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An extraordinary truth? The Ādam “suicide” notes from Bangladesh

Nasima Selim^a

^a James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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An extraordinary truth? The Ādam “suicide” notes from Bangladesh

Nasima Selim*

James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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In 2007, nine members of the Ādam family committed suicide in a small town of Bangladesh. They had left suicide notes inside the house. The Ādams believed in an anti-Islamic faith, the Ādam “religion,” founded by the father, Abdul Ādam, who had died seven years ago. Only one of the members of the Ādam family is still alive, a daughter who was not part of the mass suicide. Most newspapers in the country reported the incident, but few journalists explored the story in depth. Based on a close reading of the suicide notes and a brief analysis of the major newspaper reports, the author argues that while the Ādam “religion” was rooted in the *Be-shara* (against orthodoxy) tradition within Islam, the Ādams were also suffering from a shared delusion. The Ādams probably practiced *kufri kalam* (underground satanic practice), and they were part of the sub-culture of protest existing in contemporary Bangladesh.

Keywords: suicide; new religion; Islam; Ādam; delusion; kufri kalam; Bangladesh

The suicidal event

In 2007, nine members of a family killed themselves in a Bangladeshi small town. The police found several diaries inside the house. These are believed to be “suicide” notes. This paper is based on preliminary attempts to an idiosyncratic history of the suicidal event: a *textography* based on the “suicide” notes, their representation in the media and interviews with a journalist who covered the story in depth.

I collected a photocopy version of the “suicide” notes from a journalist friend Bipul on the night I was returning to India after a brief visit to Bangladesh. I have been away from my country the whole period I was working on this paper. Material constraints did not allow me the opportunity to conduct field visits. The newspaper reports were collected from the internet editions. I interviewed the journalist friend several times over voice chat sessions. Due to the scarcity of available information, many questions in this paper remain unanswered, often unexplored. This had more to do with my inability to visit the site of the event or access to other relevant documents. Therefore, I request the reader/audience to regard this essay as a working paper in the initial stage of research and not as an oeuvre.

Given the nature of the written comments made by my dead informants before the suicidal event, I used pseudonyms for first names, sites, and changed the original dates.

*Email: nasimaselim@yahoo.com

I also intentionally avoided the “popular negative” term “cult” to stay clear from a stigmatised/negative formulation of religious groups which do not belong to established religions.

Finally, I must apologise beforehand, if at any point, I unintentionally hurt the sentiments of my Muslim brothers and sisters. In this paper, there are “extremely sensitive” remarks on the Prophet of Islam by some of my dead informants. I will try to limit these comments to a bare minimum, unless it is absolutely necessary for the purpose of this paper.

The suicide notes and the suicide: *textography, phenomenology and semiotic perspectives*

This paper presents the results of a *textography*, borrowing the term from linguist and anthropologist Swales (1998). Although not quite used according to the original usage of the term, *textography* can be defined as a “partial ethnography based on texts” relevant to the event(s) during the initial stage(s) of a research. Since I was unable to visit the site of the event and my chief informants were all dead and buried in a local graveyard of Kalindi, I could only collect what they had left behind and used their written words as my data. Additional data came from popular print and audiovisual media representations of the event in Bangladesh and from the many hours of interview with my journalist friend. It is he who had visited the site(s) and interviewed eye witnesses, neighbours, relatives and the only surviving member of the Ādam family.

As I worked through the writings of those who planned their suicide and died accordingly, the accounts of the outside world (the public, the press and the audiovisual media) offered the first set of “common sense” understandings which for me served as entry points into the perceptions of the rural inhabitants and the urban media. These were, at the same time, my points of departure from a straightforward “popular” and “popularised” understanding of the event and the preceding *texts* towards a more problematised enquiry and interpretation.

The Ādams’ “suicide” notes are important documents that provide clues to their motive and mental states of their authors long before the act. Suicide notes have always served both these functions (Jacobs, 1971; Shneidman, 1980). Yet, a phenomenological analysis of suicide notes only involves reading them as referring to the ultimate event of suicide, ignoring the fact that the *writing* of these suicide notes was also a practical material deed in itself, and therefore, the semiotic aspects are equally important. After all, a suicide note only “anticipates the act of suicide and thus does not describe an accomplished fact” (Utraiainen & Honkasalo, 1996, p. 195). Instead of being either the cause or the effect of something else, the Ādam(s) suicide(s) can also be considered a sign, and the “suicide” notes as “symbolic gestures” (Higonnet, 1986, pp.77–80), because language not only reflects and describes, but also essentially shapes the world (Austin, 1962). Therefore, as much as I am interested in the “circumstances or causes that refer or lead to [the Ādam] ‘suicide[s],” I am not less interested in the “meanings of the world, of life, and of death as written by the notes” themselves (Utraiainen & Honkasalo, 1996, p. 96). I believe a phenomenological analysis privileging the “context over the text” (Fitch, 1998; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992) as well as semiotic perspectives prioritising the “text over context” (Fitch, 1998; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992) together can provide a much more nuanced and layered understanding of both: the exercise of writing these “suicide” notes and the circumstances that might have led to that kind of writings that followed the suicide.

Yet, I could allow only a cursory presence to the semiotic perspectives of these “suicide” notes and a more elaborate space for their phenomenology. This absence has more to do with my limited expertise in linguistic theory and linguistic anthropology than with anything else. Furthermore, I am not a trained anthropologist, sociologist or philosopher but only an aspiring researcher with a background in medicine, psychiatry, public health and qualitative methods. With my own limitations, as well as those imposed by the scarcity of available materials, I shall try to arrive at a *verstehen*, an understanding of the “secret” life of the Ādam narratives and their “public” reception. The media representations laid bare their own constructions of events and narratives. A firsthand reading of the written notes can perhaps reveal a more *accurate* description of the stated motives or describe what *more* was happening in that small town, in the house which the Ādams called their home. Failing that, at least, I may be able to describe how the Ādam themselves thought about their past and to ascertain other significant events, including what they ascribed their origins to and how they anticipated their *grand finale*, their beginnings and the end of all possible futures.

In the name of the father: a “family” suicide in Bangladesh

Do not destroy yourselves . . . [Allah] is merciful to you. (The Koran, 4:29, Tr. Dawood, 1990)

On 11 July 2007, in Kalindi, a small town in Bangladesh about four to five hours drive from the capital city of Dhaka, nine members of the Ādam family including the housemaid decided to stand in the bright Wednesday afternoon sun to wait for the train at the outer signal of the local railway station. The curved railway tracks lay within a few yards from their heavily fenced, brick-built house. Before the driver could spot them and halt the speeding train, it ran over the waiting crowd. Seven died instantly and two were still alive when the neighbours rushed in hearing a loud thud followed by the sound of breaking bones. A young boy and a man in his mid-thirties were still alive and they were asking for water. The neighbours tried to take them to the nearest hospital, but they died on the way. Not all of the dead were adults. There were two children, and the oldest member was a 60-year-old woman. The dead belonged to the Ādam family and they related to the Ādam “religion” founded by the father Abdul Ādam.

