“MODERNIZING” ISLAM
THE IMAM DISCOURSE IN BANGLADESH

by

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Abstract

International development policies and practices are curiously silent on the subject of religion. It is an overt silence, in the sense that religion appears to be deliberately omitted from consideration. There is an implicit assumption that societies in the South will adopt the secular project of political modernity already perfected in and by the North. The paradox, however, as my dissertation demonstrates, is that development and religion are deeply imbricated at various local, national and transnational sites of power-knowledge.

I adopt Foucauldian “discourse theory” and a post-colonial, post-modern, feminist theoretical framework to focus on Bangladesh, a “moderate” Muslim nation-state, as a case study of this paradox. My investigations reveal that international development organizations, in conjunction with a patriarchal Bangladeshi state, are targeting and trans(forming) tens of thousands of male Muslim imams as socio-political and religious authority figures or “Leaders of Influence” to constitute what I call the “Imam Discourse in Bangladesh”. I propose that in this newly constituted discourse, male Muslim imams are being instilled with new forms of authority and influence not only in relation to Islam, but also in relation to gender and women’s subject positions in society. In embracing the development project, trained imams are constituted simultaneously not only as non-modern men who are a potential challenge to the development mission, but as subjects being given opportunities to strengthen their gender and religious authority in the service of development, somewhat like “soldiers of secularism”.

My conclusions emerge from an interdisciplinary, qualitative study that included fieldwork in Bangladesh in summer 2006. I show how the Imam Discourse emerges in a particular ethno-religious context and a post 9/11 “moment” when American hegemonic interests are dominating geo-political understandings of, and entanglements with Muslim subjects. I also explore emerging, new counter-discourses that pertain to development and Muslim society and reflect gender-aware, and Muslim feminist reinterpretations of political modernity, secularism and international development.
Preface

Approval for my fieldwork in Bangladesh was granted by The University of British Columbia, Behavioural Research Ethics Board under a Certificate of Approval Number B06-0448 dated June 20, 2006 for a term of one year. I did not request a renewal or extension.
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Glossary

I have divided this glossary into two sections. The first section contains acronyms in English and Bangla for organizations and political parties. The second section contains a selection of words in Bangla that I have used in this dissertation. I have not italicized or placed these in parenthesis and I frequently note the meaning of these words in the body of my dissertation. Since I use a fair number of Bangla words I felt that highlighting them all would break the flow of my narrative. I have adopted spellings of place names and other non-English proper nouns in keeping with contemporary usage such as Dhaka for Dacca and Bangla for Bengali.

Section I

TAF The Asia Foundation
Bangla Bengali, the language spoken by a majority of people in Bangladesh
BNP Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CIDA Canadian International Development Agency
DFID Department for International Development
GOB Government of Bangladesh
JI Jamaat-i-Islami
Nijera Kori Bangladeshi NGO: Let's Do It Ourselves
NGO Non-governmental organization
UBINIG Bangladeshi NGO: Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona, Policy Research for Development Alternatives
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund
USAID United States Agency for International Development
**Section II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adibashi</td>
<td>linguistic, ethno-religious minority in Bangladesh; also known as tribal people; non-Bangla speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alia madrasah</td>
<td>Islamic religious school funded by the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apa</td>
<td>older sister, woman, used as a term of respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aqiqah</td>
<td>Muslim name giving ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ashraf</td>
<td>socio-economic and cultural upper class or elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atrap</td>
<td>socio-economic and cultural lower class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burkha</td>
<td>loose outer robe worn by Muslim women in Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communalism</td>
<td>British colonial word in India referring to conflict between Muslim, Hindu, Sikh communities mainly; later also for Christian and other tribal groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dharma-nirapekshata</td>
<td>Bangla for secularism; implies religious neutrality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dua</td>
<td>prayer or supplication to Allah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fatwa</td>
<td>juridico-religious verdicts, interpretations, or sanctions issued by Islamic scholars/teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gamcha</td>
<td>scarf worn by men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juma’a nomaj</td>
<td>canonical prayers at mid-day on Friday in a mosque or other assembly area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadith</td>
<td>a narrative referring to the Prophet Mohammad’s life and practices. Plural: Ahadith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawa</td>
<td>Eve in Arabic/Muslim tradition (Adam is Aadam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hijab</td>
<td>Islamic headscarf or head covering worn by Muslim women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hujoor</td>
<td>devout Muslim man; worthy of respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imam</td>
<td>leader of a Muslim prayer congregation; male and female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imamoti</td>
<td>action or act of being an imam; imamat (Urdu-Arabic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jomidar</td>
<td>landed gentry, from zamindar (Urdu-Persian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kath mullah</td>
<td>a derogatory word for a Muslim subject, usually male, implying inauthentic claim to Islamic knowledge or authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>khatib</td>
<td>imam, senior, qualified, who gives a talk called the khutba on Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khutba</td>
<td>talk given by khatib to a congregation at the Friday midday prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>madrasah</td>
<td>Islamic religious school; plural: madaris (Urdu)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maktab</td>
<td>Islamic religious school attached to a mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maulana</td>
<td>Arabic, Qur’anic word for Allah; religious scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milad mehfil</td>
<td>celebratory event marking the birth of the Prophet Mohammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mufti</td>
<td>Islamic scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mullah</td>
<td>Islamic preacher, scholar, imam, leader; can be used in derogatory fashion to imply an inauthentic Muslim subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>murubbi</td>
<td>senior in age, elderly, wise, deserving respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musalli</td>
<td>Muslim worshippers, usually men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nawab</td>
<td>ruler, sometimes hereditary, initially under Muslim rule in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nomaj</td>
<td>canonical prayers; Arabic: salaat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orna</td>
<td>long scarf usually worn by women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pandit</td>
<td>religious leader in Hindu Brahmin tradition; title for high caste Brahmin male, sometimes also female, pandita; Bengali: thakur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pir</td>
<td>Muslim spiritual leader in Sufi tradition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qadi</td>
<td>Islamic judge or magistrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qaumi madrasah</td>
<td>Islamic religious school in Bangladesh, privately funded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salish</td>
<td>informal arbitration by leaders of a (rural) community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shundor</td>
<td>beauty; beautiful; well-groomed; good or worthy of admiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sunnah</td>
<td>standards of behavior modeled on that of the Prophet Mohammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thakur</td>
<td>religious leader in Hindu Brahmin tradition especially in Bengal; title for high caste male, sometimes also female, thakurani; see pandit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ummah</td>
<td>community of believers and followers of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa’iz</td>
<td>itinerant preacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waaz mehfil</td>
<td>discussion and/or preaching sessions, usually for large assembly of Muslim men, not hidebound by rules or procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahhabi</td>
<td>Muslim movement for reform in Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

Rabbi zidni ilma
“O my Lord! Advance Me in Knowledge.”
(Qur’an, 20:114) Translated by A. Yusuf Ali, 1993, [1934])

I begin by acknowledging the Grace of my Sustainer in making this journey possible.

My deep and abiding thanks go to my supervisor, Dr Dawn Currie, for teaching me so much in such meaningful and memorable ways. I am grateful to her for mentoring me; for helping me to hold myself together when I was unsure; for challenging me to attempt to do better when I could have taken an easier way out. I thank her for her patience and sensitivity, for sharing her insights and knowledge so freely, and for her understanding in times of adversity. Most of all, I thank Dr Currie for making me realize that what I am doing is worthwhile.

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I thank my sons Ziad Alam and Kamil Alam, whose firm and unswerving belief in me has been the backbone of my success. They have never left my side through my many challenges and upheavals. They have given me unconditional love. They have consoled me when I have been hurt and inspired me when I would have given up. I could not have come this far without them. I am grateful to my daughter-in-law Goldie Alam for her unstinting support, her love and her innumerable acts of friendship for so many years. My five-year-old grandson, Zain Alam, has been a special and quite unexpected joy; I thank my budda-baba for reminding me that we never stop learning.

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In the end, I am here because of my Sustainer: Hadha min fadhle rabbi.
Dedication

To my sons
Mohammad Ziad and Mohammad Kamil Alam
and to my grandson
Zain Stewart Alam
1 Chapter: Introduction

1.1 Introduction: the “Obama Imam Video”

We have a responsibility to join together on behalf of the world that we seek, a world where governments serve their citizens, and the rights of all God’s children are respected. (US President Barack Obama, clip taken from video embedded in “Leaders of Influence” n.d.)

US President Barack Obama is frequently featured in US government promotional material, including documentary films. Consequently, the remarks reproduced above from a video clip\(^1\) of the US President are hardly surprising. What makes this particular clip interesting, however, is the site where it is located, the nature of Obama’s comments and the images that mediate his words. I will briefly describe the video and then explain its relevance to my dissertation.

Obama makes the comments quoted above at the conclusion of a seven-minute long video that is embedded in a website entitled, “LOI Regional Conference: Leaders Of Influence Program.”\(^2\) We learn from the website and other sources that this conference was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh in March 2010 (“Leaders of Influence,” n.d.; “Reflections from Dhaka,” 2010). It is clear from the information provided in the websites that Barack Obama did not attend the conference.

The video opens to show the US President standing at a podium with the US national flag behind him. A pair of flags that is difficult to identify immediately flanks the US flag.\(^3\) We hear a few distinct beats of the tabla, then a South Asian dhun or melody begins to play in the background, and Obama begins to talk. He embellishes his comments with long pauses and gestures, taking 42 seconds to deliver the following comments:

The Holy Qur’an tells us, O Mankind! We have created you a male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes; so that you may know one another. The Talmud tells us, the whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace. The Holy Bible tells us, blessed are the peacemakers - for they shall be called sons of God! (“Leaders of Influence,” n.d.)
Forty-two seconds is a long time in audio-visual terms. As the US President speaks, the camera cuts away from him to a series of images that are far removed from the White House. The images appear in rapid succession, some lasting for four seconds or less. Unless one examines each frame in slow motion, the impression generated from these images is of gatherings of men praying or engaging in religious activities in a country in the South\(^4\). Several scenes depict groups of men dressed in a particular kind of attire that South Asians generally associate with Muslim religious subjects, including imams or congregational prayer leaders.\(^5\) There are brief views of boys with their palms together, as in the Christian act of prayer. There is a fleeting image of a large hall with men and women sitting in rows facing several robed figures on a stage. Several images of Buddhist monks, and Buddhist prayer wheels being manufactured, also appear.

There are relatively fewer images of women. One is a quick image of a woman with her face partly covered, in a street scene that I recognize to be inside a rickshaw, probably in Bangladesh; and a glimpse of a woman wearing a Muslim headscarf or hijab amongst a large gathering of people possibly inside a conference hall. Interspersed with these images, and with Obama’s comments continuing in the background, we read what appear to be the opening titles of the video production:

The Asia Foundation Presents/In partnership with USAID/Leaders of Influence: The Role of Religious and Community Leaders in Asia’s Development (“Leaders of Influence” n.d.)

As Obama’s comments come to an end, there is a still shot of two men on the screen. The men are smiling and shaking—or rather tightly gripping—hands. One of the men is dressed in the attire common to imams in Bangladesh and the other man wears what is commonly known as a T-shirt; a tiny cross is visible around his neck. The image of the two men is frozen on the screen for a few seconds as the final lines of the above noted legend are repeated in bold letters:

Leaders of Influence: The Role of Religious and Community Leaders in Asia’s Development (“Leaders of Influence” n.d.).

The video then covers various aspects of the “Leaders of Influence” conference noted earlier. It would take up too much space to describe the coverage in detail, but
suffice it to say that the production is a skillful if unabashedly self-laudatory account of the conference. We learn that the conference was organized by two international development organizations, USAID and the Asia Foundation. USAID is the acronym for the United States Agency for International Development, a bilateral donor organization that has been solely and officially responsible for the disbursement of American overseas aid since 1961 (“About USAID: USAID History,” 2010). USAID is a useful conduit for the promotion and implementation of American foreign policy, a relationship that has a direct bearing on my study, as I will explain later in this chapter and also in those that follow. The Asia Foundation is a smaller American non-governmental organization (NGO), with a focus on the Asia Pacific region, and it implements many of USAID’s service-related programs (“About the Asia Foundation,” n.d.).

The “Obama Imam Video” as I call this textual source, provides clips of representatives of USAID, American diplomats and officials and a number of delegates to the conference, including priests, imams, and religious scholars, from Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. Most of the clips are of men. There are a few clips of women from Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as of a woman from the UAE, all wearing the Muslim headscarf or hijab. In contrast, and surprisingly, there are no clips of Bangladeshi “Leaders of Influence” or male imams, or of Bangladeshi women. We see the images of a number of men in attire that is distinctive to that worn by imams in Bangladesh but we do not hear them talk on camera even once.

1.2 Transforming male Muslim imams

The reason I have drawn attention to the “Obama Imam Video” is because the information generated by it and by the website where it is located echoes my research in compelling ways. My study, in essence, demonstrates the powerful and also subtle ways in which thousands of male Muslim congregational leaders or imams are being positioned as subjects of religious, economic, social and political significance within what I call the “Imam Discourse in Bangladesh”. As I explain in more detail in Chapter 2, I draw on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse to refer not merely to text or speech, but to the *set of rules and procedures* for the production of particular discursive structures, or
discourses, which demarcate and produce certain dominant, sanctioned and legitimized ways in which we think, act and behave (Foucault, 1972/1969; Mills, 2004; Hall, 2001). My research reveals how male imams are being (trans)formed into particular kinds of authority figures through programs introduced three years after 9/11 by USAID, and in the late 1990s by the multilateral agency, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). These donor organizations are running similar though officially distinct Imam Training Programs through the Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh, which is a quasi-governmental or parastatal body under the Bangladesh Ministry of Religious Affairs.

I noted earlier in this chapter (p. 2) that imams are congregational prayer leaders. This definition does not convey the meaning of imam in its entirety and complexity. Imams are not easily described or translated into Anglo-Christian-Judaic terminology. They are not clerics, priests, pastors, rabbis or monks. Imams, as I hope my study will serve to demonstrate, are just that, imams. Ideally, we ought to comprehend imams on their own terms, that is, in relation to the site-specific and time-specific ways in which they are located within particular communities. Imams are grassroots congregational prayer leaders either on a once-off temporary basis, or long term. Imams also can be scholars of Islam possessing varying levels of expertise and scholarship; they are sometimes religious teachers in a school or maktab attached to a mosque. Imams are responsible for delivering a khutba or talk at a Friday Muslim congregational prayer. In Bangladesh there are from 200,000 to a million male imams. Women can be imams and perform some of the duties of imams in Bangladesh without being known specifically as imams.

My dissertation highlights the ways in which a targeted population of several thousand male Muslim imams in Bangladesh is being transformed through different kinds of policies, interventions, actions, behaviour and sets of rules that are shaped through gendered relations of “power-knowledge” (Foucault, 1980a) within the discourse of international development. As will be explained in this dissertation, the discourse of imams cannot be termed to be an entirely new discourse in the sense that earlier manifestations and formations of imams as particular subjects in development discourse are evident in Bangladesh. Specifically, male imams were tapped in the 1980s primarily to prevent and/or diffuse what was perceived to be religious opposition to an aggressive population control program launched by the state. There is evidence, also, that male
imams were used as a conduit to spread messages on agricultural modernization as far back as the early 1950s in what was then known as East Pakistan. There are similarities and continuities, but also differences between the earlier focus on imams and the Imam Discourse that is evident now. I explain these in Chapters 4 and 5 in some detail, and thus touch on only salient points here.

The Imam Discourse today, as well as the earlier mobilization of imams, both constitute the instrumental deployment of imams as facilitators of specific policies. Population control policies introduced in the 1960s were fuelled by a thinly veiled fear in the West, especially in the United States, of potential immigrants and refugees from the South overrunning the resources and spaces of the North. Although ostensibly couched as a means to a developmental aim, the transformation of imams in the twenty-first century is embedded in, and distinctly invokes what is popularly described as a global Islamist threat of terrorism and violence in a post-9/11 world. In the earlier focus on imams, however, American domestic attitudes towards population control played an important role in containing the extent to which US foreign policy could actively engage in the reduction of the population of the South. In fact, one analyst (Grimes, 1998) claims that because the US government needed to camouflage its involvement in a radical program to curtail fertility rates in the South, it set up UNFPA and funded it heavily to promote population control policies in the South. A community of professional demographers and a newly emerging population control establishment in Washington D.C. provided funding and expertise for an aggressive campaign to bring down fertility rates in the more densely populated regions of the South, of which Bangladesh was a prime candidate.

As far as the evidence shows, Bangladeshi mosque-based imams were commissioned late in the day, in the 1980s, to provide legitimacy to family planning methods. As well, imams were targeted as a preventive measure, because population control was assumed to have failed because of religious i.e. Islamic doctrinal opposition. In fact, empirical evidence later suggested that religious opposition was not a major issue in the slow rate of fertility decline from the 1970s to the 1980s. But in the event, the family planning apparatus focused on ways in which to achieve a more rapid drop in the fertility rate by persuading imams to state that Islam supported family planning. The aim was to “modernize” perceived Islamic challenges to population control specifically; to diffuse
what was expected to be male and patriarchal opposition to the adoption of family
planning methods largely by poor rural women. Imams were brought into the specific
ambit of development for a particular purpose, namely, to be “enlightened” on issues
pertaining to family planning, and persuaded to then speak out in favour of it.

The circumstances under which a Western, largely American initiated political and
aid apparatus is turning its sights on Muslim populations and, in particular, on male
Muslims in a post 9/11 “War on Terror” scenario, are similar in that the present focus
rests also on a political aim, but the nature of the aim and the circumstances under which
it has surfaced, are different. Different too are the ways in which the present focus on
Muslims is being executed.

The objectives of the Imam Discourse in the present time are to “modernize”
Muslim subjects as a way of reigning in and eradicating Islamic “terror” in its entirety
(Hayden, 2006). I suggest that in this newly constituted discourse, male Muslim imams are
constituted simultaneously as a potential challenge to the development project, and also
imbued with authority and legitimacy in relation to Islam, gender and society. In
embracing the development project as framed by the Imam Training Program, trained
imams are being reconstituted as “soldiers of secularism”,7 as it were, who encounter the
development mission not only as a challenge to their local authority, but as a mode of
strengthening their gender and religious authority. The transformation of imams is a
primary aim of the discourse rather than, as was evident in earlier engagements with
imams in Bangladesh, its by-product or unintended consequence. In order to control Third
World fertility, a Western scientific and developmental apparatus, as well as the state,
sought to contain women’s reproductive abilities and choices, utilizing imams in
instrumental ways in order to prevent opposition to the program. Granted, the earlier
engagement with imams made assumptions and denoted specific subject positions and
agency to Islamic doctrine as well as to imams as the primary sources of the interpretation
and execution of such doctrine. But the Imam Discourse as it is being formed now is
making more holistic, more powerful and more widespread assumptions about the role of
imams in Muslim society in Bangladesh. The discourse holds up imams as exemplary
Muslim subjects and national citizens, defines their authoritative place and status in
society across secular and religious spheres of influence and posits them as potential
leaders of women and men. Not only does the present discursive formation specifically target Islam and Muslim subjects, but also it does so from various local, national, regional and transnational sites of authority and expertise.

My explorations suggest that the Imam Discourse is being facilitated by a convergence of newly constituted discursive elements. Muslim societies and Bangladeshi society in particular are undergoing and experiencing pressures in relation to the unfolding dynamics of Western geo-political insecurities, the forces of globalization and changes in the rural economy. The Islamic Foundation, a quasi state-run organization provides USAID and UNFPA with extremely conducive sites in which to promote their respective Imam Training Programs. These sites are gender specific and patently off limits to women, and this characteristic, as well as somewhat contradictory gender perspectives of USAID and UNFPA respectively, privilege patriarchy in the Imam Discourse.

In the chapters that follow I chart and unpack how the Imam Discourse is an emerging, newly constituted discursive formation. I describe how the discourse is evident; where, when and how it emerges and becomes more fully constituted than before; and what the discourse implies in relation to international development, Islam and women’s issues in Bangladesh specifically, as well as in a global sense.

1.3 Disentangling religion and development

The foregoing core elements of my study not only emerge from, but also are intricately connected to a theoretical quandary that arises, in my mind, when imbrications between international development and religion become evident. An important problematic that I attempt to disentangle in this study is the contradictory relationship that exists between international donor agencies and religious organizations, religious subjects and religious agendas. I will unpack my assertions in greater detail in the rest of this dissertation but to put it succinctly, I am starting from the assumption that the international development paradigm is deeply linked to, and in fact emerges from dominant, Western goals of attaining political modernity. A fundamental and foundational precept of political modernity is the assumption of secularity in the public domain, and the adoption of secularism as a specific code of social, political, economic and cultural
organization in the modern nation-state. How, then, does international development rationalize close engagements with religious issues, agents, and institutions? To what extent or with what degree of frequency and depth, are such engagements taking place? What are the politics of the contradictory ways in which development policies and processes overtly disavow relationships with religious issues and agents, but simultaneously undertake the same?

My explorations of the three questions posed above form an integral part of my research conclusions. They shape the manner in which I have constructed and undertaken the various stages of my study, including my search for and generation of evidence in the field, followed by analyses and writing up of my evidence and conclusions. They also, and very significantly, provide the underlying argument that I hope becomes clear in this dissertation. I advance the suggestion—in a very provisional way, based on my research for this project—that the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh is an emerging discursive construct that demonstrates in powerful ways the innate and continuing contradictions that haunt development interventions made by the North, in the South. These contradictions exemplify the fault lines that run through the North’s imaginary of development. These are weaknesses that need to be identified, deconstructed and analyzed; as well, we need to explore how they are exacerbated by the dominance and persistence of Western hegemonic perspectives and geo-political interests, and how they combine to occlude understandings of complex realities in the South. My latter reference here is specifically to a climate of Islamophobia generated with increasing intensity after 9/11 by Western, especially American state sources, supported by media and public opinion in the North and advanced under the guise of development in Muslim societies of the South such as in Bangladesh.

My aim is not to become prescriptive. Nor can I claim to have addressed the questions posed above in an exhaustive manner. After all, the three questions above are not the only ways in which one can explore imbrications between religion and development—and their implications. The same can be said for the ways in which answers to these questions may be sought. The trajectories that I pursue in the course of this investigation stem from the scope and limits of this study, from my particular
positionalities and biases, all of which I attempt to clarify and adequately explain in the discussions that follow this first chapter.

1.4 Methodological guidelines

The methodology of my research is explained in detail in the next chapter. I will outline the main points here. This dissertation is an interdisciplinary, qualitative study undertaken after my qualifying examinations were completed, in September 2005. The bulk of my research was completed by late 2006. My dissertation is based on evidence generated from a wide range of English and Bangla textual sources available on the internet, and in print that were accessed by me from 2005 onwards. I undertook fieldwork in Bangladesh for three months, from July to September 2006. During this time I conducted twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews and one focus group meeting mainly in Bangla (Appendix A). I also held informal meetings with members of the development community including several senior managers in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh.

I started searching for and generating evidence from a variety of textual sources, in print and on the web, in English and Bangla from September 2005 onwards, after completion of my qualifying examinations as a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia. My aim was to locate any engagements between religious representatives, issues, topics and international development organizations. I did not consciously or actively choose a particular international development agency/agencies, though I realize that I was guided by my own prior academic and professional experience, i.e. my positionalities. I discuss what I mean by my positionalities in the next chapter. The evidence that emerged from these initial explorations formed an important backdrop to the Imam Discourse and I have analyzed these explorations in Chapter 6.

My focus on imams emerged when I went to Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2006. I conducted a set of preliminary, informal interviews with practitioners in the development community whom I selected for the most part because these were the only practitioners at a management level willing to meet with me, and in part because my family and I knew several practitioners personally. I recorded my informal conversations with them and
began to transcribe these in the first two weeks of my stay in Bangladesh. I also made notes of my activities and discussions in a journal on a daily basis. As I listened to my conversations and began to review my notes, I noticed a pattern in the evidence: there was repeated mention of newly occurring engagements between male Muslim imams and two international development agencies: USAID and UNFPA.

Next, I embarked on a more focused exploration of my topic. I conducted semi-structured interviews with my participants who were mainly senior and middle management level development agents at USAID, the Asia Foundation and UNFPA, as well as in several international agencies and non-governmental organizations. I conducted interviews also with officials of the Islamic Foundation and the NGO Affairs Bureau, government of Bangladesh, and held a focus group meeting with a group of seven male Muslim imams. I have provided a list of interviews; the dates on which they were conducted, the names of participants, their job titles and names of their respective organizations in Appendix A. I have omitted the names and details of several participants from this list and cite them in my dissertation as “anonymous” at their request.

As is evident from my explanation above, a substantive proportion of my evidence emerges from interviews with senior officials, including foreign nationals in international development organizations, Bangladeshi heads of domestic non-governmental organizations and Bangladeshi government bureaucrats. The challenges of “studying-up” that I encountered during my empirical work are discussed later in this chapter.

1.5 New technologies of power-knowledge

My reason for drawing attention to the “Obama Imam Video” at the beginning of this chapter is because it reinforces in striking ways the theoretical underpinnings of my dissertation. The secular logic of Western political modernity dictates a disavowal of religious affiliations in the public domain, and thereby in development discourse; and yet, as I describe in Chapter 2, my “life” experiences, based on my professional work as a journalist and development consultant in Bangladesh and on my academic explorations, point to a different social reality. These indicate that religion, though officially absent from
development discourse, in reality is deeply imbricated with the processes, practices and policies of development.

During my fieldwork and while I analyzed my source material, I felt that events on the ground, including interventions by international agencies, are rapidly re-shaping how we understand and interact with religion, specifically Islam in Bangladesh. The smooth insertion of the American president into the “Obama Imam Video” brings to mind Donna Haraway’s “god-trick” (1991, p. 189); that is, the manifestation of an omnipresent power seemingly located nowhere and yet, present everywhere. It is never claimed that Obama was present at the Dhaka conference; at the same time, there are no specific indications as to his location. There are no explicit indications to separate him from the “Leaders of Influence” conference in Bangladesh; and linkages between the president and the regional event are suggested in persuasive ways. Two national flags that are clearly not the stars and stripes are displayed behind Obama. These flags are identifiable as the Egyptian national flag only upon close and diligent scrutiny (see Endnote 3). As noted earlier in this chapter, Obama’s opening comments run seamlessly into various images that are clearly located in sites unlikely to be frequented by the American president (see Endnote 4); that is, they depict ordinary people and not heads of state or elected leaders, and these images, in turn, lead into the “Leaders of Influence” regional conference.

Soon after Obama’s clip, we see clips of the US ambassador to Bangladesh as well as of someone called Joshua Du Bois, Director White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships. Both men make statements that reinforce linkages between, “President Obama’s commitment to advancing democracy and development through global engagement” (“Leaders of Influence,” n.d.), and the “United States government’s engagement with Muslim communities around the world” (“Leaders of Influence,” n.d.). It is interesting to note that Du Bois’s exact location is unclear, though his title and connection to the White House are displayed prominently under his image in the video. An exploration of the website where the video is located and several others that are linked to the conference reinforces linkages between a domestic, South Asian event sponsored by USAID and the Asia Foundation, and the White House. A USAID website declares:
The conference is an important aspect of President Obama’s Global Engagement Initiative to work with Muslim-majority countries to advance democracy and development. This conference is also a continuation of the U.S. Government’s effort to engage religious and community leaders in Bangladesh through its “Leaders of Influence” program (“Press release”).

The above statement is noteworthy because of the ease with which it collapses four nodes of authority and expertise, namely, American international or global tools of influence; American political and economic tools of influence in Muslim societies; the Dhaka regional conference; and ongoing American government engagements with Muslim imams in Bangladesh.

The importance of the “Obama Imam Video” lies in the way that it encapsulates “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault, 1980/1978, p. 140) in ways that closely resemble engagements and discursive processes that my research explicates. The video demonstrates new and increasingly sophisticated technologies and techniques that are being deployed in these particular sites.

1.6 Politics in a post 9/11 context

I just don’t understand what [some development agencies] mean by saying that Bangladesh is a “moderate” Muslim state? Why are they so keen to project such an image? I wonder at the politics of it, of trying to ensure and project that image. (Khushi Kabir, interview)

When I carried out my fieldwork in Bangladesh in the summer of 2006 there were no obvious linkages that I came across between the “Leaders of Influence” program and the US president. The remarks quoted above are from Khushi Kabir, the founder and coordinator of Nijera Kori, an activist NGO that assists poor women and men to establish their rights in landless communities in Bangladesh. Kabir voiced a sense of surprise during my interview with her about the persistent ways in which international donors are establishing a hierarchy of Islamic religiosities, from “moderate” to “extreme” (Kabir, interview). These definitions signal the production of compliant Muslim subjects, somewhat similar to the theme of the “Obama Imam Video”. That an involvement between an Imam Training Program in Bangladesh and Barack Obama’s comments on religion at an unspecified time and location, is being invoked in 2010 is not surprising. Since the events
of September 11, 2001, there have been increasing concerns about linkages between development regimes and Western geopolitical and military objectives in Muslim societies of the South. My research provides an example of such a linkage.

In the chapters that follow, I show how the Imam Discourse is advanced as a model of a “moderate” or Western-friendly variety of Islam. In the “Obama Imam Video”, the flags that flank the US President are Egyptian and the words of his speech encompass the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious traditions. But the main footage that is used to illustrate Obama’s rhetoric comes from Bangladesh and specifically depicts male Muslim imams in a “modernizing” and secular context, that is, as male Muslim religious subjects inhabiting the sites of international development. There are clear indications in my evidence that global issues that impinge in particular on American self-interest and foreign policy objectives are imbricated with the production of what I call the Imam Discourse.

In a post-9/11 era, there is a climate of change with regard to Islam, Muslims and in particular in relation to Muslim women’s agency or lack thereof (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Jamal, 2005; White, 2010; Zine, 2004; Sonbol, 2001; Barlas 2001, 2002). The following statement, regarding the role of women and religion in Bangladesh, speaks to the overall nature of change:

In south [sic] Asia as elsewhere in the world, religion has come to play an increasing role in shaping and reshaping women’s lives .... the whole area of religion – the application of its foundational beliefs, its public presence, its social and cultural practices – has acquired different meanings (Azim, 2007, paragraphs 1 and 2)

Azim’s article (2007) focuses on a research initiative on women and religion in Bangladesh that she has undertaken as part of an international development project called “Pathways to Women’s Empowerment”. Azim writes that as a feminist greatly influenced by the “explicitly secular” (2007, paragraph 2) women’s movement of the 1980s in Bangladesh, for her and others like her, “the idea of religion – specifically, in Bangladesh, Islam – as a site in which women might find or exercise ‘empowerment’ was unthinkable” (2007, paragraph 2). My research indicates that Azim’s perspective on religion, and in particular, Islam, as a potential arena for women’s advancement, is not an isolated point of view.
Farida Akhter, founder and head of UBINIG, a Bangladeshi NGO, explained during my interview with her that she is interested in the ways in which Islam is being perceived and she, herself, is very keen to explore and “understand religion, especially Islam” (Akhter, interview). She remarked that a television program by a Pakistan scholar fascinates her because it provides an informed and also progressive interpretation of Islam. She added that the program appeals to her particularly because it is in Urdu, a language that she learned as a teenager living with her family in West Pakistan.

As those who are familiar with the politics of culture and identity in South Asia and especially that which relates to “communal”10 divisiveness know, Urdu is not merely another language in South Asia, but heavily overlaid with the politics associated with a “foreign” Islam and an indigenous, “authentic” Bengali; certainly, not many Bangladeshis would go on the record with such a statement unless they meant to do so for particular ends. That Farida Akhter does not hesitate to make these comments demonstrates her self-confidence and credentials as a Bengali and a well-known left-wing Marxist grassroots activist in Bangladesh, but also, the gist of her message, that she is drawn to a progressive interpretation of Islam, suggests the changing dynamics of engagements with Islamic issues and Muslim subjects—such as male imams for instance—in Bangladesh. The politics of linguistic, religious and “secular” interests and identities evident in Bangladesh are far from stable. I explain in some detail in Chapter 3 how domestic national political movements have been pushed and pulled in different directions often by regional alliances and interests and often by the peculiar characteristics of Bengali Muslim identity. The emerging discursive structure of imams in Bangladesh is positioned within these complex formations.

If we examine the literature, we find that diverse political and strategic interests are increasingly mediating issues pertaining to women’s empowerment in Bangladesh, and elsewhere in Muslim societies.11 As a feminist researcher I am committed to the principle of gender as a socially constructed process that, along with other markers of difference such as class, race, ethnicity, age, religion and sexuality, demarcate and facilitate inequitable and socially unjust practices and consequences for women, as well as for men. My research in the field of international development is guided by an overarching objective of working towards the attainment of social justice and empowerment in
particular for women who are the most vulnerable and impoverished members of societies in the South. I will explain my research interest in Bangladesh in the next chapter in more detail. Here I would like to explain that my qualitative study does not focus directly or explicitly on women’s voices, interests or activities in Bangladesh. Instead, I approach issues of gender, religion, women and Islam, in the context of international development in Bangladesh, without adopting a direct focus on women. Let me explain my reasons for doing so.

It is often assumed that any exploration of development in a Third World society that is undertaken from a gender perspective or that seeks to address women’s concerns, must inevitably focus on the lives and/or voices of ordinary women. It is also often assumed that because I am a Canadian woman of colour, originally from Bangladesh, seeking a doctoral degree in women’s and interdisciplinary studies, I will conform to these expectations. There is no doubt of the importance of focusing on the standpoint of women, and that of Third World women, especially as a way of interrogating and overturning the dominance of “the masculine experience” (Bakker, 1999, p. 211) as the norm in development. But my own perspective is somewhat different. I feel that an exhaustive focus, especially by gender scholars and feminists, on “studying down” (Judd, 1999, p. 220; Kirsch, 1999, p. 61); that is, focusing on women clients or beneficiaries of development, ought to be accompanied by critical enquiry into, and analyses of, arenas dominated by male-centric or patriarchal networks of power-knowledge. Development is one such arena. Although much has been achieved in terms of gender issues and women’s standpoint being mainstreamed in the development industry, the actual degree and nature of the integration are uneven, disappointing and ultimately do not translate into visible and sustained improvements in the lives of women in the South.

There are many reasons for, and implications of these shortcomings of development. What is relevant with regard to my research focus is that for a number of reasons, feminist voices in development have become muted in relation to feminist goals of “transformative change” (Judd, 1999, p. 219); ideas and movements that rested on strong, clear and politically informed critical frameworks of gender thinking in development have become hidebound, misinterpreted, depoliticized or misappropriated by a wide range of interests to become virtual myths or “gender orthodoxies” (Cornwall et
al., 2007a, p. 3). As one scholar puts it, the development industry has adopted a visible and dominant “gender lens” (White, 2006, passim) while relegating and subsuming critical considerations of race and power relations to the background.

