The effect of the campaign to portray the Ahmadis to be non-Muslim was highlighted to me through a personal encounter when a senior professor of Jahangirnagar University, upon reading a research report of mine on the Ahmadiyya community, asked me to recite "Tauba Astagfirullah" (to beg forgiveness of God in acknowledgement of a sinful mistake) for having referred to the Ahmadiyya community as 'Muslim' in my report!

While a growing number of Bangladeshis seem to be prepared to accept the claim being propagated by organized groups that the Ahmadiyyas are 'not really Muslims', in reality the boundaries between Islam and non-Islam have never been very clear or fixed, particularly in the context of Bengali Muslims, as noted earlier. In revisiting this point, we may take

note of an anecdote shared by Huq (1999:15), who became curious upon finding a Bangla book (novel) written by a prominent Bengali Hindu writer in an Islamic book fair. When expressed her curiosity, the bookseller reportedly told her:

Yes, the author is a [Hindu]. But whatever he may be, he is not against Islam. I am sure you understand that there is a huge difference [between being labeled as a Muslim and following Islam]. A non-Muslim is not necessarily against Islam, whereas someone can turn against Islam despite being a Muslim. This author does not attack or belittle Islam in his book; rather, he depicts Islam respectfully in his work.

The attitude of tolerance, mutual respect and inclusiveness indicated in the above remarks of a bookseller is by no means uncommon in Bangladesh. However, for reasons including developments that we have touched upon, in recent decades more rigid views of what it means to be 'proper' Muslims, or to follow 'true' Islam, seem to have become increasingly common in Bangladeshi society. In this context, apart from facing mounting pressures from political groups, the members of the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh have experienced various forms of discrimination in social interactions with their colleagues and neighbors as well.

While religious minorities of all kinds may experience different degrees of exclusion or marginalization in everyday social interactions with the Muslim majority in Bangladesh, the experience of the Ahmadiyya are different in one respect. Because of relentless propaganda against them, many ordinary Muslims may not be sure of how to deal with someone if they come to know he or she is a Muslim. In case of a Hindu or a Christian, there are known or established boundaries across which all kinds of social transactions and interactions can take place. But an Ahmadiyya individual may pose the challenge as to whether he or she should be treated as 'one of us' or as representing the 'other'. In the course of my research, I came across many accounts of the Ahmadiyya of Bangladesh being treated as the latter by members of the 'mainstream' Bengal Muslim community. For example, during field work, we (I worked with a research assistant) came across a former bank official who told us that he was forced to leave his job at a bank for being an Ahmadiyya Muslim. His employer had not known this before, and told him, "I did not know this", implying that he would not have been hired if his identity had

been known earlier. Our respondent wondered, “If there is no problem hiring a Hindu or a Christian, why should it be a problem to employ an Ahmadi?”

Although possibly an extreme case, the experience narrated above was not exceptional. Thus we came to know that an Ahmadiyya Muslim woman too lost her job because of her religious identity. Her story was narrated to us by colleagues who knew her. The woman under consideration worked as the principal of a kindergarten for many years, but was reportedly fired once her religious affiliation came to light. As in the previous story, the owners of the school did not know that the principal that they had hired was an Ahmadi. Some of her co-workers did know about this but the matter did not attract greater attention until her husband died. At that point, as the question of attending the deceased’s funeral came up, the principal’s identity as a Ahmadi became known to many more people. Reportedly she was tricked into leaving her job by first being given paid three months’ paid leave in an ostensible gesture of sympathy, but at the end of the period of her leave, she was asked not to return to her job!

Another woman (she worked at a school for the disabled) whom we met during the course of our fieldwork informed us that during the anti-Ahmadiyya agitations in 2003, she had to keep silent even after hearing many offensive remarks against members of her community. She added, “it was a terrible experience to have to live in constant fear by concealing one’s identity.” Another respondent, who worked as a school teacher in Narayanganj, told us that their family had to flee their ancestral village in Kishoreganj after his grandfather and along with a brother of his joined the Ahmadiyya Jamaat. The rest of his family now lives in Natore, Rajshahi, although he himself lives in Narayanganj with his wife. He told us that many of his friends distanced themselves for his family’s faith, and that it is difficult for them to live by having to conceal their Ahmadiyya identity.

From a student of Islamic Studies at a renowned public college in Dhaka, it was learned that he was humiliated upon expressing his disagreement over what he thought was misrepresentation of the Ahmadiyya community by a teacher in the classroom. After his reaction, the teacher asked him “Are you Qadiani?”, and when the student responded by saying that he was a Ahmadiyya Muslim, the teacher announced to the class, “All of you listen and keep in mind that he is a Qadiani!” The teacher made this remark deliberately, in a humiliating manner, with full knowledge of the

fact that the label 'Qadiani' is used in a derogatory manner for the Ahmadiyya community. The teacher's remarks came as a silent provocation for his classmates and other teachers, many of whom began to maintain a distance in interactions with him.

The experiences of discrimination, social exclusion and different forms of persecution, as experienced by ordinary members of the Ahmadiyya community, are well captured in a documentary film titled "Muslims or Heretics?" made by Naeem Mohaiemen. In one part of this documentary, we come across a father's confession that a fatwa had been issued to him to disown his son and kick him out of the house for joining the Ahmadiyya Jamaat. He was forced to oblige. But, afterwards, the father himself was not allowed to cultivate his own land! Different accounts of similar acts of discrimination, not to mention instances of more violent attacks, against the Ahmadiyya communities can be found in different newspaper reports published over the past two decades or so.