Right after the event, all trains passing through the region were stopped. Kalindi was in the vicinity of an important district town. Thousands reached the site from the neighbouring villages and other areas. In Bangladesh, it was the first time that a family killed itself in such a manner. Next day most newspapers (The Daily Prothom Alo, 2007; The Daily Star, 2007a; The New Age, 2007) in the country and a few websites (Mail Online, 2007; South Asia News, 2007) reported the event. Some called it a “tragic mystery.” The following day, the most widely distributed English daily published another more detailed report seeking to unearth the “tragic mystery,” by digging deeper into the related “stories and rumours.” The same newspaper also offered a straight forward analysis for the readers, putting the blame on the social, rather than religious circumstances. It said:

What has happened . . . makes it imperative for the authorities to delve deep into the question of whether or not and indeed *how far the family was compelled by social circumstances* into putting an end to its sufferings in such a macabre manner. (Chowdhury, 2007)

The right wing newspapers published a different story. They described the suicide event as the result of their frustrated attempts to convert others to the Ādam “religion,” in the

wake of the popular resentment against the blasphemy of the Prophet. Their views were attuned to the opinions of *Sunni* orthodoxy in Bangladesh where losing one's faith in Islam was a "completely derailed thinking":

The planned suicide had several factors behind it. This was a completely derailed thinking and the need and desire for a reincarnation . . . No government detective agency could fathom this mystery. But the local neighbours, the suicide notes, eye witnesses and experts have solved some of it . . . They lost their faith in Islam, Allah and the Prophet. (The Dainik Sangram, 2007)

Abdul Ādam had died seven years ago on the same day his family members later killed themselves and took the lives of the two children in the family. He died in a tertiary hospital in Dhaka after suffering from a prolonged illness. Trouble began when his dead body was brought back to Kalindi. Abdul Ādam had already left a note with instructions regarding his burial:

After my death, do not perform the *janazāh*. Do not give me a bath and do not cover me with a *kafan*. Dig up the soil inside the house and bury me under. Bury me in the same clothes I shall be wearing. When you lay me down in the grave, my head should be turned towards the east, my feet to the west, and my face towards south. If there is any violation to this [instruction], I will take revenge. (Translated from the note written by Abdul Ādam)

This was a clear violation of the *sharī'ah*. Feet turned towards the west is considered a sin, a sign of disrespect to the *Qiblah*, the holy Ka'bah in Makkah (Hughes, 2007). With his note, Abdul Ādam expressed the wish to go against every stage of the *janazāh* ritual: He instructed against bathing and wearing the *kafan*, instructed to shun a public burial and finally showed the ultimate disrespect to Allah and the Prophet by asking to keep his feet directed to the west, towards Makkah. Abdul Ādam transgressed one of the most basic and non-negotiable Islamic laws.

His immediate family, whom I refer collectively as the Ādams, consisted of his wife (Hazera), two sons (Maruf & Adil) and five daughters (Afsari, Baby, Monsura, Razia, & Sharmin). They tried to follow his burial instructions, but active resistance from their Muslim majority neighbourhood and some of their own relatives made it impossible. In the end, Abdul Ādam was buried in the local graveyard in the presence of the local *mullah*, the police and the magistrate. None of his immediate family attended the *janazāh*.

Abdul Ādam had been born as Abdul Hossain. Until 1995, he was known as Abdul *Darbesh*, also occasionally as Abdul *Fakir*. His neighbours recognised him as a pious, learned man. He had served the then East Pakistan Army as a non-commissioned officer and retired in 1972. He had got married and settled in Kalindi. There, he devoted his time to reading with occasional innovations in agriculture and indigenous medicine. Till 1995, he was a regular visitor to the local mosque. In the same year, however, something must have happened. For reasons unknown, Abdul Hossain began to call himself Abdul Ādam. He started to question in public the divine status of the Holy Qur'an, the legitimacy of the birth of Prophet Muhammad, and preached against Islam as well as other religions. This was the year when he clearly distanced himself from *Sunni* Islam and, for the first time, engaged the influential local leaders in a nearby *bazaar* in argument against the Prophet and the Holy Qur'an. Everyone was furious. Abdul Ādam was publicly humiliated. At one point, he was driven out of the marketplace by his audience. The number of people seeking his help for material or spiritual gains reduced significantly after that incident. Abdul Ādam also began to withdraw himself from the outside world and concentrating, instead, on his family.

The Ādam family had been living in relative isolation even before Abdul Ādam died, probably, since 1995. Things turned for worse in 2000 due to the public dispute over the burial of his dead body. In the next few years, the family shifted to Dhaka and lived there

for a while. Details of their stay during this period are unknown at this point. The eldest son Maruf Ādam was the spiritual and legal heir of Abdul Ādam. In the absence of the father he supported the family till the day he was brutally murdered at a busy commercial area in Dhaka. With the death of the eldest son, the rest of the family had to return to the small town. They no longer had their leader or Ādam's spiritual heir to guide or support them. This was a family of old and young women, a little girl and a small boy and the only adult male member Adil who worked as a private tutor in Dhaka to earn a regular income for his big family. Neighbours say that he ran into trouble with the police and in the end returned to Kalindi to live with the rest of the family. The Ādam family was suffering from financial hardships and stayed close to each other at the expense of severing all ties with their extended family, as well as the neighbours. According to the neighbours, housemaid Reena was the most visible member of the house. Someone had to come out occasionally to the local bazaar, and she did it dutifully. The neighbours were "curious". This was not a large metropolis, and even in a big apartment block certain individuals or families would draw attention by their conspicuous absence in public. So did the Ādams. They led a life very different from their neighbours, received an education most of their neighbours could never access to and inspired as much awe as disgust from them. One can imagine the growing curiosity of the neighbours and how their fear and apprehension about the "mysterious" family probably got better of that. Yet, while some of the young men and the *mullah* in the small town took excessive interests in the family from time to time, there was no report of major confrontations between the Ādams and their neighbourhood, certainly not according to the neighbours.

Yet, something must have gone terribly wrong somewhere. The neighbours regarded the Ādams *strange* and considered the Ādams' behaviour as clear violation of the *Shari'ah*. For instance, they may have had misgivings about the facts that the Ādams stayed awake at night and slept during most of the day, or that they held evening sessions to invoke the spirits of their dead father and the eldest brother. Some neighbours believed that they were converted Christians; others were sure that the Ādams were involved in satanic practices (e.g. *kufri kalam* practice), that they invoked *jinn*s, kept them in bottles and used them in their own interests. Since the burial incident, followed by the murder of the eldest son and, subsequently, their return to Kalindi, battle lines were drawn between the family and the outside world.

The dead shall no longer speak. But they left their diaries, their "testimony" and their "*wasiat*," and to this I shall turn my attention next.

Suicide notes in old diaries: an extraordinary truth?

My name is Sharmin Ādam. I am writing about some extraordinary truth. Maybe you will not... [find] any similarity anywhere... I am declaring that religions are false. Now I will explain how. (Translated from the note written by Sharmin Ādam).

These are the first lines of the note written by Sharmin, the 17-year-old daughter of Ādam. She wrote her 36-page note in English, using the pages of a dated diary of 1992, and titled it as "Some true talk about religion." In the same diary, her note was followed by two short notes, both in English, written by her nephew and niece, 10-year-old Montu and 9-year-old Munni. Sharmin's eldest sister Afsari, a 40-year-old divorcée, wrote next. Her notes ran for 40 pages in Bengali, followed by her mother, Hazera's version (13 pages) in Afsari's handwriting (either Hazera did not know how to write or she was too ill to do so). Sharmin's 29-year-old sister Razia wrote at the end of the same diary for 34 pages. In a

separate diary, Sharmin's brother Adil (mid-thirties) wrote his suicide note in English. Reena, the 18 (?) year-old housemaid used a relatively new diary to write her version in Bengali. Monsura Ādam was Sharmin's 33-year-old sister. She wrote the longest note in Bengali which ran for 109 pages and possibly more. I found the notes of Reena and Monsura incomplete with pages missing in the end.

