

**Religious Institution Based Community-hood and Identity of a  
'Muslim Community' in a 'Remote' Rural Village in Bangladesh**

**Mohammed Kamruzzaman**  
Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS)  
Dhaka, Bangladesh  
<[linktapan@hotmail.com](mailto:linktapan@hotmail.com)>

Paper produced for the Fourth International Conference on Gross National Happiness  
to be held at the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Bhutan on 24-26 November 2008.

## Religious Institution Based Community-hood and Identity of a 'Muslim Community' in a 'Remote' Rural Village in Bangladesh

Mohammed Kamruzzaman<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

How does the notion of community identity; therefore, community-hood develop or exist in rural Bangladesh? Here, this question is not linked to the nationalistic concern or debate about people's 'Muslim' or 'Bengali' (Ellickson 2002) identity that is still a real national issue in Bangladesh (Abecassis 1990). Rather this paper, here, focusing a 'remote' rural community in the country, attempts to explore the cultural constructions of community-hood—how do the community people identify themselves or their sense of belonging. Effort to defining 'community' in the contexts like rural Bangladesh is not new; however, much was based in ecology, mode of production and economic relations while for example, Bertocci (1996) for the specific cultural ground suggests for 'a model of community rooted in an Islamic world view' (Bertocci: 42). He argues to capture the ideational and symbolic processes that provide clues to conceive of community in this Muslim dominant country (ibid). At the micro (village) level, the dominant sense of community-hood, in general, is geographical i.e. *grambashi* (villagers) that confines a settlement boundary and/or socio-political i.e. blood or non-blood based *samaj* (traditional social group) that, followed by specific leadership, confines a lineage/descent boundary (Mannan 2002)—rather than one's religious identity. But not that the religious boundary is missing or less important. Rather many researches argue that in the whole sub-continental context including Bangladesh, religion in constructing people's identity becomes important (Ellickson 2002) though the issue is much more associated with inter-religious groups relationship (i.e. Muslims vs Hindus) and which often interprets as political phenomenon (Baird 2004). This paper addresses the concept of 'community' as a psycho-cultural phenomenon following the Abecassis's (1990) argument that 'communities are defined by their culture and their religious labels' (Abecassis: 4) and for its membership, 'the ways in which the members regard themselves and understand themselves ... their self-image' (ibid: 3) though construction of any (collective) community identity becomes illusionary because of the non-existence of a final truth (Schuurman *ed* 1993).

### Methodology

The empirical findings of this paper draw on a 'remote' rural village in Bangladesh, one of the research sites of "Well-Being in Developing Countries (WeD)", a global research programme undertaken by the University of Bath in the UK (WeD 2003). Here, this paper uses the 'Provisional Community Profile' (PCP), the qualitative focused community report of the WeD research produced in its Grounding and Piloting phase to get a basic sketch of the community's social, economic and political lives (Khan et. al. 2004). Following that PCP along with a series of observation, this research on community and religion, as part of a thematic phase of the WeD programme, applied a range of qualitative tools for its primary data collection that include eight focus group discussion and 16 in-depth interviews on different individuals considering such factors of the respondents: *samaj* (traditional social group) attachment, occupational ('religious' and 'non-religious' based) involvement, sex (male/female), age (youth/old), and level of perceived poverty (rich/middle/poor). In addition, it applied time line matrix to capture the changes of the community's religious institutions over years. This part of fieldwork was conducted from January 2004 to December 2005.

---

<sup>1</sup> Coordinator at Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) ([www.bnps.org](http://www.bnps.org)) (the views and interpretations in this paper are those of the author and not those of BNPS)<[linktapan@hotmail.com](mailto:linktapan@hotmail.com)>

**The Researched Community: an outlook**

The paper first of all focuses on the nature of the community simply means how does it look. To do this, a combination of Resource Profiles Approach (McGregor 2004)—to understand their perceived resources status, and (community) subjective perception (WeD 2003)—to understand their desires within the resources have been discussed. The purpose is not to capture different resources only that they do have, but also the psychological response (collective psyche) that is important to get a dynamic picture of the community, also the key factors that construct their sense of community-hood.

***The community perceived resources and desires***

The following table is about different types of resources the people collectively perceive available to them, also the 'desires' within the resources:

