

# Islamic Ideology & Extremism: Bangladesh Perspective

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between Islamic ideology, extremism and terrorism has been the source of much controversy and dispute between western scholars, policy makers and defenders of the faith who have all contested the subject on diametrically opposed grounds and perspectives more precisely after the events of 9/11. Some trace this new interest in Islam in the West to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001 but this ignores the long and often dogmatic history that has preceded between these two great but 'antagonistic' civilizations that largely fell short of an outbreak of open hostility precisely due to economic development observed with the new phase of 21<sup>st</sup> Century millennium order.

A careful study on the global Islamic movement emanates from Islamic revivalist movement beginning in 19<sup>th</sup> century and the contemporary resurgence traced to de-colonization of European colonies in 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, along with emergence of independent Muslim countries. The challenge to ruling government throughout the period leading onto 1990s for establishing Islam in the public life and as state principal are the outcome of the history in Middle East and newfound oil wealth that helped to gain grounds for Islamic political forces. A subtle turn having prolonged effect was further seen with Islamic revolution in Iran as competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran became evident in their quest for supremacy of leadership in sect based theological line. The Soviet war led to political activism and the war in Bosnia and Afghanistan only encouraged traditional *Ulemas* to be more active in politics.

The survey conducted on the Islamic movements show that almost all scholars are opposed to some Islamic groups' violent methods targeting real or perceived American interest.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, they equally differ on the causes and reasons; as well *current rule of law applied* on them. The issue on Palestinian resolution, new threat of micro terrorism in relation to Al Qaida and Jamayi Islami, relevance to deal with organized crime

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and terrorism, democratization of Middle East, and confusion to differentiate between increased level of ethnic and sub national insurgency versus radicalism seem to have taken reverse queue rather than addressing them under long term perspective plans on economic and political lines to weaken conditions of such uprising.

The fact that Islam grew as a political force almost in parallel to the civilization is not recognized subsequently, rather, the west which views the 'challenge' posed by Islam in apocalyptic terms and dismisses the debt it owes to Islam in the area of science, art and literature which spurred it towards its Enlightenment and Renaissance from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. The focus on Islam in recent years has been a direct consequence of this attitude which absolves the west from any blame in helping to create elements of extremism within the Islamic fold and at the same time to point out the defects and deficiencies within Islamic ideology which is seen as being directly responsible for the growth of modern radical terrorism. To understand the relationship between Islamic ideology and extremism one must also prefigure the western intervention in the Islamic consciousness which has now unhelpfully posited the idea of a 'moderate Islam' against a 'fundamentalist Islam' as if either were precisely definable within the broad umbrella of modern Islamic thought.

Bangladesh right from its origin has remained Muslim populace with attachment to its identity and enlighten outlook. While the basis of formation of Pakistan was on a two nation theory and religion, incase of the liberation of Bangladesh this was not the case. In so much the tolerant the society is till date there is no proof of any Bangladeshi having direct link to commissioning act of terror violence or be a member or party to Al Qaida or Jamayi Islamia activity. The rise and fall of JMB is a simple recollection of historical imperatives, the country enjoys both in tolerance, harmony and religious accommodation. The confrontational politics of Bangladesh is responsible for a part being played to damage its international reputation and image with such concoction as would be visible through, Bangladesh-Trading the Taliban Trail<sup>3</sup> or Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan,<sup>4</sup> without going into the depth of political expediency, social and religious life of its mass, electoral performance, and more poignantly a dearth of actual literary information on the issue.

The current study will focus on the perception of Islam as envisaged from western world, the conflict of ideologies as it presents, the reforms found within Islam, the trends of ideology in Bangladesh and a reformative prescription.

## Perception of Islam in the Western World

There are two simultaneous and contradictory dialogues on Islam with one presented by the west and the other an internal debate within the Islamic religion itself. The west's negative attitude towards Islam is unfortunately still influenced by the Christian Crusades which lasted from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and was a consequence of the "reaction of Christian Europe against Moslem Asia, which had been on the offensive since 632 not only in Syria and Asia Minor but in Spain and Sicily also."<sup>5</sup> According to John L Esposito, "For the Christian west, Islam is the religion of the sword; for Muslims, the Christian west is epitomized by the armies of the Crusades. From the earliest decades of Islamic history, Christianity and Islam have been locked in a political and theological struggle, because Islam, in contrast to other worldly religions, has threatened the political and religious ascendancy of Christianity."<sup>6</sup> That such sentiments still influence debate today was revealed immediately after the September 11 attacks on the United States when President Bush, "warned the nation, 'This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while' – oblivious of the fact that Bin Laden always referred to Christians as Crusaders. His statement raised protests by many Muslim leaders who accused him of conjuring up images of the worst conflict between Christians and Muslims."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI ignited an uproar when he quoted the 14th century Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus who said that, "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." In light of such provocative statements Muslims remain highly protective of their religion and this sentiment has been easily exploited by Islamic extremists as was the case during the Salman Rushdie affair and most recently in the Danish cartoon exhibition of the prophet and also from the perceived injustices arising out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the west's ambivalence to the Kashmir issue and the Gujarat massacre.

