

## ***Dhormo* and Social and Cultural Construction of Wellbeing in Bangladesh: a case of *tablig jamat***

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For more than a century, culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other kind of pastness – the key words here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand development is always seen in terms of future – plans, hopes, goals, targets....By default and also for some independent reasons, economics has become the science of the future, and when human beings are seen as having a future, the keywords such as wants, needs, expectations, calculations, have become hardwired into the discourse of economics. In a word the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor is a person of the future. Thus, from the start, culture is opposed to development, as tradition is opposed to newness, and habit to calculation (Appadurai 2004: 60).

### **Introduction**

This paper intends to illuminate the significance of wellbeing approach to dominant discourse of development. Dominant development approaches stand on a conviction that it can improve people's overall quality of life by producing material prosperity. Wellbeing approach is considered as an alternative framework to established development indicators which among other things emphasize the importance of *dhormo* (the Bengali word for religion) in the wellbeing of people's every day life. This paper is an attempt

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to reveal the relationship between *dhormo* and social and cultural construction of wellbeing in Bangladesh. Herein, *dhormo* is a site to look through the wellbeing approach. It has been explored through *tablig jamat*, a transnational Islamic revivalist movement. This paper is based on the empirical study on 'Wellbeing and Religion'<sup>1</sup>. This paper is divided in three sections. First section begins with a quick reexamination of the mainstream development approach and the relationships between the two key concepts; Wellbeing and *Dhormo*. In the second section, an overview of *tablig jamat* in Bangladesh and two cases were presented. The third section deals with the two individuals and their participation in *tablig jamat* which explain how as subjects they assert their own agency by negotiating and renegotiating with their everyday realities. In conclusion, we argued that the idea of wellbeing goes beyond the economic or material aspects of human life. In the case of a Bangladeshi Village, people's sense of wellbeing is strongly grounded in the ways they satisfy their spirituality in relation to other material conditions of life.

### **From Material to Spiritual: Reexamining the Mainstream Development Approach**

At the heart of many development projects, it is sometimes assumed that development not only brings the material prosperity but it also offers a better quality of life. However, this notion of development is somewhat problematic. In the discourse of development, it is generally assumed that development defines wellbeing; what to be and in what ways. Nonetheless, subjective imaginations of wellbeing by individuals and the processes involved to achieve those anticipated wellbeing state suggest that construction of wellbeing cannot be derived exclusively from development per se with reference to material resources. The meaning of wellbeing or any attempt to assess wellbeing or to understand the processes that affect it must take into consideration about the broader intermingled dimensions of everyday life. Traditional economic approaches to development assess the quality of life in terms of material wellbeing. In contrast, other scholars (Sen 1999; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Nussbaum 2002) emphasize other non-material indicators to development. Nussbaum (2002) argues that GNP per capita as an

independent indicator to assess the national wealth is problematic. She insists on the distribution and entitlement of resources to delve further to assess the quality of life (Nussbaum 2000). Furthermore, conceptualization of resources in the material sense is a limited one (Shiva 1992) which excludes the possibilities of other types of resources such as human capability, social, cultural, political and natural resources (McGregor and Kebede 2003; McGregor 2000).

The social and cultural construction of wellbeing in developing countries invites the analysis of non-material indicators of wellbeing. The wellbeing approach brings together the subjective experiences of people to the objective indicator of their welfare and how people's own perceptions relate to those objective indicators of wellbeing. Wellbeing approach tries to explore the interactions between existing structures and the individuals. Here, the structure includes the social/cultural, political, economy and policy regime where individuals use their agency to interact with that given structures. Within these structures, in contemporary societies, individuals use the available resource such as material, relational and symbolic for a variety of purposes. Individuals negotiate or renegotiate with the broader structure for their own wellbeing. The wellbeing outcomes can be seen as a process of interactions of the individuals with the structures to meet their needs. People with their available resources constantly negotiate or renegotiate with the broader forces of structure.

For the last three decades, in government policy circle, development has been the main agenda for the Bangladeshi government. The discourse of development is very powerful. It is visible in the public discourse. From academia to the garment owners, from the non profits to the government bureaucrats, from a tiny tea stall in the village to the corporate Bangladesh, all are concerned about the term development. Apparently, it seems to be the main point of departure for the Bangladeshis as shortest possible time. After Bangladesh born in 1971, many actors of development such as state, non profits and international development agencies have taken many development initiatives. As a result, some progresses have been

made in terms of economic growth and other social indicators of development.

However, the materials offered or come with the development packages are perceived differently by different people. Rather than looking at development from the material perspective, the wellbeing approaches argue that the way people give meanings to their material possessions are not the same. Wellbeing approach to development views development from a holistic perspective which along with material resources, also include the social, cultural and political aspects or wellbeing of human life.

In Bangladeshi context, *dhormo* plays a central role in wellbeing construction as it is deeply embedded in people's everyday life. Yet, in the mainstream development practices in Bangladesh, *dhormo*/religion was seen in opposition to development. Development was seen as something external as it comes upon you. Rather than viewing development comes from within, the development initiatives thus distanced itself from the religion. The relationship between development and *dhormo* has often seen as contradictory and mutually exclusive (Ashraf 2006; Karim 2004 and Shehabuddin 1999). As an alternative framework to development, the wellbeing approach argues for the consideration of *dhormo* for the overall development of people.

#### **Relationship between Wellbeing and *Dhormo***

A definition of the wellbeing is worth mentioning here. "Wellbeing is a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life (WeD; 2007)<sup>ii</sup>." Religion refers to people's religious affiliation. It also refers to the overall moral order of things and one's relationship to it. The existence of *dhormo*/religion therefore is essentially about the correct ordering and behavior of things in accordance with its intrinsic nature (Inden 1985). From the definition above, it can be assumed that the wellbeing of individuals to a significant degree depends on how religion as a source of moral guidance helps to ensure individuals relations to the God, to others and to the meanings of her/ his

material existence on the earth. However, the question of what is your religion is not so much a question of faith and belief, but about the everyday lifestyles, ways of doing things, of being with people, of feelings and so forth (Kotalova 1996). Therefore, religion is not only about narrative but also about material ordering.

