

**THE POLITICS OF BELIEF:
WOMEN'S ISLAMIC ACTIVISM IN BANGLADESH**

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ABSTRACT

The Politics of Belief: Women's Islamic Activism in Bangladesh

Maimuna Huq

I argue that investigation of Islamic movements in South Asia and elsewhere should be informed by anthropological concerns with subject-formation within historically specific cultural regimes. This entails a widening of the conventional emphasis on the public-formal aspects of Islamist discourses and the socioeconomic structures within which these discourses operate to include those micro-level processes whereby the selves of Islamic activists are formed.

I closely examine the successful Bangladeshi women's Islamist student group "Bangladesh Islami Chatri Sangstha" (BICSA) on these terms. I find that its success depends on its ability to produce a specific moral-practical subjecthood through disciplinary technologies grounded in revivalist-orthodox Islam and Western-style pedagogy. The latter is made accessible to BICSA by mass higher education and a mass print culture, both relatively recent developments in Bangladesh. I examine Islamist women's *opposition* to hegemonic Bangladeshi cultural mores through painstaking *submission* to religious prescriptions, and trace how forms of

agency mobilized by BICSA's top-down process of shaping "pristine" Muslim women return to haunt that process in the form of contestations ranging from explicit protest to ambiguous resistance.

To discern the everyday micro-level processes that guide subject formation among BICSA women, I conducted field research in urban Bangladesh (primarily Dhaka) between September, 1998 and May, 2003. This enables me to explore how Islamic activist women both embrace and subvert Islamic teachings imparted by the BICSA leadership with the intention of producing subjects totally committed to the Islamization of self, society, and state. I posit that in seeking to adapt Qur'anic prescriptions and the *jihad*-centered ideology of South Asian Islamist Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–79) to present-day realities, BICSA inevitably produces ambivalent subjectivities in the interstices of conflicting and overlapping power structures. I trace some ramifications of these conflicted subjectivities in the quotidian lives of BICSA activist women, highlighting domains of expansiveness as well as constraint.

Because their subjectivity arises amid contradictory, intersecting social domains, BICSA activists attain a more complex and textured agency than perfect commitment to any one ideology, whether conformist or oppositional, would allow.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Note on Translation and Transliteration	vii
Chapter 1.....	1
Introduction	
1.1 Islamic Activism in Bangladesh	
1.2 Women in Islamic Activism	
1.3 Structure, Agency and Gender in the Study of Islamic Movements	
1.4 Conventional Frames for Analyzing Islamic Movements	
1.5 Islamic Activist Women in Feminist Scholarship	
1.6 Gender and BICSa	
1.7 Power	
1.8 Fieldwork	
1.9 Central Themes and Overview of Chapters	
Chapter 2.....	73
Organizing a Female Students' Islamist Vanguard: Agenda, Recruiting, and Administration in BICSa	
2.1 Introduction	
2.2 BICSa's Uneasy Status	
2.3 BICSa's Political Standing	
2.4 Constructing Subjecthood: Practices and Discourses	
2.5 An Organization Of, By, and For Female Students	
2.6 Organizational Agenda	
2.7 Propagational Apparatus	
2.8 Targeting	
2.9 Structures of Authority and Discipline: Administrative Units and Cadres	
2.10 Training Methodologies and Programs	
Chapter 3.....	126
Worker Meetings: The Bodily-Spatial Production of a Female Islamic Activist Subjectivity	
3.1 Introduction	
3.2 A Worker Meeting at an Activist's Home, Palashi Unit	
3.3 Qur'anic Lesson (<i>Darsul Kor'an</i>)	

3.4	Preservation of the “Daily Report” (<i>Dainik Report Sangrakhkhan</i>)	
3.5	Organizational Discussion (<i>Sangathanik Alochana</i>)	
3.6	Peer Review of One’s Personal Disposition (<i>Mohasaba</i>)	
3.7	Supplicatory Prayer (<i>Monazat</i>)	
3.8	Conclusion	
Chapter 4	Forging Faith in the Fire of Suffering: The Everyday of Contestation and the Formation of an Islamic Activist Identity	188
4.1	Introduction	
4.2	Veiling	
4.3	Junior-Senior Hierarchy and Familial Authority	
4.4	Islamic Activism	
4.5	The Qur’an	
4.6	Conclusion	
Chapter 5	Polyvalent Resistance: Power, Agency and the Ambivalence of Desiring Subjects	258
5.1	Introduction	
5.2	Veil, <i>Parda</i> , <i>Borkha</i>	
5.3	Specific Cases of Resistance to Veiling	
5.4	Islamism’s Totalist Claims on the Activist	
5.5	Islamic Romance: Tempting Readers Away from Temptation	
5.6	Women in the Public Sphere	
5.7	Other Cases of Resistance Against Women’s Designated Place/Behavior in the Public Sphere	
5.8	Conclusion	
Chapter 6	Closing Thoughts: A Transnational Consideration of Women’s Islamic Activism	325
6.1	Introduction	
6.2	Veiling, Re-Veiling and Global Islamic Revival	
6.3	Revisiting Key Themes of This Project	
6.4	Conclusion: Piety, or Religiosity as Nested, Ambivalent Form of Social Agency Wielded as Contestation-in-Submission	
Glossary		383
Bibliography		397

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

I, the author, am responsible for all translations in this study except for those otherwise credited in the notes. In transliterating Bangla words, I have preferred to go by the pronunciation rather than follow the conventional system, which treats Bangla words as though they were Sanskrit. With regard to Arabized and Persianized Bangla words or “Musulmani Bangla”, I have transliterated them as they are printed and pronounced in Bangla. Thus, for instance, the Arabic word “Qur’an” appears as “Kor’an” in my references to the organizational vocabulary and practices of Islamist women in Bangladesh. I have retained transliterated words in italics within the document except for those used as a label or a title, such as, Sayyed, Jamaate Islami, Tabligh Jamaat, etc. In most cases, I have elected to provide the transliterated words in italics within parentheses following the translation. All transliterated words have been put in a glossary at the end of the dissertation for easy reference.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan in 1971 after a bloody war of independence that pitted pro-independence, liberal-secular nationalists against Islamists. The nationalists won, and political Islam has been denigrated in dominant political discourses in Bangladesh ever since. Even so, sociopolitical Islamist organizations for grade-school, high-school, and college students have thriven.¹ During two years of ethnographic field research in Dhaka, Bangladesh, conducted during various periods between September, 1998 and May, 2003, I became particularly familiar with the women's Islamist organization Bangladesh

¹ In discussing groups that combine political agendas with religious commitments, all possible terminologies seem problematic: one seems either to elide the essential religiosity of such movements, or to conflate an entire religion with a particular group or movement. In this dissertation, I use "Islamic" or "Muslim" when referring to the Muslim religious tradition at large or to any of those practices or virtues that have been scripturally or historically considered to be part of that tradition, and "Islamist" to refer to that genre of contemporary reform movements which see Islamization of the state as a key objective. In Bangladesh or Pakistan, the party Jamaate Islami exemplifies this phenomenon. Moreover, I use "Islamic activist" and "Islamic revivalist" to refer to members of the broader movement for the Islamization of society; Islamism is a part of this movement since the Islamization of society is also a central objective for Islamists in Bangladesh. Thus both the organization Tabligh Jamaat, which strives to inculcate individual piety, and Jamaate Islami, which aims to Islamize both individual lives and the state, are part of this larger landscape of Islamic activism or reformism. All Islamists are Islamic activists but not all Islamic activists (e.g., Tabligh Jamaat activists) are Islamists. I describe BICSa women interchangeably as "Islamist," "Islamic activist," "Islamic revivalist", as in their case all these terms apply. It should also be noted that all Islamic activists are Muslims, but not all—or even most—Muslims are Islamic activists or revivalists. In decreasing inclusiveness, then, we have Muslims: Islamic activists: Islamists.

Islami Chatri Sangstha (Bangladesh Islamic Female Students' Association), or BICSa for short. "Reform," in this context, implies not liberalization but conservative restoration. The declared goal of Islamists is to re-establish, through democratic means, what they believe to have been the social and personal purity of the bygone Islamic golden age.

That BICSa is thriving is something of a puzzle, given the hostility toward Islamist activism of the dominant public discourses in Bangladesh, including those prevalent in the university system. At the same time, BICSa has been unable to reliably produce exactly the kind of pious subjectivity in its activist members that it wishes to. This dissertation addresses several interrelated questions arising from BICSa's mixed success and failure. First, why do young Muslim students in urban Bangladesh, where political Islam has been so denigrated for so long, increasingly embrace Islamist activism? Second, what kinds of subjecthood does the emergent Islamist women's movement produce, and how does it produce them? Third, how do women Islamic activists negotiate the differences between the subordination of women inscribed in Islamic activist ideology and the empowering practices their activism entails in daily life? Fourth—and this question is closely related to the first—why is it, given that a subordinating gender discourse that insists on the seclusion of women is central to Islamic activist ideology and that secular groups provide more woman-friendly channels for empowering women and solving some of the problems women face on the ground, that

a growing number of educated women adopt BICSa-style Islamism as a “liberating” ideology? Answers to these questions, framed by careful consideration of relevant issues of gender and power, comprise the bulk of this dissertation.

The Islamist movement’s appeal for young urbanites is partly explained by the liberal state’s failure to deliver on its promises of socio-economic security for all, as most clearly evidenced by widespread sociopolitical violence, charges of corruption, widening class disparities, and street and domestic violence against women. The Islamist movement appeals to the desire for sociopolitical renewal by deploying a scriptural emphasis on “social justice” in its call for establishment of a “pristine” Islamic community. The appeal of this program is inadvertently amplified by the mass media, which have recently given Bangladeshis², including women, unprecedented access not only to local newspapers but also to stark images of global violence and suffering conveyed in great detail and around the clock through the satellite dish. Many Bangladeshis have a strong sense that not only the streets of Dhaka but the whole world is corrupt, violent, and faithless. In contrast, Islamism (BICSa, in the case of women students) offers a systematic path to “peace in this world and

² *Bangladeshi* denotes the national identity of the people of the nation-state of Bangladesh. *Bangali* refers to the ethnic identity based on the language *Bangla*. The ethnicity of the majority of Bangladeshis is *Bangali*. Most inhabitants of West Bengal in India are also ethnically *Bangalis*. “*Bangali*” is both a noun (e.g., “she is a *Bangali*”) and an adjective (e.g., “This aspect of *Bangali* culture must be preserved”). *Bengali* is the anglicized term for both *Bangali* and *Bangla*.

liberation in the Hereafter” (*duniyate santi o akherate mukti*).³ The ongoing growth of Islamic activism in Bangladesh, including women’s activism, may therefore be understood partly as a response to the perception that the local and global life-worlds are increasingly unjust, immoral, and unstable—a perception that Islamism shares with other contemporary fundamentalisms, including some Hindu, Christian, and Jewish.

Islamist reformism is a bottom-up movement in the sense that it seeks to reform the polity by reforming individuals first, restructuring their subjectivity along Islamist lines: pious, virtuous, clean-living, clean-thinking, courageous, self-sacrificial, dedicated, enthusiastic. BICSa, in particular, seeks to produce a reformist subjectivity through consuming systematic practices of emotional-spiritual discipline, adherence to organizational requirements, and the mastery and performance of Islamic discourses. These practices and discourses will be described in detail in later chapters, as will various fault lines in their operation. And fault lines there are, for the individual BICSa activist is often less perfectly malleable than the organization, or she herself, would like. Contradictions arise from several sources, including epistemological style; BICSa, though a

³ In naming “peace in this world” as a goal of their activism, BICSa members mean that individual and societal adherence to the “divinely ordained Islamic way of life” and rejection of the “human-devised ideologies” (*manab-rachita matabad*) of nationalism, socialism, imperialism, capitalism, and secularism will help secure individual emotional harmony, societal order, economic equity, and political-economic justice, thereby enabling the establishment of a peaceful polity on earth. “Peace” in this discourse is therefore not simply synonymous with the pluralistic, non-religious peace vision of the global peace movement.

religious body, emphasizes a “scientific” (*bigyansammata*) (rationalistic, hyperorganized, exhaustively recorded) approach to knowledge and behavior. The rigors of adopting the veil and otherwise hewing to Islamist prescriptions in social, educational, and family settings that sometimes bitterly oppose these choices are another source of stress.⁴

As for the apparent mystery of why women would advocate an ideology that seeks to seclude women, Islamist women’s subscription to gender inequality can be understood only in relation to other existing social, economic, and political inequalities. BICSa activists see themselves as advocating not gender *inequality* but a divinely-ordained system of gender *difference*. This system of ordinally correct differences they see as the only possible source of security and fulfillment for both women and men. Patriarchy is seen by BICSa women not as a yoke to be thrown off but as a structure of rights, restrictions, and obligations, tailored to the essential nature of both sexes, that can be trusted to help one secure worldly and other-worldly benefits in the face of economic anxieties and sociopolitical corruption, conflict, and violence. BICSa’s promulgation of gender inequality is a response to acute structural inequalities interacting with a moral-cultural understanding animated by local Bangali culture and Islamic orthodoxy.

⁴ By “scientific,” Islamists in Bangladesh, like religious ideologues in many other contexts, such as the US Christian Right, indicate a commitment to systematicity and logical consistency rather than to the epistemic open-endedness of actual science. BICSa, specifically, regards science as important to the extent that it can be harnessed to illuminate the Qur’an and benefit humankind in a manner consistent with Islamic principles.

BICSa strives to restore order, morality, and a sense of imminent accountability to God by producing a radically new kind of Islamic subjectivity. This subjectivity it seeks to produce through elaborately systematic cultivation of moral discipline, Islamic knowledge, and adherence to organizational regulations. But a second force shaping Islamist identity, one not controlled by BICSa or specified in any syllabus, is the daily visceral experience of social hostility toward the activist's commitment to an Islamist lifestyle. This experience sharpens ideological boundaries and encourages a sense of being an embattled self, a member of a besieged community of the faithful. It also tends to individuate women activists, that is, endow them with a sense of competence, toughness, and independence that can spell trouble not only for family members and others who would like to dissuade the activist from Islamism but also for BICSa itself.

In the end, BICSa finds itself unable to completely uproot most activists from the multiple—and often conflicting, imbricated, intersecting, and internally contradictory—domains of power, persuasion, and desire that they inhabit by virtue of living in a complex, internally differentiated, postcolonial society. Activists' daily experiences of ambiguity give rise to implicit and sometimes explicit resistance to organizational socialization.

My work complicates received notions of Islamic revivalist movements as a survival within or a reaction to modernity, and of the

contemporary Islamic public sphere as essentially male. I combine delineation of the structural causes, consequences, and ideological utterances of Islamist resurgence with analysis of both the quotidian micromechanics of subject-making and the dissonances within this process of identity production among women, who are often assumed to be the underdogs of Islamic revival. Below, I delve into the intimacies of Islamist discipline and the anguished ambivalences often felt by even the most committed Islamist actors as they undergo a distinctly gendered process of religious subject formation and renewal.

In the remainder of this chapter, I set the stage for exploring BICSa's national and ideological context by describing the nature of Islamic activism in Bangladesh and the situation of women in Bangladesh. Theoretical issues of gender, power, and contestation are examined as they are raised by the details of Islamic activism, especially women's Islamic activism. Also, the strengths and limitations of the existing scholarly literature, especially the feminist literature, are described. In conclusion I will give an overview of the remainder of the dissertation.

1.1 Islamic Activism in Bangladesh

Even though hegemonic, liberal-secular nationalist forces have strongly opposed and condemned the Islamists as traitors (*ghatak*) and agents (*dalal*) of Pakistan ever since the 1970-71 war of independence, during which Islamists opposed the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan and collaborated with the Pakistani army, Bangladesh is now

experiencing an Islamic revival. This is occurring for several reasons, including, as already mentioned, an increasingly widespread sense that Islamism offers an antidote to local and global corruption and insecurity.

Bangladesh has a history of Islamic revivalist movements, notably the Faraizi movement and the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya movement. These arose in Bengal (the eastern part of which is now Bangladesh) in the early nineteenth century in response to British colonialism, and served to raise Muslim consciousness against both the British and the Hindus (Ahmed 1990: 11; Kabir 1990: 119).

Regional mobilization around religious identity during the 1940s, which led to the partition of India into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India, further heightened consciousness of religious identity. However, religious identity took second place to ethnic identity from the 1950s through the early 1970s in the course of the struggle of Bangali nationalists in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to win autonomy from Pakistan. Religion began to return to the fore even during the heyday of secularism, the reign (1971–75) of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (“Mujib” for short), first president of Bangladesh.

There were at least eight reasons for this resurgence of religious identity. First, Islamist groups continued to work clandestinely after being banned by the Mujib government following independence (Kabir 1990: 119). Victims of nationalist persecution of this period supply a martyrology for present-day Islamists (Rashiduzzaman 1994: 40).

Second, the failure of the Mujib government to cope with contemporary social, economic, and political problems tended to discredit secularism—a key component of the state ideology—in the public eye (Kabir 1990: 125).

Third, the government's intimacy with India, which surrounds Bangladesh (apart from the coastline and a short border with Burma) and has a large Hindu majority, led some Bangladeshis to worry about Indian hegemony. This anxiety has grown over the years and boosted the prestige of Islamists, who, suspicious of Hindu-dominated, constitutionally secular India, have opposed Indian involvement in Bangladeshi affairs from the start. To allay public fears, counter the growing influence of the radical left-wing parties, and improve relations with the oil-rich countries of the Middle East, even Mujib, the father of Bangali nationalism (which privileges the ethnic identity common to Bangladeshis and the non-Muslim Bangalis of eastern India, playing down religious differences), began to patronize religious institutions and programs (Kabir 1990: 123-4).

Fourth, the Zia government (1975–82) allowed Islamist groups back into politics in 1979. Later, in an effort to legitimize his military government (1982–90) and to counter the two major political parties in the country—Awami League (AL for short) and Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Dol (Bangladesh Nationalist Party, or, BNP for short)—General Ershad patronized religious programs (Kabir 1990: 126).

Fifth, the boom in oil production in the Gulf states since the 1970s has obliged the labor-scarce economies of these countries to recruit workers from Third World countries, especially Muslim countries. These workers often return to their home countries more oriented toward Islam and the Gulf states (Husain 1990: 148).

Sixth, globally diverse forms of culture, especially those generated by the Western entertainment industry and by Bollywood (the Indian film industry, named by merging “Bombay” and “Hollywood”), have entered Bangladesh via the satellite dish and other routes. This was preceded by the appearance of numerous English-medium schools (i.e., schools teaching in English), including high schools and colleges, in the early 1980s. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, now boasts three English-medium colleges/universities. These have high tuition fees, and their graduates usually try to go to Western countries for further studies and settle there. Some intellectuals term this one-directional flow a “brain drain” and caution against becoming besotted with the glamour of Western culture.

Conduits of Western culture such as satellite TV and English-medium schools are mostly accessible only to the upper-middle and upper classes. The conspicuous materialism of these elites, along with their overt devotion to Western culture, prompt suspicions that they are comfortable leading such consumption-oriented lives amidst dire poverty because they have moved away from religion toward Western ideologies

defined by capitalism, materialism, individualism, and secularism.

Muzaffar (1986) suggests that this widening gap in outlook and lifestyle between elites and larger publics in Third World countries, many of which are Muslim, is one cause of the emergence of transnational Islamism. Islamist invectives against the West find important resonance among members of the middle and lower middle classes, many of whom are religion-oriented or at least traditionalist to begin with.

The influence of the new media on issues of identity increases as more people gain higher education and access to messages from Islamist leaders around the world through television, radio, printed literature, audio cassettes, and video tapes. Just as globalization means that some Bangladeshis can now watch MTV for hours a day, it also means that Islamists in Bangladesh can gather to protest, say, the shooting of a Palestinian teenager by Israeli soldiers in the West Bank the same day such an incident occurs. Some French schools' unwillingness to let Muslim students veil drew speedy protests from many Bangladeshi Islamists, who interpreted the ban as yet another instance of the imposition of dominant Western ideology on vulnerable Muslim subjects. Indeed, many scholars (e.g., Ayooob 1981; Yeganeh 1993; Moghadam 1994; Kramer 1996) have suggested that Muslim desire to reclaim economic, political, and cultural power from Western domination (colonial and neo-colonial) is a key catalyst driving the rise of contemporary Islamist movements.

Seventh, each of the two dominant national political parties in Bangladesh has come to power at different times since independence and has failed, in its turn, to solve the country's outstanding economic, social, and political problems. This has increased the appeal of Jamaate Islami (Jamaat for short), the most prominent Islamist party in Bangladesh, which has not yet held power and whose vision of an Islamic state has, therefore, not yet been put to the test.

Eighth, last, and most importantly for my purposes, Jamaat's effective strategies for mobilizing (through logical and emotional rhetoric), recruiting, organizing, and training individuals, as well as for funding its activities and "framing"⁵ its program in public discourse, have enabled it to carve out a firm niche for itself in the national imagination in the face of formidable structural constraints. Despite concerted opposition from powerful quarters, Jamaat's membership and support have increased steadily over the years.

Given that Jamaat insists on observance by its female members of a strict form veiling (*parda*) (including a face veil, not just a headcovering and overcoat), in addition to obedience to various organizational rules for both men and women, and given also that the veil is marginalized and stigmatized in present urban educated circles, one might expect Jamaat's appeal to be limited primarily to men, but this is not the case. Indeed, the

⁵According to social movement scholars Snow and Benford (1988: 198), to "frame" means to "assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists."

clearest marker of Jamaat's success is the appearance of a growing number of veiled women at educational institutions throughout the country.

1.2 Women in Islamic Activism

Much of the scholarly literature on Bangladeshi women, especially that produced for Western audiences, focuses on developmental issues relating to rural women. It is often implied in this literature (e.g., Abecassis 1990) that Islam and especially *parda* render women an “invisible resource” by preventing them from freely occupying public space, thus impeding women's integration into the national economy and posing an obstacle to the “development process” and hence the empowerment of rural women. More recent and insightful scholarship has noted the growing contention over “women's issues” and projects for “modernizing” and mobilizing women (especially rural women) among the Bangladeshi state, religious and Islamist groups, and liberal-secular non-governmental organizations (NGO for short) dependent on foreign aid (White 1992; Shehabuddin 2000; Karim 2004). Another recent body of pioneering literature has explored the ways in which women garment-factory workers, mostly poor rural migrants, creatively negotiate between constraining cultural demands for gendered modesty, as enshrined in notions of veiling and honor (*ijjat*), and the practical need for income as located in the context of growing national-global demands for cheap female labor (Siddiqi 1996; Feldman 2001).

However, this study of women students' Islamist activism expands scholarly attention from poor rural women in Bangladesh to the growing ranks of educated, urban lower-middle class, and middle-class women increasingly dissatisfied with both liberal-modernist and traditional-religious approaches to contemporary sociopolitical problems. Significant changes are under way within a small but growing segment of this population pertaining to the dynamics of religious identity, self-transformation, and sociopolitical mobilization. While women are conventionally depicted as *targets* of state, NGO, or fundamentalist machinations, this subset of urban Bangladeshi Islamist women use religious revivalist sensibilities partly grounded in *their* concept of veiling to piously access and transform public space through social-movement organizational activism. In this regard there is some overlap between Bangladeshi Islamists and women in some Middle Eastern societies, particularly Egypt (MacLeod 1991: 107–24; Karam 1996). However, the issue of veiling is more complicated in Bangladesh, where powerful segments of educated urban society increasingly see veiling as a foreign import, less a matter of private faith and individual choice than as a marker of “fundamentalism,” “extremism,” “ignorance,” or rustic backwardness. Any association with “fundamentalism” can carry a particularly heavy ideological-political stigma in Bangladesh on account of religious groups' historical opposition to national independence and because of these groups' perceived animosity to full rights for women.

While scholars of rural Bangladesh often imply that access to modern education would loosen the hold of Islamic norms over the lives of women, most female Islamists have received not only education but higher education. In fact, the growth of Islamism among urban rather than rural women might be dependent on the significantly higher literacy of the former group. Dale Eickelman (1992) has demonstrated how mass higher education is facilitating contemporary Islamist activism in the Middle East and North Africa, a premise that may be transposable to South Asia generally and Bangladesh specifically.

The innovative body of literature on women Islamist activists or “born-again” Muslim women has tended to reflect one of two trends dominant in the larger field of Islamic-movement scholarship: the exclusively causal or “political” approach or the tendency to essentialize and dehistoricize Islamic practices. One can also detect strong impulses from the scholarship on social movements in this body of literature. Less than thirty years ago, many scholars of the social sciences saw participants in collective action as psychologically dysfunctional, whipped into a frenzy by charismatic leaders, acting not out of commitment to political and/or religious goals but in response to economic forces which they neither comprehend nor control (e.g. Hoffer 1951; Durkheim 1952; Davies 1962; Smelser 1962; Marx 1972). Today, rap performers, squatters, and New Age practitioners each tend to be viewed, by different scholars, as the new vanguard of radical social change. Nor are these claims inherently

ridiculous; social-movement theorizing engages issues of enduring sociological and anthropological concern. Because social movements occur when agency seeks to transform structure, they raise fascinating questions about the relation between structural location and subjective identity, ideology/discourse and practice. They force us to rethink the concept of the individual as a mere interest-maximizer—and this reappraisal is especially appropriate in the case of Islamist women.

Further, much like scholars of new social movements in Europe and the United States, who seek to foreground issues of identity and cultural meaning without losing sight of ideological and social structures in the process (e.g., Cohen 1985; Melucci 1985; Larana, Johnston and Gusfield 1994), theorists of women's Islamic reformism tend to orient themselves around "identity politics." Some of these theorists, including Zuhur (1992), Nagata (1996), Brenner (1996), and Göle (1996), have usefully integrated close study of actors' intimate quests for identity and meaning into the dominant politico-economic and doctrinal frameworks conventionally used for studying Islamist movements.

It is no coincidence, then, that scholars of women's Islamist activism, including the author, have begun to conduct first-hand ethnographic research. Islamist movements have hitherto been primarily studied through their formal, dramatic or spectacular, "public"—therefore "significant" or "noteworthy"—features, especially overt and covert acts of violence by male activists, rousing speeches delivered by leading male

Islamists, formal interviews with male-dominated Islamist leadership, and texts authored, usually, by male Islamist leaders. Writing about the evangelical and Pentecostal forms of contemporary Christian fundamentalism, scholars have noted that as seen from a distance and through filter that selects formal mechanisms, almost any politicized religious movement appears male-dominated; yet on closer scrutiny, not only are congregations filled with women (e.g., Bendroth 1993; Cucchiari 1988; Gill 1990) but some fundamentalist ministries are even dominated by women (Cucchiari 1990). Further, it is tempting, from a distance, to categorize such movements in terms of structural features and to marginalize individual commitment, the personal search for meaning and identity, and other subjective structures of feeling, but these are again found on closer scrutiny to be intimately important to the spread, tenacity, and potency of such movements.

Further, “closer scrutiny” demands more than detailed evaluations of formal discourses and agendas; it requires ethnographic research focusing on followers as well as leaders, inquiries into “apolitical” and “private” issues, observations of activists as they go about their daily lives, and participation, to whatever extent possible, in the lives of activists. These methods blur unhelpful distinctions between the social and the political or the private and the public, and assist in the delineation of religious activists not only as objects or effects of power but as culturally-

morally constructed actors—not only as reacting but as acting, engaging creatively with existing conditions.

Yet an ethnographic, actor-oriented, subjectivity-cognizant approach has yet to take firm hold in studies of Islamic movements, and studies of Islamist women in whatever mode remain unusual. Much has been written about the rigid centrality of gender in fundamentalist ideologies, relatively little about the actual women whose life-worlds are defined, wholly or partly, by such ideologies. This dearth is reflected in the near-absence of women considered as religious activists even in a cross-cultural study of fundamentalism as extensive as that undertaken by the University of Chicago (Marty and Appleby 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995). On those few occasions when gender is addressed in the otherwise ambitious and informative Chicago project, women largely appear as objects and symbols of an Islamist agenda that seeks to subordinate them and against which “progressive” non-Islamist women struggle (Rugh 1993; Haeri 1993). On the rare occasions when Islamist women do appear (Hardacre 1993), they are seen as victims of ideology, rejecters of modernity, and bearers of false consciousness who seek solace in Islamist activism. This is unsurprising for two reasons. First, the analytic derivation of fundamentalist anger and disenchantment from structural conditions articulates with studies of Islamist movements that are predominantly male-centered. Given the paucity of ethnographic literature on Islamist women, it is tempting to try to fit these women into

this available framework—or to simply presume that it covers them.

Second, Islamist ideologies clearly do impose significant constraints on women. Thus, should agency be attributed to women who opt for Islamist activism in societies where ideologically more woman-friendly channels of activism are available (secular feminism, nationalism, socialism, liberal religion, etc.), we have another apparent paradox on our hands: agents acting against their own evident self-interest. Scholars conclude that women religious activists must *unknowingly* be contributing to their own oppression and that of their fellow women (Kaplan 1992; Riesebrodt 1993; Moghissi 1999). My study of emergent Islamic activism in Bangladesh seeks to complicate this approach by bringing these religious activist women's own projects, aspirations, and commitments to view but without losing sight of those larger structures of culture, national history and political culture, and Islamic traditions within which these women must operate. I do this, in part, by exploring the polyvalence of motivations and ambivalence of beliefs and desires, where motivations, beliefs, and desires are all culturally constructed but also malleable to creative human endeavors, and never static, but always in motion within the interstices of social relations and amid intersecting and shifting discursive regimes.

1.3 Structure, Agency, and Gender in the Study of Islamic Movements

Women are a significant and growing fraction of the membership of Islamist organizations today⁶. Yet what little literature does exist on Islamist women attends largely to the Iranian revolution of 1979 (Reeves 1989; Sullivan 1998: 233–36) and to the “re-veiling phenomenon” and political Islam in Egypt (El-Guindi 1981; Hoffman 1985; Zuhur 1992; Karam 1996, 1997). Promising work has appeared on Islamic activist women in Malaysia (Nagata 1996), Indonesia (Brenner 1996), Turkey (Göle 1996), Sudan (Hale 1996), post-1979 Iran (Najmabadi 1998; Mir-Hosseini 1999), and India (Metcalf 1998), but even detailed studies of the Islamist group of which BICSa is an offshoot, Jamaat, mention women only in passing (Muhammad 1993; Nasr 1996). There is thus an opportunity for inquiry into the nature of women’s participation in Islamism to enlarge our grasp of Islamist activism both in Bangladesh and elsewhere, especially since women are so widely held to be simply the

⁶ Exact numbers are not available. Women’s Islamic activist groups in Bangladesh such as BICSa are very reluctant to divulge numbers on account of their perceived vulnerability to physical-political attacks from more powerful adversarial groups. As one BICSa leader put it, “If our numbers seem too small, then large political groups such as the secularist AL and its student wing Chatra League or small but well organized groups such as the socialist Chatra Union might think us weak and an easy target. If our numbers seem too large, then the same groups might see us as a threat and attempt to persecute us more openly” (fieldnotes, personal communication, September 12, 1999). For numbers of different categories of BICSa affiliates valid for 1993, when I conducted preliminary research on BICSa and when Islamist organizations such as BICSa drew less public attention and were consequently less cautious than they are today, see Huq (1994).

victims of Islamism (Esfandiari 1997; Hammami 1997; Shukrallah 1994; Cherifati-Merabtine 1994; Sobhan 1994).

This dissertation partly fills this important gap in the nascent literature on women's Islamic activism by exploring the discourses and daily practices of BICSa women and the ways in which these discourses and practices both fulfill and depart from the subjecthood-shaping religious program prescribed by the group's Islamist leadership. It pays attention not only to what women Islamist activists say in interviews—where they offer self-consciously crafted responses to questions posed by a culturally, politically, and historically situated social scientist or anthropologist—but also to what these activists do in their daily lives, where they face a wide array of on-the-ground dilemmas, emotional upsets, uncertainties, economic forces, and shifting contexts. It foregrounds some of the critical disjunctures between the ideologies and lifestyles of these activists, and in so doing illuminate the complex interplay of Islamist ideology with the constantly shifting terrain of everyday life.

Growing Islamist activism among Bangladeshi women is firmly situated within Bangladeshi Islamism as a whole, which, in turn, occurs in partial tandem with global Islamic reassertions. Thus, it is not surprising that Bangladeshi scholars who have offered various reasons for contemporary Islamist reformism in Bangladesh reproduce the conventional paradigms of the scholarly literature of Islamic movements

(e.g., Ahmed 1990). In these overtly structural mappings—discussed further in the next section—even male actors (often understood by participants, opponents, and scholars as definitively constituting these movements) are difficult to locate, let alone women. Until well into the 1970s, such systemic/structural elision of agents permeated not only the study of Islamic movements but also anthropology at large (as well as linguistics, sociology, history, and literary studies; Ortner 1984). This tendency still haunts resistance and subaltern studies today (Ortner 1995), though these projects were conceived for the express purpose of bringing into view subjects conventionally ignored by historical meta-narratives. Therefore I will seek to illuminate in theoretical terms the dynamic interplay of macro-level sociopolitical structures with microsocial agency as instantiated in the lives of BICSa women. I will also examine closely the relationships between gender inequality and other forms of inequality as they play out in the life-situations of BICSa activists.

1.4 Conventional Frames for Analyzing Islamic Movements

Broadly speaking, two lines of thought, both arising out of distinct traditions in political science, history, and sociology, currently dominate scholarly literature on Islamist movements. The first may be called “crisis theory”: this includes what Shahin (1996: 10–14) terms the “success,” “developmental-social,” and “historical-cultural” perspectives. Drawing on the Durkheimian theory of social change and anomie, the “crisis” position considers psychological condition and political structures as

catalysts for the emergence of Islamic movements. It suggests that when confronted with social, political, and economic crises or sudden upheavals, people are moved by frustration, disorientation, despair, or enthusiasm for scoring against perceived adversaries to rise up (Dekmejian 1995: 7–8, 27–48). For example, it has been widely argued that the Egyptian victory against Israel in the 1973 war boosted the prestige of Islam as a viable political force against the West (Muzaffar 1986: 20).

There are three major problems with this approach. First, it tends to reduce Islamist discourses and practices to mere symbolic bottles holding “secular” contents; that is, it dichotomizes Islamic activism into “form” and “intention” with the implication that the latter—the desire for political power and economic mobility—is what counts toward shaping events. This is not helpful for grasping multivocal processes such as BICSa’s Islamism, in which formal symbols are potent at multiple levels. The act of veiling, for instance, has for “contents” both the religious virtues that veiling putatively helps one to acquire and the greater mobility that it confers without compromising responsibility. In such processes, the relation between signifier (Islamically enjoined or deployed practices) and signified (economic anxieties, the cultivation of personal piety, political grievances, social concerns) is neither unitary nor fixed. Second, in the crisis-theory approach, social actors and relations are eclipsed by political systems operated and operating from above and by determined reactions to particular events. Third, this approach uproots Islamic activism from its

embeddedness in the enduring contest over symbolic spaces, a contest intensified in recent decades by modernization and a central feature of “Muslim politics” historically (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 1–21).

The second trend or line of thought that characterizes the current scholarly literature on Islamic movements is concerned with the doctrinal forms such movements take. It privileges the ideological system as the central analytic category, thus emphasizing the integration of politics and religion in Islamic doctrine (e.g., Kepel 1993: 228). The nature of Islamic history, thought, and culture is, in this setting, understood to be intrinsically conducive to revivalism. The drawback of this kind of thinking is that it essentializes Islam, disregarding the particularity of the historical contexts within which Islamic movements occur. Tambiah (1984: 6), Munson (1988: 1-38), and other scholars have critiqued this allocation of centrality to formal religious ideology. They point to the need to consider specific religious objects and practices in order to keep human actors and particular historical and sociopolitical contexts in view. Furthermore, like the crisis approach, the cultural approach is unable to describe exactly how a “habitual” (i.e., generally observant but non-ideological) Muslim *becomes* an ideological and practical activist and *sustains* her activism over time.

We are clearly in need of an integrative framework in which to understand contemporary Islamic activism that does not insist on tidy divisions between form and content or symbolic and instrumental, and that

does not privilege system over subject or vice versa. Several factors make women's Islamism in Bangladesh a suitable site for beginning to formulate such a relatively fluid and non-dichotomous framework: (1) the simultaneous ideological import, symbolic potency, and instrumental efficacy of forms of embodiment such as the practice of the veil in the lives of women Islamists; (2) the constant negotiation by these women of dominant religious, cultural, and political discourses in their quest for personal virtue, personal and collective empowerment, social justice, and a meaningful, purposeful identity; and (3) the ambiguous positioning of women Islamists in popular, secular-elite, orthodox-religious, revivalist-religious, and even their own imaginations. In investigating the life-world of women Islamists and trying to keep both structures and agencies in view, I have found helpful recent scholarly attention to the notion of "practice" as articulated in anthropologies of the Middle East, particularly of Islam (Abu-Lughod 1989) and gender (Ortner 1996).

1.5 Islamic Activist Women in Feminist Scholarship

1.5.1 Complicating the Feminist Take on Islamist Women

Feminist scholarship in some developing countries has taken Western and feminist studies of Islam and of women in "Third World" contexts to task for reproducing what Uma Narayan (1997) calls the "colonialist stance," whereby cultural/religious practices in the non-industrialized world are reproduced seamlessly as "disturbing," exotic "traditions" understood as being practiced by all and as victimizing all

women in the same appalling manner. Marnia Lazreg (1988) and Chandra Mohanty (1991), among many others, have pointed out that many feminist discourses on women in Third World societies (particularly those in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa) actually reproduce conservative religious views of the place of women in religious traditions because they are divorced from detailed discussions of specific ideologies and practices in particular places and times.

Third-world feminist literature has enriched our understanding of the great diversity of women's projects and lives in the Third World in significant ways (as Abu Lughod [1989], for example, has cogently shown with regard to anthropological scholarship on the Arab world). However, it has thus far not provided particularly useful tools for understanding the practices and experiences of women who join religious revivalist movements, especially movements that constrain women's behavior and are perceived by many scholars, both Western and local, to be detrimental to women. In discussions of these movements, Third World feminist scholars often seem to collapse ideological and practical specificities and to reify the victimization of women by these movements in much the same manner for which they take Western feminists to task (Tohidi 1991; Narayan 1997). Thus, for instance, in her incisive critique of the concept of "tradition" as used by both Western feminists and local religious fundamentalists to sweepingly constitute entire cultures across times and spaces, Narayan portrays fundamentalists (Hindu, in this case) as having

as their only goal the achievement of material and political gains through the redeployment of nationalist discourses.⁷ But as crucial as political and economic gain are, reducing all possible motives to these forecloses the possibility of a richer analysis of conservative religious movements.

Second, Narayan fails to consider that while Hindu fundamentalist groups rely heavily on nationalist discourses of “Hindustan for the Hindus,” the aims and goals of the two most powerful religious groups in the subcontinental region—Tabligh Jamaat and Jamaate Islami—are not nationalist at all, even though the latter seeks to gain state power as a launching pad for reviving and reconstituting a transnational Muslim community (*ummah*). Tabligh Jamaat, for its part, avoids cultivating political or economic ambitions while focusing rigorously on individual self-reconstitution (Metcalf 1993; Masud 2000; Sikand 2002). As the groundbreaking volume on cross-national comparisons and analyses of women’s religious activism in South Asia edited by Jeffery and Basu (1998) has indicated, a consideration of the rich and often ambiguous and mixed forms of empowerment, meaning, purpose, and reality that co-exist with the political and economic can help make better sense of women’s participation in Hindu and Muslim religious activism across regional and class boundaries.

⁷ Narayan eloquently takes apart representations of “traditions” as these have been conventionally deployed by Western feminists, nationalists, and religious fundamentalist groups to the detriment of women and other marginalized groups. Anthropologist Lynn Davidman (1991) has shown how groups of liberal-secular women turn to orthodox Judaism for the emotional strength and calm that religion provides, in its real or imagined enduring-ness, in an increasingly mutable world.

Narayan states that she does not propose that all traditions are bad and that all changes are good; yet she cites changes that have affected marginalized groups adversely and does not cite a single tradition or a customary practice that has endured in any region of India from which women might be seen to have benefited. Most importantly for my purposes, she does not consider the fact that various religious movements such as Jamaate Islami, Tabligh Jamaat, the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, and Islamic revivalist groups in Southeast Asia are often just as critical of notions of “cultural tradition” as are Third World feminists (albeit with crucial differences). Such movements often call for their members to refuse local traditional practices as “corrupt” and “human-devised” and to forge instead new bonds of solidarity with Muslims both locally and globally. Such bonds will also, it is believed, thwart the alleged machinations of capitalist, materialist, and imperialist forces seeking to “enslave” human beings.

In Narayan’s otherwise powerful critiques of the category of “tradition,” it is difficult to locate those fundamentalist women who, we are given to understand, deploy fundamentalist discourses in self-injurious ways. This type of Third World feminist literature has contributed significantly to the study of gender, but the same cannot be said for the study of practice, actors, and agency, especially in the context of those religious movements (including Islamic reform movements) that have been sweeping so much of the world since the late 1970s. The same

charge of reification and monolithicization that Third World feminists such as Narayan direct at Western scholars might be turned also on Narayan herself, who reproduces a similar monolithic simplicity, eliding internal diversity, ambiguities, and contestations pertaining to the life-worlds of “religious fundamentalists.”

1.5.2 Gender and Practice

Anthropologists such as Sherry Ortner (1996) have drawn our attention to disjunctures between studies of gender and of practice and how better conversations between students of the two could significantly improve our understanding of how gender gets “made.” My interest in practice is motivated largely by my concern with issues of agency and power and the implications these may have for inquiries into the production of specific kinds of persons or subjects. Only through detailed attention to the ways in which specific discourses shape concrete practices on the ground and are shaped in turn by those practices is it possible to retain a focus on actors and agencies even as we situate them historically within larger economic, political, and societal structures.

In the case of studies of Muslim women in the Middle East, a body of feminist literature emerging from postcolonial studies increasingly helps to dismantle and complicate binary figurations of a ever-constraining tradition versus emancipatory modernity, East versus West, secularism versus Islamism (e.g., Hatem 1994; Abu-Lughod 1998; Najmabadi 1998; Shakry 1998; Mir-Hosseini 1999). It does so by considering in detail a

variety of projects for “remaking” women that continue to unfold in the Middle East. In paying attention to women’s projects and experiences and to women’s activism on behalf of women, while situating these factors in their local historical and cultural contexts, this literature manages to convey the dynamic interplay of structure and agency, conservatism and progressivism, “tradition” and change. It scrutinizes not only Islamist calls for a “return to authentic Islam” but also those concepts of “women’s rights” and “empowerment” so central to local feminist projects, and recuperates convergences between the agendas and practices of those who advocate tradition and those who advocate change. This kind of scholarly work opens up possibilities for fruitfully analyzing the participation of women in seemingly anti-woman religious movements.

1.5.3 Women, Agency, and Resistance

Feminist literature, as I have said, has thus far not offered adequate insights into how and why women get drawn into (and sustain their attachment to) Islamic groups with gender ideologies that require women’s submission to male authority both in the public sphere and within the family. Western scholars of religion have recently begun to point to the parochialism of the ways in which some feminists have conventionally sought to understand “agency.” But with an interrogation of patriarchal domination at its heart—a critique centered on securing women’s autonomy and self-expression—it is not surprising that the conventional feminist project has difficulty tuning its ear to the voices of women who

participate in seemingly self-oppressive religious revivalisms. Even in recent insightful studies of Islamic revivalist women (Zuhur 1992; Brenner 1996; Göle 1996; Nagata 1996) that do not engage the topic from explicitly feminist points of view—and which I explore at length in the concluding chapter in light of my findings in Bangladesh—religious women’s voices, experiences, practices, and projects of attaining greater religiosity tend to be marginalized. Rather, such studies frame their inquiries in terms of flows of foreign ideas and capital and of state failures to ensure economic prosperity and democracy. While understanding these phenomena is vital, inattention to the processual ways in which these grievances come to be understood, expressed, deployed, experienced, and embodied through religious ideas, vocabularies, and practices leads to a simplistic identification of religious women as passive absorbers of whatever information is doled out to them by religious men. As Phyllis Mack, writing on eighteenth-century Quakerism, recently observed:

Words like sacrifice, redemption, conversion, repentance, or ecstasy are not understood [by many scholars] in terms of their stated meanings or their meaning for historical actors but as pointers to other, more profound meanings: poverty, social marginality, sexual desire, political ambition; these terms have come to define both the core elements of human nature and the categories of modern science. (Mack 2003: 153)

The pioneering work of Saba Mahmood (1998, 2001), who draws on the works of Talal Asad, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, among others, has opened up new possibilities for analyzing women’s willed submission to patriarchal religious ideologies. Mahmood conceptualizes a

historically and culturally specific form of agency arduously acquired by subjecting oneself willingly to the norms of a discursive tradition—in this case, Islam. In her study of the women’s piety movement centered around Cairo mosques, Mahmood elucidates the constitution of subjectivity and of agency by rigorous efforts to internalize religious dispositions. Taking inspiration from her work, I have sought to understand the efforts of women Islamists in Bangladesh to seek moral and emotional empowerment “in this world” and salvation in the Hereafter through their participation in elaborate technologies of self-discipline. These technologies are grounded not only in orthodox and revivalist religious norms but in the culture of modern education in South Asia and in contemporary local-global notions of civility, dialogue, discipline, and the diligent pursuit of success in any mundane project. As the Bangali proverb has it, “habit is slave to a human being”; that is, we can, with effort, shape the habits that shape us. This belief is basic to BICSa’s approach to subjecthood formation.

Mahmood is critical of feminist conceptualizations of agency as resistance to cultural or religious norms. She is also critical of the universality attributed in feminist theorizing to the desire for resistance (e.g., in the work of Judith Butler, Lila Abu-Lughod, or Janice Boddy). I suggest, however, that in largely excising issues of resistance from the daily practices and experiences of the devout women she studies, Mahmood herself tends to fall into the linearity and parochialization that

she charges feminists with. While I agree with Mahmood's critique of the ahistoric impulse in some feminist scholarship (e.g., Butler's), I find that the kind of ambivalence Butler imagines as inhering in the process of subjectification is useful for understanding the multidirectional pushes and pulls that characterize the experiences and practices of faith in the lives of Islamist women in Bangladesh and, possibly, of women in religious movements elsewhere. For instance, it can be argued that impulses to both conform to and resist certain facets of an adopted and coveted religious ideology manifest in the "agonies of indecision" that Nagata (1996) ascribes to Malaysian "new-born" Muslim women, the "contradictory consciousness" MacLeod (1991) describes for re-veiling Egyptian women, and the differential "life strategies" Göle (1996) describes for Islamist women in contemporary Turkey. All these religious women critique structures of male authority significantly (though not radically) even as they submit to those structures, and attempt, through practical undertakings, to widen the boundaries of the constraints under which they operate. They find something of compelling value in these ideologies even as they experience the weight—the sometimes unbearable weight—of their commitment. These commitments must often be met in the face of intense opposition from authoritative persons, groups, and structures.

The theme of "resistance," so intricately linked to issues of agency, runs in a diffuse manner through the literature on Islamic revivalist women discussed above. Even though the concept has been critiqued in

recent years as reductionist and romanticized, and I have noted some of its limitations, I find it useful for partially conveying the mixed spirit of attraction and reluctance that characterizes women's identification with Islamic ideologies and possibly other religious revivalist ideologies in various parts of the world today. The sort of partiality, indirectness, semiconsciousness, and ambivalence that "resistance" can capture, to my mind—as opposed to terms like "opposition" or "rejection"—is an apt aid to imagining the finely textured, conflicted struggles that women wage on multiple fronts as they strive to adopt an Islamist worldview. Resistance has been part of the established scholarly discourses on the growth of Islamic activism against a background of modernization in the Third World, local and global politico-economic inequalities, and local postcolonial politics. However, looking at identification with Islamism as an increasingly prevalent life-code among Muslim women forces us to study Islamic politics at the micro level and to address charged issues such as why some social actors appear to impose or willingly sustain constraints on themselves. Another reason I am comfortable using the term "resistance" in this setting is that given the clear subordination of women in most official Islamist ideologies, there is little temptation to romanticize the resistance women enact by embracing Islamist outlooks: the pitfalls are all too evident, at least from a liberal-secular point of view.

1.5.4 Butler, Ortner, and Women's Agency

While I have found Judith Butler's theorization of the relationship between power and subjectivity useful for delineating the essentially ambivalent nature of female Islamist subject formation in Bangladesh, it is almost impossible to locate the agent in Butler's work. In the tradition of poststructuralist feminism, she reduces subjectivity and agency to mere "discursive effects." That is, the Butlerian "subject" is so thoroughly constructed, top to the bottom, that it is more of an "effect" than an entity with any kind of agentic, creative ability. For Butler (1990, 1997), as for Foucault, there is no outside of power; whatever agency there is must be summoned and enabled thoroughly by culture and operating matrices of power.

Sherry Ortner (1996), on the other hand, taking a cue from Raymond Williams' elucidation of the concept of "hegemony" (Williams 1977), emphasizes that although a given ideology or set of practices may be hegemonic, it cannot be total, and in this incompleteness lies the potentiality of structural and semantic transformation. In stressing power, practice, and discourse, Ortner's work includes and transcends the domains that Butler sketches for gender identity and the politics of agency and subject formation. Ortner posits active subjects able to consciously and intentionally devise and carry out their own projects, though these subjects remain embedded in cultures and in structures of power. She argues for a study of gender inequality not only as contextualized

“difference” but also as a form of inequality that occurs in relation to other forms of inequality. Certainly actors are culturally constructed, but they also act *on* culture.

In her essay on “The Problem of ‘Women’ as an Analytic Category”, Ortner (1996) shows the dangers inherent in using polarized male/female categories (116–38). Like Butler, she argues that in using “women” as a bounded category neatly distinct from or opposed to “men” we reproduce essentialist tendencies to reify gender, which basically contradicts the feminist project of denaturalizing gender. She suggests that studying gender as one relation among others enables us to recognize the structural relations in which gender is always embedded and reminds us that gender is never the only game in town. At the same time, she cautions that such a structuralist view of gender relations threatens to lose women and gender as significant categories in their own right and to dissolve them “back into the fog of gender-insensitive ‘variables’ from which it has only recently been rescued” (Ortner 1996:138).

In her 1996 essay, which describes the role of Sherpa women in the founding of the first Sherpa nunnery in Khumbu, Ortner emphasizes the active role played by Sherpa women in the founding of Devuche Nunnery. By taking vows, a nun is able to escape the drudgery of marriage. Further, unlike other Sherpa women, a Sherpa nun receives real property of her own from her family (i.e., a home). Additionally, either land is allocated for her material support or she is entitled to material support from her

family's herds and lands. In addition to spiritual benefits, then, a nun gains social standing and material security. Most importantly, perhaps, by taking vows a Sherpa nun annuls the various negative qualities attributed to women in Sherpa culture, which, although it encourages women to be competent, confident, and independent actors, also associates women with negative characteristics (e.g., greater inclination to accumulate sins; propensity for poisoning and bewitching; greater intimacy with avarice, materialism, and envy). The association of women with these negative characteristics in hegemonic Sherpa cultural discourses imposes significant social constraints on women. However, Ortner points out that should one focus on daily behaviors and interactions to assess the status of Sherpa women, instead of on cultural discourses, one might conclude that this society is virtually gender-egalitarian, for Sherpa women engage in various mundane acts of power. Thus ideology/discourse and practice do not simply reaffirm each other, but push against each other too, sometimes bringing about transformations in the process. Awareness of this kind of dynamic interplay of power, discourse, and practice as characteristic of human agency seems to be missing from Butler's work.

While Ortner is interested in both hegemonic orders and their "potential dis-ordering," Butler is primarily concerned with the ways in which a dominant system, such as the discursive matrix of gender, disables its subjects from challenging the status quo, always anticipates the subject's next move and outwits her, and uses even the subject's own

emancipatory efforts to consolidate itself. Even though Butler claims to explore the ways in which established norms may be displaced, she mostly illustrates the difficulties and impossibilities inherent in such a project rather than illuminating spaces of potential transformation.

Thus, issues of the subject, agency, and power are central to the domains of gender and practice. As Ortner (1996) points out, it seems odd in retrospect that there was for so long so little interaction between theories of gender and of practice. While theories of practice have much to learn from feminist insights into power and gender, poststructuralist feminist theorizing, with its penchant for reducing intentional actors to mere “effects” of power, would do well to look to the discussions of structurally embedded “agency” in practice-oriented theories. In response to earlier mechanistic modes of structuralism, practice-oriented approaches attempt to bring human intention and desire back into view. This stands in contrast, too, with that strain of poststructuralist feminist theorizing which argues for the exclusion of the subject altogether on the ground that the requirement of a subject for action embodies essentialism, foundationalism, or humanism. Butler’s genealogical critique of gender vis-à-vis power nicely complements the *making* of gender that Ortner delineates via practice and discourse.

While Saba Mahmood (1998) critiques Ortner for marginalizing religiosity as a primary motif in the founding by Sherpa women of a Buddhist nunnery, this points to certain absences in Mahmood’s own

work. In that work, using piety and the “Islamic tradition” as categories of analysis, she focuses on the rather tidily constructed and embodied Islamic discursive tradition, thereby foreclosing possibilities for imagining much of the messiness or “dis-ordering” that the daily living-out of an ideology within shifting cultural, economic, and political processes can entail even for some of the most committed practitioners of faith—such as those vanguard activist women of the Islamic movement in Bangladesh whose lives I explore in this dissertation. This is especially true of those faiths that aspire to be as comprehensive and detail-defining as the Sunni-Salafi Islam so popular among the largest Islamic revivalist movements in the world today (e.g., the transnational Tabligh Jamaat, the Jamaate Islami in South Asia, and the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and North Africa).

1.6 Gender and BICSa

1.6.1 Mawdudi’s Gender Ideology and BICSa’s Gendered World of Praxis

The world of BICSa activists is best conceptualized as an “agency-filled structure” wherein women act on themselves and the world through forms of “structure-filled agency” (Ortner 1996). Structurally, this microcosm is steeped in the Islamic ideology propounded by Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi (1978 [1972]), whose views on women are grounded in a literalistic interpretation of Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions (*ahadith*, Ar. *ahadith*) and rationalized through appeal to the alleged

biological “laws of Nature,” an appeal elaborated at length using a bizarre variety of minute details (85–124). Mawdudi argues that while man and woman are undoubtedly “equipotential as regards their physical and mental abilities,” Nature has assigned different responsibilities to them on account of their biologically determined psychological differences. They are equal in value and have “equal” socio-economic rights, but the “laws of Nature” (menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding) have determined that they should have different spheres of action. He uses menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare to argue that given the taxing nature of these experiences—the first, he says, marks a woman’s life for several days every month and the latter for an extended period of time several times in the course of a woman’s life—women are “naturally” and “justly” intended not to “take equal part with man” in any major responsibility, especially one involving intense physical or mental exertion, such as “defending the country, establishing peace and promoting the cause of industry and commerce, agriculture and administration of justice” (121). It is only fair, argues Mawdudi, that given the biologically challenging tasks a woman must shoulder, a man must take care of the other affairs of life, such as providing sustenance for the family and participating in public affairs. Thus, for example, he suggests that during menstruation, for example, a woman suffers from “pain and other troubles,” is generally “unwell”(117), and is “rendered unfit to undertake any work of responsibility” (118). “More terrible than menstruation is the period of

pregnancy,” he writes; a pregnant woman “becomes fickle, mentally disturbed and unwell, with the result that her capacity to understand and think is seriously affected” (119). Following childbirth, is “against the will and design of nature” for women to undertake “manly jobs” and “outdoor duties,” most of which “require steadfast, dependable capacity to work” (121).

Interestingly, Mawdudi cites a number of Western sexology works, including Dr. Van de Velde’s 1928 *Sex Hostility in Marriage* (117), a Professor Lapinsky’s *The Development of Personality in Woman* (118).⁸ He also cites Dr. Kraft Ebing (118), “Havelock Ellis, Albert Mole and others” (119) to support what he perceives to be the Islamic *and* “natural” view of woman. (Islamists often look to Nature for vindication of aspects of their understanding of Islam and draw on examples from natural processes to persuade audiences of the inherent correctness of their beliefs.) Mawdudi concludes that a woman’s “natural duties” are “to bring forth and rear children” and to play “the passive role in life only” (122).

Agency is invisible when one *asks* most BICSa activists about Mawdudi’s gender ideology; they affirm that ideology without demur. This is unsurprising, as Mawdudi’s book *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam* (first published in English in 1972 and in its thirteenth edition by 1998) is one of the three key texts in the BICSa syllabus and is used to

⁸ Curiously, the only references on the World Wide Web to such a book appear in online versions of Mawdudi’s own works; efforts to locate this book in the collections of Harvard University and Dartmouth College have failed. If it exists, it is very obscure.

illuminate the whole “Islamic Social System” (*islami samaj babastha*). In another key text, *The Islamic Familial Life*, by Jamaat leader Abdus Shaheed Nasim, which (first published in 1986, in its fifth edition by 2000), women are urged to obey and serve their husbands except when a husband’s wishes collide with a divine commandment. In return, a husband must provide his wife and children with financial security and treat his wife with kindness, justice, and affection.

However, when one looks at what BICSa women *do*, at how they lead their lives—at what Göle (1996) calls “individual” or “personal strategies,” or at the details of their public discourses—one glimpses the constant play between structure and agency. In this play, structure is sometimes malleable and sometimes not, agency is sometimes assertable and at other times not even imaginable. BICSa activists do not usually insist that women not engage in “manly” activities, however defined, but stress the need for sex-segregated spaces for education and work—which implies that women will receive education and perform work. By teaching at unisex institutions of higher education, serving as doctors, and working as financial analysts for non-Muslim foreign companies, BICSa activists daily and boldly cross bounds that Mawdudi saw as ordained by God.

When a BICSa activist concurs with all other parts of Mawdudi’s Islamic ideology but disrupts his gender ideology by arguing that Allah has sanctioned women’s rule over men (under certain conditions), agency spills over structure and subtle but crucial shifts take place within the

seemingly unchanging kernel of Islamist gender ideology. Contrariwise, structure suffocates agency when, for example, a BICSa activist who does not wish to cover her face nevertheless does so because her rank requires it, or when an activist asks her superior whether she can leave her face uncovered because she has respiratory problems, but is told that no, she should still cover her face, albeit loosely—surely Allah will reward her piety by relieving her respiratory problem.

BICSa's official line staunchly supports Mawdudi's Islamist ideology, also formally upheld by Jamaat. Its training methodology attempts to socialize members into this ideology from the beginning. For example, most of the books in the syllabi for the lower and medium cadres are by Mawdudi and the rest are by male Jamaat leaders. (The higher cadres study a somewhat wider body of literature.) At the same time, by exposing women to a variety of interpretations, analyses, and commentaries on religious texts and by engaging them in writing, speaking, and articulating their thoughts and opinions through essay competitions, periodic publications, speakers' forums, group discussions, seminars, and other activities, BICSa ends up fostering a spectrum of Islamic views and attitudes. This gamut of ideas continually shapes BICSa's activism in practice and is shaped, in turn, by the monitored sources of knowledge within BICSa syllabi, women's increasing access to higher education and professional careers, national and media cultures, Western and Indian imperialisms, and feminist movements both in-country

and abroad. For example, Jamaat and BICSa's official ideology sees women leading only women and men having the ability to lead both sexes (e.g., the top leaders of Jamaat are all male) and is especially clear on the inappropriateness of a woman leading a nation politically. Yet a former senior BICSa activist and a student of the Dhaka Medical College, Shamim Akter, argued otherwise in a BICSa publication in 1992. Backing her argument with numerous citations from the Qur'an, *ahadith*, and commentaries on these texts by certain Islamic scholars, she uses the figure of a Queen Bilqis from Islamic history to establish the legitimacy of female rule over men in Islam (Huq 1994: 131–2).

1.6.2 Gender Inequality and Other Forms of Inequality in BICSa

As discussed above, Ortner argues that gender inequality is best understood as one form of inequality set amidst others. Transposing this to the context of women's Islamic activism in Bangladesh, I suggest that Islamist women's subscription to gender inequality can be understood, in part, both in relation to the place of gender within a larger, hierarchical, religious world of meaning, practices, and projects of other-worldly salvation (Mahmood 2001). In part, gender inequality must also be understood in relation to other viscerally experienced socio-economic and political inequalities, inequalities often embodied in class (such as widening class disparities throughout the Muslim world), popular cultural practices (such as the practice of dowry in South Asia prevalent among both Hindus and Muslims, or the emphasis on feminine virtues of

domesticity, modesty, and “accommodation” to the wishes of one’s husband and his elders). Another class of inequalities is state/political discrimination, such as the ban on headscarves at state institutions in Turkey or the selective ban on Islamic politics on college/university campuses in Bangladesh (e.g., Dhaka Medical College and Dhaka University), where various other ideologies, from liberal Muslim nationalism to secular ethnic/Bangali nationalism to socialism or communism, are allowed to compete freely. Such a contextualized approach to gender inequality, as opposed to exclusive discussions of gendered practices (such as veiling) within Muslim communities (Zuhur 1992; Nagata 1996; Brenner 1996; Göle 1996), brings more dimensions of reality into view (El-Guindi 1981; MacLeod 1991; Ortner 1996), thereby partly demystifying the motivations of actors bargaining with certain forms of inequality.