Based on various accounts that we have come across, it is clear that the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh have been subjected to rising levels of hostility not only politically, but in the context of everyday social interactions that used to be marked with greater degrees of tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the past. The level of increasing marginalization of the Ahmadis may have reinforced a greater degree of internal cohesion or solidarity among members of this community, but the possibility remains that experiences of discrimination may vary to some extent depending on factors such as class and gender. For example, Hasan (2011) has suggested that the effects of what he calls 'an unholy alliance of secular politics and religious extremism' has intensified the experiences of being 'doubly oppressed' by Ahmadiyya women of Bangladesh, a situation that is quite common in diverse contexts (cf. Gualtieri2004).

Conclusion

In an essay titled "Time for Intellectual Honesty: There Are Many Islams" (2001), Edward Said observes that in the post-9/11 world, the US tried to hide its material (geopolitical, economic) interests by invoking abstract ideas like terrorism and freedom, which were used to justify their unwanted interferences in several Muslim countries. In this context, perceptions and representations of Islam keep changing, and become a matter of contest. Apart from different faces of Islam that existed in the past, what is known or presented as Islam in the contemporary world

acquire seven newer dimensions under changing circumstances. In many ways, the contested identity of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, either in the context of its emergence in late nineteenth century Punjab, or in contemporary Bangladesh, may be viewed from the same perspectives as that of Said.

In this paper, we have seen that while the Ahmadiyya Muslim community faced opposition since its emergence as a religious movement under British rule, the nature and extent of hostilities towards them have not been the same in different times and places. In the territory that is now Bangladesh, the Ahmadiyya community has lived in relative peace since it took root from the early part of the 20th century. Even when their counterparts in Pakistan were subjected to vicious forms of persecution and were eventually declared to be non-Muslim, the same kind of hostilities were uncommon in Bangladesh until the 1980s. Nonetheless, there are several parallels and in fact historical as well as political links between developments in Pakistan, Bangladesh and elsewhere. Some of these parallels relate to the changing nature of the Bangladeshi state itself, a process that has to be understood in terms of political and economic forces operating at national, regional and global levels. At the same time, there are also social processes of exclusion and marginalization that have added new dimensions to the contested nature of what it means to be a Ahmadiyya Muslim in contemporary Bangladesh.

References

Ahmed, Rafiuddin (1981) *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Alam, S.M.Shamsul (1995) *The State, Class, Formation and Development in Bangladesh*. University Press of America.

Ali, Tariq. 2002. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*. London; New York: Verso.

Asad, Talal (1993) *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

-----(2003) *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press.

Das, Veena and Poole, Deborah eds. (2004) *Anthropology in the Margin of the State*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Eaton, Richard (1993) *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

GOB (2015) *Population and Housing Census 2011: National Report*, Volume 1: Analytical Report. Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS),

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (GOB).

Gualtieri, Antonio R (2004) *The Ahmadi: Community, Gender, and Politics in a Muslim Society*. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Hanson, John H (2007) Jihad and the Muslim Community: Nonviolent Efforts to Promote Islam in the Contemporary World in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. Vol: 11. Issue: 2. Pp: 77-93. University of California Press.

Hasan, Perween (2011) *Life and Living of Ahmadiya Muslim Jamaat in Bangladesh: An Unholy Alliance of Secular Politics and Religious Extremism*. In Mohsin, A. and Ahmed, I. eds. (2011) *Women and Militancy: South Asian Complexities*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

Human Rights Watch (2005) *Breach of Faith: Persecution of Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh*. HRW Vol. 17, No. 6(C), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/bangladesh0605/bangladesh0605.pdf>

Huq, Maimuna (1999) *From piety to romance: Islam oriented text in Bangladesh*, in Eickelman, D. F. and Anderson, J. W. eds. (1999), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jahangir, B. K (1990) *Fundamentalism in Bangladesh, in Violence and Consent in a Peasant Society and Other Essays*. Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies.

-----(2002) *Nationalism, Fundamentalism and Democracy in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: ICBS

Justice Munir Commission (1954) *Report of the court of inquiry constituted under Punjab Act II of 1954 to enquire into the Punjab disturbances of 1953*. Punjab: The Superintendent, Government Printing. <https://archive.org/details/The1954JusticeMunirCommissionReportOnTheAntiAhmadiRiotsOfPunjabIn1953>

Kaushik, Surendra Nath (1996) *Ahmadiya Community in Pakistan: discrimination, travail, and alienation*. New Delhi: South Asian Publishers.

Khan, Adil Hussain (2015) *From Sufism to Ahmadiyya: A Muslim Minority Movement in South Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Naher, Ainoon (2008) *Gender, Religion and Development in Rural Bangladesh: An Examination of 'Fundamentalist' Backlash against Women's Participation in NGO Activities in the Early 1990s*. VDM.

Saeed, Sadia (2007). "Pakistani Nationalism and the State Marginalisation of the Ahmadiyya Community in Pakistan." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 7(3): 132-152.

Said, Edward (2001) *Time for Intellectual Honesty: There Are Many Islams*, in [lacan.com.http://www.lacan.com/said.htm](http://www.lacan.com/http://www.lacan.com/said.htm)

Talbot, Ian (2005) *Understanding Religious Violence in Contemporary Pakistan: Themes and Theories*. In Kaur, R eds., *Religion, Violence and Political Mobilisation in South Asia*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.