To demonstrate the relationship between well being and religion, we will use the concept 'capacity to aspire' developed by Arjun Appadurai (2004). In his work he argued that everyday wants, needs and aspirations derive from intermediate norms or values that in turn form the part of higher-order ethical and metaphysical ideas. For Appadurai, wants and wishes for 'commodities' as defined in strictly economic sense, are not adequate to understand individual's aspirations to the good life. These aspirations are not the features of the individual as an atomistic entity. Rather, aspirations to the good life are formed in the thick of social life, as part of a system of ideas and beliefs about life and death, the significance of material assets over social relations, the conception of social permanence, the value of peace and war, etc. Linking everyday aspirations with higher normative orders in this way offers an important route to understand the deeper cultural grounding of wellbeing. For Appadurai empowerment can be better conceived if it is translated as increasing the *capacity to aspire*. According to him capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations. He emphasized on strengthening the voices of people as a cultural capacity. As people seek to strengthen their voices as cultural capacity, they will need to find those levels of metaphor, rhetoric, organization and public performance that will work best in their cultural world.

In this paper *dhormo* is taken to represent that ultimate sense of order which people experience as given and use to navigate their lives. Wellbeing approaches view religion as forms of practice, knowledge, and experience which structure ways of being in the world and relations with the self and others, and are in turn structured by other social relations, such as those of class, ethnicity, age and gender. The way people conceive their *dhormo* is much more than what is traditionally captured by the word religion in the West.

Viewing religion as a form of identity requires the process of religious identity formation in the context of Bangladesh. *Tablig jamat* an Arabic term refers to an Islamic movement that plays role in defining and redefining the Islamic identity among the people in Bangladesh. These movements have various forms over time however with definite goals and mission they appear to be strong forces in the process of religious identity formations. *Tablig jamat* as a powerful group for identifying the self is also in constant negotiations with the broader social structure.

#### **Role of *Tablig jamat* in Constructing the 'Self'**

One of the main focuses of *tablig jamat*, as they claim, is to change one's faith of 'self.' The transition from self to a *tabligi* refers her/his affiliation to *tablig* community. Thus, they become obliged to follow and maintain certain rituals, norms and actions prescribed by the *tablig jamat* (Mitcalf 1998). Veer (2001) pointed out that the *tablighs* are professedly apolitical and this is a very deliberate stance. In that sense, they do not resist any particular state or political formation. Instead, they offer a different kind of selfhood and identity which they claim as apolitical. However, they offer a strong sense of selfhood which can potentially be political. The changing nature of the meanings of moral world is important in understanding the role of *tablig jamat* in identity construction. The new moral world offered by the *tablig jamat* is in constant negotiation with the existing moral world. By providing ethnographic examples, this paper aims to explore how these two moral worlds are being negotiated by the individual agency.

Consequently, while the *tabligh jamat's* philosophy and activities are continually advocating the changes in society through the change of 'self', then it is rather a paradoxical position of *tablig jamat's* self-claimed apolitical position. Veer (2001) further pointed out that it makes no sense to call *tablig jamat* apolitical, but it is, obviously, crucial for the *tablighs* to state that they are not interested in the state power. This apolitical stance enables them to work in a great variety of countries, both Islamic and non-Islamic, without coming into open conflict with them. The aim of total transformation, however, does

conflict in an indirect way with policies of assimilation and multiculturalism, since they promote religious enclaves of correct beliefs and behavior.

### **Key Principles of *Tablig jamat***

*Tablig* cosmology<sup>iii</sup>, as Talib (1998) pointed out, is related to making communication with Allah for a believer through performing rituals, with which he can orient to and conform Allah's complete command in his life that is an alter of the self in that way. It involves religion not only to perform by the said self but also invite others to alter their selves. The movement of *Tabligh Jamat* is based on seven of the following basic principles which are called a *tabliger saat kaz* (Seven to-do list of *Tablig*) at the local level: a) *Kolema* (profession of faith, there is no God but Allah; Muhammad is the Apostle of God). b) *Namaz* (Prayer. Five times compulsory *namaz* for all). c) *Ilm* (Knowledge of Allah's command) and *Zikir* (remembering Allah and his Prophet) d) *Ikram-e-Muslimeen* (Respecting every Muslims). e) *Ikhlās-e-Niyat* (Purity of intention, sincerity and self appraisal). f) *Tafrig-e-waqt* (Sparing time for *Tabligi* tours that is called a *chilla* and self-reformation and proselytizing). g) *Tar-i-layani* (renounce the pointless, like telling lies, backbiting, picking up quarrels and other useless pursuits). All participants are encouraged to perform all these activities in their daily life and obliged to encourage others.

### ***Tablig jamat* in Bangladesh**

*Tablig jamat*, a Muslim revivalist movement<sup>iv</sup> which was founded in Bustee Nizamuddin, Delhi in India in the 1920s<sup>v</sup>, has spread globally and by now has become one of the largest transnational Islamic movements. This movement is global as well as local.<sup>vi</sup> Every year, in Raiwand, Punjab (Pakistan), and Tongi, Dhaka (Bangladesh), *Tablig jamat* hosts *Bishwa Ijtema* (world congregation). It is the second largest congregation of Muslims after the hajj ceremony held in Mecca annually. In 1946 the first *Ijtema* in Bangladesh was held at Kakrail Markas<sup>vii</sup> Mosque in Dhaka. Since then it continues to take place once in a year. For first twenty years it used to be held in different parts of the country like at Chittagong Hajj Camp in 1948 and at Narayanganj in 1958. A village by Turag River at Tongi,

Dhaka became the permanent venue for *Biswa Ijtema* in 1966 as the Pakistan government allowed the organizers to use the land. Later in mid 1980s Bangladesh government allotted 160 acres of land for that purpose<sup>viii</sup>. In each year, Bangladesh government offers full cooperation to make this event smooth that includes deployment of especial law enforcing agencies (including military and paramilitary troops), hospital access, continuous water and electricity supply with temporary telephone booths.