BICSa’s ideological adherence to gender inequality is a response to an acute experience of social structural inequality. That experience is combined with a moral-cultural understanding grounded in the orthodox Islamic tradition and in local Bangali culture. Within this formulation, patriarchal domination is seen not as a yoke to be thrown off but as a structure that can be relied upon to help secure worldly and other-worldly rewards in the face of pervasive class inequities and sociopolitical violence. Key BICSa discourses, such as that concerning the veil, reflect both visceral insecurity and a pious desire to ground oneself in the

sociomoral values of the orthodox Islamic tradition. Women from the middle and lower-middle classes, from which most BICSa activists hail, are much more vulnerable to different various forms of social violence than elite women. Secular women's groups and daily newspapers provide a platform for addressing the more overt forms of physical violence against women (Monsoor 1999; Hashmi 2000), but the various "covert" forms of sexual harassment and "violences of everyday life" (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Kleinman 2000) to which average Bangladeshi women are subjected are largely ignored. Harnessing practical concerns to religious concerns about bodily modesty and emotional harmony, BICSa effectively steps into this discursive space, proposing a prevention-oriented approach based on self-protection (seclude oneself from the male gaze by veiling), moral reform of society and hence of men, and affirmation of women's contributions as wives, mothers, and homemakers to nation-building and the reconstruction of the global Muslim community (*ummah*). It is through the trope of a "security of life, property, and dignity" that BICSa's commitment to a local project of sociomoral change is best understood.

The forms of violence alluded to above are integrated in BICSa's ideological conception of the nation and of the world at large as a landscape of suffering, insecurity, and disorder. In later chapters, I shall explore how BICSa responds to this perceived state of injustice by striving to restore order, morality, and a sense of imminent divine accountability. It attempts to produce a radically new kind of Islamic subjectivity through

the use of moral and practical technologies deployed to cultivate discipline, knowledge, behavioral consistency in speech and action, and adherence to organizational regulations. These technologies of socialization and empowerment, deployed systematically and rigorously, help account for the enduring loyalty of BICSa activists.

Overlaid on gendered inequalities of personal security are the inequalities of class already mentioned in passing. The linkage between class frustrations and contemporary Islamic revival has been noted by a number of scholars, particularly in the context of the Middle East. Thus, in the case of Lebanon, the growth of Islamism has been linked in part with the growth of the economically deprived Shi'i community in the region. The Shi'i urban strongholds in Lebanon have been by far the poorest areas of the country, overcrowded by recent Shi'i migrants from the villages and Shi'i refugees from the South (Wright 1988: 57–78). Similarly, the rise of Islamism in Egypt in the 1970s has been attributed partly to “anomie” among educated rural migrants in the face of rapid modernization and urbanization (Ibrahim 1980: 423–53) and a growing consensus that the state is “steeped in its own corruption, while the vast majority struggle daily to prevent total destitution for themselves and their families” (Shukrallah 1994: 46). Scholars have pointed to the frustrations of university graduates unable to attain the upward socio-economic mobility promised by the state to those with higher education. Instead, these youth are faced with a widening gulf between rich and poor (Sonbol

1988: 23–38) and a perpetual struggle, not always successful, to stay on the comfortable side of that gulf. Many scholars explain the Islamic revolution in Iran partly by modernization, industrialization, and urbanization, which resulted in large-scale migrations from rural areas to the cities. The potential advantages of such migration were often nullified by congested streets, shortages of housing, unemployment, and the like. While the Shah's regime made gains in health, education, and agricultural reform, disproportionate benefits went to the urban elites (Najmbadi 1987; Esposito 1987; Arjomand 1988; Tohidi 1991; Keddie 1995). Similar statements could be made about much of the Third World today.

Muzaffar (1986) writes that throughout the world this rural-urban drift also causes those who move from hinterland to city to encounter a degree of secularization, consumerism, and display of wealth not present in the often traditional communities of rural areas, where religion tends to be the unifying pattern of the social fabric. This prompts many people in the middle and lower classes to conclude that Muslim urban elites are willing to enjoy luxurious lifestyles despite widespread poverty because they have drifted from religion toward the materialism of the West.

Alongside this rural-urban phenomenon, the middle class has expanded in most Third World societies in recent decades through the availability of higher education and economic development. However, the political establishments in most of these societies are not able to accommodate so many new entrants, many of whom then join the

opposition, challenging the legitimacy and authority of dominant groups. Given the cultural and historical salience of Islam in most of these Third World countries, many of which happen to be Muslim, and given the general state of disillusionment with Western ideologies such as secularism, socialism, and capitalism, this middle-class opposition often turns to Islam as its ideology. In the case of Bangladesh, Shelley Feldman (1998: 33–52) has recently argued that the growth of Islamism in Bangladesh and its preoccupation with women's roles is a product of shifts in the state's class alliances, growth strategies, and location within the global political economy.

In order to situate women Islamists simultaneously within the various matrices of inequality that shape the perceptions and choices of these women and are in turn made and unmade by them, I shall examine BICSa on several levels. On the level of international ideological context, I consider BICSa activists within the international landscape, where many Muslims see Islam as under siege before the technological superiority of a West perceived as having been unfriendly to Muslims historically. In this transnational realm, the satellite dish regularly carries Western media into non-Western spaces; texts, CDs, cassettes, and persons flow across state borders; and state ideologies perceived as Western imports seem unable to solve local problems. On the state level, I look at BICSa activists in the national landscape, a realm to which gender inequalities are as integral as economic and politico-cultural disparities. On the local level, I regard

these women within the institutional structure of Islamic activism, where gender inequities co-exist with senior-junior hierarchies determined by degrees and displays of piety, adherence to group rules, textual proficiency, and oratorical skill.

1.7 Power

To understand the consequences of the overlapping inequalities (of gender, class, and other) that exist in the space that BICSa inhabits, one must deploy a capable concept of power and power relationships. This points us to the thought of Michel Foucault.

Foucault's (1979) analysis of how certain forms of discipline produce a new category of individual self is helpful for understanding the technological formation of new Islamic selves in Bangladesh. This analysis, seen in conjunction with Foucault's (1977) insight that power (in the context of modern European societies) is not only repressive but productive, illuminates how particular Islamist disciplinary technologies in contemporary Bangladesh, such as the "worker meeting" (discussed in Chapter 4), enable the emergence of a culturally and historically individuated subject with particular abilities and aspirations. The systematically inculcated ability to research Islamic texts, pose and refute arguments, ask pointed questions, respond to peers, and offer "constructive critiques" of peer presentations combine with experiences of being personally attacked within the family and the classroom to produce complexly empowered actors embedded in a community of activists

bound by highly rewarding emotional relationships. These actors' resistance to aspects of the very ideology that enables their agencies illustrates well Foucault's argument for the diffusiveness and ubiquity of power relations.

On the other hand, Foucault's elision of human intentionality in his earlier works (1979), where he depicts human bodies and capacities as mere sites for the inscription of power, is problematic. BICSa activists strive to reconstruct both their own consciousness and that of others through a concerted coordination of the intellect, body, and emotions. Such an "intention filled structure" (Ortner 1996) can be conceptualized through the relationship between power and subjecthood developed in Foucault's later work, where he suggests that new subjectivities can be acquired through practice, though these must necessarily be produced through historically embedded relations of power (Foucault 1988).

Judith Butler (1997), drawing on Foucault, has argued for the centrality of the process of subjection to the formation of a self-conscious entity (Mahmood 1998, 2001). This move helps illuminate the twofold process of BICSa women's submission and empowerment. The capacities BICSa women acquire in the course of mastering submission return to haunt their source, the organizational structure, through a process of resignification whereby crucial alterations are performed from the margins. These capacities—such as assertiveness learned from refusing familial opposition to Islamic activism, or expertise in Islamic knowledge

attained through study of diverse texts—occasionally chafe against the boundaries of the very organizational forms that enable them. Over time, this process produces in many BICSa activists an amorphous but growing and anguished awareness of the weight of subjection to a religious ideology that emphasizes “obedience” to leaders, privileges those interpretations of Islam that Mawdudi advocated, and aspires to a totalistic hold over a subject’s ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. Feelings of being beset by a demanding Islamic worldview are further facilitated by the fact that BICSa’s ideology, in claiming the devotion of all of one’s time, energy, talents, and financial resources to the task of Islamization, must compete intensely with other operating ideologies. One is the liberal statist ideology of realizing a “modern,” “hard-working,” and “self-sufficient” citizenry able to secure economic advancement for the country. Another is the set of middle-class familial expectations oriented around the image of a “good” daughter who “obeys” her parents, respects her elders, excels in her studies, acquires cooking and cleaning skills by aiding her mother in household tasks, and enhances her family’s current socio-economic status by marrying a man of her family’s choice—a well-educated, financially secure man from a reputable family.

Mahmood (1998, 2001), however, takes Butler to task for assuming the naturalness and universality of the desire for freedom. My project delineates, in part, how Butler’s argument for the relationship between subjection and agency can be rescued from its ahistoricity

through an exploration of this relationship within specific historical and cultural regimes. The aspect of Butler's argument most useful for my purpose is the profound ambivalence she attributes to subject formation, the slipperiness and mutability of the differentiating markers between forms of subjection and of empowerment.

Foucault has been widely criticized for conceptually blocking the path to resistance by imagining power as ubiquitous, diffuse, and inescapable. Yet Foucault's historical exposition of the ways in which power operates in modern European societies can facilitate our understanding of the complexities and partialities inherent in the resistance of dominant forces in other societies, which generate and sustain various relations of inequality. I argue that Foucault's conceptualization of modern power as more productive than restrictive enables us to see that power as such does not have inevitable negative connotations, and that resistance itself can use the techniques of power. While Foucault labels everything as an effect of power, he also suggests that there are always multiple opportunities and sites for resistance. Since modern power does not emanate from a single center, resistance too may be waged from multiple points.

Another idea of resistance that Foucault proposes more clearly in his later work—one that I find useful for analyzing both disciplinary practices of self-cultivation in BICSa and the quotidian projects that individual BICSa women engage in beyond the confines of organized

religious activism, though often in intimate relation to it—is that it is possible to transform the self and to create more “space” for self-creation through engagement in practical projects or “forms of self-writing” (Foucault 1983; 1997). That is, new subjectivities can be acquired through resistance. Since the individual is the product of power, Foucault argues that de-individualization through diverse combinations could constitute resistance in this regard. Finally, Foucault’s identification of the body as a primary locus of modern power is particularly useful for understanding how women’s Islamism can be simultaneously a form of resistance and an effect of shifting modes of power.

Later in this dissertation I will elaborate on several observations about the roles of power and resistance in women’s Islamism, drawing on Foucault’s conceptions in part. I present these observations here in *précis*. First, I suggest that Islamist women are not necessarily cooperating in their own domination; they have their own projects and see themselves as resisting a particular set of power relations. By refusing what their larger society wants them to do and be, whether in Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Egypt, or Bangladesh, women Islamists resist the dominant top-down social construction of their identities, desires, choices, and decisions. They question whether secularism, feminism, nationalism, and Western modernism are in fact emancipatory for women. They resist the universalizing impulses of these paradigms through an insistence on the truth of a politics of difference and seek to empower themselves through

participating in this politics, using whatever resources they can muster. These resources include the practices, forms of knowledge, expressions, and experiences that such participation gives them access to. Islamist women therefore seek to counter dominant discourses by producing their own discourses, organizations, symbols, self-images, body-images, yardsticks for measuring success and self-worth, and forms of protest. The Islamic revival in Turkey is a case in point. There, veiling is ridiculed and banned on all state premises, and yet women have begun to veil in numbers. Growing numbers of Turkish Muslim women challenge the veil's dominant symbolization as oppressive and backward and produce a discourse of the veil as agitational, empowering, egalitarian, refusing of the male gaze, embodying cultural pride, and oppositional to a perceived Western association of female liberation with the public display and visual consumption of the female body.

Second, since modern power is diffuse and does not have a unitary "eye," women Islamists end up resisting multiple power schemes in practice even though in principle they struggle only against anti-Islamic forces. Thus, when the anthropologist Judith Nagata's (1996) Malaysian interlocutor Zainab adopts Islamist clothing against her parents' wishes, she opposes not only the perceived hegemony of a Westernizing secularizing modernizing ethic, as she explicitly, consciously, ideologically intends, but also contests the power invested in seniors over juniors by Malay custom (*adat*) and the power exercised by traditional

religious authorities in her neighborhood. In fact, women Islamists perforce resist elements of the very ideological code to which they consciously commit themselves, as they frequently stand up to opposition from older family members invested with social, moral, and economic power over them. Thus, in Judith Nagata's work on Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, the woman Zainab is reluctant to stop celebrating birthday parties as a committed Islamist should, or to have an austere Islamist wedding, or to teach at a low-salaried religious school to further the "cause of Islam" as did the devout teacher who drew Zainab to Islamic reformism in the first place.

Third and last, since power is everywhere, so must be resistance. The very ideology that Islamist women embrace at the risk of marginalization is shot through with power relations and therefore with resistances. In practice, Islamist women resist some of the gendered aspects of their ideology that seek to subordinate them, even though they do not articulate such resistance. Instead, they act out such resistance in "everyday forms," and as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, such practices of resistance/power, although as yet unable to alter formal structures such as the Islamist gender ideology, bear significant implications for the kinds of subjectivities that get produced in the process. Thus, many Islamist women continue to pursue higher education and devote themselves to professional careers, much like secular women, even as the former continue to formally assert the home as the proper place for women, in full

ideological agreement with Islamist gender principles. Since state attitudes toward women have undergone modernization, pluralization, and liberalization to various degrees in countries where Islamist revival has been occurring in urban settings, such as Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, women who choose Islamism in these contexts are able to practically push back the gendered boundaries of Islamism by continuing to engage selectively in empowering practices sanctioned by the dominant subcultures of their socio-economic classes. The Turkish sociologist Göle (1996) terms this process the development and implementation of “life strategies.” However, since Islamist women do not challenge the formal, gendered codes of behavior central to Islamist ideology, they continue to be seen as bearers of “false consciousness” by some feminists and liberal-secular humanists who, given their own proclivities for activism and formal organization, personal experiences, and access to certain forms of knowledge, tend to focus more on formal mechanisms and debates than on the real lives of individual women Islamists. In the case of Islamist women, even anthropological studies of Islam—and such studies generally resist depiction of local and global cultures as monoliths, as Abu Lughod (1989) notes—tend to produce rather simplistic renderings of these highly complex socio-religious life worlds, worlds characterized by incessant and dynamic interplay between practices of conformity and contestation, founding texts and multiple interpretations, and historically constituted

and strategically re-deployed discourses (e.g., Brenner 1996; Nagata 1996).

I will argue in greater detail in later chapters that groups of Muslim women—in particular, BICSa women—embrace Islamist ideologies partly because these ideologies allow them to resist certain forms of domination in a gendered manner. In the process of opposition to formidable forces, women lay claim to new kinds of actorial agency and feel empowered to interpret, critique, and engage with both local and global material worlds in an active, rationalized mode while cultivating access to emotionally strengthening, character-purifying, and self-transcendent forms of knowledge and practice. They draw on various, even divergent repositories of cultural meaning and political ideas, playing one ideal against another in the pursuit of an empowered sense of self that is connected to the divine and able to rise above its material interests and worldly desires. They appropriate elements from the systems they formally resist in order to combat hegemonic demands made by the system they formally embrace as their weapon against the dominant world.

However, in our (at least occasional) attempts to see resistance as meaningful in the way we think it *should* be meaningful, we tend to dissolve the subject within our interpretative frameworks (Ortner 1995). In this dissertation, I therefore seek to focus on human beings not only as socially and historically constructed objects but also as thinking and

planning subjects with their own particular projects set amid hybrid worlds of meaning that provide convincing yet conflicting recipes for happiness and living purposefully. These projects and worlds are located at the intersection of specific cultural, material, and historical discourses. An exploration of Islamist women's mundane efforts to make sense of and negotiate between these multiple but intertwined regimes of sociality reveals a wide range of moods. These moods are context-dependent. Some are less ambivalent and hence more amenable to description than others, from moments and stages of conversion, devotion, and adherence—such as those forms of agency and enactment so well described in the works of Saba Mahmood (1998, 2001) and Susan Harding (2000)—to expressions of explicit opposition. The latter are evident in much of the literature on social movements generally (and for present purposes, Islamic movements specifically) and in “everyday forms of resistance” such as “foot dragging,” lateness, and acts of petty deception so brilliantly documented in the work of James Scott (1985).

1.8 Fieldwork

This research grew out of a Senior Fellowship project I undertook as an undergraduate at Dartmouth College. I spent September 1993 through November 1993 in Dhaka interviewing some BICSa leaders. Given the marginalized position of Islamism in the local political culture and the awareness of many BICSa members of the global location of Islamism, BICSa members were at first suspicious of my intentions. Most

of my early efforts, therefore, went into getting sufficiently close to some women Islamists so that they would be comfortable in talking to me. My identity as a female Muslim Bangali from a middle-class family with a religious parent played a key role in the construction of mutual trust and friendship. My membership in BICSa for a few years in junior high school helped others consider me as a partial insider. However, my departure from the group was viewed as problematic, even though all the women I had known during those years as a junior member had graduated and left the organization by the time I returned to the group to conduct research in 1993. Some were more suspicious of my intentions than others. Rumors circulated that I might be a “Western agent” or even a local secularist agent looking to infiltrate the ranks.

Inspired by my grandfather, who always wore a form of headcovering in public as a marker of his status as a graduate of the Islamic Deoband school in North India and who was known both within his rural community and in Dhaka for his learned piety and kindness and tolerance for difference, I grew up engaging in variable and creative practices of veiling. However, my veiling practices were considered suspect by BICSa members, especially since I did not cover any part of my face, which is thought by BICSa to be the most “attractive” (*akarshaniya*) part of a woman’s body and hence in the greatest need of coverage. I was occasionally chided (gently) for not even covering my hair and forehead diligently. Thus sometimes, a BICSa member would

affectionately but with a casual purposefulness pull my headcovering down from the very edge of my forehead to the center of it such that a bit more of my face and even more of my hair might be covered. I was not allowed to attend certain BICSa meetings and training programs, particularly those reserved for members of the highest cadre of BICSa. Despite such obstacles, which dogged my research both in late 1993 and during my later fieldwork for the dissertation, I grew close to a number of women Islamists. These friendships were invaluable in my re-acquaintance with BICSa upon my return for dissertation research in September 1998.

I also conducted research (November, 1994 through January, 1995; June through August 1997) on the market for contemporary Islamic literature in Bangladesh. I was particularly struck by a genre of Islam-oriented romantic and historical novels and teenage thrillers that had begun to appear in the mid 1980s. These novels were available only in Islamic bookstores. This project enabled me to partially access the Islamist cultural imagination and some of its intriguingly hybrid tendencies.⁹

I conducted my fieldwork in Bangladesh, mostly in Dhaka, where the central headquarters of BICSa as well those of its “brother” organization Bangladesh Islami Chatra Shibir (Shibir for short) and parent organization (Jamaat) are located. Also, Dhaka University, Dhaka

⁹See Huq 2003 [1999] for my findings and reflections on the market for contemporary Islamic literature in Bangladesh.

Medical College, Jahangir Nagar University, and Eden College, all in Dhaka, are some of the most politically active campuses in the country, where much of the Islamist and secularist discourses are generated. Of the two years I researched BICSa, I spent two weeks in Chittagong and the rest of the time in Dhaka. I went to Chittagong not only to get a sense of how BICSa fares in semi-urban areas outside the “center,” but also because Chittagong has been a site of frequent Islamist-secularist conflict in recent years, some of which have resulted in injuries and deaths.

A *thana* is BICSa’s second-smallest administrative institution for a residential area, while a *branch* is the second-smallest administrative institution unit for those affiliated with a given college or university. The smallest cell or structural atom within either is a *unit*, which usually consists of a neighborhood. In Dhaka, I focused on the residential Palashi Thana and the Shahjahan College branch as my primary units for study.

I chose Palashi Thana for a number of reasons. First, my family resides near this *thana*. Second, I grew especially close to two BICSa members in this *thana* during my earlier research. These activists, with whom I had kept in touch, became two of my key interlocutors. Third, an unusual feature of this *thana* is that it includes neighborhoods ranging from upper-class to lower-middle-class. Focusing on this *thana* therefore allowed me to see at close quarters what roles class plays in fund-raising campaigns, recruitment, intra-organizational training, and the like. Fourth, over the last few years the importance of this *thana* has increased within

BICSa. In particular, Palashi representatives of BICSa have recently begun to make unprecedented inroads in garnering financial support from the middle and upper classes. During my latest trip to Dhaka (June, 1997 through August, 1997), I noticed that this *thana* boasted several donors among upper-middle class, middle-aged women who contributed significant sums of money periodically to BICSa's Palashi Unit, which then usually passed on part of these donations to the central apparatus.

I chose Shahjahan College for two reasons. First, it is one of the most competitive colleges in the country. BICSa therefore considers it to be a particularly important site for recruiting. Second, a quirky activist I had grown to know well during my undergraduate research in 1993 had been a student there and served as a donor for later generations of activists. I felt she would be able to help me forge connections with the small but growing BICSa community at Shahjahan.

I employed four different techniques to collect data. The first was interviewing. Interviewing allowed me to get answers to specific questions within a relatively short amount of time, particularly questions related to family and educational backgrounds, reasons for joining BICSa, and perceptions of veiling and of what Islam requires and forbids and why. Initially, I interviewed twenty women from each of the five cadre-levels of BICSa (one hundred interviews in total). This enabled me to compare responses across cadre-levels and to trace the contours of the process of Islamist socialization. Later, I conducted more detailed interviews with

those five women from each group of twenty who seemed most comfortable in discussing their thoughts and experiences with me.

My second method was participant-observation. I attended regular meetings of the Palashi Thana and Shahjahan College Thana. Each unit within each *thana* holds weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly meetings and study circles for cadres at each level (primary, worker, advanced, member). I accompanied Palashi Thana and Shahjahan College Thana activists on their frequent rounds of “invitational work” (*dawati kaj*). On these outings, activists visit their regular donors to chat, collect money, and sell items produced by the central apparatus, such as calendars, posters, and greeting cards. They also visit members and potential recruits to invite them and their families to upcoming events being organized by the *thana* or Unit. I attended the annual events organized by the Palashi Thana and Shahjahan College Thana on the occasions of Ramadan, Eid, Women’s Day, and so on. I also attended similar events organized on city and national scales at the “central” level in Dhaka; these events are attended by BICSa members either from throughout the city or from all over the country. I attended events organized twice or thrice a year only at the “central” level, such as Training Camps and Training Sessions, where hundreds of BICSa activists gather from all over the country for a few days to study Islam, eat, sleep, pray, and chat in Spartan environs. Attending these trans-regional gatherings enabled me to interact with Islamists from outside Dhaka without having to visit particular

geographical locations; I was also able to observe the dynamics between activists from the “center” and those from the “periphery.” Outside of organized events, I often “hung out” at the BICSa headquarters in Dhaka, where activists stop by every now and then to attend to bureaucratic matters and then linger, chat, and debate issues—from the personal to the global—afterwards.

Third, I joined activists not only in organizational settings but in their interactions with family, neighbors, friends, and fellow students (the latter especially in the dormitories, where BICSa women always share rooms with other students).

Fourth, I studied local texts: BICSa archives, newspapers, Islamist syllabi texts, and popular texts, both Islamic and secular, read by activists for recreation. Research at BICSa’s central archives in its Dhaka headquarters produced some statistical data. The lively debates in newspapers sensitized me to issues of concern among the educated public; further, BICSa’s main offices subscribed to the most widely read newspapers—most of which are liberal-secular—so that leaders who spend entire afternoons at these offices, as well as the many activists who stop by these offices on business throughout the day, especially the afternoons, can keep abreast of the latest local and global developments.

This multi-sited ethnography allowed me to capture a richly complex picture of women’s participation in BICSa and related Islamist movements.

I spent September-December 1998 re-acquainting myself with women activists I had interviewed during September-December 1993 and getting to know other women activists, including some who joined the group over the last few years and others who had moved up to positions of leadership from those of apprenticeship in the organization since my last visit. I was able to get back in touch by phoning and visiting the women I knew best and seeking information on others through the central office in Dhaka. Some of those I had interviewed as an undergraduate had “graduated” from BICSa by now (i.e., were no longer students); some of these “graduates” had gone on to join the parent Islamist organization, Jamaat while others had not made any such formal commitment. I spent a few months tracking these women down, since many of my former interviewees were married by this time. Some had moved to different parts of the city and others to different cities altogether (since Bangladesh’s marriage tradition is predominantly virilocal).

I also sought the acquaintance of various high-ranking leaders who had emerged since 1993, partly in order to facilitate my access to the “masses” within the group. Some of these leaders were more cooperative than others, for they tend to see themselves as responsible for “protecting” their group—which they perceived as extremely vulnerable—from outside threats. While the leadership was difficult to reach initially except through scheduled appointments (these women lead extremely busy lives), I was

able to meet other activists through attendance at various Islamist events as well as through informal visits to the head office.

1.9 Central Themes and Overview of Chapters

My dissertation is informed by three interrelated analytic motives. First, in writing against conventional tendencies to flatten out the subjectivities of actors and dissolve them into ideological and political structures in the studies of Islamic movements across disciplines, I explore the organizational, familial, and personal lives of a group of Islamist women even as I situate these women's formal and informal views and quotidian efforts within the larger matrices of national and transnational projects of (re)constructing self and nation and forging global communities. The result is a full-length ethnography (to the best of my knowledge, the first) of a women's Islamist movement in South Asia generally and Bangladesh specifically. Second, I follow Saba Mahmood in treating piety or religiosity as central to the process of self-formation for women religious activists. However, I also seek to move beyond Mahmood by exploring how motivation for and practices of religiosity dynamically shape and are shaped by multiple but often intersecting projects in the lives of religious women, and how this interplay manifests in individual experiences of ambiguity and resistance. Third, in taking care not to simply romanticize resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990), I interrogate the workings of different forms of power and resistance in the daily lives of women Islamic activists as they strive to attain their central

objectives of peace (*santi*), liberation (*mukti*), and success (*safalya*) “in this life and in the Hereafter.”

In Chapters 2 and 3, I will explore the means whereby BICSa, with highly specific agendas in mind, guides its members in crafting of a female Islamist activist subjecthood in contemporary Bangladesh.¹⁰ In its attempts to produce a specific kind of female Islamic subjecthood in contemporary Bangladesh, BICSa employs ideas and practices shaped not only by Islamic norms but by local and global modernities.¹¹ It uses not only traditional methods of cultivating personal piety but also techniques it considers “modern” (*adhunik*) and “scientific” (*baigyanik*) to shape a new member’s subjectivity into that of a Islamist Bangladeshi activist. These techniques are explored in depth in Chapters 2 and 3. The piety of the ideal BICSa activist is defined as much by orthodox moral virtues as by an urgent commitment to the transformation of Bangladesh into an Islamic polity; the achievement of an Islamic society-cum-state is seen, in turn, as

¹⁰ I use “subjectivity,” “subjecthood,” and “selfhood” interchangeably throughout the dissertation. I use the term “subject” instead of “person” or “individual” to denote, ethnographically, the nature of the relationship between God and a Muslim, and between an Islamic organization and a member, that is constitutive of BICSa’s moral-practical imagination. Also, I find the concept of “subject” useful analytically, especially in the ways it emerges in the thought of Michel Foucault (1983) and Judith Butler (1990, 1997); in those of practice-oriented social theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Sherry Ortner (1996); and in works of anthropologists concerned with issues of modernity in contemporary Muslim societies (Bowen 1997; Abu-Lughod 1990, 2000). It enables me to interrogate the multiple and interconnected discursive regimes of power and domains of cultural meaning inscribed in the world of BICSa activists.

¹¹ For Talal Asad’s conceptualization of Islam as a “discursive tradition,” see Asad 1986.

key to the individual cultivation of what Mahmood eloquently calls “moral-ethical capacities.”

My exploration in Chapters 2 and 3 of BICSa’s model for top-down remaking of its recruits’ subjectivity will be structured around three themes. First, it is informed by Mahmood’s seminal work (1998, 2001) on women in the Cairo mosque movement. Mahmood, in turn, draws on Talal Asad (1986, 1993) and Michel Foucault (1988, 1997) to conceptualize the mosque women’s struggles to turn themselves—morally and practically, emotionally and bodily—into virtuosos of Islam’s orthodox Sunni-Salafi tradition. Also central to her project is Judith Butler’s theorization of subjectivity (1997). Butler, drawing on Foucault, argues that subjection to operations of power is central to the very possibility of agency. Mahmood uses this insight to illuminate the ways in which her informants emerge as pious actors through submitting themselves to and embodying a range of disciplinary practices grounded in an Islamic tradition. However, while Butler sees agency as embodied primarily in opposition to norms, Mahmood argues for a reconceptualization of agency that includes the “doing” of specific norms. Central to such a re-theorization of agency, argues Mahmood, is a suspension of universalist impulses in favor of paying attention to the particularities of the historical, sociocultural, and political constructed nature of *any* desire, whether it be to resist normative values or to uphold them.

In delineating how agency is mobilized in performance through specific ideological and social processes in a particular place and time, my dissertation therefore seeks to move beyond Butler. BICSa women emerge as powerfully motivated socio-religious actors through two processes. First, they subject themselves to organizational structures of authority and disciplinary practices that they perceive as enabling “true” or “complete” Muslimness (*purna musulmanitya*); second, they endure frequent painful encounters with family, neighbors, fellow students, friends, and school instructors who oppose these women’s efforts to live what they consider a pious life.

The second theme around which I orient my treatment of subjectivity formation is Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus” (1977). This illuminates the mutually structuring relationship between individual and society, pious “complete faith” (*purna iman*), and social action that is so central in the BICSa imaginary. BICSa activism assumes the indispensability of an Islamic habitus to the formation and sustenance of both individual and communal piety (*taqwa*).

The third central theme in Chapters 2 and 3 is the tension between “modernity” and “tradition” that infuses the discursive practices of BICSa activists and is often mediated through a vocabulary of “science” and specific “strategic needs” demanded by the particularities of place and time (as distinguished from the “general, eternal fundamentals” of the faith, understood to be enshrined in the Qur’an and embodied by the

Prophet Muhammad 1,400 years ago). I have used the term “tradition” in the sense employed by Alisdair MacIntyre (1984) and elaborated for Islam by Talal Asad (1986). I am indebted to Saba Mahmood’s usage of this concept to illuminate the pursuit of piety by participants in the contemporary women’s mosque movement in Cairo (1998, 2001). In this conceptualization, tradition is understood to be neither unchanging nor in a state of constant reinvention. While Islam is practiced in diverse ways in different places and during different historical times, certain sets of beliefs, practices, and symbols central to Islam have specific historically constituted genealogies and are understood to be definitive of Islam, though in culturally specific ways, by the vast majority of Muslims. These include the importance of the Qur’an and the prophetic traditions to a Muslim’s life as repositories of guidelines for daily and occasional ceremonial conduct.

BICSa seeks to reform society in accord with its understanding of “correct” Islamic tenets for living by producing a radically new kind of Islamic subjectivity through the elaborate cultivation of discipline, knowledge, behavioral consistency, and adherence to organizational regulations. These disciplinary technologies are explored in Chapters 2 and 3, but especially in the latter. A second major modality through which Islamist identity gets crafted, is explored in Chapter 4. This modality is constituted by daily visceral experiences of social hostility toward the activist’s commitment to an Islamist lifestyle. This helps crystallize

ideological boundaries and a powerful sense of “embattled” self and community.

In seeking to adapt Qur’anic prescriptions and the *jihad*-centered ideology of Mawdudi to present-day local and global realities, BICSa produces ambivalent subjectivities formed in the interstices of sometimes conflicting and sometimes overlapping structures of power. I elucidate these ambivalences in Chapter 5, exploring some of the ramifications of these conflicted subjectivities in the quotidian, practical lives of Islamist activist women. I highlight domains of expansiveness and of constraint that BICSa membership and training help cultivate.

In my final chapter, Chapter 6, I will pay particular attention to the issue of veiling, where so many discourses of power, gender, and piety intersect and around which so much of the work of subjecthood formation is centered for Islamist women. I will locate veiling and women’s Islamist movements within a transnational framework delineated through the particular contexts of contemporary Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Egypt. A quick recapitulation of the dissertation’s main points will be offered, as will a number of specific conclusions.

We now turn to the nuts and bolts of BICSa: its structure, status, and organizational mechanisms.

CHAPTER 2

Organizing a Female Students' Islamist Vanguard: Agenda, Recruiting, and Administration in BICSa

2.1 Introduction

The activists of BICSa are female students ranging in age mostly from their early teens (in junior high) to their late twenties (at universities, including schools of engineering and medicine). However, in recent years, BICSa has begun to recruit from amongst school children and establish administrative branches exclusively for “school workers” (school children successfully recruited as activists). Formally, it is a social organization committed to the task of mobilizing habitually Muslim female students to transform themselves and their peers into thoroughly pious Muslims and practical-ideological activists; informally, it is subordinate to the Islamist political party Jamaat and seeks to Islamicize the state by elevating Jamaat to political power through democratic means, that is, through dialogic persuasion of the masses.

Even as early as 1993, BICSa boasted nearly 50,000 members with more than 5,000 women “workers” actively propagating BICSa’s message on the ground and recruiting others to its cause. Current numbers are not available, but there is every indication that BICSa has been growing

slowly but surely over the years. While 50,000 or so may seem insignificant in a country of 130 million people, it must be kept in mind that currently only a small percentage of the population has access to high schools, colleges, and universities in which BICSa primarily operates.

Given that they operate in a relatively small realm of educational privilege, BICSa women remain surprisingly inconspicuous. A few Bangladeshi university professors I spoke with were familiar with BICSa's male counterpart Shibir, but had never even heard of BICSa. "I always figured the small number of fully veiled students I see around the campus must be Tabligh Jamaat women," observed one mildly puzzled professor who had been teaching at a key university for more than a decade. Tabligh Jamaat (Tabligh for short) is a rapidly growing, traditionalist, transnational and apolitical pietist movement. To most secularist Bangladeshis, any veiled woman must obviously have been "brainwashed," perhaps even coerced, into "this type of mentality" (i.e., "fundamentalism") by male kin: what organizations she may or may not belong to is unimportant. Further, the prominent daily newspapers, avidly read by the educated public, almost never mention BICSa. Even the less-circulated Islamist newspapers rarely mentioned BICSa or the activities of female members of Jamaat. It is as though the thousands of BICSa activists whom I saw in urban and semi-urban Bangladesh were invisible: dismissed by secularists as fundamentalist zombies marching off to some private doom, and treated

like wraiths by male Islamists, many of whom are conflicted about the increasing public mobility of the young, unmarried women of BICSa.

2.2 BICSa's Uneasy Status

The ambivalence of some Islamist men toward BICSa is rooted deep in Muslim theological discourses about the status of women, especially the writings of Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979), prolific Qur'anic exegete and founder of Jamaate Islami. Mawdudi does not speak to or even mention women anywhere in his writings or speeches except when discussing veiling. Thus, for instance, in his booklet addressed specifically to students, now used by BICSa, he actually addresses male students (*chatra*), not female students (*chatri*). It is therefore not surprising that conflict over the appropriateness of female student Islamic activism dates all the way back to its rise in the early 1960s. A senior male Islamist leader who became an Islamic activist in the mid-1950s and supported female Islamic activism early on, describes his reasons for holding that view and the opposition his view encountered as follows:

At that time, there were no more than three female Jamaate Islami leaders in the country but even they worked “under” male supervision. My fellow religious students and I studying at Dhaka University between the late fifties and late sixties noticed that with the domination of our campus by socialist and secularist students, religiosity was disappearing fast among the students, especially the hundreds who now lived in the dormitories away from their families. Women especially had begun to dress in different ways and to interact immodestly with the men. There was growing competition among the women to make themselves physically attractive and desirable. Religiosity was being actively

discouraged. We felt that by the time religiosity would trickle down through the effects of male Islamists on their families and friends, it would be too late. We needed female Islamist representation on our campuses right there and then. But bringing women out of their homes and into the public arena would create “disorder” (*fitna*), we were told. Islam does not allow this. Women should be encouraged to stay at home and not to delve in politics, make speeches, and become leaders. After much debating among male Islamists and indirect¹ debating with some female Islamists, it was decided that women Islamist students should indeed play a more active role on their campuses. The women wanted to organize formally and some of the men supported it.²

Notable here is the apparent paradox of mobilizing, activating, and empowering women for the explicit purpose of keeping female behavior, especially female sexuality, within strict traditional bounds. BICSa, therefore, not only exists amid ambivalence about the Muslim woman’s proper role, but exacerbates that ambivalence by the nature of its project. The ways in which these contradictions complicate the process of shaping pious female Islamist subjecthood in Bangladesh will be explored in some detail later in this dissertation.

BICSa women themselves, of course, do not doubt that what they are doing is godly and needed. They are convinced that Muslim women have been in the forefront of religious activism since the time of the Prophet Muhammad and see themselves as continuing or reviving a “tradition” enshrined in the Qur’an, the prophetic traditions (*ahadith*), and

¹ “Indirect” because Islamist men and women sought to abide by gender segregation in order to privilege piety and foreclose possibilities for the arousal of sexual desire in an extramarital context.

² Interview with a leading member of Jamaate Islami at his home, March 21, 1999.

in the thought of Mawdudi. When pressed, however, they are hard-put to name specific women from the Prophet Muhammad's time who might have addressed large audiences, even audiences of women (as BICSa leaders do), or who might have gone door-to-door to recruit other women for the Islamic cause (as BICSa activists do). To defend some of their characteristic activities, therefore, BICSa activists must argue from non-Qur'anic grounds—not the most secure or persuasive of possible rhetorics, in an orthodox Islamic setting.

Ambivalence is involved in not only the propriety but also the relative value of BICSa's activities. After decades of violence between the various political groups in Bangladesh, the valor of Islamist men (as inscribed in their death and maiming at the hands of political/ideological opponents) is at the core of female Islamist discourse in the region. BICSa activists thus generally feel that male Islamist activists, who often literally risk life and limb in violent conflicts with secularists, do the truly "real" and "courageous" work of upholding Islam in the face of challenge and make the "ultimate" sacrifice—martyrdom. Martyrdom stories circulate widely among BICSa activists and remain central to the self-concept of the Islamist movement in Bangladesh. At the same time, in recent years there has also been a subtle shift within BICSa from exclusive valorization of male martyrdom to the argument that in some cases *living* for the faith may entail greater courage, patience, and suffering than *dying* for it, and may be even more meritorious.

2.3 BICSa's Political Standing

Of the various Islamic women's groups in present-day Bangladesh, BICSa has been the most successful in attracting educated young women. This success was not a given, since BICSa is rooted in the ideology of the political party Jamaat which opposed the very independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and has been demonized ever since in hegemonic national discourses. This was somewhat modified by Jamaat's rise to a modicum of political power in the 2000 national elections in alliance with the liberal Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP for short), one of the two the major political parties in Bangladesh; the other major political party is the secular nationalist party of the Awami League (AL for short). But until 2000, and to some extent even since then, there has been formidable opposition to political Islam (and thus to Jamaat) from within the state where power tends to shift between the BNP and AL. Currently, such opposition continues unabated from the increasingly influential NGO sector, intellectuals, the hegemonic media, the AL, which is currently the chief opposition party, and the various smaller left-leaning political parties. The majority of traditional religious experts also oppose Jamaat, though on different grounds. While they too wish to see Islam play a greater role in society, most view the revivalist ideology of Jamaat's

founder, Mawdudi, as a threat to traditionalist/ orthodox Islam (Nasr 1996: 114-115).³

In refashioning themselves and other female students both morally and culturally, BICSa activists perceive themselves as helping to Islamicize a society in the grip of Indian/Western hegemony, political corruption, socio-economic injustice, and increasing crime (especially violent crime against women and children). BICSa must promote its brand of Islam in competition with apolitical, pietist Islam such as that practiced by the Tabligh; secularism; and liberal, Muslim nationalism, where feminism is a component of the latter two. It does so by working overtly (and safely) toward sociomoral reform and covertly toward the establishment of an Islamic state in Bangladesh with Jamaat at the helm. This double mission follows from BICSa's commitment to the ideology of Mawdudi, who regarded Islam as a "complete way of life." In this view, sociomoral and political reforms must go hand in hand, for political power can facilitate the gains of sociomoral reform *and* make these gains permanent. Fearful, however, of political persecution, and adhering to a gender ideology of segregation, BICSa members do not participate in normative political activities such as processions or street meetings. Nor,

³ Additionally, some traditional religious experts and local leaders of Tabligh take Mawdudi to task for his critique of a few among the Prophet Muhammad's companions (personal conversations with a traditional religious scholar on June 12, 2001, and with a local Tabligh leader on June 13, 2001). For Jamaat's response to some of these charges of "irreverence" against Mawdudi, see the booklet *Iqamate Deen* (The Establishment of Religion), 20th edition, 2000 (1981), by the former Jamaat chief (*amir*) Golam Azam.

cautious of greater social marginalization and political repercussions, does BICSa advertise its connection to Jamaat. Most junior BICSa members are unclear about the exact nature of the relationship between their organization and Jamaat. In practice, Jamaat leaders interact with BICSa leaders in an advisory capacity, particularly in matters relating to the body of Islamic law (*shariyat*) derived from the holy Qur'an and the recorded sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

2.4 Constructing Subjecthood: Practices and Discourses

BICSa broadcasts its call to Islam (i.e., conducts *dawat*, Ar. *da'wah*) among female students through literature and through public celebrations of various religious occasions. It recruits individual women through “targeting” procedures, then schools each new recruit in BICSa’s Islamic ideology using a repertoire of practices designed to construct a specific kind of Islamic female subjecthood. These practices are oriented around a triad of basic discourses.

The first is the acquisition of Islamic knowledge, classically understood as obligatory (*faraz*, Ar. *fard*) for Muslims. In BICSa, such knowledge is obtained through the guided study of cadre-based syllabi to which Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*), textual records of the utterances and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (*ahadith*), and didactic works by Mawdudi are central.

The second discourse is that of “self-construction” (*atyagathan*) “self-purification” (*atyasuddhi*), or “character formation” (*charitra*)

gathan). This is enacted through a combined performance of traditional Islamic rituals of worship and modern, “scientific procedures” (*baigyanik padhyati*). The traditional Islamic rituals that are enjoined include the scrupulous performance of the five daily prayers and fasting during the month of *Ramzan* (Ar. *Ramadan*) as well as supererogatory acts of worship (*nafliyat*) such as Qur’anic recitation (*telawat*, Ar. *tilawah*), the late evening prayer of *tahajjud*, fasting on certain days of certain months of the Arabic calendar as believed recommended by the Prophet Muhammad, and the remembrance of God through repeated utterances of specific Qur’anic words or verses (*zikr*, Ar. *dhikr*). BICSa’s techniques for self-purification in a “scientific” manner include “report-keeping” or meticulous recording of daily activities; daily “self-criticism” (*atyasamalochana*); constructive criticism by peers at the final “worker meeting” of each month (*mohasaba*), and attendance at group training programs.

The third discourse of “invitation to true Islam” (*dawati kaj*) derives from the classical Islamic notion of “calling others to Islam” and is understood to be grounded in the Qur’anic commandment to “enjoin good and forbid evil.” BICSa urges other female students to follow Islam “correctly” and in its “entirety” and, incidentally, to join BICSa. In other words, this third discourse urges a BICSa activist to impart to others the Islamic knowledge that the first discourse exhorts her to attain through study, and to imbue others with the spirit of righteousness that a BICSa

member comes to embody through practicing the second discourse of self-purification. I explore each of these discursive practices in some detail below as I locate them within the larger organizational framework of BICSa. In the remainder of this chapter I shall discuss the origin of BICSa's identity as a student organization, its organizational agenda, and its propagational or "targeting" apparatus. I shall also briefly outline its training programs, which I explore in greater detail in the following chapters.

2.5 An Organization Of, By, and For Female Students

There are a number of reasons for BICSa's emphasis on female students. First, BICSa's student character links it to the nationally glorified tradition of college/university student activism in Bangladesh. Students have been at the forefront of sociopolitical movements in this region since the early 1950s, when the then Pakistani government (based in what was then West Pakistan and is now simply Pakistan) attempted to impose Urdu as the state language on the Bangla-speaking majority of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Students organized to oppose the imposition of Urdu. Later, in the civil war, which led to Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, students also played a leading role. Student groups have continued to act as major players in the politics of an independent Bangladesh, often serving as student wings of political parties. National political leaders and leaders of social movements such as the feminist movement continue to emerge from student groups. In

national discourse, “students,” like “peasants,” “women,” “children,” and “liberation fighters,” have come to constitute a special and valorized category with a certain set of associated exhortations, promises, and expectations. In an extremely poor country like Bangladesh, students also tend to occupy a culturally prestigious place because of their access to education, knowledge, and empowerment.

While benefiting from the prestige nationally attributed to students, BICSa, as already mentioned, seeks to distance itself from the violence-haunted arena of national politics. Potential recruits and their family members are reassured by BICSa’s distance from conventional political activism. In Bangladesh, parents and students widely perceive the intimate involvement of students in national politics as detrimental to their pursuit of education—and with some reason. While no statistics are available as of this writing, even a cursory look at the newspapers makes it clear that many (usually male) students are injured, permanently maimed, and killed each year in armed confrontations with students supporting rival political parties.

Given the prominent role student groups have traditionally played in Bangladeshi politics, however, one might ask whether a symbolic or ideological emphasis on the acquirement and transmission of knowledge is sufficient to enable BICSa to convincingly distance itself from conventional politics in the eyes of parents and potential recruits. I suggest that BICSa partially succeeds in doing so by emphasizing that it is

an organization for *female* students. This both embodies BICSa's ideology of gender segregation and conveys BICSa's removal from the traditionally violent site of student politics. While a relatively small number of women *are* active in the student wings of political parties, they do not usually take part in armed clashes. Women do sometimes participate in street demonstrations orchestrated by particular political groups, but even on these occasions one often sees only a few women and these are usually positioned in the foremost rows for two reasons. First is that these women are then spared some of the jostling. Second, they are positioned as shields: it is understood that the police and male members of rival political groups are less willing to strike at women than at men when attacking a demonstration.⁴

There is also a logistical reason for BICSa's emergence as an organization of, by, and for female students. When the founder of BICSa, whom I call Amina, became interested in Islamic activism in the early 1970s, a small number of women had already been active within the Jamaat party for more than two decades; however, these women were of an older generation. As Amina began to recruit other women from her college and to socialize with Jamaat women (encouraged by her nephews who were Shibir members), she realized that the older women had an older style of talking, acting, and thinking that would not appeal to the

⁴ Attacks often issue from the front when a demonstrating and counter-demonstrating group face off or when the police tries to impede the forward march of demonstrators intent upon besieging certain state buildings/institutions or block traffic routes by convening at major intersections.

younger women attending modern high schools and colleges in growing numbers. The older women did not seem to grasp the concerns of students or the nature of “campus culture,” which was increasingly coming to redefine the lifestyle, tastes, sensibilities, and aspirations of female college students—many of whom had left their rural and semirural homes for the first time to pursue higher education in the capital city of Dhaka. Even for women from Dhaka itself, campus provided an important formative space away from the control of parents and older siblings and from the prying eyes and wagging tongues of neighbors and relatives. Older women activists, most of whom had not studied at modern schools, were therefore unable to advise Amina on strategies for offering effective Islamic competition with the attractions of secular entertainment increasingly available to college students. These attractions include pop music, romantic movies, and cultural functions centered on music, dance, and drama at which men and women can socialize with relative freedom from the constraints of mainstream Bangladeshi culture.⁵ There was clearly an emergent space for an organization run by and for young Muslim women students.

⁵ Personal conversation with Amina, the founder and first central chairwoman of BICSA, January 15, 1999.

Despite years of opposition from the more conservative segments of Jamaat to the formation of an even partly independent group of young women, BICSa came formally into being on July 15, 1978.⁶

2.6 Organizational Agenda

BICSa's training methodologies, persuasive strategies, and techniques for propagating its call are all geared to the first two clauses of its formal organizational agenda. The first mandates the propagation of "correct" ideas regarding Islam among students. The second calls for the mobilization of students already somewhat inclined towards religiosity, and for the training of such students to lead a higher moral life.⁷

This official organizational agenda has a general aspect and a technical one. The general aspect, the "spirit" of the agenda threading these two key clauses together, is considered to be immutable owing to its direct grounding in the organization's Islamic ideology. The technical aspect is understood as subject to change with time.⁸ For instance, over the last decade, BICSa's focus on recruiting from primary and secondary schools has intensified as BICSa increasingly realizes that the younger women are, the more willing they are to listen. Further, once recruited,

⁶ Interview with a senior male Jamaat leader, March 21, 1999.

⁷ *Sangbidhan* (Constitution), 3rd edition, pp. 3. Al-Falah Printing Press, Dhaka, 1998.

⁸ *Karmapadhyati* (Work Procedure), 2nd edition, pp. 6. Al-Falah Printing Press, Dhaka, 1995.

younger girls can stay with the organization longer than college/university recruits. This is a major attraction of such recruits because by the time college/university women are recruited to BICSa they are only going to be students for a few more years. Once an activist completes her student career, she moves on to the women's wing of Jamaat should she wish to continue being active in the Islamic movement (although if an activist has exceptional leadership abilities her membership may be extended a few years beyond her school years). Another reason for college/university women's short careers in BICSa is that most female students in higher education get married early on in their university years. The additional restraints and responsibilities of marriage make it difficult to spend the amount of time out of the home that activism entails. In order to work longer with BICSa, some activists not only go on to obtain Master's degrees but also enroll in additional diploma programs afterwards; others delay marriage, causing much concern within the family and "talk" among relatives and neighbors. In urban Bangladesh, motherhood remains the primary role for women, and there is considerable pressure on women to get married by their early to mid twenties.⁹

Another instance of the mutability of the technical aspect of BICSa's formal agenda is the very recent emphasis on activists' acquirement of knowledge of ritual prescriptions (*mas'ala*). Earlier,

⁹ Women must marry earlier in rural Bangladesh, where the majority of the population resides. Nationally, the marriageable age for women is sixteen, and for men, eighteen.

BICSa focused its pedagogy exclusively on *tafsir*, *ahadith*, and issues related to the Islamic movement such as the cultivation of moral character, the imperative of socio-political reform, and the conceptualization of Islam as a “complete way of life”. But in recent years, partly because of competition for recruits with Tabligh, whose female members appear well-versed in the details of ritual prescriptions—for example, the variety of specific acts and bodily states which render prayers or fasting “displeasing to Allah” (*maqrub*)—BICSa has felt the need to train its representatives in ritual prescriptions. Such knowledge enhances BICSa members’ authenticity as Islamic experts in the eyes of student communities. Thus, on the first day of October 1999, BICSa activists at a particular college convened an “urgent meeting” (*jaruri baithak*) in a dormitory room to discuss the growing popularity of a particular female Tabligh student activist. Apparently, many students had begun to attend the lessons she delivered in her room. Some BICSa activists had attended to see what she talked about; they agreed that she was more knowledgeable than they about numerous details concerning religious performances such as prayers and fasting. Many students were also joining the Tabligh activist for meals in the dining hall, where she ate on a floor mattress instead of using the tables and chairs, as an enactment of reported prophetic traditions (*sunnat*, Ar. *sunnah*). Such acts resonated well with many students, a BICSa activist explained to me at the “urgent meeting,” since “Bangladeshis have traditionally perceived religion in terms of prayers-

fasting (*namaz-roza*), religious chantings (*doa-darud*), and holy men (*pir-faqir*). It was decided at the meeting that in addition to acquiring greater knowledge of ritualized prescriptions, BICSa activists at that particular college would adopt the Tabligh style of taking another's hands into one's own, embracing, and uttering in Arabic "May Allah bless us and you" (*baarak Allahu lanaa wa lakum*) at the end of a religious gathering.

According to BICSa activists who observed the lessons delivered by the Tabligh student, such a mode of interaction seemed to "foster love" among participants and facilitate "softening of the heart", objectives valued in BICSa's own ideology.¹⁰

This instance also provides a glimpse into the dynamics of the relationship between BICSa's activist Islamic ideology and dominant cultural perceptions of Islam in Bangladesh. Popular Islam in Bangladesh centers on a culture of saints, on the conduct of essential life-ceremonies surrounding birth, marriage and death according to Islamic precepts, and on the five performances of faith central to orthodox Islamic tradition: belief in and utterance of "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet" (*shahadah*), the five daily prayers (*namaz*, Ar. *salah*), fasting during the month of Ramadan (*roza*, Ar. *sawm*), almsgiving, determined by one's income and assets (*zakat*, Ar. *zakah*), and the pilgrimage to

¹⁰ Fieldnotes, participant observation, October 1, 1999.

Makkah (*hajj*).¹¹ These are understood as engendering individual spirituality and piety in themselves, and thereby promoting social morality. BICSa, in contrast, believes that one cannot benefit fully from religious rites without taking part in social action to Islamize the sociocultural environment and understanding the “larger” or “fundamental values of Islam” (*islamer maulik mulyabodh*) underpinning ritual acts.

2.7 Propagational Apparatus

BICSa’s propagational apparatus, which enables it to implement the first clause in its agenda (“widely propagate correct ideas regarding Islam within the student community”), consists of three elements:

1) Befriending suitable students or “targeting” potential recruits through personal or face-to-face contact (*bektigata jogajog*) at school, at home or within the family, and in one’s neighborhood.

2) Organizing a wide range of public events, from socio-religious events during *Ramzan* oriented around the breaking of the day’s fast with particularly delectable food (*iftar mahfil*) to Qur’anic lectures to congratulatory ceremonies for women achieving the highest scores in the

¹¹ As Richard Eaton shows in his splendid book, Sufis played an important role in the emergence and popularization of Islam in Bengal (1993: 71-82). See Asim Roy (1983) for a discussion of the “syncretic” development of Bangali Islam as Islamic thought from the Middle East interacted with indigenous Hindu beliefs. Razia Akter Banu (1992) identifies three basic impulses in present Bangladeshi Islam. Peter Bertocci’s essay on “Bangladesh” in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 1995, provides a useful, concise overview of the traditions that have come to constitute Islam in Bangladesh historically. Rafiuddin Ahmed’s earlier work (1981) remains the best study of nineteenth-century Bangali Muslim society. His latest work (2001), a seminal collection of original essays, delineates the specific religious and socio-political developments in Bangladeshi Islam since 1971.

two major national matriculation examinations (one follows the tenth grade and the other the 12th).

3) Distributing Islamic literature among women, including and especially magazines BICSa publishes for women and children.

2.8 Targeting

In the BICSa lexicon, the process of working on a potential recruit on a one-on-one level to persuade her to support or join BICSa is called “targeting.” I see it as a mode of “civic persuasion,” given that “targeting” practically involves an active engagement not only on the part of the recruiting activist, as the term itself implies, but argumentation and negotiation on the part of the “targeted” woman or potential recruit as well, and that this mutual engagement occurs within a framework defined by “discussion” (*alochana*), sincerity (*antarikata*), civility (*bhadrata*), and cordiality or “sweet behavior” (*misti babahar*). There are many cases of failed “targeting” where the “targeted” refuses conviction. Failure may be attributed to insufficient piety on the part of the targeting activist.

According to a BICSa leader, “The more God-fearing an activist, the greater her ability to speak from the heart. This ability helps the target to sense the truth in what we say, for the truth always comes from the heart.”¹² In other words, an activist must be genuinely pious herself to be able to wield sufficient influence on a potential recruit. My own

¹² Fieldnotes from a “worker meeting” where a BICSa worker/activist sought her peers’ and superior’s advice regarding a potential recruit the worker was having difficulties with, November 2, 1999.

observations of numerous targeting sessions support this view, but on a different level. An activist's degree of piety has a more significant bearing on the development of her new recruit in the *aftermath* of recruiting than during the period of recruiting itself. The effectiveness of the initial recruiting process is influenced by many factors not explicitly related to a recruiter's degree of piety. For example, while most activists offer similar arguments, greater eloquence contributes greatly to success. Also, even a slight differential in class and education, often evinced in accent, style of speaking, and attire—a differential that gives the activist an edge, however small, over the targeted student—can facilitate the targeting process. Thus, one mid-level, leading BICSa activist, Shaila, with whom I worked very closely in the course of my research, is often more successful in targeting than some of her more devout peers. Unlike the majority of BICSa activists, not only does Shaila study at the most competitive college in the country, but she is also very articulate and self-assured. She always dresses well and hails from a middle-class family aspiring to upper-middle-class status. However, having closely followed Shaila's development as an activist over a period of several years, I found that Shaila did not ultimately advance to the highest cadre level in BICSa, despite a constant encouragement and high expectations from her BICSa mentors and support from her family.

Piety also contributes to success in targeting, but plays even a bigger role in sustaining of a recruit's loyalty to BICSa over time. Most

BICSa women strike those they target as exceptionally devout anyway, at first, for BICSa activists practice veiling by not only donning a loose, ankle-length coat with long sleeves and a headscarf (locally known as a *borkha*¹³), but also the face veil (*neqab*), which together with the coat and headcovering have traditionally constituted the strictest form of veiling. Most BICSa activists also tend to observe the five daily prayers with greater care and regularity than an average educated, urban, Bangladeshi Muslim woman. These are usually the two markers of BICSa women's piety that a targeted student has greatest access to, given that the two spend time primarily in the context of periodic "meetings." As judged by these markers, variations in piety among BICSa women are small. Following recruitment, however, a recruit becomes more aware of differences of degree in piety. Such differences become manifest in members' daily activities, both mundane and religious; their relationships with others; and their apparent sincerity in the performance of organizational duties. Thus, for instance, despite Shaila's record success in targeting, some of her recruits were ultimately discouraged by her occasional failure to get up on time for the dawn prayer or by her attendance at "un-Islamic" cultural programs on college campus or by her persistent reluctance to perform certain organizational duties. These recruits began to lose conviction in the organization. "If our own leaders

¹³ A traditional *borkha* consists of a loose, ankle-length (or at least knee-length) gown of solid colored material (often black), with a wimple-like headgear of the same material falling in loose folds over the torso. It is conventionally worn by some middle- and upper-class women in rural areas and/or of recent rural origin.

are morally lax,” observed one activist, “how can we call others towards Islam? And how do we keep *ourselves* inspired?”¹⁴

While such complications may follow the successful completion of a targeting project, and indicate some of the struggles integral to the crafting of an Islamic activist subjecthood, targeting constitutes BICSa’s most effective means of propagating its message. For instance, while BICSa may initially attract some women through public events and publications, developing a personal relationship with these women through numerous visits or informal meetings is essential if they are to be eventually recruited. As a sign of changing times, BICSa recently arranged for a debate among junior activists on the issue of whether technologically advanced means of communication, such as audio and video tapes and the Internet, are more effective in reaching potential recruits than the older style of face-to-face contact. The “judging committee,” consisting of senior BICSa members, concluded that the “tradition of personal contact,” propounded by Mawdudi and followed by the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets and messengers before him, remains the most effective primary medium for persuasion.¹⁵

¹⁴ Personal communication, December 3, 1999.

¹⁵ BICSa Training Camp (TC), March 28, 2003. Some participants in the debate pointed to class as an impediment to access to certain kinds of technology namely computers, the information superhighway, video cassettes, and even some printed literature such as hardcover volumes of Qur’anic exegesis.

Official guidelines advise the BICSa activist to be guided by the following in choosing a target: she should be intelligent, diligent, and sincere; she must display signs of “modesty” (*salinata*) in dress and manner; she must offer her five daily prayers, or at least desire to do so; she should have some leadership qualities and be an accomplished student. In practice, however, it is difficult to keep all these characteristics in mind or to find them all in one person, especially since an activist is often under pressure from her superiors to recruit new activists. Often, therefore, BICSa activists make do with less-than-ideal targets. Activists usually target friends or women in the same neighborhood or school.

BICSa’s focus on targets with at least potential for leadership follows from Mawdudi’s model for an “Islamic revolution.” He imagines a transformation in individuals’ thinking working its way downward from the helm of the society through education. “It is not the people’s thoughts which change society,” argues Mawdudi, “but the minds of the society’s movers and shakers” (Nasr 1996: 77). However, such a strategy is not easy to put into practice. Class is one obstacle. For instance, BICSa tries its utmost to attract top performers in the two key national exams, one of which takes place at the end of the 10th grade and the other at the end of the 12th grade. While most such women hail from upper-middle-class and middle-class backgrounds, a majority of BICSa activists are from the lower middle class. The regional accent of many activists betrays their

humble class position and strong rural ties, thus setting them off from the urban elite who often occupy the upper echelons of student communities.

Ideally, BICSa targets only those women who show clear promise. As one BICSa leader observed, “We would rather have a few solid workers than a large group where not every member is firmly rooted in Islamic ideology. A few strong workers can carry the movement a long way. Ultimately, it is the quality of an individual worker that is essential to our success, not quantity.”¹⁶ However, growing opposition from dominant nationalist groups has gradually pushed the problem of womanpower—sheer numbers—to the top of BICSa’s priority list. And as BICSa grows, so do unfavorable remarks from earlier generations of activists regarding the increasing visibility of cracks in faith and character among members of the new generation.

While the founding of BICSa was formally declared in 1978, a handful of female students, drawn to the cause of Jamaat, had begun to mobilize during the mid 1960s, under the unofficial name of “Islami Chatri Sangha.” Some in this group, such as Shameema and Maqsooda, along with some leading activists in the first generation of BICSa members, such as Fazeela, Amina and Nahar, observed in personal conversations that today’s activists, despite access to the various training programs that have evolved within BICSa over time, lack the “strength of faith” (*taqwa*) that they and contemporary workers harbored in the good

¹⁶ Personal communication, October 12, 1999.

old days. Nevertheless, BICSa prides itself in the “scientific” nature of its evolving recruiting and training processes.

Targeting entails a variety of subtle moves executed methodologically and geared towards effective persuasion. Here I try to reconstruct a model of targeting from my observations of several targeting projects, my conversations with activists regarding this process, my presence at conversations in which veteran activists advised junior members about targeting, and my reading of the BICSa published booklet *Karmapadhyati* (Work Methodology), which contains instructions concerning targeting or “personal contact” with potential recruits. An activist first tries to discern her target’s temperament through friendship and frequent social calls. She learns what her target’s interests are and tries to adopt some of those interests in order to build rapport. For instance, if the target likes sports, the activist tries to keep abreast of sports. If the target likes music, then instead of lecturing her on orthodox Islamic disapproval of musical instruments, her mentor develops an interest in music and uses this to build a closer relationship. Activists are often urged to cultivate “general knowledge” in a multitude of fields for this very purpose—literature, sports, ideologies such as communism and nationalism, local and international politics, etc. The activist must be able to share in her target’s joys and sorrows, and lend a helping hand whenever necessary, in order to build trust.