My perspective is that feminist researchers need to move beyond a general academic trend to “recover women” (White, 2010, p. 338) as active, thinking, doing subjects in the South whom we study in order to decipher how and when they engage in and battle against various forces in their everyday lives. I am not attributing a focus on women to be a limitation. I feel that we need to interrogate development in all its facets, crevices and complexities. In particular, we need to examine those topics that, for one reason or another, are assumed to have been foreclosed by the civilizing propensities of the North. Religion is one such topic. Most gender scholars and feminists approach religion tentatively or not at all; a customary approach in women’s studies textbooks for instance is to perceive religion as a cultural and spiritual embellishment of the social or to focus on women’s “spirituality”. Gender scholars and feminists seldom address religion as a critical aspect of social processes and ideas. Furthermore, the assumed immutability of “secularism”, the other side of the religious coin as it were, needs to be unpacked and explicited with specific reference not only to gender, but also in relation to international development engagements and interventions in a post-9/11 context.

When we look at development in relation to religion, the literature is limited. There is not merely a dearth of scholarly works on the topic, but also a marked absence of critical works that seek to ask how religion and its supposed opposite, secularism are being defined, by whom, and with what possible implications and/or consequences. For instance, scholars note a striking difference in quantitative terms between the mere recognition of terms such as “religion” and “religious”, as compared to “environment”, “gender” and “population”, in development journals (Afshar, 2005; Ver Beek, 2000). A difference is apparent not in quantitative terms alone, but generally, in qualitative studies as well. Ver Beek (2000) states that development agents frequently and deliberately avoid the topic of religion.

Two authors (Deneulin & Bano, 2009), who have undertaken an extensive study promisingly entitled Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script, critique the existing literature on the topic. Their aim is to provide an “analytical grid” (p. 2) with
which we can understand the role of religion in development. However, these scholars undertake their analysis without addressing the critical issue of power relations; that is, how the so-called public and private domains of secularism and religion respectively have been constructed and are sustained, and with what likely impact on society. Deneulin and Bano reflect a broad trend in the literature to consider partnerships between religious and non-religious domains in instrumental ways, primarily to achieve the objectives of development. Selinger (2004) shows us in some detail that not only is the literature on religion and development exceedingly limited, but also within the literature, religion is examined once again in purely instrumental terms in relation to development, or as an impediment to progress and modernity. None of these scholars addresses religion and development policy exclusively through the perspective of gender issues or women’s interests.

Development policy, for its part, is a generally secretive enclave and policy documents in particular are seldom available to the public. As Raunaq Jahan (2002) has noted, the irony is that the recommendations contained in the policy documents of development agencies strongly influence the direction of public policies “without the benefit of being exposed to public scrutiny and debate” (p. 6). Most feminist and gender-sensitive works that focus on development policy tend to look at topics and issues that are regarded to be “secular” or, as stated earlier, attempt to analyze and represent the agency and subjectivity of ordinary women, often by scrutinizing them in the most minute ways. The absence of a gender lens in the study of religion and development therefore turns out to be what might best be described in colloquial terms as a “double whammy”.

1.7 “Studying Up”

My research aims have been to “study up” (Kirsch, 1999; Judd, 1999; Hertz and Imber, 1995; Luff, 1999 cited in Sprague, 2005, p. 59; Wolf, 1996); that is, to examine development policy in relation to religion by examining the perspectives, attitudes, policies and actions of policymakers, authority figures, and persons in positions of power—many of whom turned out to be men. I explain the particularities of my sources in the next chapter, but I found that while there are large numbers of women working within
development agencies and especially in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh, they are rarely in positions of power. Several women working in gender advocacy positions within development organizations spoke to me only on condition of total anonymity. Our meetings took place outside the workplace, in a neutral venue and although some of the information they provided is extremely useful and revealing, I am unable to cite them at all, even by using pseudonyms. The nature of the information is such that its source would be obvious to anyone reading this dissertation. I therefore have to skirt the borders of some debates without commenting directly on them; this omission is among the limitations of this study. At the same time, these very characteristics, namely of “studying up” mark and locate my research within an extremely restricted terrain in development studies (Kirsch, 1999; Judd, 1999).

My research objectives have been to examine the intersectionalities of development policy with Islam and Muslim practices and processes in Bangladeshi society, from a feminist perspective. Post-colonial and anti-racist perspectives also influence my work, especially in my analyses of international development in a society in the South. The outcome of my above-noted interests, undertaken through fieldwork in Bangladesh is what I call the Imam Discourse, which forms the core of this dissertation. My dissertation is therefore an important, albeit provisional, step in explicating how religion and development are linked and the implications of their entanglements on gender issues in a post-colonial context. In the next section I introduce the chapters that follow.

1.8 Organization and chapter description

The interdisciplinary nature of my academic influences has a particular bearing on both the content and organization of this dissertation. My approach and background in academia and through my life experiences are a combination of disciplinary influences that stem from gender/feminist studies, history, sociology, anthropology, development studies, media and cultural studies. My dissertation, therefore, displays a greater emphasis on theoretical aspects and arguments than might be frequently found in studies of international development, including those undertaken by scholars of gender studies, sociology and development studies. At the same time, I draw on empirical fieldwork in
substantive ways, departing from the norm in history, cultural studies and generally in the humanities.

A useful example of the way in which my approach straddles different disciplinary hemispheres is the “Obama Imam Video” with which I began this chapter. The textual product is useful in showing the insidious manner in which the Imam Discourse is produced, that is, how the objectification of subject formations in the South are fostered and sustained in seemingly benign ways by American hegemonic devices. My attention is drawn to this video because it is a constitutive element in the argument that I am making, through analyses of various sources of evidence, in this dissertation.

Similarly, my analyses of international development discourse as evident in Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) policy reveal a continuing contradiction in relation to religion: there is a pattern of disavowals of religious engagements that contrasts with CIDA’s ongoing relationships with religious issues, representatives, and organizations. These understandings occurred early in my research before I had generated evidence on the emerging Imam Discourse during my fieldwork in Bangladesh. I have presented the earlier analyses in a later chapter (Chapter 6), after the Imam Discourse has been explored and explained (Chapter 5). I have done so in the interest of introducing my key research arguments as soon as possible in this document. But the earlier evidence contributed significantly to my theoretical insights pertaining to relationships between religion and international development, as well as on the influence of political modernity on the development paradigm.

What I am pointing towards here is the possibility that “purist” perspectives may distinguish between the import or weight of my analyses of the video or similar evidence generated through other textual sources in this dissertation, and analyses of material that emerges from, for instance, interviews with actual human beings. They may find one lacking in relation to the other. I am not claiming that they are the same; my aim is to provide an example of how interdisciplinarity influences are visible in dynamic and active ways in this dissertation. In other words, it is possible that the political economy of disciplines in academia detracts from a robust hybridity or equitable conversation between disciplines, within a single project (Jackson, 2002; also see Harriss, 2002). Thus, a major consequence of a healthy interdisciplinarity in my work is that my dissertation may
appear to be unevenly braided, or asymmetrical, specifically when viewed from the perspective of a single discipline. I felt it was important to explicitly note the varied influences that have shaped this study before I provide introductory descriptions for the rest of this dissertation.

In Chapter 2, “Conceptualizing religion and development”, I provide details of my methodological framework including, in particular, the salience of Foucauldian discourse theory and feminist methodology. I also discuss my positionalities as a feminist researcher and map out the various steps undertaken in my research process.

In the next chapter, Chapter 3, “Unpacking “Development”: A theoretical outline”, I discuss theoretical issues and debates pertaining to development and religion, unpacking constructs that are relevant to my research topic, including “development”, “modernity” and “the West”. I trace the origins of development as it emerged in a particular historical “moment” and became established as the normative paradigm for the improvement of humanity in general and the South in particular. I then examine the problematic, dichotomous relationship between secularism and religion, particularly as it pertains to political modernity and development. I explore the imbrication of a specific Western understanding of secularism with modernity and international development and its dichotomous relationship with religion. My discussion focuses on how dominant Western perspectives shape our understanding of these constructs, that is, religion, modernity, the secular and secularism. My chapter concludes by suggesting that we need to unpack and reexamine several key assumptions within development, including the deeply embedded problematic of political modernity, and all that it entails, as its most important goal and attribute.

Chapter 4 provides a dynamic anchor for the Imam Discourse. It is called “Bangladesh: Particularities of the terrain”. Domestic national political movements in Bangladesh have been pushed and pulled in different directions, often by regional alliances and interests, and often by ethno-religious characteristics attributed to Bengali-Muslim identity. I trace and explicate critical issues that have marked constructs of Bengali-Muslim national, religious, community and linguistic affiliations. I reference several key scholarly works in order to draw out the major themes that have shaped and informed the politics of Bengali-Muslim identity and community belonging. My discussion maps events
and ruptures that constituted the birth of Bangladesh, including historically rooted cleavages pertaining to class, religion, ethnicity and language; the role played by religious-based parties and non-Bengali linguistic and ethnic groups; and the complex, instrumental ways in which religion and secularism are experienced in this particular terrain. I draw out the gendered connotations of Bengali-Muslim nationalism as a way of delineating the complex and patriarchal contours of ethno-religious tensions in Bangladesh. My objectives in this chapter are to provide a canvas within which imams continue to be embedded in Bangladesh today.

In Chapter 5, “The Imam Discourse in Bangladesh”, I present and explain my evidence and arguments to demonstrate the ways in which many intricately connected discursive elements construct or bring into being a specific, gendered discourse of imams. I call this the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh. On the face of it, it seems that the two major international development agencies, UNFPA, and the American agency, USAID, the latter in conjunction with The Asia Foundation, are working independent of each other to enable the Imam Discourse. However, my research demonstrates that they are closely connected in part through a Bangladeshi state-run institution called the Islamic Foundation and in part through geo-political interests and ambitions of the West, specifically of the USA. I propose that, rather than existing in ahistorical ways as fixed “religious leaders”, it is through the processes and practices of the development agencies themselves that imams are discursively produced as particular authority figures and “Leaders of Influence”. I discuss also how an underlying objective in the reconstitution of imams appears to be the prevention of potential threats to Western, specifically American, domestic and geo-political interests by Muslim radical subjects.

In this chapter, I identify and discuss what or who is involved in the Imam Discourse and what we know about imams in Bangladesh. I trace earlier entanglements between imams and international development institutions in Bangladesh and map how the present “moment” in the reconstitution of imams emerges. I unpack the core concepts that are deployed in the reconstitution of imams and outline the disjuncture between these new subject formations and the situatedness of imams in their everyday lives. I also note in brief the gender aspects of the Imam Discourse, a topic that I address in more detail in the next chapter.
In Chapter 6, “Oppositional strategies and counter discourses”, I explore the ways in which the Imam Discourse is also a starting point for oppositional strategies. These strategies demonstrate resistance and also delineate the contours of discursive dominance. I trace these currents in various kinds of oppositional strategies—denials, erasures, contestations and ruptures—that construct resistance within both the dominant discourse of development and what I call the Imam Discourse. I chart and analyze my evidence pertaining to two bilateral agencies, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the UK Department of International Development (DIFID). I focus also on various points of resistance in the Imam Discourse as evident in my analyses of UNFPA, the Islamic Foundation and The Asia Foundation. My discussion includes examining the gender connotations of the Imam Discourse and patriarchal understandings of “imam” both in Islamic tradition and practices in Muslim societies such as Bangladesh. My research draws on secular NGOs such as UBINIG and Nijera Kori, and a faith-based NGO called Islamic Relief, Bangladesh.

In Chapter 7, “Conclusion: Disentanglements and postcolonial futures”, I conclude my study by drawing together and highlighting my main arguments, the evidence generated for this study and the analytical insights that support my suggestions and claims. I revisit and explore the theoretical underpinnings of my dissertation, specifically, postcolonial critical understandings of religion and secularism and their relevance to modernity and development today. I unpack how religion is understood in the modern Western imaginary and explore perspectives of life-worlds and life-practices that problematize dominant Western notions of modernity. I briefly retrace my steps in this dissertation in order to assess the relative strengths and limitations of my study. I focus finally on my understanding of how my study can move forward, in the future, and the kind of directions and possibilities that are likely to emerge as a result.

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1 I use “clip” to denote “a short part of a film or television program” (see [http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/clip_2](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/clip_2))

2 I accessed this website initially on November 10, 2010 and for the last time on February 5th, 2011. The website has been corrupted since then. The web address I initially accessed was http://leadersofinfluence-asia.org/ (I have removed the hyperlink here for safety reasons). When I accessed it on March 12, 2011, a window opened with a woman’s face and various links that appear to be fraudulent. Most of the information that I found here is
works that pertain to my research in the chapters that follow.

ethno describe conflicts between other communities such as that of Christians or non-social, political and religious liner between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs who were identified as communities organized along Arab men. Similar attire is also worn by men who are not imams, especially during Friday prayers, religious festivals, during the month of Ramadan, and at funerals or religious gatherings.

Simply put, imams are facilitators of Muslim canonical worship when these are held in congregation. An imam is the person who is reputed to be of good moral character, not necessarily a scholar. In South Asia where the Sunni Hanafi tradition is influential, congregational worship is not widespread for women. However, when women pray in congregation, a woman sometimes leads as imam. I have participated in women’s congregations with a woman leading as imam.

My thanks to Dr Amina Jamal for framing it thus in a conversation with me.

I do not wish to imply inferiority or deficiency in quality. I use the adjective “ordinary” as defined by the Cambridge dictionary to mean “not different or special or unexpected in any way; usual.” Also see http://mw1.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/ordinary

Websites are typically undated so it is very difficult to specify when the video was uploaded but it was probably after March 2010 when the regional conference was held.

“Communalism” came into use during British colonial rule in India to describe conflict between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs who were identified as communities organized along social, political and religious lines (see Bayly, 1985). Communalism is now also used to describe conflicts between other communities such as that of Christians or non-Bengali ethno-religious “tribal” minority groups or adhibashi as well.

There is a vast and increasingly varied scholarly literature on these topics and I discuss works that pertain to my research in the chapters that follow.

My source is the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) [http://www.oic-oci.org/member_states.asp](http://www.oic-oci.org/member_states.asp) (Link to Member States and scroll down the page to Arab Republic of Egypt).

I use the term South here deliberately, in order to specify that the shift is unusual because the locations are not those that US President Obama normally inhabits or with which he is associated. As well, I borrow from Stuart Hall’s discussion of the “West and the Rest” (1992) to suggest that terms like “South”, “North”, “Third World” are “short-hand generalizations” (Hall, 1992, p. 277) for complex ideas with multiple connotations. Such shorthand terms are problematic and contested; I use them advisedly and my rationale for doing so is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

I noted the presence of two men dressed in long robes, wearing tupi or prayer caps, with scarves known as gamcha draped around their shoulders. Their attire was of the kind usually worn by Muslim religious men in Bangladesh, including imams or congregational prayer leaders. Normally, the attire marks a male religious subject in the Muslim world in South Asia and in Bangladesh in particular. Imams in Bangladesh usually wear distinct attire that includes long robes and caps called tupi. They also drape scarves known as gamcha around their shoulders. They sometimes wear a headdress similar to that worn by Arab men. Similar attire is also worn by men who are not imams, especially during Friday prayers, religious festivals, during the month of Ramadan, and at funerals or religious gatherings.

Imams in Bangladesh usually wear the national flags. My source is [http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/ordinary](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/ordinary) for the meaning of “ordinary” to mean “not different or special or unexpected in any way; usual.” Also see [http://mw1.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/ordinary](http://mw1.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/ordinary)

Websites are typically undated so it is very difficult to specify when the video was uploaded but it was probably after March 2010 when the regional conference was held.

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There is a vast and increasingly varied scholarly literature on these topics and I discuss works that pertain to my research in the chapters that follow.

For my use of “ordinary” see fn 8 above.
The literature is so extensive and also specific to particular themes and issues within the broad topic of women, gender and development that I cannot do justice to it here. However, I have drawn on, and reference the works of key scholars whose perspectives and works are relevant to my research, in Chapter 3.

14 From the 1950s American cartoon strip Li’l Abner – a character could curse others by pointing a finger, one eye closed and saying “wham”. When he did so with both eyes open it became a “double whammy” (see [http://www.merriam-webster.com/word/word.php?date=Apr-01-2007](http://www.merriam-webster.com/word/word.php?date=Apr-01-2007)).
2 Chapter: Conceptualizing religion and development

2.1 Introduction: Regimes of “power-knowledge” in development

Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Michel Foucault, 1980/1978, p. 93)

In this chapter I begin by describing a key starting point in my research. I explain my theoretical and methodological framework, based on Michel Foucault’s explication of “discourse theory”. I trace the ways in which a Foucauldian understanding of discourse enables us to understand the networks of power-knowledge that facilitate the construct known as development. Next, I turn to the methodological influences, dilemmas and decisions that shape my dissertation. I locate myself as a researcher, explaining how my positionalities inform my research. Finally I provide details of my sources including methods of generation, translation and analysis and I assess the strengths and limitations of my research.

2.2 Summary of my research

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary, qualitative study undertaken from 2005 and it includes fieldwork undertaken in Bangladesh from July to September 2006. I draw on the following major sources:

1. Textual material in Bangla and English available in print and on websites published/owned by international development organizations including multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB), Bangladeshi non-governmental organizations, and Bangladeshi media;

2. Interviews conducted during fieldwork in Bangladesh between July and September 2006. These interviews were mainly conducted in Bangla though some were in Bangla and English and some entirely in English (i.e. with English only speakers). A complete list is given in Appendix A;
3. Tape recordings of all but four of my interviews. I explain below (2.10 Reversing the Gaze) why four interviews could not be transcribed. All other interviews were recorded and translated where necessary from Bangla into English and transcribed;
4. Handwritten notes taken during four interviews where my tape recorder was not allowed;
5. Handwritten notes taken during all my formal interviews, i.e. in addition to tape recordings, I always took notes as we talked. In this same notebook, I jotted down observations afterwards. On some occasions, I wrote questions that arose in my mind as my fieldwork progressed. I also noted how I felt. These notes commenced when I arrived and continued for the duration of my field trip to Bangladesh, from July 2006 to September 2006.

2.3 A puzzling experience

My research crystallized in my mind during and immediately after an unexpected experience at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. It is worth narrating in some detail because it encapsulates my intellectual “puzzle” in remarkable ways. The experience happened several years ago in a rural area near Comilla, to the southeast of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. I was working as a freelance writer for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)\(^2\) when I attended a training workshop for women health workers or Family Welfare Visitors (FWVs). A Bangladeshi state-run Maternal and Child Welfare Clinic (MCWC) that receives assistance from the UNFPA organized the workshop. Family Welfare Visitors in Bangladesh are typically young, female, high school graduates, drawn from the villages, who are trained to provide basic contraceptive services to women clients in their homes. The workshop was to focus on management of an Inter-Uterine Device or IUD.

I entered a large hall to find about 25 women seated in a semi-circle and several men seated on a slightly raised platform facing the women. I noted the presence of two men dressed in long robes, wearing tupi or prayer caps, with scarves known as gamcha draped around their shoulders. Their attire was of the kind usually worn by Muslim religious men in Bangladesh, including imams or congregational prayer leaders. Normally,
the attire marks a male religious subject in the Muslim world in South Asia and in Bangladesh in particular (see fn. 5, Chapter 1). I was told that the two men were indeed imams from two local mosques or masjids.

When the training began, I was surprised to see a larger than life model of female genitalia placed on a table in the centre of the room. A male medical doctor who was also a senior Bangladeshi ministry of health official based in Dhaka conducted the workshop. He gave an introductory speech and then, with the help of several women assistants, proceeded to train the new recruits in the proper and safe ways to insert an Inter-Uterine Device or IUD. He demonstrated the procedure several times on the model and selected several women to come up and practise the procedure as well. The event ended with a speech by one of the imams. He spoke about the Islamic perspective on childbirth, maternal health and the wellbeing of the family, citing several verses from the Qur’an and from Hadith. He stressed that Islam encouraged and sanctioned the spacing of childbirth in order to ensure the health of mothers, children and families.

This experience raised several unsettling questions in my mind. The sheer physicality of the model of female genitalia made me uncomfortable, and the patently gendered power relationships between the authority figures of the men on the one hand, and the subaltern women trainees on the other, was disconcerting. In my freelance work with the UNFPA I had been given guidelines that were gender sensitive and promoted the empowerment of Bangladeshi women. At the time, I was editing a study on violence against women in Bangladesh that UNFPA had commissioned. I wondered how UNFPA could be involved with an event that authorized male expertise and power over subaltern women trainees and involved male imams. I discuss these concerns below to explain why this experience is significant for my research.

It was unsettling to me that the male medical doctor who conducted the workshop adopted an overtly authoritative posture towards the trainees. In his dual role as medical doctor and ministry of health official, he seemed to be invoking the authority of technological “expertise” and that of the Bangladeshi state. Class issues were also abundantly clear: when the same male doctor had shown me around the MCWC in Comilla earlier the same day, he had addressed me in a form of Bangla that explicitly denotes respect—for class, age and gender. My Bangladeshi class credentials that were apparent in
my appearance and linguistic traits (as will be explained later in this chapter) marked me as elite, while my status as a Bangladeshi-Canadian, working for an international agency, reinforced my upper-class status.4

The women trainees at this workshop, however, were village-based, and the equivalent of working-class in rural terms. Their gender made them doubly disadvantaged in relation to the doctor. I noted that he used a familiar Bangla form of address, one that denotes that a speaker is of a higher social or professional rank and authority. Age often trumps class, so an older woman who was one of the trainees could have been addressed with more respect. But she was not.5 Furthermore, although the familiar Bengali form of address can be used to show compassion, affection or intimacy towards someone younger or lower in rank, the doctor’s tone was brusque, bordering on rudeness.

The most unsettling aspect of the workshop was the presence of the imams. It was unsettling on several registers: personal and political, intellectual and emotional. I discuss my particular positionalities later but here I need to note that my reaction to the presence of the imams stems from deep-rooted understandings and experiences of being a Muslim woman of Bangladeshi origin. It was based on a fundamental notion of purdah, which has fairly wide implications.

Purdah—literally curtain—can mean a physical barrier or seclusion for women; it is interpreted in this way to mean segregation between men and women, especially in public spaces. Mosques in Bangladesh are primarily male spaces, but when women are present, they are in a separate space. The female form is covered specifically during canonical prayer. Bangladeshi male religious subjects such as imams, pirs, or hujoors normally do not gaze directly towards women. There is a clear injunction in the Qur’an (Ali, 1993, Chapter 24, An Nur, Ayat 30-31) for both men and women to lower their eyes when they approach each other. Imams may be present at women-only gatherings, but women will conform to very distinct customs of modesty in their presence. Purdah also implies adherence to norms of decorum for and around the female body, particularly with regard to female genitalia. There is ample evidence to show that women in Bangladesh, including in rural communities, are aware of, and assert the concept of personal privacy and decorum, sometimes as moner purdah or purdah of the mind (Farida Akhter; Anonymous, interviews)6. Purdah of the mind refers to a sensibility rather than a physical
barrier or covering. It was a notion of purdah that was being breached at the workshop because of the presence of male religious subjects.

The boundaries of purdah transcend class in many instances. Elite men and women in Bangladesh will defer to male religious subjects, even when the latter belong to a lower socio-economic level. And certainly, women from the working classes would not mingle freely with or expose their flesh or bodies in the presence of men who are not related by blood, such as their fathers-in-law or brothers-in-law, and the same would apply to male imams. There is a fundamental barrier, even a taboo, towards engaging in any physical proximity with men in public and even more so in relation to a religious male subject. Furthermore, exposure of a woman’s hair or her anatomy in the presence of Muslim male religious subjects or men who are older, often described as murubbi, is seen not merely as being sexually provocative, but also as a sign of disrespect and discourtesy.

The latter implication may be lost on non-Muslims. I have had to explicitly explain to non-Muslim women in particular that when they enter a mosque or a prayer assembly—even an all female gathering—it is discourteous to uncover the hair, just as it is discourteous and disrespectful to wear footwear. This may well be a Muslim custom peculiar to South Asia in much the same way as the Muslim greeting in Arabic, “As Salaam Alaikum”, meaning “May Peace Be On You”, is often accompanied by a movement of the cupped right palm in the direction of the forehead, and a slight bending of the torso, only in South Asia. In Bangladesh and also generally in the South Asian Islamic tradition, women will draw a scarf or the end of a sari across and over their hair when the Muslim call to prayer is heard. This signals respectfulness through modesty. My exposure to Western norms and behaviour within and outside Bangladesh has meant that I do not habitually lower my gaze in the presence of all men; however, it is a norm associated with Muslim women in particular and I engage in the custom as a result of my upbringing and experiences as a Muslim woman in Bangladesh.

I was surprised and uncomfortable because of my familiarity with normative customs defining interactions between women and men in Bangladesh, and the implications of imams being present at the workshop were clear to me. I sensed that many of the women present were uncomfortable as well because they were completely silent, both during the workshop and afterwards. This was in contrast to their behaviour before
the workshop. At that time, they were curious and approached me on their own, to ask about my reasons for being in Comilla and about my profession, whether I had a family, children and so on. I noted these differences vaguely at the time, but they became clearer as I reflected on this event later.

I need to stress that the rules of modesty that I have explained here would not necessarily apply to non-Muslim women nor, perhaps, would Western non-Muslim women be aware of the breach of decorum entailed. Thus, they may fail to understand my reaction. To sum up, therefore, my surprise at the presence of the two imams at a workshop dedicated exclusively to the insertion and removal of a contraceptive device on a model of female genitalia was linked to the customary concept of purdah. The explicit display of female genitalia under the gaze of the imams in particular seemed to me to breach tradition and norms of female modesty.

My surprise was not because Islamic precepts or representatives were seen to be sanctioning birth control methods. I was aware at the time that imams had been involved in population control policies in the 1960s in what was known then as East Pakistan. One of my research participants, Khushi Kabir, later confirmed the involvement. I discuss the implications of working with imams to reduce female fertility in Bangladesh later (see Chapter 5). As far as I was aware when I observed the workshop, mosque-based imams were encouraged to sanction birth control and family planning in their Friday khutba or talk that in Bangladesh is normally attended only by men. Imams were not involved in imparting reproductive control measures to women. In fact, as I will discuss later in Chapter 5, the ingenuity of the family planning program in East Pakistan was to provide family planning tools to women within their own homes so as to maintain the norms of purdah. The presence of imams in a training workshop with a very specific purpose that involved exposure of a model of female genitalia was therefore not in keeping with the impression that I had about the involvement of imams in family planning programs in Bangladesh.

The presence of the imams was problematic for another reason. Imams represented religious sanction and authority at an event that ought to have been strictly “secular”. In the next chapter I discuss how the development paradigm is predicated on assumptions of Western ideals of secularism. Briefly though, my perspective was based on ideas very
similar to those expressed to me later by several development practitioners during my fieldwork. For instance, Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC, (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), the largest NGO in Bangladesh and by some accounts, in the world, spoke to me of “mullahs” (a word often used pejoratively for conservative or extremist Islamic preachers, scholars or imams) in adversarial terms, as strictly outside the realm of modernity, liberalism and gender equality that his NGO had visualized and successfully introduced in Bangladesh. Kabir, who has been mentioned earlier, was critical of the USAID and UNFPA training programs with imams because she felt that religion is a personal matter and ought to be kept outside the public sphere of which development is an integral part. Several other participants in my study adopted similar perspectives.

The significance of my experience in Comilla was that it directed me towards an interrogation of the relationship between international development and religion. When I looked back at the experience, I began to wonder if such events were extraordinary. The matter-of-fact manner in which the imams were integrated into the workshop, as well as the openness with which I, a relative outsider to the development community, was invited and encouraged to observe the event, made me wonder: Were engagements between religion and development taking place not merely on selected occasions, but on an ongoing basis, especially at the grassroots level? It now strikes me as interesting that I did not ask the doctor or his colleagues at the workshop if imams were involved in women’s reproductive health issues on a regular basis. At the time, I was unable to frame questions or rationalize my sense of unease.

The experience described above marked a starting point in my research. It is an anecdotal experience; nevertheless, it crystallizes some of the key issues and questions that came to mind at the time and also subsequently, as I undertook my fieldwork. In the next section I explain how my methodological framework emerged from the above starting point in my research.

2.4 An “incitement to discourse”

If engagements similar to the workshop in Comilla, Bangladesh, were indeed a recurring phenomenon in development processes, there was little or no acknowledgement
of the same in development literature. The possibility that religion and development could be entangled fairly deeply at the grassroots level contradicted dominant—and foundational—assumptions about development. As I discuss in more detail later, the “secular” logic of political modernity, which is a core principle of development, dictates a disavowal of religious influences and affiliations in the public domain, and thereby in development policies and practices. There is a general impression in scholarly works, development studies literature, in development practices and processes, and in policy papers and reports that religion has no place in the development paradigm. The major international development agency texts do not recognize religion as a theme, a concept, or a social process to be considered in development. Religion seems to be deliberately omitted from mention or recognition—deliberate in that there appears to be a studied omission of the topic, in particular at a thematic, conceptual level. At the same time, my own first-hand experience in Bangladesh implied a curious imbrication between religion and development at the very grassroots level. It was curious in the sense that it brought to mind a particular kind of discursive construct, one explicated in Michel Foucault’s analyses of the dominant discourses of sexuality in Victorian times. I refer especially to his insights on the supposed silencing of sexuality:

this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about [sexuality]; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results. (1980/1978, p. 27, italics added)

Foucault is referring to a curious kind of “silence” that seemed to emerge around sexuality during a certain era in Europe. On the face of it, the silence implied that sexuality had been banished from thought and behaviour, but according to him what happened was something quite different: sexuality had been contained, managed and “produced” in particular ways. Foucault’s genealogy of how, and by whom, Victorian era discourses of sexuality were sanctioned and sustained suggests that silence in a particular domain of discourse does not necessarily imply that the topic has been expunged from discursive structures, or from our thoughts and actions. In the History of Sexuality (1980/1978),
Foucault shows us that, from the seventeenth century onwards, sexual topics were dispersed and deployed by way of a wide variety of devices so that, rather than a massive censorship ... what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse. (1980/1978, 34, italics added)

What appeared to be regimes of sexual repression were actually regimes of facilitation which effectively worked to regulate, and thus, also significantly, to produce sexuality in very particular, often “scientific” ways.

Foucault’s analyses direct our attention also towards the ways in which power is exercised in regimes of (sexual) regulation, how what he calls the ”polymorphous techniques of power” (1980/1978, p. 11) enable particular regimes to sustain particular discourses in particular ways. By substituting the word “sex” with “religion”, I find in the following passage an uncanny ability to summarize and theoretically frame my own interrogations with regard to religion in the development domain:

The central issue, then ... is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it, but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store, and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all “discursive fact,” the way in which sex is “put into discourse.”(1980/1978, p. 11, italics added)

And so, too, with regard to how religion is “put into” development discourse. The notion of discourse or what is often referred to as “discourse theory”, as theorized by Michel Foucault, is a key element in my research methodology.

2.5 “Discourse Theory”

I noted in the preceding section that my understanding of discourse is drawn from the History of Sexuality (Foucault, (1980/1978). It is further shaped by Arturo Escobar’s discussion of Foucault’s theory of discourse and power and his relevance to the Third World (1984), as well as Escobar’s seminal analyses of development as discourse (1988;
1995). Sara Mills’ work *Discourse* (2004), which is influenced by and focuses primarily on Foucault’s writings on discourse, is also very useful. The discussion on “discourse theory” that follows is drawn from these major sources.

There are various definitions of the term “discourse” (Mills, 2004, p. 15) and even for Foucault, discourse is not a single theoretical or methodological precept but rather “one element in [his] work” (Mills, 2004, p. 15). Foucault suggests that his large body of writings can be approached eclectically, like:

little tool boxes ... if people want to open them, to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of power, ... so much the better. (cited in Patton, 1979, p. 115, cited in Mills, 2004, p. 15)

The above quotation reflects the different ways in which Foucault’s insights lend themselves to analyses, and also, significantly, to their social and political relevance. His use of the term “discourse” has a similar portent in that for him it does not imply a mere stretch of text or a collection of signs, but rather the “practices that *systematically* form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49, cited in Mills, 2004, p. 15, italics added). There is a complex but also organized, seemingly rational and replicable interplay of practices—such as prohibitions, exhortations, redistributions—that bring into being or produce something else—an utterance, a concept or an effect (Mills, 2004, p. 15).

In a Foucauldian understanding therefore, “discourse” refers not to text or speech, but to the *set of rules and procedures* for the production of particular discursive structures, or discourses, which demarcate and produce certain dominant, sanctioned and legitimized ways in which we think, act and behave. Discourse does not exist in isolation, nor in and of itself, but rather is sustained or held together by forms of power. The process of being “held together” is critical because the forms, rules, procedures which constitute a particular discourse, though widely dispersed and localized, are imbricated in very subtle ways to form a strategic whole. Taken together, these discursive sets have particular effects that bring knowledge into being; knowledge is both the product and the process of forms of objectification, regulation, control, facilitation.
A major contribution by Foucault to critical thinking has been to change our perception of knowledge as that which exists, on its own, as “an expression of [people's] ideas” (Mcdonnell, 1986, p. 86, in Mills, 2004, p. 14), to something that has to be produced in specific ways, through specific devices and conditions. In other words, knowledge comes to be known as knowledge because of the work done by power. A discourse does not exist in a direct causal relationship with elements that constitute it or are constituted by it. Although it seems as though certain conditions and elements directly produce certain kinds of discursive knowledge, practices, behaviour and norms, Foucault stresses the importance of focusing not on the constituent elements singly, on their own, or on their causal attributes, but with reference to the ways in which they are composed relationally, i.e. through the systematic ways in which the elements are connected in order to form a whole (Escobar, 1984, p. 379). It is in these relationships, interconnected nodes and forms of regulation, control, production and facilitation that power and knowledge become imbricated, and discursive “facts” are produced. Thus, in order to understand what discourse means and how it works, “what needs to be studied is the proliferation of ‘local centres’ of power-knowledge, their patterns of transformation, the ways in which they enter into an overall strategy, and, finally, the ways in which the latter finds support in the former” (Escobar, 1984, pp. 380-81).

2.6 Development as discourse

My evidence demonstrates a specific set of discursive elements that form what I call the “Imam Discourse” in Bangladesh. This discourse is enabled through different kinds of interventions, actions, behaviour and sets of rules, not only with specific reference to Bangladesh, but also within a broader discourse of international development. In order to locate the Imam Discourse within the discourse of development, I turn to the work of Arturo Escobar who has incorporated Foucauldian discourse theory in his compelling critique of international development in the Third World (1995). According to him, Foucauldian analysis reaffirms that,
without examining development as discourse we cannot understand the systematic ways in which the Western developed countries have been able to manage and control and, in many ways, even create the Third World politically, economically, sociologically and culturally. (Escobar, 1984, p. 384)

This is not to say that certain problems, such as underdevelopment for instance, do not exist in the Third World. Nonetheless, what discursive structures and practices do is mount their own response to problems that they discursively construct. Such a response is not a “natural process of knowledge that gradually uncover[s] problems and deal[s] with them” (Escobar, 1995, p. 44) but something very different; it is a discursive construct that is complex and at the same time, also organized.