One of the most striking features of these notes is the dates. Unlike most suicide notes "usually written minutes before the suicidal death" (Leenaars, 2002, p. 22), the Ādam's notes were written much earlier, about two to five months before the event. Monsura probably wrote it first – her note is dated five months before the event. The rest of the family wrote around the same time. A closer look at each of these notes reveal the individual "idiolects" (individual's speech variety) as well as their idiosyncratic "style of reasoning" (Hacking, 1990), leaving no space for counter argument or doubt.

In the eyes of the devoted: Abdul Ādam and his family

It is not clear to what extent the Ādam suicide notes were faithful to the original teachings of Abdul Ādam himself. Some of the diaries that belonged to him contained Qur'anic verses written in odd shapes and varying orders. A *tasbeeh* (prayer beads) was also found in the Ādam's house. If he was no longer a *Sunni* Muslim, there must have been other kinds of practices he was involved in. What were these practices? According to Baby, the only living member, the father and the elder brother used to sit for long hours in meditation, and discussed religious matters. Details of these rituals are unknown at this point. From the "suicide" notes we only get hagiographic accounts of Abdul Ādam's life, elevating him to the position of an omnipotent creator. There is little description otherwise about the everyday life of the Ādam family. The eldest daughter, Afsari wrote a revered account of her father:

Adam is the lord of the world and the universe. He is a completely self-contained man, the best. This complete man is my father. Abdul Adam . . . We are all childrens of Adam (*Bani Adam*). Adam is the highest truth. The rules of Adam is the truth. The existence of Adam is the truth. All else is a lie. (translated from Bengali)

While Sharmin writes by refuting all human history, placing her father Abdul Ādam at the very centre of the history of mankind:

Whatever you have heard about Adam and Eve, those are false. There was a first Adam. Who created the whole universe. He is a God, the creator of all thing . . . Every century he came . . . He is now in Bangladesh. But everyone unable to recognize the valuable things . . . The name is Abdul Adam. (original spellings)

The "suicide" notes

Ten-year-old Montu and nine-year-old Munni wrote in childlike handwriting with all words in capital. Both notes are identical except for minor punctuations marks and a few spellings. Did the adults prompt them at the time of writing these notes? Or, did they already learn by heart the basics of the Ādam "religion?" These are short notes and I think it is worth mentioning them here in entirety with the original spelling, syntax and punctuation marks:

1Montu: I AM MONTU ABDUL ADAM
1Munni: I AM MUNNI ABDUL ADAM

2Montu: I AM TEN YEARS OLD.

2Munni: I AM 9 YEARS OLD.

3Montu: I AM THE ANOTHER BODY OF ABDUL ADAM.

3Munni: I AM THE ANOTHER BODY OF ABDUL ADAM.

4Montu: I CAME THIS WORLD FOR WORK, ABOVE ALL IS ADAM.

4Munni: I CAME THIS WORLD FOR WORK ABOVE ALL IS ADAM

5Montu: I AM DECLEARING THAT ALL RELIGION ARE FALSE

5Munni: I AM DECLARING THAT ALL REIGINAL

6Montu: MUHAMMADS ORIGINAL SHAPE IS DOG AND PIG

6Munni: SHAP IS DOG AND PIG

7Montu: MUHAMMAD IS KING OF ALL JINNS IN THE EARTH.

7Munni: MUHAMMAD IS KING OF ALL JINNS IN THE EARTH.

8Montu: MUHAMMAD IS HINATH MAKRAM AJAJIL SAITAN

8Munni: MUHAMMAD IS HINATH MAKRAM AJAJIL SAITAN

9Montu: I CAME TO THIS WORLD FOR FINISH MUHAMMAD EXISTANCE AND
SAVE ALL HUMAN BEING FROM MUHAMMAD'S TRAP

9Munni: I CAME TO THIS WORLD FOR FINISH MUHAMMAD EXISTANCE AND
SAVE ALL HUMAN BEING FROM MUHAMMAD TRAP

10Montu: ALL RELIGIONS ARE FALSE

10Munni: ALL RELIGONS ARE FALSE.

11Montu: I DON'T OBEY ANY RULE OF MUHAMMADS ANY SOCIETY OR ANY
LAW.

11Munni: I DONT OBEY ANY RULE OF MUHAMMADS, ANY SOCIETY OR ANY
LAW.

12Montu: ABOVE OF ALL IS MY LOW, MY RULE. WHICH IS ESTABLISHED ON
HUMANITY.

12Munni: ABOVE OF ALL IS MY LAW, MY RULE WICH IS ESTABLISHED ON
HUMANITY

13Montu: I AM THE LEADER OF TRUTH.

13Munni: I AM THE LEADER OF TRUTH.

14Montu: I AM ALSO DECLEARING THAT, BY MA DEPARTURE MUHAMMAD'S
ALL EXISTANCE, RELIGIONS AND WORSHIP PLACES WILL FINISH FOR EVER.

14Munni: I AM ALSO DECLARING THAT, BY MY DEPARTURE MUHAMMAD'S
ALL EXISTANCE, RELIGIONS AND WORSHIP PLACES WILL FINISH FOR EVERY
DECLARATION (original spelling and cases)

These notes bear elements that are fairly consistent in the rest of the notes with more or less elaborations on particular themes: (a) a short introduction (name and age); (b) presenting each "body" as another "body" of the founder Abdul Ādam; (c) a declaration that all religions, that is, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity are false and (d) revelation of the Ādam's truth in several parts, that is, (i) Muhammad is the king of *jinn*s, in fact the Satan himself; (ii) Every religion, every holy man or woman who ever appeared in this world and everyone in the neighbourhood are Muhammad's agents; (iii) These agents betrayed Abdul Ādam and tortured the Ādam family; (iv) Abdul Ādam is the creator and the real Ādam, the lord of the universe and finally, (v) the Ādam family is here in Bangladesh to destroy the evil Muhammad and save humanity from his influence. The final statements are usually dedicated to the superiority and omnipotence of the Ādams with a declaration of their decision to leave this world to destroy Muhammad and

his agents. The only adult male member Adil wrote in English:

I am declaring that Hinnath Ajajil Mokrom Shaitan (Mohammad) is a pig and a dog. His all religions [religions?], law, rules, everything is false and cheating to all creatures and he must be punished and still he is suffering in hell. The earth must be as wonderful place with full of peace and without any existence of Hinath Mokrom Ajajil Saitan (Mohammad). (original spellings intact)

There are of course certain *differences* among these notes that may have occurred because of age, position in the family as well as the nature of each person's engagement with Abdul Adam, whether or not he or she remembered vividly the important events in 1995, 2000 and 2004. For instance, what is conspicuously absent in the children's writings is any information on the life of Abdul Ādam, or the events surrounding his death, or the murder of his eldest son Maruf, as well as what transpired between 2004 and 2007 because of the simple fact that they were too young to remember any of that. Neither did any of the children mention their mother. Only Razia devoted two pages to the sister (Baby) they regarded as the *traitor* of the family. She wrote:

There is someone in our house, another form of Muhammad, and she is Baby Muhammad. This Baby Muhammad *Shaitan* insulted and hurt our father . . . , mother, and all of us . . . She . . . spitted on our face . . . There is no place for Baby Muhammad in our mind and no place for her in this house and nowhere in this world. This *Shaitan* has destroyed our peace of mind.