In the last Tongi *Bishwa Ijtema* held in January 2008, the total numbers of participants reached more than three millions. Amongst them 5,636 foreign Muslims from 56 countries joined the event, 1,949 of whom spoke Arabic, 2,200 spoke Urdu and Hindi, 1,430 spoke English, and 57 spoke Chinese. Sermons of Muslim scholars were translated into 16 languages<sup>ix</sup>. Participants from different parts of the globe have made this national event into a global observable fact. Participation of local people is increasing as well. People from every districts of Bangladesh are joining the event. The status of second largest religious events for the Muslims and increasing number of participants demonstrate its importance.

It has a unique netting of mosque-based formal and semi-formal office premises. Bustee Nizamuddin mosque in New Delhi is the *Markas* Mosque of *Tablig jamat* for India and the World. Raiwand mosque at Punjab is the main *markas* for Pakistan. In Bangladesh, it is Kakrail mosque. There are 64 *markas* mosques in the country, one in each district. District *markas* operates as the centre of *tabligh jamat* at the locality. All activities of these 64 *markas* mosques are guided by Kakrail *Markas* mosque in Dhaka.

#### ***Tabligh Jamat at the Local Level***

The data used in this paper is based on an empirical research done over a period of time in three communities in Dinajpur: urban, peri-urban and rural. The two case studies presented here are drawn from the peri-urban research site.

The activities of *tablig jamat* started in Dinajpur in early 1960s with a group of people comprised of Bengali and Non-Bengali Muslims. The first *Ijtema* in this district took place in 1965. *Tablig jamat* continued its function till late 1980s under a selected *Amir* (district

head). Their functions were interrupted and lessened around 1971 liberation war and accelerated around mid 1970s. In early 1990s, *tablig jamat* activities have started to be operated by a *sura* committee instead of *Amir's* sole control<sup>x</sup>. Since then *sura* committee, a board of 10-12 members plays the leading role in taking all the decisions by discussing in presence of other members. *Sura* committee stands as the authority for the main *markas* mosque.

In every Thursday meeting, all interested males appear in front of the district *sura* committee. The committee sends them in Kakrail mosque. When a male *tablig* group goes out for *chilla* and camp in a mosque, they are assigned by the Kakrail *markas* mosque. However, in our field we found various forms and durations. The duration of *chilla* could be for three days, forty days, six months or even more. However, the prescribed forms of *tablig* are bit different than those of actual practices.

There are nearly four thousands and five hundred mosques in Dinajpur district. Presently, *Tablig jamat* has its activity in approximately hundred and thirty mosques. As it claimed by the *sura* committee members, they have a goal to reach all the mosques within the district. *Tablig jamat* groups have visited all the mosques and invited the local people to join. As a result, a large number of people have joined the *tablig* and the number is increasing day by day. *Tablig jamat* activities were associated with white collar professionals, mainly men. Visits of *jamat* groups along with the elite religious icons from abroad (e.g. India, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia etc.) attract people to join. Women's participation in *Tablig* is rather a recent trend in Dinajpur. Female *tabligh* activities are evident in most part of urban and rural areas.

The scope of this paper is limited to explore the relationship between *tablig jamat* and wellbeing through two cases<sup>xi</sup>; a female *tablig jamat* and a male *tablig jamat* activist.

#### **Case 1 female *tablig*: Sharifa**

##### Transition of Sharifa's *self* from "witch" to "Ammahuzur"

About twenty years ago a beautiful young women got married with Kamrul- rich man's son in the village. To the surprise of the

villagers, Kamrul married Sharifa who was already married with three kids. Both Sharifa and Kamrul (who also had wife and kids) suddenly decided to leave their families and start a new married life. People could not accept Kamrul's marriage with Sharifa. For next couple of years people in the village did not go to their houses or even talk to them. Sharifa was considered by many as a bad person and some goes on saying her witch. Women in the village did not want their husbands even to see Sharifa as they considered her as a potential threat to their conjugal life. Eventually, villagers socially abandoned both Kamrul and Sharifa. No one including their parents did not talk to them or go to their house. A couple of years later, she started to teach the Quran to some children at home to pass her leisure time. Soon after, some elderly women in the village also started to take the teachings of the Quran from Sharifa. Within a year the number of her students increased from 5 to 45. These students paid Sharifa some token money as a sign of respect.

Gradually, People began to accept her. They observed a lot of changes in her. She became very pious and *pardanshin*<sup>xii</sup>. Her modesty and knowledge on the Quran made people curious about her. Women started to visit her home. People got surprised to see that she also motivated her husband to become pious who didnot even go to mosque before. Getting inspired by Sharifa, Kamrul joined *tablig jamat*. After that, both husband and wife started to visit Dinajpur town once in a week to take part in *Masura Jamat*, a combined *Jamat* of men and women although they stayed in separate rooms. A *Moulana* who was trained from Saudi Arabia used to come on every Monday. Sharifa met a woman there who used to conduct *talim* in town. Later, she went to her place sometimes to see how she conducts *talim*. This is how she learnt to conduct *talim*. For over last 15 years she has been conducting *talim*. She was the first woman who initiated female *tablig* activity in her village. She was the first who told women in her village that preaching Islam is not man's work only. Quran also asked women to do that. This woman is now known as Ammahuzur<sup>xiii</sup>.