**Table: The community-perceived 'resources' and 'desires'**

Dimension <sup>2</sup>	what do they have and what they desire more	
	<i>resources</i>	<i>desires (want more)</i>
<i>Cultural</i>	<i>Ulama, madrasa</i> and mosque	'Morality', 'commitment' of <i>ulama</i> , 'quality' of <i>ulama</i> , 'Islamic norms'
<i>Material</i>	Arable land, limited jobs in non-farm areas, jobs in Islamic professions, migrated jobs mostly in Saudi Arabia	Enough employment and jobs, more incomes
<i>Social</i>	Social groups ( <i>sama</i> ), old aged people ( <i>murrubbi</i> ), social leaders ( <i>matbar</i> ) who are aware of their <i>samajs</i>	Solidarity and collectiveness, 'powerful' and rich people for development, commitment to the social development, preserving social values e.g. enough caring attitude towards parents by sons
<i>Physical</i>	<i>Pacca</i> mosque, primary school and the <i>Alia Madrasa</i> , also the <i>hafizia</i> ( <i>semi-pacca</i> )	Road communication to visiting the urban areas, electricity connection
<i>Financial</i>	Two absentee persons donate to the <i>hafizia madrasa</i> , also to the poor people, services (mainly loans) of NGOs	Significant number of rich who could help the community much more, 'favourable' loan conditions of the NGOs
<i>State service</i>	The <i>Alia Madrasa</i> (MPO benefited) and the primary school, the current UP chairman	Interest of the state apparatus and UP in social welfare, enough teachers both at the <i>Alia Madrasa</i> and the primary school
<i>Knowledge (Social and religious)</i>	<i>gaany</i> (being intellectual) persons have knowledge for social development	Convenient social environment to apply the 'social' knowledge
	Persons (e.g. <i>mufti</i> ) who has enough Islamic knowledge	Effective interactions of the <i>mufti</i> with the community, peoples' heartiest/positive response to the <i>ulama</i>

<sup>2</sup> These dimensions should not be understood within the typical Resource Profiles Approach (RPA) only because of the contextual meaning; for example, 'school' could come under 'human resources', but there the meaning of it has more than a typical RPA sense; the presence of a *pacca* (brick built) school is much significant to them; the same about the 'state services' that seemed better fit separately rather boxed it under 'social resources'.

The above table shows that *in the cultural resources dimension*, they have *ulama* who received formal or informal religious (Islamic) education. In the community, the *ulama* (plural sense of *alem*) are split up into four groups of people: i) *moufti*--who has enough knowledge on Islamic law (*fiqh*) ii) *moulana*--who has passed a level of (at least 12 years) education from *madrassa* (mainly *kowmi*) iii) *hafez*--who has his heart with the Quran, and iv) *kari*--who can read the Quran with perfect pronunciation (*sahih*). The community people state that they have many (more than 35 during the fieldwork) *ulama*, which enhance their *samman* (status) outside their locality. They feel proud for some of *ulama* who are working in different *madrassas* outside the community. They also have two *hajis* performed *hajj* in Mecca.

There have two types of *madrassa*--one is *alia*, and another is *hafzkhana* (*hafizia*). The community people, generally speaking, identified these as very important educational institutions in their locality, which provide Arabic as well as 'Islamic' education to the students.

There is also a mosque in the village, which was built in 1935. The community people are proud of this *pacca* (brick built) mosque. But they perceive a lack of morals, less commitment of *ulama* to their community people, loss in the 'quality' of *ulama*, lack of *rahmat* (kind from Allah), lack of 'Islamic norms' among the individuals as well as community people.

*In the social resources dimension*, the community has nine major *samajs* (social groups based on blood and non-blood kin/lineage) along with some *murubbis* (elderly people) to whom they pay respect. The *samaj* provides a sense of attachment to the groups. The community people (the *samaj* leaders in particular) are also aware of social norms and values in maintaining peace in the society.

But there have a lack of solidarity among different *samajs* (groups), lack of educated and 'powerful' people to promote social development, also lack of *collective* efforts to making social development, lack of care shown by sons towards their elderly parents.

*In the material resources dimension*, the community people, who own land, can earn money by selling crops or leasing out their pieces of land. People who are employed in non-farm sectors (e.g. as labourer in industries or *ulama* in mosque/*madrassas*) can also earn money to support their families. For the *ulama* people, working in a mosque/*madrassas* means steady income for them. Apart from the local/national labour markets, a significant number of people earn their incomes through working in foreign countries, mostly in Saudi Arabia; their remittances also spent for mosque and *madrassa* development.

But there have a lack of employments opportunities as well as expected incomes.

*In the financial resources dimension*, most of the people usually like to identify them as 'poor' because of their very poor financial conditions. However, they think that they have two persons who are important for the financial contributions towards the community, particularly for the poor people and religious institutions, although they don't actually live (absentees) in the village; financial resources also include presence of NGOs in receiving credits.

But having no significant number of wealthy villagers, still shortages of funds for *madrassa* education in spite of remittances, 'unfavourable' conditions in taking and paying loans with NGOs.

*In the physical resources dimension*, the community has a state run primary school in which the students get access to education up to level V. They also have fertile cultivable land, which produces crops both for domestic usage and markets. Also, a *pacca* mosque and *Alia Madarsa*--mosque and *madrassa* carry importance from a cultural point of view. To the community these are much more value because these are brick built.

However, the villagers feel marginalized regarding the poor road communication, especially during the monsoon. They also feel strongly about not having any electricity in their village.

*In the dimension of state services*, the *Alia Madrasa* is recognized by the state, this is valuable to the people. It benefits from MPO (Monthly Pay Order) by the government. The current Union Parishad (a tier of local government) chairman comes from this village, which is something they are very proud of.

But inadequate government services, 'callousness' of UP towards development, lack of enough supports towards education, lack of enough facilities, shortage of teachers in the state run *Alia Madrasa*.

*In the dimension of having 'social knowledge'*, the community people, apart from cultural dimension (e.g. *mufti* on Islamic knowledge), identified persons who have 'social knowledge' and can give advice on what to do about social problems. This type of person is different to the *matbar* (social leader), who may not have enough knowledge.