Afsari, Razia and Monsura, the three elder sisters and their mother Hazera spoke in length about the public humiliation of Ādam in 1995, the incidents around his death in 2000 and the murder of Maruf, the eldest son of the family, in 2004. According to their narratives, both Afsari and Hazera seem to have been suffering from some physical ailment with considerable loss of weight. Both, however, ascribed the source of their suffering to the evil influence of Muhammad and his agents: "...Mohammad has tortured me so much and anyone would know it by looking at my face, the condition of my health" (Afsari). Mother Hazera was also concerned about the fate of the Ādam house. She is the only one to admit the internal quarrels among the siblings ("Muhammad influences the body of one of my children to attack another"). The younger sister Sharmin devoted more pages to the eldest brother Maruf who may have been her guide and mentor in the formative years. Sharmin wrote about this "extraordinary smart" brother and his demise at the hands of Mohammed: "My brother worked as dean in many 52 international university in Dhaka and in outside. He is extraordinary smart, intelligent and individual and intellectual man I ever met. There is no doubt. He is different. I am very proud to be his sister . . . My brother left by muhamad's attacked." (original spellings)

Adil's note is singular in the sense that he offers the only "male" version of the Ādam situation, focusing repeatedly on his claim that their family was the most "self dependent" and "independent" in the whole world:

We are the only family in the world that is independent and selfdepanded. We are the only one family in the world that is totally independed and selfdepended and out of mohamod's rules., law and relisious activities and relisions. (original spellings intact)

Adil continued with his description of themselves as "ADAMS" and the purpose of their lives:

So who we are? I have already given my and our identity as "ADAMS" . . . We have come to establish the truth and reality in to the world but our bodies were killed again and again by mohamod's rules, law and relisions. (original spellings intact)

Reena's place in the family as a housemaid was *different* from the rest. She was very pleased to be accepted in the inner circles ("I got a new life after coming here... I never knew life could be so beautiful, human beings could be so beautiful"). Her notes were full of adulations for the Ādam daughters whom she called her "aunties" and the late Ābdul Ādam as *nana* (maternal grandfather). It is surprising that none of the Ādams acknowledged her presence in their notes. Yet, they must have treated Reena well; otherwise she would not have expressed such delight to be one of them.

Among all the Ādams, Monsura deserves special attention. In the absence of the father and the elder brother, it seemed she was the one to assume the role of the leader. Her note also contains the most difficult-to-access descriptions. She wrote in length about her states of "possession". She claimed how her body was heated up the first time she was possessed by her father's spirit and later by her brother's. Soon, the whole family was receiving instructions from Ābdul Ādam and Maruf through Monsura. Later Razia and Afsari also joined in as "mediums." Sadness disappeared when their father [father's spirit] returned. Her note incidentally reveals that the rest of the family was silent about certain occurrences. For instance, she described a confrontation with Adil's one-time girlfriend in Dhaka. The girl was informed about their Ādam "religion." She was asked to put her feet on the Qur'an. The girl fainted but nothing happened to Monsura. Monsura illustrated this point to prove the invincibility of the Ādams, the fallibility of Qur'an as one of their hard won victories against the evil Muhammad and his daughter. Monsura wrote as herself and also in the voice of her father, as if Ābdul Ādam was writing through her:

My daughter Monsura said she did not abide by Muhammad's rules. She does not believe in any religion and she even attempted to burn the Qur'an. But when she placed the Qur'an at the feet of the evil Fatema [Adil's girlfriend] why did Fatema become unconscious, and nothing happened to Monsura?

Except Baby, none of the Ādams seemed to have resisted their father. There was rarely an admission of protest against their beloved father or any possibility of casting some *doubt* on his belief. On one instance Monsura gave a hint: "They [Muhammad's agents] tried to inhabit our bodies and influence us against our father." Such rare oppositions clearly did not persist and in the end seemed to have been incorporated within the structure of the Ādam's belief system.

Finally, I will pay further attention to the three selected themes that seemed to have preoccupied them the most, that is, (a) The Ādam "religion," (b) Unbearable suffering, (c) Revenge and reunion.

(a) The Ādam religion: popular humanism

The Ādam "religion" declared all religions false and that Muhammad founded all of them but did not provide much reason as to why. They appealed to a popular notion of humanism based on such popularised statements, for example, "human beings are the greatest creatures on earth," and therefore, "they do not need any religion at all"; or in terms of certain questions, for example, "why should they require punishment or reward after death?" or "why should religions put fears in the mind of the humans?," etc. They based their religion on a straightforward polemic against all existing religions, opposing each and every one of them without very much to offer on its own.

There are also detailed sections criticising Prophet Muhammad, his birth, his polygamy, even accusing him of incest with his daughter. To prove their point, the Ādams appealed to a contemporary notion of morality (e.g. "Muhammad married young

girls, his daughter married her uncle, they were involved in sorcery or *jadu tona*” etc.). Part of their diaries also insisted on the fact that Qur’an was a book of *jinn*s.

The Ādams “religion” never invited the readers to a debate. The Ādams wrote repeatedly: “No matter what others say, we don’t care.” They cared little to provide evidence for any of their “grandiose” claims. They proclaimed that “the only truth as the Ādams truth,” “above all is the words and the laws of Abdul Ādams” and that “beauty, truth and justice shall prevail in this world.” Yet, the readers are left to wonder what these Ādams’s laws in fact are. They provided no such details.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in spite of their constant efforts to break away from Islam, they were continuously employing the Islam-based notions of humanity and everyday morality (contemporary social taboos against polygamy or marrying the uncle). Much as they tried, the Ādams could hardly shake off their Islamic past (and present). With a self-fulfilling prophecy, the Ādams cried out: “Muhammad is so influential that it is necessary to leave this world to destroy him.”

(b) Unbearable suffering: conspiracy of Muhammad

The Ādams repeatedly complained of an “unbearable suffering.” They mentioned various kinds of “visible” and “invisible” tortures by the agents of Muhammad. Housemaid Reena described regular attacks by the neighbours:

In different ways... they stole furniture, tube wells, broke the toilet doors and took away the bathroom pipes. They came inside the house and tried to cut the trees.

These accusations are too specific to ignore them as *figments of imagination*. Some neighbours did admit occasional hostility of others (!) towards the Ādams. They claimed it was not a regular phenomenon and no serious damage was ever done to the house or to the family members. The Ādams’ descriptions of torment were mostly wrapped up in the language of ultimate superiority. Facing rejection, social isolation and repeated attacks, they survived in constant denial of their own vulnerability. Was something else also troubling them, adding more suffering to their already marginalised status? Monsura wrote:

Muhammad exerted his influence on us all. He exerted influence on my father’s financial, mental laws and upon each of our brothers and sisters... He had tortured on each of our bodies by black magic (*jadu tona*). ... They [Muhammad and his agents] have attacked us in every nanosecond, visibly through the human faced evil forces and invisibly by *jinn*s.

The visible “evil forces” were of course the neighbours who attacked, but who were these invisible forces? *Jinn*s are creatures made of smokeless fire (mentioned in the Qur’an; Hughes, 2007). According to the Ādams they were not supposed to believe in Islam and what it preached or its depictions of other creatures. Yet to them, Muhammad was the king of *jinn*s and therefore it was only natural that he would unleash his “evil forces” upon his arch rival, the Ādams.