That this methodology works well is evident in the responses made by junior members to my asking what they appreciate most about BICSa. Many identified the warmth and caring they enjoy from other activists within the organization, especially seniors. Profound affection from leaders and seniors towards junior members, underlined with respect regardless of class and urban-rural distinctions, makes a strong impression on younger members in a setting where cultural norms invest authority in elders and urge “respectfulness” (*adab*) only in younger people. Strong interpersonal relationships, founded on mutual respect and concern for well-being, are crucial not only to successful targeting but to the success of BICSa’s mission as a whole.

Michel Foucault’s insight (1977) that power is not only repressive but generative of desires and subjectivities is salient here. Many BICSa members, despite being dismayed by the rigorous self-discipline and commitment to organizational projects demanded by BICSa, continue to work within it throughout their student careers. The richness of the ties they form with other members plays a significant role in the sustenance of loyalty to the organization. Ideology and the divine wear very specific human faces in the moral-practical world BICSa inhabits. Indeed, the speed with which some activists gravitate toward or grow distant from BICSa ideology is often influenced by the sorts of friendship they form with peers and the degree of admiration they hold for their particular mentors. A member continues to be targeted following recruitment; she is

assigned a mentor and new mentors may be assigned in different stages of her development into a full-fledged Islamic activist.

Once the target develops a strong liking for the activist, the latter can broach the subject of contemporary social ills and gradually hold up before the target the shortcomings of any “human-devised ideologies” (*manab-rachita matabad*), such as socialism, nationalism, and capitalism. The mentor then weaves Islam into conversations and builds a fundamental awareness of the centrality of Islam to any effective solution to society’s problems. BICSa’s Islamic worldview is discussed, but only in fragments. The target is given some elementary Islamic literature to read. On several occasions, I heard junior activists ask senior members how the former could get their targets, who had heard terrible things about Mawdudi, to peruse some Islamic texts when so many of the syllabi texts are by Mawdudi. The generic advice was to cross out every occurrence of “Mawdudi” from the first few books given to the target. If she likes the books, she could be informed afterwards that those were Mawdudi’s books. At this stage, the mentor also introduces her target to some BICSa leaders so that the target catches a glimpse of the “true Muslim woman” BICSa aims at forming. The target is thus persuaded through concrete, “live” examples in addition to persuasion by conversation and reading.

Finally, the target is brought to realize that it is her “sacred duty” to strive to establish Islam in her country. This last move involves several steps. First, the target is persuaded that contemporary Bangladeshi society

is in a deplorable condition. This is done by linking it with the pre-Islamic Arabian “days of ignorance” (*ayyam-e-jaheliyat*), the era and place perceived in Islamic history as being in darkest opposition to the “golden age of Islam,” the period of enlightenment and prosperity understood to have followed on the reign of the Prophet Muhammad and the four “rightly guided” rulers of the Muslim community (*khulafa-e-rashidin*). The following two extracts from keynote speeches delivered by topmost BICSa leaders at the organization’s annual meeting of members of the highest cadre typify the sorts of arguments generally made:

Any alert person cannot but grow anxious about the limitless terrorism spreading through the educational institutions of the country despite the establishment of a democratic government based on fair elections following a popular movement for democracy in the country. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed young men are flailing about in despair. The lives of all people, whether villagers or townsfolk, are rendered miserable by terrorizing extortionists. Industries and factories are closing down. The country has become a market for foreign merchandise. A deep

conspiracy is being hatched against our sovereignty both inside and outside the country.¹⁷

Extreme deterioration of law and order, chaos on campuses, attacks on religious students, continued conspiracy against religious education, moral degeneration, attacks on mosques led by state forces, violence against women, rape, kidnapping, murder, extortion, hooliganism, et cetera are making life unbearable. Despite the head of state being a woman, violence against women has exceeded all past records. The government is more occupied with safeguarding the interests of India than the daily social security of its own citizens.¹⁸

¹⁷ November 1, 1993, BICSa publication *Sammelan Sarak* (Conference Proceedings). The democratic government referred to is that of Begum Khaleda Zia, the chairwoman of BNP which, with some help from Jamaat, defeated its arch rival, secular-nationalist AL in the 1991 elections held following the overthrow of the military government of Hussein Muhammad Ershad through a popular uprising led by the various political parties. Jamaat saw its support for the liberal Muslim nationalist BNP as choosing the lesser of two evils. Political terrorism on university campuses and the streets, and violent crimes in general went rampant in 1993, eliciting deep public concern voiced in the major daily newspapers. Two key points are being made in this section of the speech. One is that democracy, by itself, cannot ensure peace and prosperity. Those in power as well as their subjects must have Islam as their primary reference for both moral and practical purposes. The other point is that Islam and hence, the welfare of the nation, is being threatened from within by secular-liberal forces (AL primarily, and BNP secondarily), and from without by India, which is perceived as Hindu-dominated and anti-Muslim.

¹⁸ Fieldnotes, October 28, 1999. Protest against socio-political terrorism, violence against women, and perceived Indian hegemony runs through most such keynote speeches. This particular speech, delivered during the reign of AL, points to increasing clashes between the state and religious forces. The point being made here concerning female leadership is similar to that noted for democracy in the previous extract. Thus, female leadership, in itself, does not guarantee an improvement in the condition of women citizens. In BICSa's understanding, a leader must be a true Muslim first. Only a true Muslim leader, driven by his/her fear of accountability for his/her actions and responsibilities to God in the Hereafter, and equipped with the virtues (*gunabali*) of a true believer (*satyikar imandar*) can empathize with his/her people and serve them ably. S/he, in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad and his four "rightly guided" successors, is kind (*dayalu*) but also firm (*drira*) and just (*nayparayan*). BICSa, like its parent Jamaat, generally believes that a woman can be a political leader, in the tradition of the Prophet's wife Ayesha, who personally led in a battle against the Prophet Muhammad's fourth successor, close companion, and son-in-law Ali, as long as she is not the ultimate head of state; such a position should be reserved

The target is led to see Bangladeshi society as profoundly unjust, a society in which Islam is under seige, in stark contrast with the “golden age of Islam.” Like most other Islamic revivalist movements, BICSa hearkens back to the “golden age of Islam” as the only truly Islamic period in Muslim history and as the only model to be followed in the Islamization of Bangladeshi polity. But what this ideological discourse elides is the mention, however a brief one, of changing strategies in the organization’s handbook *Karmapadhyati* (Working Methodology) and the substrate recognition within BICSa of the need for an Islam, which, while grounded in the *principles* of the “golden age” Islam, must in practice be suited to a Bangladesh located in an age of rapid technological advancement, Western hegemony, and globalization. Thus, for example, when a member of Tabligh, accusing BICSa of “innovation” (*bidat*, Ar. *bid’ah*), attacked a BICSa speaker on the ground that the Prophet neither asked for reports of daily activities from his companions nor organized them into different cadre groups, the BICSa presenter replied with some reluctance that “we live in a modern age dominated by science and new strategies employed by adversaries. Thus, using our practical wisdom (*hekmat*), which the Prophet himself employed in dealing with novel situations, we employ

for men only. More conservative sections within BICSa and Jamaat, however, would rather see a woman solely as a homemaker and an Islamic worker preaching/working strictly in an all-female environment.

‘scientific’ methods, but the spirit and objective remain the same, which is to re-orient society towards Islam.”¹⁹

Once the target is persuaded that contemporary Bangladeshi society resembles the pre-Islamic Arabian “days of ignorance” (*ayyam-e-jaheliyat*), that the polity has hit rock bottom, she is urged to rectify the situation by following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, that is, by adopting an “Islamic way of life” and calling others towards the same. This is the second step within the move to convince the target of the need for social action. This need is legitimized as an Islamic duty through application of the following Qur’anic verses:

By the oath of time. Surely humankind is in great loss. Except for those who have faith and do good deeds and advise one another to establish the right and encourage one another to be patient. (*Surah Al-‘Asr*)²⁰

¹⁹ Fieldnotes on a discussion following a “*Tafsir Class*” (exegetical talk on the Qur’an) conducted by a BICSA leader in the common prayer room of a women’s college following the afternoon (*‘asr*) prayers, September 6, 1999. Such exegetical talks are one of BICSA’s primary avenues for propagating its message both at educational institutions and in residential neighborhoods. In claiming such lectures to constitute “*tafsir*,” BICSA seeks to legitimize its discourse on the Qur’an by linking it to the popular tradition of preaching through Qur’anic exegesis (*waaz*) in Bangladesh, which has conventionally been the preserve of male, traditional religious experts. On the other hand, in terming such a talk not only as “*tafsir*” but as “class” as well, BICSA draws on the authority of a modern style of schooling where subjects are taught and classes attended in the form of a “history class” or “mathematics class” or “drawing class.” Indeed, as I show in a later chapter on Qur’anic lessons, presentations by BICSA activists on the Qur’an or a specific religious topic are modeled along the lines of present-day college lectures, and like the latter, a BICSA presentation is usually followed by “discussion” or question-answer session, where the speaker urges the audience to pose questions so that every “concept” (BICSA activists use this very English term) can be made “clear” and no confusion remains.

²⁰ A “*surah*” may be understood to designate a “chapter” in the Qur’an. The Qur’an is organized into a series of chapters, each with a title of its own that

What is the matter with you, why are you not struggling in the way of Allah? While tortured, oppressed women, men and children are pleading—“O God, take us out from this habitat of oppressors and send for us a helping friend.” (*Surah An-Nisaa'*)²¹

The third step is to convince the target that *individual* social action is not sufficient for re-forming the polity, that membership in an Islamic group or organization is essential both for keeping oneself on track and for social reform. An oft-used analogy is that of “the buffaloes and the wolf,” derived from a *hadith*: it is much easier for a wolf (Satan or *Saitan*) to attack a buffalo (a Muslim) when it strays from its herd and wanders alone than when it is with its herd. The importance of group action is further legitimized to the target through a literal rendering of the following Qur’anic verse and *ahadith*²²:

marks it off from other chapters. Thus the title or name of the *surah* cited here is “*Al-‘Asr*.” Each *surah* contains a specific number of verses; in my citations, the number following the name of a *surah* designates the number of the verse(s) being cited. *Surahs* can vary significantly in length. *Surah Al-‘Asr*, for instance, is one of the shortest *surahs* in the Qur’an. In fact, this *surah* is cited in its entirety here. This *surah* also happens to be one of the most widely studied in BICSa. Since it is so short, BICSa activists, like many other observant Bangladeshi Muslims, frequently utter it during the five obligatory daily prayers.

²¹ These two Qur’anic verses are extracted from my interview with leading BICSa activist, Hasina, Chittagong, Feb. 8, 1999. These verses are often cited by BICSa activists. The translations of these Qur’anic verses are mine. I have translated these from their renderings in Bangla as narrated to me during my interview with Hasina.

²² I heard BICSa activists narrate the following Qur’anic verses and *ahadith* numerous times in the course of public speeches and personal conversations with those they wished to recruit. The following *ahadith* were uttered by my interlocutor Farzana on Oct 9, 1999, in the course of her “personal contact” (*bektigata jogajog*) with a potential recruit. The translations of these Qur’anic

There must be a group of people among you, which will call people towards well-being and goodness, and instruct in the execution of just and honest deeds and prevent the performance of unjust and sinful acts. (*Surah Al-Imran*)

All of you hold onto the rope of Allah fast, and do not get separated. (*Surah Baqarah*)

He who dies while unattached to the group dies the death of ignorance (*jaheliyat*). (*Hadith: Sahih Al-Tirmidhi*)

He who wishes to enter paradise must hold fast to the group. (*Hadith: Sahih Al-Tirmidhi*)

The fourth step is to argue that not only will the target be rewarded in the Hereafter for actively pursuing the Islamic cause, but her practical well-being as a Muslim woman in this very world is tied to the condition of Islam in Bangladesh. Should secularist forces win, it is possible that the mosques would be attacked as in India and closed down as in the former Soviet Union. Bangladesh would turn into a colony of India. Veiled women would face greater harassment and the veil would be banned as in secularist Turkey. In the end, it would be difficult for Muslim women to observe Islam even in their own homes since religiosity would be actively discouraged and even persecuted in every sphere of life by the state and larger society.

This recalls the second of the two speech extracts noted earlier, where a BICSa leader attributes various kinds of “attacks on Islam” to

verses and *ahadith* are mine. I have translated these from their renderings in Bangla as narrated to me during my interview with Farzana.

“state forces” (namely AL, the then-ruling secular-nationalist party.) Conflicts and agendas, often driven primarily by political differences and priorities, are framed as hostility to Islam. In learning to imagine a Bangladeshi “Islam under siege” from both local secular forces and foreign hegemony — primarily Hindu (Indian) — a habitual Muslim Bangladeshi female student begins her arduous journey toward an Islamic activist subjecthood. A seasoned activist works to transform the target’s semi-conscious and ambiguous but nevertheless profound and family-based, *cultural* affiliation with Islam into a comprehensive, systematized, and ideologized identification. She appeals to concrete examples drawn from the target’s immediate surroundings, national imaginary, and singularly interpreted Qur’anic verses and *ahadith*.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 followed by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, BICSa activists increasingly shift attention from the national arena to the global stage in conversations with potential recruits. Since these attacks have been widely discussed in the local media, a BICSa activist’s reference to these events strikes a resonant chord within a potential recruit. While most of the dominant newspapers, which are of a secular persuasion, critiqued the US attacks as “imperialist” and did not proffer any solutions, BICSa activists provide potential recruits with a clear explanation for this “illness” and a precise formula for cure. It is explained that these attacks are, in part, consequences of the weak faith of individual Muslims and the resulting disunity within the

Muslim *ummah*. It is argued that these attacks reflect not only a growing Western desire for control over the natural resources that some Muslim countries are rich in but also a growing Western fear of the increasing appeal of Islam worldwide. Membership in a well-organized Islamic movement is offered as an essential medium for rectifying individual faith and for working dutifully and effectively to protect Islam and the interests of Muslims globally, starting with Bangladesh. Otherwise, warn BICSa activists, Bangladesh could become yet another Afghanistan or Iraq or Palestine, attacked and occupied directly or indirectly by either “Hindu India” or the “Christian West” or “Jewish Israel” or even by an alliance among these forces. Extracts from sacred texts and practical examples of wars, occupation, and suffering are made to illuminate each other. The underlying principle is the connection formed within the target’s moral-cultural imaginary between *belief* and *action* — action of the sort BICSa and Jamaat advocate—and the rendering of this connection as the only one logically possible.

Finally, now that the target understands she must join an Islamic group, she is urged to join BICSa, and BICSa only. This is done through a tidy construction of differences between a “fully” Islamic organization (BICSa) and “other” Islamic organizations. The movement Tabligh, for instance, is said to be only “partially” Islamic since it focuses solely on individual piety and ignores the “larger socio-political environment” within which individuals must necessarily act. BICSa perceives this larger

environment to increasingly encompass and shape the private sphere to which both secularists and traditional pietist movements such as Tabligh relegate Islam. BICSa, in contrast, seeks to realize a “revolution” on both the individual and social levels.

The discourse on “revolution,” with its pro-active and progressive connotations, appeals to many female students. Between their roles as daughters/sisters at home and awareness of a vigorous but sometimes violent national student politics embedded in a glorified tradition of Bangladeshi student activism, young women find BICSa’s oratorical and text-based, “scientific” approach to “social revolution” empowering, moderate, and feasible. This approach is directly grounded in Mawdudi’s conceptualization of an “Islamic revolution” as “radical reform” brought about through a prolonged peaceful struggle, not by “a crazed faith . . . [with] blood-shot eyes, shouting “God is great” (*Allahu Akbar*), decapitating an unbeliever wherever they see one, cutting off heads while invoking “There is no god but Allah” (*La ilaha illa Allah*) — the terms in which Islamic activists are imagined today by secular-oriented publics both within Muslim countries and without (Nasr 1996: 74).

Targeting entails a significant responsibility. The activist must in her own person uphold to the target the “true Muslim woman” BICSa aims at developing. The perception that the quality of the mentor’s own persona is a crucial factor in her ability to recruit the target constantly pushes her to further strengthen her own faith in and consciousness of God

(*taqwa*) and commitment to organizational goals, and to deepen her own knowledge of Islam even as she works on orienting her target towards Islamic activism. The activist's task of enjoining other Muslims towards an adequate religiosity (*dawati kaj*) helps to further orient her own consciousness towards Islam. In fact, this dynamic is explained in some syllabus texts on the "Islamic movement" (*islami andalan*) as one of the vital benefits of *dawati kaj*, rendering this sociomoral practice crucial to one's own salvation.

This dialectic further points to the two major concepts undergirding Mawdudi's systemic and dialogical approach to Islam. One is that faith and action exist in a mutually structuring relationship central to the production and re-production of an ideal Islamic socio-political order. Thus the more diligently one strives to enact and embody Islamic injunctions, the stronger grows one's belief in Islam, and the stronger one's faith, the greater one's desire and ability to practice and thereby to promulgate the structure of the faith. The other is the relationship between individual and society: a pious subject, in orienting all her activities toward God, generates an Islamic environment which, in turn, enables a pious subjectivity through securing those social conditions essential for the possibility of the acquirement of piety.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* is useful here. He proposed this notion as a means to overcome the opposition, posited in the social sciences, between individual subjectivity and the larger structures

which embed it (1977). He conceptualizes the reproduction of social norms and the place of human actors in this process through “the dialectic of internalization and externalization.” But two things that are missing in this model are crucial to the mutual structuration of faith and action as lived by BICSa activists. One is the element of consciousness. While Bourdieu is primarily concerned with the *unconscious* process through which objective social conditions are naturalized and reproduced, BICSa activists *consciously* strive to cultivate certain dispositions through self-discipline.²³ The other is the complex role of power. Judith Butler’s (1997) argument that the very process and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means whereby she attains self-consciousness (agency) helps illuminate how a BICSa woman attains her activist identity in the very process of submitting herself to the rigors of BICSa’s educational and other re-structuring processes. BICSa training programs (Worker Meetings, Study Circles, and Training Camps) are structured around constant self-regimentation (daily recording of various activities, periodic inspection of these records by peers and superiors), Islamic pedagogy (discussions of the Qur’an, *ahadith*, and Islamic didactic booklets), cultivation of “intimacy with God” (*taqwa*) (characterized by fear, awe, and love and practiced through the obligatory

²³ Bourdieu has been critiqued for his lack of attention to the conscious processes integral to the internalization of certain kinds of habitus (Jenkins 1992; Mahmood 1998: 24-5). Mahmood (1998) shows how women participants in the mosque movement in Cairo strive to embody the sort of piety central to the orthodox Sunni-Salafi tradition of Islam, through various programs of emotional and bodily discipline.

acts of worship buttressed by supplicatory prayers and supererogatory observances), and dedication to organizational duties and goals (attendance at meetings and training programs, and preparation, submission, and implementation of plans for monthly organizational activities).

That most activists fall far short of BICSa's standards is a widely shared complaint within the organization. BICSa leaders cite this as one of the key obstacles to the organization's efforts to Islamize student society. One BICSa leader, frustrated at her neighborhood workers' repeated inability to recruit more workers, reproached them at a workers' meeting in the following manner:

“We excel at offering excuses for failing to target others properly. We say that people don't like our affiliation with Jamaat and Shibir. We say people find the way we dress *backdated* (outmoded). But did the Prophet not draw complete non-believers toward him solely through the beauty of his character? What else did he have to offer them, besides persecution by the socially and materially powerful? Was he not able to transform an utterly hostile, pagan society into an Islamic polity? Then why are we not able to persuade those, who are already Muslims and believe in some of the basic tenets of the faith, to simply put into practice what they already believe and to recognize some of the gaps and errors in their knowledge of Islam? We fail because we ourselves do not adequately embody what we preach”.²⁴ (Emphasis mine)

BICSa therefore invests itself earnestly, foremost, in crafting the moral and personal qualities of its recruits. When a target joins the organization, it is not taken for granted that she will now steadfastly practice what she affirms. The relationship between belief and action is

²⁴ Fieldnotes, June 13, 2002.

not thought to be a simple one, especially not in a context where secularization and materialism erode faith. One's desire to enact belief, BICSa women suggest, is constantly thwarted by the state and the increasingly influential NGO sector through the media, the marginalization of religious knowledge in public education, and the persecution of political Islam. There are Indian and Western cultural hegemonies, say activists, working through the satellite dish and promoting female public sexuality and consumerism. Many families consider the time their daughters spend attending organizational training programs as time taken away from schoolwork; and good grades can help secure "respectable" jobs and even marriage into prosperous families. Some families are dismayed by a daughter's or sister's veiling, which is perceived as detracting from female beauty and desirability and as an obstacle to marriage into a well-educated and prosperous (modern) family. BICSa combats this liberal regime through structures of moral training and practical organization—all reflecting Mawdudi's systemic approach to Islam, which was developed in response to and in interaction with Western colonialism and the rise of socialism in undivided India. In contesting the power of Western modernity, Mawdudi appropriated the modern, articulating a faith-centered ideology grounded in both the local revivalist tradition of Islam and his wide reading of Western sources, including Marxist literature (Nasr 1996). Following Mawdudi, BICSa selectively coopts modernism to fight liberalism.

2.9 Structures of Authority and Discipline: Administrative Units and Cadres

The various cadre levels of membership in order of ascending authority in BICSa are: 1) *Prathamik Sadasya* (Primary Member), 2) *Karmi* (Worker), 3) *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker), 4) *Sadasya Prarthi* (Full Member Candidate), and 5) *Sadasya* (Full Member).

BICSa members are organized into administrative units arranged geographically and hierarchically. Each unit has a committee consisting of a chairwoman and secretaries elected by unit members in consultation with the central administrative body. Each unit builds up its own library and funds its own expenses with donations collected from unit members and “supporters” (*sudhi*).²⁵ Though self-sufficient in many ways, a unit must follow all instructions from the City Administration and the Central Apparatus, and must ultimately account to its supervising unit for its monthly activities, incomes and expenditures, and success or failure in recruiting members and supporters.

In practice, the relationship between member units and regional authorities can be fraught with contestation, for units, significantly shaped by the priorities, desires, capacities, and temperaments of their members, develop certain technical strategies of their own which can clash both in

²⁵ A “supporter” (*sudhi*) is a man or woman who is not active in BICSa but supports BICSa’s work and ideology. There are two kinds of “supporters.” Those who simply support BICSa’s ideology are referred to as “ideological supporters” (*adarshik sudhi*) and those who do not only support BICSa’s work but also make financial contributions to BICSa are categorized as “donating supporters” (*iyanati sudhi*).

style and meaning with those of the supervising authorities. Thus, for instance, one of the BICSa units I worked closely with spent more money on decorations and catering for its public events of religious celebration than recommended by its supervising regional authorities who occasionally critiqued the unit's chairwoman for her weakness for "glamour" (*chakchikya*). But the latter maintained that since she and her workers operated within a particularly wealthy neighborhood and within a particularly accomplished student community, the unit needed to project a particular image to be able to recruit successfully. The supervising authorities felt that while "dazzling" others into joining BICSa might work temporarily, such a strategy would not work in the long run because the course of an Islamic movement did not require grandeur and emotionalism, but a great deal of personal conviction, perseverance, and various sacrifices.

More importantly, however, this administrative structure with specific positions of authority and associated duties and accountabilities endows members, some in their early teens, with a profound sense of responsibility and purpose, modern administrative capacities, and teamwork skills. Recognition of the need for hierarchy for efficient operation of the organization is instilled in members early on. Accounting for one's activities to one's immediate superiors facilitates transformation of members from cultural and habitual Muslims to moral activists working in this world in preparation for an accounting to God on the Day of

Judgment. Very close friendships can develop between unit members, often serving as cement for the various cracks and fissures within the working of BICSa and so weakening centrifugal forces.

A cadre-based system facilitates discipline within the organization and establishes a hierarchy based on one's depth of Islamic knowledge and the capacity for the realization of this knowledge in practical life. One's ability to put the needs of the organization and of others before oneself—"self-transcendence"—is considered vital for the realization of Islamic knowledge. Proper knowledge of Islam is achieved through study of the organizational syllabus, to which Mawdudi's exegesis of the Qur'an, *Tafheemul Kur'an*, certain *ahadith* texts, and other didactic works by Mawdudi and other top Jamaat leaders are key. This knowledge must *show* in one's degree of piety (*taqwa*), personal qualities, and sincerity in the performance of organizational duties. All three arenas are intricately linked. Degree of piety is determined, for instance, by one's commitment to the obligatory five daily prayers, a willingness to perform supererogatory acts of worship (namely the late evening prayer of *tahajjud*), study of the Qur'an, *ahadith* and didactic Islamic literature (especially texts from the organizational syllabus), and a rigorous practice of veiling (*parda*). The personal virtues consist of compassion, sincerity, politeness, shyness, forbearance, humbleness, and diligence, among others. Entire lessons may be devoted to the cultivation of single virtues such as avoidance of "backbiting" (*gibat*). Regularity in report-

preservation, participation in local Worker Meetings and larger training programs, preparation/deliverance of religious lectures/lessons, memorization of Qur’anic verses and *ahadith* for the conjoined purposes of self-purification and persuasion of others, and dedication to recruiting efforts are some of the criteria whereby an activist’s commitment to organizational work is evaluated. Many of these criteria are quantifiable by virtue of the “report book,” in which amounts of time spent on particular categories of activities, for instance, must be listed.

The various cadre levels can be understood as corresponding to stages within the formation of an Islamic activist self. This structure enables BICSa to monitor the progress of each activist toward a pious and skilled subjecthood and to determine who needs what specific kind of guidance at any particular time. This precisely calibrated system, wherein certain degrees of knowledge and commitment to certain activities theoretically translate into certain moral and practical capacities, enables BICSa leaders to assess each member rather thoroughly for her readiness to move up to the next level and to assume certain responsibilities.²⁶ In practice, however, there are often disjunctures between certain qualities and/or skills an activist acquires and the “state of faith” or commitment to

²⁶ An activist’s degree of knowledge is judged by the numbers of Qur’anic verses and *ahadith* she memorized and studied, and the amount of Islamic literature she read. Her commitment to Islam and to the organization is evaluated by the delivery of certain numbers of lessons or *dars*, the performance of the obligatory five daily prayers and later the supererogatory prayer of *tahajjud* as well, the observance of veiling, the daily preservation of monthly report, regular attendance at organizational meetings namely Worker Meetings and Study Circles, and the daily devotion of a certain number of hours to the organizational work of propagation/recruiting.

Islam these attributes are supposed to correspond to. Thus, for instance, Shaila, the mid-level BICSa leader I mentioned earlier, acquired more than sufficient textual knowledge and oratorical skills to become a member of the highest cadre of *Sadasya* (Full Member) and possessed excellent leadership abilities evident only in the topmost leaders of BICSa. Yet, these “virtues” (*gunabali*) did not translate into an enhancement of piety and/or a heightened commitment to the Islamist organization: Shaila failed to offer the five daily prayers regularly, to preserve her monthly report regularly, to attend the monthly Study Circles and the periodic Training Camps, and to use the face veil consistently. Even though she had joined BICSa when she was only in her early teens and advanced to the “worker” level within a year, it took her six long years and considerable effort on the part of her mentors to rise to the level of an “advanced worker” where she remained till she graduated from college and left BICSa to become loosely affiliated with Jamaat. I explore such disjunctures between structure and practice in greater detail in a following chapter.

This system of cadre advancement is important for understanding Islamic movements like BICSa because such progress is often a crucial incentive for members to sustain their enthusiasm as movement participants. It provides such incentive in two ways. First, it gives an activist the short-term, feasible goal of advancing to the next level within a relatively short period of time. This is important since the ultimate goal of the Islamic movement in Bangladesh—the Islamization of society and

state—may not be attainable in the near future (if ever). To the vast majority of activists, therefore, movement success is not apparent most of the time. Despite all the work activists do, there is usually no discernible immediate impact even on the neighborhood, let alone the national stage. Advancement from one cadre level to the next, on the other hand, is often attainable within a few years or less. This is very rewarding and motivating for an activist. She is congratulated by her activist peers and is assigned greater responsibilities and greater authority within the organizational structure.

Second, progress from one cadre to the next represents an upward mobility of sorts. While this mobility is in piety, and not in the kind of socio-economic status valued by the larger society, it is a concrete form of achievement grounded in the morality of “success in this world and in the world Hereafter.” Socio-economic upward mobility is not attainable for the vast majority of BICSa women hailing from the lower middle and middle classes, but upward mobility along the morality ladder set up by the organization, characterized by a formal change in cadre level or organizational rank (*sangathanik man*) and tangible changes in piety, knowledge, skills, mannerisms, responsibilities, and treatment by others, is within reach.

The egalitarianism of assigning activists to positions of responsibility determined primarily by moral capacity holds much appeal for women in a society rife with widening disparities in class and thus in

access to both symbolic and material resources, especially if these women are from the lower middle and middle classes, as the vast majority of BICSa activists indeed are. In practice, however, those at the bottom of the class ladder can find it especially difficult to ascend to key positions. Many such women must do a considerable amount of household work at home since their families have limited access to hired help. After spending more time on schoolwork, they can spare little or no time for organizational work and thus have a hard time demonstrating their loyalty to the cause of Islam. These women must also spend more time on schoolwork because unlike middle-class women they do not have any access to tutoring. Most lower-middle-class women, being recent migrants to Dhaka from outlying areas, speak with strong regional accents, which give away both their class and rural associations. This can detract from their suitability as topmost BICSa leaders who, in competing successfully with hegemonic discourses (nationalist, secularist) for adherents, must stand up well to the scrutiny of the educated urban community in Dhaka, where images of “backwardness,” rusticity, and a lack of “modern” education are widely associated with Islamic activism.

However, through a conscious practice of certain forms of equality, the implications of class are muted to a remarkable extent within BICSa, perhaps more than in most other student organizations in contemporary Bangladesh. Members’ access to leaders and organizational resources is not discernably inflected by class. Women subject to greater financial

hardships may have greater difficulty rising to the ultimate positions of power and authority (such as to those of the central chairwoman, co-chairwoman, and secretary), but they can and do climb to regional positions of leadership and to the highest cadre position of *Sadasya* (Full Member) since such advancement is primarily contingent on personal piety, dedication to organizational tasks, and obedience to rules. Membership within the *Sadasya* (Full Member) rank ensures greatest participation in the decision-making process. An emphasis in organizational discourse on the simplicity of the lives led by the Prophet and his companions, and on the impermanence of wealth and the greater accountability on the Day of Judgment accruing to the wealthier, further facilitates the narrowing of tangible class disparities, as the better-off members consciously attempt to dress humbly, particularly in BICSa spaces. A shared understanding that any money a member can spare should go towards funds reserved for the neediest students and for the numerous expenses incurred in the running of the organization (“the cause of Allah”) also dampens the proclivity for status display encouraged elsewhere in Bangladeshi society.

Nor is a member’s class taken into account in assigning tasks. For instance, one participant, Shopna, who is one of the very few activists from the upper class, must help cook and clean under difficult conditions when assigned to the “food team” for periodic organizational Training Camps which last from two to three days. She has served as a “volunteer”

at various Training Sessions and Training Camps; such a “volunteer” attends to the needs of the participants in such events, such as looking after senior activists’ children, nursing participants who fall ill, serving drinks and food to participants, etc. The living conditions at such mass gatherings are lower-middle class at best and especially challenge those from the middle class; all participants must share the same food and restroom facilities and must huddle together on the floor and attempt to sleep through the heat, humidity, and mosquito bites. It is at the intersection of such organizational practices based on “equality before Allah” with the class-infused functioning of the larger society that part of the crucial but partial transformation from a habitual subjecthood to an ideological activist consciousness occurs. Organizational life provides a member with a unique moral and practical perspective that demands a vigorous critique of the outside world.

Despite the elaborate system of personal-quality assessment built into the cadre system, many activists are unable or reluctant to perform adequately the roles assigned to them. Sometimes, for example, an activist is reluctant to assume a position of leadership even though she satisfies all observable criteria for such a position. One participant, Sifat, refused to accept the position of chairwomanship of her unit, explaining to her superiors that she simply did not “feel ready” for a position of such consequence. She feared that she lacked the piety, conviction, and commitment to organizational processes necessary for such a position.

Her mentors argued, as they often do in such cases, that “responsibility comes from Allah” and imposed the responsibility on her, thinking she would “get used to it”. But Sifat responded by persistently showing up late for even the regular Worker Meetings, let alone assuming the additional responsibilities that unit chairwomanship entails. In private, she would shed tears of frustration and rage at such coercion, stating, “I know very well that these organizational responsibilities are delegated by particular human beings and not by Allah. My own case shows that some of these individuals are not always wise. Otherwise they would be able to distinguish those who are truly ready for leadership from those who are not. If my superiors truly wished me to be a leader, they should have been able to inculcate that desire within me through their own words and acts. They are unnecessarily pushing my love for the organization to its very limits.” In this way, BICSa is critiqued in “subordinate discourse” (Messick 1981) for failing to uphold its own lofty ideals of the personal virtues of a “true Muslim woman” (*khanti muslim nari*). Such criticisms are not articulated in public or to the leadership even in private. They circulate in gestures and semi-articulations behind closed doors and only among the closest of peer-friends.

This sort of resistance or reluctance is even more interesting given how emphatically the idea of “obedience to leaders” is treated in BICSa discourse, an idea I revisit in the following chapters through an examination of the Qur’anic lessons and Study Circles central to the

training of a BICSa activist. BICSa explains such obedience as having a direct grounding in the Qur'an and *ahadith*. That the theme of obedience appears repeatedly in Qur'anic lessons, Study Circles, conversations between activists and their superiors, and talks delivered at larger organizational training events speaks to the prevalence of resistance to organizational authority. Such resistance, arising out of a wide range of motivational contexts, points to the incompleteness of the hegemonic character of any project of domination, even when the subject consciously, determinedly, and even enthusiastically submits herself to such a project and sees herself as benefiting from it. BICSa leaders cite the following Qur'anic verse and *ahadith* widely in the contexts of Qur'anic Study Circles and other training programs aimed at instilling obedience in BICSa workers to their superiors and thus securing organizational discipline and efficacy:

O believers, obey Allah, the Prophet and all those among you who are in charge. (*Surah An-Nisa: 59*)

He who obeys me, obeys Allah in effect, and he who disobeys me, disobeys Allah. He who obeys his leader, obeys me in consequence and he who disobeys his leader, basically disobeys me. (*Hadith: Sahih Al-Bukhari*)

2.10 Training Methodologies and Programs

BICSa trains its members on both the personal and group levels, on the former through the daily maintenance of a "personal report" and on the latter through Worker Meetings, Study Circles or Group Meetings,

Training Sessions, Training Camps, Speakers' Forums, and Evening Worship. Members are trained to gather knowledge from a close reading of designated Islamic texts and from Qur'anic and *hadith* lessons delivered by other activists. They are also trained to impart learning to others through the giving of *dars*. *Dars*, group study of Islamic texts, and discussion of personal reports constitute the structural core of not only Worker Meetings but Training Sessions and Training Camps as well.²⁷ These different training approaches can be seen as “technologies” for transforming traditional notions and practices of religiosity and thereby (re)producing Muslim subjecthood in present Bangladesh.

Dars is the most fundamental element of any BICSa training program, the primary instrument of Islamic pedagogy in BICSa. It is also used in public events but there takes on a more open form, in the manner of a “speech” (*baktabya*) or “*Tafsir Class*.” *Dars* is a form of Qur'anic or *hadith* exegesis, with the style of delivery modeled more along the lines of a university lecture than the traditional religious sermon (*waaz*) practiced in South Asia, which is characterized by an impassioned lyrical style infused with the frequent evocation of the horrors of hell-fire.²⁸ *Dars* delineates the ways religious texts might be understood in the light of the immediate reality and local and global events and vice versa. This

²⁷ A Training Session (TS) is a shorter version of a Training Camp (TC). While a TS lasts for a day, a TC is conducted over a period of three consecutive days.

²⁸ Saba Mahmood (1998) also delineates such differences in the modes of lessons (*dars*) delivered by female preachers in at mosques in Cairo.

effectively blurs boundaries posited in secular discourse between the sacred and the mundane. In contrast with *waaz*, *dars* appeals primarily to logic and only secondarily to emotion. It consists of the illumination of verses from the Qur'an through practical examples, where, unless the verses concerned deal specifically with God's wrath, punishment for the recalcitrant in the Hereafter is invoked but as background to the main text or in conclusion, when the audience is urged to implement the verses' teachings in their own lives. In explaining *Surah Al-Asr*, for instance, activists often liken life on earth with sitting for a school exam. Just as a student is judged on the basis of her writing, so will every human being be judged in the life Hereafter for her or his work in this world. Just as every moment in an exam counts, so does every second of our lifetime. In other words, every moment must be spent with the ultimate goal of preparing for thorough accounting in the life Hereafter. Meticulous utilization of time for doing good deeds oneself and urging others towards the same is the moral of *Surah Al-Asr*.

In conclusion of the *dars*, the intimate connection between piety and recruiting or salvation and organized sociopolitical action that is so central to the revivalist spirit of BICSa's ideology is reaffirmed; the audience is passionately urged to orient its daily life around the verses' teachings in order to attain success in the Hereafter. In the next chapter I turn to a detailed exploration of the *dars* as the basic methodology in BICSa's Islamic pedagogy.

CHAPTER 3

Worker Meetings: The Bodily-Spatial Production of a Female Islamic Activist Subjectivity

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the crafting of a female Islamist subjectivity through the site of the Worker Meeting (*Karmi baithak*), where “Worker” (*Karmi*) denotes BICSa members of the second cadre level. Thus, for instance, activists of the two dominant political parties in Bangladesh, the secular ethnic nationalist AL and the liberal Muslim nationalist BNP, are referred to as “League workers” and “BNP workers” respectively. However, the term “worker” may refer not only to political activists but also to social activists, such as those active in the feminist movement, which includes such groups as Naripakhkha (Women’s Party).

It is likely that the prevalence of the term “worker” in the diversely constituted activist arena bespeaks the powerful influence that socialism and communism have wielded in Bengal since the early twentieth century, and in the area now constituting Bangladesh from the 1950s through the mid-1970s. It has been suggested that Mawdudi himself, the founder of the Islamist party Jamaate Islami in colonial India and the guiding ideologue of BICSa, which is informally affiliated with Jamaate Islami Bangladesh, was influenced in his philosophy and organizational style by communist activism in British-ruled India (Nasr 1994, 1996). Further,

with the explosion of Islamic movements in many Muslim areas since the 1970s, the term “Islamic worker” has circulated globally as part of the vocabulary of elite transnational Islamic activism.¹

In this chapter I argue/demonstrate that a Worker Meeting serves as BICSa’s primary site for socializing its members into what may be termed an Islamist disposition or habitus (Bourdieu 1977). BICSa understands its mandatory organizational techniques, including Worker Meetings, as equipping Muslims with religious knowledge and moral discipline. I argue that a Worker Meeting facilitates significant changes not only in an adherent’s knowledge of Islam and ability to cultivate “moral virtues” (*naitik gunabali*) but at the level of her subjectivity, shaping her ability to imagine, think, feel, desire, and act in both intended and unintended ways. This disciplinary site can be broken down into a number of microtechnologies: the Qur’anic Lesson (*darsul Kor’an*); “report inscription” or the regular, careful logging of daily activities (*dainik report sangrakhkhan*); “organizational discussion” (*sangathanik alochana*); peer review of one’s personal qualities and abilities (*mohasaba*); and group supplicatory prayer (*monazat*).

¹ Thus, for instance, an Islamic handbook by Hisham Altalib, titled *Training Guide for Islamic Workers* and published in Herndon, Virginia, USA, by the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations and the International Institute of Islamic Thought in 1993 (3rd ed.) has been circulating among some Islamic activists in Bangladesh and possibly elsewhere. It was published in Arabic and Turkish in 1994. Another such manual popular among Islamic activist circles in North America is *Manual of Da’wah for Islamic Workers*, compiled and published in 1983 in Montreal by the Islamic Circle of North America. Yet another text, this one by Mawdudi, titled *Guidance for Islamic Workers* (date of publication unavailable) is available on a number of websites (e.g., www.youngmuslims.ca/onlinelibrary/books/hidayat).

Through an analysis of how these microtechnologies function in a Worker Meeting, I demonstrate the ways in which Islamic subjecthood in present-day Bangladesh is formed by the intersection of corporeal-sensory, spatial, and temporal practices. By “corporeal-sensory” practices I mean those that engage the body and the senses, especially speech and hearing. By “spatial” practices, I am referring to those actions / activities / practice that produce several kinds of space, including physical (e.g., the physical setting of a Worker Meeting), expressive (e.g., the novel space of writing that a meticulous log of daily activities constitutes), and “conceptual” (Messick 1993: 249). This epistemological space is inscribed in a new style of engaging with the Qur’an, which I discuss below. By “temporal” practices, I refer to those that produce and enact a hyperconsciousness of time, including endless, repetitive recording of the time spent on daily activities and the squeezing of organizational work, such as preparation for and attendance at Worker Meetings, into packed daily schedules. All these diverse organizational practices aim, some consciously and others unconsciously, at the formation of a pious subjecthood. Most of these practices involve bodies: where they go and when, what work they perform / do, the management of time, the navigation of space. But how can we conceptualize the relationship between a certain range of bodily practices and the historical-cultural production of an ideologically motivated subjectivity? In this regard I have found particularly useful Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “body hexis,”

the unconscious transmission of cultural ideology through the mute pedagogy of daily practical habits. These include the most minute and seemingly insignificant bodily mannerisms, such as one's manner of standing, speaking, dressing, eating, or walking. These gestures, in turn, reproduce and instill in subjects a durable, naturalized structure or disposition of feeling, thinking, and of being in the world. Bourdieu writes:

“Principles embodied in this way, are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, *made* body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand’” (Bourdieu 1977: 94, emphasis in original).

Gregory Starrett, in applying this notion of “bodily hexis” to Victorian judgment of the Egyptian body in ritual performance suggests a modification to this concept. He discusses, for example, Victorian condemnations of the rocking motion of children’s bodies in Egyptian popular schools, or the performances of “whirling” dervishes “howling” repetitious supplications as symbols of Arab and Muslim racial and cultural inferiority, and demonstrates the postcolonial Egyptian educational system’s constitution of the “modernized” and “disciplined” Muslim body as a symbol of cultural progress and social order. Starrett argues for a shift from reading hexis as mere habitus-formation through

mute, unconscious means, to considering the “embodiment of ideology in habit” within that larger context of processes through which individuals and groups consciously ascribe meaning to bodily dispositions and negotiate and contest interpretations of hexis in accordance with their ideological agendas (Starrett 1995). Saba Mahmood (2001), while agreeing with Starrett that bodily contestations instantiate struggles over competing models of society, critiques Starrett for assuming that the body bears exactly the same relationship of performative significance and potential to every ideological system. Through an exploration of the disciplinary ritual of Islamic prayer as cultivated by participants in the current mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood contrasts Islamic, Sunni-Salafi articulations of the relationship between body, self, and structures of authority in Egypt with the conceptualization of this relationship by liberal-secular Muslims. Within the specific context of the orthodox Islamic tradition, Mahmood sees the body less as a neutral signifying site on which different ideological meanings are scripted / inscribed at will, than as a tool through which certain kinds of moral capacities are performatively attained over time.

In this discussion of BICSa Worker Meetings, I extend such inquiries into the body’s relationship to ideological discourses and formations. I demonstrate how modalities of the bodily hexis integral to different regimes of power collapse messily into one another as women work to become embodied subjects of a particular, “reinvented” Islamic

way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Some discourses and contestations are explicit and consciously cultivated, while others are implicit and therefore unconsciously and inadvertently embodied. The result is an intensely cultivated body through which different socio-moral scripts come to cohere in an indeterminate way. The body and its sensibilities and dispositions are only partially consonant with any one of those structures of orthodoxy—whether liberal-modern-nationalist, politically and/or apolitically religious, or Bangali-cultural-ethnicist. Multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings are attributed to the body through conflicting systems of signification. In particular, I will consider the production of hybrid ideological dispositions through examining the relationship between bodily gestures and the minutiae of the particular spatio-temporal settings within which these gestures are enacted. Some of these bodily gestures are integral to the orthodox Islamic tradition, others heavily inflected with the modernist ambitions of the contemporary educational culture in Bangladesh, yet others local to the Bangali cultural tradition.

3.2 A Worker Meeting at an Activist’s Home, Palashi Unit

The members of each Unit of BICSa gather weekly for a structured Worker Meeting.² A typical Worker Meeting takes place in a room at the home of one of the members. Attendees sit in a circle on a bed or on the floor, with their notebooks, pens, pencils, “reporting books,” and the

² A Unit is the most fundamental constituent element or “cell” of BICSa.

record book for the meeting. The meeting usually takes place late in the afternoon, between 3 PM and 4 PM, in order to avoid conflict with school and the preparation of family lunch. It lasts about two hours and ends before dark so that members can return home before parents begin to worry. Since rooms are usually small and the performance of the Islamic prayer with its attendant body movements takes up floor space, members offer the afternoon (*'asr*) prayer in sequence, one attendee after another, toward the end of the meeting. The hosting member serves light refreshments.

On a hot, humid, sunny afternoon in August 2000, the members of Palashi Unit met for a typical worker met at the home of the Unit's Chairwoman Polly. Polly, a college student, lived with her parents, younger sister, and two older brothers in a crowded flat in a cluster of yellow, four-story apartment buildings for medium-ranking civil servants. The meeting took place in Polly's bedroom. Six members and I sat in a tight circle on Polly's bed, which was covered with an old, clean sheet. The room was crowded with personal effects. A dresser sat at the foot of Polly's bed with a bottle of hair oil, a bottle of body lotion, and a casket of facial powder on it. Stashed against the dresser was a small, old, metallic bookcase painted in a bright green. This held Polly's school textbooks. Across from the bed stood a dilapidated sideboard filled with old crockery. A section of the sideboard was stuffed with various storage items. Two clocks sat on top of the wagon, one wooden, a plain, dark brown, and the

other plastic, shaped like a frog, bright yellow and green. Also across from the bed and jostling against the wagon was an old wardrobe with Islamic books on top: classical-traditional texts such as Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Behesti Zewar* (the Jewel of Paradise) as well as modernist texts by Jamaat leaders and thinkers. While no Jamaat thinker is as well-known or prolific as Mawdudi, whose works constitute the core of the BICSa syllabus, I saw none of his books in Polly's room. Perhaps this was because Polly's parents, who tolerated their daughter's involvement with BICSa, were not enthusiastic about it. Her parents and brothers were not opposed to Jamaat, she had told me earlier, but they did not support it either. Therefore Polly has tried to be as discreet about her BICSa affiliation as she can.

The Unit members and I were bathed in mesmerizing patterns of sunlight entering through the two curtained windows. The floral-print curtains were carefully drawn not only as partial protection against the heat but also to block the gazes of anybody in any of the surrounding apartment buildings. Privacy, especially a refusal of the male gaze, is paramount to the moral landscape of BICSa women.³

³ Also, a safety issue for BICSA activists is the matter of not attracting undue attention from men or women affiliated with oppositional political parties. These occasionally seek to inflict violence on the persons or property of BICSA activists. A number of *borkha*-clad women gathered in a room and pouring over books and notebooks may draw attention in an urban neighborhood where the vast majority of educated women do not veil; even among those who do, very few veil by donning the rigorous *borkha* and even fewer do so in the distinct manner adopted by BICSA women, where instead of the billowing, traditional black headgear integral to the traditional *borkha*, a colorful headscarf is used to cover the head, upper torso, and part of the face as well.

The meeting was supposed to begin at 3 PM and end at 5 PM, so that the women could get home well before dark and so avoid questions from parents. But it was nearly 3:20 PM and still we waited, even though technically a Worker Meeting can start if three or more people are present, and more than that were there. But Polly was reluctant to start since she did not want anyone to miss any of the meeting, especially the lesson (*dars*), which must happen first, per format, and constitutes the core of any Worker Meeting. One member told Polly that a certain other member was ill and would not be able to attend. Polly remarked that it would have been more responsible for the absent member to have informed Polly herself over the phone. We waited till 3:30, by which time the last member had arrived and directed the traditional form of Islamic greeting “peace be on you” (*assalamu alaikum*) towards those present. The meeting began.

The Chairwoman opened with certain stylized introductory phrases characteristic of the narrative tradition of Muslim preaching in contemporary South Asia and elsewhere. Thus she greeted those present in the traditional Islamic manner and then uttered “In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Beneficent” (*basmalah*). She then proceeded to praise and glorify Allah and call for His blessings and peace on the Prophet Muhammad. However, as is standard BICSa fare, the Chairwoman of the Worker Meeting turned these formalisms to her advantage by using them to establish frames of meaning definitive of

BICSa's larger project. Thus, she thanked Allah "Who assigned humankind the highest honor and *responsibility (dayitya)* among all His creations and Who Has enabled us to gather for this meeting today despite numerous obstacles" (my emphasis). The Prophet Muhammad was hailed as the "ambassador for the liberation of humankind (*manabatar muktidoot*), through whom we received the Qur'an and who, by establishing the rule of the Qur'an in every area of personal life, social life, and political life, proved that it is only through following the peaceful, disciplined way determined by Allah that humankind, now oppressed by various ideologies, may attain liberty."

Such rhetorical moves establish a diachronic continuity from the divine purpose of human creation, to the revelation of the Qur'an and the Prophet's actions in seventh-century Arabia, to the contemporary endeavors of BICSa in Bangladesh, and finally to the very Worker Meeting in progress. The synchronic interpretive context that a Chairwoman enunciates on such occasions, which is generally pervasive in BICSa discourse, hinges on three idioms central to BICSa's project and that are likely shared to varying extents by contemporary Islamic revivalist movements elsewhere. First, it is the defining duty of every good Muslim to serve as a representative (*khalifa / pratinidhi*) of Allah in this world. Second, she performs this duty by striving to realize the Islamic ideology (*islami adarsha*) as a "complete code of life" (*purna jiban bidhan*) as laid down in the Qur'an, throughout both her personal world and society at

large. She must strive in the manner exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, and discipline (*susrinkhalata*) is key. Third, the reward (*puraskar*) of peace (*santi*), success (*safalya*), and liberation (*mukti*), both in this world and in the Hereafter, awaits a person who performs her duty adequately. Drawing on a religious vocabulary of mixed contemporary and older genres, the Chairwoman thus frames BICSa and the Worker Meeting in progress as essential instruments of a divine plan for the liberation of humankind from liberal-secular modernization.

While the meeting is being opened in this style, the Unit Secretary begins to record the meeting neatly and methodically in an exercise book reserved for this purpose. Each member's name is recorded and her signature obtained. Each attendant must jot down the precise time of her arrival. A member's punctuality indicates — to herself and her peers, seniors, and future auditors from the supervising office — the quality of her self-discipline and commitment to the organization (and hence to Islam itself). Should she be late for a meeting, then she must record the fact herself, physically testifying to her own fault. Additionally, she is required to reflect analytically and remorsefully on this lack of discipline and any other shortcomings in conducting herself as a Muslim and as a “warrior of Allah” in written self-criticism at the end of the day. Indeed, all members are required to engage in “self-criticism” (*atyasamalochana*) daily and to record the performance of this exercise in emotional

discipline in their formal log of daily activities. This log refers to the “daily report book” explored later on in this chapter.

3.3 Qur’anic Lesson (*Darsul Kor’an*)

The first and most important item on the agenda of a Worker Meeting is an oral presentation called the *dars*, Arabic for “lesson.” Qur’anic Lessons are BICSA’s primary medium for recruiting women, reshaping the activist’s moral landscape, and training them to disseminate Islamic knowledge. While Qur’anic Lessons are most often delivered in the context of routine Worker Meetings, they are also part and parcel of the occasional Training Sessions and Training Camps (BICSA’s large-scale training programs).

In the context of recruiting women from the general populace, a Qur’anic Lesson is called a *Tafsir* Class (“exegetical class,” as in “physics class” or “mathematics class” in school) since the public is more familiar with the term *tafsir* (exegetical explanations of Qur’anic verses) than *dars*. The setting is also different, usually the living room at a home of a non-Islamist but somewhat religious member of the community, rather than the private room of an activist. There are some structural differences between a Qur’anic Lesson presented at a Worker Meeting and a class in exegesis. First, the peer critique and commentary (described below) that follow the delivery of a lesson,⁴ are absent in a *Tafsir* Class, where only questions

⁴ At a regular Worker Meeting, both the style and content of a Qur’anic Lesson (*dars*) are critiqued upon delivery by the presentor’s peers even if the lesson or

from the audience and responses by the “teacher” or “lecturer” follow the main presentation. Second, in a typical *dars*, the speaker sometimes draws on the experiences of Islamic activists to offer “practical examples” for clarifying Qur’anic verses or demonstrating their relevance. While “practical examples” are still used in *Tafsir* Classes, they do not usually touch on Islamic activism. Instead, examples from daily life, the natural sciences, and the general condition of Muslims in Bangladesh and elsewhere are cited. Third, while a Qur’anic Lesson takes place largely among peers in an egalitarian setting, with the actual lesson delivered by an attendee chosen by the Chairwoman and the latter presiding over the event more as discussant and moderator rather than as teacher, there is a distinct hierarchical gap between the speaker and the audience in a *Tafsir* Class, where the relationship of listener to lecturer closely resembles the student-teacher relationship in an average Bangladeshi classroom: it is understood that the speaker is there to instruct and the audience to learn.

Besides Qur’anic Lessons there are two other types of *dars*: one centered on the *hadith* (*darsul hadith*) and the other on a general religious topic (*bisay bhittik dars*). The latter often concerns virtues or tenets central to the orthodox Islamic tradition (such as *hedayat* or guidance—the cultivation of one’s relationship with Allah) or a matter of particular relevance to the contemporary Islamic movement (such as “the importance of spending money in the path of Allah”). While the primary purpose of

talk is delivered by a senior member such as the Chairwoman of the meeting and of the administrative Unit.

these various types of lessons is to enable the mastery of Islamic knowledge, a secondary purpose is to equip one with the skills necessary for preaching. Thus, *darsul Kor'an*, as indicated above, is deployed as *tafsir* in the addressing of a general, non-Islamist audience. Lessons concerning general topics are deployed similarly when BICSa units organize events of public celebration and BICSa leaders from either the same Unit or higher administrative offices are asked to speak to the public on matters related to those particular occasions. Thus, for instance, for events organized to celebrate *Romzan*, the month of fasting, BICSa guest speakers are often asked to deliver talks on the role of fasting in self-purification. An ability to craft talks on a variety of religious topics is also useful as one ascends to higher positions within the organization and is invited to deliver talks at large training programs for BICSa activists themselves. In this chapter, I focus on the Qur'anic Lesson since BICSa considers this type of lesson to be the most important. Qur'anic Lessons are therefore held more frequently than the other two types of lesson.

The topic and type of *dars* for a Worker Meeting is declared by the Chairwoman at the previous meeting so that every member can prepare the lesson. The Chairwoman then selects a member at the present meeting to give the presentation. The others must listen carefully, for each will be called upon to comment critically on both the style and contents of the *dars* performance. The speaker begins by reciting the Qur'anic verses preassigned for the *dars*. This is followed by her peers' comments on the

various aspects of her recitation, such as the pronunciation of letters, words, and phrases. Following the traditions of Sufism, orthodox Islam, and popular Islam in South Asia, BICSa considers melodious Qur'anic recitation important for cultivating an intimate relationship with Allah, and offers training sessions in the proper rules of recitation (*tajwid*).

Widespread practices of Qur'anic recitation and other supererogatory forms of worship within “politically Islamic” communities in Bangladesh (e.g., BICSa and its parent group Jamaat) call into question rigidly conventional scholarly distinctions between Islamic forms of spirituality (Sufism), orthodoxy, and “fundamentalism.” These distinctions tend to accord higher degrees of piety or “authenticity” in religious commitment to the traditions of Sufism and to orthodoxy than to revivalist movements that seek not only personal and social change but political change as well. Such movements are often understood to have only an “instrumental” or “symbolic” relationship with religion. The great importance BICSa attributes to supererogatory forms of worship, such as Qur'anic recitation and the late night prayer of *tahajjud*, which do not directly conform to the “scientific” or rationalistic or “research” approach to the Qur'an that BICSa promulgates, indicates the partial grounding of BICSa's Islamist cosmology in the orthodox Islamic and Sufi traditions of self-purification.⁵

⁵ BICSa activists often use expressions such as “scientific methodology,” “age-appropriate style,” and “research-oriented study of the *Kor'an*” to convey the

Following recitation, the speaker reads aloud the Bangla translation of the assigned verses. She describes how the *Surah* to which those verses belong acquired its name (*namkaran*), mentions the period (in Makkah or Madinah) and time of the verses' revelation (*nazil habar samaykal*), and narrates the historical background (*aitihasik patabhumi*) for the revelation. Then the subject matter and gist (*bisaybastu o mul baktabya*) of the verses are stated and an exegesis or explanation (*bakhya*) is offered. The speaker ends by pointing out teachings derived (*sikhyaniya dik*) from the verses concerned and exhorts the listeners to implement these teachings in their lives. These categories and their order of presentation are taken directly from the thirty-volume Qur'anic exegesis titled *Tafheemul Kur'an* by Mawdudi.⁶ However, the explanation is interlaced with creative adaptations. Further, the derived teachings category is grounded both in a modern classroom approach to literary texts

distinct viability and sophistication of BICSa's approach to local student communities.

⁶ Since the many volumes of *Tafheemul Kur'an* are too expensive for lower-middle-class women and even for some middle-class members, many borrow volumes from others or from the Unit library (or even from the central office located in the middle-class Dhaka neighborhood of Maghbazaar) in order to prepare a *dars*. Some may photocopy the relevant pages from selected volumes, as guided by the syllabus, or purchase the few volumes constituting the Qur'an syllabus for the basic "worker" cadre, to which the majority of members belong at any particular time.

Mawdudi's *Tafheem* was first translated from Urdu into Bangla by Mawlana Abdur Rahim, a prominent religious scholar in Bangladesh. The first volume was published in 1959 and the remaining volumes between 1960 and 1980 (Khan 2001: 82). It seems that demand arose later for a more lucid translation, in a more accessible and modern Bangla (*Tafheem*, 6th edition, 1993, Vol. 1, translated by Mannan, published by Adhunik Prokashoni). In response, Abdul Mannan Talib of the Mawdudi Research Academy undertook a second translation. This translation was edited by Abbas Ali Khan, a prominent leader of Jamaate Islami Bangladesh, and published between 1980 and 1987 (Khan 2001: 82).

and in a revivalist emphasis on moral action. The exhortations category is appropriated from traditional preaching. Thematically, the explanation depends heavily on Mawdudi's revivalist exegesis, which combines classical exegesis with an analysis of modern conditions and a modernist penchant for individual productiveness, communal efficiency, and scientific rigor in education, explanation of natural and biological phenomena, and solutions designed to alleviate socio-political problems.

Beside the structure outlined above, a *dars* must meet five further conditions, which require that a *dars* deliverer engage in some research, creative thinking, and original narrative construction in preparation for the presentation. The speaker must sharpen her exposition of Mawdudi's exegesis by zeroing in on or further extracting key ideas and concepts (first condition), then elaborating each concept systematically, in a "point by point" manner (second condition). But exactly how is this to be done? In part, the speaker elaborates by paraphrasing Mawdudi (third condition), and in part she must use quotations from the Qur'an and *ahadith* (fourth condition) and examples from practical situations (fifth condition).

In her search for appropriate quotations, an activist resorts to the Qur'an, certain *ahadith* texts, and secondary Islamic literature from the organizational syllabus and consults with other activists as well. She chooses practical examples for her *dars* from her own experiences, those of people she knows, and textual resources. Practical examples are crucial because they bridge the gap, sensorially and spatiotemporally, between

Allah's revealed words and the human world, between the era of the Prophet Muhammad and current times.

Following the *dars*, members must comment on the quality of the recitation, the contents of the *dars*, and the style of delivery of the *dars*. Questions may be asked. If the deliverer is unable to answer, then the Chairwoman or somebody else may attempt to do so. All in all, a kind of "discussion" follows the delivery of a *dars*, serving at least five purposes. First, it allows for clarification of details and murky areas for both the speaker and listeners. Second, it trains activists in the art of posing questions. Third, the deliverer gets direct feedback on her performance and can use it to improve future performances. Fourth, listeners are tested for their attentiveness during the *dars*. Fifth, listeners hone their ability for "constructive criticism," an ability they must use frequently throughout their activist careers, as leaders, colleagues, and administrators. Finally, apart from the *dars*, the speaker must try to master the physical art of speaking. In other words, the speaker should not just read out the *dars* but be sufficiently familiar with it to be able to present without consulting her notes frequently.

Some scholars studying religious communities have focused on preaching or speaking as central to religious conviction, while others have emphasized an ethic of listening as crucial to the cultivation of the pious self (Harding 2000; Hirschkind 2001). In her work on evangelical Christian fundamentalists, Susan Harding argues that if conversion to a

religious world means the acquisition of a particular religious language as the inner voice, then “speaking is believing.” In her scheme, speaking constitutes a much more significant and difficult act than listening. While listening to gospel stories means one is “under conviction” or willing to believe, speaking them indicates the attainment of a higher plane, completion of the shift from not believing to believing: for one can speak the Gospel only when she has interiorized the voice of Allah Himself, who then speaks through her (Harding 2000).