But there have a lack of convenient social environment (e.g. local conflict) that appears a barrier to apply such type of knowledge in case of development in the community context.

The above discussions give the sense that this is such a community where i) traditional kin association, consists of both blood and non-blood relationships appears a big phenomenon ii) any non-kin association does not appear with a *strong influence* where presence of religious organizations in a traditional mode carries a significant sense to the people, and iii) the appearance of the state in delivering services is very poor.

### **Religion and Religious Institutions in the Community**

In the community context, the perceived 'religion' (Islam) involves three types of phenomenon—i) religious institutions/organisations, refer to one mosque and two *madrasas* ii) religious actors, usually called *alem* (the plural sense is *ulama*) here are *mufti*, *moulana*, *kari*, and *hafez*, and iii) 'religion' reflected behaviour i.e. sense of 'morality', 'quality' of *ulama*, practicing 'Islamic norms' and 'values' in everyday life. It has been explored that the people like to emphasis on their 'Islamic' practices considering a presence of the religious institutions inside the village boundary; however, it does not disconnect the wider cultural sense of belonging to the Muslim *ummah* (global Muslim community) because of the experiences with outside religious institutions as well as some of labouring people's living experiences in Saudi Arabia as well as Mecca.

### ***The importance of 'religious' institutions and actors***

The community people highly emphasis on the presence of both religious institutions and actors in their village. There have one mosque built in 1935, one *Alia* (state recognised religious school up to grade 10) and one *hafizia madrasa* (community funded informal religious school for foundation training) established in 1984 and 1992 respectively. These are useful for addressing different 'religious' needs (e.g. becoming 'educated' through reading 'Islamic' syllabus in the *Alia Madrasa*, getting familiar with 'Islamic norms' in reading in the *Hafizia Madrasa*) of the community people. Apart from these institutions, the people also emphasis that they have a lot of *ulama* who were studied 'Islamic education' and who get a social status for that type of education. They are textually the *religious actors* come from this community. But putting 'importance' by the people does not end to the presence of the institutions and actors only, rather their *actions*, refers to what they can do (or cannot do) with what they do have. Therefore, *actions* of the *actors* (including functions of institutions) are much more important to the community people. Here, 'actions' broadly refer to 'religious behaviours' have been discussed later. But becoming 'important' (of the actors) in the community involves a historical motivational process that needs to be looked at—why such particular institutions and actors have become significant in the community setting.

### ***Ground for the birth of the religious institutions and actors***

'Every religion arises within a particular environment which inevitably affects the development of religion' ([www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/religious\\_studies.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/religious_studies.html)). In this

village, the notion of 'remoteness' could be an important point of departure to explore the growth of the religious institutions as well as the actors. Here, the sense of 'remote' is not a methodological vocabulary only that this study has used ([www.welldev.org.uk/research/bangladesh.htm](http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/bangladesh.htm)); rather it has a specific historical as well as political meaning to the community people. To them this is a 'char' village, refers to a range of understanding in the wider context: more than a hundred and half year ago this area has emerged from the river Dholesary, and gradually developed to a habitat now (during the researching) with more than 1200 people. By definition 'char' means 'a mid-channel island that periodically emerges from the river-bed as results of accretion' (Kamal and Khan 1994: pp.11); but to people, defining 'char' is more than geographical; it has a socio-political meaning that refers to the community-state relationship. They feel that they are deprived of some basic services e.g. *pacca* (paved) road, electricity connection that would come from the state apparatus. They are experienced in 'less interest' of the state apparatus (including Union Parishad, the lowest tier of local government) to their social development/welfare, 'they also find none' in their village/community who could lead a significant developmental activity as well as to reduce community problems i.e. severe income poverty, intra-community conflict. Thus the local perception of 'char' includes a community-state relationship where the community is perceived 'ignored' by its counter partner.

This relationship as well as the community phenomenon has made affects not in the areas of social and economic development only, but also in the cultural sphere of their lives including developing their identity . Before 1935, the people were used to pray the *zumma* prayer (Friday's special prayer) in a far away mosque that carried huge sufferings on walking for muddy road. When this community mosque was established in 1935, then it reduced that type of sufferings, especially for the older people. This mosque was established by an influential lineage group of the community to address not the religious needs (congregation) only, but also to prove it that 'they can do', as 'they then had a status in the society'; thus establishing the mosque became a symbol of power and status for a group of people. Some of local people having experiences on other areas (e.g. the district town) also felt that they need to 'educate' their children but the problem was the "state's callousness" to build a *pacca* (paved) road that could enable students to get admission in outside 'better' schools. This was the situation from demand point of view; however, state as the supreme authority of delivering such services, "did not take any appropriate measure to address the demands of the people". Within such circumstances, an individual (the first *alem* of this locality) of neighbouring village, who studied 'Islamic education' in a *madrasa* in Comilla (an eastern district in Bangladesh), started to motivate the other village people towards the same type of education ('Islamic education') in the late 50s. Since most people's livelihoods were mainly on cropping agriculture based in their locality, for them, purpose of receiving 'Islamic education' was not fully a cash-inspired activity, rather, a 'moral' inspiration to perform religion as well as motivate others to gain 'spiritual benefits' both in their eternal as well as earth lives. This motivation worked and inspired others to become *alem* through that education as it carried a higher status during that period of time. This has gradually resulted in producing a good number of *ulama* from the successor generations who have read in different *madrasas* staying far away from the village as well as relatives. This has motivated further to establish at least one *madrasa* inside their village so that younger students can receive 'religious' education staying close to their relatives. In the middle of 80s, the UP chairman (head of local government), who was a rich person of the village, donated pieces of land, also took attempts to establish an *Alia Madrasa* so that students can get 'religious' mixing 'modern' education purpose to 'serve Islam' along with securing a job in the market. He, for his position did it also; however, the *ulama* people (studied in different *kowmi* madrasas<sup>3</sup> outside the village),