A second effect of discursive practices is that they hide from view the ways in which they themselves give rise to, facilitate, enable and sustain, powerful mechanisms that both bring the (problems of the) developing world into the discourse, and also provide ways in which the discourse can classify, regulate and manage them. Escobar’s work details how the Third World is problematized, categorized, labelled and engaged with, by the supposedly disinterested and scrutinizing gaze of Western developmental expertise, under the authority of a power-knowledge nexus that underpins the legitimacy of the discourse itself. Development policies and practices produce Third World “problems” of which they speak, and endeavour to resolve and regulate them, even as the problems are produced. Once a new “problem” emerges, it is categorized, studied and becomes incorporated into the discourse. The point is that the discourse does not “seek so much to illuminate possible solutions as to give ‘problems’ a visible reality amenable to particular treatments” (Escobar, 1995 p. 42). What ensues, therefore, as part of the discourse, is a detailed, systematic, rationally justified system of observation and examination which produces a “political anatomy of the Third World” (Escobar, 1995, p. 42), one with seemingly permanent attributes.

The methodological framework that emerges from the foregoing discussion suggests that since development is a “rule-governed system held together by discursive statements that the discursive practice continues to reproduce” (Escobar, 1995, p. 154), we need to examine the discourse by unpacking the main axes upon which the elements are constructed. In other words, we need to trace the pathways of knowledge that
facilitate the discourse and ask how—based on what notions of Islamic doctrine or tradition, scientific truth, or secular ideals—is the transformation of imams brought into being, elaborated into a system of thought and legitimized? Second, who or what provides the authority for such processes and practices? What is the involvement of the Bangladeshi state, the development industry, Western global interests, US foreign policy, male Muslim imams? How does the Imam Discourse foster certain forms of subjectivity? How are particular subject positions are privileged above others? In the next section I introduce and discuss the theoretical influences and ethical concerns that have shaped my methodology.

2.7 Methodological dilemmas

The ‘messiness’ of social reality has always exceeded the explanatory power of our conceptual frameworks. (Deniz Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 147)

Methodology is itself a theory. It is a theory of methods which informs a range of issues from who to study, how to study, which institutional practices to adopt (such as interpretative practices), how to write and which knowledge to use. (Beverley Skeggs, 1997, p. 17)

Making choices and decisions informs every step of the research process, from the initial moment when an idea is formed, through its germination into a formal product. Researchers who wish to explore the social world are always challenged by an incredibly messy and often contradictory world of multiple and over-lapping realities. The literature provides innumerable accounts of researchers having to traverse back and forth, repeatedly, along their respective pathways in order to convert what they have seen as important in the world “out there” (Law, 2007, passim) into that which makes sense within a particular intellectual world “in here” (Law, 2007, passim; also see Smith, 1990). Feminist researchers in particular note that these journeys, as well as their outcomes, are complex and complicated (Kirsch, 1999; De Vault, 1999; Skeggs, 1997; Parr, 1998; Lal, 1996; Wolf, 1996). They are complex because each research endeavour or project is different, prone to its particular set of influences, limitations and inputs; they are
complicated in the sense that although they are all individual and distinct, they are also governed by many commonalities.

Until I began to design my research, I could not grasp the import of the foregoing statements. Even now, I can claim only a partial, specifically located perspective. What we receive as knowledge is “always partial and always in the interests of particular groups” (Skeggs, 1997, p. 20). As my analytical insights take a distinct shape and are, in a sense, formally committed into an academically acceptable document, I sense as well as intellectually know what it means to be more than merely methodologically literate. As a “mature” student with a fairly substantive repository of “life” experiences, I take from the literature the principle that it is important to feel comfortable with one’s methodological framework in a holistic way. I find Gesa Kirsch’s (1999) assertion significant, namely, that the critical value of adopting an ethics of feminist research is to understand how “the making of knowledge in research is not epistemologically different from its construction in other aspects of our lives” (p. 88). In other words, what we learn by way of ethics from our everyday lives should inform the way we think about our research ethics. The process of writing this dissertation has been in itself an “experience” of particular value, reaffirming that “doing” is a critical ingredient in knowledge production.


I recognize that there is no automatic connection between qualitative research and feminist critical social research (Sprague, 2005, p. 120) and neither formulation lends itself to a simple definition (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Sprague, 2005; Reinharz, 1992; Kirsch, 1999). Certainly, feminist research cannot be limited to a single method or methodology. And exactly what is “qualitative” about qualitative research is not easy to determine (Mason, 2004, p. 2 and passim). It can include open-ended ways of exploring the social world “by using methodologies that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity” (Mason, 2004, p. 1). Qualitative methods can be
distinguished because of what they are not, that is, because they are not quantitative (Sprague, 2005, p. 119). At the same time, whether qualitative and quantitative methods can be at all differentiated is debatable (Mason, 2005, p. 2). Qualitative research emerged from different disciplinary and intellectual traditions (Mason, 2004, pp. 2-3) and feminist research, for its part, originated in critiques of dominant, positivist methods in the social sciences, especially in relation to research on women (Kirsch, 1999; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). For these reasons in particular, it is often easier to describe what each of these methods is not, rather than what each entails.

An “interpretivist” approach towards qualitative research is useful because it enables researchers to use interview methods in order to explore “people’s individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes, social norms” (Mason, 2004, p. 56). Interpretation is also the process through which experience is channeled into our research; experience is at once already an interpretation and in need of interpretation (Scott 1992, cited in Skeggs, 1997, p. 28). My study emerges from observation and also from participation in the sense that as a feminist researcher committed to critical social research, I understand that what I find as my evidence are not simply collected or discovered but emerge through processes in which the researcher is implicated (Pomerantz, 2005, p. 44). Knowledge claims that are implicit and explicit in my research connect with my “life” experiences and particular positionalities, some of which I discuss later in this chapter. These characteristics facilitate a more active involvement in my research than is acknowledged by positivist methodologies.

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) sum up feminist research as comprising different approaches but also being “imbued with particular theoretical, political and ethical concerns that make these varied approaches to social research distinctive” (pp. 2-3). A key element that distinguishes feminist critical social research is how methods are used (Sprague, p. 27); that is, the ethical and political concerns that shape a particular method, both as a technique and as a political aim (Sprague, p. 27, p. 119).

My philosophy of feminism is informed by an understanding of gender as “a category of thought” (Wadud, 1999, p. xi). Gender is a socially constructed, critical element in shaping and sustaining inequalities, but also it is an interlocking element along with other markers of social differentiation including race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual
identity, age, (Razack, 1999; Collins, 1999; White, 2006). The salience of gender identity in shaping how women and men experience the social world is underscored by a commitment to social justice and equality. Thus, a foundational precept in my methodological understanding as a feminist is that “in order to transform gender relations, more than just gender must change” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 168). I discuss the nature and relevance of my positionalities below.

2.8 Locating the researcher: limits and excesses

Taking sides, beginning from some position with some concern, does not destroy the 'scientific' character of the enterprise. Detachment is not a condition of science ... We must begin from some position in the world. (Dorothy Smith, 1987, p. 177)

More than a decade ago, Diane Wolf (1996) noted a major gap in much feminist research being undertaken by WID (Women-in-Development) scholars. According to her:

these liberal feminists’ writings simply assume that the position of the author does not need to be questioned, a problem also found in the political-economy-of-gender literature. In this day and postmodern age, all feminists in the field of ‘development studies' need to critically and self-consciously examine their positionality, if only to better understand their role in the global arena or their self-appointed ‘do-gooder’ role. (p. 35)

Since the 1990s, the WID approach has been supplemented or, in some instances, replaced by a more insightful and nuanced perspective called GAD (Gender-and-Development) that privileges gender, as well as interlocking conditions of race, class, ethnicity and other variables. But GAD has not necessarily resulted in a corresponding change in the way that feminist scholars theorize and undertake their research—many development scholars still do not integrate their own perspectives, background, power and authority in relation to their research project. To be reflexive, of course, is not the exclusive domain of feminism (see Salzman, 2002), but it is a widely accepted principle that reflexivity produces “good feminist research” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 118).

The practice of reflexivity usually involves the recognition and understanding of power relations in the research process (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, pp. 118-119). To
be reflexive, in essence, means to be explicit about, and integrate into a research project how, by whom and what kind of knowledge is produced, and not produced. Researchers need to recognize and meaningfully integrate into their research their “positionalities” which are a combination of their views, relationships, decisions, privileges, and authority or lack thereof. These positionalities need to be unpacked in relation to our “sites of enunciation” (Lal, 1996, Fn. 9, p. 209) including the epistemic communities in which researchers produce knowledge.

I have found that a useful way to understand reflexivity is to contrast it with reflectivity. To be reflective “does not demand an ‘other’, while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny” (Elizabeth Chiseri Strater, 1996, p. 130, cited in Kirsch, 1999, Fn. 4, p. 106). An objective of situating the researcher in the investigative process is to preclude homogenous, universalizing claims of knowledge (Kirsch, 1999, p. 79). What happens, however, is that strategies to implement reflective research are difficult to agree upon and seldom uniform; and ensuring a timely occurrence of reflexivity, i.e. before or in tandem with a research project, is equally problematic.¹²

Diane Patai (1994) has cautioned us about deploying reflexivity as nothing more than a superficial and mechanically added tool. She notes that the mere acknowledgement of one’s positionalities does not change the circumstances and consequences of one’s research because, among other things, the “one question that the new methodological self-absorption seems not to ask [is]: Does all this self-reflexivity produce better research?” (Patai, 1994, p. 69). Recent scholarship has added to this understanding in powerful ways. As I write this section, I am aware that when researchers engage in reflexivity they ought to resist indulging in what Jennifer Mason calls “unbounded introspection” (2005, p. 5) or to adopt what Wanda Pillow (2003) astutely describes as “reflexivities of comfort” (p. 188)—strategies which, in one way or another, ultimately lead back to and privilege the researcher. Pillow’s essay underlines the pitfalls of using reflexivity to “write toward the familiar” (p. 180); that is, to remain within one’s comfort zone while mechanically fulfilling a technical requirement.

Given that my study engages for the most part with “dominant others” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 61) I find it interesting that even nuanced discussions, such as those by Kirsch
(1999) and by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), assume a particular power relationship between the (Western/Northern) researcher and the (non-Western/Southern) research participant. Pillow attends to some extent to the problematic by drawing a line between “cultural intuition” (p. 182) which she acknowledges to be a legitimate repository of historical and personal cultural insights that the researcher brings to the “formation, doing and analysis of research” and what she regards to be undeserving, self-reflexive accounts of “how the self is involved in the research process” (p. 182). In the next section I focus on the relevance of my situatedness to my research.

2.9 My positionalities: insights and limitations

I am a “mature” PhD candidate, a feminist scholar in a Canadian university and a Canadian citizen of Bangladeshi origin. I am identified as an immigrant, a member of a “visible” minority community, a “woman of colour” and also as a Muslim. These subjectivities shape my keen interest in exploring how Muslim identities are implicated in international development in Bangladesh by examining policies and processes of development agencies and state organizations. That I grew up in Muslim majority, newly emerging postcolonial societies in Pakistan and Bangladesh has to do with my perspective as well. In time, the racialization of my Muslim identity has become linked with the events of 9/11 and America’s “War on Terror”, and while the conflation provides insights, it also shapes my study in specific ways.

I recognize that my project has been oriented as much to facilitate my own need to understand and promote certain ideas and perspectives, as it has been to fulfill the formally denoted aims of my research. I have been keen to demonstrate the negative impact of neo-colonial regimes of international development in the Third World; I have been also struggling to understand how to be an observant Muslim woman with “secular” sensibilities in a world dominated by patriarchy and Western elites, especially since 9/11. These elements have influenced my research. I am not saying that my intentions have been insincere. What happens, as I now understand, is that a researcher’s own agenda permeates and influences the shape that a research project takes; it is often a question of
how much or to what degree the researcher’s own voice mediates her research and also, while some mediations can be advantageous, others may become limitations.

During my research, I related intuitively to a sense of anger that imams felt as objects of suspicion, scrutiny and even hostility by Western elites. It was because of my insights in this area that imams, as well as the director of the Islamic Foundation, began to open up to my questions during my interview with them. At the same time, because I have a specific “secular” post-colonial education and Muslim background, I approached the Director of the Islamic Foundation and the imams with the assumption that they represent patriarchy. For example, as I entered the premises of the Islamic Foundation, I covered my hair. I reacted to my gendered position in relation to Muslim men who overtly identify as religious subjects and to a space not normally traversed by women. It is beside the point that the evidence I later generated—discussed in subsequent chapters—supports that assumption. The point is that because of my positionality in relation to my gender and Muslim practices in Bangladesh in particular, I did not explicitly ask the imams or the Director of the Islamic Foundation about their perspectives on women and gender issues in relation to Islam. I do not know what they would have said in response had I posed a direct question. Instead, I engaged in a discussion on how women’s empowerment might be challenged by conservative interpretations of Islam and the imams responded defensively and as I later realized, with some anger.

My interest in providing a particular historical background to the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh is shaped by my class, religion, ethnicity, age and educational background. I was born in 1949 into an elite family located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Members of my extended family were politically active in the nineteenth century under the British Raj, to whom they were generally loyal, and later they became central figures in the movement for independence from Britain and for Pakistan. I was educated in the English-language stream in various cities in what are now Bangladesh and Pakistan, and my formative years were a blend of trilingual influences emanating from 1) an Anglo-Saxon postcolonial educational system; 2) a north Indian, Urdu-based linguistic heritage; and 3) a more contemporary, East Bengali linguistic and ethnic identity. The nature of my broadly north-Indian, Urdu-based influences was fairly uncommon in that my family straddled East and West Pakistan in political and socio-economic terms. Such elitist hybridities have certain
political connotations in contemporary Bangladesh and within social structures emanating from that country even in diaspora, so that becoming a Canadian has meant that my background has continued confront me and remains of some consequence to me.

I am noting these positionalities to explain how my dissertation adopts a particular perspective in relation to Islam in Bangladesh. I am generally sympathetic to Muslim elites in Bengal, both past and present; I approach Western international development organizations with more than healthy suspicion; it is difficult for me to accept that their interventions can be justified under any circumstances; and I am unable to “de-class” (Kabir, interview) or de-urbanize myself completely especially in relation to rural working class women and men. The workshop in Comilla, for instance, could have been differently interpreted from the perspectives of women and men from a different class, religion, ethnicity and age group.

I am shaped also by early academic immersion in the disciplinary conventions of history, followed by more eclectic explorations in women’s and gender history including postmodern appreciations of a Foucauldian “history of the present”. I have been influenced also by re-conceptualizations of history from postcolonial perspectives (Said, 1978,) and more recently, by understandings of “life-worlds” (Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000). My perspective is thus somewhat hybrid or eclectic as will become evident in Chapter 3. This perspective has more positive than negative aspects because, ultimately, it remains faithful to historical “facts”, while simultaneously unpacking different and differing “interpretative interpolations” (Ludden, 2011, p. 79) that exist within and are a necessary component of any history of the present.

An important aspect of my identity is my exposure to and understanding of Islamic, South Asian, tradition and culture. These emanated in large measure from my personal experience of the Muslim pilgrimage, Haj, with my extended family as a child; sustained and liberating exposure to the Qur’an, largely through my grandfather who was an Islamic scholar; and simultaneous appreciation of mystical Islamic Sufi music and poetry, especially a form of devotional singing known as qawwali, by my paternal grandmother, my father and members of my extended family; and North Indian classical raga, first with members of my family, and later by a well-known classical vocalist. These seemingly contradictory influences encouraged a healthy suspicion of both Islamic dogma and
“superstition”, the latter associated with half-baked religious preachers such as the “kath mullah” (some of whom are imams), as well as an abiding self-identification with the mystical or Sufi dimensions of personal devotion in Islam. I feel that these positionalities have added to the strengths of this study by, among other things, providing a nuanced exploration of Bengali Muslim dilemmas and experiences.

As an East Bengali or East Pakistani, I witnessed and participated in the birth of Bangladesh and the early years of independence in particularly traumatic ways, as a young woman living with my husband’s family in Dhaka. My in-laws, who were an elite family with noted political contributions to Bengali nationalism, were dispossessed when the Bangladeshi government nationalized the private sector soon after independence in 1971. With my own extended family dispersed across South Asia and my husband’s family under extreme financial pressure, my two children, my husband and I left Bangladesh. We thus joined what I later realized to be the ranks of a South Asian diaspora in the late 1970s to early 1980s, an event which coincided with the oil shocks of the time and the opening up, simultaneously, of “expatriate” professional employment in the Arab Gulf states. I spent some 20 years working as a secretary, schoolteacher and a journalist in the UAE, before coming to Canada as a single mother with two children.

My early experience in Canada included being marked and distanced because of my race, as a “visible” minority, immigrant, Muslim graduate student in Toronto, and simultaneously, as the recipient of intermittent professional validation as an “ethnic” journalist or “native informant” (Razack, 2000) in exceedingly poorly paid temporary employment. My entry into doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia as a “mature” student has been mediated by these early experiences. There are different kinds of boundaries within academia as well,14 and together with my early experiences, they frame my keenness to fix my gaze “upwards,” in the direction of a dominant North, rather than towards Third World subjects supposedly like myself. I have not adopted the practice of substituting “foreign” words with English, Anglo-Saxon-Christian equivalents, such as “clergy” (Karim, 2004) or “Islamic spiritual leader” (Hayden, 2006) for imams. I have also not placed “foreign” or Bangla words within inverted commas; to do so would be to populate this dissertation with immigrant words destined to remain outside the North
even while residing within its domains. These are some of the ways my personal history of being an outsider in Western society shows up in the text.

2.10 Reversing the gaze

As noted earlier, my objectives are to “study up” (Kirsch, 1999; Judd, 1999; Hertz and Imber, 1995; Wolf, 1996) by examining the perspectives, attitudes, policies and actions of policymakers, authority figures, and persons in positions of power. In their introduction to a collection of articles on the challenges of conducting qualitative research on elites, Hertz and Imber (1995) wonder why researchers would want to study people who are rich and famous or in positions of authority and power. After all, if critical social research is all about empowering the disenfranchised, what purpose could there be in giving elites a voice, they ask. In their understanding, studying elites could be a strategy to “expose the reach of power in the hope of clarifying it for those who are subject to it” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. ix), a perspective also advanced by Michelle Fine (1992). In keeping with what Fine suggests, my research aims are as much to study “dominant others” in order to unsettle conventional expectations about research, power and privilege, as they are to disrupt assumptions about who constitutes the “other” (Fine, 1992, p. 73). Examining “the pathologies” (Kozol, 1996, p. 3 cited in Kirsch, 1999, p. 61) of authority figures from the North who dominate the development landscape of the South is useful because as Gesa Kirsch (1999) maintains, it

reverses the critical gaze of the researcher, redirects the research agenda, challenges power inequities, and lays bare the process whereby ‘others’ are constructed as research subjects. (p. 61)

Although my study does not focus directly on ordinary Bangladeshi women, my interest in “studying up” stems from a desire to express an alternative, subaltern voice in relation to Northern, dominant forms of knowledge and expertise. This is as much my own voice, as I now realize, as it is that of Bangladeshi women, and men. My personal investment in this project reminds me of the views expressed by Everjoice J. Win (2007), who contends that the voices of middle-class African women with particular kinds of
development expertise are seldom heard in development circles. Win narrates her experiences as an African woman with substantive experience in development who has to prove her credentials as an authentic African to Northern development authority figures in a variety of ways. Like bell hooks14 (see fn. 14 this chapter), Win insightfully notes that researchers from the North are more likely to engage in intellectual works that are theoretical, while those with practical experiences and suggestions are most often women from the South. She takes issue with a power-knowledge nexus that privileges “development’s favourite woman” (p. 82), namely, the “poor, powerless or pregnant African woman” (p. 79). Win’s critique brings to mind Rey Chow’s (1994) account of how Chinese women who do not fit the profile of authenticity expected by Westerners are often marginalized in academia. Western scholars, she notes wryly, are discomforted that “the natives are no longer staying in their frames” (p. 123). My point here is that personal investments and biases are mediated by experiences of power and privilege.

Studying policies and processes by accessing people in positions of power and authority is especially daunting in the development industry. As I noted in Chapter 1, there is a pervasive sense of secrecy in development policymaking that precludes debate about or public scrutiny of development policies. I also realized, as my study progressed, that there is a notable gendered division of labour within this field. There are very few women in positions of authority and power in the development industry in Bangladesh.

The presence of women in development organizations is important, but not because women’s mere presence is expected to automatically usher in gender sensitive or egalitarian precepts and processes. Research demonstrates that women play a distinct role in how policies are implemented in development organizations; also that women do gender work differently than men (Jackson, 2002; Goetz, 2001). This is not to suggest that women and men are inherently different but, as Cecile Jackson (2002) puts it, “the experiences of women often shapes their approach to their work in distinctive ways which leads to distinctive understandings of development priorities and ways of working with others” (p. 505). During my fieldwork several Bangladeshi development agents were reluctant to share information with me for reasons that were never explicit. They were mainly men, though there was one woman; all were located at the deputy management level in international development agencies. Similar expressions of reticence were
apparent during my focus group meeting with imams, my meeting with the Director of the Islamic Foundation, and my meeting with the head of an Islamic NGO in Bangladesh. I was able to engage in conversations and some semblance of interrogation with policymakers like the American representatives at The Asia Foundation and USAID, the Director of the Islamic Foundation, and a group of male imams, is, therefore a notable strength of my research.

At the same time, my gender and class encouraged several Bangladeshi women in leadership positions and in middle management positions in the development domain to share their insights on policy and process in a candid manner. Two women in donor agencies complained bitterly about being completely ignored by senior male colleagues.

The lessons learned from this experience include understanding the contradictions of class, age, ethnicity and gender in relation to researchers from the South located in the North, as well as those who “study-up”. The privilege of my class enabled me to have knowledge of, and easy access to Western and domestic development practitioners, but it also posed barriers. As an immigrant who has “made it“ to the North, my credentials are both suspect and valued in the South. I am an “insider” (Collins, 1999) by reason of a shared ethnicity and language with Bangladeshis, but also an ”outsider“ (Collins, 1999) because of my social class, which stems in part from my education and location in the North and from my elite status in Bangladesh. I have also learned that methodological guidelines are not a useful or appropriate “fit” for the specificities of my particular research positionalities. As Jayati Lal (1996) has argued, postcolonial methodology is sorely deficient in providing a useful framework for women of colour in the academy in the North who undertake fieldwork in the South. There is an even greater tension with regard to “mature” feminist scholars who carry considerable intellectual, political and emotional “baggage” (Parr, 1998, p. 87) with them into the research process.

My Achilles heel, as it were, has been my journalistic background. Academia is unhesitatingly disparaging about journalism, an approach that initially made me prickly and defensive. But now, after much trial and error, I recognize that being trained as a journalist and, indeed, being a good journalist is not an asset when researching and writing a thesis. Journalism is often about getting the story; it is good detective work, keeping to deadlines and being able to distill complex ideas into simple language. Where
journalism has held back or impinged on my research is in the ability to engage in deep analysis. For instance, the Imam Discourse has contours and curves that I am only now beginning to understand. If my analytical abilities were more academically honed right at the beginning, my research would have focused in deeper ways on how imams were involved with issues of patriarchy, gender, violence against women. Moreover, good journalists do not engage in much reflexivity: they have very thick skin and they live by the dictum: you are only as good as your last publication.

I have struggled to understand how to be reflexive without reinforcing my centrality in this research. I realize now that although my objectives in undertaking this project have been ostensibly to promote the cause of feminist and social justice, I have my own investment in producing this particular study and drawing particular conclusions. Having said that, I must add that there are advantages to being trained as a journalist. “Studying up” often holds surprises and on more than one occasion during my fieldwork in Bangladesh I was unable to record my interviews. No electronic devices were allowed inside the US Embassy and the Government of Bangladesh Secretariat where the NGO Bureau is housed. Without missing a beat I began to take notes—notes that are accurate and comprehensive. Nearly twenty years of practice came in useful. As well, my feminist sensibilities and especially first hand understanding of the salience of gender emerged while I worked as a journalist in different parts of the world, as did my writing skills and my interviewing abilities. These have been useful to this project (see Endnote 15, this chapter).

In relation to my age and years of experience, I am inspired by the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1999) on the “mismatch” between the real-life experiences of African American women and the absence of frameworks to denote these experiences within the “paradigms of sociology” (p. 170; see also White, 2006). Collins suggests that when these women bring their perspectives into the paradigm, the tension generated by becoming an “outsider within” in the academy is ultimately enriching, to all concerned:

Learning the subject matter of sociology stimulates a re-examination of one’s own personal and cultural experiences; and yet, these same experiences paradoxically help to illuminate sociology’s anomalies. (Collins, 1999, p. 172)
In retrospect, I believe that, by “encouraging and institutionalizing outsider within ways of seeing” (Collins, 1999, p. 173), the academy and the researcher are both enabled. In contrast to becoming an “allegedly unbiased, objective social scientist, outsiders within bring [new] ways of knowing back into the research process” (Collins, 1999, p. 173). These points will, I hope, explain why my study is frequently mediated by first-person encounters and impressions.

Finally, my positionalities combined to influence the choice of participants in my study. The reason I chose to focus on certain international and domestic development agencies stems from my familiarity with these agencies from earlier work relationships, my location as a researcher in Canada specifically, and my social and personal contacts and associations in Bangladesh and in Canada. A major reason for choosing to focus on certain organizations was that these were the agencies working openly with imams and, more significantly, they were willing to explain their work to me.

2.11 Producing “respectable” knowledge

Certain knowledges are normalized, authorized and legitimated; only certain groups are seen to be respectable, to be worthy objects or subjects of knowledge. (Beverley Skeggs, 1997, p. 18)

Feminist perspectives on methodology are premised on the argument that without appropriate attention to methodology, research is at best problematic and at worst, seriously flawed (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Kirsch, 1999). Feminist researchers are cautioned to be explicit about their methodological stance and objectives before embarking on the research process (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Parr, 1998; Kirsch 1999). A critical understanding of feminist methodology is necessary for feminists, especially for those who undertake qualitative research, because feminists intend to provide “better” accounts of women’s experiences with the aim of transforming unjust gendered realities (Kirsch, 1999; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Nevertheless, feminist researchers investigating a range of issues have been caught off guard by unforeseen predicaments that have tested their ethical commitment, their sense of identity and subjectivity and their methodological assumptions (Kirsch, 1999; Lal, 1996; Parr, 1998;
Islam, 2000). One reason for this continuing struggle is that debates over what exactly constitutes feminist methodology are often contentious and ongoing. A detailed discussion of these debates falls outside my research mandate, and therefore I will touch only on those points that are relevant to my work.

Methodology is a framework that serves as a strategic and practical plan of action in the research process. Also, and in my view more significantly, methodology determines how and what gets to be validated and authorized as research (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Kirsch, 1999; Lal, 1996). For these broad reasons, feminist researchers do well to probe and theorize where they stand in relation to the philosophy and politics of feminism, the “science” of knowledge production, and how these are relevant to, or can provide a methodology for (their) feminist claims to knowledge.

What I take away from the general principles denoted above is that feminist research involves action beyond the mere “amassing of evidence” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 42). Methodology is the link between epistemology, that is, how we know what we know as knowledge, and what we do to claim that knowledge (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). By thinking about methodology, we address questions about whether we can (or cannot) make connections between our ideas, experiences and social and material realities because it is through these connections, or the lack of them, that we formulate knowledge.

Ultimately, the instrumental importance of this process of inquiry is that it enables knowledge producers to make claims about their knowledge; for feminists, such claims are of significance and include our political and emancipatory objectives of making explicit the subordination of women in order to facilitate the transformation of unjust gendered lives (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Furthermore, at the same time as feminists have particular commonalities of interests and perspectives they eschew essentializing or totalizing claims to knowledge. I find Donna Haraway’s (1991) argument in this regard to be persuasive, namely that feminists need to be committed to the “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make knowledge claims” (1991, p. 195).

Given that feminist methodology has been shaped by, among other influences, a contentious yet symbiotic relationship with European Enlightenment thought, it is
important in terms of my research project to be clear about several specific limitations of Western feminist methodologies. Arguments of an ethnocentric bias in Western knowledge production are not new. Edward Said’s trenchant critique of “Orientalism” (1979), as a way in which the West has constructed and appropriated the spatial, temporal and intellectual terrain of colonized peoples, is the larger canvas within which, in a sense, Western feminism needs to be discerned. Diversity, which is how differences can be construed, becomes more challenging when it is posited in terms of the political aspects of how differences are organized and constituted in practice (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 110). Thus, when power relations are grounded in research, feminists find that there is a pertinent distinction between “difference as benign diversity and difference as disruption” (Murdolo, 1999, p. 69, cited in Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 110; see also Maynard, 2001). These problematics in Western feminism, (Mohanty & Martin, 1986, cited in Barrett, 1992, p. 208) raise questions about the “privilege and ethnocentric universality” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 74) of Western feminist politics and scholarship, especially with regard to the identity of non-white women in various contexts.

2.12 Methodological strategies

Crucially, and put most simply, your methodological strategy is the logic by which you go about answering your research questions. (Jennifer Mason, 2004, p. 30, italics in original)

My research began in Fall 2005, after I completed my qualifying examinations. As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, I was struck by the contradictory ways in which international development and religion were enmeshed. I focused on Bangladesh with the following question in mind: How does religion, specifically Islam, become entangled in international development policy in a post-colonial Muslim society such as Bangladesh?

When I look back at this research question, I am reminded of Beverley Skeggs’ (1997) account that although she began her research through a methodology of historical realism, at the time she was not aware of its particular “naming” (p. 21); it was as though she was following a particular research strategy “by default” (p. 22). At this early stage, I found a resonance in Michel Foucault’s work on sexuality (1980/1978) and began working
on what has been generally described as “discourse theory” from a Foucauldian perspective, though at the time I did not associate it with a particular name. I conducted preliminary explorations of web-based information. My project was not focused on a specific development program until I embarked on my fieldwork.

As I began to locate sources, I followed what I now realize were three “categories of interrogation” (Blaikie, 2000, cited in Mason, 2004, p. 18) namely, “what, why and how” I could answer the question noted above. At the time I had no idea I was following a formalized guideline. Later, I was introduced to Jennifer Mason’s (2004) work and realized that many of the steps that I had undertaken “intuitively” did fall within a particular set of guidelines. I tried to locate sources that would help me identify relationships between religion and development, especially how (where, when and between whom) they were being enabled.

I searched in particular on the website of the multilateral agency the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). What troubled me after I attended the workshop in Comilla were the peculiar intersectionalities of international development policy and processes, Muslim and Bangladeshi state patriarchal authority, and the bodies of ordinary Bangladeshi women, all present in the same grassroots location. I also explored the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) website, initially to explore how religion was described by the Canadian agency and later, after my fieldwork in Bangladesh ended, in order to confirm my early evidence. At this stage, there were no formal, methodological precepts that guided me; like Dorothy Smith:

I [did] not start ... writing on the basis of research data. Rather, I ... started with a sense of a problem, of something going on, some disquiet, and of something there that could be explicated. (1999, p. 8-9, italics added)

As my candidature in women’s studies and interdisciplinary doctoral studies evolved, I learned the importance of, and began to design my research increasingly in relation to, specific methodological guidance. My interest in undertaking qualitative research informed by feminist, post-colonial perspectives began to grow. What I have understood is that qualitative research allows us to provide understandings of the social world that are nuanced, rich, detailed, inclusive, and also diverse (Mason, 2004), but that
in itself, qualitative research is not a specific methodology. It is more of an activity with “an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts” (Mason, 2004, p. 1, italics in original).

2.13 Fieldwork: generating my research material

My fieldwork took place in Bangladesh from July to September 2006. Before leaving for Dhaka, I designed my research with the following specific questions in mind:

1. In what ways are “Northern” or mainstream development agencies engaging with issues of religion, culture and gender in Bangladesh?
2. What are the contradictions and complexities of these engagements, especially in terms of relations of power and authority?
3. What, if any, kinds of resistance or oppositional perspectives can be discerned in the dominant policies or engagements?

I consulted a web-based directory of international development agencies in Bangladesh under the External Resources Division in the Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh (ERD-1 “Multilateral donors”; ERD-2 “Bilateral donors”; ERD-3 “Flow of external resources”). This directory has been updated considerably since 2006. At the time, the list was basic in that there were few links to the websites of the organizations; their addresses and telephone numbers were outdated; many did not have email addresses; and there was little information on the relative donor strength of the organizations listed. I selected 20 organizations including bilateral and multilateral development agencies, including several that were familiar to me.

A second phase involved contacting the 20 development agencies. My research was exploratory, as I did not have a specific program or project in view. Consequently, I sent letters via email explaining my research focus and requesting a meeting with policymakers within the next four to six weeks (Appendix C). Whenever possible, I addressed each letter personally by name to the head of the institution.

A major limitation in locating potential participants for my study was that more than half of the agencies that I contacted did not respond to my email message. I sent follow-up letters after arriving in Bangladesh in early July 2006. I also began to telephone
each of the agencies on my list. I realize now that “studying up” involves, as Hertz and Imber (1995) note, “the most special kinds of introduction” (p. x). I began to “use” my professional and family connections to meet informally with well-informed experts, including senior managers within the highly energized and visible community of non-governmental organizations; and university professors and development consultants. I also examined an NGO directory published by the Government of Bangladesh ("NGO Affairs Bureau", 2003) The publication provided the name and activities of 1,798 NGOs in Bangladesh. I went through this list mainly to familiarize myself with the vast NGO terrain in Bangladesh. The information in the directory, and from my various informants, led me to Islamic Relief, Bangladesh and Muslim Aid, two NGOs that were apparently working with imams. When I contacted the NGOs, the head of Islamic Relief immediately agreed to an interview with me. The country director of Muslim Aid arranged a meeting but failed to turn up for it; subsequently he left the country on a business trip and no one in the organization was available to speak to me.

It was largely through informal meetings in Dhaka that I began to formulate my research focus. I learned of entanglements between development agencies and male Muslim imams initially from two policymakers in the NGO and development community respectively, and a scholar working as a consultant for a legal rights NGO in Bangladesh. I recorded my informal conversations with them and began to transcribe these within the first two weeks of my stay in Bangladesh. I also made notes of my activities and discussions virtually on a daily basis. As I listened to my taped conversations and began to review my notes, I noticed a pattern in the evidence: there was repeated mention of newly occurring engagements between male Muslim imams and two international development agencies: USAID and UNFPA.

Following these initial understandings, I managed to arrange interviews with several agencies including UNFPA, USAID and The Asia Foundation. I was familiar with several names on my initial list of 20 agencies because of my professional experience as a consultant for UNICEF and UNDP in the 1990s in Bangladesh, and my work as a journalist, also in the 1990s, in Bangladesh. As a consultant for the two UN agencies I came into contact with information and details pertaining to the United Nations Organization in Bangladesh on a substantive and regular basis. As a journalist, I reported on and produced
various special reports on issues pertaining to international development in Bangladesh. I had worked with CIDA to design a special publication for the Bangladeshi daily newspaper *The Independent* on the occasion of International Women’s Day. USAID was of particular interest to me because I had written a paper on the origins of Women-in-Development and interviewed USAID officials during a journalism fellowship on US foreign policy at the University of Maryland in Washington D.C. in 1994 (see Alam, 1994). I explored the work of USAID, UNFPA, and The Asia Foundation in particular through their websites and by obtaining publications authored by them that were available to the public, in Bangla and English, from their offices in Dhaka.