Over the last 15 years, she has been conducting *talim* at least once in a week at her own house. On average, about 20 women come in each

*talim* session. Sometimes women from neighborhoods request her to conduct *talim* at their houses and she honored their request. Several times, she has gone outside her village and stayed over a week to conduct *talim*. A couple of years back, she built a *talim* house in her village with the financial help from the village people. She used to conduct *talim* there once a week. For the last few months, she is doing it at home because *talim* house is little far from her house and women prefer to come to her house than going to the new-built *talim* house. That is why she hoped to build another one beside her house.

*Talim* house: construction of new social space for women

According to Ammahuzur, "Men have mosques and we do not. We have our *talim* house where women can do prayers, *zikir*... A *talim* house is like a mosque for us. It is open for all. Nobody can claim it as his/hers. So, every Muslim woman can go there." She also mentioned that women can come to *talim* as well, *talim* house is like a mosque for women where any Muslim woman can come and do the prayers. Women even can stay there overnight during the special events like *Shab-E-Barat* or *Shab-E-Kadr*. *Talim* house is the property of the community. Community contributes money in building and maintaining it as well. So, everyone in the community owns it. She also mentioned that conducting *talim* in my own house or neighbour's house sometimes can be difficult. For example, when any of her male relatives such as her son-in-law stays at her house, she as well as other women at *talim*, feels uncomfortable. Conducting *talim* at neighbour's house can also be very problematic. Women who don't have good relations with the people in that house do not want to go there. A separate *Talim* house can solves all these problems.

Implications of *Talim*: Women are in negotiation with patriarchy

Our husbands say, "They (those who conduct *talims*) are all *vakkats* (bogus)" mentioned by a village women who comes to *talim* regularly. Women who come to Ammahuzur's *talim* are mostly from the same village and usually are old, poor with no or little education. Ammahuzur has become so much popular among these women that they often come to her *talim* without their husband's permission.

Many of their husbands do not like them go outside home and come to *talim*. They think who conduct *talims* are all *vakkats* (bogus) and all they say are silly and useless. Women do not need to go outside to know about Islam. They should stay at home, take care of their husbands and children and read the Quran. Sometimes husbands beat their wives to prevent them from going to *talims*. Yet, some women come to *talim* without their husband's knowledge. For example, Rahima, a 60 year widow, whose husband died two years ago, said that her husband did not like her as she goes to *talim*. He was not pious at all. He never went to mosque or did any prayers. He used to say, "Can't you stay at home? There are so many works at home. Don't waste your time in listening to those silly, useless words." However, she managed to come regularly. One day her husband caught her and beat her afterwards. He said, "You cannot go to *talim* leaving so many works undone at home." He strictly ordered her not to go there anymore. For the next couple of weeks, she stayed at home then again started to go there. Her neighbors and daughters kept it as a secret. She has been coming to *talim* over last 15 years. Her husband died two years ago. She has been coming to *talim* for the last 15 years. All these years, she came to *talim* without her husband's permission. She mentioned that "Most of them (husbands) do not want their wives to go to *talim*. They do not want us to go. They don't want us to talk about our family matters with other women."

Rokeya, another woman has been coming to *talim* for the last 12 years. Like the husband's of Rahima, her husband also does not want her to go to the *talim*. However, she managed to hide it from her husband for quite sometime. Rokeya mentioned that her husband didn't like to let her wife go outside the home by herself. Rokeya used to come to the *talim* when her husband is out for work. And she always returned home before her husband. But one day her husband came back home earlier and found that his wife is out to join the *talim*. He was very angry at her and beat her with a bamboo stick. Then, she stopped going to *talim*. She began to stay at home with fear. She had heard from Ammahuzur that if anyone ever tries to stop her wife from coming to her *talim* he would be punished by Allah.

Rokeya was passing her days with a fear at home. After couple of weeks later, something terrible happened to her husband. Her husband was a rickshaw-puller<sup>xiv</sup>. Like any other working days, he left home for work. Suddenly some of their neighbours took him back home. Rokeya ran to him and found his eyes became red. He cried out, "I can't see anything...can't see anything." She took him to the doctor in the nearby town but doctor said that it was too late. He'd never get his eye sight back. From then on he stayed at home. Now his sons grew older and work for his family. Rokeya believes that Allah has punished him because he didn't let her go to *talim*. Rokeya never stopped to come to *talim* again.

According to Ammahuzur and other women who come to *talim* that being a muslim, it is the duty of all women to bring their husbands, children, as well as other women in the path of Islam. Women are encouraged to join *Talim* as it is referred in the Quran and Haadis. As Ammahuzur told in one of her *talim*- "We didn't see our Mohammed but we got the Quran, haadis from him. He says, 'There was an age when women were burnt alive. I've set them free. From now on they won't be burnt anymore. They will be preaching Islam.' So, listen sisters, come to the path of Islam at your young age so that you can do it for many years.... I know some people tease us for telling them about Islam. Allah says, 'Don't stop preaching even if someone laughs at you. Do your job. I'll take you to heaven. I'm here for you to punish them.... Those who come to *talim* to listen my words I'll bless them more than the ones who do prayers over nights.' Sisters, come to *talim* house. You'll find there light of Islam. *Talim* house is a garden of Allah. Those who sit here are flowers of that garden. If you join *talim*, all your sins will be forgiven."

