

## **Bourdieu and Bengali Islam: A spatial -temporal discussion of the adoption and social utility of Islam for British Bangladeshi Muslim Workers**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores spiritual thought and bodily work that has been an integral part of the Islamic faith. The paper aims to examine the Islamic process of spiritual conversion and bodily work that began for the Bangladeshis with migration and human capital investments defined by Arabic power that would provide the basis of identity and social organization. The paper asserts the argument the Islamic faith through the reproductions of kin networks, as well as the operation of a specific set of social practices and social action suffused with Islamic representations was reproduced inter-generationally by the Bengali workers, replicated through migration within the predominance of the family to transform the urban space of Tower Hamlets into a sub Islamic field with religious citizens with religious agency and identities. In the process ergo transforming the secular sphere of Tower Hamlets into an ethno- religious multicultural sphere.*

**Key Words:** Bourdieu, Bengali, Islam, Muslim, Workers, Agency

### **Introduction**

The discussion, for the purposes of analytical clarity, is organised into eight interlinked parts. Each of these parts functions so as to provide a particular insight into the complex history and development of Islam for the British Bangladeshi Muslims residing in Tower Hamlets. Each part provides an important perspective in each sub field that sheds light on the adoption and reproduction of religiously coloured cultural capital reproduction in the British Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets.

The corpus of the eight parts link up to the overarching arc and trope of the discussion concerning Islamic capital, whilst not a whole corpus of Pierre Bourdieu's oeuvre, the paper-

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aims to recruit Bourdieu's (1984) 'cultural products' to provide a particular insight into the religiously inspired reproductions of cultural capital formation that have been adopted by the British Bengali diaspora located in Tower Hamlets.

The themes, under discussion in the paper, form part of the preliminary literature review and study based on participant observation and semi-structured discussions/interviews with different generations of Bangladeshis in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The research forms part of a two phase qualitative ethnographic narrative methodology consisting of first hand observational recording in and around the boroughs religious spaces and places of cultural capital dispensation i.e. religious ritual ceremonies, social meetings and mosques during 2012- 2015 and then in 2016 and supplemented with auto biographical interviews with first generation and second generation Bangladeshis.

A social constructionist approach was undertaken for the study which aimed to provide an additional insight into a number of key areas with a distinct focus on faith and how faith as a social lexical marker affected the first and second generation Bangladeshi's experiences and views pertaining to social solidarity and work. The research aimed to explore the mutually constituted relationship of the Bangladeshi people of Tower Hamlets and the social structures (relations between social actors and urban fields), the spheres of Tower Hamlets, the hybrid actors, their networks – religious- kin networks their habitus and the reproduction of distinctly ethnic and Islamicized field (or milieu) and capitals in social life.

#### **Brief Historical Background of Bangladeshi Migration in Tower Hamlets**

It is not coincidence that has brought many of the Bangladeshi immigrants to Tower Hamlets and further afield in Britain but a sequence of historically determined events which has shaped the social make up and events which have transpired within the London Borough. The historical link between the urban sphere of Tower Hamlets in Britain and Rural Sylhet in Bangladesh, where many of the immigrant Bangladeshi population originate from, can be traced back to the 141,000 labourers who arrived from the surrounding states from the period of 1890 and 1900 (Rizvi, 1975; Gardner, 1995; Choudhury, 1993) setting the particular

patriarchal foundations for the next generation of labourers that would come to steadily shape the east London Borough and beyond. The earliest immigrant settlers were predominantly 'lascars' (Indian seaman) employed by the East India Company, that did not return home but disembarked from their imperial trading ships and found work in and around the east end of London, around Algate, Limehouse, and Shadwell in what is now called the Docklands area (Adams, 1987; Gardner, 2002; Visram, 1986). Through organized legal and labour immigration facilitation the first notable British Bengali construction of community began after the Second World War (Adams, 1987). The number of Bangladeshi immigrants arriving by the 1960s and 1970s had swelled and these populations settled mostly around Algate in Tower Hamlets and occupied houses previously held by the Jewish population many of whom by now had moved away from the east end of London (Kerrigan, 1982). The arriving first generation Bangladeshi immigrants found employment in the previously held Jewish professions of the textile industry before extending employment opportunities into coffee shops and small eateries that would later transform into the restaurant and catering industry that now employs over 27,000 Bangladeshi workers (Adams, 1987, Local Economic Assessment (LEA), 2010).

The most visible surge in the British Bengali community in Tower Hamlets can be traced back to the early 1960s and 1970s when the immigrant Bengali population in Tower Hamlets grew from an estimated 6000 to 22,000 (Peach, 1990). Around the same time state policy prescriptions were being introduced to curb alarmist views mediated by the British mass media concerning immigration. This prompted the administration of the time to enact laws that limited immigration, such as the 1962 Common Wealth Immigration Act, enacted by the then Conservative Government that aimed at tightening controls on immigration. This act inadvertently fuelled a surge in the immigrant population (Mills and Phizacklea, 1979). The introduction of 1962 immigrant work voucher act facilitated the chain migration of many immigrants such as those in the Bengali community that were distinctly male and already residing in Britain to allow for their wife's and children to join them as well as relatives, friends and kin that already had pre-existing ties to primary Bengali immigrants by

operationalizing what Zhou (2005) termed as their ‘ethnic social capital’ to join the Bangladeshi immigrants that were already residing in Britain.