---

<sup>3</sup> The tension between Alia and Kowmi schools (madrasas) in Bangladesh is well known. The State recognized Alia provides a modern mixing Islamic education while the community funded Kowmi emphasizes on more orthodox type of Islamic education. The Kowmi followers argue that 'Alia does not provide the actual Islamic education' that 'they want to' (Islam ed 2003). The Kowmi was not

who follow a more orthodox type of Islam and oppose to any ‘modern’ (e.g. Alia) type, were not happy with such type of *madrasa*, and later they made a pressure to establish a *kowmi/hafizia madrasa* that would provide ‘pure religious’ education only, and they made it also with the supports (both ‘moral’/‘ideological’ and financial) came from a segment (belonged to different lineage groups other than the chairman’s one) of local people who i) do not support the *Aila* education for their ‘moral’/‘ideological’ ground, and ii) did not like that UP chairman for his lineage (‘Mallik’) identity. Thus over period of time, the community people got one mosque and two *madrasas* in their village. Whatever the reasons of birth of the institutions, now these are the significant collective assets to the community people and they find a meaningful attachment as well as a sense of identity with these assets.

### **Religion, Community-hood and Dynamics of the ‘Muslim’ Community**

This is a homogenous community in terms of its religious identity—all are Muslims. They highly care to this identity, also to their religious institutions and actors; however, these senses are too narrow to capture a dynamic sense of community-hood of the single ‘Muslim’ community.

This paper in using the concept of *relatedness*, refers to meaningful connections with intimate others and social groups and is facilitated by a sense of significance (Ryan 2004) broadly categories five types of ‘religion’ driven attachments that produce a sense of dynamism in their sense of community-hood. These are as follow:

- i) *The distance sense of attachment*
- ii) *The spiritual sense of attachment*
- iii) *The lineage sense of attachment*
- iv) *The gender sense of attachment*
- v) *The occupational sense of attachment*

#### **i) The distance sense of attachment**

In this research, ‘distant’ refers to the psychological as well as ideological attachment of the people with the ‘Islamic image’ of the Middle East countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. The community has a large number of people (men mainly) who are the labourer migrants to these countries (also discussed in Hossain 2004). These labourers not only send financial remittances to their origin but also social remittances. Here ‘social remittances’ include the *knowledge* or *experience* a migrant receives during his/her staying in the destination, and sends to the origin (Levitt 2001). To the community people, for example, Saudi Arabia is a ‘good’ country for migration because ‘that is a Muslim country’, ‘the land there is *pabitra* (‘sacred’) because prophet Hazrat Muhammad was born there; there have Mecca and Madina cities where they can make visit, there have the *Allah’s house* (the Kaba) and they can perform *hajj*. ‘There the *Motwa Committee* (law enforcement agency) forces people to close the shops during prayer time ...every body there force to pray ...women cannot go outside without wearing *burkah* (veil), even the Christian women also...’; thus the community people develop some sort of ‘Islamic image’ of that country and wish to reflect it in their home country/village also. They know that the mosques in Saudi Arabia are ‘very beautiful’ and they also desire to make their village mosque beautiful. They take initiative also—the migrants send some money for the mosque and *madrasa* development; they while visit their origin, tell others about these ‘good’ things of Saudi Arabia, and ask to follow Islam including the development of their community mosque. Not only the mosque or *madrasa*, individual’s everyday behaviours also get a change; for example, when a migrant returns back, s/he likes to say *salam* (as ‘hello’ in Western style) first while seeing/meeting others and most often s/he was less used to with such type of behaviour before his/her

---

recognized and controlled by the State but recently it got the recognition (Source: The Prothom Alo, a national daily, page, 1, August 22, 2006) which could be an important step to reduce the gap between the two types of schools in the country.

migration. Among the migrants, it is common to bring *burkah* (veil—the perceived Islamic dress) for their women relatives (mother, wife or daughter) so that ‘they can maintain *pardah* like the women in Saudi Arabia’. The community people, being Muslims construct/take these changes positively and feel how they are attached with these ‘Muslim countries’. They become happy with somebody migrant’s financial contributions to the community mosque and/or *madrasa*, and get inspired also to make a contribution by themselves there. The whole scenario produces a *positive inspiration* for the community people towards their ‘religious’ institutions as well as actions.