The western approach and attitude to Islam has, therefore, been less than accommodating and with the 'Clash of Civilization' thesis and the 9/11 attacks the divide has merely widened. Prof. Samuel Huntington in his book, 'The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of the World Order'<sup>8</sup> explains the antecedents to the conflict between Islam and the West and the future course of this rivalry, "The causes of the renewed conflict between Islam and the West ... lie in fundamental questions of power and culture. *Kto? Kovo?* Who is to rule? Who is to be ruled?" Put in such

terms there appears very little room for compromise or conciliation as seems to be confirmed in his assertion that, “So long as Islam remains Islam (which it will) and the west remains the West (which is more dubious), this fundamental conflict between two great civilizations and ways of life will continue to define their relations in the future even as it has defined them for the past fourteen centuries.”<sup>9</sup>

The book was of course written before the 9/11 attacks but his following graphic remark shows the predictability of those events, “Militarily it has been largely a war of terrorism versus air power. Dedicated Islamic militants exploit the open societies of the west and plant car bombs at selected targets. Western military professionals exploit the open skies of Islam and drop smart bombs on selected targets. The Islamic participants plot the assassination of prominent westerners; the United States plots the overthrow of extremist Islamic regimes. During the 15 years between 1980 and 1995, according to the US Defense Department, the United States engaged in 17 military operations in the Middle East, all of them directed against Muslims. No comparable pattern of US military operations occurred against the people of any other civilization.”<sup>10</sup> According, to this ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis the cause of Islamic extremism and radicalism is directly related to the ideological and religious differences between Islam and the West as well as in the centuries old rivalry between the two faiths. This would suggest that Islamic extremism is a consequence of this conflict and not necessarily a natural outgrowth from Islamic ideology but a reaction to surrounding events external to Islam but having radical consequences internally to meet the challenge posed by the dominance and power of the west.

Another American writer, who has had immense influence in forming opinion about Islam in the United States and elsewhere after 9/11 has interpreted the rise of political or radical Islam in a less favourable light complaining about the inherent inadequacies and instinctive aggressiveness of the Islamic religion. In his book, ‘The Crisis of Islam’ Prof. Bernard Lewis contends, “Most Muslims are not fundamentalists, and most fundamentalists are not terrorists, but most present-day terrorists are Muslims and proudly identify themselves as such.”<sup>11</sup>

Why the actions of a few extremists should taint the entire religion of Islam is never explained nor the underlying causes of Muslim resentment which breeds extremism and militancy. According to Prof. Lewis, the reason for the rise in militancy and radicalism in Islam has to do with the failure of Islamic societies to keep up with the west and the resulting

powerlessness felt by the Muslim masses, “In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly wrong compared with its millennial rival, Christendom, the world of Islam had become poor, weak, and ignorant. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the primacy and therefore the dominance of the west were clear for all to see, invading the Muslim in every aspect of his public and – more painfully – even his private life.”<sup>12</sup>

### **3. The Conflicting Ideology within Civilization.**

This interpretation of the decline of Islam has been condemned by Islamic scholars and prominent writers such as Edward Said who have described this type of writing as ‘orientalist’.<sup>13</sup> This is a form of scholarship that advances views of other non-western cultures, societies and civilizations as latently inferior and therefore, controllable. Nevertheless, Prof. Lewis remains a significant influence on western policy-making on Islam and his prescriptions on reformation of the Islamic religion appear to have been adopted by the US government to counter Islamic militancy, radicalism and extremism. Prof. Lewis provides in his controversial book ‘What Went Wrong?’ the following condescending comparison, “To a western observer, schooled in the theory and practice of western freedom, it is precisely the lack of freedom – freedom of the mind from constraint and indoctrination, to question and inquire and speak; freedom of the economy from corrupt and pervasive mismanagement; freedom of women from male oppression; freedom of citizens from tyranny – that underlies so many of the troubles of the Muslim world. But the road to democracy, as the western experience amply demonstrates is long and hard, full of pitfalls and obstacles.”<sup>14</sup> Prof. Lewis, however, does not mention that many of the repressive Muslim regimes he impugns in his commentary have been tacitly supported by successive US governments to quell radical Islamist takeovers in a number of North African and Middle Eastern countries and most recently election results were criticized when the electorate voted in favour of ‘radical’ Islamist party Hamas in Palestine and popular public street protests in favour of Hezbollah in Lebanon have been similarly dismissed.