### **The Historical Significance of Islam in Work for Bengalis in Tower Hamlets**

In order to understand the significance and social order of faith and kinship in the lives of the first and second generation Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets, and how they have both shaped and marshaled the actors in the space they occupy, it is important to revisit the historical events which have given form and functional meaning to these concepts and how they connect with work for the British Bangladeshis residing in Tower Hamlets.

In Islam the concept of work is understood from its literate basis, its religious Quranic text, the recitation. The primary text of Islam is over 1400 years old. The substantively identical and sacred unaltered text remains authentic to all earlier revelations and is regarded by Muslims as divine, and its scripture as the literal word of God (Rodinson, 1974). In Islam worship and work remain in tandem (Ghazali and Sharif, 2008). The Quranic texts corpus contains 6,236 verses and a morphology of Arabic words which can have up to 10 different meanings contingent on the context they are understood (Khalid, 2008; Subhani, 2015). The words ‘*amal*’ and ‘*fi’l*’ are interchangeably mentioned in over 360 verses of the holy text and are broadly understood and translated to give meaning to what is understood by Muslims as work (Mufti, 2006). For Muslims, worldly work is considered fundamental to both sustenance and salvation as work provided the coalesced means to be both individually and socially productive. Both within the private realm of the family and the public sphere of the community, and in seeking gods ‘bounty’ on earth that similarly encompasses making use of all resources and the means of production provided for work and self-sufficiency. In Islam sloth is regarded as manifestation of an absence of faith and puritan hard work exalted as a virtue (Esposito, 1980). This central believe was especially true for the pre partition Bengali masses residing specifically in Sylhet, whose ancestor’s gradual adoption of the faith began between 1300 and 1800, not with a military conquest and conversion but a religious alteration, with Islam supplanting Hinduism, shaped by migration that would lead to the

amalgamation of faith and work bound in early transnational capitalism. The remnants of that distinctly patriarchal system in due course would refashion a cultural legacy that resembles its modern distinctive cultural value system found today in the Bengali masses, in both rural Sylhet in Bangladesh and urban Tower Hamlets in Britain (Eaton, 1993; Gardner, 1992, 2002; Thorp, 1978).

### **The Social Utility of Islam for Bengalis**

Fundamental to this historical process was Arabic trade and commerce in the region, a product of migration, as well as the arrival of an external agency, a charismatic Yemeni immigrant, Shah Jalal in 1303 (Siddiq, 2015). Celebrated by Bangladeshis for both integrating Islam and promulgating a distinctively Bengali Islamic culture and identity into what was then a medieval Sylheti society consisting of largely jungle dwelling Hindu peasant cultivators (Eaton, 1993; Uddin, 2006). For Bengali Hindus in Sylheti society, laying claim to membership of a high caste meant that labouring on land was considered dishonorable. By contrast, those of who gradually converted to the Muslim manifesto were quintessentially emancipated from Hindu metaphysical servitude and unconstrained from the cultural traps that demanded conformity and could readily deploy their labour power and cultivate land. The symbioses of Roy (2001) and Halbfass's (1981:1988) work suggest the resultant conversion of the Bengali Hindus led not only to a social reconfiguration of space, from what was then an inegalitarian and highly stratified Hindu sphere controlled by an oppressive Hindu caste and kinship system, to a more autonomous public sphere devoid of the culturally constructed social systems operated by the dominant 'bourgeois' Brahmans. The result of the gradual process of conversion over the ensuing decades meant that for many of the Sylheti Bengali Muslims were no longer a part of the ancient myths and ritual practices that controlled their external locus of identity and ascribed social tiers to their proletariat power, but instead a part of an enlarged world of understanding (Franco and Preisendanz, 2007). All whom converted to Islam were now no longer socially subordinated, demonised or stood in judgment by the outmoded Hindu doctrine, which restricted occupations to specific groups over generations, but equal. From the masses who laboured as cultivators, spice merchants, brass and