Speaking or preaching is crucial to the formation of a godly self in BICSa as well, but listening is no less vital, for the two are interdependent and feed off each other. Preaching, according to BICSa ideology, propels the speaker towards greater piety by enhancing her cognitive knowledge of Islam and attuning her senses to Islamic sensibilities concretized repeatedly in utterance. The disciplinary impetus of preaching derives from two sources. One is the orthodox Islamic prescription to practice what one preaches—which implies that one must preach what one seeks to practice. The other is the revivalist imperative of consolidating others’ faith by serving as a role model, either actively or through the piousness (*taqwa*) and sweetness of one’s character (*charitra madhurja*). However, no matter how well one is able to deliver *dars*, she must continue to listen to others’ sermons, for listening softens the heart and “sticks words into the heart”. A softer heart, in turn, enables more persuasive speech, for the speaker’s inner sincerity moves her audience. For a BICSa member,

speaking and listening in the setting of the Worker Meeting are thus alternately and interdependently crucial for the production and regeneration of a modernized pious subjectivity. In no other BICSa practice is the importance of the complementarity of speaking and listening more evident than in that of the *dars*.

For evangelical Christian fundamentalists, there is no middle ground: you are either lost or saved. Speaking, in the sense of persuasive preaching or witnessing, indicates that you are saved (Harding 2000: 59). For BICSa activists, however, even the most sincere speaker can slip back if not constantly vigilant, for Satan is always at work. Like the pious Egyptians described by Hirschkind (2001), a BICSa activist sustains vigilance by disciplining her senses through listening to talks about Islam delivered by her peers and by those more pious and with greater knowledge of Islam than herself.

I suggest that the *dars* structure for narrativizing the Qur'an embodies a conceptual space that collapses normative distinctions between "preacher as scholar" (*'alim*) and "preacher as warrior" (*mujahid*) (Gaffney 1996). In South Asia until the 1960s this *dars*-structured space was an exclusive domain of men, the majority of whom were trained in traditional religious schools (*madrasa*). Not only have women come to inhabit this space in significant numbers since the 1970s because of BICSa, but the majority of these women have received modern or secular educations, not *madrasa* educations. The conceptual space constituted by

a BICSa Qur'anic Lesson is thus novel in many ways. On one hand, such a lesson is rooted in the Islamic preaching traditions. On the other, it essentially follows the modern ethos and particulars of contemporary classroom, departing markedly from the preaching practices (*khotba* and *waaz*) that Muslim traditional religious experts normatively follow in South Asia. Most BICSa recruits, trained since childhood in modern state schools, admire BICSa's style of engaging with the Qur'an as "scientific" (*baigyanik*), "appropriate to the times" (*jugopujagi*), and "advanced" (*unnatamner*).⁷ The modalities perceived in these terms are not superficial, but profoundly shape sensibilities over time. This disposes BICSa activists to understand and experience popular saint-centered practices as "incorrect," "backward," and "ignorant," or to perceive exclusively apolitical-ritual religiosity as "incomplete" and inattentive to Islam's "larger" objectives. Nor are shifts in sensibility limited to textual interpretation and religious speech. Thus, some members begin to complain that familial obligations detract from their real project of

⁷ In my conversations with BICSa activists as well as in speeches BICSa leaders delivered in training programs and in the course of Qur'anic discussions at Worker Meetings, these terms were often used to distinguish BICSa's approach to Islam and the Qur'an from the "conventional" (*gatamugatik*) approaches of other Islamic groups and various segments of the Bangladeshi population. By "scientific," BICSa activists often seemed to imply "strategically modern" but preferred not to describe any aspect of BICSa as "modern" in keeping with BICSa's formally propounded adherence to the "methods employed by the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets before him" and their ideological-publicly articulated opposition to "modernity." However, a close study of BICSa's organizational practices and the lifestyles of its members shows that like various Islamic revivalist groups elsewhere, BICSa repudiates "modernity" only selectively, discarding those aspects of modernity they perceive to clash with fundamental tenets of the Islamic tradition, and appropriating those aspects that are seen as consonant with the Islamic "code of life."

Islamization, and others argue that it is important for BICSa women to build careers if they are to spread the Islamic message more authoritatively. Official Islamist discourse, of course, continues to emphasize that a woman's primary roles are wifehood and motherhood, with the home her ideal location. I explore such internal contestations in Chapter 5.

Preparing to perform a *dars* requires a significant amount of time for an activist. This, in turn, requires the practice of self discipline, for BICSa activists have limited time. The majority are high-school and college/university students from the urban lower-middle class: they must spend the morning in school, the afternoon performing household work, and the evening on homework. Some tutor junior students part-time in the afternoon for much needed supplemental income. To carve extra time out of this packed schedule for organizational tasks such as preparing *dars*, traveling to and attending Worker Meetings, and collecting donations for the organization, demands constant vigilance about time.

3.4 Preservation of the “Daily Report” (*Dainik Report Sangrakhkhan*)

Indeed, the need for a “balanced” life, in which a person divides her time among essential activities in an efficient manner, is central to BICSa discourse. BICSa requires each member to record her daily activities and the time spent on each in a “reporting book” with printed slots for specific tasks, such as “prayers,” “supererogatory prayers,”

“Qur’an study,” “*hadith* study,” “study of Islamic literature,” “study of school texts,” “household work,” “organizational work,” “self-evaluation,” etc. A member must indicate at the end of each day how much time she spent on each kind of activity and how much she accomplished. It is emphasized that members must maintain a “balance” among the various activities listed. While success in the Hereafter is paramount, prosperity in this world of clocks and schedules is also important for the success of Islamic sociopolitical transformation. Striving for this transformation is in turn crucial for salvation. For instance, one should not peruse Islamic texts to the neglect of schoolwork; poor performance restricts a student’s influence on fellows. Nor must one spend so much time on organizational work that she cannot perform her household duties. Support from family members is essential, particularly for women, if they wish to spend a considerable amount of time outside the house, which is essential for most kinds of organizational work. More often than not, however, activists’ personal reports reflect a lesser commitment to organizational goals than is desirable. Schoolwork is often offered as the explanation. In response, members are exhorted that “if we study so hard just to pass an exam at school in this temporary life, how much harder should we be preparing to succeed in the exam of the life after death which shall determine our eternal fate.”

During the last Worker Meeting of each month, termed a Reporting Meeting, each Worker orally presents her daily activity log for

the past month for review by her Unit's Chairwoman (who is a slightly senior activist) and her peers. At the end of this oral review, the Unit Chairperson briefly records her comments in writing in each Worker's "report book." This serves two purposes. First, the materiality and official nature of these comments, however brief, helps persuade a worker to consider the activity log a serious, formal duty. Since each report book contains enough pages for a number of months, a Worker's supervisor's comments, enshrined at the bottom of the last page for each month, enable the activist to review at a glance her own progress or lack thereof. A Unit Chairwoman's inscribed comments serve as concrete evidence of an activist's merits and shortcomings, indeed, of her very faith and commitment to Islam for that particular month. Second, when higher-up BICSA leaders visit the Unit, they can determine whether the Workers' report books have been regularly reviewed or not.

Each report book also contains a tabulated page titled "Monthly Plan," on which a Worker records her plan for pursuing her Islamic and worldly duties during the following month. For instance, she records how many Qur'anic verses and *ahadith* she plans on studying; how many pages of Islamic literature she hopes to read; how many hours she plans to spend on schoolwork and how many on organizational work; how many times she plans on meeting with her personal "targets" (women she aims at recruiting); and so forth. During the review of her reporting book at a Reporting Meeting, her peers and chairperson will compare her plan for

the month with her actual daily log. Her plan for the following month will be evaluated for its feasibility and reflection of the member's desire to improve so that she might advance to the next cadre level.

I suggest that this system of "daily personal report preservation" exemplifies the mutually structuring relationship between self and society that underlies the BICSa imaginary. A virtuous, disciplined self is better able to work for the betterment of society which, in turn, is crucial to the formation of a virtuous, disciplined self. The constant balancing act required to fulfill familial, school, and organizational duties calls for a good deal of planning, which forces an activist to consciously reflect on the significance of each activity category within the larger setting of her daily life. In particular, enacting "self-evaluation" on the basis of the activities categorized in the reporting book facilitates a daily search for meaning, forging a connection between certain types of action and one's identity. Activists see their daily lives assume shape and meaning on successive pages, which imparts a sense of control over the course of one's life, a sense clearly cherished by my informants. Many testified that this system had been helpful in their self-construction. As members' reports continue to "improve" with time, their personhood as Islamic activists crystallizes along with their perception of their ability to *successfully work on themselves*; this produces a dramatic sense of

accomplishment.⁸ Activists feel empowered through their growing capacity to submit to divine power. On the basis of her ethnographic study of women in the mosque movement in Cairo, Saba Mahmood (1998, 2001) cogently interrogates contemporary feminist theories of power, asking what sort of analytical space these leave for analyzing subjectivities which strive to enact norms rather than to subvert them.

My BICSa interlocutors literally thank Allah for the purposeful clarity that BICSa brings to their lives and lament the “confusion,” “incoherence,” and “aimlessness” they see in the lives of those around them. Many activists consider personal reporting one of the best attributes of BICSa. As subjects of a postcolonial nation focused on forever expanding the reach of modern mass education, BICSa activists appreciate the systemic and “scientific” nature of this practice, which not only enables them to reconcile their desire for the modern with faith but also yields clear results in the form of promotion from one cadre to the next—and such promotion virtually equates to a growth of intimacy with Allah. Daily assessment of one’s own life, combined with monthly feedback from co-workers, gradually transforms the amorphous subjectivity of a cultural, habitual Muslim into the relatively coherent one of an Islamic activist. (But even the latter is far from monolithic, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.)

⁸ This coheres with the notion that Foucault develops in his later work on historically contingent “forms of self-writing” (1997). Anthony Giddens’ (1991) elaboration of the different kinds of work that one performs to acquire mastery over various aspects of the self within the specific historical, cultural regime of late modernity in industrialized nations is also instructive here.

The interconnectedness between the mundane and the divine that “report keeping” exemplifies challenges the secularist-nationalist relegation of Islam to the domain of the private, as well as the traditional Bangali equation of Islam with spirituality and concern for individual salvation. Further, the distinctly modern and “scientific” character of report-keeping challenges the local secularist ascription of Islamic activism or “fundamentalism” to ignorance, backwardness, or “medievalism,” just as it contests the invectives of some Islamist discourse against modernity, often conflated with Westernization. Report keeping elucidates an activist’s struggle to strike a “balance” between the different (but interrelated) realms of their lives with their attendant discourses: the intimate (household) and the public (organization), the spiritual (Qur’an recitation) and the mundane (schoolwork), the social (*dawat* or preaching) and the individual (prayers). In effect, activist subjecthood is formed at the *intersection* of these various discourses. A BICSa activist is thus simultaneously modern and pious, worldly and meditative, a good student and a fine Islamic warrior, loyal to her natal family but just as dedicated, if not more so, to her sisters in religion (*dini bon*). The activist discourse on Islam as a “complete code of life,” which bridges sites constructed as disparate in hegemonic discourses, is what makes BICSa distinctive for its members. At the same time, it is on the basis of this interconnectivity that members resist, with varying degrees of deliberateness, BICSa’s

regimentation of their lives. Again, such contestations will be explored in detail in Chapter 5.

I argue that physically inscribing both worldly and other-worldly daily activities simultaneously onto a single page constitutes a new, hybrid “physical space” where conventional boundaries posited between the secular and the religious realms, between the school and the mosque, and between the public mosque and the private home become blurred. The experience of constituting this space daily produces new sensibilities: recalibrated perceptions of one’s self, desires, and duties, of this world and the Hereafter, of one’s place in both worlds.

The passage of many days projected onto a single page enables a reconfigured appreciation of time and instills a sense of urgency, even desperation regarding time. “What have I accomplished today?” an activist asks herself as she looks at her life-trajectory on the pages of her reporting book. “How much time do I have left? Am I ready to account to Allah for my activities in this world?” Time is perceived as being increasingly consumed by the ever-widening reach of a modern secularity that creates the illusion of eternity through a boundless worldliness.

Yet this new space also produces a sense of control over time and over the course of one’s future. Recording the time spent on each activity materializes time so that it can be regulated. BICSa’s structured practices of record preservation and presentation is a highly reflexive exercise in self-monitoring and self-discipline which produces and cements certain

durable bodily and emotional dispositions. These habitus-forming practices are enacted not only through a concerted coordination of bodily and emotional states described so eloquently for the women's mosque movement in Cairo by Mahmood (2001), but at the intersection of corporeal-sensorial practice and spatio-temporal practice: time usage (temporal practice) is physically mapped onto the page-space (a corporeal-sensorial act), and at each "reporting meeting" the contents of the page-space are brought back into time through oral performance (another corporeal-sensorial act) so that group response can improve one's future time usage (temporal practice), which will in its turn be mapped onto the page-space, and so on, cyclically.

3.5 Organizational Discussion (*Sangathanik Alochana*)

Here I describe an organizational discussion that took place following a Worker Meeting in the Chairwoman's dormitory room at Shahjahan college.⁹ There were five members in this Unit: the Chairwoman Shaila, her Secretary Kaneeta, the treasurer Reena, the librarian Ruzeena, and three other members, Sheela, Polly, and Deepa. Of these, Shaila, Kaneeta, and Reena were advanced workers and the other four merely workers. As members of the graduating class, Shaila and Ruzeena were the most senior, with Kaneeta and Reena a year junior to them and the others even more junior. Seniority both in class and age helped Shaila and Kaneeta exercise authority over the others more

⁹ This meeting occurred on Nov. 25, 1999

effectively than if this had been a residential or neighborhood Unit (without the overlaid seniority structure of the academic setting). The following account will give some of idea of the extreme attention to physical detail, and to the ideological implications of physical detail, in the group's planning of an upcoming event.

First, a date was determined for the next Worker Meeting through mutual consultation. This took about fifteen minutes, as each member had to consult personal datebooks for exam dates, class and laboratory schedules, prior appointments with friends, and organizational activities. The latter included meetings with mentors at the city or central office, study circles, and meetings with individual donors for the collection of contributions. When most had agreed on 3 PM in the afternoon, Deepa protested that since she would have an exam earlier that day, she would be up studying late the night before and would have to get some sleep that afternoon following the exam. It was therefore decided the meeting would be held at 5 PM, following the afternoon prayer. This would give Deepa a chance to nap.

Second, Shaila wanted to discuss preparations for the upcoming Worker Gathering (*Karmi samabesh*) that their college, Shahjahan College, was hosting for their own workers and those from neighboring Rokeya College. Together these two institutions comprised a "branch," one of BICSa's numerous administrative categories. Such events are organized from time to time to inspire workers and enhance relationships

between workers at neighboring institutions. Shaila and her workers felt particularly invested in this program for two reasons. First, there had been some tension in recent years between the BICSa units at the two institutions. While Rokeya is not as prestigious as Shahjahan, the former boasts a larger number of workers known for greater dedication than those at Shahjahan. Rokeya workers felt that Shahjahan workers were somewhat snobbish and more focused on their worldly ambitions, and Shahjahan workers felt that Rokeya workers could not relate to the rigors of studying at Shahjahan, which meant that the average Shahjahan student had to do much more schoolwork than the average Rokeya worker. Shaila and her workers wanted to show that while they might not be able to perform organizational duties as regularly as Rokeya workers, they could outdo the latter in the impeccable organization of a large event. An average Shahjahan woman is wealthier than an average Rokeya worker and has access to wealthier donors (partly by virtue of being Shahjahan-affiliated). Thus Shahjahan's funds were always more ample than Rokeya's, allowing Shaila and her workers to organize relatively spectacular events.

The second reason Shaila and her workers were determined to pull off a particularly impressive worker gathering was that Shahjahan's relationship with the city and central BICSa offices had been under some strain in recent years owing to Shahjahan workers' failure to attend various training programs organized at the city and central levels.

Shahjahan workers always cited schoolwork as their primary excuse, but their superiors felt that they should be able to maintain a better “balance” between their schoolwork and organizational work and not neglect either. Now, Shaila and her workers were particularly fond of some of the recently elected officers of BICSa’s city and central committees, and these officers had been invited to the imminent “worker gathering” as keynote and guest speakers. Shaila was determined not only to impress them, but also to show them that whenever she and her workers *were* able to find the time to carry out organizational tasks, they could do so better than anybody else.

Shaila’s personal flair was for dramatic and spectacular performances rather than activities requiring daily, rigorous discipline. She, therefore, tried to impress her superiors using her strengths whenever an opportunity arose. More pious BICSa activists, however, would sometimes point out to Shaila that her bursts of “emotional” energy and attachment to the dramatic were not consistent with an Islamic emphasis on steadfastness and modesty through intellectual and spiritual reflection. Since Shaila’s enthusiasm for festivals and her “joy-seeking” personality helped render BICSa somewhat popular for the first time in decades at her college, Shaila’s superiors appreciated her charismatic skills; yet they worried that the motives which moved Shaila to organize such spectacular events were not sufficiently pure, even though Shaila appeared to think they were.

This kind of tension between practice and intention results, in part, from BICSa's methodology of engaging with the world in very contemporary ways but with a consciousness oriented to the Hereafter. The means are never outright conflictual with the ends, but they are not always in perfect harmony with them either. BICSa adopts certain strategies for reconstruction of self and society that it perceives as suited to a world increasingly dominated by science, technology, and a governmentality continually expanding into the home, the school, and the very mind of the citizen-subject.¹⁰ A strategy for reconstruction at the personal level is the mandatory keeping of a meticulous, written record of one's daily activities. Inevitably, one motive for keeping such a record is a desire to please and impress one's peers and superiors—and since a record of progress is guaranteed to please and impress more than a record of backsliding and procrastination, some BICSa members are less than

¹⁰ This perception among BICSa activists that the world is increasingly shaped by science and technology derives primarily from three sources. First, many Bangladeshis consider specialization in the natural sciences especially in the fields of medicine, engineering, and computer science as very prestigious, socially useful, and materially rewarding. Second, socio-political-intellectual leaders of all stripes often call emphatically for further national progress in the fields of science and technology if Bangladesh is to survive in a world understood to be increasingly competitive and globalized. Third, various local groups of Islamic activists believe that technological advance explains, in part, Western domination of the world today despite the moral depravity of the West. BICSa activists find these local perceptions repeatedly reaffirmed in their readings of speeches delivered by and/or essays authored by international Muslim leaders that are sometimes published in local newspapers. BICSa activist leaders' frequent lament that the British have effectively destroyed the Islamic character of Muslim South Asia by instituting a primarily non-religious system of education and that this is one of the primary reasons for many Bangladeshis' opposition and apathy to Islamic revival conveys these women's belief in and even partial admiration for the incredible power the modern state wields through the systematic molding of individual and ultimately societal minds through public education.

honest in their record-keeping. As some BICSa activists point out, it is not always possible to maintain a clear distinction between a desire to please Allah and a desire to please human beings—and while Allah is pleased, presumably, only by real spiritual progress, human beings can be made quite happy by some marks in a book.

An example of a modernistic strategy for societal (as opposed to individual) change is the kind of gathering or public event that Shaila and her fellow workers at Shahjahan were consulting about. Organizing such events to propagate BICSa's message among fellow students and recruit women into the organization is not only encouraged but obligatory. Yet, as in the case of personal report-keeping, activists are often motivated by an amalgam of factors, not all of them pious, in the pursuit of such projects. What makes motives mixed in the face of BICSa's constant emphasis on performing every good deed only with Allah in mind? I suggest, first, that it is BICSa's mimicry of state governmentality elaborated through pervasive disciplinary structures. An activist experiences this organizational culture so substantively that she is sometimes unable to locate the precise source of her motivation for performing certain actions.

Second, BICSa explicitly draws upon the orthodox Islamic notion of competing with others in the doing of good deeds. But Allah's approval is not the only reward for such deeds: BICSa offers additional incentives in the form of promotion to higher organizational ranks and

attendant notions of prestige, authority, piety, capability, and success. Thus, although Islamic competitiveness is divinely oriented in theory, in BICSa practice it becomes infused with the complex dynamics of friendship, camaraderie, frustration, rivalry, envy, and grievance. Such a polyvalence of desire and sensation contributes to the formation of an essentially ambivalent subjectivity, the effects and ramifications of which I fully explore in Chapter 5. The remainder of the above-mentioned organizational discussion at Shahjahan further reveals the extent to which intricately mixed human motivations and sensibilities come to pervade the site of a Worker Meeting.

When Shaila asked for suggestions concerning decorations for the event, Ruzeena suggested that perhaps they could draw the monogram of the college artistically on firm white paper as wall décor. Shaila and the others seemed to like the idea at first, but then it occurred to Shaila that the monogram consisted of a vague, reptilian form wrapped around the stalk of a flower. She pointed out that while she personally did not feel that a snake-shaped form in a monogram is objectionable from an Islamic point of view, it might offend some of the more pious guests, given the orthodox Islamic rule against the artistic reproduction of any human or animal figure (in recognition of Allah's exclusive right and ability to create life). The previous year, too, Shahjahan workers had been criticized for a song they performed at an organizational event they hosted on their campus. The song was an old, popular one in Bangladesh, but a guest and BICSa

superior had pointed out that it was thematically inappropriate since it implied that “Allah created the world and everything else in it out of whim and running the world is no more than mere play for Him, while the Qur’an clearly states that Allah created everything as part of an elaborate, immaculately conceived plan.” So, this year, stressed Shaila, Shahjahan must be especially careful not to make any errors. The monogram was rejected and other aspects of the event were discussed before resolving the question of décor.

It was decided that the event would take place in the room Shaila shared with Ruzeena, which was particularly spacious. Sheela surmised that at least a week’s preparation would be needed and the others agreed. It was decided through consultation that Shaila, Ruzeena, and Reena would wear *sari*, considered essential to “dressing up” for festive occasions in Bangladesh. Shaila, especially, and her closest friend Ruzeena were always loath to miss an opportunity to don a *sari* and ornaments. Reena balked; she was somewhat “tomboyish,” with a strong temperament, and expressed a desire to wear her best *salwar kamiz*¹¹ instead. She yielded, however, upon Shaila’s insistence.

It was also decided that Shaila would recite the Qur’an and read out the translation while Ruzeena and Reena served as commentators. Shaila and Deepa would be responsible for cleaning and setting up

¹¹ A two-piece customary attire for young and unmarried Bangladeshi women, consisting of loose, pleated pants and a roughly knee-length tunic worn with a light shawl (*dopatta*) draped loosely across the chest.

Shaila's room for the event. In particular, they would cover the part of the floor where the invited workers were to sit with three large, plain tablecloths that Shaila, Ruzeena, and Reena would borrow from their mothers. They would put Shaila's and Ruzeena's single beds together and cover them with two beautiful bedspreads that Shaila and Ruzeena would borrow from their mothers, creating a makeshift platform. Polly would stand at the entrance, welcoming each guest with a stalk of a white flower indigenous to Bangladesh and directing her to a seat. She was also responsible for purchasing a basket of fresh flowers to be placed on a small table placed right against the bed, in front of the guest speakers. Kaneeta and Ruzeena would be in charge of room décor, the "artistic side"—they would design and draw up two large decorative posters (no animal or human forms). These would announce the event and would be hung on the large wall right across from where the invited speakers would sit, facing hosts and guests. A pattern would be hung on each of the two sides of these posters, consisting of floral designs cut out of a silvery paper with shimmering dark pink shades on it and pasted onto a light-pink cardboard to create a subtle contrast. The wall against which the workers would sit would be decorated with two large patterns made out of real flowers, leaves, and stalks. Kaneeta and Ruzeena would also prepare leaflets with Qur'anic verses and *ahadith* written on them in a calligraphic hand. Shaila and Ruzeena would post these on the walls throughout the dormitory where the event would take place.

I surmised that the effect of posting the calligraphic verses was to sacralize the site. It would connect the Worker Meeting to the artistic, visually evocative aspect of modern Bangladeshi culture, which is particularly visible at educational institutions, at cultural events, and on graffiti-covered walls. It would also announce BICSa's presence to others in the dorm, and create a festive ambience of sisterhood and mission for the guests.

Further, Ruzeena would creatively fashion "badges" or name-tags for the guest speakers out of rose buds, ribbons, crayons, and white cardboard. Kaneeta, Ruzeena, and Shaila would shop together for the various materials they would need for their artistic projects. Since classes would take up the entire morning and the evening must be spent studying for the following day's classes, they felt they would need to spend two afternoons collecting materials. Shaila's health was fragile, and she usually needed to rest a little in the afternoon after a long day of classes, but she figured she could skip the break on this occasion, as she sometimes did for organizational work.

Organizing such events often constitutes one of the most important and, for the workers, interesting topics of discussion at Worker Meetings. In the course of these involved logistical discussions, laughter and stories were shared. Workers negotiated plans for the event against a backdrop of shared experiences in organizing similar events and contemporary

relations with central organizational leaders and fellow workers at neighboring institutions.

Another crucial item at Worker Meetings, although less entertaining, is the implementation of instructions contained in the “organizational circulars” or instructional letters periodically distributed throughout a city or administrative region by the central BICSa office of the area. To outline the nature of the practices surrounding these circulars, I describe part of a workers’ meeting that took place on April 3, 1999, at Shahjahan College.

The first item on the agenda that day was discussion of the printed “circular” Shaila had received from the Dhaka City Office concerning General Invitation Week (*sadharan dawati saptaho*). The circular for that particular week (April 17–23), during which activists must focus exclusively on inviting other women to the Islamic movement, assigned specific activities: e.g., each activist must invite at least ten women, try to get as many women as possible to fill out the organization’s primary membership form, inspire donors to contribute more money, and increase the number of subscribers to Islamist newspapers and magazines. At the end of this week, each *thana*—an administrative region that supervises a number of smaller Units—would conduct an analysis of the week’s activity reports from its units and report to the City Office within ten days.

The circular suggested specific strategies for inviting women into the Islamist fold, including distributing BICSa-sponsored cassettes,

publications, and stickers and organizing General Gatherings (*sadharan sabha*), Donor Gatherings (*sudhi samabesh*), tea parties (*cha-chakra*), feasts (*samastik bhoj*), and book exhibitions (*pustak pradarshani*).

Attached to the letter of instruction was a precisely tabulated form; this was the report that would have to be filed with the City Office following the General Invitation Week detailing the various activities undertaken and the extent to which each category was successful. Thus, for instance, if an event centered on Qur'anic exegesis was organized in a neighborhood, the Unit must record the location, the number of women invited, the number of attendees, and any comments pertaining to the outcome of the event. At the meeting I attended, Shaila first read out the entire circular, item by item, then passed around both the instructions and "report form" for the others to see.

"Organizational discussion" often works as a space for strengthening bonds among workers. Sometimes this space even allows for critiques of the organization. On the one hand, this may be understood as detrimental to the organization, since worker critiques can reinforce each other and lead to established dissent. On the other hand, I suggest that this space of critique, which may be interpreted as "subversive," "rebellious," or "facilitative of disorder (*fitna*)" by senior BICSa leaders, actually serves as an exhaust valve for frustrations and for clarifying issues that might seem "naturally evident" or "commonsensical" to older BICSa leaders.

Thus, for example, when members were trying to agree on a time for the next Worker Meeting, Sifat, an advanced worker, observed that she did not feel inspired by Worker Meetings anymore and that something was missing. She felt that these meetings did not bring her closer to her co-activists or to the organization. As for studying the Qur'an and *hadith*, she could very well study these texts on her own. Shaila, the Unit Chairperson, tried to assuage the frustrated Sifat by comparing BICSa and its various rules and regulations with those of a school. For a school to run smoothly, said Shaila, there must be certain rules and students must follow those rules. Meetings supplement personal study as classroom lectures supplement home study of textbooks. Shaila also argued, that a habit of attending classes at particular times and carrying out certain activities associated with class attendance helps one acquire discipline, likewise with Worker Meeting.

Sifat did not seem fully convinced, but the form and content of this exchange conveyed to activists the dialogic openness and acceptance of questioning and critique so characteristic of the current collegial culture of both student organizations and classroom activities. This legitimizes the functioning of BICSa as a sophisticated sisterhood based as much on discussion and reflection as on obedience and a disciplined conformity.

“Organizational discussion” also serves as a space of building solidarity through commiseration about incidents of opposition and violence or personal loss and crisis. It provides a crucial medium for

camaraderie, the articulation and sharing of personal problems, and the voicing of issues such as grievances concerning organizational rules or authorities that one would not likely raise with superiors or workers from other cadres.

3.6 Peer Review of One's Personal Disposition (*Mohasaba*)

Mohasaba is a process whereby at the final Worker Meeting of each month (termed as “reporting meeting”), one worker volunteers to submit herself to the constructive criticisms of her peers. Each peer starts off with the worker's good aspects, goes on to their less desirable ones, and ends with suggestions as to how they might improve. The worker under review can respond to criticisms if she so desires. It is explained that such criticisms are made solely for the benefit of the worker and arise out of her peers' genuine love and concern for her well-being, and that she should accept them in the same spirit. Since criticisms can involve the most intimate and vulnerable aspects of a worker's character—e.g., moodiness, impatience, laziness, insincerity—*mohasaba* can bring workers to the point where boundaries between one's self and the others become less sharply defined. It also enables activists to strive towards the BICSa ideals of humbleness and of putting the needs of other “sisters” before one's own.

While intended to embed an activist more firmly within a community of Islamic workers by diminishing the emotional distance between workers and muting hierarchical distinctions between

chairwomen and other members,¹² *mohasaba* can also facilitate individuation through fostering feelings of difference. The ways in which this tension between individuation and communal identity consolidation usually resists complete resolution is further explored in Chapter 4, especially in the context of an activist's experiences of opposition to her Islamist commitments by family, friends, fellow students, and teachers.

In principle, *mohasaba* is grounded in the prophetic tradition that declares a believer (*mu'min*) to be the mirror for other believers, and is intended solely to enhance one's qualities as a Muslim and an Islamic worker. Yet it can be acutely embarrassing or unsettling, and many activists, especially the brighter and more confident women, struggle for years to be able to calmly process criticisms of themselves by fellow members, particularly junior members. Some never master their inclination towards defensiveness. Especially hard to take is criticism of an older or more experienced activist by those she leads. In order to suggest the intimate form that *mohasaba* often takes and its power to motivate self-improvement, I describe Shaila's *mohasaba* by her fellow (mostly junior) Unit members at Shahjahan College.¹³

After Shaila volunteered to "present" herself to her fellow Unit members for critique, one member, a *Karmi* (Worker) named Shapla,

¹² A Chairwoman must take turns with other Unit members in presenting herself to her fellow Unit members for personal critique.

¹³ This Reporting Meeting at Shahjahan College occurred on Sept. 28, 1999.

observed that since she had not known Shaila for long, being a newcomer to the group and college, she felt it would be more appropriate for her to stick to Shaila's activities directly related to the organization. She suggested that it seemed inappropriate that Shaila, who had been an *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker) for several years, had not yet managed to elevate her faith and concomitant qualifications to the higher and highest level of *Sadasya* (Full Member). She said that it was a shame that a highly competitive college such as Shahjahan had not been able to produce a *Sadasya* in many years.

Another worker, Sifat, agreed and added that a general decision needed to be taken regarding the permissibility of attending college cultural programs such as concerts and film festivals, which were usually un-Islamic. Sifat pointed out that college film festivals were centered on Hollywood and Bollywood movies; films from Islamic countries such as Iran, for example, were never included. According to Sifat, non-activist women notice the participation of some BICSa women in these programs, tending to weaken BICSa's credibility as a "factory for the production of pristine Muslims"¹⁴ with stronger faith than the average Bangladeshi Muslim. Sifat said that when she recently refused to participate in a cultural program that some of her friends were going to attend, they pointed out to her that Sifat's chairperson, Shaila, frequently attended such programs.

¹⁴ Field notes, Worker Meeting at Shahjahan College, September 28, 1999.

At this point, Shaila's Secretary, Kusum, joined the conversation. She had noticed the tension in Sifat's face and in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere, said that she herself had a particular weakness for music and was struggling to overcome this weakness since BICSa activists must serve as role models for others to follow and cannot be as vulnerable to temptations as an average person. "How could BICSa hope to reform others if its own activists could not sustain an exceptionally pious character?" Kusum asked rhetorically.

I draw attention to two things here. First, even though Shapla and Sifat tried to be relaxed and mild as they pointed out Shaila's shortcomings, their discomfort was evident. For instance, instead of directly pointing out that Shaila was in fact the only one of two Islamist women on campus often seen to participate in "un-Islamic" college cultural programs, Sifat resorts to seeking a "general consensus" on this matter, as though this were a widespread problem, and to citing her friends as those who questioned BICSa's claims to moral superiority by pointing to instances of Shaila's attendance at concerts and Bollywood-Hollywood film festivals. Palpable discomfort in the room even led Shaila's Secretary Kusum to jump in, testifying that Shaila was not the only one with such weaknesses, and then to assert BICSa's *general* principle that its activists serve as exemplary Muslims. Critiquing an older fellow member who is higher both in organizational rank and college/university class does not come naturally and requires the gradual and arduous breaking-down of

certain inhibitions. In Bangladeshi society, one often goes to great lengths to avoid critiquing another openly. Criticisms are therefore often voiced through the popular practice of “backbiting” (*gibat*)—talking behind someone’s back—a practice that BICSa attempts to curb through numerous Qur’anic Lessons devoted to discussions of its “gravely sinful” (*kabira gunah*) nature. The Bangladeshi political arena, where politicians not only critique one another openly but often with extreme candor bordering on personal attack, is an exception. But then this kind of political mud-slinging can be hardly termed “constructive,” a quality considered central to all forms of critique or evaluation within BICSa, from evaluations of *dars* performances, to *mohasaba*, to the administrative performance of organizational Units. Of these various forms of evaluation, activists tend to find *mohasaba* the most difficult because in *mohasaba* a tension between “civility” and “attack” must be sustained in a delicate and productive manner. Often, especially when the *mohasaba* of a senior member is undertaken, junior activists are reluctant to participate and spend several minutes prompting each other to speak up first.

Through *mohasaba*, members come to perceive BICSa as an institution of “high culture,” harrowing but elevating, where the values of transparency and civility are held dear. At the same time, *mohasaba* sets BICSa apart from any familiar institution in the minds of members. First, the “high culture” of constructive criticism in the national arena is

conducted strictly in a vocabulary of “duties” and “responsibilities” with regard to one’s formal occupation. In the “high culture” of academia, ideas are critiqued, not the attributes of the writer as a person or as a Muslim. *Mohasaba*, in contrast, is as personal as an evaluation can be. To critique a fellow activist one knows well and cares about, openly and in the presence of several other fellow activists, and the for the critiqued activist to graciously accept the judgments passed (although a few do try to respond politely), demands a certain degree of intimacy. Second, for a senior activist to be considered a fair target for critiques by junior activists denotes a degree of equity not often found in the larger Bangladeshi culture. The idea is that, unlike the culture of “formal occupation”-related accountabilities practiced in the governmental domains, *mohasaba* embodies the possibility and necessity of improvement in *every* aspect of a person’s character and abilities. This, in turn, reflects the all-encompassing spirit of the Islamic tradition which upholds that a Muslim must in principle ultimately account for every word uttered, every deed performed, every word listened to, every image witnessed, and the precise nature of every intention. In effect, like some of the other microtechnologies described above, *mohasaba* simultaneously embodies BICSa’s place within modern or “urban” culture and its distinction from this culture, its intention to produce subjects who would embody orthodox Muslim virtue.

3.7 Supplicatory Prayer (*Monazat*)

A Worker Meeting always ends with supplicatory prayer (*doa* or *monazat*), which serves as a powerful medium for the cultivation of piety in BICSa. *Monazat* is offered both in individual settings, as at the end of each of the five obligatory daily prayers, and in group settings, such as at the end of a prayer held in congregation at a mosque, at the end of a popular preaching session (*waaz*), or at context-specific popular gatherings for devotional prayers in a group (*milad mahfil*). While this practice is firmly grounded in the orthodox Islamic tradition, it is also crucially refigured in BICSa practices. Traditionally, not only is *monazat* led by a traditional religious expert in a group setting, but women are not active participants. Recently, while a few women as part of an entourage might be occasionally seen to participate in *monazat* at the end of an inaugural ceremony, such participation can be considered superficial: not only does such *monazat* tend to be very brief, but participants can often be seen, especially in televised images, to be looking hither and thither or simply staring stonily into their hands, which are cupped in a gesture of submission and concentration. The presence of the media at such sites, often characterized by flashing cameras, understandably makes focus difficult, without which Islamic prayer, as understood within its historical context, can be argued to be essentially flawed. Many BICSa activists as well as some non-activist local observers understand such media-covered

monazat, with a few women occasionally participating as part of a key figure's entourage, as more constitutive of spectacle than piety.

In religious households, women often join men in prayer from the other side of a curtain. However, in such cases, women are often not able to clearly hear the male leading the supplicatory prayer and are therefore not able to invest themselves emotionally in the prayer in the same manner as the men. Since the majority of Muslims in Bangladesh follow the Hanafi school of Islamic law, which discourages women from participating in mosque activities, women are not usually able to participate in the powerful supplicatory prayers led by well-trained and well-versed prayer leaders (*imam*) at mosques. And until recently, women were not able to participate in the poignant supplicatory prayers conducted at the end of public preaching events (*waaz mahfil*). On such occasions, women were strictly segregated from the men through curtains (but able to hear the preachers clearly thanks to amplification). Only since the year 2000 or later have certain Islamic groups begun to make arrangements for women to not only hear the male preachers but view them on a screen installed in the women's section.

BICSa, however, departs radically from traditional Islamic practice in Bangladesh, and trains women to preach and to conduct *monazat*.

While an average pious Bangladeshi Muslim is able to utter a few standard Arabic verses to serve as *monazat* after each of the five daily prayers, few non-religious educated Bangladeshis are able to conduct *monazat* in a

public setting. In the domain of BICSa, *monazat* takes on a broader valence than has been attributed to it traditionally, and BICSa activists see themselves as reviving the correct spirit of this particular practice, namely, to cultivate intimacy with Allah by opening one's heart to Him completely and beseeching Him for all help and mercy. A true Muslim, BICSa argues, seeks help from Allah alone, and *monazat* is the ultimate medium for doing just that: direct discourse with Allah. While prayer also constitutes a form of such discourse, it must be performed in Arabic and the format is quite rigid: for instance, only specific Qur'anic verses must be uttered. *Monazat*, on the other hand, may be conducted in any language and a person may ask Allah for anything she or he desires. Ability to beseech Allah in one's own language facilitates the cultivation of intimacy with Him through *monazat*. Performed properly, *monazat* "compels" Allah to respond; many Qur'anic verses and *hadith* attest to Allah's eagerness to respond to calls from His servants.

Any BICSa gathering, therefore, whether for the public or exclusively for organizational members, closes with *monazat*. This is often led by the person presiding over the particular event. First, the conductor asks others to recite two sets of Qur'anic verses well known among devout Muslims for the purpose of purifying one's intentions and rendering one's heart more inclined towards Allah. This increases the probability of Allah's acceptance of the prayer to follow.

In the first set of verses, *astagfirullah*, refuge is sought with Allah from Satan. The second set, *darud sharif*, has some variations. In one of the most common, Allah is asked to bless the Prophet Muhammad and his family as He blessed the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) and his family. Often, each set of verses is chanted three times. *Monazat* then begins with recitation of *Surah Al-Fatiha*, the opening *surah* in the Qur'an. Each person present in the room holds up her cupped hands; the eyes are often shut in concentration. Each complete utterance is followed by a loud “*amin*”¹⁵ from other women. In the process, both the conductor and other women begin, ideally, to weep. It is believed that tears embody earnestness, vulnerability and the deepest of emotions, exemplifying the softening of the heart so crucial for compelling a favorable response from Allah. According to BICSA activists, tears ideally pour forth from a soft heart: in practice, however, since most hearts have been hardened by materialism, worldliness, and temptation by Satan, BICSA members are urged to force themselves to weep initially. In time, say BICSA activists, forced tears are supposed to gradually cause a softening of the heart; tears then follow effortlessly.

Monazat constituted one of my most powerful experiences in the field. Especially at large training programs, when the conductor begins to weep over the microphone as she offers up pleas to Allah for aid, mercy, and forgiveness—forced out determinedly through virtually uncontrollable

¹⁵ This word does not have a synonym and is the English equivalent of “Amen” with which Christian and Jewish prayers are ritually ended as well.

sobs—the sensation of being in the divine presence and of feeling simultaneously vulnerable and empowered can be overwhelming. *Monazat* can take anywhere from five minutes (as in Worker Meetings) to half an hour (as at the end of a Training Camp or public event during *Ramzan*). The larger the gathering, the longer the *monazat* and the more pious and qualified the person who conducts it tends to be.

In closing, the conductor utters certain standard Qur’anic verses and ends with “*amen*”. The following is an excerpt from the *monazat* performed at a BICSa training program.¹⁶ in November 1999:

O Allah, guide us along the right path. Grant us the ability to love you more dearly. Forgive us all our wrongdoings, done consciously or otherwise. We hope for your kindness and beg for your mercy. We cannot praise you enough for the endless blessings you heap on us. Bless our parents who have sacrificed much on our account. Grant health to those among us who are ill, respite to those who suffer, success to those who strive in schoolwork and who struggle to establish your religion on this soil. Enable us to overcome all our weaknesses and to devote all our time and energy to your cause. Bless our country, O Allah, bless the Muslim *ummah*, and bless the world. Our brothers, who struggle in your path, are being attacked, maimed, and martyred. People suffer throughout the world today and the air is heavy with their cries of despair. Muslims are oppressed everywhere and yet our enemies conspire. Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Palestine are burning. Send us leaders like Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali,¹⁷ so that we may be rescued and may fight in Your path to bring peace and happiness to this world. Help us on the Day of Judgment, when none but you will be the sole wielder of power. Preserve us from hell-fire and from the whisperings of Satan. Enable us to sacrifice all we have for your sake.

¹⁶ This training program was held during November 1999.

¹⁷ The four “rightly guided” caliphs, successors to the Prophet Muhammad’s rule, believed by orthodox Sunni Muslims to have continued and embodied the reign of the “golden age of Islam.”

An ability to articulate *monazat* in such detail and with such emotion while facing an audience, as is usually the case, must be cultivated over a period of years. Here, to indicate the kind of work many BICSA activists must invest in acquiring the ability to conduct such supplicatory prayers, I describe a moment from a Worker Meeting drawing to a close at Shahjahan College:

Shaila asked Deepa to conduct the *monazat*. Deepa, who was shy and had recently arrived at the college/university from a semi-rural town, appeared reluctant and nervous. She had never conducted a *monazat* before, she said, and pleaded with Shaila to let her off the hook, but Shaila was adamant. "Each of us must learn how to do these basic things," she said. "Just raise your hands in prayer and the words will come." Deepa, however, found that words refused to form even after she had raised her hands in prayer, as Shaila had instructed, and forced herself to utter a complete sentence or two. With her hands still raised in supplication, Deepa begged others to help her finish. What else could she say that might be appropriate for the occasion, she wondered out aloud, continuing to keep her eyes shut in forced concentration and her cupped hands raised. At this, there was muffled laughter from two of the workers. Then Shaila intervened and continued the *monazat* on behalf of Deepa, spending more than ten minutes begging Allah for help in a variety of matters. However, once the prayer had been completed, Shaila expressed her moral outrage at the muffled laughter she had heard from the others. She also reproached

Deepa for having “created a scene” when she could have simply finished the prayer by uttering “*amen*” when she ran out of ideas. She expressed frustration that despite having attended several Worker Meetings, Deepa was still unable to conduct a supplicatory prayer where one merely asks Allah for help in both personal matters, such as health and studies, and organizational matters, such as regular participation in Worker Meetings, regular study of the Qur’an, *ahadith*, and secondary Islamic literature, and inviting others to the Islamic path. Deepa looked very embarrassed and softly asserted that she would try harder to overcome her shyness of public speaking. She explained that until coming to Shahjahan College she had never been required to say anything in public, since she had always attended small, semi-urban schools. Now her mind tended to go blank from nervousness whenever she had to formulate thoughts for articulation in front of a number of people, even if it were just a few lines in prayer. Shaila and the others were quick to comfort her warmly, express admiration for how far and quickly she had already developed as an Islamic worker, and encourage her in her endeavor. Shaila sought to motivate Deepa by linking the sort of confidence participation in the Islamic movement requires to that essential for survival at an institution as demanding as Shahjahan College, with its frequent oral exams.

3.8 Conclusion

A Worker Meeting has a range of corporeal-sensory and spatiotemporal effects on its participants.

(1) Women do not usually take off their veils at these meetings, even though no male is likely to enter the room. There are several reasons for this. Many activists are lower-middle-class women who cannot afford nice clothing, so they tend to wear very inexpensive indoor clothing under the veils (which they are more comfortable not revealing). Time and effort are other factors. Many activists arrive at meetings tired and flustered; taking off the veil for a relatively short period of time is considered a hassle. Many rush to meetings from lunch or school without having had the time to change into presentable under-veil clothes (even if they own them). Also, women strive to discipline their experience of the body by refusing to unveil even at exclusively female indoor meetings where veiling is not required; sweat begins to appear on the face, especially on the forehead at the edge of the headcovering. Such discipline facilitates their ability to observe veiling in other circumstances; not only is veiling sometimes difficult outdoors in hot, humid Bangladesh, but high rents in Dhaka and other cities mean that lower-middle-class and even many middle-class women must share living space with male kin whom the Qur'an identifies as non-*mahrūm* (not forbidden in marriage), in whose presence veiling is required. Public veiling, in turn, by cultivating a disciplined and piety-oriented self, tends to induce an activist to observe veiling or modesty to an extent not theoretically or formally required by BICSa (i.e., even in the absence of men). BICSa activists thus behave at a

Worker Meeting, with regard to veiling, much as they do at a meeting in public space such as a classroom or an auditorium for public ceremonies.

(2) It is at Worker Meetings that most activists see printed instructions from the City and Central Offices. Since the majority of BICSa activists are from the lower middle class, they neither know how to use the Internet nor have access to computers. The organization itself is constantly short of funds and is not able to purchase computers although in recent years some activists have expressed concern that BICSa women are computer-illiterate and that perhaps some senior activists should take introductory courses in computer literacy.¹⁸ These materials embody the Islamic movement's claim to a "scientific" (systematic, rationalized) and hence more developed or advanced approach to the practice and transmission of religious precepts, hence BICSa's superiority over other Islamic organizations. These rigorously specified, ordered, numbered, categorized, calibrated, and tabulated materials may be understood as constituting a new "physical-conceptual space" where, on one hand, boundaries that many Bangladeshis conventionally posit between religion and the secular world of bureaucracy, technology, and administrative rules and regulations are blurred and where, on the other, new boundaries are articulated through the establishment of categories and sub-categories of activities, people, sites, and things (i.e., different types of publications,

¹⁸ These suggestions led to debates over whether such activities are indeed essential to the task of Islamization and would not ultimately detract from the far more important tasks of preaching and training.

commodities for sale such as literary magazines for children and teenagers, calendars, and stickers the organization produces both for sale and consumption by members). These novel blurrings and differentiations recalibrate an activist's sense of the world by suggesting particular modes for interpreting spatial relations (e.g., City Office and local meeting sites, schools and neighborhoods, home, and place of work), human relations, and relations between individuals and things (e.g., announcement posters, money, and printed materials). As in the context of the "spiral texts" described for nineteenth and early twentieth century Yemen, where the movements of the text engaged the body of the writer in particular ways, several effects of the official paperwork get played out not only in one's conception of the world, but on the surface of the individual body as well (Messick 1993: 231-50).

First, since these forms are usually filled out at homes or dormitory rooms during mutual consultation, much of the work must be done on either the floor or a bed, for all the members of a group must be able to sit in a circle for effective mutual consultation. This entails a significant amount of hunching or bending of the body, as an activist usually places a form either on her lap or on the floor for better purchase and then bends over it to fill it out. Since these forms are often in very small print, one must lean over even further to write neatly within the numerous narrow horizontal and vertical boxes. This posture marks off writing and recording for BICSa purposes from writing in the classroom or filling out

other institutional forms (e.g., school or a bank form, utility bill) at one's desk.

Second, as explained above, BICSa women are usually veiled as they go about the various administrative and bureaucratic tasks that a Worker Meeting entails. This “veiled state,” in mobilizing a range of bodily gestures, highly sanitized verbal mannerisms, and an emotional state suited to “official” or “formal” dealings, produces a strong sense of occupying a public space. At the same time, the veil produces sensations of a highly gendered, highly private meeting space in which the form of genderedness experienced and embodied differs, in its Islamic specificity, from the general genderedness that infuses Bangladeshi culture in more fluid and ambiguous ways. This Islamic genderedness, engendered by the retention of veils at a meeting unfolding in the most protected and secluded part of a home, reproduces profound tensions within the larger Islamic movement in Bangladesh (and within many individual female activists). These tensions center on the contradiction between domesticity as the “natural” female habitus and women's active participation in the public sphere, namely women's growing presence in the Islamic movement and therefore in activities associated with this movement, which often take women activists away from the protection of their own homes. I explore this tension at greater length in Chapter 5.

A Worker Meeting, as a microcosm of the Islamic movement, is on the whole experienced and lived as a partially “unnatural” or “illegitimate”

domain for women, where a woman must constantly practice vigilance. For instance, those women who may loosen their veils upon entering the room, constantly keep pulling their veils back over their heads, as one's head covering tends to sneak back over the head once loosened. I suggest that these forms of embodiment, spatial experience, and sensation serve to distinguish the BICSa world within the larger national discourses and practices of modernization that imagine women and men "working shoulder to shoulder," and simultaneously differentiate it from that paradigm both conceptually and corporeally.

(3) In effect, a Worker Meeting is experienced, corporeally and sensorially, as a highly modern, formal, public activity, even though it often takes place within the confines of a woman's bedroom or a dormitory room. A circular seating arrangement, along with notebooks and record books, contributes to this effect, as does a sharp consciousness of time and the performative systematicity embodied in the *dars* and in the meticulous, bureaucratic recording of the meeting proceedings and the submission of one's log of daily activities. A bedroom, an otherwise intimate space, is transformed into a bricolage where several spatiotemporal frames are superimposed upon one another. Here women perform the traditional disciplinary ritual of prayers, engage with scripture employing both traditional and modern forms, and use a traditional sermonic style to open a meeting modeled along essentially contemporary bureaucratic and academic lines. The result is not a superficial

combination of essentially disparate parts, but a thoroughly hybrid, integrated, holistic, and disciplined sense-of-being as quintessentially global and modern as it is local or Bangali (culturally) or Bangladeshi (nationally) and traditionally Islamic. The essentially heteroglossic sense-of-being that is performatively produced at Worker Meetings both consciously (through explicit and planned discourse) and unconsciously (through the mute, unintended, miscellaneous effects of bodily practices inflected with opposed sensibilities) tends to both resonate and clash with BICSa's top-down attempt to the body, which is supposed to be absolutely harnessed to self-cultivation and socio-political transformation in accordance with Mawdudi's fixed vision for an Islamic moral-political order.

(4) Some of the effects of the Worker Meeting on the subjectivity of the activist are inadvertent, but others are not. In particular, inadvertent effects are produced by those novel "scientific" techniques that BICSa considers "technical" or "strategic." These include not only the "research" approach to religious scholarship but the whole apparatus for record-keeping, feedback, time management, project management, punctuality monitoring, line-item bookkeeping of faults and virtues, and so on. These are quintessentially modern techniques, understood both by BICSa and its critics, notably Tabligh activists, not to have been employed by the Prophet Muhammad. However, BICSa leaders also feel that not only are these techniques *essentially* compatible with the *spirit* of Islam but that

also they are wholly malleable to “strategic” purposes and do not leave behind any residues of their own on the subjectivities BICSa labors to form with such care. BICSa asserts that these strategic practices merely produce the kind of Muslim the Prophet Muhammad desired back in the seventh century AD, but only in a “scientific” manner, a manner more effective for this particular age, just as a BICSa activist might ride to a Worker Meeting on a bus, though Prophet Muhammad never rode a bus. The means are understood as not affecting the final product, which should be the same as it was back in the “golden age of Islam” in Arabia.

However, I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter that such apparently superficial changes in technique *do* have serious consequences for subject-formation. They profoundly impact the way one perceives one’s body, the meeting, the room, the world outside the room, the conceptual spaces of belief and religious knowledge, the relationships between these various spaces, and the nature of one’s place in all these spaces. This impact is evident in the ways in which a BICSa activist gradually comes to see herself as radically different from most segments of the Bangladeshi population—the Tabligh and other groups of orthodox, pietist Muslims; those urbanites who practice liberal-secular modernities and have strayed from the “true” Islamic path; and those rural folk who are illiterate, poor, ignorant, immersed in superstition, and have few opportunities for acquiring knowledge. In combination with the spatial setting—a juxtaposition of administrative forms, scriptures, report books,

veils, lecture notes, bedsheets, etc.—these techniques performatively both contest and legitimize the validity of that very modernity which BICSa positions itself against. Many of its own characteristic practices are rooted directly in the modernist ethos of the larger non-religious system of nation-building as embodied in the educational subculture, which places a high premium on objectivity, objectification, quantification, intellectual comprehension, data analysis, effective scheduling, written records, and the like. This, in part, accounts for some of the difficulties BICSa’s project encounters in uprooting many of its members effectively from a non-Islamist way of life. Many activists continue to perceive and live various aspects of the “modern” Bangladeshi landscape as legitimate and strategically consonant with an Islamic lifestyle even as they seek to ideologically oppose this world on the moral ground that it promotes an “un-Islamic” way of life. Such dissonances between ideology and practice, and tensions within the BICSa ideology itself in its simultaneous aspirations towards “sophisticated” and “scientific” strategizing in this world and an other-worldly orientation, facilitate contestations explored in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

Forging Faith in the Fire of Suffering: The Everyday of Contestation and the Formation of an Islamic Activist Identity

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I discussed how BICSa, a female students' Islamist group in Bangladesh, operates as a social-movement organization. I outlined BICSa's formal agenda and administrative structure and delineated its key strategies for recruiting members and shaping them into pious Islamic activists. Subsequently I focused on the top-down shaping of an Islamic activist, that is, on those processes whereby BICSa attempts to transform an average, habitually Muslim woman¹ into a thoroughly Islamized subject. Ideally, this person's newly acquired Islamic subjecthood is defined by a coherent ideology that demands vigilant conformity and banishes ambiguity, difference, and doubt. BICSa tries to elevate religion in the subject's consciousness from an element of the amorphous, diverse realm of Muslim Bangladeshi culture to a

¹ By an "average, habitually Muslim" woman, I mean one who is not religiously observant but identifies with Islam on an amorphous cultural level. For instance, such a person does not usually perform the daily five prayers or recite the Qur'an, practices central to the Islamic tradition, but she does celebrate the two annual major Muslim festivals of *Eid ul Fitr* and *Eid ul Azha*, and feels strongly that she should marry a Muslim and have a Muslim burial. An "average, habitually Christian" person, by the same token, would be one who does not usually go to church or read the Bible, but celebrates Easter or Christmas and is likely to want to marry a Christian and have a Christian burial.

comprehensive moral-practical ideology. Such an ideology dictates an all-embracing way of feeling, thinking, and being that is oriented around a revivalist Islam grounded in orthodox forms of piety, national culture, and politics and is alert to sociopolitical events unfolding abroad.

Scholars writing on Muslim societies from feminist perspectives tend to conceptualize agency as formed primarily in opposition to established sociocultural and legal norms, especially religious norms (Minces 1980; Moghissi 1999). In this literature, women figure largely as objects of patriarchal designs, especially fundamentalist discourses and practices and/or state controls (Nashat 1983; Mernissi 1988; Kabeer 1991; Lateef 1994; Siapno 1995 [1994]; Brink 1997; Slyomovics 1997; Badran 1998; Rouse 1998; Charrad 2001). In contrast, I have argued (in Chapters 2 and 3) that activists emerge as potentially powerful agents in the process of refashioning themselves in accordance with BICSa norms understood as Islamic prescriptions. In making this argument, I have drawn on Mahmood's (1998) reconceptualization of "agency" in her work on women in the Cairo mosque movement. Through submitting to BICSa's program of self-reconstruction and sociomoral reform, activists achieve a strong sense of identity, morality, and purpose and develop a range of ethical-pedagogic-leadership capacities. They cultivate self-discipline, modesty, patience, compassion, and submission to scriptural guidance, as well as administrative or bureaucratic skills in teamwork, mentoring, conflict resolution, oratory, and participation in and leading of discussions.

Through mastery of religious texts and dissemination of textual knowledge among peers, trainees, and audiences of potential recruits, BICSa women enter into and shape the Bangladeshi arena of authoritative religious discourse, traditionally a male preserve.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I have begun to explore how a BICSa activist's Islamist subjectivity develops through conformity to particular strategic and moral practices and through education in a religiosity centered on Mawdudi's writings. Two primary aspects of this process have been touched on. First is a BICSa activist's "inner struggle" or "bigger jihad," the struggle to purify her thoughts, knowledge, desires, and intentions, waged constantly against her own "baser self" (*nafs*). Second is "the smaller jihad" (*jihad asgar*), the struggle to Islamize the polity through recruiting, organizing public events, and delivering public lectures on the Qur'an.

I now wish to suggest a third aspect of the selfhood-construction process, one involving practical contestation of dominant sociocultural mores. Such contestation, tied to efforts at both self-reform and societal transformation, arises as a consequence of the BICSa activist's attempts to wage the "smaller jihad" by inserting her continually shifting personhood into her wider, quotidian network of personal-social relations—familial life, school life, neighborhood life.

The concept of opposition or resistance to norms, central to traditional scholarship on the cultivation of agency, remains essential to

understanding the life-world of BICSa women. However, scholarship on female agency has tended to privilege opposition to religious or socio-legal norms by women seeking “liberation” or “empowerment.” This template remains valid in many circumstances, but I will also take care to examine an apparent paradox: the BICSa activist’s *opposition* to dominant non-religious Bangladeshi cultural mores through painstaking *submission* to religious prescriptions, some of which (e.g., veiling) are profoundly gendered, others not. In this process, moreover, some contestation of the Islamist prescriptions themselves tends to arise. BICSa’s training technologies combine with an activist’s daily harsh encounters with family, fellow students, and teachers, to produce an empowered subjectivity that is not perfectly submissive to BICSa—as much as BICSa would like it to be.

In this chapter and the next, then, I will move from BICSa’s efforts to construct an Islamic subjectivity from above to the contestations, negotiations, and slippages that characterize not only the relationship between BICSa and Bangladeshi society at large but also the relationships between BICSa, its individual members, and Islam. I will consider subject formation and contestation in the light of theorizations of power. Among Michel Foucault’s insights into power, that most relevant to my present purpose is that one reason modern power is so effective and difficult to locate is that it is so extremely diffuse and has no “eye.” Power relations are embedded in social networks, emanate from all directions; they

structure a person historically, culturally, and politically, through and through. Multiple forms of power may superimpose, intersect, cancel one another out, reinforce one another. There is no “outside” of power.

(Foucault 1983) Application of this notion to the practices of BICSa women sheds light on some of the ways in which they impact different sets of power relations through acts intended to thwart only a singular, distinct structure of power—the hegemony of “un-Islamic” or “anti-Islamic” sociopolitical norms.

A related theoretical perspective that illuminates the world of BICSa women derives from feminist analyses of identity-making and social group formation processes that naturalize power relations. Carol Delaney and Sylvia Yanagisako have argued that “while institutions and cultural domains of meaning have a profound impact on shaping ideas and practices, people do not necessarily organize their everyday actions according to these divisions. Rather, people think and act at the *intersections* of discourses” (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995: 18).² This insight has been usefully elaborated in Lila Abu-Lughod’s work on the modernizing impact of Egyptian television dramas on rural women (Abu-

² “Discourses,” in this formulation, derives from the Foucauldian notion of “discursive practices,” which are dominant ideas as well as systematic practices that combine to shape socio-historical understandings of reality. Thus, for instance, the sexuality discourse characteristic of Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries embodied the idea that sexuality must be repressed and disciplined, along with specific practices (e.g., of confession, pedagogization and medicalization) that incited and intensified talk and imagination of sex. This *discursive* regime produced the modern individual as the subject of sexuality, which came to be understood as the very essence of subjectivity.

Lughod 2000). She argues that those very life-aspects that allow secularizing and individualizing dramatic television series to affect Egyptian rural women's self-perceptions also enable these women's access to the Islamist imaginary flourishing in present-day Egypt. This notion that a subject can be simultaneously embedded in multiple systems of power illuminates not only BICSa's opposition to and negotiation with values hegemonic in the larger Bangladeshi society, but also how some activists are enabled to contest or resist certain beliefs upheld and propagated by their own organization. Despite BICSa's painstaking attempts to produce "warriors of Allah" (*Allahr sainik*) singularly committed to "striving in the path of Allah with life and wealth" and thereby attaining the "satisfaction of Allah" (*Allahr santashti*), the subjectivity of a BICSa activist forms ambivalently at the intersection of several discursive regimes prevalent in contemporary Bangladesh. Although the more seasoned the activist, the more her subjectivity is likely to be pervaded by BICSa's discourse at any given moment,³ I have found that for the typical BICSa activist, none of the various cultural-ideological discourses that compete to mold her worldview can fully define her capacity for thought, desire, and action from moment to moment.

This chapter delineates some of the ways BICSa women oppose dominant Bangladeshi norms in their daily lives as Islamic ideologues. In

³ Such as the Islamist discourse of BICSa, the discourse of Muslim Bangali cultural values, and the discourses of Bangali (ethnic) and Bangladeshi (nation state based) nationalisms.

the next chapter, which explores insider contestations of Islamist values within BICSa, the image that emerges from this examination of Islamist women in conflict with hegemonic social mores is complicated and deromanticized. This will bring into relief some of the ideological and practical internal differentiations that texture Islamism, differentiations that both weaken and strengthen the Islamist movement.