This contradictory policy has not deterred western governments from seeking out Muslim ‘moderates’ to challenge the radical Islamist ideology professed by some groups and political parties. The search for Muslim moderates has, however, been hampered by the process of identification as explained by controversial writer Daniel Pipes, “There is good news to

report: The idea that ‘militant Islam is the problem, moderate Islam is the solution’ is finding greater acceptance over time. But there is also bad news, namely growing confusion over who really is a moderate Muslim. This means that the ideological side of the war on terror is making some, but only limited, progress.”<sup>15</sup> Pipes provide his own quite unappealing example of what a Muslim moderate should be, “With time, individual Muslims are finding their voice to condemn Islamist connections to terrorism. Perhaps most outstanding is an article by Abdel Rahman al-Rashed, a Saudi journalist in London: "It is a certain fact that not all Muslims are terrorists," he writes, "but it is equally certain, and exceptionally painful, that almost all terrorists are Muslims. ... We cannot clear our names unless we own up to the shameful fact that terrorism has become an Islamic enterprise; an almost exclusive monopoly, implemented by Muslim men and women." In other words, a Muslim moderate is one who is prepared to denigrate the entire Muslim Ummah and submit to preconceived western definitions about Islam and propagate obviously false characterizations about Muslims in general. Opposition to the idea of a moderate Muslim has understandably been voiced by prominent Muslim commentators like Radwan Masmoudi, who has argued that, “The need for a new, progressive and modern interpretation of Islam for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is real and undeniable, as is the need for real reforms and democratization in Muslim societies. However, for that reinterpretation and reform to occur, the effort must be led by Muslims who are proud of their heritage, religion and culture and who are credible within their community.”<sup>16</sup>

In mid-2005 the Bush administration initiated a ‘moderate Muslim outreach’ program which has so far met with limited success. The reason for this failure was explained by Lee Hamilton, vice-chairman of the 9-11 Commission, who said, “Bush administration rhetoric is improving. Policy is moving in the right direction. They are articulating a new strategy. But the Bush administration is not going to accept the proposition that its support of Israel has contributed to the Islamist radicalism.”<sup>17</sup> Instead of directly confronting the issues raised by Lee Hamilton policy makers in the US have now come to the conclusion that moderate Islam really does not exist. The consequence of this turn around is described by Lawrence Auster, a leading neoconservative thinker, who states, “It's not just that moderate Islam does not presently exist in any meaningful form. It's that moderate Islam *cannot* exist ... In the end, our refusal to face the truth about Muslims, our flattery of non-moderate Moslems as "moderates," will convince them that we are saps lacking the

wit and will to defend ourselves, which will increase their aggression against us ... western criticism of and confrontation with Islam must be permanent ... whatever the specific proposal may be, the basic civilizationist idea is to speak the *truth* about Islam, to *confront* Islam, and to *contain* Islam. It is to initiate a net out-migration of Muslims from the West and to isolate the Muslim world in its historic lands. It is to restore the realm of Islam to the powerless and quiescent condition in which it resided during the early modern period. We of the west, along with other non-Muslim peoples, cannot be safe co-existing in this world with Islam, unless Islam has no ability and opportunity to affect us.”<sup>18</sup> While this is certainly an extreme version of current thinking in the US about the relationship between Islam and the West the likelihood of growing confrontation seems to be an accepted scenario in western policy making towards Islamic countries and Muslim populations, unless more policy changes are on the reformist line, However certain change of visibility is seen with much more accommodation at least with new generation leadership and scholars.

#### 4. Reformist Ideology and Islam

The reformist agenda within Islam appears to have been caused by the perceived decline of Islamic civilization in the face of western onslaught and colonization but also as an internal struggle against the restrictions placed on independent reasoning in the formulation of legal rules with the ‘Closing of the Gates of Ijtihad’ in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. This episode in Islamic history has ultimately been blamed for the stagnation in Islamic thinking from that time onwards. Joseph Schacht, a specialist in Islamic legal history, narrates the consequences of the change, “By the beginning of the fourth century of the *hijra* [approx. A.D 900] .... the point had been reached when the scholars of all schools felt that all essential questions had been thoroughly discussed and finally settled, and a consensus gradually established itself to the effect that from that time onwards no one might be deemed to have the necessary qualifications for independent reasoning in law, and that all future activity would have to be confined to the explanation, application, and, at the most, interpretation of the doctrine as it had been laid down once and for all. This ‘closing of the door of *ijtihād*, as it was called, amounted to the demand for *taklid*, a term ... that came to mean the unquestioning acceptance of the doctrines of established schools and authorities.”<sup>19</sup>