goldsmiths to the less adulterated and easily despised such as fisherman, carpenters and weavers etc. All were now a part of the circle of compassion and community of kinship in their social value and social standing, united in what Durkheim (1964) [1893] defined as mechanical solidarity, through both adherences to Islam and work that constituted their collective conscience (Eaton, 1993). Thorp (1978) argued that for the Bengali Muslim cultivators, labouring on the land was sacramental and a symbolic expression of an affinity to a celestial supervision through the emulation of the rudimentary forms of action and work that would have been performed by Adam. For peasant Bengali farmers who considered themselves descendants of Adam, to labour on the land was to achieve an affinity with the divine omnipotence, to cultivate the land was to cultivate a rich interior existence that would allow Muslim labourers to experience life more meaningfully. Extending the idea, Huff and Schluchter (1999, p.167) suggested the development of an Islamic space and identity for the Sylheti Bengali Muslim cultivators was culturally linked by agriculture and religion. For Bengali Muslims, their Muslim identity was forged through labouring and cultivating that allowed the progressive inscription of their Islamic identity to their social order. The islamization process that led to a spatial temporal and social transformation of the Bengali Sylheti masses in terms of economic, ecological, and social change, continued for several more ensuing decades. This historic process of migration and commercial trade with the Middle Eastern tribal nations facilitated the arrival of several more prominent and charismatic migrant leaders, notably, Khan Jahan (1459), Khondkar Shah (1650) and Umar Shah (1734). Each of whom are credited with positing with what could be described as the embodiment of early rudimentary forms of human and cultural capital, that would both pioneer and mechanise the farming methods of the jungle dwelling Sylheti Bengali farmers, ergo into a distinctive peasant proletariat labour force (Meillassoux, 1981 ; Rubbee, 2010).

Each of these historical figures from a Bourdieu perspective, are important, as each are historically attributed with positing the indigenous population of Sylhet with new farming and cultivation methods. As well the adherents of their own interpretations of Islam intergenerational, that led to the structural transformation of the public sphere with

construction of new canonical structures, miniscule mosques, madrasas and the formation of new social agents, practices and position, a new mystery of ministry. Namely religious actors with significant symbolic capital, known as '*mullahs*' and '*phirs*'. These religious leaders, imbued with 'religious' agency, insured the dialectical process and spiritual mortar needed to strengthen the social organisation of the peasant proletariat labour was mobilised around work and prayer, that would in due course, lead to a religious reconstruction of space by the religious citizens and production and consumption of goods that would have a spiritual administration headed by a new set of social actors within a newly created field, i.e. the creation of religious fields facilitating social structures involved in religion and social actors ascribed according to a new religious doxa and habitus. (Bourdieu, 1971, Eaton, 1993; Habermas, 1962; Hasan 2007).

These chronological events are an important research priority for the analysis of the descendants of the Sylheti's located in present day Tower Hamlets. Particularly when reviewed from a Bourdieuan prism. The application of Bourdieu's primary 'thinking tools' shows that the dialectic method that led to the adoption of faith and the acquisition of skills to both labour in addition to confront and clear the dense jungle space the Sylheti Bengali masses occupied, provided the impetus that would ultimately lead to the formation of new fields and the reshaping of the embodied social practices of individuals, an internal audit of individuals through faith.

For Bangladeshi Muslims, religion was no longer a sub rational private practice but a legitimate basis for public and social organisation .i.e. autonomous religious citizens with religious agency engaged in the public sphere (Winandy, 2015; Henkel, 2011, Habermas, 1962). This 'modus operandi' or mode of practise according to Bourdieu (1977, p.77) amounted to objectification and incorporation that is 'the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality'. What emerges from these historical events is a cultural legacy that shows the promotion of a process of intergenerational cultural reproduction of a religiously coloured capital reproduction that Tariq Mouted (2004) and others would later

term as ‘Muslim capital’. That fostered the construction of community cohesion and work that was replicated inter-generationally, transferred from the rural arena of Sylhet and is present today at a local context in the urban arena of Tower Hamlets. An ethno religious social reproduction of a rural Islamic ‘village network’ model of place and space, manufactured in the image of its pastoral roots and nestled in a wider ‘secular’ urban sphere that warrants further understanding from a local context than it has hitherto received (Farooqi, 2006; Abbas, 2011).

### **Understanding Islam in a Local Context**

Eickelman (1982) pointed out, despite theoretical problems; the study of how Islam is locally understood and interpreted is a valuable tool in understanding the changes in religiosity and patterns of thought from a local context. The challenge in the study of a world religion from a local context is in illustrating how expressions of Islam are understood by the locally advantaged and none advantaged, the educated and uneducated and how the cultural polarisation experienced by the individuals practicing the faith can also predicate the social order of the milieu (Eickelman (1990); Knott and McLouglin (2014). Piscatori (1990) pointed out that micro level studies of Islamic communities in general have in the past been predisposed to researching the role of gender, the hegemony of men, the role of kinship and socio economic influences on migration and community formation, whilst negating the exploration of the universal transmission and reproduction of religion in labour migration.

Understanding the multiple expressions of Islam within the context of the local is essential to understanding how Islam, as a monotheistic faith, binds the community network into a faith based group. These religiously inspired networks provide what Hirschman, (1984) called the ‘moral resource’, as an important source of social capital that is distinct from secular sources, providing a functional dialogue across racial, ethnic and economic classes. Putnam (1995, p.67) defined these characteristics as ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co ordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’. For Putnam (1993; 1995; 1998) the foundations of social capital formation



were located in trust and normative values that could cut across community dividers and bring to the forefront the social solidarity of networks in civic and community participation, which provided a powerful resource for individuals situated in migratory communities. For Bourdieu (1997, p.51) these value systems ‘provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a credential’ which could be embodied and transmitted through a process of ‘socialization’ that could afford each of its members the ability to generate social capital investments in networks.