Four interrelated themes run through both these chapters. The first is the public-private divide symbolized by veiling. The second is the junior-senior hierarchy characteristic of both Bangladeshi society and BICSa's organizational culture (but in different ways). The third concerns the dynamics between an activist's Islamic ideology, her marriage, and her natal family. The fourth centers on the relationship between the Qur'an and popular, orthodox, and revivalist forms of Islam. These four themes—veiling, hierarchy, life dynamics, diversity within the Islamic tradition—are will be treated in order. Each discussion is anchored extensively in the stories of particular BICSa women, relayed as much as possible in their own words. I will seek, in concluding, to connect these four themes at the intersection of (a) religious reformism; (b) the multivocality of local cultural norms partly grounded in diverse, co-existing elaborations of the Islamic tradition, secular higher education, export-oriented private industrial growth, and the incorporation of women into the work force; and (c) the expanding role of secular, non-governmental organizations in charting the national course towards

“development” (*unnayan*), “progress” (*pragati*), and the “empowerment of women” (*narir khamatayan*) (Shehabuddin 2000).

4.2 Veiling

Veiling, in Bangladesh, means female observance of *parda*, social and physical distancing from men to whom one is not closely related. A woman practicing *parda* either avoids non-familial men altogether or only appears in places where they might see her in clothing that completely conceals the face and body. *Parda* is practiced in various ways by many Muslim and Hindu communities in South Asia (Papanek 1982); however, in high-school or college-educated urban circles in Bangladesh, the milieu within which BICSa women operate, *parda* is not generally observed. When it is, it usually takes the less strict form of covering the top and back of the head loosely, with an edge of one’s clothing (*sari* or *dopatta*), in public or the presence of men one is not closely related to. In its most rigorous form, traditionally practiced by Muslim women in some elite or particularly religious South Asian families, veiling entails the donning of a *borkha*: a face covering that leaves only the eyes uncovered, a large, tent-shaped, conical head-gear that drapes over the torso, and a loose, ankle-length coat or apron worn over regular clothing. Headgear and coat are made of the same material, which is often of a silken, slippery nature to ensure a fluid, shapeless drape. Traditionally, this material has tended to be black.

This strict, traditional form of veiling is enjoined by BICSa. In accord with Mawdudi's interpretation of the Qur'anic verses concerning veiling, a BICSa woman veils in the presence of, or avoids presenting herself visually to, all men except her husband and the fourteen categories of closely related men specified in the Qur'an as *mahrūm* (forbidden in marriage): grandfather, father, brothers, father-in-law, immediate maternal and paternal uncles, nephews, and certain others. The following accounts of individual activists' efforts to practice veiling reveal difficulties commonly faced by BICSa women trying to practice strict *parda*.

4.2.1 Reema's Tears of Frustration

Reema grew up in semirural Comilla and moved to Dhaka to pursue a Bachelor's in Accounting at a women's college. Her uncle, a geologist in Dhaka, served as her "local guardian." At Romna College, Reema's roommate Ankhi, a BICSa leader, influenced Reema, who began to veil. Reema's mother, a moderately religious housewife, was surprised but pleased. Her father, however, a small businessman, was unhappy, and her uncle opposed her veiling in no uncertain terms. Ignoring her friends' advice, Reema decided to join BICSa and filled out the form for first-level members.

Veiling in non-homogeneous social settings proved to be a tricky affair. At her uncle's wedding, for example, Reema dressed like all the other female guests, in a beautiful *sari*, except that she wore a veil to travel to the site of the ceremony. Once there, she took off her *borkha* in

the room mostly reserved for women and the bride. Aware, however, that she was not in an Islamist setting but at a moderately conservative gathering where gender segregation would be only partial, she was alert. She placed herself with her back to the door and kept her head partly covered with an edge of her *sari*. Whenever a man entered the room—as one did occasionally, either to look for someone or to convey a message—she would pull her *sari* tighter around her head and cover part of her face with it. Suddenly, however, without warning, some female relatives literally dragged Reema out of the room, into the adjacent men’s and bridegroom’s room. She was placed on the decorated stage where her uncle was sitting, right before the video camera and in front of a bunch of men. She was given no chance to put on her *borkha*.

“In anger, frustration, and humiliation at this blatant violation of my *parda*,” Reema said later, “my eyes filled with tears, but nobody would take me seriously, nobody could understand my commitment to an Islamic lifestyle. “What do a few minutes in front of the camera matter? What is the big deal?” they said, laughing. They simply thought I was being stubborn, arrogant, and excessive (*barabari*). I sat on that stage as though paralyzed.”⁴ As with many BICSa women who narrated similar experiences to me, Reema’s helplessness and “paralysis” arose partly from her intimate ties with her uncle, who had dutifully served as her local guardian for several years. She did not wish to embarrass her uncle in

⁴ Informal interview, November 4, 1999.

front of a large audience, many of whom knew what he had been doing for her and that he was proud that his only niece was brave enough to live away from her parents and bright enough to gain admission to a well-reputed college in the capital. He and the members of his social circle thus expected Reema to dress and act like a “smart” (sophisticated) young woman attending college in Dhaka. Such expectations collide with the BICSa dress code with particular intensity on festive occasions, especially the various elaborate ceremonies surrounding weddings, where attending women are expected to wear makeup and bedeck themselves in gold jewelry and the finest *saris* of colorful silk. Also, mothers and older female relatives of eligible young men use wedding ceremonies as sites for matchmaking. Several non-BICSa women I knew—family, friends, and acquaintances—were marriage-matched in this manner during the period of my field work. I was myself approached by several mothers and aunts making discreet inquiries about young women whom I knew and whom they had seen at wedding ceremonies and were considering as potential brides for their sons. One of these inquiring women had noticed a particularly attractive young woman in the audience while watching a relative’s videotaped wedding celebration.

In urban areas, it has now become customary to videotape wedding ceremonies. For most of the ceremony, the bride and groom typically sit on small stages in separate rooms, the bride before a primarily female audience and the groom before a primarily male audience. Their closest

relatives and friends take turns sharing the stage, not only getting a share of the attention directed towards the bride or groom but reaffirming the intimacy of their ties to them. They lay a claim to the bride's or groom's loyalties and partake, to some extent, of their socioeconomic status.

In recent decades, boundaries between the male and female spaces at these events have become more porous. While male and female guests continue to sit separately before and after the wedding meal, the meal itself is often eaten in one room, though women may tend to cluster around some tables and men around others. In the upper class, segregation is beginning to disappear even from seating arrangements. Thus, at the wedding ceremony of Trishna, a secular-liberal, upper-class woman, the bride and groom did not sit on stages in separate rooms but side by side on the same stage, facing a mixed audience of male and female relatives, friends, neighbors, and well-wishers. A professional band was hired and an amateur group of young men and women performed Bangla and Hindi songs and dances for the audience.

Video-recording professionals are invariably male and circulate among both the male and female guests, focusing primarily on the bride and the groom. These recordings circulate among relatives and friends and are watched by both men and women. The clothing, social status, physical appearance, and mannerisms of particular individuals are all commented upon, sometimes matter-of-factly, sometimes jestingly, and sometimes to enhance one's own social standing by showing that one has

more “adequate” or “refined” sensibilities regarding clothing and behavior.

Traditionally, gender segregation at wedding celebrations served as a marker of affluence in Bangali society—only a relatively rich family could afford all the separate spaces needed to segregate the wedding preparations and the feast—but in contemporary urban Bangladesh, breaking down gender segregation has become a marker of modernity and socioeconomic mobility. Such changes pose gut-wrenching dilemmas for BICSa women who, in following orthodox Islamic norms interpreted with particular rigor by Mawdudi, are committed to not appearing without body, head, and face veils before any male except the fourteen categories of male kin specified in the Qur’an. Yet these women are also intimately tied to their families, as are most women in Bangladesh, and the cultural imperative to obey and respect parents and elders is further bolstered by Islamic teachings. Many BICSa activists thus feel a special anguish when veiling in opposition to family members, especially those on whom they are dependent for financial and social well-being. BICSa’s injunction that an activist should verbally negotiate with family members, ideally leading her parents and siblings to respect her decision even if they do not reform their own lives, often results in prolonged verbal and emotional struggle between an activist and her family. Unpleasant and hurtful things are often said by angry and puzzled elders who feel insulted at their wards’ usurpation of the moral high ground.

A BICSa activist is often urged by her superiors to be respectful of her elders regardless of their unkindness, since the burden of persuasion is on the activist. BICSa's emphasis on persuasion through civility, respect, and logic does help many an activist to keep relatively calm during showdowns with family elders. But this often puts an activist's emotions under even greater stress. I suggest that this visceral and emotional jostling with intimates over months or years plays a significant role in shaping Islamic activist subjectivity. "Passive-aggressive" engagement with family members over the issue of veiling—what I call "intimate opposition"—often leads an activist to find in herself an emotional strength that she may not have been aware of earlier. This newfound reservoir of strength and "self-esteem" (*atyasammanbodh*), honed over time through difficult encounters with family members, gradually enables her to partially escape the intense emotional and authoritative hold older family members typically wield over younger kin in Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia. As many BICSa activists observed to me in conversation, one gradually develops a "numbness," an indifference or immunity to familial reproach. Each attack seems less searing than the last. One gets used to it. As Reema said, "I used to feel really bad at first, when my father and uncle used to rebuke me and call me names, but gradually, what they said would no longer get under my skin. Family members begin to tire as well, allowing many activists to see that the father or older brother or uncle they once found intimidating is ultimately

rather helpless in the face of a teenage girl's determination to act in a particular way. A high-school or college-going teenage daughter, sister, niece, or cousin is too old to beat (usually) and too young to have her future marred through cutting off her access to education and an early marriage, a threat some fathers and older brothers make but do not, in most cases, follow through on.

In the course of these intimate confrontations, a BICSa activist begins to see herself more as an individual with unique views, capacities, and goals and less merely as a member of a particular family—the overarching identity of the vast majority of women in mainstream Bangladeshi culture. Islamic activism thus has an individualizing effect even as it seeks to further strengthen and safeguard traditional family values. On the one hand it emphasizes the centrality of women to the domestic sphere, while on the other it seeks to embed members within an activist community of “sisters in religion” (*dini bon*). With their new sense of “hardened” and “embattled” selfhood, cultivated through numerous turbulent encounters with family members over veiling, some BICSa activists become gradually able to defy familial authority in other respects as well. Thus, for instance, some demand that their guardians seek marriage partners for them only within the ranks of Islamic activists.

In Bangladeshi society, arranged marriage remains the norm. Elders—especially parents and older brothers, by virtue of their age and status as caretakers of the family—are still generally understood as having

privileged access to experience, wisdom, and full understanding of the family's socioeconomic interests and well-being, which enables them to better judge the suitability of marital partners for younger family members. Indeed, as the following account shows, marital alliance with a better-off family is not an uncommon path to socio-economic mobility in Bangladesh. Yet the determined marital stance of some BICSa activists from families opposed to Islamic activism speaks to emergent forms of selfhood and concurrent changes in relationships between women activists and their elders.

4.2.2 *Farzana's Perseverance*

Farzana, a BICSa activist, was unable to attend her paternal uncle's wedding since her father, who opposed veiling, refused to take her to the ceremony if she wore the *borkha*. "I was really sad about missing all the fun and the food and to be left home alone," Farzana says. "These wedding ceremonies are those rare occasions where one is able to meet and catch up with relatives and friends, you know. But my father wouldn't budge and neither would I." Farzana's family had recently moved to Dhaka when her father, a low-ranking government employee, obtained a transfer from the semi-urban region of Jessore. When Farzana began to veil after having been "targeted" by a friend and neighbor active in BICSa, her father was outraged and accused Farzana of being determined to embarrass him in front of his colleagues, neighbors, and relatives.

As a space of festivity, feasting, intense social interactions, flirtation, colorful decorations, and female beauty showcased amid glittering jewelry and the rustling of glistening silken outfits, a Bangali wedding ceremony stands in marked contrast to the spiritually puritan and physically disciplinary ethos of the Islamist veil. Further, in Bangladesh a wedding ceremony is fraught with the possibility of gaining and losing socioeconomic standing. With his move to the capital—a move desired by many state bureaucrats for its accompanying better pay, living conditions, schooling for children, medical services, etc.—Farzana’s father aspired to socioeconomic mobility from the lower middle to the middle class. The adoption of the veil by his oldest child, however, a marker of rusticity and regress in urban, educated Bangladesh, would impede his aspirations to membership in the middle-class society of Dhaka. He also worried that Farzana’s veil, which he derogatorily referred to as a cloak (*alkhella*), might prevent him from marrying her into an educated, urban, middle-class family.

Farzana had no income of her own, but learned how to sew so that she could make her own Islamic clothing if she could persuade her father to purchase some material; this way, she would not have to ask him to pay tailoring fees. She had great difficulty persuading her father to buy her material for the *borkha*, but eventually wore him down.

Each time I needed a new *salwar kamiz*, I would ask for some extra material. After sewing up the *salwar kamiz*, I would make a headscarf out of the excess material. But I still needed material for the *borkha* (meaning the coat which, together with a headcovering,

constitutes a *borkha*). My persistence paid off one day. My father, tired of my nagging, got me some material. But of course, as an expression of his reluctance, he got me the cheapest stuff he could possibly find and did not miss an opportunity to hurl a flurry of insults at me. But I had grown used to his verbal abuse and was just too happy to complain!⁵

Later, Farzana began tutoring a few primary-school children to secure funds for Islamic clothing and some BICSa activities. A BICSa member is expected to contribute whatever she can at the end of each month toward BICSa's funds for student activists facing special economic hardships. Farzana observed:

BICSa inspires me to attain independence, to be stronger than I ever would otherwise. I used to be so afraid of my father before. Back in our village, everyone in the neighborhood was in awe of his temper. But having had to stand up to him year after year and defend and explicate veiling, I now realize he is just an ordinary human being like most of us and has much to learn about true Islam. He even strikes me on occasion but my skin has toughened and I no longer feel half as bad as I used to before. I try to stay away from home as much as I can. I go over to my BICSa sisters' homes in the neighborhood and they make me feel better.⁶

4.2.3 *Amina's Anguish*

The veil and its associated gender segregation pose a visceral challenge to a locally hegemonic modernity in contemporary urban Bangladesh not only in public settings, such as wedding ceremonies, but also in interpersonal relationships among friends and family.

⁵ Personal conversation, September 22, 1999.

⁶ Personal conversation, September 22, 1999.

Amina joined Islamic activism at Romna College. Her wealthy, landowning family lived in rural Bangladesh, but she, like Reema, moved to Dhaka to pursue higher education and lived in the dormitory. Her older sister and her husband, a business entrepreneur, served as her “local guardians” in Dhaka, but they did not live close to Amina’s college. It was excruciatingly difficult for Amina to veil at first. Yet from her perusal of Mawdudi’s books and conversations with her two Islamic activist nephews, who had been trying to recruit her, it was clear that she must veil. “Even before I read Mawdudi’s views concerning *parda*,” said Amina, “I knew instinctively that veiling, like praying and fasting, were integral to piety.” This “instinctive” knowing was, in fact, grounded in the “traditional Muslim” family culture in which Amina grew up. Even though she and her sisters did not veil, her grandparents, parents and older siblings did observe Islamic rituals such as daily prayer, fasting, and Qur’an recitation. Some older women in the family kept their heads partially covered with an edge of the *sari*, especially in the presence of men. Gender segregation was observed to the partial extent common in affluent rural Bangladesh in the 1950s. “In fact, my father used to get us modern clothing from Dhaka,” observed Amina. “He liked modern things. He would follow women around on his motor bike to get a sense of the latest fashion trends and then encouraged us to dress accordingly.”⁷ Thus breezes of modernity began to blow into rural Bangladesh from the general direction of the capital.

⁷ Informal interview, former senior BICSa leader, January 15, 1999.

In the late 1930s, Amina's oldest sister had had to study at home in Jamalpur, since there was no school for women nearby and travel for women was difficult and suspect. However, no more than three decades later, not just education but "good education" and higher education had begun to be perceived as so crucial for women that families such as Amina's were willing to send their daughters all the way to Dhaka to live in dormitories on their own in order to obtain high-school diplomas and college degrees. This growing enthusiasm for enabling daughters to attain higher education, despite poor communications between Dhaka and rural Bangladesh at that time, speaks to the urgency of such familial commitment. Yet Amina, despite the liberalizing influence of urban modernity on her family, grew up in a definitely Islamic environment or habitus. This instilled in her a pious disposition, a basic religiosity that sensitized her, however amorously and subconsciously, to markers of a lifestyle congruent with the orthodox Islamic tradition. She neither knew nor practiced these markers in all their specificity, but was aware of the ideals they embodied or symbolized. Thus, although she herself did not veil while growing up, she was attuned to the religious sensibility of gendered modesty with which the limited interaction between men and women around her was infused. Her two Islamic activist nephews would later build on this basic disposition, this "instinctive knowing" of piety, in recruiting her to their cause.

Another instance of “instinctive knowing” further illuminates the influence a cultural habitus can exert. An upper-middle-class, secular human rights activist, Hasina, told me of her experience of working with women in a lower-class neighborhood in Dhaka:

As I was traveling in a rickshaw (a three-wheeled cart pulled by a driver on foot) through this neighborhood, I could feel both men and women gaping at me. The men, especially, had leering expressions on their faces. *Instinctively*, I pulled the edge of my *sari* around and over my head, thus covering some of my hair, which had always been lush and which I was wearing down. Since a rickshaw is open and it was breezy, my hair was blowing about in the breeze in every direction. You know how it is. The more covered one is, the more modest and secure one feels. After that, the men looked disappointed and, losing interest, gradually began to turn away to whatever it was they were doing earlier, and I felt more comfortable.⁸

My point is that even though she was a secular ideologue from a non-religious family, who habitually raves against “Islamic fundamentalists,” Hasina drew on the same “instinctual” or “habitual” base of knowing as did the Islamic activist Amina in connecting a certain way of dressing—“modestly” or “decently”—with feeling “shy” (*lajuk*) or “secure” (*nishchinta*) and being perceived by others as “a female from a respectable family”. The pervasiveness of this “modest” genderedness in Bangladeshi society, however discreet its modes in urban, well-educated circles, accounts partially for the success of the Islamic movement. Islamists, in their insistence on the importance of the veil, merely build on and re-articulate a pervasive concern with “modesty” that resonates even

⁸ Personal conversation, December 11, 1999. Emphasis added.

with advocates of progress and secularization (who sometimes criticize the local film industry for “vulgar” and “indecent” productions). The Islamist designation of the veil as the ultimate marker and guardian of “modesty” thus resonates with many segments of the population, some of which actually adopt the veil while others merely “respect” it from a distance and lament that their “shyness” (*lajja*) or inability to face public opinion, lack of “habituation”, and “weakness of faith” (*imaneer durbalata*) prevent them from taking it up. Such resonances, however, do not prevent that differences in genderedness between the Islamic activist worldview and the dominant urban educated Bangladeshi culture from jarring.

When Amina began to observe *parda* in college as part and parcel of her Islamic activist ideology, she stopped eating with her brother-in-law at the same table. “This really bothered my brother-in-law, who felt very hurt, angry, and insulted at this distance that I had suddenly begun to observe in our interactions,” said Amina. “I myself felt horribly embarrassed at first.” He had been in the habit of showing up at the dormitory to accompany her home for the weekends or special occasions, but she began to find ways to avoid returning home with him so that she could avoid riding with him in the same rickshaw where two adults cannot sit next to each other without touching. When she had to travel with him, she insisted on traveling in a rickshaw by herself while her brother-in-law rented another. Such explicit gender divides, which Amina had not practiced before and which were out of step with urban-educated

Bangladeshi sensibilities, perplexed and angered him. He felt that Amina was being “excessive”, implicitly sexualizing their relationship although he thought of her only as his “younger sister.” “He was indeed very much *like* my older brother,” said Amina, “but the fact remained that he was *not* my brother.” (A brother-in-law is not among the fourteen categories of non-marriageable male kin specified by the Qur’an.) “My brother-in-law rebuked me on various occasions. I used to cringe at first, especially since we had always had such a warm relationship. But gradually, as I myself became more certain of what I was doing, his reproaches affected me less and less. When I realized I could not persuade either my sister or brother-in-law to alter their understanding of Islam, I turned my attention to their daughter, who was several years younger than I and who went on to become a very dedicated Islamic worker.”

Despite the determination or “stubbornness” to observe *parda* that Amina’s brother-in-law charged her with, veiling had not come to Amina easily, but through much soul-searching over months and years and with numerous moments of agonizing vacillation. In her words,

Given that I grew up without even covering my head partially . . . , it was very difficult for me to adopt a full-blown *borkha* (*purna parda*). But I started to try. I used to wear a *sari* then and began to keep my body as well covered with it as I could. I’d try to sit in class with my head covered with the end of my *sari*, but then I’d start to feel really hot and would uncover my head. Once I cooled down a bit, I’d cover my head again. Then I’d remove the covering after some time. Not only was I having trouble mastering my feeling of hotness but I also felt very self-conscious about the way in which my head covering (*ghomta*) set me apart from the vast majority of college students. Until then, I had never been aware of the kind of strength and confidence it takes to be different

from others. This conflict within me—between my desire to be like everybody else and my desire to follow Islam thoroughly—became particularly agonizing on the occasion of posing for a photograph required for my admission to Romna College. Deep within, I knew that covering my head was the right thing to do. But I squirmed with embarrassment, painfully aware of what others would think, especially what my brother-in-law, who escorted me to a nearby photographer's, would think. My brother-in-law, who couldn't even imagine that I might wish to cover my head, kept urging me to comb my hair properly in preparation for the shoot; I had a luxuriant mass of long, black curly hair back then. I felt so torn between my desire to cover my head and my overwhelming consciousness of others' evaluation that I thought I'd pass out from the turmoil inside my head. I felt dizzy from anxiety and indecision, and was close to tears. I finally yielded to my consciousness of others' judgment and took the photo with my head uncovered. Furthermore, one of my pigtails ended up right across my chest in the photograph. When my nephews (Islamists) saw this photo later, they were acutely disappointed. They had expected much more since they had already put much effort into raising my consciousness about Islam. Seeing their crestfallen faces, I was so mad at myself for being weak that I tore up the photo. After that, I never bared my head again, even though it took me many days following that event to make the transition to observing *parda* in its entirety [that is, adopting the *borkha* along with the face veil].⁹

I wish to draw attention to several themes that appear in the narratives above. First, Amina's decision to veil was clearly as much shaped by her desire to conform to Mawdudi-interpreted Islamic ideals of female modesty as by her desire to please the nephews whom she had grown to admire for their dedication to the Islamist cause. In the end, it was her brother-in-law's anticipated indignation that moved her to pose for the snapshot unveiled even though she knew that her Islamic ideology demanded otherwise, and her nephews' "crestfallen faces" which later

⁹ Informal interview, former senior BICSA leader, January 15, 1999.

enabled her to make a decisive move towards veiling. For BICSa women, ideology is thus often poignantly and viscerally mediated through the intimacy of personal relations.

Second, Amina's account revisits the shaping of subjectivity through confrontations with familial authority, particularly with figures with a significant prior hold over one's emotions. The "steeling" or "numbing" effect that repeated nerve-wracking encounters with family intimates has on the self of a BICSa woman as she journeys toward a consolidated Islamic subjectivity goes a long way towards preparing her for the life of friction an activist identity entails. Most BICSa women begin to veil in high school. Conflict with family members helps prepare these women for the greater conflicts they face in college, where, in many cases, they must not only resist growing peer pressure to dress "smartly" and to attract suitors but must also contend with anti-Islamist politics both among students and faculty. Even though BICSa women do not engage in conventional political activities on campus, their veils mark them as targets for anti-Islamists. Many BICSa women dread encounters with hostile faculty members during Bachelor's and Master's oral exams, where anti-Islamist instructors often demand that a BICSa woman remove her face veil so that they can hear the activist better or can use the student's facial expressions to better assess the student's confidence and composure.

Third, while veiling irked all the male authority figures in the narratives above—Reema’s uncle, Farzana’s father, and Amina’s older brother-in-law—the kind of anger, hurt, indignation, and insult Amina’s brother-in-law experienced at Amina’s veiling is somewhat different, as is the kind of embarrassment and “shame” Amina herself experienced as she started to veil in his presence. A brother-in-law is not among the fourteen categories of men described in the Qur’an as those before whom a woman need not veil or observe particular modesty. Yet in Bangali/Bangladeshi culture, the relationship between a man and his younger sister-in-law is a particular and affectionate one, where the latter fondly but respectfully addresses the former as “brother” (*bhai* or, more affectionately, *bhaiyya*). In fact, in traditional Bangali culture, many social relationships are articulated in kinship terms. Non-relatives, who may be neighbors, family friends, acquaintances, or even employees or clients, are often addressed as kin, particularly if they are older. On the part of younger speakers, these forms of address convey respect and warmth; and on the part of older speakers, affection and nearness.

These kinship terms for non-kin individuals serve another purpose in the case of male-female relations, namely, to defuse the gendered tension inherent in most male-female interactions and so allow non-related men and women to interact comfortably. Thus, older unrelated men are often turned into or addressed as *mama* (maternal uncle), *chacha* (paternal uncle), or *khalu* (maternal aunt’s husband), and older unrelated women as

bhabhi (brother's wife), *apa* (older sister), *chachi* (paternal uncle's wife), or *mami* (maternal uncle's wife). Unrelated men and women of similar age often address one another as *bhai* (brother) and *bon* (sister), thereby enabling a closeness of interaction which might otherwise be perceived as, or indeed become, sexually suspect. Over time, these forms of address come to constitute a semi-truth of their own and to wield a physical-emotional-social impact on interpersonal relations. Thus, for instance, when a BICSa activist married a friend of her uncle's, some individuals on both sides objected on the grounds that the two had been interacting as uncle and niece for some time and so a marital relationship between the two seemed disturbing even though there were no religious or legal grounds for questioning the propriety of the union.

Similarly, when Amina began to veil in front of her brother-in-law, she seemed to be inappropriately raising the possibility, however minute or remote, of sexual feelings, thoughts, or affections between the two. Amina's action brought into relief the socially constructed nature of the naturalized, asexualized, sibling-like relationship that a woman and her brother-in-law are supposed to have in accordance with both traditional and modern sensibilities, which posit any other attitude in this regard as "dirty" (*nongra*) or unpalatable or unthinkable.¹⁰ Manisha Roy described

¹⁰ See Najmabadi (1993) for an interesting discussion of the ways in which modernity in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran inscribed its own form of moral code and self-surveillance that sought to sanitize a range of otherwise traditionally acceptable bodily and sexual expressions, understandings, markers, and sentiments inherent in women's language, writing, and knowledge.

the relationship between a woman and her husband's older brothers in traditional Bangali culture in terms of the observation of a respectful distance. She is supposed to cover her head with the end of her *sari* in the presence of her older brothers-in-law who "may be quite aware of the physical attractiveness of this young woman in the household, but they are not supposed to have such thoughts about a younger brother's wife. They are thankful for the custom of avoidance and distance; this helps" (Roy 1992: 100). This description may be transposed to the relationship between a woman and her older sister's husband, with the modification that in modernizing and urbanizing middle class Bangali families such as Amina's family and especially that of her brother-in-law, a custom of avoidance is being gradually replaced by a relationship of respect (of the younger woman towards her older sister's husband) and affection-protection (of the older male towards his wife's younger sister) between the two. In a growing number of families, young women study in cities away from their parents' home. Some of these women live at the home of an older brother or of an older sister and her spouse's home in the city. Other women may live in dormitories especially if the institution of higher education concerned is located too far away from the home of a very close urban relative such as an older sibling. In both cases, however, an older brother or older sister and her husband often serve as the younger woman's "local guardian(s)." Amina's veiling was especially galling for her older brother-in-law, who had been her designated "local guardian"

and felt implicated by the lack of security that veiling can convey. For him, who could not comprehend commitment to a rigorous religious lifestyle, Amina's veiling indicated—absurdly, offensively—that she needed a certain “protection” from her older male protector himself.

Probably she did not. But the possibility was there, however remote, and for most BICSa activists, veiling reflects not only adherence to an ideological doctrine but the practical Islamic predilection for prevention rather than cure. Veiling is understood as generally offering some protection from possible sexual advances and harassment by blocking the access of the male gaze to a woman's physical attributes, every single one of which—including facial features—is considered to be sexually significant in orthodox Islam. Further, it is not uncommon in Bangladesh for men to react violently to rejected sexual advances. In some cases the rejected woman is sexually abused; in others, her face or parts of her body are disfigured by acid-throwing. In many of these cases the attackers go unpunished, especially if they have links to powerful individuals in whichever of the two dominant political parties happens to be in power.

Nevertheless, Amina insisted that she had always considered veiling “not to be personal, but ideological,” even though her older brother-in-law took it personally. In other words, for Amina, veiling in the presence of her brother-in-law did not reflect on their particular relationship so much as it signified the application of a central principle of

the religious ideology she had committed to. BICSa's Islamic ideology seeks to subsume the individual, the personal, and the private under the rubrics of the social, the ideological/political, and the public. It thus discourages believers from making exceptions at will. I asked many activists, including Amina, whether they really thought they needed protection from the gaze of all non-*mahr*um men they encounter daily. From their responses, it was clear that for BICSa activists, applying the Islamic legal codes derived from the Qur'an (*sariyat*, Ar. *shari'ah*) and the traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnat*, Ar. *sunnah*) to suit one's personal inclinations and judgment, making an exception now for this person now and now for that, defeats the whole purpose of a conscious and unconditional submission to divine will and can facilitate misunderstanding. Additionally, if a woman chooses to veil in front of, say, one cousin and not another, she may complicate matters by reducing the veil to a single marker when the veil is meant to be polyvalent, signifying various things in various contexts (albeit under the rubric of a general doctrine) and exerting different effects on the body and the emotions in different situations. While an individual activist might feel certain that her own brother-in-law or cousin could not possibly think of her in any inappropriate manner, that is, have a "disease in his heart" (*Surah Al-Ahzab:32*), some women *are* sexually abused by close male kin, especially in extended households where men and women end up spending up a lot of time together, as some BICSa activists testify. Since it is not

possible to assess who harbors exactly what kinds of thoughts at any particular moment, it is simplest and safest to veil for all male-female interactions except those clearly excepted in the Qur'an. In any case, consistency, even at the expense of individual creativity or assessment, is deemed crucial to a proper practice of Islam by BICSa and by upholders of other Islamic reformisms and of orthodox Islam.

Yet as a BICSa activist tries to adopt veiling consistently in front of various male kin, friends, and neighbors with whom she has interacted with freely before, these men may offer opposition through indignation, incredulity, mockery, and verbal assault. Thus, in shaping an activist's encounters with familial opposition to the veil, BICSa's emphasis on consistency also shapes her subjectivity by facilitating a view of the world as divided along "Islamic" (*islampanthi*) and "anti-Islamic" (*batil*) lines.

Veiling not only impedes the defusing of gendered tension in male-female interactions in Bangladesh but challenges the local cultural assumption that younger men do not or should not find older women attractive or desirable as marriage material and vice versa. In Bangladesh, a woman's desirability is strongly conditioned by her age; a woman past her early twenties is widely considered to be unsuitable for marriage. It is uncommon for a wife to be older than her husband. BICSa, however, insists that in keeping with orthodox Islamic doctrine a woman, regardless of age (or unless she is very elderly), should veil in front of any non-*mahrum* male who has reached puberty. Thus, for instance, after Amina

got married, her husband's younger brother was upset with her for many years for veiling in his presence. As already mentioned, in Bangali culture a man's relationships to his spouse's siblings and siblings' spouses are of particular importance, especially that with his older brother's wife, whom he addresses as *bhabhi* (or *baudi* among Hindu Bangalis). As Manisha Roy has delineated so well, this relationship is a very jocular and warm one; the younger man generally adores his older brother's wife and respects her as he admires and respects his mother or older sister, only with an added element of ambiguous flirtatiousness sometimes bordering on the romantic. The older brother's wife, in turn, showers the young man, her *debar*, with affection-laden teasing, caring, and concern (Roy 1992: 106-123). Amina's husband's younger brother, therefore, fretted that whereas some young men are even affectionately fed by their older brothers' wives, he could never even see his *bhabhi*'s face, even though they spoke cordially through doors or curtains and he knew how much effort Amina put into ensuring that he was always well fed, his clothes were always properly pressed, he took his medications regularly, and his friends were well cared for when he socialized with them at home. Amina herself felt torn at times over the anguish she caused her adolescent brother-in-law. "Sometimes, I'd look upon his face from a distance as he slept and I'd think how skinny he looked and that he needed fattening up. It always gave me so much pleasure when he ate whatever I cooked with so much gusto and praised my cooking endlessly. He was such a gentle boy and I

loved spoiling him and cooking the things he liked especially,” said Amina wistfully. But, insisted Amina, she had to exercise self-restraint and discipline her emotions in order to follow through her commitment to a pious Islamic code of conduct. “Laxity in one instance leads to another and then to another,” she observed, “till one’s heart begins to harden and one gradually drifts away from Allah.” The more her husband’s younger brother accused her of excess in concealing herself from him, the more determined Amina became, apparently, to seclude herself from his person.

During my conversations with Islamist veterans such as Amina, I was often struck by their understanding of the apparently severe and robust religious code they embraced as extremely fragile, something that needed constant awareness and vigilance, particularly during a time of fundamental worldwide socioeconomic and political shifts. Sociocultural opposition to BICSa women’s overt practices constantly foregrounds the necessity of such vigilance in the consciousness of a BICSa activist. Such foregrounding, in turn, prepares a BICSa Islamist subject for a battle of wills and a life of activism outside the home, especially at school, where an average Bangladeshi woman from the lower middle to the upper classes spends the largest part of her day.

4.2.4 Hasina Upsets Her College Professors

Hasina’s experiences as an Islamist at Chittagong University point to similar feelings of anger and indignation when the Bangali norm of imagining social relations in asexualized kinship terms is challenged by

the veil. Even in a student-teacher context, where students usually address their male teachers and female teachers as “sir” and “madam” respectively, it is understood that the relationship between students and teachers resembles that between adolescents and parents or elders. Hence, professors sometimes find the veil worn by Islamists unsettling or insulting. As one of Hasina’s professors pointed out to her angrily: “I don’t understand why you people cover yourselves up like this even in class when the other professors here and I are like your father.” Much like Amina, Hasina responded, “You are indeed like my father. And I certainly respect you as I respect my father. However, since you are *not* really my father, my Islamic ideology (*adarsha*) compels me to veil. It has nothing to do with how I regard you or how you regard me personally. It is a general dress code I observe in front of all non-*mahrums* men.”

The veil not only articulates the relationships between non-kindred men and women in starkly gendered terms charged with sexual implication, but also evokes—and presumes to do so at a modernizing nation’s most valued sites of modernity production, colleges and universities—associations with rurality/un-modernity/backwardness, Islamic activism (whether of the political Jamaat variety or the apolitical Tabligh variety), and political and cultural opposition to liberal secularism (in which a majority of modern state-educated thinkers, scholars, and professionals are invested). Angered by the veil, some faculty members

sought to humiliate Hasina on different occasions. One such occasion was the day Hasina took her Master's oral exam in Chemistry:

From my humiliating experience at my Bachelor's oral exams, I knew my professors would give me a hard time at the Master's oral exams. I prayed to Allah in particular earnestness prior to the exams. I knew that of the minimum forty minutes allotted per exam, most would be spent on questions regarding veiling, birth control, employment for women and other issues that had no bearing on my field, Chemistry, whatsoever but helped identify me as a "fundamentalist." It was as I expected. Even the external member of the committee, a Rajshahi University professor, expressed irritation at this line of questioning. Even though this fellow was of a left-wing persuasion like my other examiners, he was decent (*shalin*). I had a fever and he sensed this. "Do you feel unwell?" he asked. "Your voice sounds thick." "Yes, sir, I've had a fever for the last few days," I said. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" said the Rajshahi professor. I didn't tell him that I didn't say so on purpose. I knew that I could have asked to be examined seated more comfortably owing to illness. But knowing how unsympathetic university authorities are to our lifestyle and movement, I didn't want any mocking help from them but from Allah alone. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing I was vulnerable and needed their assistance. Then one of my own professors mocked, "how can mosquitoes possibly bite you folks through all that stuff (*jobba-jabba*) you wear?"¹¹

Hasina's experience is not uncommon among college-going BICSa activists. I have already alluded to the associations with a rural, obsolete past that the veil evokes, thereby angering dominant forces, but why should evocations of such symbols by a handful of women at colleges or universities in Bangladesh today draw so much fire from students, faculty, and administrators, particularly at the more prestigious institutions? The

¹¹ Informal interview, senior BICSa leader, Chittagong, February 9, 1999. Chittagong University is dotted with trees and small swamp-like spots. Mosquitoes abound here, as they do in most places in Bangladesh. Students periodically suffer from fevers caused by mosquito-borne viruses.

answer lies partly in the fact that Dhaka University, Chittagong University, and Rajshahi University have witnessed numerous violent conflicts between male Islamist students and the student wings of the two dominant nationalist political parties over the years, so feelings for and against Islamism run high on these campuses. Though BICSa women have not participated in any political violence to date, hostility spilling over from conflicts among the male students and among Islamist, nationalist, and secularist ideologies end up affecting them in different ways. Yet hostility to veiled students comes not only from those affiliated with opposing political parties.

Thomas Shaw's (1994) exploration of the semiotic dynamics of identity is helpful here. Using Shaw's semiotic model of identity, we can understand the veil as one of the symbols, styles, or gestures—"sign vehicles"—that constitute and convey a woman Islamist's identity. As such, the veil performs both intrapersonal and interpersonal (social) functions. A symbol performs the latter, Shaw argues, by signifying membership in a particular moral community or status domain and invoking tacit, "packaged" knowledge of life-circumstance differences linked to moral, subcultural, or status domains. Such tacit knowledge enables others to make inferences about an individual's goals, desires, and presumed abilities. Reflexive hostility to the veil on campuses can be partly explained through the challenge that a veiled woman's presence at these institutions poses to the "packaged" social script that dominant

culture has written for the veil. According to this body of tacit knowledge, a veiled woman is rural, uneducated, uninformed, inarticulate, and timid, desiring nothing more than to stay at home with a husband, children, a prayer mat, and prayer beads, serving her family by cooking, cleaning, and imparting elementary moral education to the children. Therefore a veiled student at a modern-secular, prestigious college or university in present-day Bangladesh, who is competing in the public sphere to secure degrees and access to the job market, and especially one who is articulate, confident, and resistant, constitutes an unknowable, unreal, unfamiliar, inherently contradictory category. BICSa women's efforts to rewrite the dominant "packaging" of a veiled women's sociocultural attributes and life circumstances stir the ire of subscribers to and upholders of a liberal regime of sensibilities at key production centers of modernity.

4.3 Junior-Senior Hierarchy and Familial Authority

Besides challenging the cultural construction of non-kin relations in familial terms and intensifying the genderedness of identity and the potency of female sexuality, veiling poses another challenge to dominant social mores. As the cases already described illustrate, in insisting on veiling, young women often oppose the wishes of older men. In so doing, they defy not only the deep-rooted age hierarchy of Bangladeshi society but patriarchal authority specifically. In the cases discussed above, Reema opposes her uncle and local guardian, Farzana contests her father's

disapproval, Amina defies her older brother-in-law (also her local guardian), and Hasina challenges her professors.

One might argue that generational conflicts occur in most societies. They do, but what makes the conflict around veiling particularly intense is that BICSa women challenge the primary ground assumed for the authority of seniors over juniors, namely moral knowledge. A person is expected to defer to her elders not only because they provide for her but even more so because they are assumed to know more about morals, about what is important in life, about how one should behave. The fact that moral, not financial standing is the underlying principle of the junior-senior hierarchy is evident in interclass interactions. In some wealthy households, elderly male employees, be they servants, chauffeurs, gardeners, or doormen, may be addressed as *chacha* (paternal uncle) by younger members of the employing family, especially the children, as well as by younger employees of the household.

One expectation arising from the perceived moral and experiential superiority of elders is that they urge younger people to behave politely (with *adab*), to observe religious practices (especially the prescribed five daily prayers and fasting during the month of *Romzan*), to pay greater attention to studies, to be dutiful, and the like. A corollary—particularly at this time, with the growing popularity of Hindi and Western films and women’s increasing mobility and visibility in public space—is that elders often urge younger women to dress modestly. It is therefore particularly

vexing for older males when young BICSa women, in insisting on veiling, preempt the elder's admonitory role. In these circumstances, BICSa women actually outdo older men responsible for the protection of family honor (*man-samman*) at their own game of policing the bounds of propriety. By veiling, Islamist women imply that the normative understanding of female modesty manifested in the proper wearing of the *sari* or *salwar kamiz* falls short of a divinely ordained ideal: that a Muslim woman venturing into public space or interacting with any non-*mahrum* male should wear a *borkha*.

Nor is the veil the only source of conflict with familial authorities. A second is poor performance in schoolwork as a result of the time needed for organizational duties such as attending meetings, doing assigned readings, preparing lessons, and mobilizing potential recruits. A third is that the time required for activism also detracts from housework, which particularly creates tension with female family members responsible for housework. A fourth is the insistence of particularly committed activists on marrying Islamists. Fifth, Islamic activism can attract the wrath of dominant political groups (e.g., on campus); BICSa women are sometimes verbally assaulted. Their persons and property may even be attacked, though more rarely. They are thus seen by family as putting themselves in harm's way by committing to activist ideology. Sixth, BICSa women must spend a significant amount of time outside the home to carry out certain organizational tasks. Since social norms dictate that a "good"

young woman spends part of her time at school and the rest at home, these organizational outings create tension within the family, which is responsible for “preserving the honor” of its female members. If a woman spends too much time outdoors, away from the protection of her guardians or school authorities, she places her honor—intimately tied to her family’s honor—at risk. This is why BICSa forbids group worship meetings at members’ homes, lest the honor of any attendee be endangered by any male member of the hosting household (including servants). Being already at odds with the parents of many activists, BICSa is particularly careful in avoiding situations where it might be held responsible for any kind of harm.

Since a young woman is not usually allowed to spend evenings away from home, BICSa activists often run into difficulty in attending periodic organizational “teaching camps.” These require participants to spend three days and two nights with a large group of peers under extremely modest living conditions in a large hall located near the BICSa and Jamaat headquarters. Some activists, weary of arguing with guardians over attending each and every “teaching camp,” simply pack and leave home discreetly, letting a younger sibling or an older brother’s wife to inform their elders after the fact. They know they will be reprimanded later but they feel it is worth the unpleasantness. An activist “gets used to

being scolded” or learns to “suffer in silence”. Each encounter tests one’s faith, hones it as “fire purifies gold”.¹²

The sense of opposition to cultural and political hegemony born of individual experiences at home and at school, infused with the emotions of prophetic struggle against “ignorance” (*jaheliyat*) cultivated over the course of many worker meetings and study circles (as discussed in the previous chapters), helps foster a sense of besieged community among activists. This not only combats centrifugal forces within the group but turns otherwise mildly pious, soft-spoken, and shy women into strong-willed, determined, committed activists. The examples below illustrate these points.

4.4 Islamic Activism

4.4.1 Parul and Her Secular Male Adversaries

Parul joined BICSa as a ninth grader in 1980 under the influence of her youngest maternal aunt (Amina) and her three older brothers, who some years earlier had joined BICSa’s male counterpart Shibir, which is openly political and Jamaat-affiliated. Her parents were upset and disappointed. They observed religious fasting and prayers, like many other Bangladeshi Muslims, but like the majority of their semi-urban middle-class fellow citizens they did not observe *parda*, enjoyed singing

¹² An analogy a BICSa leader used in her talk at a Training Camp to boost morale, March 27, 2003.

and dancing, and found religious activism not only too conservative but politically suspect.

Parul married a Shibir activist in 1983 and moved to Dhaka from the outlying district of Madaripur. Her husband joined Jamaat after graduating from Chittagong University and is now a mid-level businessman. He helped her immensely, she said, in completing her Master's from Dhaka University while struggling with household work, two pregnancies, organizational responsibilities, and a traumatic ectopic pregnancy. While her husband and aunt, both top Islamist leaders, have encouraged her to pursue an M.Phil. and Ph.D., Parul feels too spent and is afraid that she must disappoint them.

From her narratives it is clear that her vivid memories as a student activist in high school are infused with a spirit of personal sacrifice and opposition to hegemonic practices. She was the first Islamist in her women's high school. Many women, some old classmates and friends, were shocked and upset at the "drastic" change they saw in her, both in physical appearance and ideology. "Even though this is a Muslim majority society," she told me, "one regrettably faces many obstacles in one's efforts to practice Islam fully. Numerous hurtful and derogatory remarks were directed at me, some aloud, some in whispers, and this kind of talk can gradually chip away at one's resolve, so I always strove to be especially vigilant." In 1980, she had adopted a full *borkha* and begun to engage intensely in propagating and preaching the Islamist message

(*dawati kaj*). Her efforts resulted in the establishment of a small BICSa unit.

After passing the tenth-grade matriculation exams she had to move to a co-ed high school for her “intermediate” years (11th and 12th grades), as there were no such higher schools for women in the area. Here she encountered hostile opposition from the dominant political student group Chatra League, which upholds secular ethnic nationalism. Male activists of this group used to splatter the back of her *borkha* (overcoat) with ink and scrawl offensive comments about her on various campus walls, accusing her of being a fundamentalist (*maulabadi*), agent (*dalal*) of Pakistan and thus a traitor to Bangladesh, and a corrupt woman who needed her veil to conceal the “dirt within.” Several incidents left particularly strong impressions. She narrated the first as follows:

Since we (i.e., she and the newly recruited BICSa activists at her high school) were new to the Islamic movement then, we wanted to observe veiling in an exemplary spirit, with particular rigor. This meant keeping our *borkha* on at all times. This was especially difficult during the hotter months. One day, I felt dizzy and passed out in the women’s common room. I was unconscious for no more than a few minutes. When the news spread, and it can spread very quickly on a small campus, male Chatra League activists seized this opportunity to gather around me, suggesting ways in which I should be treated. On waking up, I was quite distressed to see these boys poring over me with smug expressions on their faces, boys who had harassed me often. My very first reaction was anger at the breach of my modesty. I blurted out instinctively, “what are *they* doing here?” But the Chatra League activists took this opportunity to file a slander case against me with the court, even though I had made no accusation whatsoever of physical assault at any time; I had only expressed displeasure at the way my *adversaries* took advantage of my unfortunate situation. The hearings were very traumatic for me. Chatra League men tried to persuade the school’s Principal to expel me and followed me

around shouting the most humiliating slogans. There was nobody I could turn to for help. I felt alone and quite overwhelmed. The other few BICSA activists at the college were all my own recruits and younger than me. There were some Shibir activists around but they did not think it wise to involve themselves only on my account.¹³ I could not ask my parents for help since my father had always opposed Islamic activism. But in the end, Allah helped me. He gave me the strength to pull through this traumatic incident with dignity, on my own. I realized that if my ideological adversaries were so invested in getting rid of me, I must be doing something right in my capacity as an Islamic worker. I felt rejuvenated and more determined than ever before.¹⁴

In another incident, Chatra League activists prevented her from participating in a cultural program. She had grown up in an environment that nurtured the performance arts, but when she turned to a radically Islamic way of life she had to abandon singing and dancing. Even so, she continued to participate in debates, impromptu speech-making, and poetry recitation.¹⁵ She felt, furthermore, that she needed to prove to others that a

¹³ On account of its firm belief in gender segregation as well as for reasons of safety, BICSA is structurally, if not ideologically, an independent organization, maintaining only unofficial and advisory links with Jamaat, the parent organization of both BICSA and Shibir. Since Shibir often engages in violent conflict with the student wings of the two dominant secular-liberal political parties, there is a reasonable fear that any visible connection between Shibir and BICSA would make BICSA activists vulnerable to attacks from Shibir's ideological-political adversaries. Shibir men, therefore, try not to involve themselves in any manner with BICSA activists' affairs; such distancing might be a matter of life and death.

¹⁴ Informal interview, former senior BICSA leader, January 24, 1999.

¹⁵ According to some Islamic interpretations, women's participation in non-segregated activities violates Islamic standards of propriety. On this view, a woman's voice should not be heard by non-*mahrūm* men except when necessary, and even in such an instance, a woman should speak sternly and professionally, and not in an attractive or seductive manner. A modernist Islamic women's

woman could simultaneously observe *parda* and engage in fun as well as challenging activities:

I enrolled in two competitions. I stood first in the competition in poetry recitation. On the second day, in the competition in impromptu speech, Chatra League activists created much uproar claiming that since they could not hear me properly, I must remove my face veil. This was nonsense, of course, since men have never complained that they could not hear me through my veil before, either in class or in the marketplace or elsewhere. I was a clear speaker with a powerful voice. In this instance, I was further aided by the microphone. However, I decided to step down, not having any powerful allies and feeling that this was perhaps not worth fighting over.¹⁶

She also dwelt on the violent conflict that broke out between Chatra League and Shibir in her 12th grade year, 1981, and on how the “cruelty” of the “anti-Islamists” was seared into her memory:

Threatened by the growing strength of Islamists, the state and its leftist allies tried to nullify Golam Azam’s (chief or *amir* of Jamaat) right to Bangladeshi citizenship. When Jamaat-Shibir called a meeting in Madaripur to protest this, AL and Chatra League attacked. Since Faridpur is Sheikh Mujib’s hometown, the League is particularly strong in the Faridpur-Madaripur-Barisal region. From the interior of our homes, we Chatri Sangstha women watched some our leading Shibir brothers fall before the larger and much better-armed League forces, one after another, bleeding. We felt as though history were repeating itself and that we must help. We recalled how female companions (*sahabi*) of the Prophet Muhammad helped his male companions in the field, by tending to their injuries and removing them to safety. Shibir brothers who remained on their feet helped transport their wounded to the hospital but we did the rest.

group, Witness, encountered critiques from conservative Islamic quarters, including BICSA, when a Witness leader performed a *hamd* (devotional song without the accompaniment of musical instruments) on national television.

¹⁶ Informal interview, January 24, 1999.

Yet another event that made a lasting impression was an attack on a Shibir procession at Dhaka University in 1981:

Two Shibir brothers lost their legs to a bomb cast by anti-Islamists. . . . [W]e young Chatri Sangstha workers in Madaripur were vividly reminded of the sacrifices the Prophet and his Companions had made for the cause of Islam, of the violent opposition and physical-emotional torment they had to face. Instead of feeling intimidated, we felt inspired; we felt that our adversaries would not attack us so viciously if we were not on the just path and did not pose a real threat to their hold over society.¹⁷

While not many BICSa activists are witnesses to violent encounters between male Islamists and their adversaries, narratives of these violent incidents and other gruesome deaths of male Islamists circulate among BICSa activists in private conversations, study circle discussions, and speeches delivered at large training programs, serving as social documents of bodily opposition to sociopolitical domination. I heard Farzana tell a small group of friends and fellow activists of how an Islamist brother in her hometown was martyred as he prepared to offer his dawn prayer. The circulation of these stories is an important site for the production of Islamist subjectivity and shared identity.¹⁸ Narratives that

¹⁷ Informal interview, January 24, 1999.

¹⁸ Carole Cain (1991) discusses how through the sharing of personal stories in Alcoholics Anonymous, cultural knowledge (i.e., the form of cultural knowledge relative to and defined by that movement) is integrated into self-knowledge. Accounts of persecution or oppression similarly facilitate integration of BICSa's

lend meaning to or “frame” (in the parlance of social-movement scholarship) the sufferings of participants are a standard feature of social, religious, national, and other movements. Instructive here is Julie Peteet’s delineation (1994) of how beatings and incarcerations of young male Palestinians in the occupied territories by Israeli military personnel during the first *intifada* (Palestinian uprising in the Occupied Territories) came to be construed by the victims as rites of passage into manhood and political agency. She argues that while Foucault eloquently attended to the processes whereby the body is harnessed as a site for the inscription of power (1979), he does not address the responses of those whose bodies are thus appropriated by the dominant forces. In BICSa’s case, the very acts of humiliation, ridicule, hostility, and degradation that are intended to cow and silence come to be interpreted as affirming the righteousness and efficacy of their struggle. Such suffering is sometimes explicitly articulated as constituting “the real tests of the strength of faith” and as playing a significant role in the strengthening of one’s faith and resolve, as the account of an activist Amina demonstrates below. Thus, mainstream opposition is used to gauge the efficacy of BICSa’s struggle for change. Stories of hostility from family members, fellow students, and teachers are circulated as motivational evidence that BICSa and Shibir are indeed following in the steps of the Prophet Muhammad: do their efforts not elicit the same responses that the Prophet Muhammad and his companions

cultural knowledge of “true Muslimness,” “correct Islamic ideology,” and “Islamic history” into the activist’s self-understanding of her identity.

received from dominant social groups, including mockery, accusations of betrayal, insults, discrimination, and violence against persons and property?

4.4.2 *Amina's Marriage*

Like Parul, Amina felt inspired by societal opposition to her Islamic activism. In her case, much of the opposition came not from fellow students but from family. In Bangladesh, when parents feel that a daughter is ready for marriage, they set about finding a suitor for her. It is perceived as shameful for a son or a daughter (but especially a daughter) to even express an intention to marry of his/her own accord, let alone to declare that they have decided on a particular person or kind of person. Amina experienced difficulties as a result of familial opposition to both her Islamic activism and her demand for an Islamist partner, a demand born not out of any romantic notion but as an essential practical move in the pursuit of a pious life. Amina's family's opposition to her new Islamic identity enabled her, she said, to recognize the cruciality of emotional support to ideological struggle:

Growing up, I was a little different from other girls of my age. I read a lot and always dreamt of undertaking a huge, noble project of some kind but never really dreamt of marriage as so many young women do. But my reluctance changed following my engagement with the kind of Islam that BICSa stands for. I realized the importance of marriage in Islam. But I simultaneously began to veil. Even though my family was religious in the customary sense of the word, nobody in it lived Islam consciously and in all its details in the light of the Qur'an and *Hadith*. The kind of comprehensive Islam we (BICSa) propound was then an utterly new thing. Hence my rigorous veiling caused much

concern. My family members worried that no man would marry me, given all the restrictions in appearance and interaction that I had begun to follow. I was already always considered to be very plain, to have masculine features and tendencies in fact. On top of that, I had begun to veil. The combination, as far as my family could see, was extremely unattractive. Finally, they located a potential partner for me. However, when this fellow tried to see me at a particular event at a relative's, I kept my face veiled, to see how he would react, whether appearance was more important to him than how I felt about things. When my family heard that the suitor was not able to see me properly, they were enraged. Compelled to swallow my shame, I tried to explain that given my commitment to Islam, I needed to marry somebody who could relate to that kind of commitment, but my feelings were ignored.¹⁹

Eventually, partly out of a concern that Amina was too old to make a good marriage and partly out of anger at her stubborn commitment to Islamism, Amina's family began to consider any kind of suitor that came their way—widowers, divorced, even crippled—everything but poor. “Sometimes, I used to feel really hurt inside at this injustice, at the fact that my piety socially rendered me unattractive as a female marital partner. But I would try to laugh such frustrations away,” said Amina. Then her Islamist nephews tried to persuade her and her family of the suitability of a match between her and the then chairperson of Shibir. They argued that he was as well-educated as Amina and as committed to an Islamic way of life. Amina agreed, but her family was displeased since the prospective groom was not wealthy. Besides being an Islamist, he had just begun to work after university and did not own a home of any sort. This seriously

¹⁹ Informal interview, former senior BICSA leader, January 15, 1999.

upset Amina's oldest brother, who had assumed the role of the family patriarch upon the retirement of her father:

My brother was a secular activist and thus could not tolerate Shibir. As it was, he was extremely upset at my own new commitment to Islam. When trouble over my marriage began, my brother stopped sending me any money for living expenses at Romna College. I found myself alone and in a very difficult situation. I was practically starving. My clothes were in tatters and full of patches. I found these circumstances to be especially difficult since I had been brought up in a well-to-do family. I could not turn to anyone in my family since everybody thought I had brought this upon myself. Also it was not in my nature to beg for help. I was hoping to find a tutorial job. Then an appointment as a dorm manager helped me financially for some time... I think my financial crisis and opposition from my family strengthened my faith. Why should I beg for help, I thought. Difficulty, pain and seemingly insurmountable obstacles are bound to test one's faith in the course of waging an Islamic movement. At least I was blessed with good school performance. This motivated my family to resume supporting me financially later on... Sayyeda Munira *Khalamma* (a mentor and elderly Islamist woman; *khalamma* is a particularly respectful form of address for "aunt") had cautioned us earlier that the price of traveling the path of Islam can be very high. A time may come when we may even be cast out of our homes, as Prophet Muhammad was.²⁰

Amina's relationship with her family, particularly her oldest brother, was still tense when I interviewed her. He had never, she said, been able to accept her defiance of his worldview. It is interesting that Amina ends up opposing multiple cultural norms in practice, even though, in ideology, she sees herself as merely struggling against family patriarchs ignorant of true Islam, just as prophets struggled against pagan multitudes

²⁰ Informal interview, January 15, 1999.

as described in the Qur'an. A key social more that she contests in her narrative is that a woman's suitability as a life partner hinges crucially on her physical appearance. Female beauty is a vital element of Bangali culture and abounds thematically in the creative writing in the region. One BICSa activist, Kakoli, observed that many of her "college peers from lower middle class families, who can't afford to eat eggs for nutritional purposes, save money to purchase eggs in order to use them for the purposes of beautification. Eggs are supposedly good for the scalp, hair and facial skin."²¹ Dark, thick, long, silken tresses and a light-brown complexion are considered to be hallmarks of Bangali female beauty; the lighter the shade of brown, the prettier she is considered. Indeed, a person with a dark complexion is popularly referred to as having "dirty color" (*mayla rang*). A man's earning power and educational qualifications and not his physical attributes are considered important, so it is mostly women who suffer the stigma against dark skin. Creams promising to lighten and brighten a woman's complexion abound in local markets and are advertised widely on billboards, the television, and daily newspapers. A secular upper-class woman, Trishna, remarked that some of her lower-middle-class university peers, especially those from rural regions and hence farthest from the eyes of the family, even engage in casual sex in order to make extra pocket money with which they can then purchase those fashionable makeup and clothing used by their wealthier urban

²¹ Personal conversation, August 2, 1999, Dhaka.

classmates.²² While it is commonly recognized that parents of a dark-complexioned daughter have difficulty marrying her off, and there is some sympathy with the plight of these women, a general critique of this prejudice has not yet developed in Bangladesh.²³ However, a nascent critique of the emphasis placed on a woman's physical attributes in Bangladesh and elsewhere, emerging from Islamist discourses and articulated locally by outspoken Islamist women, offers some hope in this regard. While BICSa women have begun to offer this kind of a critique to buttress the merits of veiling and piety, other women may appropriate it for non-Islamist purposes.

Even within BICSa, recruits inclined to enhance their physical beauty prior to joining and considered normatively attractive tend to be less enthusiastic about veiling than those of their peers who are deemed plainer. According to Amina, BICSa, and an oft-cited *hadith*, a woman's degree of piety should be the first determining factor in her desirability as a life partner, not her physical appearance or family's wealth and status—leading criteria in the selection of brides in South Asia. The simplicity of lifestyle and the practice of veiling that BICSa's Islamist ideology

²² Personal conversation, December 5, 1999, Dhaka.

²³ Manisha Roy points to the emphasis placed on a woman's looks within upper class or caste families. However, I find this to be true for middle class Bangali families as well. In the eighth footnote to Chapter 4 in her book on Bangali women, Roy writes that "men do not have to be good-looking, so long as they are well-educated and are well-established in their professions. Families with ugly [or plain] girls have great difficulty in finding husbands and often a high dowry may be needed to solve this problem" (1992: 198; brackets mine).

propounds tend to mute expressions of class and physical beauty and thus level the playing field, to some extent, for women in need of marital partners. It is rarely possible for a woman whose appearance is intrinsically mediocre by the standards active in this context to get herself perceived as attractive, especially a lower-class, lower-middle-class, or middle-class woman with limited access to cosmetics and expensive clothes. The possibility that a lower-middle or middle-class woman might acquire wealth or that her family might rapidly enhance its fortunes or social status is also fairly remote. It is not nearly so difficult, however, for a woman to acquire Islamic virtues. A committed woman can rise to the highest BICSa rank of *Sadasya* (Full Member) from the lowest rank of *Prathamik Sadasya* (Primary Member) in a few years. The egalitarianism implicit in this emphasis on practically attainable piety, appeals to many BICSa women.

The emphasis on piety as the most desirable quality in a partner applies to men as well. This has even greater consequences, since the key criterion for a man's potential worth as a life partner is usually his ability to provide amply (and respectably). Men in medicine and engineering are the most sought-after, followed by business entrepreneurs and medium-ranking civil servants such as bankers, accountants, and well-placed government or private company employees. The Islamist man Amina wished to marry, following the advice of her fellow Islamists, did not belong to any of these categories even though he was quite well educated.

At the time of the marriage proposal, he had just joined an Islamic non-profit organization, a career which could at most lead to a fairly comfortable middle-class lifestyle, not more. Since Amina's family was relatively wealthy and upwardly mobile, her choice of partner sat poorly.

Her very insistence on a particular kind of marital partner, as already noted, challenged the social norm of "arranged marriage" whereby parents and elders (older brothers, uncles) choose a daughter's or son's marital partner for her or him. This is particularly true in the case of a daughter, who is supposed to be too shy to articulate a choice or even the desire to marry (despite constant encouragement since childhood to fantasize about marriage), whereas a man can without disgrace cast hints about a particular woman. Parents or guardians, by virtue of their age, experience, and intimate knowledge of and authority over their children, are understood as best able to determine a suitable match. Furthermore, they will often try to consolidate or enhance familial status by forming alliances with socially well-placed households, just as families attempt to climb socially by investing in certain kinds of education for their children, sometimes despite great financial difficulties. In insisting on marrying Islamist men, in some cases (e.g., Amina's) even *particular* Islamist men, Islamist women not only "swallow shame" and redefine female modesty, thus practicing the sort of self-crafting discussed in previous chapters, but contest familial authority and elderly wisdom. What enables them to do so is their understanding that in Islam, the final consent in marriage

ultimately lies with both the man and the woman. As Amina said to her older sister, “I can’t be happy with a man who does not share my commitment to the Islamic cause.”