### ***ii) The spiritual sense of attachment***

While the ‘distant’ dimension is explained from a trans-national perspective, the inspiration of ‘spiritual’ attachment can be explained from a local neighbouring perspective. The community people like to consider their village as a *Muslim village* where all people are Muslims. This distinct sense of community identity is geographically confined while lots of Hindus are living in the neighbouring villages but no any Hindu in their village. By confining their sense of ‘Muslim hood’ within the village boundary, they like to say ‘we all are Muslims and we have no Hindu in our village’ — reflects their spiritual inspiration that is further associated with their *roles* and *responsibilities* towards the religious institutions, here, the mosque and *madrasas*. This community is also identified to the outside people as the ‘*alemder gram*’ (the village of *ulama*). The sense of *alemder gram* not only refers to a huge number of *ulama* (religious actors) people come from the village, but also the *actions* they like to pursue for this identity as well as attachments. In this ‘village of *ulama*’, the general attitudes are: younger *madrasa* students are appreciated for their studying ‘Islamic education’, the *ulama* people, in spite of their income poverty, enjoy a social status for their ‘Islamic occupation’ like jobs in mosque and *madrasas*; there people are often called to contribute (donate) more to their religious institutions. In the *alemder gram*, people try to build an imagined and uniform spiritual platform towards their ‘religious’ practices. These efforts work also as this ethnographic research explores: people collectively desire to develop (both infrastructure and increasing number of participants) their mosque and *madrasa*, many are concern for the ‘loosing of their religious values’, many parents find a ‘moral’ obligation to send their children to *madrasas* to make them *ulama*, almost all households make contribution of *musteer chaal* (one clenched rice paid once a week) for the mosque, and more recently (on the 9th October in 2005) they through a collective effort have set up a solar technology system for lighting (power) their mosque and *madrasa* because of no electricity connection in the village.

Being Muslims, and for their spiritual inspiration, the people do these things as part of ‘religious’ duties as well as obligations. However, their obligations and actions most often are driven by other types of attachments. Here kinship (lineage/*samaj*), gender status and occupational involvement matter that are describing next.

### ***iii) The lineage sense of attachment***

The formation of lineage groups in the community is a complex and unseen phenomenon. It is relatively a less important issue compare to peoples’ occupational engagement, but has a strong relevance to their collective ‘religious’ practices as well as actions. The community people are divided into nine major *samajs* (traditional social group based on blood and non-blood kin); however, formation of as well as attachments to these *samajs* is confusing --to what extent these connect to blood relation or to what extent to particular occupational involvement. For example, ‘Munshi’ is a lineage group in the community; textually ‘munshi’ refers to a person who is involved in a specific religious occupation (Karim, 1998) i.e. to lead a congregation in mosque being *imam*, but in the contemporary community scenario, ‘Munshi’, as a group, consists of a lot of people who are not involved in any religious occupation. It was told that they belong to the ‘Munshi’ group because they come from a

same ancestor who pursued a religious occupation in the past, and for his occupation people called him 'Munshi'. The same is about the *Bepari samaj*—'bepari' there refers to a person who does business, but many people of this *samaj* are not involved in doing any business. Mannan (2002) argues that Muslim society organized according to the principles of ethnic and also occupational stratification, and not by descent criteria, in the British period. He considers social mobility that produces fluidity in descent (Mannan 2002). In the researched community, the lineage/descent formation primarily comes from blood based kin group (locally called 'sharik' means belonging to a same group to inheriting property) headed by the oldest male.

The influence of national level party-politics (except election periods) and any non-kin associational form (except a few NGOs) is less significant in the community, and the groups of people belong to individual *samaj*, generally care this traditional identity. This type of identity, in one hand, provides a (informal) social security for the individual groups/persons, for example, when an individual gets in any social problem, then *samaj* takes a responsibility first to mitigate it; provides insecurity also when inter-*samaj* conflict takes place, on the other. The source of power of *samaj* is multi-dimensional (involves amount of cash flow and size of land a person holds, 'capacity' i.e. to do significant something and 'quality' i.e. educational status or intellectuality of individual, connection to urban influentials etc.), and none (individual/group) can enjoy a monopoly of power in the contemporary social conflict that often have a connection to the community's religious practices. The *ulama* (religious actors) come from different *samajs*, and their belonging to a range of social groups does not create any significant tension into any conflicts as most of them are away from the village to earn; therefore, are absentees. Whatever the actual reason or source of any conflict between these non-religious groups, the mosque, the *hafizia madrasa* and the graveyards get importance into these conflicts for historical reason. As stated earlier, the mosque built in 1935 is an important community asset, but conflict between two influential *samajs* on it spreads tension among all the villagers. The *hafzkhana* (*hafizia madrasa*), another important community asset was established in 1992 by an influential *samaj*, but the opposite group(s) wants to control over it. There are two graveyards in the village, based on specific *samaj* attachment (*Mallik* and non-*Mallik/grihosta*). The *Mallik* people established their graveyard (at least 80 years back) close to the *Alia Madrasa*, which also was established (in 1984 but launched in 1990) by this (*Mallik*) group while the non-*Mallik*'s (known as *grihosta*) graveyard is close to the *hafizia madrasa*, and gets a 'higher' attention/care from the *ulama* people who oppose the *alia* type of education as to them "it does not provide the 'real' Islamic education that Islam suggests".