Through these documents it became clear that these agencies were undertaking engagements with male Muslim imams. I began to generate specific evidence on various relationships between UNFPA and imams, as well as USAID and imams. I further generated information on a Bangladesh state-funded institution, the Islamic Foundation, as the mediating element between these international organizations.

The next phase of my fieldwork lasted for approximately eight weeks and involved an exclusive focus on what I call the “Imam Discourse” in Bangladesh. I arranged in-depth, semi-structured interviews with experts at USAID, UNFPA, and The Asia Foundation in particular, and with several other development experts mainly because they consented to my requests for an interview. I conducted interviews with officials of the Islamic Foundation and the NGO Affairs Bureau, government of Bangladesh, and held a focus group meeting with a group of seven male Muslim imams. A list of interviews conducted, and details of participants, time and place, are given in Appendix A; and questions for the focus group are given in Appendix B. I have omitted the names and details of several participants from this list and cite them infrequently in my dissertation, as “anonymous” sources, at their request.

My interviews were semi-structured, that is, I provided participants with a list of questions in advance but I did not “steer” conversations and comments rigidly within the parameters of the questions (Appendix D). I wanted to see how the interviews took their own shape mainly because I had little prior information about how the two development agencies in question, UNFPA and USAID, carried out their engagements with imams. As mentioned above, I had one focus group meeting with seven imams who were selected by
the director of the Islamic Foundation. Attempts to arrange a second focus group meeting proved unsuccessful because only one person turned up for the meeting. Later, I was told informally that there was a reluctance to talk about religion in an open forum. As result, I gave up the idea of any more focus group meetings.

2.14 Particular characteristics: limitations and strengths

Islam in Bangladesh is a highly sensitive topic, especially in relation to foreign or international agencies. As Kamala Visweswaran (1994) writes, “acts of omission are as important to read as the acts of commission” (p. 48) and it was therefore during this early stage in my research that I began to realize that there would be several “gaps” in my evidence and that these would tell their own story, in a sense. Needless to say, my study has gone along pathways that are marked by my positionalities. There were also critical influences from external factors such as security issues that shaped my work.

I realized soon after I began my fieldwork that it has become increasingly difficult to physically gain access to the sites where international agencies are located in Dhaka. One such area is called Baridhara. This suburb houses the embassy of the United States of America. Visitors are only admitted to the embassy after they have been searched and in many instances are not allowed to carry personal belongings such as cell phones, tape recorders, even make-up. In order to access the USAID office, which is housed inside the US Embassy, I had to go through three military checkpoints and surrender my Canadian passport and all my possessions, including my tape recorder and small purse. I was allowed to enter the actual embassy premises carrying a notebook and pen. These are the only implements that were allowed with me during my meeting with two USAID representatives.

What struck me as odd afterwards was that I did not protest or even bring up the obvious inconvenience of having to take notes instead of being able to record the interview with the USAID experts. Our meeting lasted for more than an hour; I am fortunate in that my training as a journalist prepared me for such an eventuality. I took notes with a fair degree of accuracy and detail through a combination of basic shorthand and speedwriting techniques polished over a considerable length of time. In retrospect, it
was possibly my ability to write everything down at the speed of normal speech that prevented me from objecting to the circumstances.

I felt similarly inhibited by a hyper vigilant security establishment when I met a development expert at the office of the UK Department for International Development, (DFID), in Dhaka. I failed to ask the agent why she made a statement at the very outset that she would not comment on certain topics, especially on religion, in her capacity as a DFID representative. I smiled and let it go. Later, during the course of the meeting, I managed to successfully elicit on-the-record remarks from her on the very topics that she had declared off-limits. I believe my surroundings inhibited me and yet, my training as a journalist helped me to be persistent.

As a Muslim woman who does not wear a hijab I found a tension in my meeting with the Director of the Islamic Foundation. When I arrived at the spacious building housing the Islamic Foundation, I covered my hair with a flowing scarf as a mark of deference. I cover my hair upon entering a mosque, during Islamic rituals of various kinds, and often when meeting men who are categorized as religious subjects, such as imams and other Muslim religious subjects. I knew that the hijab signifies class in Bangladesh, as also in many parts of South Asia but it did not occur to me that class would be an issue in this meeting. Working-class women, located especially within expatriate families returning to Bangladesh from the Arab world, appear to be “popularizing” the wearing of hijab (Farida Akhter; Khushi Kabir, interviews). The hijab is also less cumbersome, more practical and costs less than a traditional South Asian scarf known as orna in Bangladesh. The Director of the Islamic Foundation began his interview with me with a telling remark. He spoke in Bangla interspersed with phrases and words in English, and drew attention to my elite status thus:

You are coming [sic] from the nawab (titled) family, the colour of your blood is the same as mine, yes? But who dared to enter or sit in the nawab’s house? I have seen the jomidar (landowner) in my area, no common people were allowed to sit in the chair in the presence of the jomidar. What is the difference between the jomidar and the ordinary man? There is one God, Adam is [just] one man, Hawa (Eve) is [just] one woman, all the men come from one and the same, but after some days, someone has become a nawab. Islam equalised us, there is no difference between men and men (interview notes).
My response at this point was to nod and say nothing. I sensed that the Director was thrown off balance by my appearance; it may have been connected to the manner in which I wore my head covering. Eventually, the conversation became more open and less strained, possibly because my responses were non-confrontational or because the Director felt that he had made his point regarding my class limitations. Several days later, when I met the Director again in a Focus Group meeting with several imams he made another telling and, on this occasion, fairly aggressive remark. I started the interview by asking the imams how they would describe the motives or reasons behind the training program that they were being offered by the American aid agency. One of the imams launched into a long and passionate speech about an encounter with an American visitor during the training program.

Imam: Well, this question that you ask, it’s not as though this question has not come up during our training. Last term I was training when an American came to see me; he was doing research and he came to me because he was told I was strong in Arabic. At that time the crisis in Lebanon was going on—this was the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers in 2005 by Hezbollah in Lebanon and a problem for Israel, if I recall correctly.

The American hurled a question in my face.19 He said that Hezbollah had committed a crime by kidnapping Israeli soldiers. I retorted with my own question. I asked him, “You are saying they were kidnapped and that they were wronged but from which exact location were they abducted, where were they when this wrong was perpetuated on them? They were not abducted from inside Israel, they were taken from Lebanese soil—so why did they go there in the first place?”

I interrupted the flow of the imam’s monologue to ask if the imam had actually stated the above views to the American visitor. The imam’s reply was forceful but defensive:

Imam: when it comes to questions of participating or taking training, yes we will do so but we won’t hold back in stating the truth. They have helped us but that does not mean they can silence us!

At this point, the Director of the Islamic Foundation interrupted somewhat forcefully:
Director: Why have you come to ask these questions—now that is not clear to me. As a Muslim, when a sister in Islam has asked me for assistance I have shown my generosity. Because you have come from so far, as a sister you want to know something, you want to gain knowledge. But now having learned from me whether you will utilise this for or against me that only Almighty Allah knows. And if anyone comes to be with a request for assistance to enrich their knowledge I will always help them—but if they take that knowledge and knife me in the back (he used this figure of speech in English) then, Allah will take care of her.

I did not respond immediately. There was silence for a while; it was not uncomfortable but rather a punctuation mark that I sensed was necessary to establish the Director’s authority. He began to speak again and I listened attentively. I broke my silence at an appropriate pause in the Director’s speech to explain that while I did not share an American perspective on the crisis in Lebanon, and the Occupation of Palestine and other Arab lands by Israel in general, I wanted to know about his perspective on these issues. As soon as I made my comments, the head of the Islamic Foundation smiled and said “Thank you for saying that.” I sensed a change in the imams’ attitudes as well. The conversation became far more candid thereafter and there were no comments about my class or the possibility of a “hidden agenda” on my part.

In retrospect it is clear to me that I intuitively behaved in keeping with the cultural norms of how men and women converse in a particular class and cultural context in Bangladesh. I am reminded of an example given by Kirsch (1999) of a female researcher trying to interview powerful and privileged men (p. 32). The researcher finds it difficult to interrupt the men because of gender norms of male-female conversations; when she remains silent the men assume she agrees with them, even though their comments are sexist. On the occasions that the woman interrupts the men, she is either reprimanded for being rude or they ignore her. In my case, by not speaking for a noticeable length of time and then by expressing a perspective that showed empathy with the ideals of a Muslim ummah or community of believers, I established a commonality in a shared religious identity and perhaps more significantly, I relinquished my class status and clarified my lesser position as a gendered woman in the space and in the presence of the men.

After the focus group meeting ended, several imams came up to me as I was leaving the Islamic Foundation offices and asked if they could talk to me in confidence. I explained
that in any case, their identities would not be disclosed. One of the imams then said to me: “How are you going to ‘use’ our interview, I mean everything that we have said today?” At this point, several imams began talking at the same time. They were most concerned about being seen as potential “terrorists.” They demonstrated a cynicism about the possibilities of American funding and resources changing “hearts and minds” in Muslim societies. An imam said, for instance, almost as an afterthought, without implying a threat but more a reality: “They [Americans] can do what they like; we know who we are.”

My ability or flexibility to empathize and communicate with the imams as a gendered Bangladeshi Muslim woman who acknowledged her status in relation to them allowed them to transcend the limitations posed by my class and gender, but they still had reservations about Western motives for seeking out and trying to understand the perspectives of imams. It must be wondered how the interactions would have been different if my class status and gender had been the same as that of the Director and the imams.

2.15 Conclusion

I began this chapter explaining how a key event that took place at the grassroots level in Bangladesh, before I became a graduate student, crystallized into the present study. I noted and explained my surprise at the presence of male Muslim imams at this event, a grassroots demonstration of a contraceptive method that entails an invasive and explicit procedure on the female body. The main question that emerged from this early experience was whether religion and international development are entangled or involved on a regular basis and if so, what are the implications of their relationship?

I have traced the varied influences that shape my research focus, including my conceptual and ideological approach, and my personal history and circumstances. I identified and explained how a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis informs my research and the challenges of undertaking fieldwork with participants in positions of power and privilege. The positionalities of a researcher are significant in all research processes but especially pertinent when the aim is to “study-up”. My discussion denotes how the problems and challenges that confront researchers such as myself, that is, a
Muslim woman originally from the South, located in the academy in the North, are still fairly under-theorized.

The selection of participants for this study has been shaped by my personal and professional interests and spheres of influence, and by conditions in the field. The international agencies whose policies and perspectives I explore, namely USAID, UNFPA and The Asian Foundation, were the only agencies among those that I contacted which were openly undertaking what I began to understand to be a discursive apparatus involving a vast number of male Muslim imams located across Bangladesh. They were also the only agencies willing to discuss their engagements with imams. I pursued explorations with these agencies and their main facilitator, the Islamic Foundation, and simultaneously interviewed development experts and academics who agreed to discuss the topic of religion and development, and specifically Islam and development in Bangladesh.

In this study, I have been guided by feminist research principles that stress, among other things, that “partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1991, p. 195). I hope that my dissertation adds to our understanding of development interventions in Muslim societies in the South and their impact especially on women’s issues in informative and insightful ways.

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2 See Zakiuddin, 2003
3 A Hadith (Ahadith is the plural form) is a historical tradition that is written down, but based on oral transmission of sayings, rulings, directives of the Prophet Muhammad, reported by one of his family members or a companion (Esack, 2002, p. 15). Ahadith are classified according to their authenticity, which is based on their respective chain of narrators, or isnad. The most authentic are known as sahih or reliable, hence the use of the word reliable here. Barlas, (2004, pp. 42-50) discusses the critical importance of reliable Hadith for Muslim feminists in particular.
4 He addressed me as Almas apa, the latter word meaning older sister; and he used the polite form of address which is aapni when he spoke to me directly, and the polite forms teeni or uuni when referring to me.
5 He addressed the group of trainees as tora which means all of you in its familiar form, and individual trainees as tumi which is the familiar form of direct address.
6 Literally translated, moner means “of the heart” but in this usage it implies consciousness and personal values; I feel it is best translated as purdah of the mind.
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A recent edited collection entitled Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations & Challenges (Cornwall et al., 2007) conveys, as its name suggests, a wide and diverse canvas of women’s issues and gender concerns in international development. But the only explicit recognition of positionalities in this collection is an indirect reference in the editors’ introduction (2007a): “The struggle for interpretive power” write the editors, “is not simply a struggle against and a struggle for, it is also a struggle within ... Discourses are just not tactical, but are powerful forms of interpretation for ourselves as well as others (pp. 15-16, italics in original). The editors go on to discuss how feminists can learn from their own experiences and forge appropriate forms of solidarity across differences. There is nothing explicit about how the editors’ and writers’ own biases and perspectives are likely to be implicated in their writings.

12 According to Clifford Geertz, the “author-saturated” text is one in which researchers situate themselves conspicuously, sharing and reflecting in some detail about themselves and their research (1988, p. 97, cited in Kirsch, 1999, p. 75). This type of self-reflexivity has received mixed reviews: some scholars welcome the inclusion of the personal as a departure from an alienating “metalanguage” (Behar, cited in Kirsch, 1999, p. 77), others question whether readers are really interested in the increasing use of the “authorial I” (Raymond, p. 478, cited in Kirsch, 1999, p. 78) and still others problematize the ways in which “fragmented” subjectivities of the “constructed” (as opposed to the Cartesian ‘thinking’) subject are discursively constructed (Barrett, 1992, p. 208).

13 Ludden (2011) cautions historians to be wary of “interpretative interpolations” that render history in ways that are relevant to contemporary perspectives. I adopt a
postmodern view that mediations are a part of all histories, no matter how much they claim to be otherwise.

14 I refer to subtle exclusionary practices such as noted by bell hooks whereby white feminists’ work is accepted as “theory” but the work of working-class women and women of colour are treated as “experiential” (1989, p. 37, cited in Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003, fn 8 p. 122). Also see Chakrabarty’s (2000) critique of the assumption that only Westerners can produce theoria or universal science, while other philosophies produce works of a “practical-universal” and “mythical-religious” character (p. 29).

15 The basis for my three categories was my professional training as a journalist. There are, in fact, five W’s taught in the journalistic trade: “who, what, where, why and when”.

16 I wish to acknowledge the generosity and support of my sister, Yasmeen Murshed whose personal connections greatly facilitated my research. I am also very grateful to Khushi Kabir, Tahira Yasmin, Farida Akhter and Dina Siddiqi for their time and helpful advise.

17 I am grateful to Khushi Kabir, Tahira Yasmin and Dina Siddiqi for mentioning the involvement of imams in the development industry to me.

18 Many development organizations did not respond to telephone calls. Several, including CIDA, declined to comment or be available for an interview.

19 “prosno kore boshe porlo”: implies the question and questioner are being provocative.

20 I wish to thank the Chair of my committee, Dr Dawn Currie, for suggesting this particular point, among many others.
3 Chapter: Unpacking “Development”: A theoretical outline

3.1 Introduction: foundational assumptions

My primary aim in this chapter is to provide a theoretical basis for my research by unpacking “development” from a postcolonial, postmodern and feminist perspective. Since development has innumerable meanings and applications, and since the terrain of development that I refer to is potentially vast, my discussion is selective and is intended to provide a context for my arguments. To this end, I begin this chapter by briefly defining “development”, “modernity” and “the West”. I then note the implications of several noticeable “gaps” in the development paradigm and their relevance to my theoretical framework. In the next section I trace the origins of development as it emerged in a specific historical “moment” and became established as the normative paradigm for the improvement of humanity in general and the South in particular. I discuss the emergence of a population policy for the South and turn to questions pertaining to feminism and gender. I explore the significance of women’s issues and concerns in development, and note the growth of a NGO community. Finally, I note how gender and development are positioned in a contemporary context.

My discussion is shaped by two broad and often overlapping concerns: how development discourse is shaped by practitioners, scholars and activists drawn from a variety of locations and sites of enunciation, and how relations of authority and expertise influence the various trajectories of development, especially the dominant development paradigm with which my research is concerned.

3.2 Definitions: “Development”, “Modernity” and “the West”

Development is a historical construct that is used to describe a range of activities, processes and policies that happened in the past, are happening now and potentially will continue to happen in the future. By far, the most obvious and overt origins of this construct arise from a historically determined and powerful idea: modernization. Indeed,
as one theorist has commented, development is a term that is retrospectively meaningful: “It is an idea contextualized by the ideological frame within which social changes that we retrospectively call development took place between the 17th and 19th centuries in European societies” (Nandy, 1994, p. 7, italics added).

It is this project of modernization, of striving to live according to the norms of a particular kind of “political modernity” already attained elsewhere, that has been established across the globe as the predominant way of thinking (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 4), and thus also a way of doing. Modernity, as even its staunchest protagonists understand, is not an integrated totality but rather a series of interlinked projects, which, simply put, constitute an aim (Asad, 2003, p. 13) or as James Ferguson notes, it is a “universal telos” (2005, p. 167, italics added).2 And yet, modernity is generally taken to mean both a completed project and a promise for it is that which some parts of the globe, (the West),3 claim to have already accomplished and which other parts, (the non-West), will eventually, attain. If we are to visualize this conditionality, modernity evokes the image of a pre-modern “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 8) because its fundamental assumption is that though we are all headed in the same direction, some people and places will always arrive earlier than others. Thus, if some societies or peoples are not modern, it is simply because “they [are] not yet modern” (Ferguson, 2005, p. 167). Furthermore, modernity and development are embedded in a powerful political and economic narrative that maps both a journey as well as a hierarchy: some peoples and nations are positioned not merely at the beginning, but also at the bottom of the ladder of modernity (Ferguson, 2005; Rist, 2008).

Since modernity is often synonymous with “the West” (wherein, by all accounts, it has originated) it is necessary to explain what is meant and invoked by it, and by its other, the “non-West”, as well as by North, South, First World and Third World. “North” and “South” stand for the more and less industrialized economies of the world, used interchangeably with “First World” and “Third World” (Parpart & Marchand, 1995a, p. 20 fn. 1). If we consider these terms at face value they appear to be labels, homogenizing regions and societies into undifferentiated, largely uncritical categories (Parpart & Marchand, 1995a; Hall, 1992) and, with reference to women in the “Third World” in particular, in highly reductive ways (Parpart, 1995,4 p. 254; Apffel-Marglin & Simon, 1994;
Mohanty, 1991). However, replacing these labels with descriptive and nuanced phrases or sentences can become cumbersome and inefficient.

There is also another reason that makes these terms relevant in a particular context, specifically in relation to the projects of modernity and development. Closer examination shows that these words have complex meanings that denote concepts and realities that are framed by relations of power. Taken in this sense, they are best described as “short-hand generalizations” (Hall, 1992, p. 276) that denote geographical and spatial boundaries but also, simultaneously, represent an idea or concept that has emerged in a particular historical context (Hall, 1992). Edward Said has commented that “labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind” (Said, 1994, p. 336, italics added). Labels like the “West” and the “non-West” ought to be no more than starting points, that is, representations of a bygone colonial era, in the process of being increasingly transformed into present day egalitarian relationships. But such is not the case.

The West (or North) occupies the paramount status as an advanced, progressive, secular, liberal democratic society, with a level of industrial, social, political and cultural development that functions as a “criteria of evaluation” (Hall, 1992, p. 277) by which all other societies are measured and comprehended. The South remains the primary object under scrutiny. The binary relationship of the West with the non-West shapes the modern imaginary not just in terms of what we understand to be “the West”, but also crucially what we understand about “the Rest”—the postcolonial societies of the South (Chakrabarty, 2000; Hall, 1992; Ferguson, 2005). I do not mean to suggest that the West and the non-West operate as “originary power divisions” (Mohanty 1991, p. 71), and that everything in the South is determined in and by the North. Rather, what comes to mind here is the concept of the “social imaginary,” a term attributed to Cornelius Castoriadis (1987, cited in Tucker 1997, p. 9; also see Almeras, 2001, p. 55). According to Castoriadis, the “social imaginary” denotes how a society shapes, experiences and sees its own existence, its world and its relationships with all of them (Tucker, 1997, p. 9). To quote a passage from Castoriadis:
The institution of society is what it is and as it is to the extent that it 'materializes' a magma of social imaginary significations, in reference to which individuals and objects alone can be grasped and even simply exist...What we have here are not significations that would be 'freely detachable' from any material support, purely ideal poles, rather it is in and through the being and the being-thus of this 'support' that these significations exist and are such as they are. (Castoriadis, 1998, p. 356, cited in Almeras, 2001, p. 55)

I find the metaphor of a magma particularly apt, suggesting as it does that the production of knowledge in the social imaginary flows from and is constituted by power relations and complex historical and material processes. Just as the idea of “the West” is connected to the formation of Western society (Hall, 1992, pp. 277-278), in the same way concepts such as secularism, democracy, gender rights and modernity are processes that have come to be seen as exclusive components of “Western” society. In contrast, concepts such as tradition, religion, theocracy, and patriarchy are assumed to be exclusive components of “non-Western” societies (Sayyid, 1997; Mohanty, 1991).

These above-mentioned insights suggest the problematic ways in which dominant knowledge is produced and sustained. Even now, decades after the colonial era has officially ended, scholarship that belongs to the South must ultimately measure up to and be recognized by the norms of the West. This is a reality that underwrites the significance of the West. The ways in which the domination of the West is enabled in relation to knowledge production are complex and complicated; it may be that “non-Western knowledge systems cannot aspire to global relevance, or they may be regarded as a threat if they so aspire” (Tucker, 1997, p. 6). As I have noted in the previous chapter and as the evidence I provide in later chapters substantiates, power relations underpin who decides what is to be known as knowledge. Whatever the conditions under which knowledge is produced, the point I wish to make is that Western theoretical work is generally posited as universally relevant, while similar work from a non-Western source is presumed to be local, partial or borrowed.

Western social science consistently repositions itself as the originary point of comparative and generalising theory. (Moore, 1996, p. 3, cited in Tucker, 1997, p. 6)
Indeed, there is a tendency of scholarship *everywhere* to always reference the West, even when the central focus and subject is from or of the South (Alatas, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2000; Sayyid, 1997; Said, 1979; Ahmed, 1994). As Chakrabarty (2000) insightfully maintains, the point is not merely about referencing the West, but the *manner* in which the intellectual tradition of the West is invoked as an organic, living tradition, as opposed to that of the non-West that is always framed as traditional, fossilized, static or dying/dead. The privileging of Western knowledge is one reason also why theoretical works and processes that are inspired by non-Western intellectual traditions, or which fuse theology with sociology and economics, are ignored or regarded as “strange” (Tucker, 1997, p. 6; Ahmed, 1994). In short, given the overarching intellectual dominance of the West,

> it is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 4)

These precepts shape the primary and widely assumed connotations of modernity and development.

To summarize the main definitions discussed above: development is a concept as much as it is an activity or process. As Ashis Nandy (1994) notes, “like war, development, too, begins in the minds of men” (p. 15). Development can be defined as the quest to attain modernity as exemplified by the West. The West, for its part, can be defined as the exemplary material and discursive ideal upon which the Rest is measured and evaluated. Naoki Sakai has summed up the reach and dominance of the West in compelling terms, as follows:

> The West is a name for a subject which gathers itself in discourse but is also an object constituted discursively; it is, evidently, a name always associating itself with those regions, communities, and peoples that appear politically or economically superior to other regions, communities, and peoples. Basically, it is just like the name “Japan,”... it claims that it is capable of sustaining, if not actually transcending, an impulse to transcend all the particularizations. (1998, cited in Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 3)

In the next section I explore several critical gaps in the dominant discourse of development.
3.3 “Gaps” in development discourse

An initial theoretical premise that guided me on my field work was that there is a “missing concept” in development discourse (Worsley, 1984, cited in Tucker, 1997, p. 1), a concept which in its early manifestations has been identified in terms of “culture” (Tucker, 1997; Amin, 1989), but which in the past decade or so is also being identified as the human quest to attain “well-being”, “spirituality” and “religion” (Afshar, 2005; Tucker, 1997 & 1999; Selinger, 2004; Green, 2008). The recognition of a missing concept stems, in part, from a sense of malaise in development because it has become obvious that the dominant development formula, constructed primarily in the North, is not achieving its promised goals (Rist, 2008; Ferguson, 2005; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997; Tucker 1997; Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995). The gulf between the richest and poorest countries is growing rapidly, with societies in the South much further away from reaching economic parity with the North than they were three or four decades ago, and some worse off in absolute terms than they were twenty or thirty years ago (Easterly, 2001, cited in Ferguson, 2005, p. 172). Recent multi-dimensional assessments of “human development” show rising levels of poverty, accompanied by inequalities in critical conditions of living such as education, health care and security in the South (“Human Development Reports” 2010). Far from removing socio-economic inequities and ushering in the economic, social and political advancement of poorer countries, development is being identified frequently as the very cause of hardship, deprivation and impoverishment, especially of the most vulnerable members, i.e. women and children, in communities in the South. As Escobar (1995) states, “the number of Third World voices calling for a dismantling of the entire discourse of development is fast increasing” (p. 15).

Despite these indications, mainstream development thinking has not been paying much attention to the possibility that there may be something missing or at fault in the fundamental notion of development. Instead, for mainstream economists, politicians and practitioners, it is the nature of development that holds the key to success. For them, the meaning of development is self-evident: it is predominantly an economic process—of growth, increased efficiencies, production and consumption—that does not need to be
amended or reformulated in a substantive way (Rist, 2008; Tucker 1997; Escobar, 1995; Chua et al., 2000; Afshar, 2005).

The limits of development as an economic process have been evident to practitioners and scholars alike since at least the mid-1980s (Harriss, 2006; 2002), yet powerful global development agencies continue to institutionalize and strengthen the economic nature of development (Tucker, 1997). The United Nations, by its own account, acknowledges that it has been trying for forty years to hit upon the right strategies for development success but adds, in virtually the same breath, that repeated attempts to achieve its objectives must be seen not as “failures but as incremental steps in the long struggle to address the intractable problem of development” (Jackson, 2007, italics added). At the same time, insiders at the World Bank, arguably the most powerful development agency in the world, appear to engage in critiques of development but they are unable—or unwilling—to abandon a predominant adherence to economics as a way of resolving their problems (see Kenny and Williams, 2000; Alkire, 2002). A world-renowned scholar advances the cause of Development as Freedom (Sen, 2000) yet ultimately locates the implications of his approach within the “language of the dominant ideology of ‘economism’” (Uvin, 2002, p. 8).

There is little doubt that the future of some countries in the South, such as Bangladesh for instance, is likely to hang in the balance because of disasters wrought in large measure by climate change; it is also acknowledged that culpability for the ecological destruction of the planet lies largely within the ambit of “rich-country actions” (Sachs, 2005, p. 284). Yet, the only major redress suggested by the influential economist Jeffery Sachs is that the poor countries are given financial assistance to “respond effectively to, or at least cope with, the changes ahead” (Sachs, 2005, p. 284, italics added). Gilbert Rist (2008) sums up the dominant, contemporary developmental perspective succinctly:

Even if ecological worries temper the once dominant optimism, the fact remains that, in North and South alike, on both left and right of the political spectrum, economic growth is still prescribed as the means to universal improvement, and this is increasing the threat to the global climate as well as to the very inequalities whose reduction is held up as the desired goal. (p. viii)
3.4 Implications for my research

The assumption that development is predominantly an economic process is among several that my research problematizes. An important element in my research is to ask how the meaning of development is assumed to be self-evident. To put this differently, what exactly are we assuming when we proceed from the notion that development stands for a particular set of values, goals and objectives?

To begin with, it is assumed that to talk about development is to talk about the developing world. The discourse of development is built in large measure on experiential, empirical and theoretical explorations of the regions of the world known as the South. Development as an experience of the North has seldom been scrutinized in quite the same manner (Afshar, 2005; Uvin, 2002; Sachs, 1992). As noted earlier, scholarly works that have roots, relevance or are located in the South are rarely if ever regarded as applicable to Europe or the “Western” tradition, or as being universally applicable. The core understanding of development does not incorporate or assimilate theoretical explorations by and of the South (Tucker, 1997). These assumptions combine to construct the North as normative, neutral and universal. What interests me in particular is how the process of privileging the North glosses over, subsumes and even distorts concepts and practices related to religion, not just in the South, but critically, in the North as well. The process constructs several core elements of development in such a way as to normalize, neutralize and universalize their very specific origins.

Several questions pertinent to my research arise from the above problematic. How or on what basis has it been assumed that development is a “secular” project and concept? What exactly does it mean to make this assumption? What does it imply in terms of the processes and practices of religion, both in the North and in the South? How do we understand religion in relation to modernity and development? It is important to explore why, in what ways, and to what effect, development is assumed to reflect, embody, and be framed according to the ideals of secularism and thus, why, to what effect and in what ways, the topic of religion has been officially banished, made absent, or excluded, from development discourses. Fortunately, in the same way as Edward Said’s seminal arguments in the 1970s problematized dominant constructs of the “Orient”, recent
scholarship enables us to revisit and scrutinize dominant assumptions related to secularism, religion and modernity and how these shape the discourse of development. Insights provided by post-colonial scholars Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and Talal Asad (2003, 1993) in particular problematize the assumption that modernity is necessarily a “secular” endeavour and that “secularism” can be simultaneously European in origin and universal in applicability. Their insights open up new avenues of understanding and interrogating development discourse, especially the assumptions that frame understanding and constructs of particular religious subjects, such as Muslim imams.

I revisit questions pertaining to religion and secularism in Chapter 7. Here I will note that the problematic of development policy in relation to secularism and religion relates not only to an inherent contradiction in the conceptualization of political modernity, but also to fact that the issue is seldom interrogated within the development community. I explain in Chapter 5 how development discourse unproblematically constitutes male imams as a homogenous community with traits that reflect, among other things, ordained Catholic clergy in Latin American societies; and religious subjects in Indonesia and Central Asia. There is virtually no self-reflection on the part of Western development agents about whether or how imams can be thus conceived.

Following Asad (1993) I understand secularism to be more complex than a simple separation of the religious from the secular. Secularism is a specific political doctrine, “a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history” (p. 28) which entailed a specific separation of religion from power (p. 28). What makes secularism different in the “modern” era is that it constitutes a distinct set of assumptions, namely, it “presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics’ and ‘politics’ and new imperatives associated with them” (Asad, 2003, p. 2). In order to further deconstruct political modernity, I build on Chakrabarty’s argument that the imaginary of Europe is embedded in political modernity in such deeply rooted ways—for instance in our assumptions of secular time, our assumptions of living “disenchanted” lives, within individual, human autonomies—that these assumptions construct historicist interpretations of non-Western “life-worlds” that are essentially incomplete. He suggests that we need to “release into the space occupied by particular European histories … other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices” (2000, p. 20). These theoretical points
pertaining to religion and secularism will be explored again in Chapter 7, after I have presented my evidence on the Imam Discourse. In the rest of this chapter, I continue to trace the roots and attributes of development and their significance for my research.

3.5 Origins and trajectories

That the roots of development lie in the waning moments of colonialism and imperialism, the birth of the nation-state and the salience of processes of modernization, is widely accepted (Sachs, 1992; Ferguson, 2005; Rist, 2008; Rahnema, 1997; Escobar, 1995; Nandy, 1994). The term “development” was in circulation as far back as 1929. Its usage, however, took on very distinct connotations soon after World War II (Escobar, 2005, fn. 7 p. 230). Development combined with the notion of poverty and “under”-development, to become a pivotal principle of East-West relations and, in particular, a discursive apparatus with which the West would thereafter organize and manage the Third World (Escobar, 1995).

A compelling summary of the foundational assumptions of development as a “modern” concept is found in US President Harry Truman’s inaugural address in 1949:

we must embark on a bold new program [sic] for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate, they are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people ... I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life ... The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing ... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge. (excerpted from Public Papers of the Presidents, pp. 114-15, cited in Rist, 2008, pp. 71-72)
Truman’s comments on development were apparently an afterthought, tagged on as the fourth point in his inaugural address as a “public relations gimmick” (Rist, 2008, p. 70), to divert attention from the more contentious implications of American foreign policy concerns in the opening years of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the speech has come to be seen as the central moment for the “invention of development” (Rist, 2008, p. 69 and passim; Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992).

Truman’s speech divided the world into two groups of peoples: the modern, scientific, knowledge producers of the West, and the primitive, miserable, hungry, victimized, disease-prone, stagnant and suffering people in the rest of the world. The former occupied a superior place in history for they alone, on behalf of all “humanity”, now possessed the knowledge and skill to alleviate the suffering of the “others”. In Truman’s address, the regions that became known variously as the Third World, the South and the “developing” world were depicted as victims (of their own making), whose problems could be solved only through the regime of development. This was an economic regime, for it promised to alleviate the stagnant and primitive economic life of lesser peoples, but at the same time, development was based on Western democratic practices of “fair dealing”. The notion of economics as a “scientific“ and “technical“ knowledge system, exclusive to the West but also universally valid, was established (Nandy, 1994).

At the heart of Truman’s message lay a critical, new yardstick to determine global hierarchies of power, namely the measurement of a society’s worth in direct relation to its economy, a criterion that placed the United States at the top of the global ladder (Rist, 2008, p. 76).14 A rupture was also made with the colonial legacies of development by erecting distinct boundaries between an “old imperialism” and what would be heralded increasingly as a new regime of humanitarian development (Kothari, 2005). Together, Western development and scientific knowledge promised to provide the only pathway that people could take in pursuit of a better life. Finally, while the blight of poverty clearly separated the Third World from the West, Third World poverty threatened the whole world, making its eradication a justifiable reason for interventions by the West.

The impact of Truman’s “point four” (Rist, 2008, p. 70 and passim) became increasingly evident from the 1950s onwards. Although there are exceptions to the rule (e.g. Gunnar Myrdal, 1968, cited in Harriss, 2005, p. 20), until the end of the 1970s
understandings of “development” did not deeply trouble Truman’s formulation of development, that is, as primarily an economic regime aimed at alleviating the stagnant and primitive economic living conditions of “lesser” peoples.

Poverty became the lynchpin of development strategies from these early years onwards (Jackson, 1998; Kabeer, 1994; Escobar, 1995). Based on new economic instruments such as the Gross Domestic Product or GDP (Rist, 2008, p. 76 and fn. 16) introduced in the late 1940s, the World Bank arbitrarily decided that any economy in which the per capita income was below $100 was deemed to be “poor” (Escobar, 1995, pp. 23-24). As a result, nation-states were henceforth categorized and differentiated in terms of economies, not countries (Parpart, 1995). About two thirds of the world fell within the category of “poor” and even today, development discourse determines how people and societies are known and how, to a large degree, they know themselves because of the classification of the world into low income and high income, or advanced, developing and less developed economies (Chow & Lyter, 2002, p. 27; Parpart, 1995a, p. 224; Sachs, 2005).

Practitioners of development emerged in increasing numbers from the United Nations Organization (UN) that had been established just before the end of World War II and formally came into existence soon after hostilities ceased, in June 1945 (“UN history”). Development became the major focus of an expanding UN system15 that, over the years, has mushroomed into a network of more than ten major multilateral agencies including UNFPA. The giant in the international development industry, the World Bank, was founded at approximately the same time as the UN, but under a different mandate famously associated with a gathering of the richest countries in the world in Bretton Woods in 1944 (“World Bank history”). The difference is significant in relation to my research because it denotes the power relations that shape the workings of a UN agency. Unlike the World Bank and the IMF, where membership is weighted in relation to wealth so that having clout boils down to “one dollar, one vote” (Sachs, 2005, p. 28), the UN agencies are technically run on the basis of “one country, one vote” (Sachs, 2005, p. 287; also see Kabeer, 1994, p. 70). This is a major reason why there is often a great deal of tension in the relationship between the rich countries, especially the United States, and UN agencies: the latter often depend on major funding from the US, as in the case of UNFPA. I explain the
significance of this conditionality and the specific circumstances under which the UNFPA came into being in more detail in Chapter 5.