(c) Revenge and reunion: the Ādams’ logic for suicide

The Ādams regarded the absence of their father and the elder brother not as death but departure. They were regarded to be too powerful to be dead. The Ādams argued that their departure was to strengthen their own position against Muhammad and his agents.

When all is said and done, they had only two desires left: *reunion* with their dead mentors and *revenge* against their enemy. Towards the end of her note, Sharmin wrote:

Our last resort is go and finish them [the neighbours as Muhammad's agents] all. . . . We never imagined that we have to stay without them [father and elder brother] . . . Just one wish that go to my father and brother and take revenge on Muhammad . . . We also take revenge on people shaped dogs, who hit us badly. And who didn't let us do what we had to do. We just waiting for a right time. Our time is coming soon . . . After we gone, everything will express and no one can't do any backlash. There will be no Muhammad's existence in the world. All mosque, Pagoda, Temple and church will perish forever. (in original spelling)

Shared delusion, *kufri kalam* or a sub-culture of protest? In search of an appropriate framework for the Adams' suicide

The predominantly *Sunni* Muslim neighbourhood in Kalindi and the right-wing Islamic media were more inclined to adopt a *religious/Islamic* explanation of the Adams' suicide. In their eyes, the Adams died with an anti-Islamic faith. As a result of their "frustration" to convert others, the Adams committed suicide. In addition, the secular media were interested in a not-so-religious explanation, but preferred westernised terms like "cult suicide" and the psychopathological construct of "delusion" to explain the *mystery* of the Adams' "religion" and their suicidal intentions. In their opinion, "social isolation" was a direct result of these pathological beliefs. This is what led the Adams to the railway track.

Both these explanations make common sense to their respective audiences and point towards the heterogeneous belief systems of the Bangladeshi society, which in this case can be roughly divided in its rural and urban counterparts, between more or less Islamised and secularised sections of the society. Either way, the suicide was too neatly explained – the motive clear, the case closed.

Yet, almost a year later, when the noise of the media and the rumours of the neighbours are dying down, the "curious" suicide notes refuse to be shut away. The dead Adams are perhaps turning in their graves. One can hear them rattling in the closets of the police records, the forensic expert and in my drawers too. It is time to give them a "fair hearing."

I am essentially in agreement with Leenaars (2002, p. 19–20) who argued for a complex multi-disciplinary and *idiographic* approach to study the suicide. He wrote:

Suicide and suicidal behaviour [including writing of suicide notes] are multifarious events. There are biological, psychological, intra-psychic, interpersonal, cognitive, conscious and unconscious, sociological, cultural, and philosophical elements in the events. Thus, research in suicide cannot be reduced to a single approach.

It is, therefore, necessary to *interpret* the Adams' "suicide" notes and their suicide not just in terms of clear-cut "motives" but in relation to what transpired before and afterwards. In what constituted the event, and the *context* in which the "suicide" notes emerged, the *meanings* which unfolded: specifically in relation to a fundamental question, that is, what did the Adams themselves have to say on the subject? This I have already described. The other relevant questions in this regard could be, for instance, (1) What happened in Kalindi in the wake of the Adam suicide? (2) Were the Adams suffering from shared delusions? (3) Is it possible to locate the Adam "religion" within its Islamic past, either in recognised traditions or underground "*kufri*" (satanic) practices? and finally, (4) Were the Adams part of the immanent "sub-culture of protest" in contemporary rural Bangladesh? I will address each question in the subsequent sections.

1. *Suicide in a small town of Bangladesh: what does it mean to search for motive?*

“In England, you must not commit suicide, on pain of being regarded as a criminal if you fail and a lunatic if you succeed.” (Professor C.E.M. Joad’s aphorism in Alvarez 1972, pp. 92–93 as cited by Tatz, 1999, p. 36)

In England, suicide was decriminalised in 1961. Instead, it was now considered to be a “disturbed balance of the mind,” relegated to the psychiatric domain (Tatz, 1999, p. 37). The Bangladesh Penal Code, however, considers suicide to be criminal, and specifies that *completed* or *attempted* suicide is a punishable act (WHO SEARO, 2006).

The suicidal manner of their death, of course, turned the Ādams’ bodies to become objects of investigation – under jurisprudence, a medico-legal matter. When the legal and medical investigations were over, the body of suicide remained no longer in the hands of the experts but was returned for burial preparations to the community of which the dead had once been a part of. In Bangladesh, the medico-legal “body” of suicide is a religious “body.” Parallel to the legal and medical institutions, the *Shari’ah* functions as an informal regulatory “body” in this country. To most Muslims *perhaps* and to a more orthodox Muslim bend of mind, *of course*, suicide is a transgression from Islamic values. The next of kin rarely accepts the dead body for burial preparations. In some cases, therefore, the “body” is handed over to *Anjuman-e-Mofidul Islam*, a charitable organisation which collects unclaimed dead bodies to give them an Islamic *janazāh*. The Ādams’ dead bodies received a similar fate.

In the social world of Kalindi, the Ādams suicide was perceived as a human tragedy, evoking sympathy and a genuine sadness from many neighbours. Many of them openly regretted the death of those two children. These are the same neighbours who had previously considered them *strange*, who either attacked or avoided them for the last 12 years of their lives. When the police came and the reporters thronged the small town, nobody admitted his or her own involvement in the Ādams’ affair. Who can tell how it all began? Are the neighbours to blame for their *intolerance*, their outrage at what they thought as an insult, as *unreasonable* criticisms against their beloved Prophet? If the neighbours were unworthy of their trust, did the Ādams at least tolerate the beliefs and practices of their *Sunni* counterparts? While they interpreted every event and every *misfortune* as the conspiracy of someone who died 1400 years ago, did they concede any ground to the faith of their fellow neighbours? Were they simply oblivious of the consequences of their words and action? With little evidence and many gaps in my investigation, I can only pose certain questions of this kind at this point.

Both the Ādams and the rest of the neighbours seemed to have operated within the norms they set for themselves. It is just that their values clashed at critical moments of their individual–collective lives and resulted in mutual mistrust. If the neighbours had attacked them, the Ādams retaliated with verbal insults, the most outrageous and implausible accusations against the Prophet or vice versa. You can risk doing that of course, only if you inhabit a distant, safe space in some other secularised society (even there it may not go uncontested); but not while you are in Bangladesh, not in a small town where the Prophet is the ultimate symbol of the Sacred. In Kalindi as in the thousands of Muslim majority small towns in Bangladesh, if someone curses the Prophet – he or she destroys the very notion of the Sacred. That is the time when gentle neighbours may turn into sworn enemies.

Despite instances of such outrage based on faith, I cannot look away from the fact that these apparently religious concerns could be enmeshed within other socio-economic interests. After the death of their father and the elder brother, it was evident that the family

had little source of income. It was a family predominantly of women and children, very often unattended by the only surviving male member, Adil. They had little or no hope of receiving assistance from any of their neighbours or relatives. Contrary to nostalgic perceptions, small towns in Bangladesh are not sites of idyllic greenery and innocence. Rural or urban Bangladesh is not famous for the treatment of its vulnerable or ex-communicated population. False claim to property is also not uncommon. It is not that difficult in a small town to chase the unwanted inhabitants from their own house, often with legal sanction. The Adams' "suicide" notes mentioned certain individuals with an eye for the Adam property near the railway tracks. A big house with a huge orchard was prime property because the small town was going through rapid transformation, and real estate developers were already interested in acquiring land in that area. I am not entirely sure how much the Adam "religion" and the *Sunni* Islamic responses to it contributed to the states of affairs, and what roles such possible interests of a group of opportunists in the small town played in it. It is important to note that the police did not arrest any neighbour or relative for abetment of the Adams' suicide.