Most women who come to Ammahuzur's *talim* said that they come to her to know more about the Quran, *namaj*, *doa* and the next life. Rahima said she never went to school. She didn't know anything about Islam. She didn't even know how to perform the prayers. Now she can read the Quran, perform prayers, read many *doas*<sup>xv</sup>. She thinks *talim* gave a new meaning to her life. Previously, she spent her leisure time by gossiping with other women but now she spends her time on doing prayers or reading the Quran. She wasn't aware of

her next life before she had gone to *talim*. Now she knows there is another life after death where everyone will be punished or rewarded by Allah. Another young woman Lovely mentioned, “I can now read the Quran very well. Although I learnt that at *maktab*<sup>xvi</sup> when I was a kid but I was not as good as I am now. I have also learnt some religious stories, Haadis etc. she also tells us about the importance of *pardah*. She tells us to wear *boro orna* (Large scarf) or *chador*<sup>xvii</sup>. She also suggests us to wear *salwar-kameez*<sup>xviii</sup> instead of the traditional *saree*<sup>xix</sup>..... I wear *burka* when I go to town. I also wear *chador* with *saree* when I go to our neighboring *para*. I cover my head and upper portion of my body with the *chador*. I cover all my body except my face”.

*Talim* is not all about religion: the mixture of the material, emotional, social and spiritual

Religion is not the only thing that brings women into *talim*. It also has some sort of social purposes. Poor women who do not have enough money to visit a doctor come to Ammahuzur to take *panipora*<sup>xx</sup>, *telpora*<sup>xxi</sup> when someone in their family gets sick. She does not want money in return. They believe that Ammahuzur has supernatural power. Not always her treatment works out successfully but that cannot weaken their belief. Although Ammahuzur never went to school, but she claims that she learn how to read and write *Bangla* in her dreams. This especial power of Ammahuzur made their belief strong and made her respectable to the ordinary villagers. Rahima said, “She never went to school. She was also an illiterate woman like us. Allah is so pleased on her that he has made her a more respectable woem than an educated woman in our village.” Ammahuzur told the story of how she got her education, “One night, I heard a voice in my dream. It said, “Wake up...wake up and take a shower. Then open the pages of the Quran and you will see you can read all the Bangla words.” I woke up and took a shower. I took the Quran and opened it with my trembling heart. It seemed a miracle to me. I could read all the Bangla words so easily! Now I can read even better than a S.S.C passed woman..... From then on with each line I read to women from the Quran I explain them the meaning. First, they got impressed. I was an illiterate person. How could I read and

explain them the meanings! They began to respect me. They began to tell others that I can explain the Quran nicely. Day-by-day more and more people keep coming to me.”

Sometimes women at female *tabligh* identify their group as *amader samaj*. Women who come to *talim* from the same *para* call their group as *amader mohilader samaj* (our women’s society) as opposite to *jamat*<sup>xxii</sup> which is *purushder shomaj* (men’s society). Women do not have any *jamat* but they have their *mohilader somaj* (women’s society). They do prayers together, have their *iftaar*<sup>xxiii</sup> together, and go outside the *para* together. They also have their own female *murubbi*<sup>xxiv</sup> to whom they can go for suggestions. This *murubbi* mainly resolves disputes among son and mother, mother and her daughter-in-law etc. Women get advantages from being in this *shomaj* (society) for example, when someone feels tired to do her household activities others give their hands with her. When someone became sick others cook for her family. When someone needs money she can borrow it from others.

Women come to her with various problems. Sometimes those are very personal and have nothing to do with *dhormo* like husband is attracted to another women, husband doesn’t like her etc. She listens to them, show empathy towards them and gives advices, teaches them *doa*<sup>xxv</sup> to keep their husbands. Sometimes she does more than these, like trying to help them through discussing with *murubbi*<sup>xxvi</sup> in their families or talking to the women whom their husbands are attracted to. Thus, she has become an important woman for many other women in the village.

*Talim* also helps Ammahuzur to cope with emotional distress. She went through a terrible emotional distress when her husband was having an affair with another woman whom he later married and divorced two years later from the same village. The women used to come to Ammahuzur’s *talim* every week. “They did it in front of my eyes” said Ammahuzur, “I could do nothing but to just watch the whole thing happens before my eyes.... My husband met her, here, right in my house, in my *talim*. Can you imagine? She was married then and had two children. My husband fell in love with her and married her.... Good women don’t get good husbands and good

husbands don't get good wives. This is a law of the earth. Allah made good so that I can do many good things. Then, I concentrated more on Islam. I started to conduct *talim* everyday..... He used to tell me, 'Why don't you leave my house forever?' When I said I don't have any place to go he used to say, 'Find some place where you can be busy with your *talim* for the rest of your life'. Then I began to search for a place like that. I talked to my relatives and they helped me to go to distant villages to conduct *talim*. Thus, I went several times to my daughter's in-laws house, maternal aunt's house, and some other relative's houses. I used to stay there at least two weeks whenever I went".

This is how Ammahuzur started moving outside her village to conduct *talim*. She started conducting *talims* in distant villages. Each trip was two weeks long. Two or three other women from her group went and accompanied her. Kamrul's remarriage gave a new meaning to her life. She realized there are so many things to do for women other than just doing household activities. Allah gives her the power to preach Islam among women. No matter what pain Kamrul had caused to her she thinks she will get justice in her next life. Kamrul divorced that woman two years later. But he still wants to marry again. Ammahuzur doesn't think about that now. By now she knows that a good woman never gets a good husband. If she fails to bring her husband back on track she should find some other thing to make life worthy. Preaching Islam is the best option to her since it gives peace in mind, knowledge and prestige in society as well. Though Kamrul has very bad reputation in his village and still many husbands does not allow their wives to visit their house, because they consider him a leech, she could?? find good grooms for her daughters. All her son-in-laws are educated and wealthy enough. Two of her daughters are continuing their studies in their in-law's house which is not typical for girls in Dinajpur. Her position in her community made this possible.

#### **Case 2 male *tablig*: Kobir Hossain**

##### Conversion of the 'self' and reincorporation in the *shomaj*<sup>xxvii</sup>

Kobir Hossain, aged 24 and the eldest son of his family. His father, Niamot Hossain is a businessman and was a member in the Union

Parishad for two consecutive terms. They are a middle income family. He started his education in an Alim Madrassa<sup>xxviii</sup>.