Some studies in the past have been unsuccessful in grasping the essential notion of faith as an important source of social and cultural capital in networks that provides the moral mortar towards building reciprocal relationships, which constitute common bonds, common religious identities as well as the potency to invoke categorical allegiances. As a case in point, Dench, Gavron and Youngs (2006) abstract analysis of the trends in Britain’s Bangladeshi Muslim communities was inadequately elucidated. The author’s neglect became manifestly recognisable when the authors pointing to the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, erroneously claimed ‘the Islam practiced in Bangladesh and in Britain amongst first generation...bares traces of local Hinduism and leans towards liberal Sufi tradition’ (p.96). A terse review of Islamic literature reveals that the Bangladeshi communities in Britain are mainly Sunni Muslims belonging to the second largest faith in the world with over 750 million adherents, a quarter of humanity, and subscribe more specifically to the Hanafi school of thought, the largest of the orthodox Islamic jurisprudence schools. Hanafi (Abu Hanifi d.767) jurisprudence within Sunni Islam forms one of the four schools of thought within Islamic jurisprudence. The other three schools of thought consist of Hanbali (AbuHanafa d.767), Maliki (Ibn Malik d.795), and Shafai (Al-Shafi’i d.820), each cognomen termed respectively after the men who headed them (Eaton, 1993).

In Tower Hamlets, whilst many first and second generation Bangladeshi’s subscription to faith is rooted in the Hanafi school of thought since the 1990s, set against the backdrop of generational confusion and cultural confusion, there has been a steady and

growing number of second and third generation Bangladeshis whose orientation to faith has moved away from the traditional school of thought practiced by their parents and more towards a ‘quasi’ salafis’ movement, to manufacture their sense of social unity and fashion their social identity by often discarding national or ethnic identities and adopting instead hyphenated identities. A move viewed by some conservative first generation Bangladeshis with ‘homeland’ habituated identities, as an aberration to the orthodox position (Garbin, 2005; Modood et al, 1994, Thapan, 2005). Salafis’s appeal with the younger generation lies in its non-ethnic diffused accessibility. The easily absorbed Islamic literature allows the fashioning of identities that advocates concepts of Islamic brotherhood that connects with the disaffected British Bangladeshi youth (Goodhart, 2012).

Alexander (2000), connecting faith with identity, suggested this improvised construction of identity fashioned on faith offered a psychological refuge for young Bangladeshis from confronting the reality of underachievement, poverty, discrimination and conventional politics prevailing in the inner London borough. Salafism has three overlapping sub divisions of faith, which are pietistic, political and the ominously metastasized Jihadi division. Second generation Bangladeshis post 9/ 11 and 7/7 have a greater inclination towards the political division; a form of islamist politics laced in urban language of the street that Goodhart (2012) suggested offered a beleaguered sense of empowerment. Bowen (2014) clarifies appropriately; Salafism predicates a return to the basic tenets of Islam that is simple and monotheistic and is a division of Islam that is practiced in the British Muslim community that is influenced by the teachings of Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab over 1,000 years after the birth of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him).

### **Globalisation and Arab Influence on British Islam**

The genesis of the current Salafi creed bare traces of Wahhabism and is often considered by some western scholars as a syncretism of the Saudi brand of Islam. The origins of the Salafi school of thought can be traced back to the eighteenth century, to Muhammad ibn Saud, a local tribal leader of the Najidi population of what is now Saudi Arabia, and a

direct ancestor of the present ruling Saudi Royal family, who mandated in 1744-45 a political patronage with Ibn Abd al –Wahhab that would eradicate the power of all other ancient Islamic clans and position in power an Arabian literalist interpretation of Islam the Arabs call ‘Wahhabiyyah’ or what is now referred to as Wahhabism (Hussain, 2007). The foundational framework of the Wahhabiyyah version of Islam was built on the agreement that Ibn Abd al –Wahhab would hold the position of the religious leader or what Arabs call *imam* whilst Muhammad ibn Saud would hold the position of political leader known as *amir*. To this day, that core ecclesiastical framework of political and religious rule founded on the anti-syncretism of other earlier versions of Islam still exists in the privately owned Wahhabi state, where the custodians of this version of Islam, the Saudi Royal family, comprising over 2000 princes and princess, controls the political framework of Islam in alliance with the religious council (Abukhlil, 2004).