2. *Folie à famille: shared belief or shared delusion?*

"Religion may be the object of delusional belief insofar as the culture of a group no longer permits the assimilation of [certain] religious or mystical beliefs in the present context of experience" (Foucault 1976, p. 81).

Between life and death there is *suicide*, the action of killing oneself intentionally. Across the boundary of reason, there are beliefs labelled as *unreasonable*, often with dangerous consequences. Some die for their beliefs, we think them brave. Suicide bombers kill themselves while killing others. They are heroes somewhere, and terrorists in most of the world. In the quiet corners of our contemporary world, there are yet "others," persecuted for the beliefs which may seem odd, and in direct opposition to what the others believe in their vicinity, just outside their own, small, isolated group: an "other" like the Adams who killed themselves for such "unreasonable" beliefs. Beliefs which were incomprehensible outside their limited circle and impervious to any counter argument, without any possibility of doubt; fixed, firm and sustained against all odds. The Adams could very well be brave. They might have been ill, too, suffering from a "psychopathology" called "shared delusion."

The dictionary definition of delusion is "an idiosyncratic belief or impression that is not in accordance with a generally accepted reality" (Pearsall, 1999, p. 379). According to the official definition of delusions, delusion is a "false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture." (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 765).

Folie à famille is defined as a Shared Psychotic Disorder (SPD), referring to a condition where all members of a family share the delusions (Mirabzadeh et al., 2007). This is an extremely rare condition, but one that has been found in many different cultures. The SPD delusional system at its core harbours essential delusions, very often persecutory and/or grandiose in nature, manifested as part of the sub-cultural contexts, for example, as religious or political beliefs (Goldman, 1995). Usually the dominant personality in the family first manifests the delusions, which in turn affects the other devoted members. *Folie à famille* may or may not be part of schizophrenia, or a primary delusional

disorder, or mood disorder (Gelder, Gath, Mayou, & Cowen, 1996). Progression of delusional symptoms, for example, delusional perceptions or moods, to an established system usually reflects the “dramatic attempt by a family to maintain cohesiveness in the presence of a perceived hostile environment” (Gelder et al., 1996 cited by Mirzabadeh et al., 2007, p. 46).

The Ādam ‘suicide’ notes reveal, in many more ways than not, a delusional system that they were being persecuted by their enemy and arch rival, the Prophet of Islam, and that he was conspiring against them through his ‘visible’ agents, for example, the Ādam neighbours, relatives and the *traitor* Baby (the estranged Ādam sister); as well as ‘invisible’ agents, for example, *jinns* and *pagals* (the mad men on the street). They had a hyper-grandiose vision, a ‘fixed, firm belief’ that the late Abdul Ādam was the original creator of the universe, the Ādam ‘religion’ was the only true religion. In consequence, they formulated their final mission to leave, so as to destroy the Prophet and restore peace for ever.

To accept the Ādam belief-system as an instance of SPD, one also needs to ask, who was the ‘dominant personality’ who showed the first symptoms? I believe it may very well be the late Abdul Ādam himself. Most suicide notes began by referring back to the 1995 incident and did not go much beyond that year, except when they briefly mentioned the legends of Abdul Ādam’s birth and his subsequent life before settling in Kalindi. Abdul Ādam may have had symptoms at around that time. The family members initially noticed his unusual behavior but were soon taken in by the leader’s own explanations or devised their own. Monsura wrote:

Why every morning my father was muttering verbal insults while sitting inside his room [when nobody was around]? Why did he strike the bed repeatedly with his stick? And [all this was directed] to whom? No one behaves like this without a reason? . . .

He used to beat up every mad man that passed in front of our house. The neighbours tried to put a stop to it. But let me ask, why would a healthy [did she mean sane?] man beat a mad man of the street? . . .

These mad men were all Muhammad’s agents. He sent them to torture us. That is why my father used to beat them. (Translated from notes written by Monsura)

These could be instances of delusions and auditory hallucination either as part of that or as a priori condition. Or, could it also be that Abdul Ādam was suffering from an organic illness affecting his brain and these symptoms were part of his illness? Whatever the nature of his illness was it can be argued that the extremely devoted family later shared the same delusional system of the father, and that they continued to support one another in their beliefs. The Ādams evidently had an ‘unusually close relationship’ with each other. The second sister Baby perhaps was not as devoted as the rest, and therefore, immune of her father’s influence. The other Ādams rejected her and regarded her as a *traitor*, an example of how a delusional family treats its dissenting member. However, I must admit that more evidence is required before coming to a definite conclusion that the Ādam family indeed suffered from SPD.

At this point, I am reminded of the well-publicised news on two sisters in Dhaka who suffered from a similar condition two years back. Rita and Mita, physician and engineering graduates from prestigious universities, had previously severed all connections with their relatives, colleagues and neighbours, even with their eldest sister. They buried their dead mother inside the compound and remained inside the house without food. After starving for a couple of months they were finally rescued and separated for therapeutic purpose. One of them first heard voices (auditory hallucinations) informing her that their enemies had targeted their family. The father had died many years back, and the maternal

uncle, who took charge of the family business, had also been dead for some time. Life in that particular suburb of Dhaka without a male “guardian” aroused the curiosity of their hostile neighbours, the harassment and subsequent isolation and with drawal of the sisters (The Daily Star, 2005, 2007b). The incident received considerable attention from the media and the psychiatrists took both sisters in their custody. Later reports revealed that one of the two sisters no longer suffered from any symptoms, while the other was in remission.

Controversies around the definition of delusion

It is true, however, that the official definition of “delusion” has often been criticised as being either “incoherent or subject to significant counter-examples” (Bell, Halligan, & Ellis, 2006). There is an ongoing debate on the definition and nature of “delusion”. To judge whether delusion is a separate category (Jaspers, 1963) or an extreme kind of belief (Jones et al., 2008) is not within the scope of this paper, and not really necessary at this point to indulge into. The admission of an “epistemological” discomfort around the diagnosis of “delusion” is, however, important.

Scholars like Dawkins (2007) would, of course, argue against religion in general, and lump all kinds of religious beliefs into a singular category to brand them as delusions. Yet, there is little consensus in the academic world that religious belief itself is necessarily delusional. All religious beliefs are not always impervious to counter argument or any notion of doubt. At least, the believers are capable of accepting the fact that the existence of “non-believing” neighbours is possible.

It is also interesting to note that the Ādams’ transgressions were never recognised by their neighbours as *pagalami* (madness), despite the fact that, in common parlance, similar acts are usually regarded as such. Maybe it is because of the revolting nature of the Ādams’ vilification of the Prophet, and also because the Ādams never publicly manifested the “typical” symptoms of a *pagal* (mad man) on the street. In Kalindi, therefore, they were regarded not as *pagal*, but as *kafir* (non-believer or infidel) or *murtadd* (infidel or atheist) involved in various satanic practices, for example, *kufri* (satanic practices), *kali sadhana* (Tantric practices by the devotees of the goddess *Kali*), *jinn pala* (invocation of evil *jinn*s) etc.