N. J. Coulson describes the far-reaching consequences of this development, “When the consensus of opinion in the tenth century asserted that the door of *ijtihad* was closed, Islamic jurisprudence had resigned itself to the inevitable outcome of its self-imposed terms of reference. Thus circumscribed and fettered by the principle of *taqlid*, jurisprudential activities were henceforth confined to the elaboration and detailed analysis of established rules.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, original thought was confined to, “nothing more than abstract systematic constructions which affected neither the established decisions of positive law i.e. Shariah nor the classical doctrine of the *usul al-fikh*.”<sup>21</sup>

The ‘Closing of the Gates of Ijtihad’ has been widely accepted as having actually occurred even amongst Muslim scholars with only one writer claiming that, “... while one finds in Islamic sources assertions about the closing of the doors of *ijtihad* by the tenth century, this was nothing more than a rhetorical device employed to resist the chaotic proliferation in new schools of thought and legal opinions.”<sup>22</sup> This unique perspective has not received very much scholarly acceptance or attention so far and the prevailing view remains that due to the resistance to change represented by the closing of the doors to *ijtihad*, Islamic societies gradually fell prey to political disintegration and social and moral decline and was unable to meet the challenges posed by the west through military conquest and colonization. As Rafiq Zakaria succinctly puts it, “Everywhere Muslims found themselves utterly defeated and thoroughly demoralized”<sup>23</sup> It was at this time that the religiously minded Muslims, led by the ulema and the Sufis took up arms against the invaders. The leading lights of this movement - who tended to be influenced by Wahhabi teachings - included Abd al-Qadir who organized armed resistance against the French colonizers in Algeria; Muhammad Ahmad between 1840-45, who led the rebellion against the British in Sudan; in Libya, Muhammad Ali al-Sanusi between 1787-1859, drove the foreigners from his native land; in Somalia, Muhammad Abdullah Hasan ruled from 1863-1920, spearheaded the movement against the British; and in India the Wahhabi influenced intellectuals like Shah Wali Allah between 1702-62, Sayyid Ahmed of Rae Bareilly between 1786-1831 and Hajji Shari’at Allah between 1781-1840 led the violent uprisings against foreign infiltration. The armed resistance initiated by these individuals and groups ultimately failed and were quickly subdued by the foreign forces. This failure was mainly due to the inability to wage modern warfare and to compete with the intellectual and scientific advances of the west. To quote the Marxist scholar, Maxime Rodinson, “Christianity



was made out to be by its very nature favourable to progress, and Islam to mean cultural stagnation and backwardness.”<sup>24</sup>

In their intellectual efforts to redress the imbalance between Islam and the west a schism was created amongst Muslims that has persisted to this day and is a principal cause of today’s radicalism and terrorist off-shoots. In the highly motivated language of Prof. Bernard Lewis the situation is expressed that, “For those nowadays known as Islamists or fundamentalists, the failures and shortcomings of the modern Islamic lands afflicted them because they adopted alien notions and practices. They fell away from authentic Islam, and thus lost their former greatness. Those known as modernists or reformers take the opposite view, and see the cause of this loss not in the abandonment but in the retention of old ways, and especially in the inflexibility and the ubiquity of the Islamic clergy. These, they say, are responsible for the persistence of beliefs and practices that might have been creative and progressive a thousand years ago, but are neither today.”<sup>25</sup> Amongst the modernist or reformist groups in this period were the towering intellectual personalities of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciples, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida and in South Asia Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal. Central to Afghani’s program for Islamic reform was his call for a reopening of the door of *ijtihad*, “that would serve as the source of a renewal or renaissance that would restore Muslim political independence and the past glory of Islam.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Sayyid Ahmad Khan believed that the survival of Islam depended on the rejection of unquestioned acceptance or *taqlid* of medieval interpretations of Islam and the exercise of *ijtihad* in order to produce fresh interpretations of Islam to demonstrate its relevance and validity for modern life.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, the modernists identified with premodern revivalist movements and called for the purification of internal deficiencies and deviations. On the other, they borrowed and assimilated new ideas and values from the west.<sup>28</sup>

On the other side of the debate were equally notable and prominent figures which included ideologues and activists such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Maulana Maududi, Yusuf Qardawi, Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini. These Islamic intellectuals while adopting a traditionalist approach to Islam also claimed the right to go back to the fundamental sources to reinterpret, *ijtihad*, and reapply them to contemporary needs and conditions but they abhorred any suggestion of

compatibility with the west. It was on this basis that Hasan al-Banna established the Muslim Brotherhood as a political entity in Egypt in 1939 with the purpose of liberating the 'Islamic homeland' from alien control through jihad. But it was Sayyid Qutb, an acolyte of Maulana Maududi, who provided the real inspiration to the Brotherhood and radical Islamists in the Muslim world.