The tense relationship among different social and religious groups in rural Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon and it has extensively discussed in many literature; for example, Arens and Burden examined the social relationship in the agrarian structure among the peasantry (Arens and Burden 1980). In case of researching religious/communal relationships in the sub-continent, more attention have been paid on the 'majority vs minority' approach (e.g. Muslims vs Hindus) (for example, Azad, 1996); but this paper, in presenting the sense of community-hood, goes beyond that 'agrarian' and/or 'majority vs minority' approaches, and argues that even a single or homogeneous community might have a heterogeneous outlook that questions its purity of identity.

The following statements made by a villager describe how social conflicts make a negative consequence to the 'religious' practices:

*We have many hafezs, but we cannot get them in our mosque for Ramadan special Tarabi prayer for having conflict among different groups and persons. In 2003 we had to pray sura tarabi due to the conflict in appointing hafez raised among Dildar Fakir and some others. Dildar without informing the Mosque Committee, appointed a hafez, but it did not agree with it. At last, the appointment was cancelled and we prayed sura tarabi. This year (2004), no*

*any perfect hafez was managed to conduct khot'me tarabi; a younger hafez, aged of 14/15, was found, but he is local, in addition, used to enjoy films on CDs, even does not pray regularly, so the villagers did not agree to pray following him.*

(Source: Field notes, Dec 04)

Not only in the community's religious practices, but also in other non-religious areas, the social conflict makes an affect that weakens the collectiveness of the single 'Muslim' community. A group of people of the community, following a 'callousness' attitude of the state' in delivering services, wants to organise the villagers for taking a collective action based on the mosque to develop the village road. That, at one stage, works also as 'the mosque is for all' and as 'it helps the village people coming to the congregation'. During the time of fieldwork, a new road was developed that connects the mosque with some parts of village, but not the all. It helped those people who reside close to the mosque, and to the road; however, a large number of people, live in other parts, remained out of the facilities and they took it as a 'deprivation'. To them it produced such sense that some people are getting benefits with the new road and they (also belong to different lineage groups) have thought to establish a new mosque in their location 'as the people from there face difficulties coming to this (older) mosque'. The existing intra-community relationship accelerates the thinking but they yet to be made it as, i) building a new mosque requires a good amount of money that they cannot provide ii) their forefathers built that 'beautiful' mosque where 'they should go for congregation' and iii) it will create a more division among the villagers while they, at least once a week (for Friday's prayer) come as well as interact each others in the mosque that 'they do not want to lose it'.

While the community people think themselves as a single 'Muslim' community, then the presence of different lineage groups influences this 'Muslim-hood'; on the other, while these groups have a potential to create more division among them, they try to 'defence' that type of division by reproducing the mosque-based identity.

#### ***iv) The gender sense of attachment***

The gender sense of attachment here refers to the nature and extent of the village *women's participation (inclusion) and actions* with the above-mentioned religious institutions in the village. The community mosque, two *madrasas* are the 'public' (male face and opposite sense of "domestic"/"private") institutions in the village and the existing religious norms and values as well as practices do not allow the women to come and take an action (e.g. attend the congregation in mosque) publicly that the men can do (except the studying opportunity in the *madrasas* for the girls). However, the research explores a *hidden inclusion* of the village women with *their* mosque that encourages them to be the *community members* apart from their conventional household membership. This type of *inclusion* can broadly be categorised from the following two aspects:

i) *Material aspect*

ii) *Non-material aspect*

*i) Material aspect of attachment:* It denotes the material goods or cash donated for the mosque and *madrasa* or received from there. The mosque collects *musteer chaal* (one clenched rice) every week to meet its different expenses and to do it a man (asked by the Mosque Committee) visits every door when women in most cases hand over/transfer an amount of rice to him. Here, the women as individuals are not the decision makers to give the rice; but they, being the community members, feel a *sense of belonging* to *their* mosque that creates a social obligation for them. To them it is their 'religious duty' also. The following descriptions come out from an observation have been made during the *chaal* collection:

*The man (chaal collector) was moving door to door for collecting rice, I just followed him. The time was before mid-day and most of the men were busy in the paddy fields. The man appeared in front of every door and asked women to*

*give chaal ...they (women) gave it also by a given pot. I asked some women why they are giving chaal while they do not go to the mosque. Then they replied: it is 'our' mosque ...we do not go, but our husbands, sons and other male members go there, pray there, so we have a rights to our mosque.*

(Source: Field note, Dec 10, 2005)

The mosque, as the collective community institution, produces a sense of 'our' for the women also though it restricts them to get a physical entry in it. The women, for their belonging to *samaj* or community cannot ignore such obligations. Not only the giving of rice, but in case of receiving also, they get material benefits from the mosque. Very often, the mosque distributes *tobaraak* (food items come from community people) to the *musullis* (men, boys come to the mosque to pray) just after the Friday's *Jumma* (noon) prayer and some carry it to their family and transfer to their women and children in the households. Apart from the mosque, the *hafizia madrasa* organises annual *waz mehfil* (religious gathering) where lots of women (in a separated sitting arrangement) participate as listeners, also receive *shirni* (late night meals) as part of the programme. Thus both the mosque and the *hafizia madrasa* create 'a sense of inclusion or participation' (no matter it is equal or not compare to men) for the village women that cannot be understood just within the 'family' framework, rather more than that—the frame of 'community membership' that confers some customary *responsibilities* upon them.

ii) *Non-material aspect of attachment*: The 'non-material' aspect of attachment refers to women's obligation for the religious institutions other than the material goods. A woman is not just a household members, she has a customary membership with her lineage group, and regarding religious identity, with the community mosque. These all together develop a sense of *our* in their cognitive level for which the women also cannot ignore their attachment with *their* religious institutions.