This fact diverts our attention to somewhere else and warrants an explanation beyond the psychopathological and towards the socio-cultural and religious underpinnings of the Ādams belief system. We need to address questions, for example, how was the Ādam “religion” made possible in the first place? Could such beliefs, psychopathological or not, come out of the blue, without being grounded at least in part, in some pre-existing religious tradition(s)? Even if we go by the urban media’s *modernist* explanation, that the Ādam “religion” was a figment of imagination, a collective delusion – or the expert notion of the SPD – what gave these symptoms their sustenance? If not an origin, could we think of possible links to existing practices within or outside Islam in Bangladesh? Or, shall we think of it is something entirely new, devoid of any probably link to the past, something that never happened before, a completely contingent occurrence?

3. Deviance of deviances: Sufi Islam, ‘kufri kalam’ and the Ādam religion

We could perhaps argue that the Ādam “religion” was not an entirely *contingent* and therefore *new* occurrence, but rather an offshoot from pre-existing and unorthodox Islamic belief practices – a *deviance from all possible deviances*.

Let us not forget that Abdul Ādam had attended the mosque as a pious Muslim for more than 20 years, ever since he settled in Kalindi in 1972. People knew him as a *Fakir* and a *Darbesh*. What kind of Muslim was he from the beginning? Can we place him within a continuum of Islamic beliefs? Is it possible to trace possible links of the Ādam “religion” to its Islamic past?

According to the neighbours, the fact that Abdul Ādam was called a *fakir* or *darbesh* refers to his prior claim to be a *Pir*. Mannan (n.d.), a social anthropologist, provided a descriptive account of the *Pir* tradition in Bangladesh. He wrote:

The appellation *Pir* . . . means a teacher who can guide one for spiritual attainments; salvage one from worldly sins; protect one from evil; and enlighten oneself with the wisdom of Allah. *Pirs* [in Bangladesh, are believed to] have spiritual powers . . . phenomenal extra-sensory perception and gift of prophecy.

. . . The degree of power also categorizes *Pirs* into two categories . . . *Ba-Shara* and *Be-Shara* (Khan 1960, pp. 53–54). . . The *Ba-Shara Pirs* are known mainly as orthodox *Pirs* because of their practices of conforming Islamic *Shari’ah* . . .

On the other hand, *Be-Shara Pirs* . . . [are believed to] control . . . *jinn*s and a mystic world. The *Be-Shara Pirs* are known as heteroprax [heterodox] since they have their own self-innovative styles and their practices do not conform to *Shari’ah*.

Abdul Ādam may have been regarded as a *Be-shara fakir* (or *Darbesh*). In that he was perhaps following the route of the heterodox Islam that had a long history in the region where he lived and had received his lessons in Islam. He may have been involved in certain secret practices, for example, uttering Quranic verses to invoke *jinn*s; otherwise forbidden by the *Shari’ah*. But, until 1995, he kept up with his public appearance as a *Sunni* Muslim. It was widely known that in his house, he often treated people believed to have been possessed by *jinn*s, as well as all kinds of physical illnesses. He was regarded as a *bona fide* religious healer, also known for his clairvoyance, an exceptional ability to foretell the future. According to the housemaid Reena, some of the second generation Ādams, for example, Afsari and Monsura, also tried to fill in the place of their father, although they met with very limited success.

Some of the Ādam daughters mentioned that Abdual Ādam had been born several times before he came to Kalindi. In one of his previous births, he appeared as “Anal Huq” in Multan, Pakistan. I could trace no link to the heterodox Islamic practices in Multan but there is some historical evidence for the legend of the “Anal huq.” In 922 A.D., *Sufi* Monsur Al-Hallaj cried *ana al-Huqq*: “I am the Turth,” “apparently identifying himself with divinity” (Sedgwick, 2000, p. 222). Imam Al-Gazzali later argued that Hallaj “had not been blasphemous but only unwise in proclaiming an esoteric truth that could be misleading to the uninitiated. Because there is no reality but al-Lah – as the Shahadah maintains – all men are essentially divine” (Armstrong, 1993, p. 229). In his own time, Hallaj was however hanged for blasphemy.

It is important also to briefly mention here the little known tradition of “*kufri kalam*” in Bangladesh. *Kufri kalam* is regarded as an extremely deviant and “underground” practice of committing the ultimate *kufri* (infidelity) by reciting Qur’an from the end in opposite direction. Other extreme acts include spitting or urinating on Qur’an, cursing the Prophet and his family in the most derogatory manner possible. This is believed to be the result of a pact with *Iblis* (*Shaitan* or Satan) to invoke the dark forces, the evil *jinn*s for various maleficent purposes. Sometimes certain *Be-shara Pirs* are accused of practising *kufri kalam* for material and supernatural gains. The presence of *kufri kalam* may very well be nothing but exaggerated rumours, often a term manufactured by orthodox Muslims to persecute adherents of the *Be-shara* tradition. Yet, its continual presence in popular

parlance, the extreme secrecy surrounding the esoteric practices of certain Be-shara *Pirs* in Bangladesh invite speculations that it might exist.

The late Abdul Ādam had his place secure within the “universe of belief” of his fellow Muslims, among his *Sunni* neighbours in Kalindi. He may have transgressed the limits set by the *Shari’ah*, but before 1995 he did not step out of the “space of transgression” (i.e. the Be-shara *Pir* tradition) defined and delimited by the *Sunni* orthodoxy. It is only when he made public what was supposed to be kept secret that he went beyond that liminal space of transgression. That is when his society rejected him and accused his preaching against the Prophet as instances of *kufri kalam* (satanic practice).

Beyond the *psychopathological* and the *religious* frameworks, the Ādam beliefs could also be located within the broader category of the *social*. Let us now shift our attention to what one may call the “sub-culture of protest” against orthodoxy and religious persecution in rural Bangladesh.

4. A “sub-culture of protest”: religious persecution and anti-Islamism in contemporary Bangladesh

Although the Islamic world has never undergone any grand *Inquisition* in the Christian sense, persecution of minority sects by more orthodox Muslims is nothing new (Sedgwick, 2000). In contemporary Bangladesh, the assaults against the *Ahmadiyya Muslim Community* for the last two decades are publicised events. Islamic scholars often consider such sects as protest movements, rising in protest against *Sunni* orthodoxy, in opposition not only to their environment but to the state (Khuri, 1990). The Ādams, in spite of their recent Islamic past were more like an anti-Islamic sect. Compared to the *Ahmadiyya* instance, however, they received a “less violent” treatment from their neighbours for more than a decade. Yet, in the end they had to suffer a tragic fate, constituted within the religious milieu of persecution. What began with the public humiliation of Abdul Ādam in 1995 was accentuated in confrontation with the state authority and *Sunni* orthodoxy over the dead body of Abdul Ādam in 2000, and culminated in the 2007 suicide, the ultimate act of defiance.

One can perhaps compare Abdul Ādam to a contemporary iconoclast, the late Aroj Ali Matubbar (1900–1985). Matubbar too had his first public clash with the *mullah* over the dead body of his mother. He wished to click a photograph of his dead mother. This was regarded as an anti-Islamic practice. Troubles ensued and Matubbar had to give in to the socio-religious pressures. Later, he went on to advocate his brand of atheism and anti-Islamism throughout his life, much to the dismay of the local *mullah*. Born in a poor peasant family and without any formal academic training, Matubbar came to be regarded as a self-taught philosopher from rural Bangladesh. His weapons against orthodoxy were borrowed from available literature on rationalist science and secularism (Matubbar, n.d.). This brought him within the fold of the urban intellectuals of his time. Matubbar inspired numerous articles, reviews, novels and stage dramas based on his life and his writings (Chanchal, n.d.).