Bilateral agencies were set up by many countries in the North including the United States, which embarked upon its earliest foreign assistance venture with the launch of the Marshall Plan, designed to rebuild Europe and contain the influence of the Soviet Union after World War II (“About USAID”). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) grew out of this experience and was eventually officially constituted in 1961 (“About USAID”).

Governments, politicians and bureaucrats in the South, for their part, embraced the idea of development with a notable degree of enthusiasm (Rahnema, 1997; Rist, 2008). According to Rahnema (1997) there was an interesting if incongruent “convergence of aspirations” (p. ix) between three broadly defined constituencies for whom the newly defined processes of development offered distinct advantages. They included the leaders of newly emerging nation-states who wanted to transform their countries through modernization. A second constituency comprised millions of ordinary people, or the masses in post-colonial societies, who saw in development a way of finding freedom from oppressions, both old and new. A third constituency was made up by “the old guard”, former colonial powers, who saw in the development industry¹⁶ new ways to perpetuate their former modes of domination and exploitation, while simultaneously pursuing current geopolitical ambitions (Rahnema, 1997, p. ix).

In many ways, development entered the terrain of the South analogous to modern colonialism (Nandy, 1994, p. 7; Harding, 2000, p. 249-250), and also to modern science (Nandy, 1994; Parpart, 1995). Development practitioners trace their roots to ideas generated by the nineteenth-century European Enlightenment, as embodied in the industrial revolution and the philosophical framework of liberalism; these combined to create conditions for the rise of new institutions of learning in Europe and North America and a corresponding new, middle class of professional men with exclusive claims to expertise (Parpart 1995):

The gatekeepers in these institutions thus became the guardians of regimes of truth identified with modern societies and consequently played a pivotal role
in the creation of Western modernity. (Foucault, 1980, pp. 130-31, cited in Parpart, 1995, p. 223)

There was considerable overlap between former colonial administrators and development experts (Kothari, 2005), particularly as independent post-colonial nation-states emerged from the end of World War II into the late 1960s and early 1970s (Harriss, 2005; Rist, 2008). As well, development scholars and intellectuals emerged in the field of development studies, as it was known in Britain and Europe (Harriss, 2005), and development economics as it was described in the United States (Escobar, 1995). The work of these scholars and economists, many of whom were also elite officials in colonial administration, authorized and legitimized a powerful developmental enterprise in and about the South, managed by mostly male Northern experts (Escobar, 1995; Parpart, 1995a; Kabeer, 1994; Chowdhry, 1995). The “economics of poverty and economic development” became a powerful enterprise from the late 1950s onwards in the United States in particular, providing a foothold for scholars within a field of study of “the poor countries ... that would assuredly expand and endure” (Galbraith, 1979, cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 57). The focus of interest began to shift, however, as it became clear that development was not living up to its promises.

3.6 Failures of development

The coalescence of highly divergent interests that had given development “a charismatic power of attraction” (Rahnema, 1997, p. ix) in its early years was all but gone a decade and a half later. Early successes in “positivist orthodoxy” (Leys, 1995, cited in Harriss, 2005, p. 19), a term used to describe development theory and national planning models such as were adopted in India in the 1950s, fell apart in the late 1960s (Harriss, 2005), and the economic benefits of development did not “trickle down” as promised to the masses (Rist, 2008; Rahnema, 1997). A number of external factors impinged on the global economy in the 1970s, including the Yom Kippur war between Israel and the Arab states in 1973, followed by shocks in the oil supply, a huge slump in world commodity prices, worldwide inflation and severe food shortages mainly in the South (Jackson, 2007).
The United Nations, the World Bank, bilateral agencies such as USAID, and governments in the North and the South, proceeded to adopt different strategies and form diverse coalitions in search of solutions. Various approaches marked this decade, including a “New International Economic Order” announced by the UN General Assembly in May 1974 (Rist, 2008, pp. 143-144) with the express purpose of “recasting the rules of the international economy” (Rist, 2008, p. 144), and a “basic needs strategy” promoted by the World Bank and also adopted by the International Labour Organization (Rist, 2008, pp. 162-169). In many ways, the 1970s marked a “great turnaround” (Rist, 2008, p. 169; see Harriss, 2005), producing more poverty in the developing world, and ushering in sharper economic disparities between the North and the South. That said, it must be noted that the decade also saw the emergence of women’s advocacy groups which led, in turn, to increasing recognition amongst development scholars and practitioners of the critical importance of women in development policy and processes. Mainstream scholars tend to overlook this distinct characteristic of development in the 1970s, an aspect that I discuss later in this chapter.

Increasing recognition in the North of the failures of development laid the groundwork for the ascendency of neo-liberalism and the imposition of massive “structural adjustment policies” or SAPs on the developing world in the decades that followed. More immediately, they set the stage for a new series of interventions that targeted population growth as the root cause of continuing poverty in the South. In the next section I highlight development interventions pertaining to population that provide an important context to the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh.

3.7 “The Population Bomb”

A catalyst for the emergence of development interventions pertaining to population was the recognition by several modern demographers in the 1960s that developing societies were growing in numbers far more quickly than developed ones. An influential book by Paul Ehrilch, somewhat inflammatorily entitled The Population Bomb (1968, Duden,1992, p. 153; Kabeer, 1994, p. 193-94), encapsulated the foundations of a new orthodoxy, namely that “over-population” and “outbreeding” by the South, would soon
overwhelm the North (Duden, 1992, p. 150). Population increases were seen now as the root cause of poverty and the failures of development in the South; they were soon perceived to be an imminent threat not only to the wellbeing and prosperity of people in the North, but also to everyone on the planet (Duden, 1992, p. 153).

It is interesting to note that in its initial stages an emerging consensus on population was relatively open to perspectives from the South. One reason possibly for this was the declaration by US President Eisenhower in 1959 that birth control was strictly outside the realm of government activity or responsibility (Duden, 1992, p. 149). At the World Population Conference in 1974 in Bucharest, delegates from the South, including socialist countries, argued that a narrow focus on the “population problem” was a way of distracting from inequalities of the world economic order (Kabeer, 1994, p. 189). They suggested that “development is the best contraceptive” (Caldwell, 2007; Kabeer, 1994) and the social context in which high fertility levels existed ought to be taken into account in any policy to curtail the growth of population. Population control initiatives that followed reflected these concerns by targeting women as principal actors in the population issue, but also focusing on other socio-economic incentives to encourage women to choose family planning (Kabeer, 1994, p. 189).

Such an approach was soon abandoned, however, as the US government reversed its stand on birth control. There were many reasons for the change. One was the emergence, from the late 1960s onwards, of a powerful “population establishment” (Grimes, 1998, p. 375), made up of a relatively small, elite group of professional demographers who managed to convince the US government and sway public opinion in favour of what was ultimately a simplistic and narrow analysis of the development “problem”, namely that women were having too many children in the South (Donaldson, 1990, cited in Grimes, 1998, p. 381). There were substantive resources available now from the United States government and also from acts of private philanthropy such as a large personal gift from the Rockefeller family that set up the Population Council in the early 1950s (Duden, 1992, p.150).

The result of these combined pressures was the formulation of a radical program spearheaded by the American population establishment, the American government and USAID, to curb fertility rates in the South by persuading mainly women through various
means, including coercion if necessary, to have fewer children (Hartmann, 1995). American domestic opinion and political ideologies were not unanimously in favour of birth control, as was evident in Eisenhower’s unequivocal statement noted earlier. But so strong was the push at this time by policymakers in the US for the radical policy to be implemented that the US moved quickly to initiate the establishment of a new multilateral development agency, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (Grimes, 1998). USAID has sought funding approval from Congress for UNFPA since its inception in 1969 (Obama Rescinds, 2009).

The relationship between USAID and UNFPA is discussed in Chapter 5. I explore how the new population control orthodoxy that emerged in the 1960s was implemented in Bangladesh and how, consequent to this policy, imams became subjects of development discourse, albeit in limited ways. It is worth noting here how the theoretical premise outlined in the previous chapter (see 2.6) has an interesting bearing on the population policy outlined above. Following Escobar’s (1995) explication of Foucauldian discourse theory, we understand that development discourse often defines a specific “problem” and then assembles a powerful developmental apparatus to deal with that problem. Escobar clarifies that his argument is not that such problems do not exist; rather that once a problem has been “discovered”, development discourse does not “seek so much to illuminate possible solutions as to give ‘problems’ a visible reality amenable to particular treatments” (Escobar, 1995 p. 42). The constitution of population growth as a “problem”, followed by the mobilization of an apparatus to deliver “particular treatments” to deal with that problem echoes Escobar’s interpretation. It is not that population growth was not taking place rapidly in the South. The point that is being made here is that population became constructed as a threat and linked to regimes of control and regulation over women’s reproductive behaviour in the South (Akhter, 2005). Imams came into the ambit of development indirectly through these interventions.

I want to end this discussion by noting that the population policy introduced in the 1960s has changed drastically. After remaining in place for nearly two decades, what some described as the “classical third world national family planning program” (Caldwell, 2007, paragraph 1), was curbed in the 1980s when US President Ronald Reagan’s neo-liberal policies came into effect. Population control ceased to be a priority for several reasons.
Neo-liberal perspectives began to identify the public sector and cumbersome state enterprises for failing to reduce poverty in the South (Kabeer, 1994, p. 190). The “new power of the women’s movement” (Kanter and Kanter, 2006, cited in Caldwell, 2007, paragraph six) also came into effect. An influential network of women’s lobbies emerged in the North and there were several UN sponsored conferences on women, and a UN Decade of Women from the mid seventies to mid eighties; all taking place amidst a changing global political landscape. The focus of population policies officially shifted to holistic considerations of women’s reproductive health and choices, though as my encounter in rural Bangladesh indicates (see 2.3 earlier), such an assertion may be problematic.

3.8 Development’s “economic man”

As I noted earlier, the Enlightenment roots of the development paradigm made economic poverty a major determinant of progress, signaling how societies are placed in the temporal and hierarchical continuum of modernity (Ferguson, 2005). This in turn means, quite simply, that societies that are not modern are expected to “catch up” with those that have attained that status. It is assumed that since Western social, political and economic systems have “modernized” in a linear manner through a liberal, capitalist, democratic model of increased production and consumption, all other societies will necessarily desire and benefit from the same experiences (Ferguson, 2005; Chowdhry, 1995; Kabeer; 1994). The liberal discourse on markets, framed by neo-classical economic theory, with a complementary sociological analysis provided by modernization theory (Kabeer, 1994, pp. 13-16), thus adopts the common objective of transforming the Third World into “free” capitalist market economies (Pieterse, 1991, cited by Chowdhry, 1995, p. 30). At the centre of this construct stands the “atomized self-interested individual” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 13) whose actions according to economic principles are expected to be rational and in his [sic] own self interest. He was originally the “modern man” of the Enlightenment, now reincarnated as development’s “economic man” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 17).

The gendered tones that permeate the narrative above, summarily erasing women from development and its antecedents, stand out fairly obviously in a contemporary context. There is a general consensus now that gender and development has “arrived”
(Pearson, 2005, p. 157) in the sense that the issue of gender is recognized in international development policy as a significant condition for the attainment of all major development objectives (White, 2006). Policy-level directives clearly define gender as a key component of efforts to alleviate and reduce poverty, attain processes and practices of good governance, provide access to education, health and other resources, provide for a sustainable environment, and create civil society institutions (White, 2006). At the same time, gender is also notable as a crucial element that shapes several key objectives of what Feldman (2001a) describes as a “neo-liberal variant ... [of the] ...post-Bretton Woods development approach” (p. 1102). She points out that the current development aid structure promotes the principle of women’s empowerment and their self-reliance as individuals but, at the same time, pushes the need for women’s increased participation in economic production, more often than not as cheap labour for domestic export industries.

In other words, while women and gender issues are more distinctly at the front and centre of development discourse, they are constrained by neo-liberal economic policies. And so, while it cannot be denied that “gender talk” (Pearson, 2005, p. 157) is everywhere and the concept of “gender mainstreaming” has become more widely adopted in development circles, “gender inequality has proven to be much more intractable than anticipated” (Cornwall et al., 2007a, p. 1). Cornwall et al. (2007a) note how the original political aims of integrating gender as a social construct in development have been eroded as notions of gender have become reductively synthesized into formulaic “gender myths” (p. 1). Gender sensitivity in research (Feldman, 2001a) appears everywhere and there have been striking gains made by women; but inequities continue to strike women the hardest and in new and increasingly detrimental forms. How changes have been wrought in women’s situation and in relation to gender issues in development is a long and complicated story, the telling of which in any detail requires more space than is available here. I will touch on pivotal aspects to provide a sense of the context in which gender manifests itself in relation to development.

A “path-breaking” (Pearson, 2005, p. 158) work published in 1970 by Danish economist Esther Boserup entitled Women’s Role in Economic Development marks the moment when women became officially recognized by development experts to be a part of the terrain of development. The reason I qualify the recognition of women as being official
is because as feminist proponents of Gender and Development (GAD) would later succinctly argue, “women had always participated in development, they had just not been recognized as such” (White, 2006, p. 59). In hindsight one can suggest that Boserup was largely responsible for drawing attention to the presence and significance of women in agricultural work in Africa; that women were actively engaged in such pursuits already. At the same time, it must be noted that development discourse constructs and sustains itself (Escobar, 1995) or, as Sarah White (2006) states, “the development industry is committed at once to producing an output (development), and to reproducing itself” (p. 56). Consequently, sustained and repetitive interventions—in Boserups’ case, in farming projects in Africa—that render women invisible, inconsequential or restrict them to low-status and poorly paid women’s work must have the effect of producing the very objects of which these actions discursively speak (Escobar, 1995, p. 172).

That development discourse, as well as modernization theory and the neo-classical approach, were “gender blind” (Chow and Lyter, 2002, p. 28; Chowdhry, 1995) might be obvious to us now, but at the time it was extremely challenging to change entrenched ways of thinking. Although Boserup’s work set the stage for a new field of research and activity (Pearson, 2005), the actual implementation of women’s issues materialized slowly. The United Nations, a major player in the field of international development since the 1960s, marked its first “decade of development” from 1961 to 1970 without any mention of women (Kabeer, 1994, p. 1). The “first glimmerings of a new consciousness” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 1) within the UN emerged with its second decade that saw a brief recognition of the need for women’s integration in development. Women became important also as the development community began to take a sobering look at its economic performance and noted, among other things, that the “trickle down” effect of economic growth had not materialized (Chua et al., 2000, p. 822; Chowdhry, 1995, p. 31; Chow and Lyter, 2002, p. 38).

As well, the sixties and the seventies were marked by social movements such as the civil rights and black-power movements, protests against the Vietnam War and various student movements (Kabeer, 1994; Pearson, 2005); liberation struggles in the South (Kabeer, 1994), especially in Africa where many former colonies became independent in the 1960s (Harriss, 2005); and an influential “second wave” feminist movement in the
North (Pearson, 2005). The UN became increasingly aware of the importance of women and established a number of departments and organizations within its system to ensure women’s integration into its development agenda. The organization also held several conferences, beginning with the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, followed by the UN’s Decade of Women from 1975 to 1985, another conference in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

From the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards, feminist and post-colonial scholars started to problematize development discourses as being rooted in imperial and colonial agendas of modernization, Enlightenment thinking and positivism. They stressed linkages between contemporary notions of passive and victimized women in the South, with the hitherto “widely influential model of the Oriental woman” (Said, 1979 cited in Chowdhry 1995, p. 27; Mohanty 1991; Harcourt 1994). They traced how the “invention” of tradition by colonial rulers had enabled the construction of a cultural hierarchy that provided a rationale for colonial activities by apparently higher-order Western civilizations (Tucker, 1999; Mani, 1998; Apffel-Marglin & Simon, 1994), with far reaching implications for women. Studies focused on how Third World women were perceived in monolithic terms, as subjugated and passive victims of gender oppression, in need of paternalistic “civilizing” interventions; and as sexualized and fertile subjects whose bodies and reproductive functions needed to be regulated and controlled (Mohanty, 1991; Chowdhry, 1995; Parpart, 1995a; Apffel-Marglin, 1994; Koczberski, 1998).

3.9 Development approaches: WID and WAD

By the 1970s, there was a growing awareness that Third World women could have an instrumental impact on the goals of development. In the decades that followed, it also became clear, though often slowly and intermittently, that women and girls were amongst the most vulnerable and impoverished members of Third World societies. At the same time, a number of political and economic factors influenced and shaped women’s own initiatives, demands and interests in relation to international development. Several distinct perspectives or movements, based on a specific set of assumptions or rationale,
began to emerge in relation to women and development. Among these perspectives, two became well known: “Women-and-Development” or WAD, and “Women-in-Development” or WID.

WAD, which was theoretically informed by Marxist-feminism and had a strong class-based analytical approach, was advanced in the mid-1970s (Kabeer, 1994; Rathgeber, 1990). The WID perspective appeared soon after and was shaped largely by liberal feminism in the United States. The catalyst for WID came from a feminist lobby in Washington D.C. whose combined pressures pushed through a single paragraph on WID in the Percy Amendment to the USAID’s “New Directions” legislation in 1973 (Kardam, 1997; Alam, 1994). WID offices were set up initially in USAID, and later, in other development agencies, including the World Bank. WID was spearheaded by predominantly white, middle-class feminists whose agenda reflected first-wave feminism, especially in terms of defining women’s interests in largely instrumental terms.

WAD visualized women mainly as beneficiaries of development who needed to be “added” to the development process and both WAD and WID framed women as passive recipients of welfare. Their perspectives corresponded with assumptions that women are predominantly mothers engaged in domestic roles and therefore need food aid and family planning services (Moser, 1993, cited in Chowdhry, 1995, p. 31; Chua et al., 2002, p. 822; Kabeer, 1994, p. 6). The aim of “integrating” women into development became a “catch-cry” (Koczberski, 1998, p. 396) of both WAD and WID but it did more harm than good by suggesting that women were not part of the development process, and hence needed to be “added” to the mix (Koczberski, 1998, p. 399; Jackson, 1998, p. 43; Chua et al., 2000, p. 824). The idea that women could simply be “added” to development (Koczberski, 1998, p. 399) was similar to an “efficiency” approach, an instrumental justification for women’s involvement in development that emerged in the 1980s (Chua et al., 2002).

WID’s liberal discourse on markets, based on neo-liberal economic theory, was found seriously wanting by Marxist and socialist feminists. A WID approach could not mitigate the impact of development on women, in part because of the policies pursued and imposed upon the Third World by a dominant development apparatus, and in part because of WID’s own limitations. The latter stemmed from its political legacy, as well as the precarious position that it occupied within mainstream development (Staudt, 2002;
Razavi, 1998; Kardam, 1997). But WAD was also flawed in the sense that it failed to move beyond classical Marxist class analysis and ultimately remained hostage to the dominant development paradigm (Kabeer, 1994; Rathgeber, 1990). A different perspective emerged, one that would bridge the gaps made evident by the failings of WAD and WID.

3.10 Gender and development (GAD)

Gender and Development (GAD) emerged in part because of a disenchattainment with both WID and WAD, as noted above, and, to a greater extent, because of heightened and radicalized sensibilities and increased political coalition-building amongst a new generation of professional, academic and activist women in the North and South (Pearson, 2005, p. 159). It was no accident that the first UK-based international conference on gender and development, which was organized by the SOW (Subordination of Women) collective at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University in September 1978, comprised 60 international feminists of whom UK-based individuals were restricted to 25 percent of the total (Whitehead, 1979, cited in Pearson, 2005, p. 159). GAD rests on a more holistic and nuanced theoretical framework (Rathgeber, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Chow and Lyter, 2002; Parpart & Marchand, 1995a) than WID or WAD although limitations can impinge on its implementation (Sardenberg, 2007; Matlanyane-Sexwale, 1994). According to Sardenberg, gender is a slippery term, difficult to translate into diverse conceptual and linguistic registers and even more challenging to execute in practical terms. When forced to fit into foreign locales, gender begins to lose its radical, political undertones (Sardenberg, 2007).

Granted that like other labels, gender too has the potential to lose its dynamic qualities or, as another recent work points out (White, 2006), it can overshadow and even erase other critical considerations such as race, for instance. Nevertheless, the GAD perspective remains useful for several reasons. GAD draws on the Marxist insight that class based social relations ascribe meanings to people and things, and GAD extends this idea to gender relations (Rubin, 1975, cited in Kabeer, 1994, p. 55). In this configuration, analytical insights are sought through the “social relations of gender which mediate ... the ways in which individuals experience ... structural forces” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 54, italics in
original). A gender perspective allows feminist theory and practices to denaturalize social inequalities based on sex differences (Sardenberg, 2007). It also allows the deconstruction of not just women but also men as essentialist categories and allows their re-formulation as relationally and historically defined (Sardenberg, 2007; also see Scott, 1988). GAD posits theoretical analyses of multiple positionings, relationships and subjectivities because in this paradigm, feminists can explore how,

relations of class and gender mediate social realities, translating broader processes of change into concrete gains and losses for different groups of women and men.” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 62)

The pitfalls encountered by WAD and WID are addressed in important ways by GAD, including notions of economic determinism, the universality of women’s oppression and its linkages with global patriarchy or capitalism (Kabeer, 1994; Rathgeber, 1995; Chow and Lyter, 2002). GAD encourages the recognition of women as active agents of change, rather than passive clients of development, thus refusing to fit them into a predetermined, linear model of instrumental importance. It also recognizes the existence of power in social relations, leaving room for women and men to engage with development in strategic ways (Kabeer, 1994; Rathgeber, 1995; Chow and Lyter, 2002). A cornerstone of GAD is that there is no single “women’s situation” as WID and WAD propounded, but instead there are multiple voices and perspectives that women hold, that are influenced by gender, class, race and other categories. What this means is that when understanding women’s and men’s problems in the development paradigm, feminists turn to these categories, in their specific locations—within the household, at the local or global levels—in order to provide a nuanced account of challenges, options and acts of resistance (Beneria and Sen, 1982; Rathgeber, 1995). An important impact of GAD perspectives in development has been to open up reproductive health issues to more holistic and contextual understandings. Women’s reproductive choices have been recognized as valid and important and these have been understood as existing in relation to the specific circumstances of women’s lives and expectations. Men’s role and responsibilities in shaping women’s choices and options have been problematized and explored in order to suggest gender-aware and gender-balanced alternatives.
3.11 “Non-governmental” development

An important change began to take place in the 1970s in the development landscape in both the North and the South. This was the emergence of “non-governmental” approaches to development that, although not entirely new (Lewis, 2005), created substantive alterations in the ways in which development looked at and worked to improve the conditions of marginalized groups including that of women. A range of different incentives and imperatives led to the establishment of development institutions that followed the new form of “non-governmental” development and fell loosely under the umbrella of non-governmental organizations or NGOs. That NGOs vary in many ways must be noted here not least because there is, in contemporary times, a sense of disappointment with the ways in which some NGOs have become privatized, institutionalized and bureaucratized (Feldman, 2003a; White, 1999).

At the time, however, the rise of NGOs overall was welcomed by diverse interests—from the population establishment in the USA, to women’s advocacy groups in the South—as innovative, creative and responsive forums through which the most pressing development issues in the South could be better addressed. A UN Decade for Women in 1975, followed by several UN conferences focusing on women’s issues from 1980 onwards, was now being accentuated further by an increasing recognition by the development establishment in general that women were important to the project of development. This was in part a reason why women’s groups coalesced with the mushrooming of NGOs, especially in the South. The other reason was growing awareness at various socio-economic levels in developing societies that women’s interests were critical to the eradication of poverty; that women were being ignored or unfairly targeted by mainstream development organizations; and alternatives to mainstream development were crucial.

NGOs were different because they were smaller, more efficient than mainstream development organizations and purported to represent grassroots interests in more direct and authentic ways. It was hoped, especially by gender and development advocates, that because they were less restricted by bureaucratic rules, they could interact directly with
ordinary people and thus be more innovative in the kind of work that they did, including being specifically attentive to women’s issues (Kabeer, 1994, p. 229). From other perspectives, their utility lay in the fact that they could be, and many were, indigenous to the South and thus, they could do the work that governments were doing, with greater efficiency. They could also be more easily regulated and influenced than large bureaucracies in developing countries. NGOs did not emerge solely and spontaneously through the efforts of poor women (Kabeer, 1994, p. 256) but rather, their significant expansion and replication were facilitated by policies in the North including a neo-liberal agenda and the imposition of harsh structural adjustment policies, cut backs in state social programs amidst a rising tide of privatization pressures on governments and societies in the South. Northern development donors became increasingly impatient with state-led development and looked to NGOs as a convenient, efficient and controllable alternative.

This is not to imply that the NGO terrain has been completely appropriated by a neo-colonial agenda. There has been a strong movement for “alternative” forms of development from the 1980s onwards that has provided a substantive impetus to the growth and proliferation of NGOs as well (Lewis, 2005).

In the last two decades, as spaces have opened up for more indigenous, local, and cultural practices of development by NGOs, limitations and restrictions have also become visible in the NGO terrain. Many NGOs have transitioned from grassroots advocacy movements to commercially savvy, corporate organizations such as the Bangladesh NGO, BRAC, which is reputed to be the largest NGO in the world. BRAC’s main focus is on primary education, but the NGO has branched out into diverse activities, from poultry and dairy farming and micro-credit, to manufacturing and printing; it has been generating a substantive portion of its income from its own business sources—31 per cent in the 1990s (White, 1999)—and to all extents and purposes, is not accountable to either the state or any single donor. The size of exposure by Northern funders to BRAC is so big that if the NGO were ever in financial trouble, it is likely that its funding institutions would not escape lightly either (White, 1999). As NGOs have been institutionalized to reflect the needs of donors and produce results mandated by them, the space for women’s voices have become restricted and muted (Feldman, 2003a). Development interventions continue to be critically important for women who are amongst the most impoverished people in
the South. In recent decades, new approaches by feminists have been evident, even as dominant agendas of Western self-interest have also persisted.

3.12 Feminist approaches: scholars and practitioners

Feminist scholarship in relation to international development has been influenced and shaped by various constituencies and interests that have sometimes overlapped and sometimes functioned in oppositional ways. As explained earlier, several distinct approaches known as WAD, WID and GAD have emerged over the years. The divergent trajectories of these approaches were fairly distinct at their points of origin and appear also to have been clearly defined in their early years of inception. From the 1990s onwards, however, there has been considerable blurring of their boundaries, especially with regard to the ways in which the development industry has appropriated and deployed gender-sensitive vocabulary and language. The universality of gender has been challenged (Sardenberg, 2007), even as the deployment of gender has become virtually commonplace in the language of international development. It is in this context that various new ideas have been advanced, generally, in terms of feminist scholarship and more specifically, in relation to gender issues and women’s interests in international development.

Scholars have suggested modifications to development and new formulations based on gender, the environment and other relevant concerns (Rathgeber, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Chowdhry, 1995; Apffel-Marglin & Simon, 1994; Green et al., 1998). These suggestions have raised several new and insightful questions about feminism and development, reflecting postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives. Feminist scholars have focused increasingly on issues of power, on language and representation, in order to deconstruct and understand the linkages that influence knowledge production (Chowdhry, 1995, p. 35; Cornwall et al., 2007). These influences have encouraged gender and development scholars to interrogate Western, universal claims to knowledge, and dualisms inherent in modernization, thus introducing different interpretations and alternative ways of conceptualizing and doing development.
Some scholars have rejected the whole notion of “developmentalism” (Saunders, 2002; Apffel-Marglin & Simon, 1994), while others have felt it necessary to adhere to some universally applicable feminist standards grounded in concrete, social realities (Chowdhry, 1995; Parpart 2002). Development scholars have noted, with some concern, how the increasing, self-interested pressures of capitalism and a market-based global economy have led to distortions in domestic socio-economic, political and cultural relations, with the impact being heavily felt by women (Feldman, 2001a; Pearson, 2005). The inroads of global political and economic interests into regional and local sites in the South are a problematic that relates also to a recently introduced, and by some accounts, useful “rights based approach” (RBA) to development (Tsikata, 2007; Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembe, 2005). Although activists as far back as the late 1920s fought for women’s rights on the basis of human rights (Pietila, 2002), the more recent RBA has emerged from a different set of imperatives.

According to Peter Uvin (2002), in the 1990s in particular, international development agencies began to produce a “slew” (p. 2) of documents and declarations in which they promoted the introduction of a supposedly new and visionary perspective on development, namely, the Rights Based Approach or RBA. Uvin contends that among other things, the moralistic, idealized rhetoric of the RBA provides a moral high ground to development agencies, while it simultaneously shifts interpretations of economic strictures imposed by international development agencies on national governments and populations into the arena of political advancement, for instance, as propagated in the notion of “good governance”. The notion of “good governance”, coupled with the assumption that the proper adoption and implementation of the RBA is the responsibility of a state committed to social justice and democratic principles, pushes the onus of change on the state and civil society. It does so without problematising the conditionalities that are being placed on an ever-shrinking state; the impact on vulnerable members of the population as the state cuts back vital public services; and distortions that emerge as nation-states are encouraged to increasingly harmonize their domestic economies within the global market economy.

It is important to understand that while in principle, a RBA provides an element of accountability and culpability; an ethical/moral dimension to development (Cornwall and
Nyamu-Musembi, 2005), the RBA can be, and is being, deployed as a means of justifying particular Western geo-political interests and interventions, for example in Afghanistan and Iraq (Kandiyoti, 2007). Here, the negative impact of military interventions including the erosion of gains made in previous eras for women are glossed over by a dominant rhetoric on individual and gender rights and freedoms. It is important to note that there is a critical though sometimes less than obvious relationship between the propagation of a rights-based approach to development and Western rhetoric legitimizing interventions in the South under the guise of bringing democracy and gender equality specifically to Muslim majority regions of the world (Kandiyoti, 2007).

3.13 Conclusion

In this chapter I have critically analyzed the dominant development paradigm from a postcolonial and postmodern feminist perspective. My analysis has shown how political modernity, which is a pivotal constituent element of development, is premised on assumptions that frame progress in linear, Western-centric terms. In this imaginary, modernity is attainable within a spatial and temporal framework that has been established already by the North.

In essence, I have problematized the fundamental notion of development and the core premise of modernity in order to open up a space for non-linear appreciations of the social as they pertain in particular to societies and peoples in the South. I have traced the origins and influences that have shaped dominant understandings of development in some detail in order to substantiate and demonstrate the assertions noted above. My discussion has shown the significance of development as a global phenomenon; as a specific industry constructed and sustained by expertise primarily from the North; as a topic of scholarly research; and as an option for change and progress for millions of people in the South.

Last but not least, I have focused in some detail on the intersectionalities of gender and women’s issues in relation to development. My exploration has demonstrated that feminists and gender scholars have struggled long and hard to promote the centrality of women’s issues, and in particular, that considerations of gender, race, class and other aspects of social identity are pivotal to how we understand society, and therefore also how
development is problematized and unpacked. I have shown that in spite of substantive achievements by feminists, gender and development and grassroots advocates in non-governmental organizations, increasingly powerful currents of neo-colonial interests and agendas have buttressed development discourse. Western geo-political exigencies are being masked by development discourse, with consequences for women and men in postcolonial societies such as Bangladesh. The Imam Discourse, as I explain in Chapter 5, emerges in these critical conditions.

1 “Development” has innumerable meanings and applications, a detailed discussion of which lies outside the scope of my dissertation. In this chapter I focus mainly on my understanding of the term as it relates to my dissertation.

2 Ferguson (2005) writes, “Modernity figured as a universal telos, even for the most traditional of societies” (p. 167).

3 I explain the problematic of using terms such as “West” and “non-West” immediately below in the next paragraph.

4 Parpart states that the ways in which the label “Third World woman” has been used in Western perspectives in development is such that “the poor Third World woman remains truly ‘other’ to her development expert sisters.”

5 Edward Said wrote in his seminal work (1979): “In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on [a] flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (p. 7, italics in original). Two decades later, Syed Hussein Alatas (2007) notes that Muslim history is still being read through the dominant lens of European history, albeit in “a more diluted and sophisticated” (p. 379) way. Scholars who are studying Muslim extremist groups, for instance, look at these groups as though they are reformist in their orientation because in European religious history, reformers were the precursors of those who rebelled against the establishment. Sayyid (1997) adds to this discussion in an interesting way by introducing what he calls Kemalism, a political ideology modelled on Western ideals of modernity and secularism that permeated Muslim societies from the nineteenth century onwards. Durre Ahmed (1994) writes somewhat scathingly about the so-called secular intellectuals in Pakistan who do not problematize their easy acceptance of Western ideals of political modernity and secularism.

6 Chakrabarty distinguishes in importance between thought and practice. I find this distinction useful, particularly his examples about how educated South Asians relate to modernity. He notes for instance that to be a member of parliament in India does not require one to have an intimate knowledge of parliamentary history but any textbook in India (I would add, also in Bangladesh) on parliamentary forms of government could not be written without reference to, and engagement with, some aspect of European history.

7 I am not sure if Nandy’s erasure of women is because he does not think that wars could stem from the minds of women or if he is being androcentric.

8 Kenny and Williams’ (2000) article represents an insider perspective since Charles Kenny works for the World Bank. The authors acknowledge the failures of economic
models of development and also that more holistic treatments of the development process that reemphasize its complex and interlinked nature can be difficult to implement. At the same time, it is interesting to note that they do not budge from their adherence to a fundamentally economic approach to development; instead they seem to suggest more is better than less: “While it can well be argued that saying everything is important has little practical use, it might be a more accurate characterization of the development process than focusing on one or two keys to development success. As we do not seem to know exactly what we are aiming at, it might be better to use a shotgun than a rifle, then” (p. 16, italics added).

9 Uvin writes in relation to UNDP’s promotion of a rights-based approach in development that, “none of the human rights objectives outlined relate to the UNDP, the aid enterprise, or the international community itself. All of them are to be implemented out there, in this separate place called the Third World, but do not require any critique of the global system and our place in it” (2002, p. 9, italics added).

10 Wolfgang Sachs (1992) discusses the environment and the rise of what he calls “ecocracy” a dominant perspective that does not interrogate the North in any way; instead, its aspirations are “implicitly taken for granted” (p 36).

11 As mentioned in the previous chapter, (Endnote 14) bell hooks has remarked that research parameters often unproblematically correspond with racist structures so that while white women scholars are expected to undertake theoretical dilemmas, black women are assigned to explorations in the field. Sarah White (2006) highlights erasures of black women’s anti-racist scholarly contributions within the otherwise progressive framework of Gender and Development (GAD).

12 See Joarder (1990) for an account of the diversity between ulema or Islamic scholars some of whom are imams, in Muslim societies in Egypt, Sudan, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh.