The following story reflects such type of cognitive sense of a village woman:

*"I feel proud with our mosque; I do not go there, women never go there ...my husband goes there to pray; I ask him to pray for the departed souls of my father/mother in laws, he prays also. He also shares Hadiths with me that are discussed in the mosque ...I do not think that the mosque is for the men only ...this is for both ...they can go, they can pray there, we cannot; but we receive religious statements (Hadiths) from our husbands ...I live in this village ...this is our mosque also..."*

(Source: Field note: Dec 2004)

The mosque there is not merely a place for men to pray, but also an instrument to reproduce religious ideologies as well as roles and responsibilities both for men and women. The *imam* there states many religious prescriptions that are significantly applicable for the women—what they should do and what not. Thus it becomes a 'public guardian' for the women, includes (or control) them, recognises women as its 'members', and takes a 'responsibility' to 'guide' them to the 'paths of Islam'.

However, this is all about 'female face of inclusion' with the male-faced religious institutions in the village, which is not conducive to effective democratic participation that usually exists in any conservative religion (Welch et al 2004). Obviously such type of women's 'inclusion' differs from the men and produces a very limited scope compare to them (men), for example, women's job in transferring the weekly rice (women also responsible for cooking at the household level) is large while they do not hold any position of *ulama* in the village.

### v) *The occupational sense of attachment*

Occupational engagements of the people include both internal (inside the village) and external (outside the village) involvements of work to make a living. This is a 'Muslim village', people own one 'beautiful' mosque and two *madradas*; they have lots of *ulama*, every individual belongs to specific social group that are important in that context, but here cultural construction of occupational involvement is also important as it has a religious implication as well as relationship with their 'Muslim' identity.

Occupations relate to the community identity can be seen from two dimensions:

- a. Involvement with 'non-religious' face of occupation (e.g. non-farm labourers)
- b. Involvement with 'religious' face of occupation (e.g. *imam*)

#### a. *The 'non-religious' face of occupation*

The 'non-religious' face of occupation refers to these *activities have no any direct religious attachment* and people are pursuing these occupations to make a living. The people, having enough arable land find the cropping agriculture as the main source of earning, and the research explores that most of the farmers heavily depend on cash crops like jute, maize etc. apart from the staple food of HYV paddy. They also produce vegetables both for selling and domestic usage. Though the present farmers are habituated with the land cultivation, nowadays, their descendents find less interest for that. This is for two reasons: i) the successor generations (age below of 30) are getting attraction with various non-farm occupations in urban areas; also in foreign countries, and they find a 'status' with the new jobs, ii) the economic benefits against the costs in the contemporary agriculture is not so much attractive (profitable) to the village farmers.

The changes in the local economy are fastening with their increasing connections to the capital city and closer urban areas. These have shaped their cognitive level and reflect when they consider DEPZ (Dhaka Export Processing Zone, the largest specialised industrial zone in the country) as positive intervention (source of getting jobs) in their 'traditional' life. These changes have shifted the mode of religious contribution also—donation of money/cash instead of/along with rice/paddy to the community mosque and *madrassa* in some cases. The increasing number of jobs in urban and the non-farm sectors encourages the village people to be out-migrants that produce a negative effect to the conventional family as well as social integration. Now more and more nuclear type of family is emerging causes to be less caring to the older parents by their married sons. These are developing a sense of individualism among the younger people who in the contemporary village scene are out-migrants or want to be, and who have been identified 'callous' to lead a village life staying in the community. This 'callousness' also includes people's degree and nature of religious participation at the community level including their regular physical presence in the mosque and the older generation often interprets these changing behaviours as the 'deterioration of or losing religious values' of the younger people. The research observed that number of *musullis* (people come to the congregation) in the mosque becomes very less (except Friday's *zumma* prayer; Friday is public holiday in Bangladesh) as many men remain busy with their work either inside the village or far away from it. This disconnects the physical presence of the working people from their community mosque; however, the older people, who are non-workable or unable to do any physical work, find it as a *deviation* from their 'religion' as well as the community and identify them as the 'missing people' (absent). This 'missing' in one hand lessens the number of people in the mosque, but increases the volume of cash (*daan*) donated for the mosque on the other. Two rich persons of the community, living in Dhaka, are the leading contributors to the village mosque. Apart from them, a number of international migrants (most of them staying in Saudi Arabia) (elaborately discussed in Hossain 2004) also make financial supports there.

These are very significant sources of fund for the mosque and *madrassa* operations. Thus the non-religious face of occupational involvement at the same time produces two phenomenon at the community level: one is the sense of 'missing membership' from the religious congregation, and other is the sense of 'donor membership' for the mosque who receive a status and honour for the donations which is a 'good' work and which 'brings *chouab*' ('religious gains') to the donors.