According to Qutb, "a society whose legislation does not rest on divine law is not Islamic, however ardently its members may proclaim themselves Muslim, even if they pray, fast and make the pilgrimage." Further he added, "A society that creates a made-to-measure Islam other than that laid down by Allah and expounded by His Prophet, and called erroneously 'enlightened Islam' cannot be considered as Islamic either."<sup>29</sup> He also exhorted his followers to wage war on America and the West – a sentiment that would be echoed decades later by Osama bin Laden and his intellectual mentor, Ayman Zawahiri. It was through the intellectual ferment created by Qutb and the Brotherhood in Egypt that other radical Islamist groups emerged such as Al Jihad, Al Gamaat al Islamiya and Al Takfir wa al Hijra. Of these, Al Jihad was the most prominent providing intellectual stimulus to its members that included Ayman Zawahiri who later formed the Al-Qaeda network with Osama bin Laden. Amongst the leaders of Al Jihad was the Islamist thinker Muhammad Abdul Salam Faraj who authored two books: *Al Jihad: The Forgotten Pillar*, and *The Absent Obligation*. According to Faraj, "every true Muslim is obliged by his faith to struggle for the revival of the Islamic Umma, and that the Muslim groups or leaders who have turned away from the Sharia are apostates. It is therefore sinful for a genuine Muslim to cooperate with an infidel ruler. Those who want to end the Order of Jahaliya and revive the Islamic umma are obliged to wage a jihad against the infidel state. The only acceptable form of jihad is the armed struggle; anything less implies cowardice or foolishness. A true Muslim must first confront the internal infidel and then the external infidel i.e. the non-Muslim world at large. Straying from the course of jihad has led to the current sorry state of the Muslim world: divided, degraded and disdained."<sup>30</sup> Such emotive statements have helped to spawn numerous radical Islamist groups around the world who have adopted the way of violent jihad to achieve their ideological goals and objectives. Amongst the aims of these groups included the restoration of Islamic government in Muslim lands, especially after the failures of socialism or nationalism to effectively address the grievance felt by Muslims against the west. During this phase jihad was essentially aimed against 'apostate' Muslim

governments and societies rather than against the west. The next phase of their program was the offensive jihad against the ‘western stake holders’ that started with the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing planned by the Egyptian cleric Shiekh Abdul Rahman that led to several other major attacks on Western interests in the following years including 9/11.<sup>31</sup>

More recently and after 9/11, the emergence of radical groups influenced by Salafist ideological thinking has been of particular concern to western policy makers as their views are now being exported from Muslim countries to the west with the obvious fear “that various ideological forces—emanating from abroad, but also from within the west itself—will conspire to radicalize portions of the western Muslim population, resulting in a range of possible threats to the future of European and American democracy, from political challenges like the growth of “parallel societies” to the related security threat of ‘homegrown jihad.’<sup>32</sup> Unlike their predecessors the Salafists adhere to a “literalist” interpretation of Islamic scripture and to a political theology that views Muslims in the west as travelers in enemy territory, a realm they variously speak of as a “Land of Kufir” or as a “Land of War.”<sup>33</sup>

The more ‘moderate’ Wassatiyya movement instead espouses the use of ijthihad which has allowed its adherents to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the west but this has not prevented them from advocating ‘defensive jihad’ in majority-Muslim countries and supporting political parties like Hamas and the insurgency against American forces in Iraq. To the consternation of many western political commentators the Wassatiyya movement has been able to build-up a vast web of ideological institutions in the West: think tanks, media outfits, educational centers, and Sharia councils with the stated purpose of conquering the west not by “the sword or armies, but by preaching and ideology.”<sup>34</sup> The difference in perspective between the Salafists and the Wassatiyya movement appears to rest upon the manner of use of ijthihad in interpreting Islamic legal sources but both the ideological movements - like their earlier counterparts the reformers and the ‘fundamentalists’ - are essentially seeking a redress with the West. The terms of this debate have often led to the radicalization of certain sections of Muslims who feel most alienated, humiliated and insulted by what they perceive as injuries inflicted by the West on Islamic culture and society and find legal sanction for their violent actions through ideologically sanctioned acts and reprisals against western targets and Muslim governments who are perceived to be supporting the western agenda.

## Bangladesh and the Islamic Ideological Trends.

Bangladesh has largely been detached from the ideological disputes that have convulsed Islamic thought for more than a century. It is because of this relative detachment that it has remained for the most part immune from the radicalization that spread through out most of the rest of the Islamic world in its hostile encounters with the west. The reason for this unique position is the historical factors that introduced a more spiritual and tolerant version of Islam to the region. The fact that Islam came comparatively late to Bengal allowed for a more gradual process of conversion and assimilation which avoided the violent social unrest and painful disconnections that occurred elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent. In fact, it is only from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and in particular only after the Mughal conquest in 1574, that there is solid evidence of a Muslim peasant population anywhere in Bengal.<sup>35</sup>