13 Rist, (2008), traces “The Making of a World System” in interesting detail (pp. 47-79) including in particular the “Covenant of the League of Nations” which, at the end of World War I, introduced the concept of “stage of development” (p. 61) into the international domain, “thereby justifying a classification system according to which there were ‘developed’ nations at the top of the ladder” (p. 61).

14 The evaluation of a society through measurement of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a new economic instrument was introduced in the 1940s (Rist, 2008, p. 76).

15 Apparently, the UN’s motivation to focus increasingly on international development stemmed from the fact that Cold War tensions blocked the Security Council’s decision-making powers (Rist, 2008, p. 81).

16 Sarah White, (2006), refers to the development “industry” comprising government departments, aid agencies and NGOs and describes its working in an interesting way (p. 56).

17 Kothari’s (2005) aims are to explore the nuances of colonial administration in order to unpack simple comparisons whereby development can only be “good” and its opposite, colonialism is necessarily always “bad”; she demonstrates the limitations of development studies in a post-colonial context. In so doing, she problematizes both the development expert and the ways in which development expertise is constructed.
Although as Rathgeber (1990) notes, the demarcation between the WID and WAD approaches is not entirely clear (p. 8).
4 Chapter: Bangladesh: Particularities of the terrain

4.1 Introduction: Re-conceptualizing identities

Are you Muslim first or Bengali first? (Partha Chatterjee, 1993, p. 223)

My overall aim in this chapter is to explain how collective experiences of community identity in Bangladesh are intertwined with the region’s complex religious, political and social history, as well as with contemporary movements for national development and political modernity. I briefly noted in Chapter 1 that domestic national political movements in Bangladesh have been pushed and pulled in different directions, often by regional alliances and interests, and often by ethno-religious characteristics attributed to Bengali-Muslim identity. In this chapter I explore the characteristics and politics of these movements in order to contextualize the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh.

How do these movements relate to the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh? My objectives in this chapter are to explain the complexities of the terrain in which imams are located and to suggest that we need to understand imams in relation to, and as imbricated within the complicated contours of this terrain. As will become clearer in the next chapter, the Imam Discourse constitutes a specific, discretely constructed, homogenous Muslim religious subject whose legitimacy, authority and particular attributes are not reflective of the contingencies pertaining to this context. I want to suggest that we cannot understand imams by isolating them, or identifying them reductively, without being attentive to the intersectionalities of their subject formations; we need to understand imams within the layers and imbrications of ethno-religious nationalisms and the unstable formations of Bengali-Muslim community identities, some of which I explore in this chapter.

As unitary identity formations become increasingly unstable in the contemporary world, modern nation-states are faced with new challenges, including competing or conflicting notions of community identity. Identity issues can be viewed in somewhat benign ways, as “visions of community” (Uddin, 2006),¹ that is, without being particularly attentive to the divisiveness of identity politics; they can be seen also as “communalism”—a term deployed under British colonial rule in India for conflicts ascribed to “essential”
ethno-religious differences between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs (Bayly, 1985; see p. 23). Communalism is still widely used in South Asia, usually to denote religious divisiveness and discord and it is often posited as that which exists or emerges in the absence of secularism.

How secularism is understood varies. The Bangla word for secularism, dharma-nirapekshata, means religious neutrality on the part of the state (Murshid, 1995, p. 5). In India, the constitution uses a word with similar Sanskrit antecedents for secularism, sarbadharmasamabhaba, but here the word stresses the equality of all religions before the state (Murshid, 1995, p. 5). Although dharma-nirapekshata in Bangladesh implies that no one religion may be favoured by the state, or that religion is present and will be dispensed with in a “neutral” manner by the state, it is usually seen as a way of containing communalism. The issue gets complicated in part because “secularism” and Islam have been privileged in different ways and at different times in the Constitution and in the body politic, and their respective positionings are, in turn, linked to ethno-religious politics in South Asia in general and Bangladesh in particular.

More often than not, what happens in Bangladesh is that “religion” stands in for Islam. The state is seen to be “secular” when it privileges and provides legitimacy and space to ethno-religious minority groups and when explicitly Islamic identities are correspondingly subsumed. The absence of secularism thus becomes communalism. Communalism is ascribed primarily as an Islamic characteristic.

In a contemporary context, social identity has been increasingly re-conceptualized and reformulated, particularly in relation to culture and ethnicity (Eriksen, 2001). As Stuart Hall (1996) notes, “old identities” (p. 274) that were stable and unitary have been replaced by multiple and fractured identity formations that reflect wider changes in the social world. We have become more aware in recent times of how reifications of culture, ethnicity or religion can be exploited for ideological and political aims to “cleanse” society of community groups that are defined as being less authentic than others. As well, conflicts over community identity in modern nation states are being shaped in no small measure by struggles over scarce resources, which, in turn, are exacerbated by tensions brought on by modernization and the forces of capitalism and liberal-democracy.
More than anything else, postcolonial and postmodern explorations of belonging and diversity have become inclusive of different disciplinary understandings. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) exploration of “life-worlds” is a compelling example of such an approach and one that I am influenced by, as he combines the analytical understandings of Marxist ideology, with phenomenological insights on “human belonging and human difference” (p. 19) to enrich our vision and understanding of South Asian modernity.

In sum, while challenges and conflicts over community identity—in relation to culture, ethnicity, religion, and nationhood—can be strategically invoked and are socially constructed, the impact of these struggles on subject formations, as well as the world around us, are complicated and often paradoxical. What we mean by, and how “secular” and “religious” identities work, can become fairly complicated, depending on a range of contingencies, some of which I will draw out in relation to Bangladesh in this chapter.

This chapter is organized as follows: I begin by deconstructing the complexities of the Bengali-Muslim dichotomy. My focus is on issues pertaining to ethno-religious nationalisms that led to the birth of Bangladesh, and also preceded the same. I briefly trace various interpretations about the place of Muslims in Bengal—or the “proper” role of Islam in Bangladesh—and focus on Bengali-Muslim nationalism from a gender perspective.

I would like to note that my background as a student of history, as noted Chapter 2, shapes my interest in locating Bangladeshi identity and subject formations in relation to history. However, I am not following the dictates of conventional historical analysis, that is, I do not shy away from “interpretive interpolations” (Ludden, 2011, p. 79). Rather, my approach is to be attentive to the genealogies of knowledge production, in order to examine different historical and socio-political explanations and arguments that are significant to my research.
4.2 Complexities of the Bengali-Muslim dichotomy

...the Bangladesh state is still engaged in the continual quest for self-definition: Bengali but not Indian, Muslim but not Pakistani. (Sarah White, 1999, p. 310)

The dichotomy implied in the hyphenated word, “Bengali-Muslim”, often used in the literature to describe a Muslim inhabitant of Bangladesh, reflects a complicated ethno-religious relationship. For reasons that are embedded in the past, but manifest themselves in a variety of ways in the present, Islam and Bengali ethnicity are generally perceived to exist in a state of tension with one another. Citizens of Bangladesh frequently self-identify as Bangalee (the Anglicized version is Bengali), but also, some citizens identify explicitly as Bangladeshi, not only because the nation-state is called Bangladesh, but because they have been encouraged by explicit interventions of the state to privilege one over the other.


More than three decades later, under Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League which swept to power in elections held in 2008, the notion of “Bangalee” has been re-scripted into the country’s Constitution. The Supreme Court ruled in July 2010 that while citizens of Bangladesh are deemed to be Bangladeshi, "the unity and solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bangalee nationalism” (Yeasin, 2010). An intervention has been made, yet again, on what is implied by Bangladeshi and Bangalee. The Supreme Court ruling was given parliamentary sanction in the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution passed on June 30th, 2011 by the country’s parliament (Liton and Hasan, 2011).
The debate over Bangalee and Bangladeshi extends beyond mere issues of nomenclature. Different descriptive words or labels, including the less common but also present “Muslim-Bengali”, mainly used in reference to the upper classes in colonial Bengal and postcolonial East Bengal, are invested with political connotations that denote ethno-religious, as well as class-based and regional affiliations. These affiliations are linked to larger interests and issues such as questions of political modernity and a secular polity, not only in a local/domestic context, but also with regard to post 9/11 global (Western) engagements with, and apprehensions of Islamic radicalism.

The Fifteenth Amendment adds yet another chapter, so to speak, to a continuing struggle in Bangladesh with issues of secularism, religion and nationalism. I will discuss several important events and actions that mark the ongoing struggle later in this chapter, but simply put, the 1972 Constitution privileged secularism, as well as Bangalee—rather than Bangladeshi, or Bengali-Muslim—nationalism, and banned “communal” activities, including those undertaken for a political purpose, on the basis of religion. But from 1975 onwards, several key principles of state ideology were reversed: “secularism” was deleted from the Constitution; Islam was privileged as a cornerstone of state ideology; the ban on religion-based parties was lifted; and eventually, Islam was declared to be the state religion.

The ethno-religious dichotomy in Bengali-Muslim community identity is particularly obvious in comparison to other nation-states in South Asia such as Pakistan and India. These nation-states are marked by diversities and differences, but not in the same way as in Bangladesh. Let me explain what I mean: Muslims in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, without exception, are either descended from Muslim settlers or from converts, or are converts themselves. Islam originated in West Asia, well outside the Indo-Pakistan-Bangladesh region. But Muslims in Pakistan, for instance, in relation to various ethnically and linguistically distinct regions such as Sindh, Punjab, Baluchistan, the North West Frontier, are not seen to exist in tension with their respective ethnic, linguistic or cultural antecedents; nor are Muslims in India described in hyphenated or fractured terms, as “Tamil-Muslim” or “Bihari-Muslim”. In India, Muslims can be politically distanced under certain circumstances as “alien” but facets of Islamic culture and language in India have
been successfully adopted and “secularized” into acceptability as Indian culture (Partha Chatterjee, 1993, see pp. 73-74).

My aim here is not to compare Bangladesh with Pakistan or India in any detail, but rather to draw attention to the complexities that mark Bangladeshi ethno-religious identities. How are these constructed and what is their significance in contemporary Bangladesh? In what ways are they related to the Imam Discourse? I will attempt to answer these and other related questions below.

4.3 Old frictions die hard

Every nation, it is said, has a memory of past experiences that influence present acts and decisions (Lipset, 1969, cited in Maniruzzaman, 1988, p. 54). Bangladesh came into existence on December 16th, 1971 as the second largest Muslim nation-state in the world after a violent civil war with (West) Pakistan that lasted for nine months and included the intervention of the Indian army. It is not surprising, therefore, that events that led up to and included the traumatic birth of the nation continue to haunt contemporary predicaments and debates.

Twenty four years earlier, on 14th August, 1947, Bangladesh, which was then the eastern half of Bengal, joined with four provinces in West Pakistan to gain independence from British rule, detach itself from Bengal proper and what remained as India in the subcontinent, in order to become a part of Pakistan. This new nation was a unique construct: East Pakistan sat on the eastern edge of the sub-continent, while West Pakistan occupied the northwestern regions of the subcontinent. In the middle lay India. Benedict Anderson’s (1983) argument that nation-states are “imagined” communities is exemplified in interesting ways by the birth of Pakistan, a geographically truncated nation built on the promise—or so it was assumed—of Muslim nationhood. This assumption, though not unproblematic, reinforced the construct of Bengali-Muslim identity.

In 1971 when Pakistan broke asunder, it was easy to assume that so, too, had the Bengali-Muslim subject: the religious or Islamic half of the duality, Bengali-Muslim, had either been jettisoned or, at the very least, seamlessly fused with the ethnic, Bengali half. Thus, as Asim Roy, (2006a) states, “if the partition of Bengal (1947) is seen as the
vindication of the Bengali-Muslim’s “Islamic” identity, the rise of Bangladesh (1971) on the ashes of the ‘Islamic Brotherhood’ of Pakistan does fly in the face of many of those ‘Islamic’ assumptions “(p. 73).

In subsequent years, however, “those Islamic assumptions” have not been laid to rest. If anything, they have become more entrenched and complex. The Bangladesh state has continued to vacillate in its engagements with Islam and secularism, often because of the polarizing pressures of different political regimes, but also because of deeply embedded historical experiences. Naila Kabeer aptly sums up the dilemma:

The contradictions and uncertainties which have dogged the state’s Islamisation policy in Bangladesh stem partly from a central ambivalence in prevailing notions of national identity, an ambivalence which relates to the significance attached to the place of “Islamic” versus “Bengali” values in determining national identity. (1991, p. 116)

She goes on to suggest that while Islam and Bengali ethnicity are both the “very essence of the community’s separate identity, its historical experience has prevented the two from being successfully moulded into a coherent unity” (p. 117). As well, a lack of unity stems in part from the manner in which Islam was introduced and absorbed in this region (Kabeer, 1991, p. 116-117). The circumstances and issues that are entangled in and led to the existence of Bangladesh as a nation-state are rooted in part in the story of Islam in Bangladesh. I cannot go into this story in detail, but I will outline several key moments that pertain to understandings of ethno-religious nationalisms.

4.4 The “discovery” of Muslims in Bengal

There have been Muslims in Bangladesh for eight hundred years. Although Aryan Brahmins ostensibly ruled from the fifth century C.E. onwards, the inhabitants of Bangladesh “enthusiastically embraced” (Kabeer, 1991, p. 118) anti-Brahminical movements and were generally followers of Vaishnavism, which is a less hierarchical form of Brahminical Hinduism; many later converted to Buddhism (Nicholas, 2001). In the early thirteenth century, several hundred Turkish soldiers from northern India entered the fertile delta of Bengal, unseated its Hindu monarch, and “inaugurated an era, lasting over
five centuries, during which most of Bengal was dominated by rulers professing the Islamic faith" (Eaton, 1993, p. xxii).

Although this event is noteworthy primarily for historians,\textsuperscript{10} the mythical import of an Islamic “invasion” that spread all across India but most particularly across Bengal continues to influence and inform debates and perspectives on identity even now (see Chatterjee, 1993).\textsuperscript{11} The presence and implications of an Islamic/Muslim presence in India, however, became defined in a particular way during the experience of colonization in the late nineteenth century. At this time, a somewhat baffling demographic anomaly was noted—namely, that there was an unusually high density of Muslims in Bengal, on the far eastern corner of the Indian subcontinent. This discrepancy, so to speak, was “discovered” when the British undertook the first census of Bengal in 1872 (Ahmed, 1996/1981; Ahmed 1974). Until then it had been assumed that, like the rest of eastern India, Bengal too was predominantly Hindu.\textsuperscript{12} Instead, the census showed that in the low-lying marshy tracts of eastern Bengal (the area now known as Bangladesh), there was “an unexpectedly large number of Muslims” (Ahmed, 1996/1981, p. 1), to wit nearly half of the total population.

Among other things, the census set off a fierce controversy over why East Bengal had so many Muslims (Ahmed 1996/1981). It seemed unusual that a large Muslim population had emerged so far from the region where Islam had originated, especially because similar concentrations were not found elsewhere in India (Eaton, 1993, p. xxii). Richard Eaton (1993) notes that although Muslim sovereigns had ruled over the subcontinent from the eight to the eighteenth century, among India’s interior provinces only in Bengal did a majority of the indigenous population adopt the religion of the ruling class, Islam (p. xxii). Questions about the place of Muslims in Bengal were raised also because a vast majority of Muslims in East Bengal were of the lower—poor, often landless, rural based peasants or urban working classes—while the Hindus, though small in number, dominated the upper landowning classes, as well as the professional classes.

Various theories were, and continue even now to be advanced to explain the “anomaly” of Muslims in Bengal. These theories became particularly significant in the twentieth century when the British were urged to leave India and the movement for India’s independence and a separate state, Pakistan, gained momentum. While a detailed examination of these debates lies outside the scope of my dissertation, the manner in
which they intersect with and impact on ethno-religious issues and regional alignments in South Asian politics are pertinent and I therefore summarize several major themes below.

4.5 Theories of conversion: class and ancestry

Some scholars trace the origins of Bengali-Muslims through class stratifications which are linked to ancestry, the Muslim upper classes being of “foreign” or West Asian origin, and the lower classes being indigenous Bengali converts to Islam. In an influential work, Rafiuddin Ahmed (1996/1981) analyses a hybrid Bengali-Muslim textual source called puthi literature\textsuperscript{13} to advance his main argument which is that following the Muslim invasion of Bengal, there evolved two main classes in Bengali-Muslim society: the ashraf, or elite Muslims, of immigrant stock, who spoke no Bangla and chose instead to adopt the language, attire and customs of west Asia and north India; and the atrap, mainly rural based lower class Muslims who spoke a variant of Bangla—with Urdu, Arabic and Persian intrusions—called Mussalmani and who had little claim to foreign ancestry. According to him, “the elite and mass ethos was poles apart” (1996/1981, p. 6, italics added). The notion of “ethos” represented a fundamental difference between the two classes:

The two strata of Bengal Muslim society represented two streams of ‘Muslim’ culture, the one foreign to Bengal, the other of indigenous origin. The former was hostile to all local associations, the latter was closer to the land – its language and cultural traditions. (Ahmed, 1996/1981, p. 6)

He argues that because Hindu converts to Islam did not automatically rise in rank in Muslim society, and class distinctions continued to stratify Bengali-Muslim society into upper class or ashraf and lower class or atrap, it is clear that Islam in Bengal had a distinct and aggressive agenda to dominate an indigenous Bengali peasantry.

Ahmed grants a peculiar agency to Islam that at least one other writer, Joya Chatterji (1998), has criticized. Chatterji’s argument is that Islam cannot be characterized as holding universal or “core values” that might be transferable seamlessly to other social groups and thus, granting unbridled agency to “Islam” while rendering Bengali society its passive recipient, is problematic. She notes how dominant views of Bengali-Muslim identity portray it to be stridently divided, as if “riven by a fault line” (p. 265), with Islam
on one side and Bengali ethnicity on the other. She asserts that problems arise because of a particular understanding in Ahmed (1996/1981), Murshid (1995) and other scholars’ works of Islam as “a pure, transcendent idea, the ‘essentials’ of which are indisputable” (1998, p. 266). In this scheme, Islam has unlimited agency, and thus, conversion to Islam can only be seen as passive acquiescence. She argues against an essentialised Islam of foreign origin being pitted against a local, syncretic version. Such a view renders Bengali subjects without agency and forecloses nuanced and contextual readings of Islamic practices as being dynamic and also socially constructed.

An important outcome of her arguments is that it demonstrates the complexities to be found in the parallels drawn between class, ethnic origin, and Islam in Bengal. Class stratification is an important feature of society in Bangladesh; its deep roots in the past are relevant even now (Hossain & Hossain, 2002). My analysis shows that socio-economic or class distinctions play an important role in relationships of power in Bangladeshi society, especially in relation to gender relations. At the same time, class divisions are socially constructed and essentially porous to various influences; thus, the so-called ashraf-atrap divide is fluid and unstable particularly because Muslims in Bengal are not governed by strict limitations of “caste” in the Hindu Brahminical tradition.

Ahmed’s argument regarding the ashraf-atrap dichotomy is further problematized by Eaton (1993) who convincingly argues that class stratification emerged in different phases in Bengali-Muslim society and not necessarily in relations of binary opposition. Eaton suggests that the elite Muslim classes originated in the “pre-modern” era, from the thirteenth century onwards. This era embraces the very early years of Muslim settlement in Bengal, when Muslim rulers were keen to establish linkages with West Asian centres of patronage, in part to undermine the authority of the Muslim king in Delhi. In short, the upper classes of Bengali-Muslims did not—as Ahmed and others of his ilk would argue—emerge to willfully dominate their lesser co-religionists. The atrap, in turn, emerged much later from the sixteenth century onwards. I refer to Eaton’s analyses in order to demonstrate the complexities involved in following a simple linear trajectory in order to trace class, ethnic and other formations and constructs. As well, Eaton’s account suggests that Islam has deep and tenacious local roots in Bengal, even though it originated in a distant geographical location. Furthermore, this kind of interpretation enables subjects to
have agency, and also makes visible relationships of power in the discursive shifts taking place in Bengal.

4.6 “Pioneer-saints” and early Islam

Eaton’s seminal argument is to map the story of the Bengali-Muslim through a series of sometimes overlapping, seldom seamless constructs that he terms “frontiers”. One of these frontiers is that of the Muslim “pioneer-saints” or pirs, Muslim mystics from distant lands across West Asia who introduced Islam and its practices at the grassroots level in the subcontinent, especially in Bengal. These pirs were influenced by the “Way of Sufism”, a pathway of devotional life-practices and life-worlds that is often called the “mystical heart of Islam” (Helminski, 2003, p. xiii). Sufism began when the Muslim community was in its infancy in eight-century Arabia as a form of asceticism, simplicity and meditation (Ramadan, 2007, p. 114, fn. 14; also see Schimmel, 1992), and it fused with various local traditions across West Asia, most notably in Turkey. There is thus no single Sufi ideology; the mystic pirs who came to Bengal were shaped by Turkish Islamic and pre-Islamic influences (Eaton, 2002, p. 71). Eaton’s research suggests that the pirs combined physical skills with social volunteerism to develop a specific kind of relationship with farmers and rural inhabitants. Pirs apparently engaged in clearing large tracts of forests in order to facilitate the establishment of settlements, and they also provided spiritual guidance to the ordinary Bengali farmer or landless rural resident.

Eaton argues that his study refutes stereotypical assumptions about Muslims that are found in dominant historical narratives. One of these assumptions is that in the “pre-modern” centuries immediately before the British came to India, Bengali-Muslims (and Muslims in general in the subcontinent) were hopelessly mired in social decay and fragmentation. Blame for the “backwardness” of the Indian Muslim was placed on a stereotypical image of the Islamic religious leader who was depicted as deeply conservative and hostile to change (Eaton, 1993, p. 312). What happened was quite different, contends Eaton. Bengali Islam became closely integrated with an agrarian way of life, and Islam also became associated as the harbinger of technological innovation, of facilitating increased levels of literacy, and resulting in overall prosperity. Furthermore,
the network of rural learning that was established through mosques and madrasahs, or religious schools, formed the basis of a vibrant Bengali-Muslim cultural tradition. What interests me is not a historical debate over how Muslim society emerged in Bengal but how, as I noted earlier, certain dominant depictions of an alien Muslim presence have been mobilized at different times, with particular political purposes. These mobilizations are useful when we consider that in contemporary times certain characteristics are associated as inherent to overtly Muslim subjects such as male imams in Bangladesh.

4.7 The “Sword Theory”

A second school of thought advocates what Razia Banu (1992) succinctly calls the “sword theory” (p. 22) that is, conversion by force or coercive means. Banu (1992) herself ultimately acknowledges that the “sword theory” can only partially explain the massive conversions in Bengal. She notes other important elements that contributed to the Muslim presence, for instance, that a less rigid form of Hinduism and of Buddhism prevailed in Bengal; Islam offered an egalitarian social system; the influence of Muslim mystics and Sufi saints; and the policies of Muslim rulers of Bengal. Nevertheless, what strikes me as interesting is that Banu appears to be responding to, and arguing against a dominant perspective of a militant, violent Islam.¹⁶

The impression of an aggressive Islam comes through also in an unlikely source, a study by Rangalal Sen (1987) of Bengali-Muslim elites several centuries later, in the 1950s. Sen refers to Muslim elites in Bengal in the thirteenth century almost in passing, but surprisingly, presses home the impression that they were intruders and outsiders. He defines upper class Muslims in Bengal centuries ago as an “alien aristocracy” (p. 8) and implies in subtle and often minute ways that it is an aristocracy that has been implanted into Bengal, by dint of force.¹⁷ I want to point out that as Joya Chatterji (1998) notes with regard to Ahmed’s (1996/1981) analysis, here, too we find a homogenous, aggressive and alien Islam being contrasted with a homogenous, passive and authentic Hinduism. What is striking is how the image of an alien Islamic presence in Bengal travels through the decades in persistent and insidious ways.
4.8 “Accretions” and reform movements

A third perspective that seeks to analyze Bengali-Muslim origins focuses on the emergence of what is variously known as Sufi, popular, folk, or syncretic Islam in Bengal. This is a vast and complex topic. Sufism’s fusion with the metaphysical traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism is seen to have resulted in the construction of what is often referred to as popular Islam in Bangladesh, (Banu, 1992). Its relevance to my study lies in that a Sufi form of Islam is sometimes deployed in a binary manner, being seen as less “pure” and hence more “secular”; it is then contrasted with a more orthodox and “pure” but also alien Islam with roots in Arabia. Banu (1992) is inclined to think along these lines. In this interpretation, Sufi Islam is seen as a domesticated and “secular” version of orthodox Islam, one that is also more in keeping with a seemingly gentler, Hindu-Bengali tradition.

I am not suggesting that Sufi Islam is being misrepresented, but that Sufism is not a homogenous tradition or set of practices; thus, we need to understand manifestations and strains of Sufi thinking and practices in site, time and context specific ways. In Bangladesh, there are various strains of Sufi influence including the introduction of Muslim practices and ideas through pirs or Sufi saints of Turkish origin many centuries ago as Eaton (1993) has detailed. There have been many other influences since then. In a contemporary context in South Asia, Sufi practices are divided into mainstream orders which stress spirituality and lower or bazaari orders that mainstream practitioners decry as corrupted, commercialized versions of the “true”, traditional forms (Pemberton, 2006).

Sufi pirs are generally not identified as imams, though imams can be influenced by Sufi teachings. An imam’s duties are to lead congregational prayers, while a pir may lead prayers as an imam but also provides spiritual and material guidance that follows a particular philosophical, mystical interpretation of Islam (Pemberton, 2006). Relationships between pir and disciple, piri-muridi (Pemberton, 2006; Joarder, 1990) are more structured that that between an imam and members of a congregation.

The tension referred to above between a “pure” Islam and a syncretic or folk Muslim tradition in Bengal relates to the role of religious subjects, including some imams, in Bangladeshi society in a different context as well. From the early nineteenth century to
the early twentieth century, several powerful and sometimes violent movements for "reform" arose in Bengal. Several forces of change that took place in northern India and in distant Arabia at this time inspired these movements. These forces of change basically introduced rigid, conservative and often violent interpretations of Islam, such as Wahhabism, in order to "purify" Islam from what were seen as accretions or corruptions rooted in other religious and cultural traditions (Aslan, 2005, pp. 240-48). Men of rural, humble origins who were influenced by these new interpretations of Islam spearheaded the reform movements in Bengal, launching movements to purge local, Bengali Islam from what seemed to be innovations and "accretions" borrowed from Hindu, popular Sufi, and folk traditions (Ahmed, 1996/1981). Several interesting changes took place as a result of these movements, including the "Islamicization" of the attire of Bengali-Muslim men and women, for example, and also the introduction into the social imaginary of a distinct Bengali-Muslim modernity.  

My interest in drawing attention to the reform movements is to point out that the influences of an orthodox Islam, of "alien" origins was apparently not limited to elite Muslims in Bengal. Rural members of the lower, trap class led aggressive campaigns to "Islamicize" the masses and although not all their reforms were implemented or sustained after their influence waned, they left their mark on the religious and social landscape. In contemporary times, imams in Bangladesh frequently fall into a homogenously constructed category of itinerant rural mullahs who are assumed to be troublesome subjects pitted against secular, political modernity, the latter often conflated with Bengali linguistic and ethnic "purity".

4.9 Religious nationalism and (East) Pakistan

Debates over the presence of Muslims in Bengal (as also in India proper) were of critical importance during the closing decades of the British Raj when movements for independence stratified along religious or "communal" lines. By the mid 1930s, Muslims had organized under the Muslim League and its leader, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, to demand a homeland that would be distinct from what, by then, had come to be identified by the League in particular as predominantly Hindu India. British policy that had long sought to "devolve" or "divide" native power along "communal" lines, ultimately accepted the
inevitability of relinquishing control over India. When East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, it did so within a movement of Muslim nationalism spearheaded by Muslim elites that later incorporated diverse classes and bridged racial, linguistic and ethnic differences. Soon after the creation of Pakistan, however, Bengali-Muslims began to chafe under the authoritarianism of a ruling West Pakistani establishment. Conflict and disaffection emerged over issues of economic exploitation, political domination and the suppression of Bangla linguistic and cultural identity by West Pakistani interests.

How and why Pakistan broke up into two separate nation-states in 1971 has been explained from various perspectives, most notably, by Jahan (1972), Maniruzzaman (1988), and Kabeer (1991). These scholarly studies, as well as my personal recollections as a member of a politically involved family, shape my views. It is clear that a “deliberate policy of institution-building” (Jahan, 1972, p. 7) pursued by Pakistani military ruler Ayub Khan, from the late 1950s onwards, failed to “integrate” (Jahan, 1972, p. 7) or mould together East and West Pakistan into a centralized national unit. The narrow interests of a “Punjabi-military-bureaucratic oligarchy” (Kabeer, 1991, p. 40) and its colonial attitude and treatment of East Pakistan were critical in shaping the birth of Bangladesh. The rise of what Jahan aptly terms “a vernacular elite” (p. 38) as different from a national or ruling bilingual elite in East Pakistan provided the leadership—both political and intellectual—to frame demands for Bengali-Muslim autonomy and eventually for independence. Jahan and Kabeer both question the viability of Islam as a binding force in nation-building, and note that a deliberate policy of cultural assimilation pursued by Ayub Khan to neutralize Bengali linguistic and ethnic traditions, including relentless efforts to “Islamicize” Bangla, combined to create stronger feelings of alienation and frustration amongst Bengali-Muslims.

In a larger context it becomes apparent that domestic, national and regional pressures and insecurities often experienced by newly emerging nation-states, rather than simple conflict situations between “religion” and “secularism”, combined to divide rather than hold Pakistan together. In the early years after Pakistan came into being there were clear signs of disenchantment and disillusion, not only between Islam and Bengali ethnicity and language, but also in Bengali-Muslim class-based movements that were in turn shaped by economic, political and social issues of the time (Maniruzzaman, 1988).
The physical challenges of two “wings” of the same country divided by different time zones and locations were also important in reinforcing fissures and ruptures in religious nationalism. It is interesting to note that a sense of alienation from Pakistan was articulated in terms of religious, class and ethnic differences. In dominant (West) Pakistani popular rhetoric, often accompanied by hostility and discrimination, Muslims of East Pakistan were constructed as “nominally Muslim” (Kabeer, 1991, p. 119). They were distanced as being racially inferior in large part because they were apparently low caste Hindu converts, and also unreliable co-religionists (Kabeer, 1991). Bengali-Muslims, for their part, reaffirmed in sundry ways a distinct Bangalee culture and language, without privileging religion as an earlier generation fighting against British and Indian domination had done.

4.10 Bangladesh: a traumatic beginning

I return now to the traumatic events immediately preceding the birth of Bangladesh. In March 1971, the government of military ruler General Yahya Khan, with tacit support from the leader of the Pakistan People’s Party, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, clamped martial law on East Pakistan. Soldiers from West Pakistan, airlifted in the hundreds of thousands, fanned across East Pakistan and occupied through brute force what had earlier been a part of Pakistan.

In December the previous year, elections had been held in Pakistan under a parliamentary form of government that had been introduced after a countrywide popular “one-man-one-vote” campaign spearheaded by political parties and civic movements mainly in a numerically dominant East Pakistan. There were more East Pakistani Bengalis than any other ethno-linguistic group in Pakistan but until the introduction of parliamentary democracy, the eastern half of the country had been under-represented in the legislature. As well, there was a distinct imbalance in resource allocation, power and influence between the two wings of Pakistan, with the western half of the country dominant in all but numerical strength. In polls held in December 1970 the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a majority of seats in parliament. The central government and the military establishment, which controlled the country, were at core
West Pakistani; so was the Pakistan People’s Party, which won enough seats to become the official opposition. However, with fissures between East and West Pakistan running deep, Yahya Khan’s government refused to convene the National Assembly in Dhaka with an Awami League government at the helm; instead, Khan ordered the army to impose martial law and launch a massive operation under cover of darkness on March 25th, 1971 in East Pakistan. Overnight, everything changed and from a nation on its way to democracy, Pakistan was locked in civil war. The army killed thousands of activists, students and ordinary civilians, and imprisoned political leaders including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was spirited away to an unknown destination in West Pakistan. Bangladeshi nationalists went underground, escaping to neighbouring India where they were welcomed and trained as Mukti Bahini, or Freedom Fighters. Thus began the fight for the birth of Bangladesh.

In a nine-month Liberation War for Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of ordinary women and men were killed, their homes and their sources of livelihood destroyed. The Pakistan army deployed various tactics to subdue and control East Pakistan, including targeted assassinations of key Bengali intellectuals, political leaders and other unarmed civilians, the regular imposition of curfew, violent search and arrest operations inside civilian homes, the mandatory carrying of “dentity” (identity) cards by all civilians, and other forms of harsh military rule. Women disparately experienced the consequences of the war. It is not known exactly how many women were raped and killed by the occupying Pakistani army and its local supporters. Estimates range from 30,000 (Kabeer, 1991, p. 122) to 400,000 (Brownmiller, 1976). Brownmiller likens the rape of women in 1971 in Bangladesh to the Japanese rapes in Nanjing and German rapes in Russia during World War II, thus:

200,000, 300,000 or possibly 400,000 women (three sets of statistics have been variously quoted) were raped. Eighty percent of the raped women were Moslems, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindu and Christian women were not exempt. ... Hit-and-run rape of large numbers of Bengali women was brutally simple in terms of logistics as the Pakistani regulars swept through and occupied the tiny, populous land. (p. 81)
I will come back to the experience of rape later and the gendered dimensions of Bangladeshi nationalism. Meanwhile, a major limitation for the Pakistan army in its occupation of East Pakistan was that it was a non-Bengali speaking force, drawn from Sindh, Baluchistan, the North West Frontier Provinces, and the Punjab in West Pakistan.\(^{22}\)

The army, together with a provincial government loyal to it that was appointed under martial law, raised several local constabulary and civil defense forces to assist in the task of subjugating East Pakistan. Members of a large volunteer group were called rajakar. The word “razakar” in Persian means volunteer but the meaning of this word in Bangla from this time onwards became akin to Quisling in a Western context: it means traitor. Several armed paramilitary groups, with more specialized training, were also raised and these were given Arabic names such as Al Badr (Kabir, 1990) which is the name of a key battle fought and won by a Muslim army led by the Prophet Mohammad in seventh century Arabia.

The political base and recruiting strength of these pro-Pakistan groups came from the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), a political party that worked with “fanatical zeal” (Maniruzzaman 1988/1980, p. 31) against Bangladeshi interests. Although the Jamaat was an all-Pakistan political party, it had not found a political base in East or West Pakistan for various reasons including opposition from the Muslim League, the party which played a prominent if controversial role in what is generally termed to be the “struggle for Pakistan” (see Ayesha Jalal, 1999). Members of the JI in East Pakistan, together with members of several other centrist and Islamic parties,\(^ {23}\) worked on behalf of the Pakistan army against Bangladeshi civilian resistance by engaging in acts of indiscriminate brutality and plunder (Maniruzzaman 1988/1980, p. 101-103; Kabir, 1990). The Pakistan army and provincial government also set up a network of civilian representatives in urban centres, ostensibly to assist in local government, but in reality to facilitate further acts of subjugation of the local populace. These representatives formed what were euphemistically named “Peace Committees” across occupied East Pakistan. Peace Committee members were local politicians who belonged to the above-noted political parties, at the municipal and city council levels. Their collaboration with the Pakistani regime through coercion, intimidation and indiscriminate violence against the local population only hastened the Pakistan government’s short-lived occupation of East Pakistan. Although Bangladesh
gained independence after less than a year of civil war, the cleavages in the social and political landscape remained longer; some might say, they remain to this day. While collaborators were condemned by a majority of Bangladeshis, a sense of disillusionment with overt Muslim religiosity and nationalism was also evident.