After completion of his madrassa education, he got admitted into a college at his locality and became associated with party politics. He became a Jatio Party supporter like his father. During this time he began to take drugs regularly and also developed other bad habits. It was in 2001, and according to him all these happened during the national election. He used to involve himself in fights with the other political party activist in his college. One event related to party politics changed him a lot. He was attacked by two party workers of rival group. They caught him in a shop and he had no where to go. They beat him up brutally and he got the feeling that he could die on that day. It had an impact on him; he lost all his confidence and became a person full of fear of death.

At that time, he could not think that what else he could have done. He realized that he should leave all bad habits. He started to perform *namaz*. Eventually, he started to concentrate on *namaz* to overcome his drugs. He sought shelter into *dhormo* and then became solely devoted to Allah. According to him, "I became a person like I do not feel good with anything except Allah. Allah and me and me and Allah. My home and mosque and my mosque and my home. It was my mobility at that time. I became a very pious person then."

He also started to do *zikir* and participating in Islamic *mazma*. He was doing *zikir* continually as if they were part of his breath. As he said, "It could be stopped only if I stopped breathing." Amongst some of his family members have a long relationship with *tablig jamat*. His maternal grandfather and one of his uncles both are involved in *tablig* work for a long time. He first went to *chilla* with his grandfather, when he was in grade 9 but he didn't practice the *tablig* rules later. He learnt *zikir* from there.

A few months later, he was able to come back to a normal life (i.e. he got cleaned). He took a job in an electric equipment repair shop located nearby the town. The main *markas* mosque was very close to that place. He started to go there whenever he gets a chance. He then decided to go out for a *chilla*. He went to Kakrail *markas* and saw so

many people who were involved in Allah's work leaving behind their family and other work. He was fully convinced that he found his way of life.

Together with some other people, Kakrail *markas* sent him in a place called Khilga Malibagh in Dhaka. He was told to stay there for sixty days. He used to live in a mosque and performed all the *tablig* rituals. His food was provided by the local inhabitants though he didn't like that very much: having food from others. He also missed his home. He eagerly waited to visit his family members. After 40 days, he decided to leave that place for home. He told it to his other team members (*tablig shathi*) and they could understand the state of his mind. He then went to Karail *markas* to take permission to go back to home and they allowed him with a promise that next time he will have to stay all sixty days. He promised them to do that and then came back.

As he returned to his place he became more pious. Mosque becomes his home since then. He got involved in *diner kaz* (work of Islam). In recent days, he has been involved with some other social things. He also decided to live a normal life. He was thinking of party politics again. He was searching the ways to rejoin the political party. He involved himself in social work. He was invited to attend a shalish and there he resolved some social disputes very well. It was related of an illicit relation. His *faysala* (judgment) was accepted by the *somaj*. He arranged a marriage between the girl and the boy who were in illicit relationship. His involvement with *dhormo* as well as society helped him a lot to get back on track. He views his changes of his life as:

When I went to *tabligh* for the first time, I was a student. Now, I have more experience. I know what to do. People call me in social events as well. When I was in *madrassa* I used to wear Islamic dress like *panjabi*. When I went to college I started to wear jeans and shirt then when I went to *tablig* I again started to wear *panjabi*. Now, I wear shirt and pant. I feel comfortable in it. People used to fear me for different reasons when I was in college. Now people have forgotten my past and consider me as

a religious person. They show me enough respect. (Kobir Hossain)

At this moment he is involved in local party politics. He is the president of Union Jubo League<sup>xxix</sup>, member of a local *mela* committee and actively involved in *tablig jamat*. According to him, 'Tabligh work is our Nobiji's<sup>xxx</sup> work. This is the only true path of life. Whenever I see my self doing *tabligh* work I feel good.'

Lately, he joined the Awami League. He knows that he gained social acceptance. He went to the party office with 140 Awami League *kormi* (activists) and party authority accepted him as the president of jubo league of his union. His identity as a member of *mela* (fair) committee helped him a lot to be in Awami League again.

#### Some dilemmas in Kabir Hossain's life

*Tabligh* helped him a lot to come back in a normal life. It has many positive sides but it also become a problem for him. According to him, by doing party politics, it has its own rules that may does not go together with *tabligh*. If he wants to follow *tabligh* rules in his regular party activity, it is then a problem for him. If he does any mistake, party members or ordinary people would caught him with firm allegation. According to him,

When I concentrate fully in *tabligh*, I need to find out my *ontor chokhkhu* (insight of mind). It is my internal knowledge and my internal existence where I live with Allah's work and amol. *Ontor chokhkhu* is so powerful and dangerous to deal. Goal of *tabligh* is to deal life with *ontor chokhkhu*. It involves our prophet's work to be carried out in our own life. We have to follow his *akhlakh* (character). We need to follow his work. We need to follow his speech. We need to follow his everything. If I follow his life then I have a little possibility to found Allah's blessings in my life. Now, I am trying to combine the two. I want to continue my *tabligh* work and at the same time I want to do my party politics. (Kobir Hossain)

Aside his dilemma of doing politics and *tablig* together, he also faces other kind of dilemma relating to his family life in the local context. His father Niamot Hossain has some observation about his son's *tabligh* activities. According to him, he is anxious about his son's

future family life and at the same time he is happy with his *tablig jamat* activities. As he stated