The Arabic creation and expediency of the Wahhabi soteriology from a simple desert form of Islam to a global ideology can, in part, be attributed to what Taylor (2011) termed as ‘naked capitalism’. That has appropriated spirituality as *raison d’être* for the merger of the bourgeois culture of commerce with the spiritual, for the expansion of the material aspects of culture paradoxically found within the Wahhabi doctrine that can only be termed as ‘a religiously coloured expression of bourgeois interests’. The mien, in turn, has expedited a capitalizing opportunity for the country’s oil rich Wahhabi clerics, under the pretext of modernisation to deploy a dual strategic interest in abolishing ancient Islamic history and learning and both replace and export instead, its own singularly dominated Arab brand of Islam by spending an estimated eighty seven billion dollars from oil revenues to propagate Wahhabi Islamic interests and institutions in secular states funded by the private Saudi State; a form of state sponsored indoctrination and theocracy in western democracy (Hussain, 2007, Kulichenko, 1977, Valentine, 2015).

The transporter of this version of Islam in Britain, under the compression of both time and space, could be argued as being the phenomena of globalisation and modernisation, the

movement of people and goods (Harvey (1990). Advancements in the flow of (rural) labour supply from the former British colonies such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan etc, information and trade has facilitated the modern day mediation, interpretation and indigenisation of the faith at a local context in secular spaces and places in Britain, and an imbibing of the Wahhabiyyah version of Islam into the training of the British Islamic clerics in the 1,700 mosques now prescribing to the rudiments of the religious doctrine of salvation (Bowen 2014). Lasinska (2013) suggested how religion is adopted and orientated can determine whether faith as an anchor in group cohesiveness can foster protracted social capital formation or hinder cooperation. Harris (2003) argued that faiths with a predisposition to an evangelist doctrine were more likely to hinder the formation of social capital. Whereas faith with an emphasis on interfaith engagement were more likely to promote values, beliefs and attitudes needed to operate in the different social spheres of life. Whether the vicissitudes of the Wahhabiyyah version of Islam practiced by the minority British Muslim communities contribute to interfaith multicultural engagement and promotes social connectivity could be argued as debatable, according to whom and how the detailed prescriptions from the seventh century are interpreted and prescribed by twenty first century Muslims in secular spheres in societies and for what purpose. The significant point that arises from the historical analysis is the changing religious orientation of faith in time and space for international migrants, namely the first and second generation Bangladeshis, its adoption and practise that is negotiated by the different generations of diasporas Bengalis traversing the different spheres as passive actors, and how faith as an important source of capital acts as both a social connector as well as social marker for social actors in the global labour exchange (Meillassoux, 1981 ; Gardner 1995).

### **Bourdieu, Durkheim and Weber on Islam**

The cursory examination of the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Emile Durkheim and the work of Max Weber provides an important functional point of departure in understanding the religious discourses of social unity. Bourdieu's (1958) early ethnographic analysis of the Kaybille peasants of rural Algeria, which he described as the 'Protestants of Islam', observed

how Islam provided an important function in seeding social actors within the religious field, the religious semiotics and sacrosanct social structures as the basis that would facilitate community cohesion through ritual collective action. Attempting to reconcile some of the dogmatic views of Weber and Durkheim, Bourdieu's analysis of Islam in his first book, *Sociologie de l'algerie* (1958) offered an early theoretical framework that would allow the careful sociological and historical analysis of how Islam as a religion related to the multiple spheres of social life. Bourdieu recognised that the core corpus of Islam's religious system of beliefs and repetitive practices conserved community cohesion and unity and contained within it a message that was not shaped by economic or political structures, but simple religious rituals that could be effortlessly accommodated in any space and place that was devoid of socio economic and socio cultural characteristics (Robbins, 2013). Whitehouse (2002) suggested that the corpus of Islam as a source of faith based capital was transmitted within the private sphere, the primacy of the family through repetition of religious rituals that allowed intergenerational transmission and preservation of cultural value systems with faith providing the crucial interlocutor for transmission. Scoufurfield et al (2012) resonating Marx's central thesis on religion contended that Muslims with a more modest means of production and economic class took to religion more readily.

Weber and Durkheim, far from compelling the position of Marx (1843 - 1844) by discharging religion as the 'opium of the people', considered faith as a specific form of social action, social unity and social organisation (Forseth and Repstad, 2006). Weber (2013) [1904-05] in his examination of the modern forms of economic conduct noticed the permeation of religious ideas into the conduct of social life that gave form and functional meaning to society through a correlation between ascetic Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism and pointed out that certain internalized values were necessary for economic prosperity. Kessler (1979) suggested that Weber's view of Islam was 'political in character' as Weber's analysis of Islam postulated that Islam as a faith did not have the protestant prerequisites that proliferated capitalism. Weber's writing suggested that work and earning money and becoming proficient was once exalted as a spiritual obligation of self-sufficiency

and survival under religious ideas which mirrored the capitalist principle. Weber argued in his writings that human nature alone did not lead to the flourish-on of capitalism but a certain set of shared and understood values that were practiced and internalized and facilitated economic prosperity. Turner (1974) explained that Weber's analysis of Islam was premature; as he was not aware that the Islamic text, the recitation, contains 360 verses which exalt the same virtues of work, self-sufficiency and prosperity, and those Islamic reformers in the modern world adhere to Weber's thesis of social development.