Prioritizing piety in possible partners also contests an ongoing shift in marriage style in Bangladesh. As more men and women pursue higher education in co-ed institutions, they increasingly choose classmates as partners on the basis of “romantic love” (*prem* or *bhalabasha*). For BICSa women, however, this trend reflects Westernization and Indianization as conveyed to numerous homes and campus lounges through the satellite dish as well as through popular romance novels and classic Bangla novels with romantic themes. Some such novels and short stories by renowned Bangali writers such as Bankim Chandro Chatterjee (1838–94), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876–1938) are in fact included in high school, college, and university syllabi for courses related to modern Bangla literature. For Islamists, Islam does not allow for romantic interactions—even physically chaste ones—between men and women outside the context of marriage. Islamic activism in Bangladesh, in this regard, thus differs from such activism in Turkey and Egypt, for instance, where Islamists have come to embrace the idea of marriage for love (Abu-Lughod 1998; Gole 1996; Zuhur 1992).

As Amina waited for a marriage proposal suitable for her Islamist lifestyle, she came under fire from family members and well-wishers who wanted to see her married. In Bangladesh, there is pressure on women to

get married by their early twenties in urban areas and late teens in rural areas. What helps stave off marriage for an urban woman is her pursuit of higher education. But the highest degree a woman can usually shoot for, and that provided she is from a relatively well-off family, is the Master's, which is usually attained by the time she is in her mid-twenties. After this an unmarried woman's life can be made miserable by the "talk" of neighbors, friends, peers, and relatives. Her family is reproached, since it is considered the family's responsibility to marry off their children at a nice early age, especially daughters. A family, in turn, tries hard to locate a suitable partner for a daughter as soon as she reaches marriageable age and brings considerable pressure to bear on her if she resists its decision. BICSA women such as Amina tend to marry later than usual since their commitment to an Islamist lifestyle severely shrinks the pool of candidates.

There is also a more intentional reason for activists' delay in marriage, however, as became clear from my conversations with activists. They feel that marriage, even marriage to an Islamist, constrains a woman's ability to devote time to organizational work by increasing her household responsibilities. Furthermore, since a married woman usually moves to her husband's home and lives with his family as a daughter-in-law or *bou* (bride) of the house, she is no longer able to slip out and in as freely. Members of her husband's household are even less willing to overlook than those of her natal family the large amount of time she must

often spend away from the home. Sayema and Fazila, both leading BICSa activists who married in their late twenties, endured years of reproach from family and friends before marrying. They felt that earlier marriage would have distanced them from the organization when their services were needed most. But when they finally did marry, each got exactly the kind of Islamist she preferred; Sayema married a modernist Islamist she met on the Internet, and Fazila, a conservative Islamist who happened to be from a family less wealthy and more rustic than her own middle-class, relatively wealthy family. Munnie, another BICSa leader, married in her late twenties a man who is not only an Islamist but belongs to the same organizational cadre as Munnie and occupies the same key administrative position in BICSa's male counterpart, Shibir, that Munnie occupies in BICSa. Munnie rejected an earlier proposal, though it was from a man who was a pious Islamist and a successful professional, on the ground that the man lived abroad. Since the organization was going through a crucial stage of growth at that point, she felt that she could not leave the organization and join her husband in an American suburb. On account of "social pestering," as they put it, all these women ended up having to avoid social and familial gatherings for several years prior to marriage by virtue of their status as "spinsters" (*aibura*), a stigma that Bangladeshi women and their families go to great lengths to avoid. In short, many BICSa leaders resist marriage by the age prescribed by society. They prefer to wait, despite mounting social stigma, for suitors who meet their

personal criteria. Often, where the family itself is not enmeshed in Islamic activism, suitable candidates are fielded not by the family but by the organization.

A final cultural norm that Amina ends up opposing for the sake of her commitment to Islamism is that of family as a woman's ultimate refuge. Amina instead turns to her fellow ideologues. For example, when her brother, the family patriarch, cut off monetary support, it was difficult for her to purchase a *borkha*. Her position as a dormitory supervisor, acquired through her good reputation among teachers, administrators, and students, allowed her free meals; this enabled her to put some money aside. An older, mentoring Islamist then added to this amount and purchased a *borkha* for her. Another Islamist contributed a watch, a third gave her a purse, and a fourth bought her a pair of slippers. "These small but essential things," said Amina, with tears glistening in her eyes, "that my family should have provided, came from my sisters in Islam (*dini bon*) all of whom were very much struggling financially themselves."

Oppositional practices combine with experiences of exclusion and discrimination to shape each activist's Islamist identity. A sacred, activist subjectivity is produced, enacted, and reproduced as much through resisting dominant sensibilities as through conformity to the organizational disciplinary techniques discussed in previous chapters. In her daily life, which seems to be dotted with obstacles, an activist imagines herself as enacting a prophetic struggle against hostile pagans analogous to those she

reads about in the literature that comprises her organizational syllabus. Not only does she connect herself to an Abrahamic past through contemporary experiences of emotional exile, but she interprets in terms of a future where Islam triumphs over seemingly insurmountable and oppressive odds. In her engagement not only with the present and past but with this projected outcome, she not only reconstitutes herself but creates new conditions and feelings that enable an acting-out into the world in a process of becoming.

An activist also uses fragments of remembered struggle, whether obtained at first or second hand, to communicate her point of view “from the heart” to outsiders such as myself and to inspire other activists by illustrating abstract points raised in lectures and textual discussions. In this way, instances of sacrifice, including vivid narrations of male martyrdom, circulate as evidence for Qur’anic verses linking righteous struggle with inevitable oppression and ultimate success.

A BICSa woman becomes a “warrior of truth” (*satyer sainik*) through daily struggle at home and at school, resisting the desire of her “inner self” (*nafs*) to yield to external pressures even as she acquires the epistemological matrix for her motivation through top-down organizational pedagogy. Thus, in attempting to enact and embody pedagogically acquired Islamic knowledge, BICSa women often counter hegemonic ideals. These collisions serve to further ground activists in BICSa’s Islamic discourse, yet in repeatedly opposing social norms,

activists also develop determination, a profound sense of personal strength and independence, and an inclination for critique that sometimes turns on aspects of BICSa itself. Such development of character, combined with organizational training in articulation and in Islamic modernization, and the kind of mutivocality characteristic of increasingly accessible religious knowledge “from below,” pave the way for certain internal contestations which I shall explore in the following chapter.

4.5 The Qur’an

BICSa derives its power of moral persuasion from grounding its worldview in the Qur’an and *Hadith*, the primary moral points of reference for Muslims in Bangladesh (as elsewhere). The belief that their views and practices are rooted in the Qur’an braces BICSa activists to oppose family elders, instructors, and fellow students in a sustained manner on issues of veiling, marriage, and organizational tasks. Activists and non-activists are repeatedly and emphatically exhorted by BICSa to *study* the Qur’an and reflect on the *meaning* of each verse with “a researcher’s mindset” (*gabeshaker man*). This is a radical departure from the traditional practice of simply *reciting* the Qur’an, which, being in Arabic, remains unintelligible to the lay Bangladeshi reader.²⁴ Activists point to a consequence of this unintelligibility in the instance of the five daily prayers (*namaz*; Ar. *salah*) that constitute one of the “pillars” of

²⁴ See Gade (2002) for a good discussion of Qur’anic recitation as a valued practice of piety within the orthodox Islamic tradition. Also see Denny (1980).

Islamic tradition. They argue that prayers, like the other pillars—fasting (*roza*; Ar. *sawm*), charity (*zakat*; Ar. *zakah*), and pilgrimage (*hajj*)—are supposed to instill and habituate an Islamic moral-ethical disposition (*islami man-manashikata*) in a Muslim. Yet secularists point out that many who observe these rituals do not refrain from committing bad deeds. One activist explained:

We do often find that even though a person is praying all right, he also continues to engage in sinful activities, such as lying, stealing, backbiting, and deception. This then leads some people to erroneously think of religion as useless or superficial. Others, who are against religion, “expose” religion as a mere tool for masking bad deeds. But what is happening here is that prayers do not have the intended effect on many Muslims in Bangladesh and elsewhere because people simply go through the physical motions of prayer mechanically, habitually regurgitating the few Qur’anic verses memorized in childhood. These Muslims do not *understand*, let alone reflect and act on the meaning the numerous Qur’anic verses which constitute and are at the heart of prayers.”²⁵

Another activist said:

We wrap up the Qur’an lovingly in a *gilaf* (covering sewn out of cloth) and respectfully place it on a bookshelf so high that it is practically beyond reach. But we have no knowledge of or curiosity about what it actually contains.²⁶

These perceptions contest a number of norms. First, they are an attempt to redefine piety as entailing more than ritual performativity without literal comprehension, emotional coordination, and intellectual

²⁵ Personal conversation, senior BICSa leader, January 12, 1999.

²⁶ Personal conversation, July 3, 2002.

reflection. Bangladeshi cultural discourse is alleged to allocate religion to the domain of the ritual and symbolic, away from any practical engagement with shaping life and character. On one hand, the activists argue, Islam is affirmed absolutely (by the standard practices) during certain rituals; on the other, it is demoted to an abstract conception with which one identifies symbolically at the levels of culture and morals. On the cultural level, rites of birth, marriage, and death are characterized, at least in part, by Islamic elements, but on the moral level one turns to Islam for strength and comfort only in time of crisis, not habitually, not profoundly. As one activist pointed out, “during times of flood, our radio and television barrage the public with religious songs and discussions and Qur’anic recitations. When the crisis passes, God is forgotten.”²⁷

Also contested by activists is the hegemonic nationalist political imagination which, in its leaning towards a secularizing, modernizing agenda, urges a relegation of religion to the private realm of unchanging belief, away from the public domain of developmental activities, “progress,” change. BICSA urges women to study the Qur’an so that they might see that “true” Islam applies not only to one’s private life but also to one’s civic life. “Islam is a complete way of life,” observed one activist, “and encompasses each and every sphere of life—spiritual, social,

²⁷ Personal conversation, August 13, 1999.

cultural, economic, political.”²⁸ Given the increasing impact that state and society are seen as having on individual lives, an Islamic society and state are understood as essential conditions to the inculcation of an authentic Islamic morality. Jahan, whose father holds a job in Saudi Arabia, explained as follows:

Even though I disagree with the monarchical system practiced in Saudi Arabia, I must admit I felt an incredible sense of peace on my trip there in the recent past. It is so easy to orient the self around God there, to be a good Muslim. The streets were as clean and as facilitative of purity of the mind (*maner pabitrata*) as the interior of a pious home. There was no display of bodies anywhere. But here, in Bangladesh, we try to cultivate purity through our prayers and other religious activities at home. And then, when we go out, these huge colorful posters advertising films and male and female bodies assail our senses. It’s impossible to watch the television. The commercials are saturated with sexual provocation (*jauna sursuri*) and materialist (*bastubadi*) messages. When the senses are assailed by these images, time and again, then no matter how much you pray in private, it becomes very difficult to cultivate a constant awareness of accountability to God. And without such an awareness, it is not possible to secure peace in this world and liberation in the Hereafter.²⁹

In opposing the hegemonic private-public divide, BICSA also contests the boundary posited between religion and modernity, between faith and science, in the dominant political and cultural thinking of Bangladesh. “Islam is for all times,” says an activist. “One can dress

²⁸ Personal conversation, December 7, 1998.

²⁹ Informal interview, senior BICSA leader, December 2, 1999.

religiously and appear ‘smart’ [intelligent] at the same time.’³⁰ BICSa takes pride in the “scientific” approach to moral training enshrined in the practices of the cadre system and the methodical recording of daily activities. Its emphasis on research-study of the Qur’an, along with its style of preaching and training members through Training Sessions, Training Camps, Symposiums, Study Circles and Speakers’ Forums, points to a profound desire to be modern. These practices cultivate a subjectivity partially anchored in “scientific methodologies” and hence in discourses and desires of “progress” and a modernity compatible with Islam. The emphasis on “modernization” in national and liberal discourses is re-imagined as an imperative to harness science and contemporary knowledge to understand and serve Islam better, to demonstrate the suitability of Islam for all ages, and to expose the limitations of “human-devised” ideologies (*manab-rachita matabad*). While experiences of personal and communal struggle facilitate the construction of an Islamist subjectivity based on membership in a suffering but righteous minority, scientized practices of Qur’anic pedagogy and discourses of cynicism toward traditional, rote veneration of the Qur’an further ground this subjectivity in a politics of difference. This politics diverts secular-liberal othering of backwardness onto the traditionally pious, who would (in BICSa’s rhetoric) “follow tradition blindly” or in an “unscientific” or “illogical” manner that is not only

³⁰ Personal conversation, August 13, 1999.

“unsuitable” for current times but also opposed to the “complete” and “practical” way in which the Prophet and his companions engaged with the Qur’an. An oft-cited saying attributed to the Prophet’s companions Abu Bakr and Umar notes that these men focused not on reciting the Qur’an in its entirety as many times as possible (*Kor’an khotom*)—a practice popularly thought to have great religious merit—but on studying a few verses of the Qur’an every day and enacting these verses in the course of daily living. The traditional approach of faithfully reproducing the conclusions of classical and medieval religious scholars is contrasted in BICSa rhetoric to individual access to scriptural knowledge, argumentation, refutation through logic, studying scripture “with the outlook of a researcher,” and “wielding one’s God-given intellect”—values at least partially drawn from modern-liberal educational discourses.

However, BICSa activists are simultaneously critical of modernity, which they conflate with Westernization.³¹ The tension between the yearning to be modern, as defined by dominant culture, and the desire to be devoted to an Islamic tradition of thought and action permeates the experiences of BICSa women. This tension, which is inherent in the practical elaboration and inhabiting of a religious tradition within the

³¹ In the book by Maryam Jameelah (1996), titled *Islam O Adhunik Mulism Nari* (“Islam and the Modern Muslim Woman”), and read widely among BICSa women, modernity is conceptualized as the corrupting force of a Westernization grounded in materialism (*bastubad*) and a consequent exploitation of women’s sexuality and labor in the public arena in the name of “equality with men” when Islam “frees” her from any economic responsibilities and participation in the public sphere. Jameelah rails against “feminism” and sees it as a conspiracy to destroy the institutions of marriage and family, which Islam has established for the ultimate protection of women and children.

shifting dynamics of regional modernity, gets played out in a range of internal contestations, some of which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

4.6 Conclusion

There are three primary ways in which a BICSa member, in attempting to pursue a pious life, develops an oppositional consciousness or identity centered on transforming Bangladeshi society. First, quotidian opposition from one's family members, teachers, and fellow students to the activist's life choices contributes to the crystallization of an activist self. Second, this modification of consciousness through encounter with emotional and sometimes physical violence is intimately tied to the practice of narration. The circulation of "struggle stories" of individual BICSa activists against family elders and school instructors, as well as martyrological narratives of the maiming and killing of individual male Islamists at the hands of ruthless foes, constitutes an important modality for the formation of an activist self. Third, BICSa's contestation of the popular form of engagement with scripture, which is based on melodious recitation rather than on literal comprehension, facilitates the construction of a "progressive," "systemic," and "scientized" activist identity, which sits in tension with both traditionalist, ritual-oriented, orthodox, *ulama*-authored piety (exemplified by the apolitical pietist movement Tabligh) and the secular-liberal sensibilities regnant in higher-educated urban circles. The latter group seeks to exorcise religion from politics, to

confine religion to the realm of “private matter”; the liberal modernists and the traditional pietists thus agree, more or less—in contrast to BICSa and its allies—in defining religion in safely apolitical terms.

In critiquing their parents, elders, and teachers and an exclusive focus on rote recitation and symbolic veneration of the Qur’an,³² BICSa activists break from their former docile selves and from their cultural past. They seek a new “enlightened” subjectivity, even as they themselves are viewed as grossly “retrograde” by dominant segments of the urban, educated classes. This sought-after reformed Islamic subjectivity, “painted in the colors of Allah”, is simultaneously “Islamic” and “modern” and is premised on textual study, research, discussions, lectures, question-and-answer sessions, an embodied opposition to mainstream cultural practices, and social action oriented toward an Islamized future. This conception of modernity as a self-conscious break from the past resonates with the Western notion of modernity, notions articulated in general form by Habermas and explored by Brenner within an Islamic context (Habermas 1987; Brenner 1996). But BICSa activists, much like Islamic activists in Indonesia, also refigure modernity in critical ways. They contest the religious legitimacy of dominant cultural forms in the process of reclaiming the ethos of an earlier, glorified, “golden” past.

³² There are interesting parallels between BICSa’s rationalism, textualism, and conservatism and similar features of Christian evangelicalism in the West. Protestants long despised Catholics for not understanding religious ritual speech in Latin, much as BICSa denigrates Qur’an chanting by people who do not understand the literal content of the Arabic.

They discursively define themselves against Western modernity—even while claiming “scientific” virtues—and practically invest secular domains (clothing, study, entertainment) with religious content (Brenner 1996). Thus, for instance, BICSa members, reluctant to read the secular novels which currently dominate the literary landscape of Bangladesh, increasingly turn to an emergent genre of literature that I call “Islamic romance novels” and explore elsewhere. (Huq [1999] 2003) In this process of contestation and re-investment, Islamist subjectivity gets shaped not only by Mawdudi’s ideology but by other discourses as well.

BICSa’s emphasis on individual *study of* and *research on* the Qur’an significantly undermines the authority of traditional, *madrassa*-trained religious experts to whom individuals have traditionally turned for an understanding of what Islam or the Qur’an says about a particular issue. Men usually learn about Islam from Friday sermons at the mosque and occasional events of popular preaching (*waaz mahfil*) and share this knowledge with their womenfolk at home. Women also pick up information from female family members of traditional Islamic experts (*ulama*) of both higher and lesser standing. A smattering of religious TV and radio programs is another source, as is popular religious literature, which includes *mas’ala* texts that instruct readers in the proper Islamic way of conducting various activities such as prayers. Only in recent decades have women had less-mediated access to the sacred word by virtue of the rise in mass higher education and the availability of the

Qur'an in Bangla translation. Jamaat and its affiliated groups such as BICSA are in the forefront of this movement, which articulates an "Islamic modernity" (even as it seeks to distance itself from *Western* modernity) and seeks to infuse its project with the pristine aura of the "golden age of Islam."

Scholars of civil society, drawing on elements of democratic theory, have argued for the fragmentation of older sites of authority as a characteristic of modern society. This body of critical theory, emerging partly in opposition to the overwhelming emphasis in Foucauldian perspectives on all-encompassing domination, focuses on how pluralization of life-worlds creates (often unintentionally) spaces within which individuals and groups are able to exercise greater initiative and self-determination "from below" (Rudolph & Piscatori 1997; Eickelman & Anderson 1999). In contemporary Oman, for instance, as in other parts of the Middle East, mass higher education enables younger, self-appointed thinkers with access to multiple religious interpretations in print and on audio-video cassettes to contest the traditional authority of older, *madrasa*-trained specialists. This has resulted in a proliferation of public religious identities (Eickelman 1992).

Increased access to Islamic knowledge does indeed enable BICSA to buttress its position as an authoritative voice on Islam, but it also opens up areas of contestation within the organization as when, for instance, some activists pick up on the multiplicity of Qur'anic interpretations.

These reactions temper, from below, the top-down construction of subjectivity within BICSa. I turn to such contestations in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Polyvalent Resistance: Power, Agency and the Ambivalence of Desiring Subjects

5.1 Introduction

I now turn to some of the ambiguities and resistances of some BICSa members toward certain organizational teachings. In doing so, I depart from Saba Mahmood's (1998, 2001) groundbreaking but relatively linear depiction of the relationships between religious ideology, authority, and practice. In Mahmood's study, the pious women strive single-mindedly to follow received teachings in order to become pious Muslims; there are no significant dissonances or fractures—at least, none that Mahmood mentions—in engaging with what they are taught in the mosque or in their efforts to put these teachings into practice. These women appear to understand any difficulties in practicing orthodox Islamic injunctions strictly in terms of their own shortcomings. Seemingly, no serious questions are posed, doubts voiced, or ambiguities experienced regarding the absolute validity of Islamic orthodox norms. Yet these must be practiced in an increasingly diverse cultural context characterized by a fragmentation of socioreligious authority and by a plurality of ideologies and modes of cultural reproduction ceaselessly interacting in a myriad of

ways. In seeking to debunk feminist and liberalist emphasis on agency as solely resistance and opposition, Mahmood tends toward a similar uniformity or linearity by focusing exclusively on arduously-acquired *conformity* as agency.

I suggest that in the arena of religious ideology, authority, and practice in the modern world, as in other areas of lived reality shaped by the multivocality of complex, modern, and postcolonial conditions, agency is generally characterized by efforts towards both conformity to and resistance to particular modes of being and thinking, especially those modes that explicitly aim at being totalistic and all-encompassing. In learning about life as understood and practiced by women in the contemporary world, it may not be particularly fruitful to look for singular moments of seamless “doing” or “undoing” of norms. While a handful of virtuosos are indeed able to achieve perfect conformity to a code of religious conduct, for most ordinary religious people, including the majority of the self-avowed, diligently religious Islamic activists I have studied, such conformity is textured by numerous moments of tension, ambiguity, and subversion. To illuminate the process whereby pious subjects strive to perfect various Islamic moral capacities (e.g., modesty, patience, shyness), Mahmood draws analogies to the process of learning to play the piano masterfully, pointing out that a person who ardently desires mastery does not resist or contest the processes inherent to its acquirement. But playing the piano is only one aspect of any artist’s life,

however important, which is not the case with the Sunni-Salafi or orthodox traditions of Islam to which both the Cairene women Mahmood studied and BICSa activists are committed. These forms of religion require that their moral-ethical-legal sensibilities define *every* aspect of a devotee's life.

I believe that contestation, ambiguity, and negotiation are inherent in the execution of such a vast and many-faceted project, particularly in the context of most postcolonial Muslim societies. As many scholars have argued, these societies are undergoing profound socio-economic changes and experiencing fragmentation of cultural and religious authority alongside the steady encroachment of state authority into the most intimate spaces of daily life.

5.2 Veil, *Parda*, *Borkha*

In BICSa ideology, veiling is a requirement for Muslim women, mandated by certain verses from *Surah An-Nisa* and *Surah Al-Ahzab* in the Qur'an. According to the strictest version of Islamist ideology, veiling is more than a piece of cloth covering the head: it is equally important that a Muslim woman stay within the private confines of the home, away from the male gaze. This imperative of seclusion hinges on two assumptions. One is that sexuality is extremely potent, female sexuality even more so than male. If men and women are not segregated, then sexual attraction can cause "disorder" (*fitna*) in society. The other is that of a gendered division of labor grounded in biological-psychological factors—"Nature."

Men are assumed to be more suited to providing for the family and overseeing public matters. Women, biologically destined to bear children and more suited to rearing and nurturing both children and husbands, should stay home and do so.¹

Practically, veiling bridges the gap between BICSa's gender ideology of female seclusion and contemporary socioeconomic reality. Through veiling properly, Islamic activists now argue, a Muslim woman can legitimately insert the "private world" into the "public" when "necessary," for she remains essentially hidden or secluded even when out and about.² Hence BICSa's constant emphasis on and vigilance regarding veiling, considered so crucial that the very degree of an activist's fear of God or her anxiety over displeasing Him (*taqwa*) is evaluated by her vigilance in veiling. When an activist wishes to advance from *Karmi* (Worker) to *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker) in the organization, her public dress code is one of the first criteria considered.³

¹ For Islamist gender ideology in South Asia, see Mawdudi, 1998 (1972), *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam*. This ideology also holds true for apolitical Islamic movements that enjoy a growing popularity in the region, such as the transnational pietist movement Tabligh Jamaat.

² Indeed, some scholars have argued that the veil actually enhances women's mobility in the contemporary Middle East by allowing them to move more freely in public space than unveiled women. The veil, or *hijab* as it is usually termed in the Middle East, even enables women to enter spaces that unveiled women from "respectable" families tend to avoid, such as public transportation and crowded marketplaces. See, for instance, El-Guindi 1981, Zuhur 1992.

³ It is important to note here that *parda* or *purdah* is deeply rooted in both Muslim and Hindu cultures in South Asia and considerably precedes the rise of

“Proper” veiling entails covering not only the body and hair but also the face, leaving only the eyes clear. Sometimes, however, a member is reluctant to cover the face even though in all other respects her dress standards are suited for the status of an advanced cadre. Since BICSa’s principle of “winning others over” through example and education does not permit it to coerce anybody directly, it tries to compel acquiescence by sending upper-cadre women, to whom the junior member concerned looks up, to persuade her. The reluctant worker often complies in the end, even if she is not morally convinced, as in the course of her affiliation with BICSa she comes to greatly value her personal relations with BICSa peers and seniors. However, she might continue to be “careless” about the face veil when away from BICSa eyes. Convincing such an activist of the strict veiling requirement is particularly difficult since by virtue of her organizational training in reading Islamic literature she has access to multiple approaches to interpreting sacred texts. She is familiar with, or at least aware of the existence of, the growing body of secondary Islamic literature in which women’s issues, including veiling, have begun to be treated from divergent perspectives within the Islamic circle itself. Thus, another women’s Islamic group in Bangladesh, Witness, uses the works of

Islamism in the region. Female seclusion among Bangali Muslims (who now comprise the majority in Bangladesh and a minority in neighboring India) was first contested only in the late nineteenth century (Amin 1996). Since then, much has changed, even though the principle of gender segregation continues to operate in different forms in contemporary Bangladesh. However, veiling, the physical marker of segregation, is not usually visible among educated urban women today. To date, *Separate Worlds* (Papanek and Minault, eds., 1982) remains the only serious study of *pardah* in South Asia.

Arab scholars such as Abu Shukkah and Al-Qaradawi to argue against the face veil. They regard Mawdudi's position on the face veil, adhered to by BICSa, as "extreme" and even as ultimately a liability to the cause of Islam. They argue that the face veil is not mandatory and that it discourages many educated Muslim women from pursuing Islam. These dissenting women cite Qur'anic verses in support of the need for a "middle ground" (*madhyam pantha*).

Resistance to the face veil (*neqab*) is further motivated by the fact that it draws greater opposition from the dominant urban educated culture than the hair covering. BICSa women who practice strict veiling⁴ are, as reviewed anecdotally in the previous chapter, sometimes harassed and ridiculed by their "modern" peers and teachers at institutions of higher education where the vast majority do not cover their hair at all (see Chapter 4). Sometimes, veiled women are taunted as "ninjas" (referring to the Japanese pop-culture warrior image). In some instances, instructors demand that a student take her face veil off so that the teachers can hear her "clearly." Women who narrated such incidents to me often argued that this was a pretext, since friends, salesmen, neighbors, and vehicle drivers could always understand them clearly through the thin face veil. Some women, such as Hasina (some of whose stories were reviewed in Chapter 4), complained that they were given poor scores on oral examinations because the examiners disapproved of their face veils and

⁴ That is, veiling of the body, head, and face.

considered them “fundamentalists.” Shahnaz, who graduated from medical school a few years earlier, says that she abandoned the idea of specializing and had to remain satisfied with the general degree of MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery):

I simply got tired of being harassed for our face veil (*neqab*) by instructors, particularly during the oral exams. I felt that I could not go through all of that again in pursuing the FCPS (Fellowship of the College of Physicians and Surgeons) degree. I have heard that instructors get even nastier during the FCPS orals. Initially, I thought I could function in a non-Islamic environment without having to compromise my Islamic ideals in any significant manner. I thought I could influence the environment more effectively if I could occupy an influential position in society by becoming a famous medical expert, for instance. Every day, I grow more aware of how illusory that is. The environment constantly pressures an individual, directly and indirectly, to conform. By the time a sister (i.e., a fellow BICSa activist) actually acquires a prestigious position in society, more often than not, it is she who has become a different person, while society has not changed at all! Sooner or later, we gradually begin to yield. Despite all the training and knowledge, some sisters gradually begin to grow lax in their observance of the face veil. Then they begin to grow lax in covering the head as well and then the body. In the face of daily pressures, Islamic requirements begin to strike even the most devoted Muslim as burdensome. So now I’m more committed than ever to actively transforming not only myself and other individuals into true Muslims but our society as a whole into an Islamic one. (Brackets mine.)

As distinct from the Middle East, in urban, educated Bangladesh veiling is considered a marker of rusticity, backwardness, and “fundamentalism.” In response, BICSa activists try to transform the veil into a tool for acquiring new forms of “prestige” rooted in the global Islamic landscape (accessible via newspapers, travel, television, the satellite dish) and local class markers. For example, they distance

themselves from the traditional all-black form of the religious veil or *borkha*. The BICSa outfit consists of a long gown as well a head covering, but the material is often colorful and of variegated textures and can be of quite expensive quality. Since material type (cotton, silk, georgette, velvet, chiffon) is a class marker in Bangladeshi society, particularly for women, many BICSa activists invest heavily in material for two or three *borkha* overcoats and use these interchangeably for several years, like a “uniform.” The clothes underneath remain hidden, deferring class identification—although at the cost of stigmatization in many settings.

It is primarily through their headgear that these activists identify with the global trend in women’s Islamic dress. BICSa activists wear “headscarves” similar to those worn by many urban, educated Muslim women in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and even Europe and the USA. Most such headscarves are imported from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Some regular scarves from the USA and Europe travel to Bangladesh with individuals and are then worn as headscarves. Sometimes Bangladeshi workers in various Middle Eastern countries take headscarves home on visits in order to sell them at higher prices or to give them as gifts. Market demand for high-quality headscarves is intense. In the summer of 2000, a three-day exhibition and sale of headscarves and coats from Iran was staged. The items were quite expensive by the standards of most

Bangladeshi Islamic activist women, but the items sold so quickly that women who came the second day found a virtually empty hall.

Thus Islamic activist subjectivity, though still primarily defined by boundaries of the nation-state, acquires (in these ways and others) a transnational dimension. Events such as state opposition to the veil in Turkey and France, dramatized in the marginalized but functional Islamist media in Bangladesh, stimulate the growth of this dimension. Incidents of local and translocal opposition to Islamic activisms are made to feed off each other. These events, in conjunction with Qur'anic references to the hostility of the "enemies of Islam" towards the community of the faithful in historic Arabia, contribute to the crystallization of Islamic activist subject positions and infuse them with the power inherent in organized opposition to perceived domination.

BICSa activists hold that veiling is grounded in scripture and that their chief concern, as "warriors of Allah," is to attain success in the Hereafter. One might wonder, then, why they should care about how they are perceived in this world. While some members resist the face veil, most try to use it in "acceptable" or "prestigious" ways by choosing fine material for the veil and attending to color coordination between the headgear and the overcoat. I argue that this is because most Islamic activists, despite their "conversion" to the "Islamic movement" (*islami andalan*) and avowed opposition to prevalent Bangali cultural norms in the name of adopting "Islamic culture" (*islami sanskriti*), remain partly

grounded in hegemonic Bangali culture and thus in many of the values and perceptions associated with it. This, in turn, may be explained by the partial location of BICSa's own practices within hegemonic cultural discourses of modernity and scientific progress, an embeddedness suggested in some of the preceding chapters. In the urban-educated culture of contemporary Bangladesh, a person's worth is assessed, in part, by how "smartly" dressed he or she is. For women, the burden is heavier than men, since women must look not only "smart" but "pretty" (*sundar*) as well. It is owing to the partiality or hybridity of Islamist subjectivity that an activist, despite her avowed devotion to Allah and unquestioning obedience to all His commands, finds herself emotionally vulnerable to the judgments passed on her and the glances cast her way. Hence her resistance to the face veil or efforts to get a "smart"-looking veil as a marker of an alternative or parallel, Muslim form of prestige, status, and modernity.

5.3 Specific Cases of Resistance to Veiling

5.3.1 *Shaila*

A neighbor introduced Shaila to BICSa in fourth grade, when she was nine years old. By the time she joined the organization formally as a *Prathamik Sadasya* (Primary Member), she was well into the eighth grade. It took her another two years to become a *Karmi* (Worker) and an additional two to rise to the rank of *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker).

Since she was a particularly good student—bright, confident, and articulate—her BICSa superiors had high hopes for her and expected her to soon become a candidate for the highest rank in BICSa—the rank of *Sadasya* (Full Member). Also, Shaila was one of BICSa’s few recruits from the upper-middle class and had acquired some fluency in English, having had spent the first five years of school at an English-medium school (where tuition fees are typically much higher than at Bangla-medium schools). Shaila’s parents, while not formally affiliated with any Islamic organization, empathized with the larger Islamic movement and were supportive of her involvement in BICSa, which her superiors saw as another factor that could facilitate Shaila’s advancement to the highest BICSa cadre rank. Advancing to the *Sadasya* (Full Member) level entails the kind of commitment and dedication that is difficult to realize without familial support.

When Shaila managed to gain admission to the most competitive medical school in Bangladesh, her BICSa superiors were sure she would assume a leadership position in the organization. Since students of medicine are generally seen as the brightest in Bangladesh, BICSa pays particular attention to its (relatively few) recruits at medical schools. Also, one of BICSa’s best-known central chairwomen and the general secretary at the time had both been graduates of Shaila’s college/university. However, despite years of mentoring, counseling, and encouragement, Shaila did not advance to the level of a *Sadasya Prarathi*

(Full Member Candidate) let alone become a *Sadasya* (Full Member). She ended her student career in 2003 and left BICSa as a mere *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker). Why?

One reason, Shaila said, was her discomfort with the face veil (*neqab*). According to BICSa policy, an *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker) is required to don the face veil in public, leaving only the eyes clear. It was largely for this reason, said Shaila, that it took her several years to become an *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker) even though in every other respect she was qualified. Her organizational mentors corroborated this. They, however, viewed Shaila's resistance not as a problem with a particular BICSa policy but as general "weakness in her faith" (*durbal iman*). Otherwise, what was the big deal with the face veil policy, they wondered? Thousands of BICSa activists don the face veil every day. "It's such a small step to take, especially if you've spent years covering everything else except the face," said Sumi. But even after becoming an *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker) largely as a result of persuasion by a few mentors and superiors, Shaila continued to subvert the face veil rule whenever she could. I noticed that she would cover her face properly whenever she was around BICSa women, but at other times, including at school, she would cover only the lower part of her mouth with her headscarf, leaving most of the face open. Not only would she leave her face uncovered on festive occasions outside of BICSa's domain (campus concerts, film festivals and cultural programs, friends' birthday

parties, relatives' weddings, dinner parties), she would even wear makeup, including lipstick. When directly confronted by senior BICSa activists, she said that veiling the face throughout the day at school made her nauseous and dizzy; having the nose covered, in particular, caused her breathing difficulties on account of asthma and nose polyps. Since she cited health reasons, her BICSa mentors decided not to push any more, especially since BICSa discourages prying and suspicion and encourages giving one the benefit of the doubt. They therefore usually left Shaila alone, though they were not quite convinced, and only occasionally hinted that were she to fully commit to veiling, perhaps Allah would ease her respiratory ailments. Shaila did not heed these suggestions, though she did try to observe face veiling amidst BICSa activists out of respect for their sensibilities and to convey to them her sincere desire to attain the pleasure of Allah. Toward the end of my two-year field research period, Shaila purchased two fashionable and relatively short (knee-length) cotton/silk overcoats from an Iranian store near her home in an upper middle class neighborhood, which she began to wear atop *saris* to festivities instead of the ankle-length overcoats BICSa activists wear in public and which Shaila herself had worn for many years. In the course of Shaila's wedding festivities, which took place during my follow-up research in 2003, I observed that she was quite comfortable in front of male photographers and had photos taken not only with her face uncovered and quite heavily made-up but with part of her hair and arms

uncovered as well, as is customary in Bangladesh. And she did so even though her parents, being moderately religious, had said they would support however she wished to conduct the wedding—not being photographed by professional photographers (who are usually male), say, or keeping her hair and arms completely covered. She wore numerous ornaments and beautiful saris at each ceremony, like most other upper-middle-class Bangladeshi women. She even engaged video professionals (also male) to record the festivities and did not seem to mind the glare of the lights. When I asked, she said that this was once-in-a-lifetime occasion and she wanted to preserve all the memories of her wedding celebrations. Besides, the photography was important to her husband, and her friends' and husband's relatives wanted to watch the wedding video later too. She invited a few BICSa activists who sympathized with Shaila's resistance to strict veiling but she did not invite any BICSa leader to her wedding ceremonies, telling them later that the arrangements had been somewhat rushed.

5.3.2 *Shopna*

I observed changes in attitude toward veiling in another activist, Shopna, over the course of fieldwork. Shaila was Shopna's mentor and closest friend, and Shopna became a BICSa “worker” under Shaila's supervision. It took Shopna only a few years to make her way from *Karmi* (Worker) to *Sadasya* (Full Member). Since Shopna first donned the face veil as a BICSa worker, she followed the entire code of veiling rigorously

till her father began to look for a husband for her. The first time she took off her face veil before “forbidden” (non-*mahr*) men was at a photo studio. Her father wanted her to get some glamour shots taken so that he could then provide them to a professional matchmaker for distribution to potential suitors. For Shopna, a “glamour shot” meant she would take off neither her long coat nor headscarf but that she would wear makeup and leave her face exposed. “It felt really odd,” said Shopna. However, unlike some other BICSa *Sadasya* (Full Member) I knew, she did not protest, since she very much wanted to get married and to marry into an upper-class family like her own. Such people would naturally expect to see some proper photographs before seeing her in person. Besides, she said, “exposing the face so that a potential suitor can see you is permitted” (i.e., by orthodox Islamic norms).

Shopna’s wedding took place soon after my departure from the field. However, upon my return to Dhaka for follow-up research, I learnt certain details about Shopna’s lavish wedding ceremony from Shaila’s testimony and some wedding photos. While Shopna did not allow male videographers at her wedding ceremonies, she did allow herself to be still-photographed by male professionals—after ensuring that the few BICSa leaders/senior BICSa activists she had invited had departed. Shopna had known, said Shaila, that the senior BICSa activists, feeling uncomfortable in the lavish surroundings of the finest hotel in Bangladesh, would leave immediately following the feast. Besides, the food was to be served by

male waiters, as is customary, which would make it difficult for the BICSa leaders to linger, and Shopna knew how busy BICSa leaders generally are, so that they rarely spend any time chatting or dawdling. Shopna allowed herself to be viewed, decked out in all her jewelry and glamorous wedding outfit and with her face uncovered, by her husband's relatives and friends. I noticed that Shopna also relaxed her veiling practices to some extent following her marriage. She explained that while her husband and his family tolerated her Islamic conduct, they were not enthusiastic about it. But I also recalled that unlike some other BICSa activists I knew, Shopna had never asked her father that her husband be affiliated with an Islamic organization or movement of any sort. Shaila confided that it was more important to Shopna that she marry into a wealthy family than into a particularly religious or Islamist one—and the vast majority of Islamists are from the lower middle and middle classes.

I discovered that Shopna had “transgressed” in yet another way. During the months prior to her marriage, she was worried that she was putting on weight. Her family members and BICSa colleagues began to comment on her weight gain. In response, and encouraged by her cousin, Laila, who was then visiting from London, Shopna joined a local elite health club for women, where she managed to shed quite a few pounds dancing to the fast-paced tunes of Hindi and Western rock and roll. In celebration of her own slimming figure, Shopna even posed in certain tight clothing articles in the confines of her room, before Laila's digital camera.

When I pointed out to Shopna that the men who printed the photographs must surely have seen her, she responded that as long as they did not recognize who she was—as they probably didn't, since she always went fully veiled in public—no harm would be done. “I'm not sure what suddenly came over me,” she said giggling. “It was all that naughty Laila's doing.”

5.3.3 *Sifat*

Sifat also expressed doubts about the mandatory nature of the face veil, even though she tried partially to observe it. I noticed how active she was in the secular social activist group Sandhani, an NGO staffed mostly by medical students and doctors, that organizes blood drives and makes the blood available to the poor. When I first met Sifat during the early stages of my field research in 1999, she complained that it was hard for her to socialize with her Sandhani friends and colleagues at restaurants because it was difficult to eat in public and observe the face veil at the same time. When I revisited her during follow-up research in 2003, I found that her argument against the face veil had solidified:

I have read up on this matter and it seems to me that not all Islamic scholars agree that the face veil is obligatory. It seems that the face veil may be relevant for particularly attractive women, which is certainly not the case with me. Besides, if I'm going to practice medicine, my patients or students need to see my facial expressions and hear me clearly if they are to understand me adequately and if I'm to exert an adequate degree of influence on them, establish my authority, and command their respect. They need to know when I'm displeased or when I'm in doubt or when I'm anxious or suspicious or cynical, or when I'm approving, relaxed, and pleased or surprised.

5.4 Islamism's Totalist Claims on the Activist

BICSa shares with other Islamist movements the motto, "Islam is a complete code of life." A corollary belief is that a Muslim must dedicate her life, wealth, time, particular talents, and everything else she possesses to the service of Islam; the central aim of every single deed, ranging religiously obligatory acts such as praying, fasting, veiling, and organizational chores to seemingly material-emotional worldly concerns such as carrying on friendships, enjoying amusements, writing fiction, doing household work, and pursuing a career, must earn the pleasure of Allah, enhance His remembrance, and propagate of faith. This central belief in "dedicating one's life in every way to the cause of Islam and living every aspect of one's life in consonance with Allah's commands,"⁵ and the rigorous efforts that BICSa consequently demands of its members, give rise to various contestations. Most of these contestations arise from the pastiche or intensely negotiated way in which the holistic claims of BICSa ideology clash, sometimes painfully, with activists' daily experiences and polyvalent desires as they navigate various religio-cultural demands on their loyalty: family, school, friendship-leisure, romance (possibly), and BICSa.

Two discursive regimes where these contestations are most manifest, where the poor fit between the ideological ideal and the human

⁵ Fieldnotes, interview with BICSa leader Hasina, Chittagong, February 9, 1999.

and social material opens spaces of ambiguity and ambivalence, are (1) veiling, which activists are urged to do, and often sincerely strive to do, and (2) “balance,” devotion of all to Allah without (somehow) neglecting obligations that apparently have nothing to do with Islamist reform. Just as BICSa emphasizes veiling partly to bridge the gap between Islamist gender ideology and the growing practical need, individual and organizational, to occupy public space, it stresses the idea of “balance” in an effort to close the gap between unconditional dedication to *jihad* and activists’ daily, variegated, practical needs. As veiling is to spatial and social mobility, so “balance” is to time management: a suspension system or shock-absorbing mechanism that reconciles the ideal to the unavoidable.

Thus, the twin Islamist discursive regimes of veiling and balancing constitute two overlapping terrains of “patchwork” in the BICSa cosmology where various dissonances arise. Though BICSa formally emphasizes the need to sacrifice anything and everything unconditionally and spontaneously for the cause of Allah (thus securing eternal happiness in the Hereafter), there is a substrate organizational recognition of the divergent, worldly commitments of the activist. These worldly commitments cannot simply be opposed, purged, or shed: some are intricately linked to an activist’s ability to effectively wage organizational *jihad* for other-worldly success (e.g., poor school performance often leads to greater parental opposition to daughter’s Islamic activism on grounds

that her Islamist work takes time away from schoolwork). This paradox—that progress toward the other-worldly needs the worldly—issues in BICSa’s dictum that activists strive to “balance” the different aspects of their lives. But this notion of “balance” is implicitly in tension with BICSa’s assertion that Islam recognizes no differences between life domains; a true Muslim must conduct herself as a warrior and representative of Allah regardless of context, setting, pressure, inclination, worldly need. Some of the dissatisfaction and tautness that can result from the totalistic, life-encompassing impulse of such an approach are captured in an observation made by one of my most outspoken yet ideologically committed BICSa interlocutors, Farzana:

As a soldier of Allah, BICSa expects us to do well in school so that our fellow students and teachers respect us, to tolerate insults and injuries cast on us with smiling patience and logical arguments so that others are drawn towards our ideology, perform our household duties well so that our parents are satisfied with us, and then study Islamic literature regularly and perform all kinds of organizational duties. I often feel I’m trying to do too much and not really learning much of anything in the process. Even though I would love to become a chemist, I’m not learning my chemistry very well, since I can’t spend half as much time studying my school texts as I should, nor am I becoming an Islamic scholar since there simply is not enough time to really delve deeply into various aspects of Islam. If I manage to please my organizational leaders, my mother is displeased that I’m not spending enough time helping her with chores. If my teachers are pleased in school, then the organization complains I’ve become too worldly and devoting more time to schoolwork than to Islamic work, and that worldly success is not important in the end, at least not in the face of eternal success in the Hereafter. I want to do many things and to do them well. I want to be an all-rounder, to have a “balanced” life as Islam urges, but it is so difficult! I get so stressed out that I tend

to fall sick. How can I devote my life to Islam effectively if I'm sick half of the year—or dead for that matter?⁶

5.4.1 *Resistance by Shaila and Her Fellow Activists to Fulfillment of Organizational Responsibilities*

Shaila was the chairperson of her unit, which consisted of BICSa members studying at one of the most competitive colleges/universities in the country. Shaila and her small coterie, like some other groups of women, became well-known in BICSa for their reluctance to attend training programs, from short “group meetings” to three-day training programs. Many excuses were offered for these workers’ inability to attend programs or their late arrival at meetings, usually relating to schoolwork or exams. However, these absences and delayed attendances did not go unremarked on. Sometimes BICSa leaders would gently admonish them for their laxity in “striving in the path of Allah” (*jihad fi sabilillah*), cautioning them that one can be easily seduced by the glammers and temptations of this world but that one should remain focused on earning the satisfaction of Allah alone.

Citing schoolwork as an excuse for avoiding attending programs was particularly common among women studying at more prestigious colleges/universities, but such excuses were fairly common among BICSa workers in general despite repeated exhortations by BICSa leaders to sacrifice worldly interests to secure other-worldly benefits. Veteran

⁶ Fieldnotes, informal interview with a BICSa *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker),” Farzana, February 13, 2003.

BICSa activists such as Shaila would sometimes help junior activists negotiate demands made by school and BICSa by advising them about which trainings were more important and should therefore not be skipped. Knowing how BICSa leaders respond, for example, Shaila would sometimes advise her junior college workers not to seek permission for absence from certain training programs, knowing that permission would not be granted in certain situations. Instead, she might advise them to not show up on the second day of a three-day training program, in time for the “important” events. Tardiness is a transgression, but far easier to get away with than outright absence. She would advise junior workers seeking permission for absence to do so at the last moment, telling BICSa leaders that they had not sought permission earlier because they had thought they would be able to finish the assigned schoolwork on time but only just then found out that they could not. In some instances, I saw tardy junior activists simply keep quiet, heads bowed as though in embarrassment, as their superior admonished them—then repeat the same tardiness over and over again, to the frustration and despair of senior activists.

I see such acts as “silent dissent.” They may be understood as conveying many BICSa activists’ resistance to the BICSa doctrine that unconditional commitment to BICSa is religiously essential and so should shape every aspect of an activist’s daily life and priorities.

Household work is another popular excuse for tardiness or absence, especially for lower-middle-class women who do not reside in

dormitories but with their families in Dhaka. Thus Hafiza, an otherwise dedicated BICSa worker, was often late to meetings. She explained that since her mother was often unwell, her family could not afford any hired help. And since she did not have any sisters, only brothers—who are not expected to do domestic chores—she was responsible for most of the household work. Between studies and household work, she said, she could find little time for organizational work. Hafiza’s supervisor empathized with Hafiza’s situation but always advised her to strive harder. Many suggestions were offered. Could she get up earlier? Try to finish her chores more speedily? Yet it was never suggested that she ask her mother or brothers to do more work (her father, a bus driver, was usually out from early morning till late evening). I later discovered that Hafiza would offer household work as an excuse even on occasions when she did not have much to do around the house but was simply tired and wanted to rest or visit a friend.

Parental opposition was a third popular excuse for not participating, especially in the longer training programs. BICSa leaders urge members to try to win their parents over to the Islamic cause, so some leaders cast parental opposition as a failure of persuasion on the part of activists. Occasionally (but not commonly) a leader would suggest that a worker could pack up and leave quietly for a BICSa program, having a sibling inform the parents later. All the parents could do was reprimand their daughter after the fact, but “getting scolded is a very small price to

pay to strive in the path of Allah”, as BICSa activists often pointed out. BICSa leaders were usually, however, unwilling to encourage members to deceive their parents outright. Some BICSa members used parental opposition as an excuse even when their parents were not especially opposed and could have been swayed with relative ease.

In an effort to allow BICSa less control over their lives, some members take their own good time in advancing to higher cadre levels, which entail greater organizational workload and rigor in ritual observance. Shaila, for instance, took several years to advance from *Karmi* (Worker) to *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker), and despite pressure from BICSa to advance to the highest level of *Sadasya* (Full Member), she steadfastly remained an *Agrasar Karmi* (Advanced Worker) to the end of her days as a BICSa member in 2003. From various comments she made, I gathered that she felt that the *Sadasya*'s rigorous commitment to Islam and BICSa was not for her. For instance, she had a particular weakness for “un-Islamic” entertainments such as morally suspect Hindi and Western movies, reading secular-popular Bangla romance novels (such as those by Humayun Ahmed) and English-language romance novels (e.g., the “Harlequin” or “Mills & Boon” series), and attending loud concerts on her college/university campus. She was also attached to makeup, relatively expensive clothes, and not covering her face on festive occasions such as weddings and birthday, luncheon, and dinner parties. She was simply not willing to relinquish total control over

her social life to BICSa regulations or orthodox Islamic norms. At the same time, she reveled in the admiration and encouragement she secured from BICSa leaders through her success in recruiting, oratory, Qur'anic discussions, networking with wealthy donors, and organizing spectacular Islamic events on campus. She also seemed to enjoy the authority she wielded among the junior BICSa workers at her college, who looked up to her as a veteran role model and who consulted with her on personal and academic problems. In her hometown, away from the college/university campus, Shaila also enjoyed a great deal of authority among local elderly women, who sometimes consulted with her on religious issues and invited her to give talks on a variety of religious topics. Shaila clearly valued the knowledge of the Qur'an and *hadith* that BICSa gave her access to, and it was this knowledge, among other things, that deterred her from removing her headcovering or leaving BICSa, despite ample opportunity to do so. Even to her critical eye, BICSa was, after all, engaged in the traditional Qur'anic endeavor of "preaching the good, and forbidding the evil." By refusing to elevate her organizational "rank" on one hand and refusing to distance herself from BICSa on the other, Shaila was able to enjoy those aspects of both worlds that were most important to her.

I suggest that there is a specific reason why BICSa activists, despite their avowed and practical dedication, resist BICSa's disciplinary regime by persistently refusing to privilege "the Islamic cause" over all other commitments. Such resistance or reluctance arises from BICSa's

own ambivalence toward a member's familial duties, her relationship with her parents or "guardians," and her responsibilities as a student, as dictated by dominant social norms. Since BICSa's Islamist ideology subscribes to a gendered division of labor in which women are ideally the caretakers of the home, it is unable to tell activists outright not to privilege household responsibilities over organizational duties, even though some leaders do occasionally suggest that work for Islam is obligatory and should be privileged above all else.

BICSa also subscribes to the traditional Islamic tenet of obedience to parents (except on occasions when a parent tells a child to disobey a mandatory Islamic regulation). Even then, however, a Muslim is urged to be polite to her misguided parents. Though BICSa argues that being part of an Islamic organization is compulsory for Muslims at a time when Islam is under attack from various forces and when contemporary Bangladeshi society, like many Muslim societies, is in a state of "ignorance" (*jaheliyat*), BICSa is not willing to say explicitly that an activist should disobey her parents. Instead, leaders generally urge women to persuade their parents to see BICSa for what it is and to negotiate their participation in BICSa through making a good impression. In a similarly ambivalent vein, BICSa emphasizes the primacy of organizational work over schoolwork but at the same time stresses that one must be a good student in order to win teachers and fellow students over to Islam. It also points out that if BICSa membership hurts school performance, parents

cannot be expected to support their daughters' activism. The home and school thus figure as especially ambiguous spaces in BICSa cosmology. Activists often use this ambiguity to contest BICSa's totalistic claim over their lives.

5.5 Islamic Romance: Tempting Readers Away from Temptation

The conflict between Islamist ideals and Bangladeshi realities is acted out not only at the level of the practical—public space, family, studies, schedules—but also in the realm of imagination and fantasy. For example, in narrating Shaila's reluctance to conform entirely to BICSa ideology in the previous section, I mentioned her taste for secular-popular Bangla romance novels. Romantic fiction is so popular among young Bangladeshi women that Islamists have been forced to produce a competing literature—Islamic romance literature, a phenomenon in some ways analogous to Christian heavy metal.

Elsewhere (Huq [1999] 2003), I have explored the growing market for Islamic literature in Bangladesh as a register for both continuity and transformation in literate public engagement with notions of Muslim-ness or religious identity in Bangladesh. Continuity is exemplified by ritual manuals and the biographies of Prophets and saintly figures, and transformation is exemplified in the new genres of didactic booklets and the romance novel. There is a symbiotic relationship between Islamic literature and Islamic activism (Huq 1999), with each feeding upon and

modifying the other. This site of literary representation is yet another source of ambiguity within BICSa's discursive regime: many BICSa women partake of the emergent genre of Islamic romantic novels, which conveys profoundly mixed messages.

As boundaries between the "religious" and "secular" in Muslim Bangali discourses began to solidify during the mid-twentieth century emergence of secular Bangali ethnic nationalism in contemporary East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the face of perceived oppression by the Islamic state of Pakistan, the domain of fictional romantic love—as of creative literature as a whole—came to be dominated by secular artists. These typified Islam in stock characters: the hypocritical rural preacher, the corrupt, lascivious saint, the reactionary political hoodlum. Only during the 1980s did Bangladeshi Islamists began to counter these popular secular representations by introducing their own views on cultural and national identity, socio-political problems, and global concerns into not only polemic booklets but also teenage thrillers and socio-romance novels.

Islamic romance novels are a good medium for Islamization. It may be difficult to imagine linkages between Islamic teachings, citations from the Qur'an and *hadith*, and narratives of romance that involve not only married but also unmarried couples. However, when one considers the especial popularity of romance novels with vivid covers among the high school and college/university students whom BICSa targets, one can see why Islamists might have harnessed this medium. This project can be

understood as a pragmatic attempt to extend and redefine the boundaries of the Islamic imagination and to create a platform for Islamist critiques of liberal-secular ideologies and practices. Islamic romance novels help attract Bangladeshi youth to Islamism by making the latter feel more, as it were, user-friendly.

By providing an Islamic alternative to secular entertainment, Islamic romance novels help sustain the Islam-oriented lifestyle that activists strive for, helping to legitimize Islam as an all-encompassing, holistic system of life. Moreover, an hour spent reading Islamic romance novels is an hour not spent absorbing secular texts or entertainments. These novels both displace non-Islamic texts and bolster the sense of all-encompassing plausibility that any totalistic religious system needs. An idea inherent in the production of these novels is that it is possible to reflect on the intimate nature of human relations in a “decent” manner as opposed to the conventional style that Islamic revivalists perceive to be “vulgar.” Islam is understood to provide the most adequate framework for such “decent” explorations. Many among these Islamic novelists therefore see their works as inspired by Islamic sentiments and a belief in the need to re-moralization of society. (Huq [1999] 2003: 142-4).

On the other hand, the very reason BICSA recruits identify so closely with both Islamic and (to the chagrin of superiors) secular romance novels, as became evident to me in conversations with BICSA interlocutors, is that many Islamic activists, as formally-ideologically

opposed as they are to “modernity,” are in practice just as integrated into Bangladeshi modernity as their non-Islamist and secular counterparts. They grow up listening to popular love songs on the radio and watching the highly popular drama serials on television, which often have romantic themes. Some grow up watching romantic Bangali and Hindi movies as well. This pre-existing heterogeneity in the propensities of Islamic activist women is further compounded by the ambiguities with which emergent Islamic romance novels inadvertently infuse their own imaginary. The blurring of “secular” and “Islamic” boundaries built into Islamic romance novel’s very form, so effective in challenging monolithic secular depictions of Islam in a disarming manner, introduces ambiguities into the project of Islamization. Integral to that project is the tidy packaging of Islam as a “complete way of life” with detailed prescriptions (and proscriptions) for every realm of human life and a claim to be radically different from contemporary “un-Islamic” (*jaheli*) Bangladeshi culture, which Islamists seek to uproot in favor of a distinctly “Islamic culture”. Central to this notion of “Islamic culture” are gender segregation and extreme modesty in women’s attire and male-female interactions.

To mediate between Islamist disapproval of premarital romance and the need to attract youth towards Islamist ideas, Islamic romance writers often describe romantic relationships in some detail in order to draw the moralistic conclusion that suffering, misunderstanding, disillusionment, and deception are integral to experiences of romance

outside marriage. Yet these elaborate and sometimes intimate depictions of romance can serve to distract readers from the very spirit of Islam that authors intend to imbue them with, and even legitimize romance as an essentially human experience, one manifesting a “natural” human weakness despite the various risks and possibilities entailed. And tragedy and suffering are not, in imaginative fiction or self-dramatizing daydream, necessarily antipathetic. Also, a reader may reason within a putatively Islamic frame that romantic transgression may be counteracted or undone, like so many other human weaknesses, by divine forgiveness. Some of my BICSa interlocutors who avidly consume romance novels occasionally confides that they feel that Allah is more likely to forgive such transgressions if men and women embark on a romantic relationship with “correct intentions,” namely, the intent to consummate their relationship through matrimony and the securing of familial blessings.

The popularity of romance novels illustrates and consolidates female Islamist practical (as opposed to moral-theoretical) ambivalence toward romance, an ambivalence that leads some activists (as described in earlier chapters) to engage in romance, which often pulls these women into webs of desire in conflict with organizational or familial matrices of loyalty. Moreover, the large market for Islamic literature in Dhaka—which is much larger than the market for strictly *Islamist* literature—illustrates a pluralistic public attachment to Islam, a coexistence of old and shifting impulses. This variegated Islamic literature is not read only by

one group—Islamists, traditional pietists, or other—but by many Muslims in nominally religious households. Many BICSa women grow up reading this literature, much of which, especially saint biographies and ritual worship manuals, reflects the dominant apolitical understanding of Islam in Bangladesh. In short, even when BICSa has recruited a woman it has not necessarily uprooted her from the different forms of knowledge that she has been internalizing since childhood. As a consequence, BICSa activists take organizational life less seriously than their ideology tells them to (e.g., miss meetings, disobey superiors, or neglect their daily log of activities) because they are in fact *not* fully convinced that they will be punished on the Day of Judgment if they do not engage in organized religious activism and adhere rigorously to its various rules and regulations. The complexity and hybridity of the Bangladeshi Muslim literary imaginary highlights a point visible throughout this dissertation: that for Bangladeshi women, Islamist subjectivity can only form at an *intersection* of discourses.

Furthermore, for BICSa women and others, such as scholars, contesting some of the truth-claims of the organizational hierarchy, the larger market in popular Islamic literature testifies directly to the thriving of differential interpretations of Islam. This tends to undermine BICSa's claim to totalistic authority in religious matters—and so in all matters.

5.6 Women in the Public Sphere

Another realm of “patchwork” terrain in BICSa ideology, that is, of multivocal religious interpretation and hence room for internal contestation, is the discursive strategy of “necessity” that BICSa deploys. Much like the practice of veiling, which is used to negotiate between an ideology of female seclusion and the contemporary needs for women to leave the home, the idea of “necessity” is used to mediate the fractious relationship between BICSa’s gender ideology and the socioeconomic need for women to be employed.

As mentioned earlier, the seclusion of women or *parda* is the organizing principle underlying BICSa’s gender ideology. In brief, BICSa argues for gender segregation and gendered division of labor. It teaches that the Qur’an urges women to stay at home as much as possible, and that female public presence creates possibilities for social disorder by attracting undesirable male attention and facilitating illicit sexual desires and relations. Furthermore, if women work outside the home, they not only neglect their “God-given” roles as mothers and wives but also compete with men, whom God intended to be complementary partners, not rivals.

Certain practical considerations thwart this discourse, however, and generate ambiguities and ambivalences. First, BICSa’s central project of Islamizing the female student community in Bangladesh requires that activists venture forth into public space to reach their targets, many of

whom study at co-ed colleges and universities. Second, higher education is vital in two practical ways. It is a vital social asset, enabling, for example, marriage into a respectable family, and also an economic asset. These two needs combine to compel many BICSa women to study at co-ed institutions, as most universities, including all engineering and medical schools, are co-ed. Third, a growing number of BICSa activists must hold jobs in order to sustain a lower-middle-class or middle-class lifestyle or for socioeconomic upward mobility.

The discourse of “necessity” is used to negotiate or connect these dissonances. BICSa’s argument that women can leave the home when absolutely necessary is derived from the religious canon of *ahadith*. However, this argument has been mobilized only in recent decades to justify women’s growing presence at educational institutions and at the workplace. Also, growing women’s secular activism has invigorated Islamist efforts to popularize their own agenda among women.

Opposition from traditional religious authorities to women’s Islamic activism has further mobilized the discourse of “necessity.” Urgent situations, BICSa argues, call for urgent measures. Since Islamic values are disappearing under the onslaught of modernization and Indian-Western cultural and economic hegemonies, it is now “necessary” that female “warriors of Allah” enter the fray as well as men—though of course, men and women must work separately. Intensifying opposition from the NGO sector and feminist circles to the gendered aspects of Islam

further demands an effective challenge from women themselves to such “propaganda.” Otherwise Islam will lose women to secularism: women are not only almost half the population but also mothers to the next generation.