Some of the questions Matubbar posed against the Islamic viewpoint are strikingly similar to the more intelligible sections of the Ādams’ notes. For instance, both argued against Islam and religions in general. None of them took Qur’an as the Holy Text above and beyond criticism. Both spoke within the premise of a “common-sense” humanism and *manab dharma* (religion of humanity). Yet, Abdul Ādam and his family faced outright rejection by the rural neighbours and were completely ignored by the urban elites.

The Ādams were alive when the dual spectres of Islamism and anti-Islamism were raging across the globe with far-reaching consequences even for Bangladesh. The rise of politicised Islam in its current militant variety was not yet prevalent in the eighties, the time when Matubbar was still alive. He did not have to face a similar intensity of persecution from the orthodoxy as the Ādams did or some of his urban counterparts did much later.

Yet, it can be argued that both Matubbar and the Ādam family belonged to the often dormant “sub-culture of protest” against Islam and “religion” as orthodoxy. This may have occurred to resist the Islamist intolerance to doubt and atheism in contemporary rural Bangladesh. Their presences were perhaps also made possible by the existing multiple “space(s) of transgression,” the “multi-vocality” of voices within Islam and at its margins. Historically, the *Sufi* traditions and various unorthodox religious practices (e.g. Be-shara *Pir* traditions and the Bāul) have stood in contrast to the orthodox version of Islam. At present, these traditional practices are major forces to resist the highly politicised “Wahabi” Islam, based on an ultraconservative understanding of and a strict adherence to the *Sharī'ah*. Apart from internal resistance in the form of sectarian movements within Islam, although rare and often obscured, it seems that from time to time these extraordinary instances of protests arose in rural Bangladesh of which both Matubbar and Ādams had been a part, as atheists or adherents to a new “religion.”

No one, of course, would argue against the sanity of Matubbar except perhaps the local *mullah*, since he always spoke within the bounds of consensual rationality, within the “recognised” tradition of a secularised, rationalist discourse. He applied common sense logic, cited examples from existing literature, provided arguments based on collected evidence and finally there was scope for debate and a possibility of doubt. The Ādam family did none of these. They transgressed the bounds of all “recognised” discourses in the small town or in greater Bangladesh. In that, not one but several limits have been crossed simultaneously.

“Category fallacy” versus the “Seligman error”: concluding remarks on the Ādam beliefs

Going back to the initial psychopathology argument, some might argue against *medicalising* or *psychiatrizing* the Ādams at the expense of other possible explanations. The “social labelling approach” (Helman, 2001, p. 175), for instance, considers psychiatric disorders as probable “myths,” as “problems of living” (Szasz, 1974) or as culturally relative entities without universal existence (Waxler, 1977). Such views have often been criticised for ignoring the biological aspects altogether. Most medical anthropologists would rather agree on a combined approach including both the biological and the social labelling perspectives of mental illness, that

there are certain universals in abnormal behaviour, particularly extreme disturbances in conduct, thought or effect. While there is wide variation in their form and distribution, the Western categories of major psychoses, such as ‘schizophrenia’ [or, in this case, Shared Psychotic Disorder] . . . , are found throughout the world, though of course they may be given different labels in different cultures . . . though their clinical presentations are usually influenced by the local culture. (Helman, 2001, p. 176)

Applying the model of Shared Psychotic Disorder to conceptualise the Ādam state of mind can, however, be regarded as a *category fallacy*, that is, “the reification of a nosological category developed for a particular cultural group . . . applied to members of another culture for whom it lacks coherence and its validity has not been established”

(Kleinman, 1987). SPD or shared delusions are not recognised or accepted by the inhabitants of Kalindi but it can't find support among the urban and secularised elite. However, one should take note of the fact that much as I put in question the validity of the SPD diagnosis as a methodological or even epistemological dilemma, lack of firmer evidence to establish the SPD questions the validity of diagnosis in the first place.

Also, before we abandon the psychopathology argument, it is important to keep in mind that we run the risk of committing the "Seligman error," that is, miss a universal illness because "local understandings and social response did not allow it to appear objectivised through social extrusion as in a Western [read psychiatric] hospital but rather incorporated it into some shared institution where it lay unremarked by the medical observer" (Littlewood & Dein, 2000, p. 10). "Restricting ourselves to the local ethnography [or, localised understanding] may allow us to avoid [universal] categorisation but it hardly facilitates cross-cultural comparison [or transcultural understanding]: surely one of medicine's imperatives, as well as anthropology's" (Littlewood & Dein, 2000, p. 27).

The orthodox Muslims would exclude the Ādams by labelling their belief-practice as satanic (*kufir*). I admit, calling the Ādams "delusional" and perhaps schizophrenic can be equally stigmatising and exclusionary. These are two very different "epistemological models" employed in two kinds of "epistemological realities." A clash between these two is ultimately a confrontation of two knowledge systems, that of the *Sunni* orthodoxy and the secularised science of psychiatry. Yet, does it mean one is less or more acceptable than the others? Should we drop the argument for an SPD altogether? Or, should we stick to the community perception and call it *kufir*? What about my insistence on the Ādam beliefs, and their subsequent suicide as resistance, as a "voice of protest?" What will happen to the rejected self-claims of the Ādam "religion?"

We are well advised against taking a singular position at the expense of the other possibilities. "The same pattern may be variously identified as norm, illness, aetiology . . . as resistance or performance" (Littlewood & Dein, 2000, p. 27). Reflecting on the Ādams' diaries and imagining their suicide with diverse frameworks is, therefore, not only possible but also necessary. The legal, medical and psychiatric or religious and social frameworks may not be commensurable but each has its place in the "universe of belief" that we Bangladeshis inhabit.

Epilogue: countries we couldn't name

Towards the end of his novel, *Virgin Suicides*, a novel based on five sisters committing serial suicide, writer Eugenides speaks to the audience:

In the end we had the pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptiness mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name (1993, p. 246)

My preliminary attempts in this paper were to gather a few pieces of the Ādam puzzle. Reading the Ādam "suicide" notes was therefore always the first step, a modest beginning under certain material constraints a researcher must come into terms with. An elaborate ethnography may provide more comprehensive answers not only to the question of motives and the circumstances that led to the Ādams' suicide, but also to the formulations of the Ādam "religion", the contexts and meanings of their "deviant" belief-system, within a "sub-culture of protest." Perhaps the "truth is [indeed] out there," or everywhere: in these texts and that abandoned house, in the graveyard and the face of the survivor, in post-mortem reports and the police investigations, in newspapers and televised

programmes, in the past traditions of *heresiography* (Lewinstein, 1994) and contemporary polemics within Islam, in the underground traces of *kufri kalam* practice, or the formation of the founder Ādam, the circumstances leading to the murder of his spiritual heir, the last days and hours the Ādams spent together. There are many different paths one could take to try fathom this “tragic mystery,” and all of them may be necessary at some point. I realise the time has come to put away these “suicide” notes for a short while and proceed to the site of the suicidal event. My journalist friend just informed me that the second sister Baby, the only survivor of the Adam family, has come back to Kalindi, to the Ādam house. I wonder what is going to happen next in the “country ... [I] ... couldn't name.”

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