Many theories have been put forward concerning the manner in which Islam came to the eastern provinces of India e.g. by the sword, forced conversions, an influx of Muslim settlers but the most widely accepted version or explanation has been authoritatively advanced by Prof. Richard M. Eaton in his book ‘The rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier.’ In the book Prof Eaton argues that, “By the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the dominant carriers of Islamic civilization in Bengal were not the urban *ashraf*, but peasant cultivators of the eastern frontier, who in extraordinary ways assimilated Islam to their agrarian worldview.”<sup>36</sup> This was achieved through novel initiatives promoted by the Mughal rulers in East Bengal but for reasons other than for proselytizing the local inhabitants to Islam as Prof. Eaton points out,

“From Sylhet to Chittagong the, Mughal, government fused the political goal of deepening its authority among dependant clients rooted on the land, with the economic goal of expanding the arable land area. A principal instrument for achieving these goals was the land grant that aimed at the agricultural development of the forested hinterland ... Although Vaishnava temples, Saiva temples, and individual Brahmins received numerous forest grants, the bulk of these went to members of Islam’s religious gentry – petty *mullas*, pilgrims returned from Mecca, preachers, and holy men (*pirs*) – men who had overseen, or had undertaken to oversee, the clearing of forest and the construction of mosques or shrines. Although humble in physical appearance, these institutions became the nuclei of new communities, attracting local or distant labour for clearing the forest and working the rice fields included

in the grants. These institutions also possessed considerable cultural influence, becoming the nuclei for the diffusion of Islamic ideals along the eastern frontier. In this way Islam gradually became associated with economic development and agricultural productivity.”<sup>37</sup>

This wedding of slow gradual conversion, assimilation and economic development through the activities of forest clearance and cultivation had pronounced effects on the reception of Islam in eastern Bengal amongst the local inhabitants. One of the most important consequences of this process was that, “to a greater degree than elsewhere in India, Islam in Bengal absorbed so much local culture and became so profoundly identified with Bengal’s long-term process of agrarian expansion, that in its formative years the cultivating classes never seem to have regarded it as ‘foreign.’”<sup>38</sup> This method of absorption of Islamic teachings amongst the cultivating classes allowed a certain amount of progressiveness, tolerance and receptivity towards change that was absent elsewhere in India and in greater parts of the Islamic world. Another aspect that differentiated Bengal from other parts of the Islamic world was the influence of Sufi holy men who were intricately involved with the local inhabitants through their preaching and most importantly through forest clearance and cultivation and setting the up of religious institutions such as mosques and seminaries. Contrary to received wisdom, “the more contemporary evidence of Sufis on Bengal’s political frontier portrays men who had entered the delta not as holy warriors but as pious mystics or freebooting settlers operating under the authority of charismatic leaders. No contemporary source endows them with the ideology of holy war; nor is there contemporary evidence that they slew non-Muslims or destroyed non-Muslim monuments.”<sup>39</sup>

By the 19th century, however, the outside world began to impinge upon the Muslims of Bengal - which was by then under British rule - with a revivalist Islamic movement influenced by Wahhabi teachings and led by intellectuals Shah Wali Allah in 1702-62, Sayyid Ahmed of Rae Bareilly between 1786-1831 and Hajji Shari’at Allah in 1781-1840. Due to what he perceived as the impoverished and indigent state of Bengali Muslims caused by the policies of the British and the Zamindari class, Haji Shariatullah, returning from Mecca after 20 years preached Islamic virtues emphasising Faraiz or duties that were incumbent upon all Muslims to practise according to the teachings of orthodox Islam. However, the revivalist/reformist nature of the Faraizi Movement he started could be uncompromising and as Dr. Rafiuddin Ahmed<sup>40</sup> points

out, “The movement not only professed reverence for the ethical principles embodied in the *shariah* but considered even any slight deviation as sacrilegious. What they wanted was total conformity and no concession.” It was only a matter of time before such preaching became an issue for the British authorities. Although, the Faraizi Movement never became part of the wider Wahhabi Movement and did not openly advocate Jihad there was little doubt about its intent, “there was a general feeling at that time that the real object of the Faraizis was the expulsion of the alien rulers and the restoration of Muslim power. The movement later clashed directly with the government when the British intervened in favour of the landlords to suppress peasant uprisings led by the Faraizis. Many of its members reportedly took active part in the Jihad.”<sup>41</sup>