Having “Islamically” legitimized the need for women’s public work, BICSa urges women to leave the home in order to run the organization, recruit for it, refashion themselves into “real” Muslims, and reform society. It explains that women can secure employment if they deem it “truly necessary for decent survival.” Women must also pursue higher education, even if at co-ed institutions, since it is “necessary” that they acquire knowledge, which Islam deems vital. According to an oft-cited *hadith*, each Muslim man and woman must strive for knowledge even if this requires him or her to travel far to acquire it. While traditional religious authorities argue that Prophet Muhammad meant only “Islamic” knowledge, BICSa argues that without higher education, women can neither fulfill their God-given roles as mothers and wives efficiently nor engage profoundly with religious texts. Worldly knowledge is essential for effective opposition to the hegemony of secularist intellectuals and to persuade the growing number of educated women to heed the call to Islam. BICSa also cites the *hadith* that “every act of a true believer (*mu’min*) counts as an act of worship (*ibadat*).” Thus, if a BICSa activist studies college texts with the basic *intention* of pleasing God by serving

His cause better, then attending college becomes as virtuous as praying or fasting.

However, this discursive regime of “necessity,” which enables BICSa to adapt traditional interpretations of the Qur’an to its modern reformist project and thus strengthen its appeal to women, also creates spaces for contestation. BICSa leaders admit that there is no definitive yardstick for determining the “authenticity” of a perceived “necessity”: the phrase “decent survival” is, after all, inherently ambiguous. In effect, it is left up to the conscience of the individual Muslim to reckon with her real motivation for leaving the home. The only criteria are that she must be well-informed about Islam, be truly God-fearing and God-loving (possess *taqwa*), observe Islamic requirements of modesty, and be capable of making sound judgments.

Many BICSa activists deploy “necessity” not only to secure much-needed employment but also to engage in other “borderline” activities despite organizational disapproval. Thus, some activists take courses in computers or spoken English, hold a second job for extra money, or apply to go abroad for higher education. BICSa sees such activities as reflecting one’s desire for worldly happiness and would rather activists spent *any* time they can spare on securing success in the Hereafter—that is, on organizational work.

One of the most prominent themes in BICSa talks is the deceptive allurements of this temporary, material world. One leading but less-

conservative BICSa activist, Ayesha, drawing on the plurality of religious discourse on women's work, argued:

It is “necessary” for women to work in order to provide other women at the workplace with role models. Otherwise, if people see only non-Islamist women in public, then this curtails the influence of the Islamist ideology on the wider population. In order to attract bright, capable, women to Islam, Islamist women must show, by example, that one can be pious and have a career at the same time. This way, we will not alienate women who wish to pursue a career. This way, we do not leave the field open to anti-Islamists who can badmouth us to the public. Unless we go to places occupied by women today, we cannot tell them what Islam is really about, we cannot defend ourselves. In this sense, I regard women's professional work as a service to the cause of Islam. If we can afford some hired help for household work, then why should we waste the educational opportunities that God has granted us, by staying at home all the time? Able women must play a role in the building of society and country. A female teacher can wield much influence over her students, for instance, by teaching them to think in particular ways. The only condition for women's participation in the work force, of course, is that she be dressed modestly. It is preferred that she work in an all-female environment. But if that is not possible, then she must simply be very cautious in her interactions with men.

This view is accessible to and used by some BICSa activists to justify their educational and career aspirations in the name of “furthering the cause of Islam” but does not enjoy particular authority within BICSa today. One activist, Sayema, incurred organizational displeasure by passing up a low-paid teaching job at a girls' school for a well-paid job at a multi-national firm employing both men and women. Sayema is not only an activist, but a member of the highest cadre in BICSa. And yet all day long, she works among men, though fully veiled, with only her eyes

and hands showing. Given how hot and humid Bangladesh is, this is not easy.

This example illustrates the Foucauldian insight with which I began this chapter, that power relations are ubiquitous. By working at her job, Sayema does not consciously see herself as opposing any kind of power relation at all. She sees herself as merely trying to sustain a middle-class lifestyle for her large family. “I don’t want to make a point of any kind,” she said, “or upset anybody. My work concerns survival, nothing more.” (Here “survival” is equated, interestingly, with an accustomed level of prosperity.)

But since every action is nested within a mesh of power relations, Sayema ends up opposing multiple structures of power on the ground, however inadvertently. First, as mentioned above, she defies key organizational teachings on gender segregation and resistance to material desire. BICSa treats these themes thoroughly in lessons, study circles, and talks at training sessions and teaching camps, yet here is one of their *leading* activists transgressing both these core values. Second, her veiled presence in a corporate setting, contests and threatens the secularist ideologue’s equation of female professionalism with modernism and progressivism. Women who participate in the privileged and sophisticated setting of multinational work are supposed to have “unshackled” themselves from the constraining bonds of religion and tradition, including veiling. A third norm that Sayema subverts is the hegemonic, popular

cultural expectation that a woman, particularly one with a claim to piety, should stay at home to offer prayers, recite the Qur'an, and care for her family. In Bangali Muslim culture, a devout woman is expected to be more socioculturally conservative than other women; Sayema's status as both veiled and employed therefore draws derogatory remarks both from orthodox relatives, who see her as morally lax, and from fellow secular-liberal workers, who say tauntingly that women who veil belong at home with prayer mats and beads, not in a corporate office.

By taking full advantage of the idea of "necessity," individual activists push at those very ideologized boundaries which BICSa wishes to strengthen for the larger society out of concern that a growing proclivity towards materialism is eroding the gendered public-private distinction. Such erosion, according to BICSa, erodes the honor Islam accords women as mothers and wives. Of course, Islamic honor for women nicely coincides with the respect traditionally allocated for women in South Asian culture in general. Indeed, as I show elsewhere, such resonance between dominant Muslim Bangali culture and BICSa ideology explains, in part, BICSa's appeal to women in the face of otherwise formidable opposition to Islamic activism in Bangladesh today.

But how does one account for the gap between activists' ideological opposition to women's employment and practical participation in it? I suggest that it can be explained partly by conceptualizing Islamist subjectivity as forming not wholly within Islamist discourse but at the

intersection of multiple discourses. Many activists told me that they wished they did not have to work, since Islam does not recommend it; yet they continue to do so. For these individuals, not working would not have led to particular economic hardship, but would have made upward economic mobility difficult. Leaders discourage junior members from working, but do not push them especially hard on the matter. In fact, one sometimes hears particular BICSa leaders observing that there is a special kind of pride in being able to contribute to organizational funds from money which one has earned oneself. This speaks to the powerful role that the dominant cultural discourse of material prosperity continues to play in the imagination of Islamic activists. Integral to such a discourse is the desirability of a middle-class lifestyle. Some activists do indeed manage to successfully fight such desires, this being evident in a refusal to work or in passing up better-paid jobs for humble teaching positions in primary schools. Many activists, however, are often torn between the differing discourses of success defined by Bangladeshi society and articulated by BICSa. Indeed, as the practice of the veil and the idea of “necessity” reveal, some activists occasionally chafe against certain BICSa constraints. Thus, for instance, faced with organizational disapproval of her work and also unhappy with BICSa’s enforcement of the face veil, Sayema remarked quietly one day, “Were I aware of BICSa’s rigidity earlier, I would have been more cautious in advancing to the highest cadre of *Sadasya* (Full Member).”

5.7 Other Cases of Resistance Against Women's Designated Place/Behavior in the Public Sphere

5.7.1 *Interactions with Men*

Shaila was quite upset on December 18, 2000. When I asked why, she confided that a BICSa alum, in the course of visiting her alma mater, which happened to be the prestigious college Shaila herself was attending, had spotted Shaila socializing “inappropriately” with some male students. Not only did she reprimand Shaila, she also took up the matter with Shaila’s mentor/superior at BICSa to make sure that BICSa leaders would keep a better eye on their members studying at co-ed schools. In her defense, Shaila said that this alum did not know that Shaila never observed the face veil strictly at school. As she had explained to her superiors, she found that wearing the face veil too long made it difficult for her to breathe. She said that her superiors understood the health reasons she had cited and that the alum’s complaints regarding her laxity in observing the face veil in the presence of men would therefore not pose a problem for her. Also, she observed that team projects in school often forced her to work in close quarters with her fellow male students. What the alum basically saw, said Shaila, was Shaila having an intense conversation with classmates regarding a shared project. For my part, having spent many hours with Shaila on campus over the course of many months, I was aware that she not only had work-necessitated relationships with her fellow male students, but (like many of her non-religious and non-BICSa counterparts)

was quite friendly with a number of them. She laughed and joked with these men and even ate out with male students at restaurants on occasion.

Like the face veil, interaction with men is an area BICSa is particularly strict about. Fearing that interaction between men and women may thwart the project of self-purification and lead to premarital intimacies, BICSa women are strictly forbidden to interact or speak with men unless “absolutely necessary.” Unlike Islamists in some other countries, such as Egypt or Turkey, Islamists in South Asia remain strictly opposed to socialization between men and women in any form. Choosing a spouse through socializing with members of the opposite sex remains unacceptable. However, in recent years there has been indication that some BICSa women are not abiding strictly by these rules. Indeed, at a national training program BICSa organized for college/university activists in May 2003, a woman asked a BICSa leader during the question-answer session (that usually follows a speech at such events) whether it was permissible for a woman to have an important conversation with a fellow male student in a public place. The guest speaker responded that “what then would be the difference between characters in a typical popular television drama and BICSa women?”⁷ The questioner later confided in me that she wished to speak to a likely suitor, a male Islamist, to devise a

⁷ Television drama series are very popular in Bangladesh and avidly watched by the middle classes. Since the advent of the satellite dish in the 1980s, Hindi movies and drama series have gained greater popularity among the upper classes than Bangla drama. Romance and generational conflicts constitute the subject matter of television drama in Bangladesh.

strategy for marriage; her family, being secularist in orientation, would oppose such a match.

Violating a central BICSa regulation, Shaila married “for love” following nearly a year of (physically chaste) courtship. When her fellow college BICSa activists and I discovered her romantic attachment about six months into the courtship period, Shaila informed us that since her mother had not agreed to the match yet, her father had had the key marital religious ceremony (*'aqd*) performed, where the actual nuptial contract is signed before a licensed traditional religious expert. All that remained was for the cultural, public ceremony to take place. Shaila was therefore free to socialize intimately with her fiancé Hasan.

She must have figured that since BICSa women rarely interacted with her father, they (and I) were not likely to be able to check her story. I discovered soon afterwards, however, that neither Shaila’s father nor mother had been aware of Shaila’s relationship with Hasan. In fact, since Hasan was not as well-educated as Shaila and had had a few run-ins with the law, she was apprehensive about her parents’ reaction to a proposal. Shaila and her suitor were thus trying to buy some time while the latter sought a respectable job and educational credentials, which Shaila’s parents might demand. When I asked Shaila why she was willing to risk her parents’ as well as BICSa’s displeasure by marrying Hasan, what was so special about him, she said:

Many of my fellow students are getting married. Even many junior students are either in serious relationships or married. I'd like to get married too. Among other things, I don't want my colleagues and friends to laugh at me or pity me. The older a woman becomes, the more difficult it becomes to find a partner, and I certainly don't want to be a spinster (*aibura*). My parents are getting marriage proposals only from male Islamic activists since other educated men do not approve of veiled women and consider them either "unattractive" or "immodern" or "fundamentalist." While I've problems with the face veil and will abandon the face veil completely as soon as I've completed my studies and am able to leave BICSa, I want to continue to wear a headcovering and an apron in the tradition of moderate veiling. At the same time, I don't want to marry an Islamist; I find Islamist values too rigid. I want to marry somebody who follows the fundamentals of the faith but also knows how to have a lot of fun; for instance, watching Hindi movies is important to me, as are socializing and traveling. Also, I'm not a particularly good Muslim in that I'm not disciplined enough to offer my prayers regularly. I tend to miss the dawn prayer especially, since I'm in the habit of studying late into the night, and then waking up rather late in the morning. A typical Islamist man would be scandalized by this kind of habit. However, just because I veil and am affiliated with BICSa, non-Islamist men never approach me. Hasan is the first liberal Muslim man to express a sincere interest in me despite the centrality of Islam to my daily life. He likes my personality so much that he does not care what my religious values are. We think alike about many things and are emotionally compatible. Also, he is tall, like myself, and quite handsome, and comes from a middle class family only slightly less wealthy than my own. I know my parents want a husband for me who would be very well-educated and accomplished, since my parents have made so many sacrifices to give me a good education and enable me to build a career. But there are no guarantees that a well-educated and professionally able man would be able to put up with my various peculiarities or make me happy.

Some other BICSa activists articulated the double bind that Shaila expressed of having only partially Islamic, multivalent, or contradictory desires and of being seen as uniformly rigid (in a "fundamentalist" sense) by many non-Islamists on account of one's veiling and affiliation with Islamism. Such women suffer judgment and pressure both from their

more diligently adherent fellow activists, who may sometimes be junior to them, and by secular critics of Islamism as well, who, in judging these “only partially successful Islamist” women by the yardstick of BICSA’s formal ideology, which does not allow for ambiguities, find them “lacking” and condemn them to “hypocrisy.” A common charge my secularist informants directed at Islamist women was that even though the latter may wear the veil and claim a higher moral ground, they are in fact “dirtier” on the inside than those who do not claim to be religious or practice religion per se. It is to cover this “dirt in their hearts” (*maner nongrami*) that Islamist women need the veil. On the other hand, those Islamist women who adhere most strictly to Islamist ideology are labeled “extremist,” “brain-washed,” and “blind.” Thus, for instance, when Shaila and Hasan began to court, or whenever Shaila would attend concerts on campus, she was critiqued by younger activists, some of whom Shaila herself had targeted and recruited to the movement only a few years earlier. They complained to older activists that Shaila’s activities were making them targets of mockery and derisive comments by their secular friends and peers at the college.

To fend off secularist and Islamist fellow students as well as relatives and neighbors who had begun to gossip, Shaila decided to marry Hasan earlier than she had first planned. While women and men studying at co-ed institutions of higher education away from family surveillance increasingly court one another and marry “for love,” this kind of marriage

based on romantic love continues to be frowned down upon by mainstream Bangladeshi culture, where parents and family elders continue to enjoy sole authority to “arrange” marriages for their wards on the basis of familial socioeconomic interests. It is not uncommon for young couples in contemporary Bangladesh, whether in urban or rural areas, to commit suicide in protest to social/familial opposition to their marriage (Kotalová [1993] 1996: 162).

Ideally, Shaila would have liked to get married a year later, after graduation, when she could lend a financial hand by securing a job. But faced with multi-frontal attacks, Shaila asked me to negotiate a solution with her parents. Shaila’s father proved persuadable, Shaila’s mother not. Shaila’s mother argued that she cared for Shaila’s well-being more than her father, for she had raised Shaila almost single-handedly; her husband (i.e., Shaila’s father), she charged, had little interest in hands-on child-rearing. She accused Shaila’s father of always playing the role of a friend instead of that of a guide and charged that in agreeing to Shaila’s marriage with Hasan, he was taking “the easy way out.”

In the end, Shaila’s father, with some financial help from Shaila herself, hosted elaborate wedding festivities in keeping with upper-middle-class standards—a class status that Shaila’s family had been struggling to attain for more than a decade. Shaila herself had become increasingly interested in upward economic mobility in recent years, particularly since her graduation from high school and enrollment in

college/university, where women's clothing and means of transportation used acutely reflect class differences. While Hasan was not as well-educated as Shaila, he was somewhat handsome by local standards and his family was somewhat wealthier than hers; they owned a four-story house in a middle-class neighborhood and a new luxury car, while Shaila's parents lived in a rented apartment in an upper-middle-class neighborhood and owned a small, old car. Shaila's mother did not attend her wedding.

I was present when a BICSa activist informed Shaila's superiors of Shaila's romantic ventures. By then, Shaila had been "dating" for more than six months.⁸ Such transgressions by individual BICSa activists were treated extremely confidentially at BICSa for a number of reasons. First, BICSa felt strongly against the popular culture of "backbiting"; in fact, entire lessons are devoted to the topic and both Qur'anic verses and *hadith* are cited to convey the gravely sinful character of backbiting, which is considered to be especially damaging to self-purification in general and the Islamic movement in particular. Second, it was felt that publicizing an individual activist's transgressions might encourage others to engage in similar activities. Third, the humiliation and embarrassment that public knowledge of her transgressions might further distance an activist from both Islam and BICSa.

⁸ The recent phenomenon of "dating" in Bangladesh is generally understood to establish a romantic relationship that does not entail sexual relations. This is not to say that some women and men do not engage in sexual relations outside marriage, but is particularly unlikely in a relationship where one or both partners is religious or affiliated with an Islamic movement.

I discovered through the events surrounding Shaila's romantic relationship that despite BICSa's rigid formal positions, its leaders can show a great deal of tolerance even toward the most serious transgressions by activists. When BICSa leaders learnt of Shaila's romantic relationship, she was repeatedly urged to meet with her mentor at the BICSa headquarters close to her college. When she did not respond, a few junior activists demanded that her parents be informed and that she be expelled from the organization, since her activities with her partner on and around the campus were causing other BICSa activists to lose face. While dating is fairly common on university campuses in Dhaka today, it is not so among BICSa activists, who are respected to some extent, even by some ideologically opposed students and instructors, for their general religiosity, peaceful and respectful demeanors, and greater religious knowledge. Despite considerable pressure, however, BICSa leaders refused to either inform Shaila's parents or to expel her from the organization. They argued that they did not want any part in publicizing a fellow sister's sinful activities and would not exact any kind of "revenge" or facilitate any kind of "punishment" by informing the parents or casting Shaila out. A fellow sister's disgrace, after all, is BICSa's disgrace as well. They reasoned that Allah is forgiving, that a person can always change for the better, and that BICSa never turns anybody away from its doors since its very motto is to win others over through love, sincerity, perseverance, patience, and "sweetness of character" (*charitra madhurja*). In such

cases, leaders often cite a Prophetic tradition where the Prophet Muhammad is allegedly urged by Allah to practice understanding and compassion instead of harshness towards his followers in order to sustain and nourish their bonds with Islam. Senior BICSa activists often feel that Islam privileges mercy and forgiveness over punishment.

Being familiar with Shaila's astuteness, I was at first curious as to why she was not more discreet in socializing with her partner on and near the campus in order to avoid being found out by her fellow college BICSa activists. I also wondered why most of Shaila's fellow college activists were not particularly morally outraged by Shaila's actions. I was to learn later, from other BICSa activists from Shaila's college, that two other activists at the college had had premarital attachments in recent years and that Shaila and some of her fellow college activists had been aware of both these cases and had, in fact, tried their best to protect the privacy of the two activists concerned from both BICSa leaders and fellow students, not just as fellow activists but as "friends." In both earlier cases, BICSa had known what was happening and had only politely cautioned the activists concerned that "as representatives of the Islamic cause at their college, they risked much more than their own reputation when they acted immorally, that if their activities tarnished the image of BICSa, then the

individual activists must account to Allah not only for their personal transgressions but for harming the cause of Islam as well.”⁹

5.7.2 *Traveling or Spending Too Much Time Outdoors, Staying Out Late*

A romantic relationship was merely Shaila’s final act of transgression as a BICSA activist. Earlier, emboldened by her experiences of *sofor*¹⁰ during 1997 and 1998, Shaila undertook several leisure trips in 1999 and 2000 with a close friend to destinations outside Dhaka without informing either her parents or BICSA. Sometimes she spent large parts of the day socializing with friends, attended late-night concerts on campus, and then returned home late to explain to her parents that she had been held up by BICSA work at either the BICSA office or at the home of a neighboring activist. Meanwhile, she would tell her superiors that she has been unable to attend to certain organizational duties on account of exams or household work. Shaila explained to me that since her parents were rather “strict disciplinarians,” particularly with regard to schoolwork, they tended to see most other activities as a waste of time. Hence she had to lie

⁹ Personal conversation with a senior BICSA leader partly responsible for supervising activists at a number of colleges including Shaila’s college, June 2003.

¹⁰ “Travel” in Arabic. *Safar* was also used to denote “travel” in *Musalmani Bangla*, the Islamized Bangla of old, characterized by a high frequency of Arabic and Persian words. In the BICSA lexicon, *safar* denotes interregional organizational travel with one or more BICSA activists or companions for purposes of preaching, administrative supervision, and moral encouragement. Such travels are undertaken by members of the central administrative body of a city to different and especially peripheral parts of that city and sometimes from the capital city of Dhaka, where the centre of the entire organization is located, to other especially smaller cities.

to them to have a robust social life. BICSa, too, was too rigid in its understanding of “entertainment,” she confided, and underestimated the importance of entertainment for emotional well-being. Entrenched in her college culture of social activities, Shaila complained that BICSa regarded most “fun activities” (*maja*) as “un-Islamic.” Nor was she alone in her complaints. While the term *moja* was not part of the BICSa lexicon even as late as the early 1990s, when I conducted an undergraduate study of the organization in the late 1990s and early 2000s, things had begun to change. I observed that BICSa leaders were making a concerted effort to make training programs more “fun” or “interesting” for participants—*Islamist maja* to compete with worldly *maja*. (One recalls the production of Islamist romance novels to compete with secular romance novels.) Thus, for instance, for the first time in the history of BICSa, a debate competition was organized at a major training program for college activists in March 2003, despite reservations expressed by some senior BICSa activists that debating is un-Islamic in that it encourages emotions of anger and excitement, which Islam discourages. It was also argued that debating encourages a culture of verbosity, while Islam discourages excessive words, and that debating can degenerate into verbal assault, while Islam encourages politeness (*bhadrata*) and “softness” (*namrata*).

Shaila’s mother often accused her husband of spoiling Shaila and not making an effort to stay better informed of Shaila’s whereabouts. One day I asked Shaila’s father whether he worried that Shaila returns home at

such late hours. He responded, “She practices veiling and she does God’s work. I’ve always had a great deal of faith in my daughter’s judgment and I’m confident that she stays out late only when it is absolutely necessary. Surely, God will protect her. He is the best of all protectors.”

This raises the issue of violence against women, one of the most dominant themes in speeches delivered by BICSa leaders and in more intimate discussions of veiling. A steady increase in violence against women in Bangladesh is widely deemed symptomatic of progressive overall moral degradation and the family’s and state’s growing inability to protect women (Monsoor 1999; Hashmi 2000). Speeches delivered by BICSa leaders at training programs are peppered with statistics concerning abduction, rape, and the permanent disfigurement of women by “acid-throwing” by men whose sexual advances are rejected. BICSa argues that a woman’s final refuge is in God’s laws and in sociomoral and political reform, which will naturally entail the reform of men and of the enforcers of the law. It also argues that while a woman must discipline her “natural” urge to display her physical beauty by veiling, a man must be taught the discipline of lowering his gaze in modesty whenever he suspects the possibility of transgression on his part; he must be trained to treat women with respect, as did the Prophet Muhammad. In BICSa’s view, men and women must cooperate in the making of an environment favorable for the pursuit of piety, self-purification, and good deeds.

5.7.3 *Outperforming BICSa in Religious Devotion: Annie's Story*

Challenges to BICSa's authority in defining the correct place for women in the public sphere not only occur through individual acts of "moral weakness" (*imaneer durbalata*), as BICSa understood such acts, but also through a subversion of the very moral ground of righteousness that BICSa stands on: namely, that struggling to re-Islamize society is a religious duty for Muslim women, just as for Muslim men. In committing herself to Islam through her earlier BICSa-affiliation and her later membership in Witness, Annie, a particularly bright Islamic activist and engineering student, ultimately found women's Islamic activism beyond the home problematic and decided to devote herself entirely to rearing children within the household as good Muslims. When I observed to her that BICSa argues that Muslims should follow the Prophet Muhammad's lifelong efforts to Islamize the polity, Annie responded that while Muslims must certainly follow the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim women must remember that the Prophet, after all, was a man, and there are some "natural" differences between men and women. Women are more suited to nurturing their families, particularly the children. It is because Islamist women are neglecting their own families, she charged, that the children of Islamist women and hence younger generations of Islamist women are not turning out to be as dedicated to Islam as older Islamists. The character of an average younger Islamist today, said Annie, is a far call from that of the Prophet, and this is hurting rather than helping the Islamist cause.

Annie thus gradually distanced herself both from BICSA and Witness despite both group's efforts to keep her within the fold. "I don't want to make a hodgepodge of my life and my faith," said Annie.

I find that practicing the basics of one's own faith and raising one's children to be good Muslims are challenging enough for any woman. I want to teach at a small women's college and have a good husband and good Muslim children. I want a quiet, peaceful life. Why should I unduly make my life harder by adding social activism to my list of duties? Women struggling for Islam today often end up not doing any of their tasks thoroughly because they unduly take too many responsibilities upon themselves.

Later that year, from amongst various marriage proposals made to her parents, Annie chose a well-educated man working and living in the West, who also opposed women's religious activism. Annie discovered from a close study of the Qur'an and *hadith* that Fatema is the real role model for Muslim women, not Ayesha, Khadija, Maryam (the mother of the Prophet 'Isa), or even Asiya, the wife of the Egyptian pharaoh and the foster mother of the Prophet Moses. Fatema was not a preacher (*da'ii*) or an activist in any capacity, observed Annie, but a mother, wife, and daughter. She did not leave her home to enjoin others towards Islam but tended to her husband's daily needs and brought her children up to be good, strong Muslims. If Ayesha, Khadija, or those few female companions of the Prophet who participated in battles (and are frequently cited by Islamic activists as role models for Muslim women today) were better Muslims than Fatema, challenged Annie, why has Allah assigned Fatema the honor of presiding over *all* the women in heaven—as has been

clearly stated in the *ahadith*? It is instructive that the same Islamic figure of Fatema that Iranian Islamists such as Ali Shariati used as an example of a female fighting spirit to mobilize the masses, especially women, into Islamist agitation against the secularist Shah regime prior to the 1979 revolution, is used by Annie to refuse Islamic activism and/or surveillance beyond the home (Tohidi 1991; Sullivan 1998).

While increased access to Islamic knowledge enables BICSa to legitimize its position as an authoritative voice on Islam, it continually opens up areas of contestation within the organization as some activists pick up on the multiplicity of Qur'anic and *hadith* interpretations. These contestations temper the top-down construction of subjectivity within BICSa, though knowledge of multiplicity in religious interpretation, by itself, does not result in significant doubt; differences in established modes of interpretation are not radical in the first place, and BICSa invests heavily in convincing new recruits of the greater accuracy of its positions on basic religious issues. However, when such multiplicity concerns a “patchwork” aspect of BICSa ideology—a bricolage, an area of negotiated dissonance between BICSa ideology and dominant socio-cultural norms—an activist may lean toward the interpretation less oppositional to dominant culture rather than toward the interpretation privileged by BICSa. Yet even a convergence of interpretive multiplicity and patched-ness might fail to facilitate contestations were it not for the fact that activist subjecthood, despite considerable crafting from above, ultimately

forms in the intersection of different discourses, not wholly *within* Islamist discourse as BICSa would like. In other words, the transformation of a BICSa member from a cultural Muslim into an ideological activist is often incomplete in practice. Thus, once familiarized with multiple religious interpretations of an issue, an activist who is already and still partially grounded in competing narrations of desire recognizes the “constructedness” of a particular element of BICSa ideology. She then begins to contest this element, often quietly, within the confines of her own practices and conversations with close friends in BICSa. She differentiates this element from the rest of BICSa doctrine as “policy,” “strategy,” or “excess” (*barabari*) and does not consider it as a binding “Islamic” prescription. In this way, she continues to see BICSa as representative of “true” Islam without fully assenting to certain of its claims.

5.7.4 Power, Subjecthood, and Contestation

Theories of power and resistance are useful for analyzing the production of subjecthood in and the contestations permeating female Islamic activism in Bangladesh. Subject-formation and the performance of oppositions can be usefully considered together. There is a large literature on how women, often either born into male-dominant societies or located willy-nilly within male-dominant institutions, employ a wide variety of coping techniques. These range from outright opposition to subversion and accommodation to “everyday” forms of resistance (Boddy

1989; Friedl 1989; Peteet 1991; MacLeod 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994; Hale 1996; Aretxaga 1997).

My ethnographic findings show that a range of acts of opposition characterize the female Islamic activism in Bangladesh. BICSa activists see themselves as struggling against social injustice and the encroaching secular-liberal regime of modern power wielded by the Bangladesh national state, the neighboring state of India (second most populous country in the world), and the NGO sector, which is perceived as being significantly funded by Western organizations and the local secular-liberal elite. Simultaneously, junior activists within BICSa contest, subvert, and accommodate certain values imposed on them from above. Some, for example, resist organizational regimentation of their lives by being less than honest in the recording of daily activities. Despite the thoroughness of training programs designed to instill piety in workers and dedication to the organization, many activists offer health, family and schoolwork-related explanations (often perceived as “excuses” by superiors) for a persistent lack of improvement in performance as “true” Muslims, sometimes over long periods of time. Occasionally, an activist becomes “inactive” altogether, even after reaching the highest cadre level of *Sadasya* (Full Member). On the other hand, in the previous chapter I have also outlined the elaborate structuring to which one must subject oneself in order to become a BICSa activist.

Any analysis of these Islamist women, who are not simply born into a patriarchal culture—as are the female subjects of most feminist scholarship—but who *choose* a subordinating ideology and simultaneously unravel it in crucial ways, must necessarily both rely on and question conventional theories of power, such as those propounded by Michel Foucault. The Foucauldian insight that power is not only repressive but also productive illuminates my case. Foucault argues that modern power works as effectively as it does because it not only subjugates but incites, provokes, and rewards (Foucault 1977). Thus, while some BICSa activists chafe against certain organizational views, they continue to be active members. They continue not only to be persuaded by BICSa's fundamental convictions, but to feel bound by the emotionally rewarding ties they form with other activists.

However, I take issue with Foucault's elision of human intentionality in his earlier works, his insistence on human beings only as the vehicles or products of power (Foucault 1979). BICSa activists invest heavily in reconstructing both their own consciousness and that of others through a coordination of the intellect, body, and desire, even as they themselves are practically constituted by the hegemonic modern forms of power they oppose discursively. This process can be conceptualized through the relationship between power and subjecthood developed in Foucault's later work. Drawing on the Nietzschean ideal of aesthetic self-creation, Foucault proposes that it is possible to transform the self and to

create more “space” for self-creation through engagement in practical projects (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). In other words, new subjectivities can be acquired through resistance, even as these must necessarily be produced through historically embedded relations of power (Foucault 1988).

This double Foucauldian move partly illuminates the twofold process of BICSa women’s submission (to rigorous organizational training methodologies) and empowerment (emergence as disciplined, organized, assertive, and well-informed actors able to see through some of the trappings of hegemonic culture). The capacities thus produced return to haunt the very source of their being, the organizational structure itself, through a process of resignification whereby crucial alterations are performed from the margins, though still very much within the fabric of BICSa ideology.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that contestation within BICSa is enabled by the location of the perplexed formation of activist subjecthood at the intersection of particular historically and culturally constituted discursive regimes. While the personhood of an Islamic activist is profoundly shaped by Islamist ideologies and practices, BICSa members, like other social actors in complex, internally differentiated societies, are shaped by multiple institutions and cultural regimes of discourse and tend to “think and act at the intersections of discourses” (Yanagisako and

Delaney 1995). Hence the incompleteness of the grip held by BICSa, popular Muslim Bangladeshi culture (into which most activists are born), or the secular-liberal nationalist imagination (currently hegemonic in national politics) on the typical activist's capacity to think, feel, desire, and act.

Since Islamic subjecthood is formed at the contentious intersection of a number of discursive regimes, an activists' role as an actor is intensified, endowing her with a more complex agency than can be derived from commitment to a single, oppositional ideology. Each action, however "ordinary" or "ordered" in its particular setting, can be empowering in its potential for destabilizing a set of power relations integral to another setting. Thus, an activist might choose to work in a corporate firm for her own economic betterment, but in the process she contests Islamist ideologies of gender and other-worldliness, the dominant cultural understanding of female piety, and the liberal association of female professionalism with secular progressivism.

The ideology that BICSa activists embrace in order to oppose a dominant, secular-liberal sensibility is shot through with power relations of its own. Some activists thus run up against occasional walls in their practical pursuit of an Islamic ideology. For instance, women end up subverting some of the gendered aspects of the Islamist ideology that seek to subordinate them, though for several reasons they do not formally articulate such resistance. First, they can usually get what they need

through the “fractures” in the system. So, for example, they use the veil to inhabit public space at least as freely as non-Islamist women, if not more so. They justify embarkation on careers as “necessary,” be the necessity financial or tied to spreading the message of Islam. Second, their *core* project is not to achieve gender liberation but to liberate themselves from the binds of worldly desire and from subservience to those human beings in positions of power or to human-devised/un-divine structures of authority by transforming themselves and others into active subjects of a particular Islamic interpretative tradition. Third, BICSa’s fundamental gendered values of segregation and division of labor are already well-rooted in the traditional rural Bangali society that many BICSa activists hail from, and so attract even less attention.

This third point is well illustrated in Judith Nagata’s (1996) exploration of the world of a particular young Malay woman Islamic activist, Zainab. Nagata argues that from a distance, it might seem that Zainab’s inclination towards Islam as an all-encompassing ideology reflects a clear loss of personal freedom. However, the mostly self-imposed restrictions of the Islamist commitment are not necessarily more limiting than those in traditional rural Malay society; only for the Islamist, the notion that a woman’s focus should be on her home and family is phrased as an Islamic value instead of as a sociocultural requirement (Nagata 1996). In the context of present-day Bangladesh, this kind of continuity between Bangali cultural or extra-Islamic gendered values now

delineated as Islamic prescriptions therefore only facilitates a BICSa activist's understanding and acceptance of the gendered domains within an Islamist ideology. However, as I demonstrated above, ambiguities that arise in the course of activists' efforts to live these gendered Islamist values under shifting educational and employment conditions inflected by growing nationalist emphasis on "progress," "modernization," and "self-sufficiency" enable a non-radically subversive culture of nested contestation-within-obedience. Many BICSa activists therefore practically contest certain threads of BICSa ideology through "everyday forms" of resistance or weave resistance quietly, among close friends and in spaces removed from the BICSa arena, as a "subordinate discourse" (Messick 1981). Persistent conflicts between daily practices of "necessity" or "survival" and certain elements of BICSa discourse then engender, over time, ambiguous shifts in ideological perception in complex interaction with growing access to a gradually diversifying world of Islamic literature.

Most BICSa activists submit to those male authority structures that they understand as being embedded in Islam as a means to the full realization of Islam in their lives, which is their ultimate end. However, activists increasingly try to engineer situations in which the obedience to male authority putatively required by Islam does not entail any significant sacrifice or compromise on their part. Thus, for instance, they increasingly choose to marry activists from Shibir (Jamaat's male student wing). This way, a BICSa activist ensures that her husband, whom she is

required to obey in Islam, will oppose neither her dress ethic nor her commitment to organizational Islam—first to BICSa and then, following the completion of her higher studies, to the larger parent organization Jamaat—and is more likely than an average Bangladeshi man to empathize if her household duties suffer as a consequence of that commitment. Often, a BICSa member marries not only a male Islamist but one of a similar or higher cadre level; given the profound understanding the two will share by virtue of their organizational ties and training in Islamic culture, this minimizes the chances of her either having to “obey” or “disobey” her spouse. Thus, for instance, a pious wife should in theory ask for her husband’s permission to leave the house, but in practice, an Islamist woman usually “announces” her departure to her husband if he is at home, and the husband does the same so that his wife is aware of his whereabouts. Sometimes the purpose of the outing is announced; when it is not, it is understood that the spouse is going on some legitimate errand, as to school, an organizational meeting, the market, a relative’s, the doctor, or the like. Given male Islamists’ inculcation with Qur’anic verses and *ahadith* that enjoin not only wifely obedience but also kind treatment of the wife, such men often prove more supportive of their wives than average Bangladeshi men. From informal conversations with married female Islamists and non-Islamist female relatives of Islamist men and from my observations of conversations among married Islamist women about their spouses, it seems that despite

the growing attribution of oppression of women to “fundamentalist men” by both local secularists and Western observers, male Islamists in Bangladesh are actually making a concerted effort to emulate the Prophet Muhammad in his respectful and kind treatment of women. This further decreases women Islamists’ motivation to formally resist male hegemony in Islamic ideology, as is particularly evident in familial relations (e.g., requirements of wifely submission to husband’s authority, a husband’s right to unequivocal divorce and child custody, a woman’s lower share in inheritance, etc.)

There are no particular directives in Bangali cultural codes, in contrast, telling a man to treat his wife respectfully. In most cases and in most societies, a man conceives his wife’s place in his life in terms of his cultural surroundings: in this context, verbal and physical abuse of women abounds in families, TV dramas, movies, and literature. Another conventional source of knowledge for Bangladeshi men regarding the treatment of women is the sermons delivered by traditional religious experts, the majority of whom explicitly privilege wifely subordination and husbandly authority over all other aspects of the relationship between the sexes. The widespread physical abuse of wives by husbands, often in collusion with mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, is only occasionally treated in newspaper articles and editorials, and its discussion remains a marginal discourse confined to small human rights’ and women’s groups.

The practice of engineering marriage with male Islamists is yet another instance of the diffuseness and plurality of power relations in Bangladeshi society. When a BICSa member urges her parents to find an Islamist partner for her, her key project is to marry into a situation that facilitates her ability to practice Islam and activism and hence secure salvation in the Hereafter. Thus, for instance, activists sometimes even pass up proposals of marriage from non-Islamist physicians and engineers. While an activist might see in the rejection of such proposals only evidence of her love for God, she in fact contests not only “satanic temptation” but other relations of power as well:

First, by dominant cultural standards, physicians and engineers are ideal partners. Such an assessment of a partner’s worth is integral to the Bangladeshi cultural discourse of success as centered on material prosperity, a good education, and familial happiness.

Second, in asking her parents to choose a particular type of partner for her, an activist inadvertently contests the cultural authority invested in parents and elders in the choice of spouses for their children. Such authority rests on the conventional cultural wisdom that by virtue of their experience and wisdom, parents and elders know what is better for their children than the children do themselves. But BICSa activists contest such parental wisdom on the ground that their parents are not as well-informed about Islam as they are. According to BICSa activists, their parents’

knowledge grows not out of the Qur'an and *hadith* but out of the mores of popular Bangladeshi culture and the institutions of secular education.

Many women Islamic activists continue to inhabit public space, much like secular women, even as Islamist women continue to formally assert the home as the proper place for women in full ideological agreement with Islamist gender principles. Arlene MacLeod, in her study of veiling among working-class women in Cairo, termed this phenomenon a “contradictory consciousness,” which as Gramsci originally argued, provides openings for the emergence of alternative worldviews and formal challenges (MacLeod 1991; Gramsci 1971). Indeed, since several countries facing Islamic resurgence continue to undergo varying degrees of liberalization in state attitudes towards women,¹¹ Islamist women are sometimes able to push back the gendered boundaries of Islamist ideology by continuing to engage selectively in empowering practices sanctioned by the dominant subcultures of their socioeconomic classes. Nilufer Göle (1996) terms this process the development and implementation of “life strategies”.

However, since Islamist women do not challenge the formal gendered codes of behavior central to Islamist ideology, they continue to be seen as bearers of “false consciousness” by feminist and liberal scholars (Göle 1996; Shahidian 1997; Moghissi 1999; Winter 2001). Such scholars tend to focus more on formal mechanisms and discursive

¹¹ This holds true for countries such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Algeria and Morocco.

formations than on the “informal” aspects or “lived realities” of the lives of individual Islamist women. They are therefore often reluctant to engage in a detailed manner with the indigenous person’s point of view, to seriously treat piety or religiosity as a consciously and reflectively adopted and key objective of many Islamist women. On the other hand, my study also shows the importance of simultaneously locating the motivation for and ideology of piety within a larger, richer set of lived social relations and intersecting discourses of power and ideology. Thus the devout women of BICSa, while avowing and striving to follow a singularly articulated Islamic lifestyle and worldview, often find themselves in a complex relationship with this ideology in practice. The religio-cultural subjects that result from a constant interplay of multiple and often internally dissonant discursive regimes are, in most cases, neither the purely ideological Muslim women BICSa ideally seeks to construct nor the habitual, unreflecting, unquestioning subjects (or solely materially-practically accommodating, functional strategists) envisaged in much of the contemporary literature on Muslim women.

CHAPTER 6

Closing Thoughts: A Transnational Consideration of Women's Islamic Activism

6.1 Introduction

My dissertation explores the production and practice of political Islam among educated women in Bangladesh through an ethnographic study of a women-students' Islamist organization called "Bangladesh Islami Chatri Sangstha" (BICSa). While scholarly literature on Islamic revival has proliferated since the Iranian revolution of 1979, it focuses overwhelmingly on Islamist men. Islamist women only recently have begun to be considered. Moreover, those scholars addressing Islamist women tend either to highlight a reactive identity politics of Muslim difference, symbols, and anomie versus Western hegemony as the foundation for current Islamic activism, or alternatively, the sculpting effect of political-economic foundations—determinist state and class cultures—as the catalyst for current Islamic activism. While reactive identity politics and political economic foundations offer crucial insights, they treat religious actors as fully formed entities. In the process, scholars often marginalize issues of the active, contingent formation of new subjectivities in a changing world including the issue of subjective religious values and goals despite many women's insistence that it is a

desire for piety that motivates them to reconstitute themselves in accordance with Islamic ideals.

In contrast to the dissolution of social actors' own projects, and a singular focus on the public-formal aspects of religious ideology and the socio-economic and political structures within which those ideologies operate, my dissertation argues for an ethnographically thick investigation of Islamic movements in the light of an anthropological concern with subject formation within historically specific cultural regimes that have available very distinct means of cultural reproduction. This analytical move, centered on the micro-politics of the everyday, has led me to locate the success of the Islamist movement among Bangladeshi women in its ability to produce and sustain a moral-practical subjecthood through disciplinary technologies grounded in revivalist-orthodox Islamic traditions and Western-style educational techniques as facilitated by two recent phenomena: mass higher education and a mass print culture.

In delineating the quotidian microphysical and micropsychological processes that help contribute to the formation of "the self" for these Islamist interlocutors, this dissertation illuminates the intricacies and ambiguities in the processes through which BICSa women produce themselves as gendered Islamist subjects and seek to deploy this subjectivity in its harmonics as well as its ruptures. Within BICSa's moral-practical cosmos, patriarchal domination is seen not as an obstacle to overcome but as a resource to circumscribe and harness in service of the

fundamental project of other-worldly salvation combined with this-worldly peace and harmony. I have indicated that the ideals of domesticity and wifely obedience integral to the Islamist ideology do not seem to trouble many Islamist women in any significant manner partly because these women already find themselves embedded in gender and other types of inequality inherent in those socio-cultural relations constituting those Bangali cultural forms dominant in present-day Bangladesh. Against this backdrop, the kinds of public activism and gender segregation that the Islamist ideology demands of both men and women, actually facilitates women's participation in gender-egalitarian practices on the ground in an "of women, for women, and by women" style.

I examine the ways in which activists not only embrace and cultivate but also question and subvert Islamic teachings imparted by the BICSA leadership intent on producing "pristine Muslim women" ideologically opposed to modernity. However, as I have shown (in Chapters 2 and 3), many of the techniques and sensibilities integral to this top-down structuration of an Islamist subjectivity are in fact thoroughly modern. In seeking to adapt Qur'anic prescriptions and the jihad-centered ideology of the South Asian Islamist thinker Mawdudi to present-day local and global realities, BICSA produces ambivalent subjectivities formed in the interstices of sometimes conflicting and sometimes overlapping structures of power, which I elucidate. I explore some of the ramifications

of these conflicted subjectivities in the quotidian, practical lives of Islamic activist women, highlighting domains of expansiveness as well as constraint that BICSa membership and training help cultivate.

To carry out this research, I immersed myself in the world of BICSa women during two years of fieldwork in Dhaka and Chittagong—two cities in Bangladesh with Dhaka as the capital city—between September 1998 and May 2003. This fieldwork included formal interviews, daily informal conversations, participant observation in training and study programs, and participation in members' social and familial lives. Following the movements of my BICSa interlocutors within interrelated modules of social relations, I moved from the homes of BICSa activists to those of their neighbors, friends, and fellow classmates, to activists' dormitory rooms (often shared with other activists and non-activists), to those multi-purpose rooms at the organization's head office in a lower middle class to middle class neighborhood, where BICSa women often gather for meetings, meals, prayers, training programs, celebrations, and loiter for informal conversations.

I also studied texts central to the habitus of a BICSa activist. These I found in the organization's archives, where texts central to the organizational syllabus are often available; in offices at BICSa headquarters in Dhaka, where the daily newspapers to which BICSa subscribes are housed; down alleyways in small Islamic bookstores jam-packed with Qur'anic exegeses (often by Mawdudi and Sayyed Qutb),

hadith collections, Islamist-authored booklets, and the new popular genres that some BICSa women consume avidly: Islamic teenage thrillers, science fiction, and romance novels. This multi-sited ethnography enabled me to develop a nuanced picture of the kaleidoscopic lived reality of Islamist women's activism in Bangladesh.

In this chapter, I continue to reflect on polyvalence and ambiguity as intimately definitive of an Islamic activist life-world located at the intersection of multiple and often shifting discursive regimes. I further develop this notion of ambivalence, which I see as central to religious subject-formation in postcolonial Muslim societies, by extending my analysis from the localized case of BICSa to Islamic revivalism among women in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. I will do this, in part, by examining the pious politics of the veil that has increasingly become a marker of "public Islam" among groups of women in Muslim majority societies. I dwell further on the diverse, multi-faceted practices of veiling for two reasons. First, as I showed in earlier chapters, various discourses of power, gender, and piety cohere in the issue of veiling, around which much of the work of subject formation is centered for Islamic activist women. Both Islamic activists and their fellow citizen observers, whether sympathetic or critical, emphasize the distinctiveness of the "new veil" in Bangladesh and elsewhere. For instance, BICSa women consider their rigorous but relatively fashionable style of veiling as both "complete veiling" (*purna parda*) or "authentic veiling" and as

“appropriate to the times” (*jugopujagi*). Second, much of the recent scholarly literature on Islamic revival among women is focused on “re-veiling,” the “veil movement,” or the “veiled revolution.”

In simultaneously bringing insights from my work in Bangladesh to this seminal body of scholarship and drawing on it to illuminate the lives of Islamic activist women in Bangladesh, I will highlight some of the key arguments in this dissertation and identify some commonalities and divergences among women’s Islamic activisms in different cultural-national contexts. I will explore some of the implications of introducing ideological-cultural ambivalence and ardent religious commitment to some of this insightful literature on the growing importance of the veil for many Muslim women. In much of this literature, the women’s religious motivation is too often dissolved in frameworks that reduce religiosity to a symbolic guise for “real” and “underlying” needs grounded in economy, gender relations, political protest, and identity politics.

I will conclude this chapter with some thoughts on my study of BICSa and on how that work might nuance the seminal scholarship on Muslim women who laboriously seek to live Islam as a discursive tradition (Mahmood 1998, 2001).

Scholars tend to assume that women religious activists must be unknowingly contributing to their own oppression and that of their fellow women (Kaplan 1992; Riesebrodt 1993; Moghissi 1999). However, looking closely at emerging Islamic revivalisms among women in

Bangladesh (and some other Muslim-majority societies, including Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey) in ways that include the perspectives of the women themselves, allows us to see how the commitment of many women to Islamic activism is more complex and multivocal than either ignorance-driven self-oppression or a simplistic, functionalist response to socio-economic insecurities or pious self and social transformation. In the remainder of this chapter, I set the stage for exploring Islamic revivalism among women in an international context.

6.2 Veiling, Re-Veiling, and Global Islamic Revival

Of all the gestures, signs, or symbolic sites where the multivocality of women's Islamic activism is acted out in daily life, none affects Islamist women more universally or channels a greater number of such intense meanings than the veil. As discussed in earlier chapters, the veil is more than a society-ordering barrier behind which female sexuality can be sequestered, the erotic equivalent of asbestos shielding. It is more than a set of fabric prison-bars behind which women are locked, and more than a mobile gaze-deflecting shelter from behind which women can exercise canny power. Particularly relevant to my study is veiling's role as a public marker of allegiance to Islamic revivalism and hence to a socio-moral-political order envisioned by both itself and others as revolutionary. This has local and personal consequences, as I explored in Chapter 4, but wider-reaching consequences too; as a number of scholars have pointed out, the veil has been symbolically powerful for constructing a

transnational Islamic identity. Islamist veiling style varies little from country to country, in contrast to traditional, folk-dress forms of veiling, which vary considerably from one Muslim setting to another (MacLeod 1991; Zuhur 1992; Göle 1996). Below, I examine the state of women's Islamic revivalism in Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Egypt, with special attention to veiling. This provides a context for further conceptualizing women's Islamic activism and of veiling in Bangladesh as one point in a complex space of possibilities.

6.2.1 Turkey

Turkish women's Islamic activism is a particularly interesting parallel to that in Bangladesh. Göle (1996) interprets the post-1983 veiling movement among university students in Turkey as a social movement: Muslim female students define the objectives of their action autonomously and articulate their claims collectively and publicly. One of these claims is to expertise in both religious and secular knowledge. Since most of these women have been educated at non-religious institutions, they cast their knowledge of Islam as "objective" or secular-scientific; at the same time, they cast their knowledge of secular matters as Islamic. As we see in Chapters 2 and 3, BICSa women make a similar set of complementary knowledge-claims: "scientific" epistemological and organizational style legitimates the Islamist activist's religious knowledge, and religious epistemology legitimates the Islamist activist's critique of liberal-secular society. Göle sees this bifold claim to expertise as enabling

the accumulation of that “symbolic capital” on the basis of which a historically new figure, the female Islamist intellectual, can emerge (Göle 1996: 5). She notes that a bricolage of Islamist ideology and women’s autonomy occurs because Islamist strategy deems the politicization of women essential, even as Islamist ideology seeks to circumscribe women’s roles and delimit their visibility (21). This paradox is therefore a commonplace wherever Islamist reformism is active, not only in Bangladesh. In these contexts, Islamist women experience politicization as empowering because it enables them to engage in variant forms of “public” protest against the state, even though in Bangladesh much of such dissent is conducted from within bedrooms, dormitory rooms, and strictly women-only office spaces tucked well away from the streets and the reach of the media—the conventionally defined “public sphere.” Islamist women are also enabled by their activist training to transform hegemonic institutions (i.e., to wield religious authority in the worldly sphere) and to participate in debates over the meaning of sacred texts (i.e., to wield systematic, “scientific” intellectual tools in the religious sphere); in doing both or either they begin to carve out a female space within the traditionally male-dominated realm of the authoritative interpretation of religious dictates. At the same time, the appearance of the veil on campus is a visible challenge to the supremacy of the liberal-secular *Weltanschauung* that dominates higher education. It plants the flag of the Qur’an, of *parda*, of piety, in the very headquarters of the unbelieving

Other. At least, this holds true for Bangladesh. In Turkey, *turban* (traditional religious headgear for men and women) is banned at *all* state institutions.

As Turkish Islamist women stage sit-ins and hunger strikes to demand that the ban on *turban* be lifted, they confrontationally question the top-down secularization and Westernization of the Turkish polity initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the late nineteenth century (Göle 1996: 84). Recipients of university education and practitioners of professional careers, these women subvert the dominant dualities of progressivist vs. reactionary, educated vs. ignorant (97). Islamist ideology calls for women to return to their traditional setting, the home, but necessarily replaces the traditional image of the good, homebound Muslim woman with a valorized, activist image (84). Empowered by their secular professional training, women Islamists assert their right to “a life of their own” and continue to develop practical “life strategies” not quite consonant with the discursive subordination of women in Islamist ideology. At the same time, as dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters, they are authorized to critique Islamist ideology and male Islamists on several levels—not radically, but significantly—thus provoking “disorder in Islamic gender definitions and identities” (Göle 1996: 22). The ways in which similar contestations arise from below in the world of BICSa women have been examined in detail in Chapter 5.

There are remarkable family resemblances between the backgrounds of young Turkish Islamist women, BICSa women, and Indonesian Javanese women (Brenner 1996) who have begun to veil. In Turkey, many young women who have begun to veil come from traditionalist families and small provinces; but veiling cannot be explained entirely by its enforcement by male members of the family, the influence of rural traditionalism, or the impact of religious education at home and school. First, in many families, especially those aspiring to social mobility, men actually reproach daughters who wish to veil. BICSa women and newly religious women in Indonesia often meet similar familial resistance (Brenner 1996). Non-Islamist male kin often object to veiling because they are afraid (a) that the young activist woman will not be able to pursue higher education, since university campuses are secularist strongholds hostile to Islamic symbols; (b) that the young activist woman will be isolated from modern, Westernized society, including its economic opportunities; (c) that potential husbands and in-laws will disapprove of the extreme religiosity, backwardness, and rusticity that the veil is widely thought to betoken; and (d) that the family's enjoyment of the prestige of having a daughter enrolled at a modern university will be diminished because onlookers will assume from the veil that the woman is studying at a traditional religious school (Göle 1996: 88–92).

Further, most re-veiling women have had secular high-school educations rather than traditional high-school educations. A person from the former background often sees general female “modesty,” but not veiling, as “natural” or instinctively obvious. For many such women it is physically and socially uncomfortable to take up the veil.

Finally, many Islamic revivalist women in present-day Turkey, Bangladesh, and Indonesia have come to their ideological commitment through encounter with political Islamic discourses rather than traditional pietistic ones. For these women, religion is not a part or compartment of life, or even an ubiquitous force that permeates life in a diffuse manner, but an all-encompassing system of meanings, definitions, putatively scientific arguments, and highly particular prescriptions, a constant and consistent demand on the whole person. *Every* action of a good Muslim is Islamic and must be conducted with that burden in mind. No distinction between the sacred and the secular is admitted. Women holding this view see themselves as opposing a Western modernity based on consumption, commodification, and exploitation on behalf of an Islam that is holistic and stably text-oriented. In this they are at odds with the “traditional” religious understanding of their parents, who have often considered “religion solely as a matter of worship and a pure conscience” (Göle 1996: 92). Their perceptions of gender principles, for example, are grounded less in custom and more in systematic, intellectualized interpretations of sacred Islamic sources. Such direct grounding in printed codes has the

advantage of providing assurance of transnational, ahistorical purity or correctness, but does not allow for much flexibility. Islamism, as we have seen, often insists that women are properly limited to the home, kept out of the public eye, and focused on the task of supporting their husbands in their Islam-enjoined responsibilities and of mothering and rearing proper Muslims. Yet, the presence of Islamist women in contemporary public, professional, and controversial spaces (though *usually* not in the realm of physically violent conflict) and the strength of their worldly aspirations for personal power keeps pushing at the boundaries of Islamist gender ideology (Göle 1996: 121). In this practical process of constant and subtle negotiation between ideological-structural constraints, strategic necessities, and personal needs and desires, both Islamist gender ideology and the imagination of Islamist women are significantly stressed and transformed.

6.2.2 Indonesia

In the case of Muslim Javanese women in Indonesia, Brenner (1996) puzzles over the growing attraction to the veil in a society where veiling is neither deeply rooted in local tradition nor encouraged by most families. In fact, veiling is popularly considered rigid and extremist. Much like newly veiled Turkish women, young Javanese veilers see themselves as “becoming aware,” rejecting a flawed past in favor of a correct and informed tradition, shifting their allegiance from a merely

local, Javanese, ancestral past to a putatively changeless, universal, text-based system of Islamic thought and practice.

What does the individual gain by veiling? While veiling facilitates and legitimizes women's movement in public spaces in various parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia by acting as "mobile curtains" (MacLeod 1991; Papanek 1973), it is no protection for Javanese women in Indonesia. There, veiling marginalizes its wearers and attracts harassment. Veiled women often have trouble with family members at home and experience difficulty in the job market (Brenner 1996: 675). As for Bangladeshi women, they occupy (as we have seen in earlier chapters) a mixed position, where the veil may either attract unwelcome attention or divert it, depending on context. However, there is no economic advantage to veiling in either country, and even in Bangladesh veiling is more socially and politically disadvantageous in urban, educated arenas than otherwise. Since women in Indonesia (much like Bangladeshi women) gain neither socio-economically, nor politically by making a physical statement about their heightened commitment to Islam, Brenner suggests that what is at stake is not covert tactical advantage but a search for identity and meaning. This phenomenon, she says, may be understood partly within the context of globalization (whereby the messages of Islamists find quick access to a growing, often international audience) and partly within the sociopolitical context of contemporary Indonesia, which has undergone rapid state-sponsored modernization since the late 1960s:

By identifying with the international Islamic community, Indonesian activists validate their sense of being part of the modern world without the need to adopt a Westernized way of life; for many Indonesians that lifestyle lacks morality and religious faith and is materialistic and self-indulgent. (Brenner 1996: 678)

Although veiling is associated in popular Western imagination with the heavy dependence of women on men, Javanese women Islamists feel that their newfound religiosity renders them accountable to God alone. They view themselves, as regards the decision to veil, as independent from their parents and all the other persons on whom a young woman is instructed by tradition to depend for moral and behavioral guidance. And yet, for some such women, veiling begins in the wake of pressure to do so from friends or siblings (Brenner 1996: 684): the veil is no more a badge of individualism than it is a form of enslavement. *This kind of simultaneous individuation and communal ties that practices integral to women's Islamic activism, such as veiling entail*, is evident in Bangladesh as well.

Furthermore, since the 1960s, the Indonesian state's focus on "development" has emphasized "self-discipline" and "self-sacrifice" as essential for the country to prosper. Women (more than men) have been urged to discipline and sacrifice themselves for the sake of the family and the nation. In adopting veiling and an Islamist stance, Muslim Javanese women seem to draw on this very discourse and so reinforce it. On the other hand, veiling challenges state hegemony by resisting the state as the ultimate source of authority and power.

Drawing on Foucault, Brenner argues that in this situation the female body becomes a site for both the inscription of power relations and the destabilization of those relations (690). Göle takes a similarly Foucauldian view of the Turkish case:

Once the relations of power become rooted in the formation of social reality at micro-levels and when, as a consequence, the sources of repression are hard to detect, then the role symbols play in political discourses gains much greater significance. The body becomes a symbol of resistance as much as of power relations. (Göle 1996: 135)

While I have clearly found such use of Foucauldian insights good to think through some aspects of women's Islamic activism in Bangladesh, I find that Brenner, for instance, and to a much lesser extent Göle, limit their otherwise astute description and analysis of women's Islamic activism largely to the ways in which these women destabilize socio-political relations *external* to the Islamic movement, namely statist ideologies and familial norms. Brenner's analysis, for instance, conveys a certain singularly effective internalization of the "discipline of veiling" that newly "aware" Javanese Muslim women narrate and strive so hard to practice (1996: 688-90). Göle, however, crucially explores one aspect—gender—of the dynamics within the Islamic movement in Turkey. Through a discussion of "social practices" and the concept of "life strategies," she highlights tensions that emerge between Islamic revivalist women and men when Islamist women, enabled by their growing participation in the public sphere and other spaces secured by secular

feminists in earlier decades, question conventionally gendered family arrangements. Thus, for example, an Islamist woman voiced a desire for greater participation by her husband, a leading Islamist, in the domestic task of child-rearing so that she might be able to participate to some extent in “social life” (Göle 1996: 119). However, since Göle’s methodology is primarily discourse analysis based on texts and arranged group discussions among a small number of elite Islamist women, and since she is primarily concerned with veiling and gender relations as these relate to the Islamic movement, she concludes that Islamism bans the visibility of women by emphasizing the veil and thereby reinforces male hegemony (136) even as she points to transformations underway in Islamist gender relations by virtue of women’s individual experiences, social practices, and political activism (137–40).

In my study of Islamist women in BICSa, I have taken inspiration from this double destabilization of power relations. Thus, I have sought to show how BICSa women seeking to realize a newly adopted Islamist lifestyle must often strive against norms hegemonic in cultures of the state, family, and school—norms external to the Islamist discursive regime—even while sometimes pushing against certain demands on their capacities and bodies made from *within* that regime. Yet I have also departed from the exclusively veil- and gender-centered approach common in studies of Islamic revivalist women in order to grasp some of the complexities of the *daily lived process* of women’s Islamist ideology and to contextualize

women's veiling practices and experiences of gender relations within their larger project of moral-political transformation of self and society. In so doing, I have been able to show that the meaning of "invisibility" and "domesticity" attributed to veiling in the work of Göle and others such as Arlene McLeod (1991, discussed below) is not static but constantly sliding in the course of daily veiling in shifting contexts by Islamic revivalist women. Thus, in Bangladesh today, Islamic activist women don the veil partly to announce their presence in the public sphere as defiant bearers of an Islamic tradition often mocked in urban, elite, educated circles. The veil, in its bodily semantics, has become the most visible marker of allegiance to the project of Islamization: less like a magic cloak of invisibility than like a magic cloak of heightened visibility (in a certain mode). No other aspect of Islamic activism seems to give liberal-secular observers of present-day Bangladesh greater pause than the growing numbers of women's bodies clad from head to foot in long coats and headscarves, some more colorful than others.

6.2.3 *Malaysia*

Ong (1990) insightfully delineates the centrality of women's bodies to competing state and Islamist ideologies in Malaysia. Since she argues that "resistance" is too reductionist and oppositional a term to describe Islamist women's agency in their interactions with state modernization and Islamic revivalism (Ong 1990: 269), one might expect her to offer a more nuanced conceptualization of how women

simultaneously engage dominant paradigms and are constructed by such paradigms. However, despite the occasional appearance of agency-oriented terms like “protest,” we are left in the end with an image of Muslim Malay women as distinctly disoriented by modernization and intimidated and swayed by male Islamists into retreating from the public sphere in exchange for the honor accorded to devout Muslim mothers (271). Islamist groups recruit women so that their agency can be reoriented to the rebuilding of Malay-Muslim identity; the women are “compelled” to represent their own interests in society because the state has “released” them from the guidance and protection of their kin by allowing them greater access to education and work (270).