4.11 Ethno-religious subject formations

It is interesting to note the role played in the Pakistani occupation of East Pakistan by a large number of Urdu-speaking settlers, referred to loosely as Biharis, who had crossed into East Pakistan mainly from the neighbouring Indian state of Bihar but also from other areas in India, in 1947 at the birth of Pakistan. Exactly how many crossed from India is not clear, but there were approximately one million “stranded Pakistanis” as the Biharis would be called later, just after the birth of Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2009).

These settlers never assimilated into Bengali society. While a majority of Bengali-Muslims were employed in rural areas, in farming and agriculture, Bihari settlers pursued occupations in trade, commerce, small business and the industrial sector (Farzana, 2008). They spoke Urdu and supported (West) Pakistan’s interests in virtually every way, from campaigns that privileged the Urdu language over Bangla, to electoral support for parties that stood for the dominance of West Pakistan. Like other Muslim groups that had crossed into (West) Pakistan in 1947, the Biharis clustered together in housing colonies located on the outskirts of urban centres such as Dhaka, the capital, as well as in Dinajpur, Rangpur and Bogra in north Bengal, and Khulna and Jessore in the southwest of the country.24

When East Pakistan exploded in civil strife in March 1971, the Bihari communities became active recruiting grounds for pro-Pakistan militia groups. The Pakistan army and the provincial government used Biharis mainly as foot soldiers, and especially as informers, to terrorize the Bangalee people. The ethnic identity “Bihari” became synonymous with “rajakar” or collaborator/traitor, and also with anti-secular, Islamic fundamentalist, anti-Bengali and pro-Pakistani sensibilities. Immediately after the birth of Bangladesh in 1972, although the Indian army provided unprecedented protection to some 90,000 surrendering Pakistani troops25 and several thousand Urdu-speaking civilians including Biharis, reparations by Bangladeshis were carried out in large numbers.
Many collaborators in positions of power, such as those on peace committees, managed to flee to safety in Pakistan and elsewhere, but “secular” Bengali groups subjected an untold number of men and women to indiscriminate violence.

When the dust cleared after the birth of Bangladesh, the new government offered the Biharis the option of staying as citizens or going to Pakistan (Farzana, 2008). A majority chose the latter option. From this time onwards, the Biharis became “stranded Pakistanis”—not refugees because technically, they do not qualify as such—waiting to be repatriated to their homeland. Over the years, nearly 200,000 Biharis have officially entered Pakistan, but since the late 1980s, successive Pakistani governments have turned their back on the Bihari issue. An estimated population of about 300,000 Biharis (Farzana, 2008) have continued to live in temporary camps in Bangladesh, once again outside the main urban centres, but this time as aliens, unable to own land or property, find regular work, send their children to government schools or exercise the right to vote. The Bihari camps have turned into slums. They are easy breeding and recruiting grounds for criminal activities. Young girls and women are particularly vulnerable to prostitution and trafficking, while older Biharis have turned to begging.

What strikes me as significant is that Biharis in Bangladesh have the potential to be identified in divisive ethno-linguistic-religious terms. Many younger members have assimilated in the sense that they speak Bangla and some Bangladeshi-born Biharis have started a movement to claim citizenship (Lynch and Cook, 2004). But their identity has continued to have negative connotations; it is a pejorative, a serious ethnic slur in Bangladesh to call someone “Bihari”. However, it is possible that because the Biharis have become an underclass, with virtually no rights, living on the edge of society, their ethnic and linguistic traits and allegiances have ceased to elicit the kind of animosity that was there before. Following the aftermath of the 1971 war, there has been no violence or “ethnic cleansing” of Biharis in Bangladesh. Secular forces have not felt threatened by the presence of hundreds of thousands of impoverished Biharis in their midst.

My interest in bringing the Bihari example into my discussion is in order to show the fluidity with which certain poor, working class socio-economic groups have been able to assimilate into Bangladeshi society. At the same time, I want to note that class differences are not straightforward. An overwhelming number of Biharis do not have any
claims to authority and exist in a state of tenuous legitimacy as nominal citizens of Bangladesh. Yet, broad ethno-religious and class differences that exist between Bengali-Muslims can represent “Bihari” characteristics as upper class and elite, as well as anti-Liberation, fundamentalist Muslim and pro-Pakistan. Their opposite, that is, secular Bangalee subjects, can be grouped as being more working class, and representative of Bengali ethnic identity, and also seen to favour close ties with India.

The bulk of imams are more likely to be identified as “Bihari” in terms of religious and nationalist affiliations though they are not necessarily as socio-economically challenged as the Bihari communities. Imams are embedded in both the fissures and commonalities that mark negotiations of religion and class, as well as other differences such as gender, age, location in society and as such, it is difficult to constrain their lives and subject positions within specific ethno-religious boundaries based on unified or homogenously constructed historical experiences. It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to explore the subjectivities of imams or that of other religious subjects at the grassroots level, especially in relation to development interventions and constructs. In sum, what is important for my analysis is that ethno-religious identities, mediated by class differences, remain in almost mythic proportions in the social imaginary, demonstrating the complex ways in which Bengali-Muslim identities are constructed in Bangladesh. In the next section, I focus on the politics of ethno-religious affiliations and community identities in modern Bangladesh.

4.12 Political exigencies in contemporary Bangladesh

Ethno-religious fault lines in Bangladesh are further accentuated by the activities of Islam-based political parties, and in particular the Jamaat-i-Islami. The Awami League spearheaded the movement that culminated in an independent Bangladesh rejecting religion, specifically Islam, as a basis for nationhood (Uddin, 2007; Ahmad, 2007). The first constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 upheld the principles of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as fundamental pillars of state policy (Hossain, 2004; Jahan, 2002; Anisuzzman, 2002). All forms of “communalism” were banned, as were all forms of political activity by religion-based parties. Together with the JI, several other political
parties, such as the Nizam-i-Islami, the Muslim League, and the Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam were also banned (Ahmad, 2007). On the face of it, and particularly from the dominant, Awami League perspective, religion-based politics and “communalism” were now successfully banished from the polity; Bangladesh could set off safely on a path of secularism, modernity and progress. However, these assumptions would soon be challenged.

The Awami League swept to power in the first parliamentary elections held in 1973 and its leader, the charismatic Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was hailed as “Bangabondhu” which translates literally as “friend of Bengal”, but he assumed the status of the Father of the Nation, rather than that of a friend. Mujib’s personal style of leadership was that of a political activist and a master orator, not as a statesman or administrator. His populist, highly centralized form of leadership—conducted often from his home with his wife and family participating, as I, personally, witnessed on one occasion—came at a tumultuous time for the nascent state. His popularity soon began to be put to the test.

There is a complex story here, one that I cannot go into in detail or depth, but basically, there were two major issues that confronted Bangladesh. First, there were several domestic constituencies and interest groups that had contributed to the independence movement. The Awami League had to appease, deal with and reward these groups, as well as those within its own party ranks. Notable amongst the non-Awami League groups was a powerful, diverse, widely represented left wing political movement involving labour unions, students, political parties (Maniruzzaman 1988/1980) and also sections of the armed forces (Lifschultz, 1979).

There were several interests group in the army, including one that identified with the leadership of Ziaur Rahman who had taken up arms against the Pakistani army in March 1971, in Chittagong, and then fled to India, coming back later to fight the Pakistani troops as a freedom fighter. As noted earlier, when the civil war began, Sheikh Mujib was arrested by the Pakistan army and flown to an unknown location in West Pakistan, where he remained until January 1972. Ziaur Rahman was the first Bangladeshi leader to declare an independent Bangladesh on Bangladeshi soil (Maniruzzaman 1988/1980).

Interestingly, the call made by Zia has been interpreted differently in subsequent years, primarily to gain legitimacy for political parties with particular ethno-religious
affiliations. One view claims that Zia’s call established the originary roots of his political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as the “true” representative of Bangladeshi identity. Zia's call claims legitimacy in temporal and spatial ways: it was the first to be made by any leader it is claimed, and it came from a location within Bangladesh—not from across the border in India, as was the case when leaders of the Awami League fled in March 1971 and declared independence, quite understandably, under the protective eye of their Indian benefactors. The Awami League initially insisted that Zia did not make a declaration at all; later the party began to cite Sheikh Mujib’s speech on March 7th in Ramna Maidan, when he called for total non-cooperation with Pakistan, as the “real” call for independence. Other suggestions state that Zia’s call affirmed the leadership of Mujib (Ludden, 2011) or that both leaders merit recognition for their separate yet valuable roles in the liberation of Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2002, pp. 327-328).

As far as the first government of Bangladesh was concerned, a second problem loomed large for Sheikh Mujib. The birth of Bangladesh had been heralded across the world as a triumph of democratic and secular ideals (Jahan, 2002), but the country faced challenges from the moment of its inception. The new nation was in an extremely precarious economic situation. The country’s infrastructure, poor as it had been in relation to West Pakistan, was destroyed during the civil war. A retreating Pakistan army had wreaked havoc in its path; and the Indian “liberators” were also controversially implicated in acts of thievery and plunder. A shortage of food grains threatened the country amid predictions of a dire famine (Butterfield, 1972). All in all, Bangladesh needed a sound administration within, and international support from without. International support eventually arrived and Bangladesh fell into a spiral of dependence on international aid that was difficult to break (see Sobhan, 1982). In sum, the early years were challenging in the extreme.

A major obstacle to external support was Pakistan’s close relationship with the United States while India, which had been vital in the eventual defeat of the Pakistan army in East Pakistan, was allied with the Soviet Union in an anti-Chinese power axis. It was at this time that in a meeting of the National Security Council chaired by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the incumbent USAID (then known as A.I.D.) representative, Maurice Williams, described Bangladesh as an “international basket case” (Anderson, 1972).
Kissinger apparently retorted: “It will not necessarily be our basket case” (Anderson, 1972, emphasis added). The basket case label served to haunt Bangladesh for decades afterwards.27

By 1974, matters became worse for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s government when an estimated 100,000 people perished in the worst famine in the country’s history (Maniruzzaman 1988/1980, p. 162; Ahmed, 1991/1983, pp. 245-254; also see Jahan, 2002). As noted earlier, Sheikh Mujib governed poorly, allowing both his own family as well as the party to become embroiled in “the politics of patronage” (Maniruzzaman 1988/1980, p. 162), and unable—for reasons that are not entirely unjustified—to break away from a close association with neighbouring India.

The Awami League and its leadership, including Sheikh Mujib himself, were seen to be “pro-Indian” right from 1949 when the party was established as an alternative to the elitist, centrist, Muslim nationalist party, the Muslim League. In fact, the party was initially known as the Awami Muslim League: the Urdu word “awami” meaning “of the people” that has remained to this day and “Muslim”, presumably following trends established by communal politics at the time, was dropped in 1955 (Anisuzzaman, 2002, p. 54). In the late 1960s, Pakistan’s military president, General Ayub Khan, had brought charges of sedition against Sheikh Mujib in a highly publicized trial that polarized Pakistan to a great extent, gained Mujib overwhelming popular support and led to riots and civil disobedience across East Pakistan. Mujib was accused of conspiring against Pakistan with Indian spies in a place called Agartala on the Bangladesh-Indian border. Public opinion in East Pakistan reacted violently against the Agartala Conspiracy Case as it was known, and the fallout of the public outrage was that Ayub Khan was deposed in a bloodless coup by another military general, Yahya Khan and the case against Mujib was withdrawn.

Whether the Awami League had conspired with Indian agents is not known or relevant here; my point is that a close relationship with India was inevitable. After breaking away from Pakistan, Mujib turned to India for assistance and support almost as a matter of course. Unfortunately, as pressures from various sides mounted, he became increasingly autocratic (Maniruzzamm, 1988, p. 164) raising a para-military force called the Rakhi Bahini with assistance from India, bringing in a draconian “Special Powers Act” to bypass the judicial system, banning a free media and eventually, through the Fourth
Amendment to the Constitution passed in January, 1975, he introduced a presidential form of government, with one-party rule.\textsuperscript{28}

Left wing parties and leftist groups within the army voiced their anger and frustration at the turn of events, accusing the Awami League of “selling out” to Indian hegemonic interests (Maniruzzamn, 1988, p.173; Lifschultz, 1979), and with allegations of corruption, extortion, nepotism and rape leveled at his close family, henchmen and Awami League members, Mujib’s popularity waned.

The government now faced a serious cash-flow problem, forcing Mujib to turn to the Muslim world for financial assistance. As well, Bangladesh needed to mend its fences with Pakistan. Mujib accepted a rapprochement with Pakistan as part of a major effort to solicit financial bailouts from the oil-rich Arab states.\textsuperscript{29} At the same time, he tried to appease Islamic constituencies within the country in order to bolster domestic support. The constitutional ban against religion-based parties remained, but Mujib was seen more openly to embrace Muslim symbols in terms of language, forms of address, and by providing support to specific Muslim interest groups. After a survey by the Education Commission in 1973 revealed that a majority of rural communities did not support a “secular” education for their children—which meant, in effect, the absence of all reference to religion, including Islam—the Awami League government introduced Islamic studies in government schools (Ahmed, 2009, p. 151). Mujib stated in public that he was proud to be a Muslim and that Bangladesh was the second biggest Muslim state in the world (Roy, 2001, cited in Ahmed, 2009; Kabir, 1990).

It was during this time that the Awami League government upgraded the relatively obscure, state-funded Islamic Academy into the Islamic Foundation. I discuss the details of the specific act that sanctioned the expansion in the next chapter, but the context in which this Islamic parastatal became strengthened and institutionalized are worth noting. In sum, Islam was deployed in instrumental ways during the Awami League government to garner financial aid and resources, and appease pro-Islamic interest groups both at home and abroad. The aim was to balance or offset the “secular” components of the Constitution and the Awami League, as well as the ruling party’s close ties with India. The Awami League’s secular stance, coupled with close links with India, were perceived as eroding Islam and Bangladeshi sovereignty; at the same time, interpretations of what is meant by
“secularism” varied and ranged from the erasure of Islamic symbols and language in the public domain and educational curricula.

4.13 Islamicization: the Zia and Ershad regimes

The government of Sheikh Mujib collapsed in a traumatic turn of events in August 1975 when Mujib and 17 members of his family were brutally assassinated inside their homes by a group of young army officers. The army officers, in an unusual move, did not directly grab power but rather facilitated a change of regime by installing a centrist civilian government with ties to the old Pakistani political establishment. The killings were followed by several months of instability, and the eventual emergence of General Ziaur Rahman as martial law administrator. Zia later introduced a limited form of civilian government with himself as president and governed until he was assassinated in 1981. His successor, another general, H. M Ershad, held power from 1981 to 1990 when he was unseated in a movement to restore democracy by all the major political parties.

Both Ziaur Rahman and Ershad depended for their popular support on a centrist Islamic-identified political base. Their foreign policies sought to balance the hegemonic influence of India in South Asia by establishing stronger ties with Islamic countries, including Pakistan (Ahmed, 1995). Ziaur Rahman is credited with laying the foundations of the first regional cooperation organization for South Asia, the South Asian Regional Cooperation Council (SAARC) that among other objectives, attempted to contain Indian hegemony by positioning India as one amongst several smaller nations.

In his internal policies, Zia brought in changes that removed the “secular” characteristics of the state and replaced these with symbols, language and institutions that were distinctly Islamic. The word “secularism” was dropped from the Constitution and replaced with the phrase “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” (Bangladesh Constitution, 1972, article 8; Hossain, 2004). Under Zia, Article 12 of the Constitution that outlined measures to implement secular objectives was completely deleted (Jahan, 1987 [1980] p. 201-226; Hossain, 2004). Zia also added the Qur’anic phrase Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Raheem, commonly used by Muslims to mark beginnings of any kind, at the start of the Constitution, before the Preamble. He withdrew the ban on religion-based
political parties and introduced public symbols of Islam such as the recitation of the Qur’an by the state-owned television and radio stations. Ziaur Rahman formed a right of centre political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and replaced the concept of Bengali nationalism with Bangladeshi nationalism in the Constitution, thus privileging the Islamic antecedents of the nation-state. The BNP set itself up as a bulwark against the expansionist interests of India and emphasized its commitment to safeguarding the country’s sovereignty (Ahmed, 1995).

Under Zia, the Islamic Foundation’s activities expanded considerably under a newly established department of religious affairs, later upgraded to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA). Ershad, who came to power after being indirectly associated with Zia’s assassination (a suspicion that was never proved), introduced measures that further entrenched Islam in the Constitution and forged close ties with the Islamic bloc in international affairs. Under Ershad, Islam became the state religion of Bangladesh and government support was increased and expanded to mosques, the madrasah system and Islamic institutions including the Islamic Foundation. Ironically, the Jamaat-i-Islami did not back Ershad’s regime and rebuffed his attempts to forge an alliance with the party (Kabir, 1990).

The community affiliations and politics of identity and interests between the two parties—one led by Sheikh Mujib and the other by Ziaur Rahman—functioned not just as two political parties in Bangladesh but also as representative of particular ethno-religious-political interest groups, with different approaches and interests in domestic and regional alliances, as well as in relation to modernization and national development. The Awami League established external links with Islamic countries and domestically tried to appease popular and specific interest groups by identifying its regime as Islamic; Zia and Ershad courted “petro-dollars” (Kabir, 1990) from the Arab states, while Bangladesh went into a deeper cycle of debt to international donors than before (Sobhan, 1982). Class stratification increased as a new class of bourgeoisie, emerging immediately after independence in the vacuum left by the large-scale migration of Pakistani business classes and entrepreneurs to West Pakistan, pressed for financial and economic measures to consolidate its influence (Kabir, 1990). The Awami League’s initial policies of socialism and secularism were weakened; Zia and Ershad launched privatization policies, opening
up an agriculture-based rural economy to the aggressive interventions of global
capitalism. A shift occurred in economic policies, from emphasis on social welfare and
redistribution to individualism, entrepreneurship and self-reliance (Feldman, 2003a).
Rural elites have been challenged as income redistribution fuelled by a global demand for
manufactured goods have attracted thousands rural women to export-oriented
manufacturing enclaves in the cities. Women’s economic autonomy increased, even as the
socio-economic status of elites in rural communities has been diminished. NGOs have emerged as new sites of donor funding and women’s activism and empowerment. We do not know specifically how imams have been impacted by these changes. It might be suggested, in a provisional way, that imams have not benefited as traditional forms of income generation in rural communities have been supplanted by new business elites, and as increasing numbers of rural women have moved to export oriented manufacturing centres in the cities.

From the perspective of ethno-religious politics, the Awami League has come to represent “secular” policies and alliances and close ties with India and her allies; while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party or BNP, represents linkages with Pakistan and Muslim countries. In domestic matters, the Awami League boasts both rural and urban support, while the BNP draws on older Muslim League affiliations and Islam-based political parties. In terms of gender and modernization, assumptions are made along similar lines, that is, with the BNP assumed to be more conservative towards women’s rights and modernity, and the Awami League being seen as more progressive and gender sensitive.

As noted earlier, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in 1975 and successive Bangladeshi military-led governments rescinded a fundamental pillar of the Constitution, namely secularism; eroded the interpretation of socialism to mean “economic and social justice” (Jahan, 2002, p. 5); declared Islam to be the state religion; and lifted the ban on religion-based political parties. Statements such as “absolute faith and trust in the Almighty Allah” were introduced in the Constitution as a fundamental pillar of state policy.

Several decades later, as I have been completing my dissertation, a majority Awami League government is re-writing the Constitution and reviving the principles enshrined in 1972 including that of secularism and Bangalee nationalism (Liton and Hasan, 2011; Liton, 2011). That said, the Awami League negotiates its vulnerability to secular domestic
interests and Indian regional ambitions, by reclaiming and reinforcing its Islamic credentials. A renewed interest in imams and support for increasing facilitation of male religious subjects can be surmised to be an underlying political necessity for the Awami League government. As well, since 9/11 in particular, Bangladeshi political life has been destabilized by recurring incidents of violence including bomb attacks specifically on Awami League gatherings; a marked increase in gang violence, kidnappings, targeting killings under the umbrella of Islamist nationalism; as well as violent impositions of state control by a quasi-military force called the Rapid Attack Battalion (RAB). At the same time, especially since 9/11, international development agencies are undertaking recurring, focused engagements with male Muslim imams with the objective, it appears, of bringing them into the ambit of political modernity and liberal democracy. Imams are positioned within and in relation to a range of complex and complicated interests and pressures in Bangladesh. These interests shape the national imaginary and influence the lives of Bangladeshi women and men in material ways.

In the next section I explain gender perspectives of Bengali-Muslim nationalism as a way of explaining how male Muslim imams are privileged in the national struggle for independence and Bengali-Muslim community identity.

4.14 A gender-blind “Imagined Community”

A significant limitation in studies on Bengali-Muslim identity is the virtual absence of women’s voices and gender perspectives (Roy, 2006; Sen, 1987, Ahmed, 1996/1981). That most studies of Bengali-Muslim nationalism take virtually no notice of gender is not surprising given that nationalism in general is a deeply gendered construct. If we take Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of the “imagined community” as a widely influential explanation of how nation-states came into existence, we find that Anderson left several critical questions pertaining to gender unresolved. Ruth Roach Pierson (2000) has sharply critiqued Anderson’s arguments to show, among other things, how he failed to recognise the deep, structural ways in which gender and nationality are imbricated in the construct of national identity; and how he ignored and subsumed links between racism/imperialism and nationalism. By assuming race and gender to be separate, stable categories, Anderson
glossed over the often violent ways in which racism under imperial regimes “annexed” nationalism for its own vested aims (Mosse, 1978, cited by Pierson, 2000, p. 42). The result has been a largely optimistic view that those who were excluded from the national community—e.g., women and racial/ethnic/linguistic minorities—would eventually and easily be integrated into it.\textsuperscript{32}

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (1989, cited by Pierson, 2000, p. 45-46) make an interesting distinction between “nation” and “state”. These authors suggest that nation is an entity, which communities imagine, and the state is that which they seek to acquire as a means of gaining power. The “nation-state” construct has two distinct aspects, each of which can operate in a particular way to designate separate levels of inclusion and exclusion (Pierson, 2000, p. 45-46). The distinctions enable us to map the position of women and marginalized “others” within the nation-state. In the European context, we find several examples of women being simultaneously excluded from the political arena of the state but being included in the patriarchal nation’s imagination, placed in properly subservient, or domesticated, female roles (Pierson, 2000).

The Bangladesh example is striking in its similarly to the European example above. Shelley Feldman (2003) and Amena Mohsin (2004) provide thoughtful analyses of the construct of a gendered and hegemonic Bangladeshi state and its impact on women and ethnic and linguistic minorities in particular. Feldman’s discussion explores the forced migration of an estimated five million Hindu subjects from East Pakistan into India during and after the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 through what she calls a “lens of displacement” (p. 111). Her discussion highlights the experiences of dislocation, their meanings and consequences on Hindu migrants as these played out both in their marginalization as the “other” in a newly Muslim East Pakistan, as well as in their experiences of settlement in neighbouring Hindu West Bengal in India. Overlaying these experiences are critical questions of nation-building and national identity, and the role of the post-colonial state in the displacements and dislocations that occur when border and boundaries are forcefully stabilized.

Mohsin (2004) demonstrates how since its inception, the Bangladeshi state has assumed the role of patriarch, and how a normative view of gender and Bengali ethnic dominance is built into the fabric of its nationalist discourse. She provides examples from
the Liberation War, when ordinary Bangladeshi women fought, died, were raped and killed in the thousands, but were barely acknowledged once the war ended. Only two women were recognized, fleetingly, as shaheed, a term bestowed liberally on Bengali-Muslim men who died in the Liberation War and before that, in struggles against oppressive state and military forces. According to Mohsin (2004), the women shaheed are Saleena Parveen a journalist and Meherunessa, a poet (Fn. 1, p. 63). Elsewhere we learn of two women, Taramon Bibi and Sitara Begum, who have been formally recognized as freedom fighters (Amin, et al., n.d) but none who have been given the title of shaheed.

The term shaheed is awarded posthumously and derives from the Islamic concept of jihad. A shaheed is a Muslim who has died in the cause of the lesser jihad (the greater jihad is a struggle of personal dimensions and does not require the giving up of life). Shaheed thus represents a specific Muslim conceptualization of eternal life for believers if death comes as a consequence of a struggle in the cause of defending family, community, religion, country, or against several forms of oppression and injustice.

I find it noteworthy that the concept of shaheed has been seamlessly appropriated by the Bengali-Muslim political, social and cultural imagination, including in particular as a secular, if gendered symbol of patriotism. As far as I can assess, the concept entered the Bengali-Muslim imagination in the early 1950s during riots between student activists and a repressive Pakistani police force. The riots were in large part to protest the imposition of Urdu and the erosion of Bangla as a state language in Pakistan. There were violent uprisings that eventually led to a concerted effort soon to be defined as the Language Movement, which formed the cultural and linguistic basis for the creation of Bangladesh. The death of four student activists and the public observance of their death led initially to the erection of a small monument in Dhaka. This monument, called the “Shaheed Minar” (minar is a Persian-Arabic word meaning column or pillar), has since become a national monument. In the dying years of the Pakistan era it was a rallying point for defiant Bengali-Muslim nationalists struggling against the brutality of Pakistani authority. After the founding of Bangladesh, it has attained the stature of a sacred national symbol.

Women are only marginally part of this symbol, as adornment and “allegorizations” (Pierson, 2000, p. 44) of the Bengali ethnic nation. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of women were raped by Pakistani forces in the nine months of occupation in
1971; and after Bangladesh came into existence the women were given the title of Birangana, which means female warrior in Bangla, by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The title honoured the women only in theory; in practice it served to marginalize and mark them as tainted, exposing them to increasing social ostracism. There is a great silence regarding the victims of rape in official Bangladeshi discussions and deconstructions of the Liberation War. Little is known about the children of rape in particular. There are some reports that large-scale abortions took place after the war and some evidence of adoptions abroad. But virtually all sections of society, including women activists and feminists, failed to draw attention to the plight of the raped women and their children or fight for their rights. The national attitude is summed up best by comments attributed to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as follows:

Send the children, who have no identity of their father, abroad. Let the children of human beings grow up like proper humans. Besides I do not want to keep that polluted blood in this country. (Ibrahim, 1994, p. 19, cited by Mohsin, 2004, p. 45)

Mohsin points out that by bestowing the title of Birangana on the raped woman, the Bangladesh state further appropriated for itself the space and power of patriarch. Similar suggestions are found in other explorations, for instance, in Kabeer, (1991), and Chowdhury, (2008), the latter examining how women leaders in politics in Bangladesh have perpetuated patriarchal and gendered power relations.

4.15 Conclusion

My overall aim in this chapter has been to understand how the construct of the Imam Discourse is located in a particular terrain, namely Bangladesh; or, to put it another way, to ask what are the contingencies that this terrain holds or does not hold that facilitate these specific discursive elements? My aim has been to both trace and interrogate the “groupings that history suggests” (Foucault, 1972/1969, Chapter 1, paragraph 8) without a dichotomous reading of history. Most discussions of identity, culture or religion in Bangladesh inevitably grapple with how Muslim Bengali subjectivity might reconcile
itself between two opposing forces—an indigenous “Bengali-ness” that stems predominantly from a linguistic heritage, and a constructed, alien and instrumental Muslim-ness, originating in a non-Bengali Islamic tradition. What this implies is that people are Bengali, but they become Muslim. This is a problematic way of understanding identity, not only because such an approach overlooks the fluidity of identities in the contemporary era, but also because the lessons of history point us towards a different direction.

In this chapter I suggest that it is important to understand Bengali-Muslim subject positions as heterogeneous, overlapping, fluid and complex. I trace historically specific discursive ruptures and formations of Islam and Bengali ethnicity. These complex relations of “apparent familiarity” (Foucault, 1972, Chapter 1, paragraph 8) connect to the origins and expressions of different strains of Islam—such as Sufi or Wahhabi—as both external and alien to Bengal, as well as intrinsic and embedded within the same terrain; they are mediated at specific moments and specific ways by class, linguistic, ethnic and gender affiliations; and, most significantly, they are shaped and informed by the politics and power relations of post-colonial nation-states and the particularities of nation-building and national development. I show in this chapter that Bengali-Muslim subjects are continually being formulated in new ways or, as Sonia Amin with reference to the identity formations of the modern Bengali gentle-woman in colonial Bengal has perceptively stated, “the problematic of the Bengali-Muslim identity [was] born and resolved simultaneously, as it was to be reborn and resolved time and again” (1996, p. 21).

How do these formations and their genealogies matter to the Imam Discourse? The particularities of the Bangladeshi terrain hold complicated ethno-religious and nationalist discourses pertaining to Bengali-Muslim identities within which the Imam Discourse is being constituted. It will become clear in the next chapter that imams are being discursively constituted as “leaders of influence” with authority to straddle both religious and secular domains; they are being constructed within gendered entanglements comprising imams, development donors and the state, that are constituted also by these complicated discourses. Imams are being “modernized” in specific ways by an apparatus that, among other things, is negotiating the intricacies and complexities of a Bangladeshi
terrain, the depth and significance of which I have tried to make evident in the foregoing discussion.

1 Uddin (2006) explains “visions of community” as a textured way of explaining “identity” (p. xvii). She does not stress the politics of power and authority that vest community identity with particular meanings and lead to particular consequences in Bangladesh.
2 Ashis Nandy (1998) suggests religious tolerance as a more appropriate phrase to use in the context of India and he also suggests the word samanvaya which is a Sanskrit word meaning a form of tolerance that is more open to difference and diversity than mere tolerance (see Nandy, 1998, p. 324, fn 3; also see Galantar, 1998).
3 For example, there is no one-to-one relationship between culture and ethnicity; one can have cultural variation without ethnic boundaries as between English middle class and English working class; or deep ethnic differences without cultural differences as in Bosnia, (Eriksen, 2001).
4 I refer to the “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnian Muslims in post communist Yugoslavia; and increasing levels of scrutiny and policing of Muslims in a post 9/11 scenario in the North.
6 Later displaced by Pakistan; in the 1980s it was also the second largest Muslim ethnic population in the world, after the Arabs (Eaton,1993 p. xxii). In the twenty-first century Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim nation after Indonesia and Pakistan.
7 Raunaq Jahan (2002) suggests that “the sudden and massive introduction of violence and arms on a society hitherto used to non-violent forms of resistance created a deep imprint on all social and political institutions and defined the course of the country’s political development for the next few decades” (p. 4).
8 Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP)
9 Ayesha Jalal’s work, Jinnah, the Sole Spokesman, suggests that Muslim nationalism was a construct that promised specific returns for different interests including in particular the personal ambitions of Muslim League leader and Pakistan’s first governor general Mohammad Ali jinnah. Jinnah apparently did not really visualise Pakistan as a separate nation state at all, but he pushed for it as a gamble that would force the hand of the British in such a way as to give him a concrete political constituency within a Hindu majority India. Hamza Alavi has also suggested that Islam was not the proverbial glue that held the nation together but that: “the Pakistan movement was a movement of Muslims rather than Islam” (1988, p. 67, cited in Naher, 2005 p. 36). He stresses the importance of class interests over that of Islam and other ideologies. I recall conversations with my grandfather who was a political associate of Jinnah that when it happened, the actuality of Pakistan astonished everyone including Jinnah himself. I grew up hearing tales about how unprepared bureaucrats and politicians scrambled to find their feet in the two wings of Pakistan.
10 Percival Spear, (1967/1958), who edited & updated The Oxford History of India by the late Vincent A Smith first written in 1919, writes: “The conquest so easily effected was final. Bengal never escaped from the rule of Muslims for any considerable time until they were superseded in the eighteenth century by the British” (italics added)
11 I was recently informed by a professor at a university in Vancouver that the reason Islam is not included in a course offered by the university on “Religions of India” is because
it is not Indian. Popular culture in India especially Indian national cinema, also known as Bollywood, conveys a distinct sense of an alien Islam and Muslim subjects (Hirji, 2008) and a north Indian Brahmin, non-Muslim identity as the “true” identity of India (see Virdi, 2003).

I use the term “Hindu” advisedly because it, too, was a construct of British colonial rule. Going into this in detail is outside the scope of my dissertation but see Chatterjee (1993), p. 95.

Puthi literally means manuscript or book but in this context it refers to tracts written in a common, popular, Islamized Bengali, often termed Mussalmani, as opposed to chaste or literary and thus more ‘Hindu” Bengali. According to Banu, (1992), although the word refers to all ancient and medieval Bengali works, in the 19th century the term became associated with “a class of literature created by semi-literate Muslims in a mixture of Bengali, Arabic, Persian and Urdu” (fn 55 p. 53).

Various explanations have been offered to trace the origins of Sufi. Some commentators say it comes from “suf”, the word for wool and refers to the simple garments worn by ascetics (Schimmel, 1992, p. 101). Others say it refers to the growing number of ascetics and homeless Muslims who began to reside near the main mosque in early Arabia and were called “ahl as suffah”, the people of the bench (Ramadan, 2007, p. 114).

The word for pen (kolom) and paper (kagoj) in Bengali are Persian-Arabic (Eaton, 1993, p. 309).

She references the Qur’an to suggest that the Islamic text has a particular agential power and that it advocates a proselytizing militancy.

For instance, having constructed the impression of an “alien aristocracy” in the thirteenth century, Sen has to explain how a powerful Hindu aristocracy flourished at the same time in Bengal. He explains away the contradiction, in a sense, by suggesting that the Muslim rulers (who presumably allowed the Hindu aristocracy to retain its elite status) acted “paradoxically” (1987, p. 9), that is, they allowed Hindu elites to be strong in order to consolidate Muslim control over the region. I am not suggesting that Muslim rulers’ self-interest did not play a part in the privileges accorded to Hindu upper classes in Bengal. But I am struck by the agency accorded to Islam and in contrast, the passive status given to Hindu subjects and interests. I am also struck by the persistence with which Islam is distanced from Indian/Bengali indigeneity.

My understanding stems from personal communications from my grandparents, now deceased, whose parents’ generation witnessed/implemented these changes. Muslim attire in the upper classes was already distinct to some extent; these changes now affected the masses. Eventually, many markers of identity were socially constructed and more rigidly adhered to, including different connotations for water, bathing, prayer; garments and attire; personal embellishments denoting marital status. These added to differences already existing in relation to religious and cultural practices, personal laws of inheritance, divorce, marriage and dietary rules between Muslims and Hindus in Bengal.

Joarder (1990) referenced earlier (p. 95) acknowledges variations in the life-practices of ulema and notes that like “the rootless members of the Muslim aristocracy” (p. 161), the ulema (including imams) are persistent in their hostility towards “local culture in all its manifestations—language, literature and the various art-forms” (p. 161).
Maniruzzaman, 1988/1980, notes that student involvement in Bangladeshi politics has a long history. Apparently students were enticed to become involved in the earliest political movements by the Muslim League in India because of an absence of middle class Muslims or bourgeoisie comparable to that available to the Congress Party for instance. The latter drew its numerical strength from a Hindu middle class as well as from working classes. The entry of students into the political arena was expedient in the early 20th century as a way of boosting the Muslim League’s numerical strength. I was told by my uncle, who was a student in the early 1940s, that he secretly joined the Muslim League student wing but when my grandfather found out, he was extremely disturbed. My grandfather was a political leader and what I surmise from his surprise is that involving youth in politics was not the norm at that time.