The objectives of the Faraizi Movement were therefore in keeping with the wider ideological imperatives being played out in the Islamic world in the 19th century. This was also the case with the more militant Tariqah-i-Muhamaadiya movement that belonged to the tradition of the Waliullahi School of Delhi and was, to all intents and purposes, an extension of the *jihad* movement launched by Shah Sayyid Ahmad (1786-1831) of Rae Bereli in northern India.<sup>42</sup> Sayyid Ahmad’s purpose in launching the jihad was to rid Islam of Hindu practises, to end belief in the intercessionary power of saints and to establish an ideal Muslim community where Muslims could live according to the holy law. This was all very much in consonance with the wider struggle being waged in the Islamic world to purify Islam of alien elements and to overthrow foreign rule.<sup>43</sup> Both the Faraizi and Tariqah-i-Muhamaadiya movements, however, eventually lost steam due to the sustained prosecutions of its leaders by the British and a generally hostile attitude to their ideological program by the ordinary Muslims they were attempting to reform. Contrary to their intentions the more progressive, tolerant and receptive Islam that had prevailed in Bengal since the 16<sup>th</sup> century began to reassert itself, as pointed out by Dr. Rafiuddin Ahmed, “The reformists succeeded in ‘converting’ only a fraction of the total Muslim population to their point of view; the vast majority remained steadfastly opposed to any new dogma and faithful to the traditional system, with its peculiar mix of Islamic dogma and local beliefs and practices.”<sup>44</sup>

It was only after more than a century that a new Islamic militancy emerged in what was now Bangladesh under the twin banners of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahidin (JMB). The group had superficial Salafist tendencies but seem to have been inspired more by the jihadi peasant

revolts instigated by the Faraizi and Tariqah-i-Muhamaadiya movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, against a defined outlawed group initially. From the documents and books obtained from the JMB hideouts by law enforcement agencies it appears that the group propagated the ideas of Abd al-Wahhab, after whom Wahhabism is named and the writings of Ibn Tamiyyah. These two renowned Islamic thinkers were the intellectual driving force behind reformist jihadi movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that sought to expel foreign rulers from their native lands and to purify Islam from alien accretions. The JMB tend to follow the line taken by Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Abdul Salam Faraj in seeking the overthrow of ‘apostate’ governments and the reinstatement of Islamic rule under Shariah law. In their literature they have applied these ideas directly to the secular constitution and political framework of Bangladesh stating that, “There is no evidence and acceptance in the Holy Quran and Shahiyee Hadith to maintain the regime under Democracy, Socialism, Communism, and Secularism etc. All these systems are manmade laws invented by the Kuffar. Each and every ‘ism’ is a rival to the rule of Allah. In order to destroy the basic belief of Muslims these ‘isms’ were composed by Kafirs, Mushriks and Jews. So, it is high time to think to earn escape for all Muslim concerns.”

The ideological weakness of this extremist position has been identified in an excellent essay by Shah Abdul Halim titled, ‘Doctrinal Claims of Militants: An Examination’ in which he argues that, “Muslims can rule without implementing Shariah if the circumstances are not in their favour or people are not ready for such reform or the situation is not healthy enough or conducive for such a transformation or change.”<sup>45</sup> Halim backs up this assertion with authoritative statements by eminent Islamic scholars such as Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi and Dr. Yusuf al Qaradawi who are both associated with modern Muslim Brotherhood and the Wassatiyya movement.

Ultimately the militant agenda of the JMB failed in Bangladesh due to the widespread disapproval of their violent tactics and methods but also because of their ideological intolerance and regressive ness, followed up by the death penalty on the Shura members on 29 March 2007. These were the exact same reasons that the Faraizi and Tariqah-i-Muhamaadiya movements failed more than a century ago. Muslim identity in Bangladesh has been on the whole progressive, tolerant and receptive and with Islam being a constant element of everyday life there was felt to be

no necessity for violence which was clearly repellent to most people especially when democratic alternatives were available. The nature of Islamic sentiment in Bangladesh has representation in day to day activities that include Madrassa education at grass root level and learning basics of Islam right from the childhood. It has been perfectly described by Prof. M. Rashiduzzaman in his article, 'Islam, Muslim Identity and Nationalism in Bangladesh' where he states, "The rituals of Islam; prayer, fasting in Ramadan, charity, annual pilgrimage to Mecca, marriages, funerals, were intertwined with the lives of average Bangladeshis. Radio and television transmitted the daily prayer calls. The blaring loudspeakers in the mosques were the daily reminders of the Islamic character of Bangladesh. Reverence for saints, veneration for Mazars or shrines and Pirs/Sufis, although not favoured by many, was an old Bangladeshi tradition which continued to thrive as a significant manifestation of 'folk' Islam in Bangladesh."<sup>46</sup> This statement exemplifies the egalitarian character of Islamic belief in Bangladesh that favours democratic, pluralistic and peaceful change rather than sudden, sporadic and violent upheaval. Bangladesh has shown that instituting democracy and an open society in a Muslim country although very difficult is not impossible. Such a 'liberal' attitude is entirely consistent with Islamic doctrine as the, "Qur'an advocates consultative governance and the practice of the Prophet, as enshrined in the Compact of Medina, treats minorities equally, and he governed by consent and consultation."<sup>47</sup> Opposed to this view are militant groups like the JMB who make unilateral and dictatorial decisions to inflict violence upon the state and the people so that they may impose their highly personalized brand of Islam on the rest of society. Such a decision is made without the consent of the people and also without their consultation which goes against the basic premises of Islam and has been consistently rejected by the people of Bangladesh.