In the two ethnographic examples Ong offers to illustrate female students’ “struggles between autonomy and (Muslim) group identity,” we see one woman, “liberated,” who is persuaded by her boyfriend to veil, and another who is directly threatened into Islamist membership. Where are the “struggling” subjects in these scenarios? While there is no doubt that some women are forced into certain positions across ideological, religious, and national boundaries, one wonders, for instance, why coerced female Malay recruits would go out of their way to show their loyalty to the Islamist ideology by refusing to abide by a University of Malaya (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) ban on the veil in lecture halls (270), especially when Islamists are a subordinate group in relation to the state (Muzaffar 1986). Does opposition to Islamism by the more powerful state structure

not afford forced female converts to Islamism certain opportunities for subverting specific Islamist prescriptions? Thus, in Bangladesh, as I showed in Chapter 5, Islamist women sometimes cope creatively with organizational pressure to adhere to certain Islamist demands by citing conflicts between these demands and certain duties to their families. Greater attention to some of the intimacies of Islamic revivalist persuasion might have led Ong to delve into some of these multiple and imbricated layers of meaning and motivation that seem to characterize women's ties with Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Further, Ong suggests that gender roles were much more open prior to Islamic revivalism, when still primarily under the sway of local Muslim Malay customs. While this helps explain some women's opposition and resistance to Islamism, it mystifies the support Islamism evidently enjoys among other women. The work of Judith Nagata (1996, discussed below), in its close study of the daily life of a young "born again" Muslim Malay woman, is illuminating in its uncovering of significant commonalities between the genderedness of local Muslim Malay customs and of Islamist ideologies. In the case of Bangladeshi Islamist women, one of the key arguments I have attempted to make throughout this dissertation is that *resonance between dominant Muslim Bangali culture and BICSa ideology explains, in part, BICSa's appeal to women in the face of otherwise formidable opposition to Islamic activism in Bangladesh today*. For instance, there are resemblances between the

Islamist notion of veiling and hegemonic Bangali cultural notions of “decency” and “modesty.” Another Islamist value, that of “honoring” women, neatly coincides with the respect traditionally allocated for women in various South Asian cultures. Conversely, I have argued that it is the partial grounding of BICSa’s ideology in hegemonic cultural norms, despite BICSa’s claim to practice an “Islamic culture” distinct from the “un-Islamic culture” prevalent in Bangladesh, that disables BICSa from uprooting its members from the latter, fully “purifying” their intentions and selves. Ong’s work brings to mind that pioneering work emergent from Middle Eastern Studies wherein some scholars have begun to question the conventional radicalization of differences between Islamist and non-Islamist (modernist, secularist, feminist) politico-cultural discourses and projects, especially with regard to issues of gender (Hatem 1994; Abu-Lughod 1998; Najmabadi 1998).

Extending her view of Islamism’s totalitarian tendencies and effects from gender to ethnic relations, Ong further asserts that boundaries between Malay and Chinese ethnic communities were fluid prior to the rise of Islamism. However, some scholars (Muzaffar 1986; Nagata 1996) have argued that one reason for the rise of Malay Islamism was the widening socio-economic gap between Malays and non-Malays during the 1960s—a reverse relationship between Ong’s proposed cause and effect (i.e., Islamism was stimulated by the stiffening of barriers, rather than barriers stiffened by the rise of Islamism). Here, I am reminded of Sherry

Ortner's insight (1995) that the complex and ambiguous phenomenon of "resistance" would be better understood if scholars paid as much attention to the internal politics of dominated groups as to external factors impacting these groups. The scenario that Ong maps might have been more complex and her analysis more illuminating had she not privileged the formal ideological discourses of the state and the Islamists over the quotidian practices of Muslim Malays, particularly Malay women, but attempted some balancing of the two.

In the case of Indonesia, Brenner successfully delineates the ongoing interplay of social agency and systemic constraints that characterizes the Islamic movement there. I have found her work particularly useful for this reason. She explores the practice of veiling through a focus on local idioms of "awareness," "self-mastery" and "self-discipline" on the one hand and peer pressure and gendered constraints on behavior on the other. I would suggest, however, that even Brenner's cogent analysis would be richer if veiling were contextualized within the larger ethical program of moral beliefs and self-fashioning to which veiling, intended by its practitioner to both cultivate and manifest the virtue of modesty, is integral. The devout Muslim woman seeks an entire array of virtuous physical and emotional habits that cannot be acquired successfully apart from one another, as Saba Mahmood (1998, 2001) has described so eloquently for Muslim women in the diffuse Cairo mosque movement. A detailed investigation of the practical, embodied processes

whereby Javanese Islamist women come to acquire their radical form of Islamic “self-awareness”—not only of ideological narratives—would illuminate the ways in which the particular dress-ethic of veiling comes to wield its disciplinary force over veilers in Java. To discuss veiling in isolation from the mutually animating socio-moral practices with which it is interrelated tends to frame a practitioner’s struggle to acquire and sustain her religious commitment in the modality of “obsession”—a modality problematic in Judith Nagata’s (1996) otherwise ethnographically rich and analytically insightful discussion of Islamic revivalist women in Malaysia. Without detailed ethnography, we run the risk that the activist’s vigilant micro-management of every aspect of behavior to consort with veiling, which Brenner’s interlocutors describe, will merely mystify rather than illuminate the practice of veiling among Islamic revivalist women. This befalls Brenner in the following passage:

Several women mentioned that when they first began to veil they constantly fretted about whether they were behaving consistently with their new style of dress. One student said, “When I started wearing jilbab (the veil) my behavior changed. I kept wondering, “Is this a sin or not? Is this wrong or not? I always felt afraid.” Another recalled that she had even worried about whether she was properly performing simple acts like sweeping; every act seemed fraught with the potential for making her a sinner. (Brenner 1996: 688) (Brackets mine)

An opportunity is missed if such fascinating, complex conflicts are treated only as dramatic, illogical, or inscrutable manifestations of internalized religious guilt. Below, I suggest a number of ways for re-

thinking the issue of Islamic revivalist women's "obsession" with perfectly Islamizing the minutiae of daily practices, especially that of veiling, in the light of my inquiry into the lives of Islamic activist women in Bangladesh.

6.2.4 Islamist Women's "Obsession" in Malaysia and Bangladesh

The need to consider social practices in all their complexity if one is to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the on-the-ground dynamic between ideologues and ideologies is evident in Nagata's (1996) close look at the life of Zainab, a young Malay woman from a lower-middle-class, semi-religious Muslim family. Zainab is neither "disoriented" by modernity and Westernization among the middle and upper classes nor indifferent to these processes. Instead, like many other pietists in contemporary Malaysia, she inclines toward an "Islamic modernity." Inspired by an Islamist teacher at an all-Malay, all-Muslim semi-boarding school that prepares high-school graduates for the university entrance examinations, Zainab and her schoolfriends became interested in Islamist activism. She was further influenced by some Islamist students from the university in her home town. Also, she had been early sensitized to subtle ethnic distinctions, not only between Malays and Chinese (a profound divide in her country) but also between "real" Malays and her own, mixed variety (partly Indian in origin). Her desire to be part of the "real" Malay community resonated with the Islamist worldview, which attempts to conflate Malay-ness with Muslim-ness in opposition to the non-Muslim

Chinese—the latter also perceived as having more socioeconomic power than Malay Muslims.

Zainab was able to persuade her traditionalist parents to allow her not only to attend the university but also to stay in the campus hostel, using the lure of a future career as a schoolteacher with its attached prestige and salary (46). As Zainab prepared to enter the university, she also decided to adopt the Islamic revivalist outfit. This dismayed her parents, who feared that her “extreme form of religious involvement” would limit the range of possible marriage partners (37–8). Moreover, since Malay houses are not designed with special quarters for the seclusion of women, Zainab found it difficult to dress comfortably at home amidst frequent visits by male non-relatives. Her insistence on meticulously practicing Islamist conceptions of female modesty thus required reorganization of the domestic environment. She developed a system whereby her younger brothers were posted at various strategic locations so that they could warn her of approaching male non-relatives (47).

A staunch supporter of the government party, Zainab’s father was upset that his daughter was part of the growing Islamist opposition to the state. Also, he worried that Zainab’s activism might draw attention to his marginal racial status (i.e., Indian) (48). Zainab and her fellow Islamists, marked by their clothing, were often harassed in public by children and older Malays. The latter regarded the secular-educated Islamists in the

neighborhood, armed with religious knowledge gleaned from both the Qur'an and modern religious texts, as a challenge to the religious authority traditionally invested in older Malays (44). Some government officials were also apprehensive at the contestation by youth of senior authority, and recruited various Muslim religious scholars to support their view that Islamist practices were "deviant." This led to the banning of various Islamist activities on university campuses (48).

Even though dedicated to Islamist ideology, which urges women to stay at home, Zainab was determined to have a professional career in teaching. She justified her decision to Nagata by arguing that she would teach only among women and would use her knowledge to draw others toward "true" Islam (49). However, unlike some of her fellow Islamists, she was not willing to sacrifice government-scale wages for the much lower salaries offered by religious and semi-religious schools; she said she would like to help her family by earning a bigger salary (50). Neither was she willing to wear socks and gloves like her more enthusiastic Islamist peers—though she always said she admired them for their greater purity. And she continued to enjoy numerous ethnic Malay occasions of celebration with family and friends, such as homecoming and farewell gatherings, and even Western cultural imports such as birthday parties. On such occasions, like many young Malay women, she experimented with new recipes clipped from non-Islamic women's magazines, including recipes for Western-style cakes (43). She also wished to celebrate her

wedding in the traditionally lavish Malay fashion with its numerous non-Islamic rituals, even though in Islamist ideology a devout Muslim is supposed to have a brief, austere ceremony. She argued that anything less than a fine Malay wedding would attract negative attention from the community, thus doing more harm than good to the cause of Islam (50).

On the basis of Zainab's "many agonies of indecision" (51), Nagata observes that Zainab "betrays some of the ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding her position as a 'born-again' Muslim woman in relation to her duties as a daughter in a Malay family" (50). This notion of *ambivalent intention*, which I find to be missing from most literature on contemporary Islamist reform movements, has aided me crucially in making sense of the seemingly befuddling simultaneity with which BICSa women daily inhabit multiple discursive regimes, some contradictory, some overlapping. Although Nagata does broach the topic of ambivalence, she forecloses its rich possibilities for anthropological analysis of some of the dynamics of Islamic reformism by reducing Zainab's ambivalence to a somewhat linearized conflict of duties, family vs. religious ideology—a conflict negotiated by a sort of "hypocrisy" on the part of Zainab, a "touching combination of submission on the one hand and a certain moral arrogance on the other." A more insightful analysis might have resulted had Nagata explored the world of Zainab's "submission" through the details of some of its attendant practical processes rather than framing it as her "obsessing" over her family's

consumption habits (43) and her “obsessive desire to conform to all the Islamic canons of female modesty in matters of dress and appearance” (47). Nagata reduces what could be seen as Zainab’s struggle for moral-practical excellence by not situating her preoccupation with eating and dressing habits within the larger moral, historically-culturally constituted Islamic tradition of self-cultivation and within the all-encompassing, “objectified” (Eickelman 1992), hypercoherent systematicity that many Islamic revivalist ideologies attribute to Islam, whereby every aspect of life, every action or disposition, has a distinct, logical, and prescribed relation to the whole.

Zainab’s multifaceted negotiation with both Islamist ideology and Malay custom clearly bore the imprint of gendered power relations. Men of her Islamist group vigilantly policed the boundaries of womanly modesty. Such pressure was particularly effective because women like Zainab deeply value the approval of fellow Islamists (Islamists are urged to compete with each other in attaining Islamic excellence). Thus, for instance, like some other Islamist women, Zainab gradually stopped going to the marketplace alone (47). And though she was, in anthropologist Nagata’s words, a “fun-loving girl,” she avoided all social occasions at the university because they were not gender-segregated.

Nagata argues that while Zainab more or less submitted to the restrictions that she (Nagata) perceives Islam as placing on women, she also derived from her submission a clear sense of “moral superiority” over

both non-Muslims (in Malaysia and elsewhere) and “lesser,” “misguided” Muslims. I would suggest, however, on the basis of my study of BICSa women, that Zainab derived more than a “sense of moral superiority,” or even real moral strength, from her commitment to an oppositional ideology. In locating herself at the contentious *intersection* of the Islamist habitus and the Malay habitus, Zainab intensified her role as an actor. Virtually each gesture of compliance in one world meant a gesture of resistance in the other. *Each action, however “ordered” in one setting, potentially destabilized the power relations of some other setting.*

Thus, for example, in celebrating a Malay birthday party, Zainab subverted Islamist expectations of anti-Westernism and rigorous self-discipline. In excising all photographs of herself from the family albums except those where she appeared in full “Muslim” dress, she opposed her role as a dutiful Malay daughter (39). Her strenuous efforts to prevent her family from consuming anything that might contain “un-Islamic” (i.e., “Chinese”) ingredients may, in this view, be interpreted as self-affirming rather than as “excessive” or “obsessive” (Nagata 1996: 43). Excessive or not, such diligence was for Zainab resistive and empowering on several fronts: First, it opposed longstanding Malay belief in the greater worth of the socio-economically advanced Chinese. Second, it opposed the docility expected of a daughter in a traditional rural Malay family. Third, it contested the authority of seniors over juniors (which always coincides with the parent-offspring relationship but is not limited to it).

This theme—the arduous formation of subjecthood at the *intersection of multiple discourses*—has surfaced throughout my dissertation and has centrally informed my reading of the BICSa activist life-world. Before moving on to discuss scholarship on the Egyptian veiling movement, I want to briefly examine the issue of “obsession,” raised both by Brenner’s discussion of the practices of Islamist women in Indonesia and Nagata’s of the life of a young Islamic revivalist woman in Malaysia, through the lens of multivalent desire.

I suggest that “obsession” of this type can be understood as conveying more than a consciously cultivated concern with avoiding sin. This is a vital part of these women’s moral sensibility but does not exhaust their motivation for Islamizing every aspect of their lives. For instance, while BICSa activists generally strive to offer their daily prayers on time, most miss them occasionally on account of shopping, sleeping, or schoolwork. Yet one does not detect the kind of anxiety about missed prayers that one does about strands of hair escaping from underneath an Islamic headcovering, even though the issue of prayers is broached many times in the Qur’an (which these activists study avidly), while female modesty is broached only twice, once in *Surah an-Noor* and once in *Surah al-Ahzab*. How does one explain a BICSa activist’s overwhelming anxiety about a single hair showing and not about some other areas of Islamic emphasis, such as prayer?

First, activists try to compensate in the realm of veiling for their shortcomings in other realms. They have more control over how they clothe their bodies than over their ability to offer the five obligatory daily prayers amid the many activities of an activist's life; it is far easier to ensure that one's hair is neatly tucked underneath one's scarf than to get up at 5 AM for the dawn prayer after staying up late the night before to do schoolwork or chores.

Second, activists try to set themselves apart from "ordinary" Muslims as an "Islamic vanguard": *muttaqi* (one constantly anxious about displeasing God—the Beloved—in any way) as opposed to *mu'min* (one who merely professes faith.) Veiling is the most pronounced public marker of the activist's rejection of hegemonic cultural norms, "conversion" to "Islamic culture," and allegiance to a "revolutionary" ideology "radically" different from conventional Islam. It is the most effective way to draw attention to the dramatic effect that "revolutionary" Islam has on a Muslim woman. After all, most Muslim women in Bangladesh fast during the month of *Romzan*, most approve of pilgrimage (*hajj*), and few Muslims anywhere would disagree in theory with the obligatory nature of the five daily prayers. Moreover, since most Muslim women in Bangladesh today do not pray in public spaces such as mosques, it is not possible to tell at glance who is committed to prayer, and to what extent. But through veiling, BICSa women can make an unequivocal statement about their commitment to Islam. In this regard, the veil is the

whole-body equivalent of a political campaign button: it speaks for one's ideology automatically, full time.

Third, I would suggest a linkage between the sort of “thoroughness,” “consistency,” “completeness,” “sincerity,” and “tidiness” constantly urged on Bangladeshi students by teachers throughout their school years and Islamist women's desire to do their “best” at all Islamic tasks, especially those that are more visible and hence more vulnerable to being judged by others. These notions of “tidiness” and “thoroughness” are intimately tied to those projects of modernism with which so many postcolonial societies are preoccupied today. Thus, for example, one of the *hadith* most frequently repeated on state-run television and radio states that “Cleanliness and tidiness are integral to faith”. In their speeches, political leaders often urge citizens to conduct their duties towards their country with “full sincerity” (*purna antarikata*). In these representations, thoroughness and sincerity are conveyed as mutually implicating. Some of my BICSa interlocutors would occasionally gently pull my own headscarf more decisively over my forehead, commenting how much *tidier* I looked with no hairs showing and explaining that one should observe the duty of veiling in a “complete” manner because it reflects the “degree of one's sincerity” toward Islam. The need for “meticulous” veiling was often simultaneously articulated in the traditional religious terminology of sin. Thus, I was told on more than one occasion that according to one *hadith*, a woman would burn in

hellfire for sixty-five thousand years for the public visibility of every single strand of hair. In my conversations with BICSa women, both the religious and social aspects of veiling would often emerge in a mutually reaffirming manner: the question of sin would blend inextricably with the question of what kind of disposition—tidy or sloppy, sincere or hypocritical, meticulous or careless, consistent or unstable—one’s veiling practices convey to others.

I would suggest that Islamist women in present-day Bangladesh, and perhaps in some other cultural-historical contexts as well, feel especially compelled to embody their politicized religiosity in as flawless, sanitized, “trim,” and “tidy” a manner as they possibly can as a response to the widespread prejudice against the veil as representative of ignorance and backward traditionalism: veiling neatly might not dissolve the stereotype, but veiling carelessly would certainly confirm it. Further, the emphasis on “discipline” in moral self-cultivation that Islamists so value and extend to other areas of their project, as I have explored in Chapter 3, harmonizes with nationalist calls for the production of a “disciplined citizenry” (*susrinkhal nagarik*), giving additional impetus to the drive for meticulous performance in every aspect of the Muslim life. A perfectionism arising from the convergence of rationalistic modernization, the desire to fend off negative stereotyping, and competitive striving for Muslim perfection may be reasonably posited as partly accounting for the “constant anxiety” that Brenner notes in Javanese Islamic revivalist

women. The quest for consistency manifests itself in exercises of self-surveillance and in mutual surveillance: many Islamist women monitor the habits of their fellow activists, classmates, and family members pertaining to dressing, eating, interacting with others, spending one's leisure hours, celebrating, and so on.

In sum, I suggest that Islamist women's "obsession" with meticulous observance of religious prescriptions in certain life-realms can be understood to result from (1) their stated goal of pleasing God, (2) their desire to participate in modernist projects of self-construction and nation-building, and (3) as compensation for their polyvalent resistance to full adherence to Islamic prescriptions in other arenas.

6.2.5 Egypt

Gestures of multi-edged resistance characterize women's Islamism in Egypt, where feminism made some headway during Gamal Abdul Nasser's reign (1952–67). During that period, women who continued to veil came to be regarded as rustic and backward; most upper- and middle-class women at universities and in the business and professional sectors began to wear Westernized clothing. Yet during the 1970s, women from these same groups began to veil again, though not in the traditional style. The new veil is more uncomfortable in hot weather and more expensive than the traditional form (Williams 1980).

Much as in Malaysia and Bangladesh, some young Egyptian women (often urban and educated) have greatly dismayed parents and

elders by adopting the veil (Zuhur 1992: 76). In the years since the appearance of Fadwa el-Guindi's insightful article appeared on the rise of Islamists during the 1970s in Egypt (1981), in which she briefly explored a growing Islamic ethic among women, a growing body of works has investigated the appeal for men of the new Islamist groups but relatively few have rigorously treated the process of Egyptian women's identification with Islamic revivalism. Within the latter and relatively smaller body of work, the most insightful studies have tended to focus on women's participation in revivalist Islam as symbolized in the politics of "re-veiling."

Structural factors such as political and economic frustrations do not fully explain the identification of women with Islamism, since Islamist gender ideology specifically seeks to restrict women to the home and to impose dress codes on women. Also, as scholars like Arlene MacLeod (1991) have argued, some women have adopted the new veil in contemporary Egypt for reasons more variegated than heightened religiosity or affiliation with Islamism, and this fact, too, is central to the understanding of the "veiling movement." On the basis of her study of working women in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Cairo, MacLeod argues that these women's adoption of the veil signifies a new form of struggle that she terms "accommodating protest." These women work outside the home to realize their desire for social mobility, but feel that by working outside the home they compromise the social ideal of women as

good wives and mothers. Through the new veil, therefore, they seek both to publicly identify with the traditionally valued role of women in the home and to protest the lack of socioeconomic security, which obliges them to bear the double burden of office and household work. By veiling, however, they also affirm the dominant gender ideology (which considers the home the proper place for a woman), thereby reproducing and solidifying relations of gender inequality.

Despite her repeated invocations of the awareness and activity of these working Egyptian women, in the end McLeod concludes that their choice of symbol is poor. The veil, loaded with traditional gender symbolism, overshadows the intentionalities of innovative wearers: “their own actions inadvertently strengthen the inequalities they would like to escape” (162). McLeod thus has trouble reconciling her own sense of agency and empowerment with that enacted by the Egyptian women, many of whom (especially the married ones) find their secretarial jobs unchallenging but stressful and wish to stop working as soon as their family can afford it. It is as though MacLeod, if she could, would will these women away from continuing to see themselves in “old pictures” and toward “seiz(ing) and mold(ing) the new opportunities which are coming their way” through women’s increasing access to higher education and employment (161). While she wishes these women were “able to believe in the value of their work, or at least in the dignity of their double identity as both worker and mother” (160), many value their work outside

the home only because they must support their families, as MacLeod herself documents. Instead of seeing their double roles as worker and mother as dignified or personally fulfilling, they regard their “identity” as workers as a burden they would rather not bear. She points to the inequality of the gender discourse in lower-middle-class Cairo as the root of the problem, as it “absorbs women’s efforts to alter their situation” (161).

However, it is possible that these women’s struggle strikes MacLeod as self-defeating and confused because she privileges that gender discourse which the women articulate repeatedly in response to the author’s highly specific questions over what they actually *do* from day to day—how their beliefs about what they “ought” to do or how they “ought” to feel articulate with the practical decisions they must make on the ground on a daily basis. It is telling that despite firmly expressing the belief that working is wrong, and despite the fact that their families would not be utterly destitute without their income, most of the women interviewed continued to work. Drawing on Gramsci (1971), MacLeod herself points to this as an example of the sort of “contradictory consciousness” that provides openings for the emergence of alternative worldviews and formal challenges (160).

The flexibility of the idea of economic “necessity” is revealed by similar contradictions between Islamist ideals of female domestic seclusion and the economic and education realities of BICSa women’s

lives. I have sought to conceptualize the bricolage of ideology and practice that is so characteristic of the lived world of Islamist women in Bangladesh in terms of the multiplicity of women's projects and the kind of ambivalences this generates, but MacLeod's acknowledgement of "contradictory consciousness" is eclipsed by her theoretical attempt to extract and magnify those threads from her informants' articulations that she can present as constituting desirable forms of opposition to gender and class inequalities.

Class is indeed important in analyzing the re-veiling movement in Egypt and elsewhere. However, as Zuhur (1992) points out, veiled women do not really "constitute one class, one interpretation of religion, or one special interest group" (24). This is also borne out implicitly in Mahmood's (1998) study of the women's mosque movement in Cairo. While MacLeod interviewed young lower-middle-class, working women only, Zuhur interviewed women of varying age and of socioeconomic statuses ranging from upper-middle-class to lower-middle-class. The younger veiled women in Zuhur's study had much in common with the women in MacLeod's: they were largely middle-class and moderately well-educated and had recent rural roots, and their mothers were housewives and their fathers mostly blue-collar workers. However, while the women in MacLeod's group explained their desire to veil in terms of cultural authenticity and distanced themselves from politics, the young veiled women in Zuhur's group, most of them college students, explained

their veiling in terms of morality, religion, and the search for self-esteem, and voiced their desire for an Islamic state and distaste for the consumerism that characterizes modern society. While none of these women were directly affiliated with Islamism, they supported and admired the Islamist cause, and some offered detailed critical assessments of Islamist and national politics. One likely reason for the differences in expressed attitude between women of the two groups toward veiling and Islamism is the difference in education and immediate environment. While most of MacLeod's informants had high-school diplomas, most of the young women in Zuhur's group were university students and so more resembled those women (also mostly university students) who began the re-veiling trend in the 1970s in support of political Islam. University campuses still remain the centers of political activism in Egypt.

The "contradictory consciousness" that the women in MacLeod's study displayed is also evident among the young university women Zuhur interviewed. The latter seek to mediate the contradictory pulls and to resist the fragmentation characteristic of modern life through an Islamic self-image oriented around personal piety and community service; the latter goal is used to justify women's presence in public spaces and the pursuing of careers. The combined modern-ness and historic-ness of the Islamist self-image renders it particularly practical and tangible for these Egyptian women, and contemporary veiling is a good illustration of the way Islamist women unify and assert diverse parts of their identities,

seeking to become the “new Islamic woman” (Zuhur 1992: 7–8). On the one hand, Islamist veiling fulfils the modesty requirements of Islamist gender ideology and symbolizes a woman’s Islamist identity; on the other, for upwardly mobile Egyptian women, with its colorfulness, fashionability, and brand-name designer status, the new Egyptian veil establishes the wearer’s identity as a modern Egyptian woman from a particular socio-economic class. The veil identifies its wearer as an intruder in public space (which, according to Islamist gender discourse, she actually is); at the same time, it legitimizes her presence in public space, enabling her to engage in various activities of modern life much like non-Islamist women. The mixed, contingent nature of public space itself renders this mixed effect inevitable.

The diverse ways in which Islamist Egyptian university women deploy Islamist ideology to explain, justify, and link their otherwise contradictory views and actions delineates the heterogeneity of Islamist ideology itself. Both MacLeod and Zuhur allude to how different women manipulate the ambiguities in available religious discourses to suit their individual ambivalent purposes and to simultaneously construct and sustain their group identity as women Islamists. This play with religious idioms is more evident in Zuhur’s work than MacLeod’s, since the students explicitly use Islam as the referential code for their views on gender issues, veiling, cultural and economic issues, and local and global politics. While Islamist ideologies invariably call for women to be

constrained, their appeal to and ultimate usefulness for women lies in their malleability and re-translatability at the hands of their daily practitioners. These practical themes of ambiguity and contradictory desire and intention, emergent in the works of scholars such as McLeod, Zuhur, Nagata, and Gole, have significantly informed my own study of Islamist women in Bangladesh. I have sought to develop them further in conversation with the work of Saba Mahmood, who has drawn our attention to the centrality of Islamic traditional piety to the motivations of Islamic revivalist women.

6.3 Revisiting Key Themes of This Project

As discussed above, several recent monographs have examined women who actively seek to orient their lives around Islam. However, much of this literature tends to take fully-formed female religious subjects as their point of departure rather than exploring those processes whereby women's Muslim subjectivities are *formed*, that is, those paths by which Islamist subjects come to occupy the ideological positions from which they engage interviewing social scientists. Conventional studies of women in Islamic reform movements thus embark either on discussions of the socio-economic foundations out of which religious activism arises (El-Guindi 1981; MacLeod 1991; Nagata 1996) or on analyses of the identity politics of symbols and difference among formed, dedicated Islamist

subjects (Zuhur 1992; Göle 1996; Brenner 1996).¹ As have I noted at several points in this dissertation, Mahmood's important work (1998, 2001) on women in the mosque movement in Cairo, which focuses on the processual constitution of the participants' moral and political selves, is an exception that has deeply informed my own project. I have sought to extend and nuance this exemplary work by foregrounding the ambivalence of even the most pious actor's intentions and the multiplicity of her projects. The group I have studied, unlike the loosely organized pietistic movement centered on attendance at mosque lectures that Mahmood has studied, is a social-movement organization with a written constitution, a clearly articulated agenda, a set of well-defined, even rationalistic prescriptions for social action and individual moral transformation, and an implicit but unambiguous political project—namely, to help its parent organization, the political party Jamaate Islami, to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic state through democratic means. Unlike Tabligh Jamaat, possibly the most widespread Islamic movement in contemporary South Asia and one of the most successful transnational movements for Islamic renewal, neither BICSa nor Jamaat recognizes any boundary in principle between piety and politics (or between piety and anything else, for that matter); on the contrary, they view any Islam isolated from politics as “incomplete.” Yet interestingly, it was the contrast between BICSa's

¹ Saba Mahmood critiques studies of the resurgence of the practice of veiling in contemporary urban Egypt as offering either functionalist explanations or analyses in terms of symbolic resistance to the hegemony of Western values. She points out that these works dismiss women's articulation of piety as motivation for veiling (2001: 209).

ideological emphasis on the “completeness” of the Islamic vision and the practices of its adherents that sensitized me to the specific incompletenesses and ruptures integral to the Islamist discursive regime.

When presenting a small portion of my dissertation at a workshop at Harvard University in 2001, I was asked by a friend acting as a “devil’s advocate” whether, despite my emphasis on issues of partiality and polyvalence, anybody would actually argue today that *any* culture or system or ideology is truly totalistic and not partial. Perhaps they shouldn’t, but they do. Despite the work that Clifford Geertz and many other anthropologists and scholars have done to complicate our notion of cultures as linear, singular, and static entities, formulations such as Samuel Huntington’s depiction of a “West” in inevitable conflict with the “rest,”² where the “rest” has increasingly come to define perceptions of “Islam,” continue to be produced and to circulate as commonsensical knowledge in various forms. In depicting the partiality and polyvalence of not just any culture, but of the life-world of the highly organized and disciplined group of BICSa activists, who are viewed both by themselves and by their anxious liberal-secular critics as a “vanguard of the Islamic revolution” planned on the totalistic terms Mawdudi outlined and elaborated between the 1930s and 1970s, I offer a substantive—not merely generalized or assertive—case for the contingent, contested, shifting, and dynamic nature

² See Huntington, Samuel 1993. “The Clash of Civilizations? *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer): 22-49.

of any social structure or cultural project, especially as embodied by real human subjects.

I have taken issue with the decentering of social actors and their own projects that has characterized much conventional scholarship on Islamic movements generally and on Islamic activist women specifically. Using ethnographic field materials gathered on a women's Islamist group in Bangladesh, I support the claim that Islamic movements should be investigated with attention to the politics of subject formation. Study of the public-formal aspects of Islamist discourses or on the state and global economic and political structures within which these discourses operate must be augmented by a wider ethnographic analysis that does not elide the micro-level processes whereby the very selves of Islamist subjects are formed. With this broadened analysis, we can see that the success of the Islamist movement in Bangladesh lies in its ability to produce and sustain a moral-practical subjecthood through daily practices grounded both in an orthodox Islamic tradition and modern technologies of organization and education.

Islamic education, whether in the form of traditional religious schooling or socialization into Islamic movements, has usually been understood in recent Western scholarship as highly linear and doctrinaire. In exploring the moral-practical discursive regime that BICSa activists inhabit, however, I uncover intricate complexities and ambiguities inherent in the processes through which these activists painstakingly craft

a radically new kind of Islamic subjectivity and proceed to live out in its various harmonics and ruptures. I do so by attending to the ways in which movement members not only rigorously cultivate but subvert and contest the Islamic teachings laboriously handed down by the leadership in order to produce “pristine” Muslims resolutely opposed to liberal-secular modernities perceived as West- and India-inspired, and singularly dedicated to the project of (re)Islamicizing self, community, state, and world.

Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, after a bloody war. The conflict pitted liberal pro-independence nationalists against Islamists. The latter lost. Consequently, political Islam has been denigrated in dominant nationalist discourses. Yet BICSa, an Islamist organization with a sociopolitical agenda of “pursuing peace both in this world and in the Hereafter,” has thriven. A central question for my project has therefore been this: What accounts for BICSa’s success in not only recruiting women but in sustaining their loyalty over the years (in many cases binding them to some form of Islamic activism for the rest of their lives) in the face of a dominant discourse that denigrates Islamist activism and (often) harsh familial opposition? For it is notable that the ambiguities and contestations with which the official subjecthood-formation project is riddled do not weaken it enough to stop it from going forward, and from achieving, at least partially, its goals. Another way of asking this question is: What kinds of subjects does BICSa produce, by

what means does it produce them in spite of countervailing forces, and what precisely is the nature of the living dynamic between the organizational structure of BICSa and those pious Islamic subjects whom it seeks to produce and who strive to embody this structure and the set of beliefs it represents so laboriously and systematically?

I have sought to explore these issues through the three basic segments of my dissertation. In the first (Chapters 2 and 3), I explore some of the disciplinary technologies, such as the Worker Meeting, through which an Islamic revivalist subjecthood is crafted. In the second (Chapter 4), I examine the daily contestation of dominant, liberal social practices by BICSa activists. As a BICSa activist tries to inhabit an Islamic lifestyle, she encounters animosity from family, classmates, and others; rather than causing her to revert to a conventional lifestyle, this pressure may actually strengthen her commitment to an alternative, Islamist lifestyle. In the final segment of this dissertation (Chapter 5), I have sought to complicate the image of Islamist women as being strictly in conflict with hegemonic, liberalizing cultural mores by exploring how activists contest Islamist values *within* BICSa.

In thinking through these pieces of my dissertation, I have been guided by two sets of theoretical lenses in particular, one set deriving from some of the formulations put forth by Michel Foucault and other scholarly extensions of these insights, the other drawn from the contributions of practice theorists such as Sherry Ortner. First, Michel Foucault (1997)

pointed out that although modern social networks are shot through with power relations that have no discernible center, individuals can and do exercise agency through various *historically constituted* forms of “self writing” or “self care.” Building on Foucault, Judith Butler (1997) has argued for the centrality of subjection to the very possibilities for the securing of agency. These insights have helped me explore the ways in which Islamist disciplinary techniques in Bangladesh are practiced with the aim of transforming one’s subjectivity as well as the surrounding world.

In unpacking the world of BICSa women, I have also found useful feminist cultural analyses of identities formed through the naturalization of power. Employing a Foucauldian perspective, these scholars have argued that while institutional and cultural discourses profoundly shape actors’ ideas and practices, people tend to think and act at the *intersections* of these discourses rather than in adherence to these divisions (Delaney & Yanagisako 1995). Any subject is therefore simultaneously and complexly embedded in multiple systems of power. This approach helps me trace not only BICSa’s opposition to hegemonic Bangladeshi values, which is part of BICSa’s carefully crafted project, but to uncover ways in which some activists resist certain norms of the very Islamist ideology they have adopted.

I have sought to keep in view the different forms of structure-embedded agency developed and sometimes creatively deployed by the

activists of BICSa by balancing a Foucault-Butler inspired focus on discursive formations and the profound effects of power structures on human subjectivities with the analytical emphasis in practice theory on the *whole lived process* of cultural subjectivity, social relations, and those concrete practices that often unfold within the matrices of these social relations (Ortner 1996; Ahearn 2001). This then comprises the second theoretical framework for this project. This approach centered on the on-the-ground practices of cultural subjects, sometimes re-affirming and sometimes pushing against the boundaries of ideological discourse, has enabled me to analyze those modalities of resistance that inhere in the very endeavors of BICSa activists to embody a totalistic worldview on the constantly shifting socio-cultural terrain that the inter-relatedness of discursive regimes and the multiplicity integral to human desires and projects can constitute. I have found helpful Sherry Ortner's (1995) reflections on resistance in locating the ambivalence and ambiguity so characteristic of BICSa women's resistive engagement with organizational norms and other inter-related domains of their daily lives.

However, in seeking to avoid the pitfall of romanticizing resistance, I have taken a cue from Lila Abu-Lughod's formulation of "resistance as a diagnostic of power" (1990: 42). "Following" patterns of resistive gestures has enabled me to trace some of the intricately related systems of power in which the BICSa activist is embedded and the ways in which she contends creatively with these systems. Styles of contention

ranging from diligent adherence to organizational regulations, to subversion of both hegemonic Islamist and Bangali cultural norms by playing one off of the other, to courageous expansion of the parameters of the intricately imbricated worlds of organizational Islamism, Muslim Bangali society, and the culture of the Bangladeshi state. That state is bent on “modernization” (*adhunikayan*), mass higher education, and production of a “diligent” citizenry able to effectively face the challenges of the twenty-first century and globalization through technological advances.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I have shown that BICSa’s success in mobilizing and organizing women depends, in part, on its ability to produce and sustain a highly specific form of subjectivity through routine discursive and embodied practices grounded in traditional and creative revivalist Islamic practices, Bangali norms, and various forms of local modernity, including and especially the contemporary cultures of higher education, student activism, and print media. The latter include numerous daily newspapers and an increasingly broad selection of Islamic literature, especially Mawdudi’s works of Qur’anic exegesis and booklets authored by Mawdudi and Jamaat leaders that activists must use in preparing routine lessons or presentations at the weekly Worker Meetings which I explore in Chapter 3.

In the orthodox Islamic tradition, much emphasis is placed on disciplining the self through ritual practices such as the five obligatory

daily prayers. BICSa promulgates discipline not only through these traditional forms but also through novel technologies that it perceives as “scientific.” Mixing traditional and modern educational styles of comportment, the Worker Meeting serves as a primary BICSa technology for producing an Islamist subjectivity capable of shaping the present-day world. To reshape subjecthood, the worker meeting produces and embodies essentially two key categories of space. One is a physical space, the physical setting of a Worker Meeting —often an activist’s bedroom, a private space adapted for a non-private purpose. The other is a conceptual space, the space of knowledge (Messick 1993: 249). One dimension of this space is the mode of knowing inscribed in the highly structured Qur’anic lessons or *dars* which form the core of a Worker Meeting. Others include the mode of knowing implicit in the highly scheduled, classified, rationalized, and paperwork-heavy “scientific” procedures that structure and pervade each meeting. These different modes or dimensions intermingle. On one hand, women are urged to study and articulate the Qur’an in a “scientific” manner, with a “research mentality.” On the other, activists must adhere to ritualistic religious speech and traditional Qur’anic recitation practices. While this intermingling or integration is itself no accident and is fundamental to BICSa’s Islamist project of crafting a countermodernity, it produces somewhat inchoate subjects the hybridity of whose dispositions can articulate in unexpected ways with the singularity of Islamist ideological discourses.

In Chapter 3 I have explored how a BICSa woman's distinctly hybrid but Islamist sense of being and feeling is further crystallized by emotionally charged opposition to her Islamist lifestyle, opposition which usually comes from older family members and teachers. In the course of handling these emotionally powerful instances of social opposition, a BICSa activist begins to see herself more as an individual with unique views, capacities, and goals, and less as only a member of a particular family—which is the overarching identity of the great majority of Bangladeshi women. Islamic activism thus has an individualizing effect on activists even as it seeks to further strengthen and safeguard traditional family values. With their new sense of embattled selfhood, forged in visceral encounters with family members over Islamist practices such as veiling, some BICSa activists become able to defy familial authority in other respects as well. For instance, arranged marriage is the norm in Bangladesh, but to their parents' chagrin some BICSa activists demand that their parents seek marriage partners for them only within the ranks of Islamic activists—or even, as I explore in Chapter 5, choose their own through romantic exploits, in defiance of both Bangali cultural norms and the core Islamist proscription of male-female intimacy in any premarital context, no matter how physically chaste.

Two other aspects of a BICSa woman's experience combine with the strengthened, informed, articulate personalities acquired through disciplinary practices and in response hostile opposition to thwart BICSa's

efforts at totalistic production of Islamic subjects. First, the BICSa activist masters the art of researching religious texts and explaining them in both religious and secular “tongues” or rhetorical modes. The mastery of Islamic literature that BICSa instills gives women some access to the multiplicity of existing religious interpretations. This relativizing awareness of the variability of authoritative religious interpretation combines with an activist’s creative negotiations of the intersecting demands of Islamist ideology, family, school culture, and her own personality to enable her to identify sites of ambiguity or tension within BICSa’s ideological world. This awareness opens the door to different degrees and forms of contestation.

These contestations, explored in great detail in Chapter 5, result partly from the inherent incompleteness of any program of socialization embedded in a complex society characterized by competing, fragmented ideological and cultural formations. For example, many of the technologies that Islamist movements like BICSa employ in training new members in piety are grounded in explicitly modern styles of schooling, time management, and subject production. These methods imply and communicate a world-sense grounded in observation, quantification, cause and effect, repetition, counting, extension, and conditioning, as opposed to traditional religious modes of knowledge such as love, fear, awe, desire, compunction, praise, giving, thanksgiving, and mortification. Although Islamist leaders take pride in the “scientific” nature of these disciplinary

methods and dismiss as absurd the possibility that such methods might temper the production of pristine Islamic selfhood, these media of subject formation, in their very materiality and embodied texture, subtly but significantly thwart the crafting of the kind of “pure” (*khanti*) Muslims that BICSa envisages, and contribute instead to the production of somewhat fragile, inchoate commitments. Nor is this surprising, given that *like most Bangladeshi women, BICSa activists, despite their avowedly purist conversion to “Islamic ideology” and “Islamic culture,” inhabit multiple, conflicting, overlapping, intersecting, and internally contradictory domains of power, persuasion, and desire.* Ambivalences experienced and enacted in these “fractured subject positions” (Das 2000: 222) give rise to implicit and sometimes explicit resistance to organizational training and disciplining. These ambivalences can result in the backsliding of even the most highly seasoned activists to “inactive worker” (*nishkriya karmi*) status—not outright irreligion by any means, but a relaxed state far from the organization’s heroic ideal. BICSa’s efforts to negotiate differences with a constantly shifting reality without compromising on basic principles result in inadvertent redefinition of the very boundaries it so painstakingly constructs between itself and the “ignorant” (i.e., liberal Muslims, secularists, adherents of other faiths), and between conservative Muslims and the expanding sphere of materialist, capitalist Westernization.

6.4 Conclusion: Piety or Religiosity as a Nested, Ambivalent Form of Social Agency Wielded as Contestation-in-Submission

The first two segments of my dissertation (Chapters 2 and 3) are inspired by Saba Mahmood's (1998, 2001) insightful call to take piety seriously as an analytical category that can illuminate the motivations, experiences, and sensibilities of devout women. However, her study of the everyday piety of devout Egyptian women notes no significant ambiguities or complications. Therefore, in debunking the tendency of some feminist and liberalist theorists to construe agency as consisting solely of resistance and opposition, Mahmood tends to exclusively frame arduously-acquired *conformity* as agency. My study adds nuance to her superb work by delineating some of the kinds of ambivalence that can and in many cases do characterize even the most committed religious subjectivities, in culturally and historically specific ways. In grappling with the ways in which even the most profoundly religious projects of self-cultivation and sociopolitical transformation stand in a crucially, mutually structuring dynamic relationship with the socioeconomic aspects of BICSA activists' lives, I have found that the concept of "resistance," for so long central to scholarship on the cultivation of agency, remains helpful in understanding the everyday reality of BICSA women's conflicted efforts to live out an Islamic revivalist ideology. Mahmood takes various scholars to task for privileging resistance in their formulations of gender; building on her work and at the same time departing from it, I prefer to

point to ways in which resistance is integral to projects not only of opposition but of conformity. Thus, in Chapter 4, I have shown how diligently and painfully BICSa women must resist hegemonic sociocultural norms in the process of adhering to their religious ideology. In many cases, experiences of resistance crystallize the notion of difference between “Islamic culture” and “un-Islamic culture” that Islamists seek to privilege and can help fuel a devotee’s desire to assiduously abide by her ideological code of conduct. In other words, part of the *pleasure* or zeal in conforming to a revivalist movement can derive from the very resistance it encounters from socio-political Others and from the way certainties of religious identity and transcendental purpose and meaning take shape in the course of daily battles of wills, spirits, and conviction.

However, a gamut of ambivalences exists. Resistance occurs. Yet the commitment of these activists to Islam is far from a sham. They are disobedient but sincere; submissive but non-compliant. Despite the absence of any formal machinery for preventing a member from leaving the group, many never sever their ties with the organization and stick it out despite their groans and grumblings. The bonds that hold activists to the organization are often under tension, but they hold. I therefore wish to suggest that in the arena of religious belief, persuasion, and practice in the present-day world, as in other areas of lived reality shaped by the multivocality of complex postcolonial conditions, agency tends to be

characterized by polyvalent efforts toward both conformity *and* resistance to particular ideological, religious, and cultural systems of thinking and acting. Further, conformity in a particular discursive regime translates into resistance in another. In studying religious life as understood, experienced, and embodied by women in today's world, it is therefore not particularly fruitful to look for singular moments of seamless "doing" or "undoing" of norms. While relatively small groups of virtuosos are indeed able to achieve near-absolute belief in and conformity to this or that code of religious conduct, for many religious people, including the majority of the self-avowedly devout BICSa activists with whom I interacted closely over lengthy periods of time, between my undergraduate Senior Fellowship project in September-December 1993 and my doctoral dissertation follow-up research in 2003, conformity is fraught with ambivalence and contestation. How can we grasp the processes integral to the formation of such complex subjectivities?

I propose joining Saba Mahmood's analytics of the will to religious conformity with attention to the *multivocality of desire and its location within the matrices of social relations*. On this view, the pursuit of piety among BICSa women is a finely textured and ambivalent project that includes multiple and sometimes conflicting longings and goals yet remains, usually, oriented around an earnest desire for intimacy with the divine, a desire mediated through relations to organizational structures, numerous people, and some texts. Such a pursuit, by enabling the activist

to shift gears and pursue different means for securing joy in living within a shifting Islamic framework, allows for the destabilization, however momentarily, of weighty feelings of subjection, constraint, and pressure. Sometimes an activist finds particular joy and renewal of self through her familial roles, success in school, a fictional romantic imaginary, or her commitments to BICSa. Thus, for instance, I explored in Chapter 3 how worker meetings—the most standard feature of the organizational life of a BICSa activist—are not only sites of subject production through textual performances but also of camaraderie and laughter. I indicated how BICSa activism includes the detailed planning and execution of different types of socio-cultural programs some of which might be understood as Islamist teenage socials, through which different organizational units compete with each other for excellence. Organizing such events entails a wide range of tasks, from electing what refreshments to serve and which Islamic singers to invite to how the walls might be adorned, who is in charge of announcements or Qur’anic recitation or poetry recitation, and who will wear what. These undertakings often generate a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement among BICSa activists, many teenagers from lower-middle-class families where financial hardship severely limits opportunities for organizing significant social events and where, when such events *are* organized, women in their teens are rarely allowed leading roles in the organizing such as they are encouraged to take on by BICSa.

There is no doubt that a BICSa activist's attachment to a particular understanding of piety and "true" Muslim-ness guides her to different degrees in her movements in and out of the interrelated modules of organizational, familial, and other social relations. However, in the world of BICSa women, the organizationally defined project of self-construction combines in intricate ways with wrenching social experiences to produce a variably empowered subjectivity that is, in many cases, far from perfectly submissive to BICSa. Since the Islamic subjecthood of these women forms at the contentious intersection of a number of discursive regimes, the activists' role as an actor is intensified. She is endowed with a more complex and textured agency than could be derived from perfect and total commitment to any one ideology, whether conformist or oppositional. Each and every action, however routine or apparently self-oppressive, can, in the realm of overlapping and contradictory power schemes which these women inhabit, be unsettling and empowering.

GLOSSARY

<i>adab</i>	politeness, respectfulness
<i>adarsha</i>	ideology
<i>adarshik sudhi</i>	ideological supporter (of BICSa)
<i>adat</i>	(Malay) custom
<i>adhunik</i>	modern
<i>adhunikayan</i>	modernization
<i>Agrasar Karmi</i>	“Advanced Worker”; the third cadre level of membership within BICSa
<i>aibura</i>	spinster
<i>aitihasik patabhumi</i>	historical background (of a Qur’anic verse’s revelation)
<i>akarshaniya</i>	attractive
<i>‘alim</i> (pl. <i>ulama</i>)	traditional Islamic expert
<i>alkhella</i>	cloak
<i>Allahr sainik</i>	warriors of Allah
<i>Allahr santashti</i>	satisfaction of Allah
<i>Allahu Akbar</i>	“God is great”
<i>alochana</i>	discussion
<i>amin</i>	English equivalent of ‘Amen’
<i>amir</i>	chief (of the political party Jamaate Islami)
<i>antarikata</i>	sincerity

<i>apa</i>	older sister
<i>'aqd</i>	the key marital religious ceremony
<i>'asr</i>	afternoon
<i>assalamu alaikum</i>	“peace be on you” – traditional form of Islamic greeting
<i>astagfirullah</i>	Qur’anic verses to seek refuge with God from Satan
<i>atyagathan</i>	self-construction
<i>atyasamalochana</i>	self-criticism
<i>atyasammanbodh</i>	self-esteem
<i>atyasuddhi</i>	self-purification
Awami League (AL for short)	a secular nationalist and one of two major political parties in Bangladesh
<i>ayyam-e-jaheliyat</i>	the pre-Islamic Arabian “days of ignorance”
<i>baarak Allahu lanaa wa lakum</i>	“may Allah bless us and you”; a form of greeting currently being used primarily by the members of Tabligh Jamaat
<i>baigyanik</i>	scientific
<i>baigyanik padhyati</i>	scientific procedure
<i>bakhya</i>	exegesis or explanation (of Qur’anic verses)
<i>baktabya</i>	speech
Bangladesh Islami Chatri Sangstha (BICSa for short)	a female students’ Islamist organization in Bangladesh
Bangladesh Islami Chatra Shibir (Shibir for short)	the male student wing of the Islamist party Jamaate Islami

Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Dal (BNP for short)	Bangladesh Nationalist Party - a liberal and one of two major political parties in Bangladesh
<i>barabari</i>	excessiveness, extremism
<i>basmalah</i>	name of an Arabic phrase: "In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Beneficent"
<i>bastubad</i>	materialism
<i>bastubadi</i>	materialistic
<i>batil</i>	anti-Islamic
<i>bau</i>	bride
<i>baudi</i>	older brother's wife; term used by Hindu Bangalis
<i>bektigata jogajog</i>	face-to-face contact
<i>bhabi</i>	older brother's wife
<i>bhadrata</i>	civility, politeness
<i>bhai</i>	brother
<i>bhaiyya</i>	older brother
<i>bhalabasha</i>	love
<i>bidat</i> (Ar. <i>bid'ah</i>)	innovation
<i>bigyansammata</i>	scientific
<i>bisay bhittik dars</i>	lesson on general religious topic
<i>bisaybastu o mul baktabya</i>	subject matter and gist (of the Qur'anic verses)
<i>bon</i>	sister

<i>borkha</i>	a loose, ankle-length coat with long sleeves and a headscarf
<i>cha-chakra</i>	tea parties
<i>chacha</i>	paternal uncle
<i>chachi</i>	paternal uncle's wife
<i>chakchikya</i>	glamour
<i>charitra gathan</i>	character formation
<i>charitra madhurja</i>	sweetness of character
<i>chatri</i>	female student
<i>chatra</i>	male student
Chatra League	student wing of Awami League, a major political party in Bangladesh
Chatra Union	a socialist political students' group in Bangladesh
<i>da'ii</i>	preacher
<i>dainik report sangrakhkhan</i>	logging of daily activities (by BICSA members)
<i>dalal</i>	agent
<i>dars</i>	lesson
<i>darsul hadis</i>	lesson on prophetic traditions
<i>darsul Kor'an</i>	Qur'anic lesson
<i>darud sharif</i>	a set of verses uttered in devotion to the Prophet Muhammad
<i>dawat (Ar. da'wah)</i>	preaching
<i>dawati kaj</i>	invitational work

<i>dayalu</i>	kind
<i>dayitya</i>	responsibility
<i>debar</i>	husband's younger brother
<i>din</i>	religion
<i>dini bon</i>	sisters in religion
<i>doa</i>	supplicatory prayer
<i>doa-darud</i>	religious chantings
<i>dopatta</i>	light shawl draped loosely across the chest
<i>drira</i>	firm
<i>duniyate santi o akherate mukti</i>	peace in this world and liberation in the hereafter
<i>durbal iman</i>	weak faith
<i>Eid ul Azha</i>	one of the two major Muslim festivals, observed during the final month of the Islamic lunar calendar when the <i>hajj</i> is performed
<i>Eid ul Fitr</i>	one of the two annual major Muslim festivals, observed at the end of <i>Ramzan</i>
Faraizi	Islamic revivalist movement arose in Bengal (the eastern part of which is now Bangladesh) in the early nineteenth century in response to British colonialism
<i>faraz (Ar. fard)</i>	obligatory
<i>fitna</i>	disorder (in society)
<i>gabeshaker man</i>	a researcher's mindset
<i>gatamugatik</i>	conventional

<i>gibat</i>	backbiting
<i>ghatak</i>	traitor
<i>ghomta</i>	head covering
<i>gilaf</i>	covering (for the Qur'an) sewn out of cloth
<i>gunabali</i>	virtues
<i>hadith</i> (pl. <i>ahadith</i>)	prophetic traditions
<i>hajj</i>	pilgrimage to Makkah
<i>hamd</i>	devotional song without the accompaniment of musical instruments
<i>hedayat</i>	guidance
<i>hekmat</i>	practical wisdom
<i>hijab</i>	veil; (term used in the Middle East)
<i>ibadat</i>	act of worship
<i>iftar mahfil</i>	socio-religious events during Ramadan oriented around the breaking of the day's fast with particularly delectable food
<i>ijjat</i>	honor
<i>imam</i>	prayer leader
<i>imaneer durbalata</i>	weakness of faith
<i>islamer maulik mulyabodh</i>	fundamental values of Islam
<i>islami adarsha</i>	Islamic ideology
<i>islami andalan</i>	Islamic movement
<i>islami man-manashikata</i>	Islamic moral-ethical disposition
<i>islami samaj babastha</i>	Islamic social system

<i>islami sanskriti</i>	Islamic culture
<i>islampanthi</i>	Islamic
<i>iyapati sudhi</i>	donating supporter (of BICSa)
<i>jaheli</i>	un-Islamic
<i>jaheliyat</i>	ignorance
Jamaate Islami	originally founded by Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi in the early twentieth century India; it is currently the most prominent Islamist party in Bangladesh
<i>jaruri baithak</i>	urgent meeting
<i>jauna sursuri</i>	sexual provocation
<i>jihad asgar</i>	the “smaller” jihad
<i>jihad fi sabilillah</i>	striving in the path of Allah
<i>jobba-jabba</i>	Literally means, heavy unwieldy clothing; sometimes derogatorily used in reference to the <i>borkha</i>
<i>jugopujagi</i>	appropriate to the times
<i>kabira gunah</i>	grave sin
<i>Karmapadhyati</i>	“Work Methodology”, a BICSa published booklet
<i>Karmi</i>	“Worker”; the second cadre level of membership within BICSa
<i>Karmi baithak</i>	Worker Meeting
<i>Karmi samabesh</i>	Worker Gathering; a program for “Worker” cadre level members of BICSa
<i>kathar parisrami</i>	diligent

<i>khala, or khalamma</i>	maternal aunt
<i>khalifa</i>	representative (of Allah)
<i>khalu</i>	maternal aunt's husband
<i>khanti</i>	pure
<i>khanti muslim nari</i>	true Muslim woman
<i>khulafa-e-rashidin</i>	the four "rightly guided" rulers of the Muslim community
<i>khotba</i>	sermon immediately preceding the Friday congregational prayer
<i>Kor'an</i>	Bangla version of the Arabic word "Qur'an"
<i>Kor'an khotom</i>	recitation of the Qur'an in its entirety
<i>lajja</i>	shyness
<i>lajuk</i>	shy
<i>madhyam pantha</i>	middle ground
<i>madrasa</i>	traditional Islamic religious school
<i>mahrum</i>	(men) forbidden in marriage, for a woman; includes fourteen categories of closely related men specified in the Qur'an
<i>maja</i>	fun
<i>mama</i>	maternal uncle
<i>mami</i>	maternal uncle's wife
<i>man-samman</i>	honor
<i>manab-rachita matabad</i>	human-devised ideologies
<i>manabatar muktidoot</i>	ambassador for the liberation of mankind
<i>maner nongrami</i>	dirt in one's heart

<i>maner pabitrata</i>	purity of the mind
<i>maqrub</i>	displeasing to Allah
<i>mas'ala</i>	ritual prescription
<i>maulabadi</i>	fundamentalist
<i>mayla rang</i>	dirty (dark) color
<i>milad mahfil</i>	devotional prayers in a group
<i>misti babahar</i>	sweet behavior
<i>mohasaba</i>	a process of BICSa, whereby at the final Worker Meeting of each month (termed as Reporting Meeting), one worker, regardless of her organizational rank, volunteers to submit herself to constructive criticism by her peers
<i>monazat</i>	group supplicatory prayer
<i>mujahid</i>	one who strives in the path of Allah
<i>mukti</i>	liberation
<i>mu'min</i>	believer
<i>muttaqi</i>	one constantly anxious about displeasing God in any way
<i>nafliyat</i>	supererogatory acts of worship
<i>nafs</i>	inner or baser self
<i>naitik gunabali</i>	moral virtues
<i>namaz (Ar. salah)</i>	prayer
<i>namaz-roza</i>	prayer-fasting
<i>namkaran</i>	naming (of Qur'anic verse)
<i>namrata</i>	softness (of character, non-pejorative)

Naripakhhkha	Women's Party; a feminist movement political party in Bangladesh
<i>narir khamatayan</i>	empowerment of women
<i>nayparayan</i>	just
<i>nazil habar samaykal</i>	time of (a Qur'anic verse's) revelation
<i>neqab</i>	face veil
<i>nishchinta</i>	secure, without any worry
<i>nishkriya karmi</i>	inactive worker
<i>nongra</i>	dirty
<i>parda, purdah</i>	veiling
<i>pesh kara</i>	present (oneself for constructive criticism or <i>mohasaba</i>)
<i>pir-faqir</i>	holy men
<i>pragati</i>	progress
<i>Prathamik Sadasya</i>	"Primary Member"; the first and lowest cadre level of membership within BICSa
<i>pratinidhi</i>	representative (of Allah)
<i>prem</i>	romantic love
<i>puraskar</i>	reward
<i>purna antarikata</i>	full sincerity
<i>purna iman</i>	complete faith
<i>purna jiban bidhan</i>	complete code of life
<i>purna musulmanitya</i>	"true" or "complete" Muslimness
<i>purna parda</i>	complete veiling

<i>pustak pradarshani</i>	book exhibition
<i>Ramzan (Ar. Ramadan)</i>	the month of fasting for all Muslims; it is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar
<i>roza (Ar. sawm)</i>	fasting
<i>Sadasya</i>	“Full Member”; the fifth and highest cadre level of membership within BICSa
<i>Sadasya Prarathi</i>	“Full Member Candidate”; the fourth cadre level of membership within BICSa
<i>sadharan dawati saptaho</i>	General Invitation Week (organized by BICSa)
<i>sadharan sabha</i>	general gatherings
<i>safalya</i>	success
<i>safar</i>	interregional organizational travel with one or more BICSA activists or companions for purposes of preaching, administrative supervision, and moral encouragement
<i>sahabi</i>	companion of the Prophet Muhammad
<i>salwar kamiz</i>	A two-piece customary attire for young and unmarried Bangladeshi women, consisting of loose, pleated pants and a roughly knee-length tunic worn with a light shawl draped loosely across the chest
<i>samastik bhoj</i>	feasts
<i>sangathanik alochana</i>	organizational discussion
<i>sangathanik man</i>	cadre level or organizational rank
<i>santi</i>	peace

<i>satyer sainik</i>	warrior of truth
<i>satyikar imandar</i>	true believer
<i>shahadah</i>	In Arabic, “ <i>la ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad ur rasul Allah</i> ”). There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet.
<i>Saitan</i>	Satan
<i>salin</i>	decent
<i>salinata</i>	modesty
<i>sariyat (Ar. shari’ah)</i>	the body of Islamic law derived from the holy Qur’an and the Sunnah (recorded sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad)
<i>sikhyaniya dik</i>	teachings derived (from Qur’anic verses)
<i>sudhi</i>	supporter
<i>sudhi samabesh</i>	supporter gathering
<i>sundar</i>	pretty
<i>sunnat (Ar. sunnah)</i>	reported prophetic traditions
<i>surah</i>	a “chapter” in the Qur’an
<i>susrinkhal nagarik</i>	disciplined citizenry
<i>susrinkhalata</i>	discipline
Tabligh Jamaat	a rapidly growing, traditionalist, transnational and apolitical pietist movement
<i>Tafheemul Kur’an</i>	Exegesis of the Qur’an authored by Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi

<i>tafsir</i>	Qur'anic exegesis; exegetical explanations of Qur'anic verses
<i>tahajjud</i>	a late evening prayer
<i>tajwid</i>	rules of Qur'anic recitation
<i>taqwa</i>	fear of Allah, piety, strength of faith
Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah	Islamic revivalist movement arose in Bengal (the eastern part of which is now Bangladesh) in the early nineteenth century in response to British colonialism
<i>telawat</i> (Ar. <i>tilawah</i>)	recitation (of Qur'an)
<i>thana</i>	BICSa's second-smallest administrative institution for a residential area; it supervises a number of smaller <i>units</i>
Training Session (TS)	a one-day long program for BICSa activists
Training Camp (TC)	a three-days long program for BICSa activists
<i>turban</i>	traditional religious headgear for men and women in Turkey.
<i>ummah</i>	global (Muslim) community
<i>unmatamaner</i>	advanced
<i>unnayan</i>	development
<i>waaz</i>	preaching through Qur'anic exegesis ; popular sermon; traditional religious sermon
<i>waaz mahfil</i>	gathering to conduct <i>waaz</i>
<i>zakat</i> (Ar. <i>zakah</i>)	almsgiving, determined by one's income and assets

zikr (Ar. *dhikr*)

remembrance of God through repeated utterances of specific Qur'anic words or verses

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