Weber (2013) [1904-05] in his writings argued that where the Calvinist doctrine of predestination psychologically limited individuals and society by an inherent belief of a pre-ordained path, the material aspects of culture found within the protestant doctrine was a major driving force and highly influential in creating modern western societies. Whereas in the past, 'world religious systems had little opportunity to realise themselves globally' (Turner, 1994, p.83), in today's post modern and post colonial modern transnational Muslim civil societies, the material base of religion or spirit that Weber claims has driven capitalism may not be present but in its place, modernisation and globalisation could be argued, has in part, fuelled the vast capitalist system for the past five decades, transforming hitherto what was the tribal medieval polarised Islam into a globally de-territorialised and expedited faith on the coattails of capitalism. Turner (1978), Huff and Schluchter (1999) pointed out that Webersbasic analysis of Islam was incomplete as was his sociology of religion and a product of German sociology of its time that could not placate the possibility that Islam could hold the social leverage needed to accommodate the spirit of capitalism.

Capitalism it appears has historically at all times been progressive and not absent outside of Europe as Weber's work had suggested. Voltaire noticed this change in the Royal Exchange in London of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where he saw and commented that Muslims, Jews and Christians transacted in tandem as if professing the same religion (Beaud, 2001). The Wahhabiyyah doctrine in its various shades of interpretation is inextricably linked to the capitalist logic and with the world market through the exportation of oil global trade and the

rise of neo liberal free market fundamentalist values. And paradoxically appears to contradict its core tenets, that demand conformity by all Muslim individuals who are willingly or unwillingly a part of it and shaped by it, to discard all cultural accretions attached to the religion in place of a return to a basic brand of Islam, the Salaf. On closer ethnographic examination Muslim diasporas societies such as Bengali diasporas, do not fully ascribe to the Wahhabiyyah version of Islam that symbolises akin to what Weber designated as the characteristics of the Calvinist doctrine, but instead exhibit what Durkheim (1964) [1893] described as a mutual constitution of the material and social that is neither Marxist in determinism or Hegelian in idealism, where faith, identity, and agency are all functioning in an ongoing of mutual constitution (Markus and Kitayama, (2010). Robinson (2008) and Gumuscu (2010) drawing links between Islam and capitalism, suggested that this aspect of the Muslim faith was the product of Islamic reform and modernity and a part of the ongoing secularization process and ubiquitous in the socioeconomic reforms and emergence of moderate islamist constituencies in Turkey and Egypt. Building on Gumuscu's (2010) contention as a rejoinder to Weber's amalgamations of his thesis on the economic sociology and sociology of religion, Islam then, far from being a faith lacking the necessary conditions for capitalist production, appears endogenously able to paradoxically accommodate economic development for carrier groups who share an affinity with the values and beliefs of the faith i.e. the emergence of a well organised and devout bourgeoisie.

Uncovering the multiplicities of complex social process and meanings within faith was an integral part of Durkheim's work on religious discourses. Durkheim's (1961, p.62) sociology of religion posited the argument that the structured consciousness of the collective rather than the consciousness of the individual was essential in understanding shared emotions that unite into a single coherent 'moral community' reinforced through shared cultural rituals and practises. Durkheim (1998) [1912], far from discharging faith as an imaginary and hallucinatory construction, argued that faith acted as a source of social solidarity and a cohesive adhesive for collective consciousness for individuals in society that solidified their 'mechanical solidarity' in a post industrial society . Fligstein and McAdams

(2012) suggested that faith seen in this light provided a refuge as a ‘sanctified affirmation’ as well as expression of the collective consciousness. (Mandaville, 2001; SparkNotes Editors, 2006; Hirsch and Fiss and Green, 2009).

These tenements of discussion on faith based economic and social interaction are an important feature as they bring to the forefront the social solidarity of faith based groups. The ‘mechanical solidarity’ of the working class nostalgic romanticism that bonded the heterogeneous working class of Tower Hamlets was also equally prevalent within and had parallels with the economic immigrant Bangladeshi diasporas population who are no more averse to this manufactured consensus either, as the Bangladeshi community too fostered its own imagined community solidarity constructed under a religious label, the banner of the ‘Ummah’ (McLoughlin, 1996). An Islamic term that personifies the notions of belongingness to an Islamic community or global Islamic community that provided what Dallal (1995) described as a form of spiritual ‘citizenship’ for diasporic and displaced individuals.