### **Perspective Formula.**

Bangladesh has shown a distinctive culture of its own both in religious practices and political governance. The current situation in Bangladesh politics is facilitated by domestic and external condition. With the level of international cooperation, the much founded position to accept and recognize Bangladesh as moderate and aspiring democratic country is the confidence the world community reposes on the country as partner of international peace support and global war against terrorism. The people of Bangladesh are the greatest assets it has both in terms of mobilization



of opinion and human resource. The uniqueness of the country is its ability to integrate all cultural, religious, social, political and economic aspects to suit its inherent needs of the day. Following formula may help the country to be more cohesive in days to come.

a. **Moderate and Flexible Policy:** Bangladesh emerged more matured and even handed after the events of 9/11. Actions and laws adopted by the government has been duly recognized and appreciated world over. As the country has deep attachments towards religious belief and identity, its ability to accommodate 12% of other communities in the country reflects perspective understanding and respects of human rights and respect to other religion by Islam. An outreach programme may be initiated with educated university youths to continuously help government plan on long term basis.

b. **Rule of Law Governance Issue and Human Rights:** Ideological exploitation has taken place in such environment where human rights have been abused and political rights are curtailed. Confrontational politics, lack of democratic governance, rampant corruption in the country, radicalization can help to extremism and inappropriate use of laws and forces along with indiscriminate repression. Consent and participatory decision making process is encouraged in Islam. There is no alternative to inclusive political system and good governance at national and local levels including conducting support economy and social development as well public services in preventing and curbing radicalism. To maintain and support effective rule of law based criminal justice system can help discharge Rule of law. The country seriously needs legislatives actions to facilitate drug control, money laundering, arms and human trafficking, organized crime, smuggling, explosives handling, especially through mutual cooperation and assistance in criminal matters can pave way for greater checks against radicalism.

c. **Integrated Strategy:** The shifting frontiers on security, the non lethal environment and asymmetric nature of micro terrorism would demand Bangladesh to be engaged on development politics to ensure degree of credibility within the forum of developing nations. A constructive engagement on improving curriculum of education including Madrassa education, strategy against organized crime, transnational phases of crime related to Bangladesh border, social development of its people can supplement the democratic process and largely reduce specter of regional radical threat perceived beyond the borders.

d. Education and Awareness: Bangladesh has to take up own challenges to integrate all national education system. The Qaumi Madrassa issue and the modality to rehabilitate and provide employment to its graduates will directly benefit the community and indirectly benefit the country. All resources and should be exploited including micro credit facility to ensure youth are the driving forces to take up new millennium challenge for the country. Besides, public awareness must be increased through community engagement and social services. Our Imams will do wonders along with journalist and university volunteers, if used under this project.

### **Conclusion**

The powerful tool that helped Bangladesh to be recognized in international domain is its resilience to survive, set example of an aspiring democracy, show to the international community of its simplistic practice of a peace loving Muslim populace with homogeneity, a continuous economic development on GDP, improvement on literacy rate, women empowerment including a model country on micro credit system. When the world is divided on radicalism and extremism issue, Bangladesh has successfully presented its case study how religious harmony to be maintained and how quick people could be repulsive to radical ideas by hunting and bring them to the book of justice.

The economic potential in the country and across the world is so vast that the country can magnify its sustainability through human resource management, provided, a clear understanding on issues relating to religious extremism is addressed and such problems are approached more on political and economic foresightedness rather than militarist adventurism. The country has a historic opportunity to move ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reach to a universal agreement on defusing tension on 'Clash on Civilization' by actually addressing it and resolving the case through strategic partners and international community. Bangladesh should be proactive to demonstrate its willingness to convey to the international community to deal with the current events as supportive partner. As the nature of warfare is quickly becoming without boundaries, lethal and virtual, states developed or under developed, democratic or autocratic, promoter or supporter will remain vulnerable to new trends unless brought to the new platform of partnership. A comprehensive understanding to own security compulsion, understanding and applying on the need assessment an reviewing the current threats to newer set of

vision can help to move forward towards an economically beneficial and politically aware global region, where expectations of all civilizations are made and addressed. A prosperous Bangladesh can deal with new challenges faced by the world, and at this time – the pre-requisites like human resource, environment of economics, human security indicators, opportunity of globalization and appetite to strive for better future are in favour by the global conditions – a positive intent and leadership looking to reengagement policy and demonstrative flexibility will increase the viability of a moderate, enlighten and democratic Bangladesh.

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