I have an observation on *tabligh*. My son, he often goes to *tabligh*. When he goes with to *jamat*, for example, for seven days or more, being his guardian, it is difficult for me to bear the travel cost or pocket money. But he is in the line. He has full wish to be in the line but it is really difficult for me to bear the cost. I have limited income. He has the intention to be in that world of Allah and he always wishes not to go any other world. He wants to belong to it for life. This is one thing. Besides, he is young. I told him, 'you have a future. Someday you will marry. You will have kids. You will have a wife. You will have a *ghor-shongshar*. How will you do that entire thing if you become involved in *tabligh* at this age? He avoided all my questions. I asked him for several times that doing *tabligh* is fine but as you are young and having a family is also a religious task. He doesn't listen to me. I also cannot create pressure on him as he is in Allah's line. (Niamot Hossain)

According to him, the person who goes in Allah's path that is the happiest news. He can be a social person; everyone in the society will love him. Everybody of the society will respect the person. The day when he will live on this earth will live with dignity. He can pray and make himself free from drug abuse, which is an acute problem for this society. For this reason, he is happy with his son. But he is not so sure that how *ghor-shongshar* would fit with it. He further added on his son's involvement in *tablig jamat*,

I found it as a nice thing and we all should do this but my concern is that he is young; his full life is ahead of him. I want to see him married and happy with his family life. Without being married and children a life is not a complete one. If he cannot be a father in proper time it will be too late. He also needs to earn and can do some business or job. He has to enter into the job market very soon, otherwise, it will be too late. I am in tension with this but I am happy that he is so religious and he is not a spoiled child anymore. When I come to know from other people that my son is doing well, I feel great and it gives me pleasure but religious activities and regular life can go together. (Niamot Hossain)

According to Niamot Hosain, the young generation in the village and elsewhere has become derailed these days. The *juboshomaj* (young group of the society) is about to destroy for drug abuse or being involved in party politics at the early age. Social values have been changing rapidly. If anything happens bad to the sons then parent's head will down in front of the *somaj*. They live in *somaj* and have to act properly in front of the *somaj*. If they fall from their moral character then they cannot show their faces in front of the *somaj*. He emphasized on guardians' control over children in religion but in a delicate way.

***Tablig Jamat* and Wellbeing Construction: an analysis of the two cases.**

Efforts to strengthen *capacity to aspire* for good life are evident in both the cases. They both showed how active participation in *tablig jamat* and its practices in every day life render changes of their self, which has the potency to bargain, negotiate and renegotiate with or to relocate the normative values to conform or redefine. In the reading of experiences of Shahida's marital and social life and the process of reconstitution of her social position in the village, *dhormo* was the key resource for her to deal with, which enables us to redefine resource as it is typically defined in dominant development approaches. Her second marriage with her husband was not accepted by the fellow villagers and even by the natal relatives. They were ostracized by them and were excluded from the societal events. She first repaired her ruptured image as a 'bad woman' to her neighbors by making herself a 'pious woman' through *tablig jamat* and made her husband in the same way. Along with the performing rituals of Islam, she started to be in *pardha* (seclusion) to affix that to her public image. The new transformed self of Ammahuzur, a religious one had the influence to accept her in the society, more precisely amongst the women. Her charismatic loom i.e. as spiritual healer and her overall personality dispensed the contour of her positive portrayal to the village women.

She also made her husband join the *tablig jamat*<sup>xxxi</sup> and then she started practicing of *talim* in her house and locality. She and her

followers started to congregate to perform Islamic rituals according to *tablig jamat*. However, it was resisted by their husbands to keep their wives within the domestic sphere. Typically, women are occupied with household management, nurturing children; give services to husband, cooking etc. Womanhood juxtaposed with motherhood and wifehood in the predominantly patriarchal society. Likewise, women are not supposed to go outside their private domain. On the other hand, steady participation in *tablig jamat* increased physical mobility for them within and outside the village. It became a place for social gathering where they can seek advises from elderly women. The significance of *talim* house is related to its follower women's lives as it is the construction of a new social space, which is neither public nor private – a place for women themselves. *Talim* house is opposed to and an alternative place which is similar to mosque for the village women with a notion of collective cohesion. They do consider it as their own society; parallel to the males' public world vis-à-vis *shomaj* (mosque), which gives them a sense of wellbeing and belonging. According to the religion, being pious in the lifetimes confirms a life in the heaven after death. Becoming pious increases social status for the women, however it is to some extent contradicts with husbands' preference with reference to predominant patriarchal ideology and typical imagination of women's live.

Women's involvement in *tablig jamat* and routine participation in *talim* is not only religious but a mixture of material, emotional and social states of the individual. Participation in *talim* sessions gave new meanings of life to the women. This religious congregation- a place of women also fulfills their social, spiritual and emotional need. It enhances cooperation amongst women in crisis management. This also provides them a new identity. For example, these *tablig* women may appear in public or even private spheres wearing the salwar-kamiz, large orna with borka instead of their traditional dress *sharee*. Thus, *tablig jamat* give them a separate identity to hold onto which is very distinctive as well.

Eventually, as we see the *tablig jamat* – the transnational revivalist movement has many implications in women's lives at the local level.

The new 'womanhood' that of Ammahuzur and the 'new social space' - '*talim* house' is fused and has been paving the ways to increase mobility to women, new meaning of life to them, means to gain social reputation, a space of women's selfhood and having a sense of cohesion. In doing so, all *tablig* activists are drawing references from *dhormo* to construct their wellbeing outcome. It shows the presence of agency to act, and a negotiation with the existing structure of patriarchy. Woman as subjects assert their own agency and construct their own space within an otherwise patriarchal socio-religious territory by negotiating and renegotiating their own realities.

Kobir Hossain's life trajectories tell us that how a man reconciles somewhat dismantled social reputation through alteration of his self by getting involved in *tablig jamat*. While he was actively involved in party politics, he had become a local gangster as well. He was also involved in drug addiction. All these ruined his social reputation. For him to return to his normal life and to regain the social acceptance he first sought the shelter into *dhormo* and then through *tablig jamat* he finds his ways to reincorporate into the society. Becoming a pious person enabled him to repair his dismantled social reputation and eventually made him a political and social leader in the locality. However, the norms of party politics contradict his religious position as to be more conscious in public affairs. Another dilemma of Kabir mentioned by his father was Kabir's full devotion to religion is hindering his ability to attain a family life as perceived in the local context. Kobir Hossain's wellbeing construction in terms of reincorporation in the society is associated with the broader reference to *dhormo*.