The concept of the ‘Ummah’ is considered significant in understanding the moral ecology of diasporas communities as faith provided the ontological ground on which the ideas for individual, family and collective identities can be fostered, based on both real and manufactured canon to provide the authenticity needed for non-territorial concepts of social solidarity (Barghouti, 2015; Gardner, 1995). For Bangladeshi immigrants arriving in the 1950s and 1960s, the symbolic and ritual resources of faith would go on to provide the framework from which to fashion their social identity, social solidarity and best fit in their community that would be constructed from Islam. Faith fusion, as Stewart and Shaw (1994) pointed out, can act as a ‘holding container’, a synthesis for stable and secure community construction throughout special temporal flux, that Cohen (1985) argued provided an unalterable shared symbol of social solidarity required for constructions of community and sensory security against racist social exclusion and deprivation experienced by diasporic individuals within the community. Werbner (1997a) and Cohen (1985) explained that in the face of social exclusion, alienation and uncertainty, faith represented a return to a sensory



sureness and security appropriated by the dominant shared religious signs and symbols and religious ritual practices of prayer and fasting that were devoid of class symbols and an equalizing feature that provided the social glue that bonded a diasporas community by producing a homogeneous way of life within the community (Kessler, 1979; Modood, 1990).

Philips (2011) suggested modern communication technology had made the concept of the ‘Ummah’ a very tangible construction for the younger British Muslim generation than the older generation in light of a perceived sense of disaffection. In contrast, Eade, (1997) and Hussain (2007) pointing to the Bangladeshi diasporaic community in Tower hamlets, argued that this religious construction of belongingness when examined in detail quickly unfolds as a metaphorical imagining and entrenched in doubt and ambiguity by many second and third generation young British Bangladeshis as a consequence of both national and transnational social conditioning, located in both the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the wider social society. Hodgson (1977) suggested the nexus of community homogeneity of minority Muslim communities could not always be attributed to Islam, as minority communities often found a shared consensus in their own cultural heritage. Giddens (2000,p .65) explained that the influences of tradition and custom can shrink on a worldwide level and as a consequence, identity and self-identity has to be created and recreated and ‘ a sense of self is sustained largely through the stability of the social positions of individuals in the community’.

### **The Significance of Bengali Kinship**

Gardner (1995) pointed out that whilst across the globe the universal signs and symbols of Islam remained unalterably the same and sacrosanct, conversely, from a local context how religious ideology is reproduced, understood and practised cannot be separated from its intricate relationship from cultural reproduction that gives formation to local social hierarchies that are not equally shared but are determined by age, gender and wealth etc. Goodhart(2013) argued for British Bangladeshis in the east end, religion was embedded in traditional patriarchal tribal and clan systems and migration has contributed to these

economic and social differences in the Bangladeshi community; a product of early migration which has resulted in varying degrees of social mobility and class formations in Bangladeshi families in Tower Hamlets. The origins of this social organisation of the Bangladeshi community can be traced back to an ‘atomistic rural society’ in Bangladesh (Greenhalgh et al. 1998, Pollen, 2002). The process of kinship organisation to the one found in Tower Hamlets today began for many Sylheti’s after the territorial organisation of space and place following the end of British imperialism in what was then pre partition Sylhet. Beginning with the construction of compacted enclaves known as ‘*bari*’ and the group making of related family members into clans known as ‘*gushiti*’ that enabled the occupation and control of the most scarcest resource of all; land, and the vacant spaces being filled by arriving immigrants (Islam, 1978). In most places land was reassessed every thirty years by the settlement officers of the British administration, but as early as 1793, in the Bengal settlements, most parts were declared permanently unchangeable. This fallacy by the British whilst depriving the administration of profits from productivity had the effect of creating a new class of landed peasantry the *Zamindars* (Gilmour, 2005). This process in turn led to the transformation of land labouring Sylheti workers into major land owning groups engaged in capital accumulation in what could be described as a macro ‘Sylheti’ socialist sphere (Ludden, 2003). Gardner (2002) pointed out that this social action was not universally the same for all Bangladeshi farmers but a specific characteristic of Sylheti farmers that allowed the formation of higher economic and social status groups that could deploy their economic and social capital for greater capital accumulation through the control of land and labour. These landowners comprising of the strongest of kin within their ‘*ghusti*’ (group) were no longer labouring on their own land but had workers deployed to toil the land and set their sights on economic expansion through migration and in turn pioneering the now familiar transnational networks that have fuelled the British driven micro economies that can be found today in Sylhet (Saunders, 2010).

Bengali kinship networks remain a complicated lattice work of relations transcending geographical boundaries. The formation of transnational networks within the Bangladeshi

community that began from the mid 1950's and 1960's was made possible through the intergenerational reproduction of the village network and extended kinships networks that were fostered with Islamic values and that were patrilineal in nature and termed as *biradari* (Abbas and Reeves, 2006). The first generation immigrants that arrived in Britain in the early 1960s and 1970s who reproduced these *biradari* networks were from the same 11 sub districts of Sylhet and conversely owners of land rather than direct labourers of their lands (Dench, Gavron and Youngs, 2006). These first generation Sylheti Bangladeshis were economically better off than the vast majority of other Bangladeshis and able to reproduce their hierarchical and controlled culture and often employed close kin to work on their lands (Gardner, 2002). In a process epitomised by Bourdieu's (1984; 1985; 1986) model of cultural reproduction, they all shared the same economic and social status and the capitals to operationalise their economic and social resources to migrate to Britain as a means of expansion of their economic and social wealth (Dench, et al, 2006; Gardner, 2002). Nestled within the '*biraderi*' based social organization is the construction of kinship networks with varying social positions. These network systems are very important as they differ from family bonds in western societies which are conditioned by social trends rather than social requirements (Schweizer and White, 1998).