*b. The 'religious' face of occupation*

The 'religious' face of occupation refers to the *activities to earn based in religious institutions* mainly at mosques and *madrassas*. It has two types: i) formal, ii) informal. *Formal* refers to the institutions, which are state recognised (e.g. the *Alia Madrasa* of the community) while the *informal* are community funded, 'traditional' in nature and not recognised by the state. Different mosques, *hafizia/kowmi madrasas* in and outside the village boundary where the community's *ulama* people pursue their jobs, are the important sources of earning. Apart from the cash earning by the religious professionals, many poor students reading in the community's *hafizia madrasa*, receive regular free of cost food supports from the village households; also free accommodation in the *madrassa* building. Pursuing these type of 'religious' occupations is mostly depend on the financial supports made by the community people to whom being the *members* (of the community) it becomes a 'moral' as well as 'spiritual' duty for them. A number of local students, who are reading in different *madrassas* far away from the village, also get free of food and accommodation supports there for the same reason. Thus, pursuing 'religious' face of occupations (re)produces the sense of community membership (or community-hood), at the same time, determines some obligations for that type of membership. These sustain a particular professional group, also people's community identity (the sense of Muslim).

**Conclusion**

This ethnographic paper looked at the role of perceived religion into the construction of community-hood in a 'remote' rural village in Bangladesh. It argued that religion and religious practices in that specific context develop a collective psyche which further builds up a (collective) community ('Muslim') identity of the people there. Following a range of material and non-material importance of the religious institutions/organisations, also for the state's (ignored) development approach towards the community, that ('Muslim-hood') identity strongly maintains or/and sustains. It, beyond the religious rituals, motivates the local people to take a range of collective actions for village 'development'. Developing this religious sense of community-hood, however, positively or/and negatively, is influenced by people's other non-religious involvements which at last produces a complex sense of community identity.

## Reference:

- Abecassis, D. (1990), *Identity, Islam and Human Development in Rural Bangladesh*, University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- Arens, J. and J. Van Burden (1980) *Jhagrapur: Poor peasants and women in a village in Bangladesh*, Gonoprakashani, Dhaka.
- Azad, S. (1996), *Hindu Sampraday Keno Desh Tyag Korse* (Trans: Why are Hindus Migrating from Bangladesh), SUS Publication, Dhaka.
- Baird, V. (2004) "*In the Name of God*" **In** New Internationalist; **Vol. 370**, New Internationalist Publication Ltd., Australia.
- Bertocci, P. J. (1996), Models of Solidarity, Structures of Power: The Politics of Community in Rural Bangladesh **In**: *The Politics of Community and Culture in Bangladesh: Selected Essays*, Centre for Social Studies, Dhaka.
- Ellickson, J. (2002) '*Local Saint vs. Cotemporary Reformer: Religious Trends in Bangladesh*' **In** Alam S.M. ed. (2002) *Cotemporary Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, Jahangirnagar University and University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- Hossain M.I. (2004) *International Labour Migration: A Nexus Between Remittances and Well Being*, Masters thesis, Department of Economics and International Development, University of Bath, UK.
- [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/religious\\_studies.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/religious_studies.html) (Accessed on May 29th, 2006).
- <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/bangladesh.htm> (Accessed on September 2005).
- Islam ed. (2003), *BANGLAPEDIA: National Encyclopaedia of Bangladesh*, **Volume 6**, pp. 329 331, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka.
- Kamal, G.M and M.H. Khan (1994), *Selected Terms on Environmental Management in Bangladesh*, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Karim, F. (1998), (rendered) Purba banger jati, barna O pesha (original: Wise, J., *Notes on The Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*), ICBS, Dhaka.
- Khan et. al. (2004), *Provisional Community Profile of Farirchar: a basic sketch of economical, social and political life*, WeD-PROSHIKA, Dhaka.
- Levitt, P. (2001), *The Transnational Villagers*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Mannan, M. (2002), Bangsha: Islam, History and Structure of Bengali Muslim Descent **In**: Alam, S.M. Nurul ed (2002) *Cotemporary Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, Jahangirnagar University and University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- McGregor, J. A. (2004), *Researching Well being: Communicating between the Needs of Policy Makers and the Needs of People*, paper presented at the Hanse Institute for Advance Study Delmenhorst, Bremen, Germany, 2-4th July, 2004.

- Ryan, R. (2004) *'Basic Psychological Needs Across Culture: A Self- Determination Theory perspective.'* Paper for International workshop on Research on Well-being in Developing Countries, Hanse Institute for Advance Study Delmenhorst, Bremen, Germany.
- Schuurman, F. J. ed. (1993) *Beyond The Impasse: New Directions in Development Theory*, ZED Books, London and New Jersey.
- WeD (2003), Newsletter, **V.1, Number 1**, ESRC, University of Bath, UK.
- Welch et. al.(2004), *Trust in God and Trust in Man: The Ambivalent Role of Religion in Shaping Dimensions of Social Trust*, Journal of Scientific Study of Religion, 43:3 (2004) 317-343