### Conclusion

Social and cultural construction of wellbeing in Bangladesh suggests the centrality of a broader notion of order, known as *dhormo*, constitutes a deeply rooted cultural norm, which structures lives and relationship, time and space, and against which particular ideologies or practices, whether of 'religion' or 'development' must be judged. Hence, the propensity to see development and *dhormo* in bipolar opposition disallows and hides people's manifold interactions with *dhormo*. The two examples presented here shows that *dhormo* in

Bangladesh is an important part of people's everyday lives. People continue to mark the areas of their lives they consider most important with different religious references. The way people draw references about *dhormo* in their lives goes beyond economic. The interweaving of the material and spiritual is very much evident in many areas of their lives. Focusing on wellbeing allows us to look deeper into the significance of *dhormo* here in constructing people's sense of happiness, life satisfaction and achievements in their everyday and practical lives. People in Bangladesh consider *dhormo* as a survival strategy. It contributes in identity construction. The use of *dhormo* in every day life and as it serves different purposes other than religious; *dhormo* appears as more than a system of belief or norms. It rather appears as a resource in wellbeing construction. It is not only related to one's self but also mediates communication with others and socio-political-cultural aspects. It is people who use *dhormo* and are the key actors in constructing their own wellbeing, not development.

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### Notes

i. This is a collaborative research on 'Wellbeing and Religion' of the project titled *Religions and Development Research Programme* (RaD) based at University of Birmingham, UK (2005-2010) (See details of the research at [www.rad.bham.ac.uk](http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk)) and between Centre for Development Studies (CDS), University of BATH, UK and Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). This research is funded by DFID and its significance is related to take 'faith more seriously' for policy debates. This research component builds on the existing work within the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC), UK funded research project *Wellbeing in Developing Countries* (WeD) research programme (<http://www.welldev.org.uk>) (Oct 2002-Sept 2007).

During the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of this research, 16 PRA exercises were conducted to understand time and space in relation to local understanding of religion that how time and space is holding sacred and profane divide in everyday life. And then 64 people (at 60:40 ratio of male and female) were interviewed in ethnographic manner to understand recent changes of their life in 2<sup>nd</sup> phase

- focusing on six aspects of their lives in relation to change in religion and vice versa: a) Knowledge and learning, b) Religious practice, c) Social/community life, d) Politics, e) Body, dress and fashion and f) Relation between men and women and between generation. This paper is based on data drawn from 3<sup>rd</sup> phase of work. *Tabligh Jamat* was chosen as a field of investigation and collective case study method was applied to get an understanding of *Tabligh Jamat* movement and its implications on people's every day life.
- ii. For details on wellbeing, see <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/aims.htm>
  - iii. For detailed and textual version of *Tabligh jamat* see Mohammad Talib (1998) *The tablighi in the Making of Muslim Identity* in Mushirul Hasan (ed.) *Islam Communities and The Nation, Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*. The University Press Limited, Dhaka.
  - iv. As Reetz (1998) pointed out *tabligh jamat* as revival movement. According to him, for the purpose of self-definition, self-projection, they [this movement] gave prominence to certain Islamic injunctions or institutions and their representation.
  - v. By Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944) founded *Tabligh jamat* around 1927 who was a Deoband scholar and was also under the influence of Wahhabi school of Islam. Nizamuddin mosque is also known as 'Bangalewali Masjid', which continues to be the head quarter of *Tabligh Jamat*.
  - vi. For details see Veer, Peter van der (2001) *Transnational Religion*, WPTC-01-18, University of Amsterdam. Paper given to the conference on Transnational Migration: Comparative Perspectives. Princeton University, 30 June-1 July 2001
  - vii. It is a central mosque or head quarter of *Tabligh* activity of a particular region
  - viii. The Daily Star, December 22, 2003
  - ix. The Daily Star, January 26, 2008
  - x. Amir means the head of *tabligh jamat* of a particular region at the local, national or global level.
  - xi. All the interviews were conducted in Bengali. Translations of the interviews were done by the authors.
  - xii. Woman stays in *parda*.
  - xiii. Pulling van is an occupation similar to rickshaw pulling
  - xiv. In Bengali *Amma* means mother and *Huzur* means Islamic teacher. *Ammahuzur* is a title refers to female *tabligh* leader
  - xv. Incantation
  - xvi. Mosque-based religious education centre for pre-school aged children.
  - xvii. Long piece of cloth to use for seclusion
  - xviii. Traditional dress (two or three pieces) worn by girls and women in Bangladesh. Not much worn by the married women.

- xix. A long piece of cloth. Traditional dress worn by women in Bangladesh, which often refers with Bengalianness.
- xx. Incanted water
- xxi. Incanted oil
- xxii. Mosque-based community, households are the members of a *jamat*. Each *jamat* has its own mosque, and plays a role in a range of activities including religious celebrations, arranging marriage and burials, organizing arbitration processes and so forth. It has the power to impose sanctions on the individual within its jurisdiction.
- xxiii. Meal after the day-long fasting
- xxiv. Old, respectable and learned person
- xxv. Incantation
- xxvi. Elderly persons
- xxvii. Shomaj means the society vis-à-vis the public sphere in the local context
- xxviii. Is equivalent to higher secondary school
- xxix. Jubo League (league of youths) is a wing of national level political party Awami League.
- xxx. The last prophet of Islam Muhammad (SM)
- xxxi. That is different from the females' one.

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