### **Kinship Networks**

In Bengali communities both in Britain and Bangladesh, the family unit is nuclear; these units are stabilised through kinship systems which promote well organised family orientated, and god fearing networks which entrust care for their elderly kin as well as social participation within the community. These kinship ties have over the past several decades become distinctively Muslim in terminological terms, by replacing identifying terms that were once Hindu and with an assemblage of Muslim equivalent terms borrowed from the Arabic vocabulary as well as Urdu, Persian and Sanskrit terms (Inden and Nicholas, 2005). The Bengali kinship network links from pastoral societies carry social and economic obligations, specifically to land and property and also identify the position of individuals within the extended family networks, and to what extent these contacts can be activated for

assistance as well as pooling resources from the family unit in times of need. The broad designated terms found in western kinship models such as uncles and aunts do not cover the family terms, as Bengali kinship models have many extended family members and all relatives have specific terms that identify all paternal and maternal relatives.

In contrast to western kinship models where there is an absence of legal and economic needs that differentiate family bonds, in Bengali kinship ideology these relative links also imply the level to which they can be activated or be inactive for economic and social mobility as well as denote their perceived social status. As Gardner (1995) and Pollen (2002) pointed out, many of these patilineages and genealogies are often manufactured or imagined as they carry social status, and some migrants often lay claim to being descendents of Sheikh or Soyod Strata's or caste as these were given the name *Bhadralokas* they carried higher kin status. Seabrook (2014) and Sen (1999) argued that these social manifestations often have implied connotations towards aristocracy and are more pronounced and reinforced in Bangladesh and carry credence as social badges for diasporas communities, as they are designed to reinforce the position of the insecure middle classes, many of whom arrived in Tower Hamlets during the 1960's onwards and sought to maintain and define their positions through their traditions and cultural reproductions. These reinforced kin networks allow all Bangladeshis irrespective of whether they are first or second generation, to easily identify the patrilineage, caste and strata of all Bengali acquaintances. Appadurai (1989, p. 89) argued that these primordium constructs of community solidarity which are often located at the most rudimentary level to kinship ties, religion etc. formed the 'seedbed of brutal separatism' that can have the ability to turn the social sphere of the local into a mini system of disjuncture structured by the global flow of labour, technology and capital which permeate into the local.

For many millions of people in Bangladesh the process of migration has led to small steps in modernisation and facilitated the support and flourish-on of macro and micro economies in the most rural parts of the country funded by British Bangladeshis. This transformation was not a product of policy but remittances from first generation immigrants

working in the Arab Gulf States and Britain. Sylhet has had five decades of remittance cash flow into the city from Britain's first generation Bangladeshi immigrants. The global economic link between Bangladeshis in Britain and their Kin in Bangladesh is significantly altering according to the changing orientation of the value systems adopted by the second and third generation. The second and third generations of British born Bangladeshis who are socially conditioned by western values and have fewer ties to the construct of homeland also have less of an obligation to follow such practices and as a consequence remittance flows from second and third generations have dwindled to just 20% from Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets compared to 85% of all workers sending remittance for first generation in the 1970s and 1980s (Garbin, 2012; Saunders, 2010).

### **Summary**

Discerning the presence of Bourdieu in the background and foreground of the discussion, to sum up then, spiritual thought and bodily work has been an integral part of the Islamic faith. The Islamic process that began for the Bangladeshis with the migration and settlement of prominent and charismatic Middle Eastern migrant leaders positing their own human capital investments defined by Arabic power, seeded the start of a sequence of historically ordered events that would lead ultimately to a social reorganisation of space and place in rural Sylhet, in Bangladesh (Eaton, 1993). Religion for the Sylheti Bangladeshis is given a primacy where the basis of identity and social organisation is formulated and deployed (Thorp, 1978). The deployment of a specific set of practises that were distinctly Islamic and characterised by mind and man power in the course of preoccupation of prayer and worldly work would be manufactured in the image of the ethno religious group a new Islamic space and place (Bourdieu, 1971; Farooqi, 2006; Abbas, 2011). That basic core framework through the reproductions of kin networks as well the operation of a specific set of social practices and social action suffused with Islamic representations would be reproduced intergenerational, replicated through migration by the early Sylheti settlers within the predominance of the family, to transform the urban space of Tower Hamlets previously secular domain with secular citizens into a sub Islamic field with religious citizens, with

religious agency and identities culminating into a ethno religious multicultural Tower Hamlets (Winandy, 2015; Henkel, 2011; Modood, 1992; Habermas,1962).

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