I, myself, am witness to a woman’s body being unceremoniously dumped into a crude hole in the earth just outside our home in Dhaka, in summer 1971. The mutilated body was found when a neighbourhood farmer tried to drive a small stake into the ground to tether his cow on the grassy patch outside our home. Family members buried the woman unceremoniously in a hastily dug grave in fear of the Pakistan army’s wrath if we were discovered harbouring her. I can only surmise that the woman was raped and killed by the army. Kabeer is citing from Tariq Ali’s 1983 book, Can Pakistan Survive? The Death of a State, Middlesex, Penguin Books, p. 91. See also [http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/?page_id=20](http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/?page_id=20)

Members of the armed forces who were ethnic Bangalee were either interned in camps in West Pakistan or forced to flee mainly to neighbouring India where they joined the Mukti Bahini, Bangladeshi Freedom Fighters, trained and armed by the Indian army.

According to Maniruzzaman 1988/1980, the other parties were not as effective as the JI: the Muslim League had broken into factions in the 1960s while the Nizam-i-Islam, the Jamiat-i-Ulema-e-Pakistan found their support mainly from ultra orthodox sections and madrasah students. The JI was highly efficiently organized on a pattern common to that followed by revolutionary totalitarian organizations, with concentric circles of cells and stringent membership procedures that included full ideological immersion in the philosophy of the JI (p. 31-33; p. 192)

Farzana, 2008; and from my experiences of growing up in East Pakistan.

Unlike any other surrendering army, Pakistani troops were told to carry arms until they were “safe” inside the Dhaka military cantonment in Kurmitola. On December 16th, 1971, seven months pregnant, I remember running jubilantly through what was then known as Mymensingh Road (now Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue), taunting and jeering at thousands of Pakistan soldiers who were walking, single file and carrying rifles with their bayonets unsheathed, towards the cantonment in Dhaka.

The highest number was 170,000 Biharis repatriated to Pakistan from 1973 to 1974, under the supervision of the Red Cross (Farzana, 2002, p. 13)

I recall a sense of despair and frustration when we, young people who were euphoric after the liberation of Bangladesh heard about Kissinger’s disparaging remark; the description haunted Bangladesh’s national imaginary for many decades.

The new party was called the Bangladesh Awami Krishak Sramik League or BAKSAL. My husband who worked for the Bangladesh Tobacco Company at the time in 1974-75 was informed with other colleagues that they would have to become party members when the
new law took effect. Mujib was assassinated on August 15th, 1975, before the BAKSAL law came into effect.

29 Mujib went to Lahore in 1974 for a meeting of the IOC, the umbrella organisation for Islamic countries. He was received as a hero by Mu’ammar Gaddafi who brokered a rapprochement with Pakistan’s leader Z A Bhutto.

30 “Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim” means In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

31 Ahmed in particular, barely recognizes the presence of Bengali-Muslim women. He cites an autobiography called From Purdah to Parliament by Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah as an example of a turn of the century, Urdu-speaking, elite family’s lifestyle. Ahmed does not comment on the remarkable personal story of the author or mention her work. Begum Ikramullah’s brother, Hasan Shaheed Suhrawardy, was the founder and leader of the Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s mentor for many years. Suhrawardy himself, like Ikramullah, was from the elite Urdu-speaking Muslim social class.

32 This echoes Asad’s (2003) critique of the claim made by Charles Taylor that everyone in liberal democracies has “equal access” to the nation.

33 My paternal aunt, Tahera Kabir, was active in the women’s movement in Pakistan and later in Bangladesh. Her husband a retired senior police officer spearheaded an aggressive family planning initiative in the 1960s in East Pakistan and later in Bangladesh. In the months following Bangladesh’s independence, she told me that Bengali women raped by Pakistani soldiers were undergoing abortions in large numbers at specially set up medical “campaigns” arranged by various international aid agencies in cooperation with the new Bangladeshi government.
Chapter: The Imam Discourse in Bangladesh

5.1 Introduction: Turning to imams

Yes, earlier there were other important people (in rural areas). But the situation has changed in the last few years, maybe since 9/11. Now people are turning to imams. (USAID, 2006, interview)

In the previous chapter I mapped some of the complex ethno-religious issues and experiences that mark the terrain in which the Imam Discourse is being constituted. These show, among other things, that the formation of religious subjects in Bangladesh has been mediated by the experiences and politics of community identities and ethno-religious nationalisms. In this chapter I demonstrate how a newly constituted discourse emerges in Bangladesh and how geopolitical and development interests come together to produce imams as religious leaders. In my discussion I show that rather than existing in ahistorical ways as fixed “religious leaders”, it is through the processes and practices of the development agencies themselves that imams are discursively produced as particular authority figures and “Leaders of Influence”. These processes and associated practices may be called the Imam Discourse; that is, an interconnected web of rules, activities, procedures, regulations and concepts within which thousands of male imams are being (trans)formed and discursively constituted as subjects of development in Bangladesh.

The discourse constitutes imams in very specific ways: as potentially radical male Muslim subjects; as socio-economically challenged members of their communities who exist outside the contours of modernity and secularism; as endowed with authority and influence in society; and as a newly discovered, uniquely positioned national development resource in Bangladesh. Gender issues are given limited recognition; on the whole, a patriarchal construct of male imams as normative leaders in Muslims society is upheld and reinforced, though there are nodes of gendered resistance and difference against which the construct is delineated.

The discourse suggests two main aims: first, that imams can be used in instrumental ways in order to attain specific developmental objectives, and second, that
imams need to be exposed to the positive development interventions being undertaken by the international agencies that are engaging with imams in Bangladesh. The aims of the latter activity include demonstrating in particular to imams how American funds and resources are helping national development objectives. Thus, while discursive formations typically show no origin or intentionality, in the postcolonial context of Bangladesh the imam discourse may be linked to the exigencies of geopolitical power and state interests.

An underlying objective in the reconstitution of imams appears to be the prevention of potential threats to Western, specifically American, domestic and geopolitical interests by Muslim radical subjects. Exposing imams to the good works that American funding, resources and expertise are doing can, it is hoped, construct more amenable imams. These goals are thought provoking because development policy and policymakers hold up Bangladesh as an exemplary “moderate” Muslim country with no visible involvement in acts of Islamic radicalism against American or Western interests. This begs the question as to why these specific discursive entanglements with imams are being constituted here. What are the conditions under which the Imam Discourse is being facilitated in Bangladesh? I explore this and other questions below.

In this chapter, I provide a brief account of what or who is involved in the Imam Discourse. I then describe what we know about imams in Bangladesh. I trace earlier entanglements between imams and international development institutions in Bangladesh; explain how the present “moment” in the reconstitution of imams emerges; how geopolitical and development interests coalesce; and how interconnected circuits of development expertise and authority at global, national and local levels, including through a parastatal organization, facilitate the discourse. I next focus on the “making of imams” in the discourse. Here I unpack the core concepts that are deployed in the reconstitution of imams and outline the disjuncture between these new subject formations and the situatedness of imams in their everyday lives. I also note in brief the gender aspects of the Imam Discourse, a topic that I address in more detail in the next chapter. I conclude this chapter with analyses of locally mediated networks and funding ties that link development expertise, the state and US foreign policy interests in the facilitation of this discourse.

I must note that my aims here—and in this dissertation—are not to provide a definitive or “objective” account of “Imams in Bangladesh”. My discussion on imams is only
one particular and partial assessment, based on research undertaken for this dissertation. I am not suggesting that imams are inauthentic, or false claimants to religious identity; rather that a particular mode of being an imam is constructed, circulated and enacted by the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh, and is related to new imperatives and objectives of development which include the building of “moderate” Muslim subjects.

5.2 The main actors

In my fieldwork I identified three international development institutions that have specific training programs for imams in Bangladesh on a regular basis. The agencies are: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and its partner, The Asia Foundation, (TAF), a non-profit US-based NGO that focuses on the Asia-Pacific region; and a third agency, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). USAID and The Asia Foundation work together, the former defining policy and providing funding, and the latter being responsible for implementing an Imam Training Program. A third organization, the state-owned and autonomously managed Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh, is the conduit through which these development agencies undertake their respective imam training activities. I will explain the role of the Foundation in more detail later in this chapter. Essentially, it is the sole government body for the supervision and regulation of hundreds of thousands of imams in Bangladesh.

The USAID-TAF’s program has trained more than 30,000 religious leaders in Bangladesh from 2004 to 2009. The initiative began relatively modestly, as an “Imam Orientation Program” which was part of a pilot project called the “Bangladesh Leaders Outreach Initiative” (“Bangladesh Leaders Outreach Initiative” n.d.). From 2004 to 2006, more than 5,000 male imams were given three-day training courses consisting of workshops and field trips to USAID partner programs, followed in many cases by refresher courses (USAID interview; TAF interview; Rashid, 2004). From 2006 onwards, the program was expanded to induct 20,000 trainees, comprised for the most part of male Muslim imams, but also including, at least officially, a “more diverse group of respected community leaders” (“Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Program” n.d.), from “all religious faiths and a variety of secular fields” (“Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Program” n.d.). As
well, as of December 2009, an additional 12,000 “Leaders of Influence” from nine different groups completed a combined total of 160 orientation sessions (“Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Program” n.d.). I have given more details of the program in Appendix E.

There were no women in the pilot project (Islamic Foundation; USAID; TAF; interview). Since the renamed “Leaders of Influence” (LOI) program has started, participants have been divided into two groups, religious and secular. The proportion and distribution of women in these groups has been negligible. No Muslim women religious leaders have participated and amongst 94 “secular” women leaders, 31 have turned out to be men (USAID Mission, 2011, p. 15).²

The UNFPA’s imam initiative is older than that of USAID-TAF and boasts larger numbers. The agency launched a “nationwide” (Success Stories, 2005, p. 10) training program in 1999. It was called “Involvement of Religious Leaders in Human Resource Development” and its implementation was carried out with the help of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), as well as the Islamic Foundation (Success Stories, 2005, p. 10-11). Starting in 1999, up until 2006, approximately 40,000 male imams have undergone training under the aegis of the UNFPA and the program continues to expand (interview UNFPA; Success Stories, 2005). Here there is no demarcation between “religious” and “secular” subjects and women are not identified as participants. There is evidence of women religious subjects participating in a few meetings of imams but as observers, not as full participants (Islamic Foundation, interview).

The Islamic Foundation was officially constituted by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) in 1975 (Act, 1975). The original institution was conceived in the late 1950s (Rashid, 2004). The Islamic Academy as it was called at the time, was a little-known department within a large state-funded project called the Baitul Mukarram Masjid Complex in central Dhaka (“Baitul Mukarram Society”). After Bangladesh’s independence, the Academy was briefly abolished (Husain, 1990, p. 142). In 1975, a move to “upgrade” the project into an autonomous or quasi-governmental body came about when the new leader of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, turned to the oil rich nations of the Islamic Organization Countries to garner funds from (Jahan, 2002; Feldman, 1991). Mujib also faced internal political pressures and it was against this backdrop, in a bid to prove his Islamic credentials (Feldman, 2001) that he sanctioned funds to establish the Islamic
Foundation. Later, under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, the Islamic Foundation launched an “Imam Training Program”. The Imam Training Academy was set up “on an experimental basis” (Rashid, 2004, p. 122) in 1979-1980 by the Government of Bangladesh as part of a two-year development plan (Rashid, 2004, p. 122). Under Ershad’s government, from 1981 to 1990, the Foundation was strengthened with more resources and funding, as were mosques and the madrasah system.

Before I trace the ways in which the Imam Discourse has emerged, I want to note what is mean by an imam; and how and where imams are located both in a wider, Muslim context, and specifically in Bangladesh.

5.3 Who are imams?

He said: “I will make thee

The word imam has multiple “connotations” (Aslan, 2006, p. 181) originating, for the most part, from the body of foundational Islamic text, the Qur’an, and for Shi’ia Muslims in particular, also from Islamic political history. If we approach imams as constructs in the Muslim world generally—assuming for a moment that there is a stable canvas that we can call the “Muslim world”—we find that an imam represents several quasi-formal and formal titles, some of which are interchangeable and overlap, while others are quite distinct. The normative understanding of imams as male is linked to customary practices, and also to connotations based on foundational textual sources including the Qur’an and Hadith. In sum, however, and for the purposes of my study in particular, the most widely understood understanding of imams in Sunni Hanafi Muslim societies in general and Bangladesh in particular is as leaders of Muslim canonical prayer congregations.

That said, it is important to point out that imams are highly fluid and unstable subjects. This is so in part because of the particular ways in which Muslim doctrine and tradition are disseminated and practised, and in part because of the nature of canonical prayers. Islamic religious observations emanate from doctrinal and traditional sources as well as processes and practices that are highly diverse and difficult to map in a general
way, as well as in the context of Bangladesh. Sunni Islam does not have an institutional body that regulates and controls religiosity; and imams are not equivalent to clergy, priests, monks, pastors or preachers, as these are understood in Anglo-Christian and other religious traditions. Even within a largely Muslim context in Bangladesh, imams are slippery in the sense that they are often subsumed within other Muslim subject formations, particularly under the rubric ulema, which means a learned person or scholar (Joarder, 1990). In the previous chapter, as we traversed different perspectives and political movements pertaining in particular to religious and ethnic tensions and interactions in Bangladesh, it was impossible to identify a specific class or group called imams.

Evidence from my fieldwork denotes that there is frequent slippage between an imam and mullah, the latter being used to denote either a religious subject with little scholarly knowledge and dubious intentions, or a Muslim scholar with a particularly conservative, radical and fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. In Bangladesh, mullah is often substituted with moulubaadi (fundamentalist). There are instances when the foregoing titles overlap, that is, an imam is also a mullah and a moulubaadi, and vice versa (Abed, interview; Anam, interview; DFID, interview). But there are other instances when there is a distinct difference, as this comment from Khushi Kabir shows:

The way I remember it, until recently, the imam of the masjid was not a power factor in a village, the imam of the masjid was important for very specific social and religious reasons—deaths, marriages, births, milad things like that. The imam was not a power or a influence—the mullah yes, but not the imam. (Khushi Kabir, 2006, interview)

Other titles that are sometimes collapsed with imams include maulvi (religious teacher or scholar), hujoor (a respected person), ustaad (teacher), pir (spiritual guide), qadi (legal clerk), mufti (religious scholar with authority to pronounce a considered legal opinion or fatwa), wa’iz (itinerant preacher). There are commonalities between these words, but there are also critical differences.

A significant aspect of the job description, as it were, of imams lies in the canonical prayers, known as sal’at in Arabic and nomaj in Bangla. These are not prayers in the ordinary sense of the word, for instance, as supplication—the word for which is dua—nor
entirely similar to services conducted in other religious traditions. The way in which Muslim canonical prayers are practised—and have been since at least the eighth century C.E.⁸—appears to outsiders to be hidebound by ritual (Hawting, 2006). There is a formalised set of acts that are undertaken at five specific times of a day; and although each mandatory prayer is different from the other, it also has similar components.⁹ There are minor variations between Shi’ia and Sunni practices with regard to the time of the prayers and supplications, but other than these exceptions, all Muslims¹⁰ recognise (and practise, when they choose to do so) highly similar canonical prayers, five times in a day.

None of the regular five daily canonical prayers need to be performed in a group, nor legitimized, sanctioned, or conducted by a church or religious body, or by its representative. An imam who leads the regular, canonical prayers does not perform any sacerdotal functions as in other religious systems (Arkoun, 1989, p. 110, cited in Hours, 1991, p. 143), nor needs to be a scholar of the Qur’an or a religious official as such, though many scholars and religious officials are also imams. In its simplest sense, being an imam can also be a temporary act that lasts for the duration of a specific congregational prayer.

There is one exception to the daily canonical prayers: the Juma’a or Friday congregational prayer entails the delivery by an imam of a khutba or “sermon” before the shorter than normal zuhr (mid-day) canonical prayers. In Bangladesh, the male imam who leads the Juma’a sal’at and also delivers the khutba is supposed to be more qualified—in terms of knowledge of the Qur’an, Hadith and Sunnah—than one who leads the five daily prayers. The former is called a khatib and the latter a pesh imam. In rural areas such distinctions are often eroded and the same imam officiates in both circumstances. Nevertheless, the imam who delivers the khutba is not equipped or expected to “bless” the congregation or mediate between believer and Creator.

There are certain distinctions pertaining to women’s role in congregational worship in Bangladesh that are worth noting briefly.¹¹ Women in Bangladesh, and in South Asia generally, do not participate in congregational prayers in mosques or other public assembly areas, as a matter of course. The congregations or constituencies that imams have interactions with and access to are thus overwhelmingly male. The Qur’an’s directive to establish “regular prayers”¹² is incumbent on all Muslims, women and men. But women do not attend congregational prayers with men in mosques or other public places as a
matter of course in Bangladesh. They pray individually for the most part in Bangladesh though of late, there are indications that women’s congregational nomaj is happening in select mosques. During my fieldwork I learned that a large mosque in Mohakhali, a suburb of Dhaka, was running out of space for women during the late night prayers called taravih held during the month of Ramadan. The women, I was told, were middle and upper class. I focus on the gender aspects of the Imam Discourse in the next chapter, and thus I will note here that it is possible for women to lead female only congregations, and also perform the functions of an “imam” without being formally inducted into that position.\textsuperscript{13} There is, in fact, emerging evidence of Muslim women spiritual leaders Bangladesh, as I will explain more in Chapter 6. Bangladeshi customary practices in relation to public congregational prayer for women differ from other Muslim societies, especially in West Asia, where mosque-based worship and leadership by women imams—albeit for female only congregations—is more common (see Maher, B. & Tiny Leaps Production, 2009\textsuperscript{14}).

In sum, imams are not easy to categorize into a professional class or community. The fluid nature of imams stems from the ways in which their primary role is structured, and the manner in which Muslim practices and processes are organized and regulated. Given these characteristics, two questions come to mind: How then does the emerging Imam Discourse identify and discursively incorporate imams as religious subjects; and how do imams emerge as objects and subjects of the discourse in Bangladesh? I explore these issues below.

5.4 An emerging discourse

The discourse of Muslim imams in international development is a “specific type of discourse...a specific form of extortion of truth, appearing historically” (Foucault, 1980[1978], p. 97), at a particular time and space in Bangladesh. Engagements between development organizations and imams are not new in Bangladesh. My evidence shows that interactions took place in the mid 1950s in the era of the green revolution in Comilla, a rural town in southeastern Bangladesh. Akhtar Hameed Khan, a giant in cooperative farming and founder of the Bangladesh Academy of Rural Development (BARD),\textsuperscript{15} approached imams to talk in their Friday khutba about the usefulness of new seed
varieties that local farmers were not keen on adopting (Farida Akhter, interview). Using imams was apparently Khan's own idea and not inspired by development donors or Bangladesh government officials (Farida Akhter, interview; Yousaf, 2011). I did not examine the Comilla project in Bangladesh in my fieldwork and thus do not know if imams are involved in the same way now. Certainly, there is no recognition of Khan’s engagement with imams amongst policymakers at USAID-TAF and UNFPA, nor in accounts pertaining to Khan’s later work in Indonesia in the early 1970s and in Pakistan in the 1980s.16 The way I understand the Comilla example is that it was a personal initiative that may have sown the germ of the idea of imams as a development resource, possibly amongst imams themselves in those locations, at BARD, other development actors including the state, NGOs and international development agencies.

A more significant intervention and a forerunner of the Imam Discourse is a family planning program that was implemented in various phases from the 1960s onwards. As I have discussed in Chapter 3, from the 1950s onwards a new population control policy was formulated for the South by a convergence of international aid agencies, governments and private interest groups in the North. A powerful lobby of American private foundations and professional demographers, whose sole concern was how to curb population growth in the South, propelled this policy in the South. The lobby persuaded the American government to throw its weight behind the policy, but because government involvement was problematic, funds were channelled through USAID and a new multilateral, UNFPA, that was set up with this specific purpose in mind (Grimes, 1998).

Bangladesh soon felt the effects of the new policy. The area (East Pakistan) was densely populated and had a fertility rate of 6.3, one of the highest in the world (Mitra et al., 1997, p. 31, cited in UNFPA & IPPF Evaluation, 2003). A small, privately established family planning program (Larson & Mitra, 1992; Akhter, 2005) was augmented by government involvement after pressure from USAID, UNFPA and other agencies, in the 1960s. Government involvement did not achieve much. In the mid 1970s, military ruler Zia and after him, in the mid 1980s, Ershad came to power. Pressure from donor agencies intensified and a cash-strapped Ershad launched an innovative family planning program (Caldwell et al., 1999; Hartmann, 1995). Thousands of rural women were trained to provide contraceptive services to rural women in the privacy and confidentiality of their
homes (Larson & Mitra, 1992). Sterilization was made freely available and promoted by offering cash and in kind incentives to women (Hartmann, 1995). Most of the funds for these incentives came from USAID, masked as miscellaneous expenses to prevent a backlash from evangelical constituencies at home (Hartmann, 1995). At the same time, domestic organizations such as the Family Planning Association of Bangladesh (FPAB) began to work with imams to bolster the government’s initiative. As far as my evidence shows, UNFPA does not acknowledge that its imam initiative, which began in the mid 1990s, emerged from these early family planning incentives.

Bangladesh’s fertility rate began to drop substantively in the 1980s, coming down to 3.3 in the mid 1990s (Caldwell & Barkat-e-Khuda, 2000). What surprises scholars and practitioners alike—and has launched a debate that continues even now—is how the drop was achieved. Poverty levels remain high, and women’s roles are still constrained by dominant patriarchal structures (Larson & Mitra, 1992; UNFPA & IPPF Evaluation 2003). There are claims that the family planning program was the sole reason for success (Kanter & Kanter, 2007, cited in Caldwell, 2007; Buse and Gwin, 1998), and waves of violent opposition from conservative Islamist groups were diffused in virtually no time at all because imams were persuaded by several family planning organizations to speak in favour of contraception and birth control methods approved by Islamic tradition (Uddin, 2000; Chowdhury, 1991; Neaz, 1996)

Nuanced interpretations and sound empirical studies (Caldwell et al., 1999; Bernhart & Uddin, 1990; Rob, 1988), however, show us that notwithstanding the prevalence of socio-economic inequities in Bangladesh, the fertility decline reflects substantive changes in lifestyle, greater awareness of and aspirations towards modernity and progress amongst rural families. Bernhart & Uddin (1990) report that they carried out a survey of 1200 women in a rural area reputed to be particularly conservative in Bangladesh. Initially, nearly 15 per cent of the women stated that their husbands opposed family planning on religious grounds. Later, when the researchers began to engage in open-ended conversations with the supposedly conservative husbands, they found that 25 per cent were currently using contraception, and another 50 percent were willing to use birth control methods. Other investigations reveal that women and men rarely take decisions on contraception from imams or on religious grounds (Rob, 1998). Overall, the
evidence shows that although imams were involved in family planning in Bangladesh, their numbers were small and their involvement began fairly late in the day, in the 1980s. Scholars who debate how Bangladesh achieved its dramatic results in curbing population growth rarely identify imams as a factor to be considered. Most of the evidence about imam involvement comes in the form of high praise from those who have planned and implemented engagements with imams themselves.

It seems more likely that the demographic situation in Bangladesh and women’s increasing adoption of contraception was bolstered by the growth of a large and influential NGO community, which, among other things, began to offer a new platform for women’s voices to be heard and for them to achieve greater autonomy and empowerment. NGOs receive direct funding from international donors and are increasingly porous to donor pressures and policy imperatives. They command significant material resources, offer employment to emerging educated middle class women and men, and with the exception of faith-based NGOs, are generally aligned within the “secular” ambit of Bengali-Muslim ethno-religious frictions. The influence of NGOs is an important element in changing attitudes towards smaller families. At the same time, that women began to make choices in relation to their reproductive health signals an increasing sense of autonomy and self-confidence.

In this dynamic of fertility reduction and women’s increasing empowerment, a perceived tension emerges between NGOs as modern, Western-funded sites of women’s autonomy and material resources, and imams who are profiled as conservative and fundamentalist opponents of family planning, with lesser claims to donor support or funding. I must note that my interpretation is based on explorations of secondary material and the involvement of imams in family planning initiatives in Bangladesh needs further examination. However, based on my research, I suggest that there is a danger of positioning modernity, women and NGOs on one side, and imams and radical Islam on the other, without being attentive to socio-economic and political factors that relate to their relationship. Lamia Karim’s (2004) nuanced study of a highly publicized outburst of violence between imams and rural women in the 1990s in Bangladesh does much to dispel such an impression. That said, how do debates over fertility rates, the rise of NGOs, women’s autonomy and the instrumental use of imams pertain to the Imam Discourse? I
want to suggest that the involvement of imams in population control policy laid the foundations for the Imam Discourse but did not, in itself, constitute a full discourse in the same way as is evident in the reconstitution of male imams as subjects of development now.

Given the nature of population control policies, it is unlikely that the Imam Discourse would have emerged through family planning interventions alone. Lobby groups and women’s movements in the South and the North have become increasingly aware of the disproportionate and invasive interventions that target women in order to reduce fertility rates and have pressed for greater choices for women and for development to address reproductive health in holistic ways. As well, contraception and abortion are major political and religious issues in the North, especially for the Catholic Church and right wing American governments. The aggressive population policy launched in the 1960s was curbed when Reagan came to power in the mid 1980s and with it, USAID’s involvement was correspondingly limited. Eventually, the entire thrust of population policy changed and, on paper at least, it has become more gender aware and democratic in its methods of dispensation.

The Imam Discourse, in contrast, as I explain below, “modernizes” Muslim subjects as a way of reigning in and eradicating Islamic “terror” in its entirety (Hayden, 2006). I suggest that in this newly constituted discourse, male Muslim imams are positioned as subjects who are being readied through their newly acquired developmental incarnations to themselves become and also by so doing, to shape their respective communities to adopt more tolerant and less radical positions on Islam, as these are being defined by certain select interlocutors. The transformation of imams is a primary aim of the discourse rather than, as was evident in earlier engagements with imams in Bangladesh, an incidental interest manifested by development organizations.

In order to control Third World fertility, a Western scientific and developmental apparatus, as well as the state, sought to contain women’s reproductive abilities and choices, utilizing imams in instrumental ways in order to prevent opposition to the program. Granted, the earlier engagement with imams made assumptions and denoted specific subject positions and authority to imams as religious arbiters on family planning.
The assumption was that imams would convince their male congregations, who would, in turn, encourage or at least not prevent their wives in accessing contraceptive services.

The Imam Discourse as it is being formed now is expanding the range and depth of assumptions both about the role of imams in Muslim society, and about Islam itself, in problematic ways. The discourse holds up male imams as exemplary Muslim subjects and national citizens, defines their authoritative place and status in society across secular and religious spheres of influence and posits them as potential leaders of women and men. Not only does the present discursive formation specifically target Islam and Muslim subjects, but also it does so from various local, national, regional and transnational sites of authority and expertise. In this reformulated subject position, imams have not only bolstered access to their traditional constituency of men but also intensified, more direct access to poor urban and rural women.

5.5 Geo-politics of “terror”

The USAID folks are interested in Islamic fundamentalism: the imams are just an excuse, a diversion. (Anonymous, 2006, interview)

I now delineate the first of several discursive networks that constitute imams as subjects and objects of development. Although discursive formations typically emerge without intentionality or origin, in post-colonial societies like Bangladesh the Imam Discourse may be linked to specific geo-political exigencies and interests. I noted earlier how the American government funded the formation of UNFPA in the late 1960s to mask its investment in an invasive population policy for the Third World (Grimes, 1998). The underhand connection makes the notion of multilateral autonomy as enshrined in the UN system somewhat moot, of course, but also, more significantly, confirms that USAID’s programs and US self-interests are virtually inseparable. Furthermore, while the earlier population policy interventions could be contained by fears of a domestic backlash, there are few limitations to constrain American state interests now. The conflation of Islam with “terror”, that of Muslim subjects as “terrorists”, and the launch of targeted programs to contain the two simultaneously, appear to sit quite easily with USAID.
USAID officials are surprisingly candid about why they find imams to be of such interest now. During my meeting with two policymakers at the US embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I pressed them to explain why, given that there are typically several equally important and influential individuals present in rural and urban communities, imams are being singled out as "Leaders of Influence". At first the response was a vague statement about wanting to enable grassroots change in Bangladesh. Then the American official explained that 9/11 marked the moment when the “situation changed”. From this specific time onwards, Bangladeshi society was differently organized. I have cited his remarks at the start of this chapter and I do so again:

Yes, earlier there were other important people (in rural areas). But the situation has changed in the last few years, maybe since 9/11. *Now people are turning to imams.* (USAID, 2006, interview, italics added)

The logic of perceiving Bangladeshi social interactions differently because terrorists attacked America appears to be self-evident. In a recent report, USAID acknowledges that

The *basic assumption* underpinning the LOI [Leaders of Influence] program was that the knowledge of different aspects of development, gained through training and exposure in regional settings will help these leaders of influence to increase tolerance, dispel erroneous myths about the United States, and decrease the attractiveness of extremist appeals. (USAID Mission, 2011, p. iv italics in the original)

According to the same report, the LOI program emerged as a direct consequence of the terrorist attacks on the United States, and "subsequent military responses” in Afghanistan and Iraq (USAID Mission, 2011, p. 5), as well as apprehensions of potential antagonism from “extremist elements within Bangladeshi society”(USAID Mission, 2011, p. 5). Thus, global fears are quickly connected to local threats. The report states that a series of bomb attacks by a Bangladeshi organization in 2005 increased concerns that local provocations could lead “disillusioned young people to seek alternatives” (USAID, LOI Evaluation, 2011, p. 5; TAF, interview, 2006). The nature of these alternatives is not explained, just that it was in this context that the United States Embassy in Dhaka began to increase its efforts to work informally with the Islamic Foundation on “shared interests” (USAID, LOI Evaluation, 2011). The bomb attacks of 2005 in Bangladesh were not claimed by, nor attributed to
imams; rather, blame was pinned on two banned militant groups, Jamatul Mujahideen and Jagrata Muslim Janata. They are acts of Bangladeshi Islamist militancy and are acknowledged as such by USAID and TAF, but they are also seamlessly fused with potentially radical Muslim imams. I reference them here to demonstrate the slippage between security concerns pertaining to West Asian strategic American interests, domestic issues in Bangladesh and the building of amenable imams.

American foreign policy linkages with the Imam Discourse are outlined unambiguously in USAID’s Bangladesh strategy statement for FY 2006-2010. It is stated here that the agency is closely and effectively aligned with broad US government goals and objectives including the prevention of terrorism and respect for American values abroad (USAID, Strategy, 2006-2010). Imams are both the objects and subjects of development because it is through their discursive formation, as leaders of influence and authority, that the discourse fosters its engagements with Muslim subjects or communities:

American officials working in Islamic countries simply cannot engage Muslim communities without first nurturing direct relationships with Islamic leaders and other people of influence. Carefully cultivating these relationships over a period of months or even years is a condition precedent to creating pro-American sentiments, fostering freedom and promoting economic growth in Muslim countries. (USAID, Strategy, 2006-2010, D: Outreach)

The statement cited above is worth deconstructing briefly. It elevates and establishes “Islamic leaders” as key authority figures and mediators in relationships with Muslim communities everywhere. Once this “truth” is established, it goes to reason that careful nurturing of “direct relationships” with said leaders would be seen as a crucial precondition to achieve specific American objectives. American objectives in relation to Muslim subjects and societies are summed up rather well in a seminar series organized by USAID in 2004, as follows:

The U.S. government has identified two major goals with respect to its engagement in the Muslim world: (1) enhancing domestic security and (2) promoting moderation among Muslims. (Muslim World Outreach, 2004)
The seminar series, entitled “Muslim World Outreach and Engaging Muslim Civil Society” has an impressive global span, integrating speakers and perspectives from every continent and community that is Muslim in some way. The pithy statements I have reproduced above confirm the dominance of a particular logic outlined earlier, namely, that events in post 9/11 America and the subject formations of Muslims are inextricably and inexplicably intertwined.

5.6 “Mullahs on a Bus”

An interesting question comes to mind. How has Bangladesh become the site of the discursive production of moderate Muslim subjects? The discourse aims to reconstitute potentially radical, young, Muslim religious leaders as moderate Muslims and friends of America. The bomb incidents of 2005 aside—and these were a domestic issue and security concern for the Bangladeshi state—Bangladesh is notably described elsewhere in development policy documents as a “moderate” Muslim society, with a track record of ethno-religious pluralism in South Asia. How do entanglements with imams co-exist with, and emerge from within this context?

It appears that the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh has wider links than are immediately obvious. An interesting commentary by an insider at USAID (Hayden, 2006) states that for the last five years in particular, USAID has made a concerted effort to direct US funds towards combating the root causes of terrorism by promoting “moderate” Islam through direct funding of programs involving religious organizations and activities (Hayden, 2006). According to Hayden, religious leaders’ outreach programs have been instituted not just in Bangladesh, but also in Central Asia to “combat what USAID believes to be an “American image problem” in Muslim communities across the globe” (Hayden, 2006, p. 175-76). The USAID program in Central Asia aims to create “cognitive dissonance” (Hayden, 2006, p. 177) by challenging perceptions of US foreign policy. The program, nicknamed “Mullahs on a Bus” (Hayden, 2006), evidently does just that, puts imams and mullahs on a bus and drives them to various sites to introduce them to American largesse.

I have not gone into USAID’s Central Asia initiative in any depth, and thus what comes to mind is highly provisional. The discourse of imams in Bangladesh, and its
linkages with the USAID religious leaders’ outreach program, may reflect a coalescence of particular interests who want to test drive, as it were, certain new and problematic development initiatives in amenable climes, before or even while they are being introduced elsewhere. Bangladesh is perceived to be a majority Muslim country that exhibits ethno-religious differences, but also holds generally moderate Muslim views, has a tradition of Sufi influences and, perhaps most significantly, does not exert the kind of clout or potential to upset oil supplies, or strategic alliances in a geo-political sense. As the population control policy demonstrates, Bangladesh is vulnerable to donor pressures in distinct ways. I must add that these possibilities are speculative and reflect some of the broader contingencies of imam subject formations in a Bangladeshi context, with linkages that extend into Central Asia and other parts of the world.

5.7 The “developmentalization”\textsuperscript{18} of social actors

When we first suggested working with Islamic issues in Bangladesh the reaction [by development experts] was, are you guys crazy? (The Asia Foundation, interview)

The two programs\textsuperscript{19} by USAID-TAF, and UNFPA, respectively, are ostensibly independent of each other, but there are interesting similarities between them. For instance, there is pattern of comparing the Bangladeshi programs to “similar” initiatives elsewhere. The USAID and The Asia Foundation experts repeatedly drew parallels between Muslim imams in Bangladesh and religious subjects elsewhere, especially in relation to their own prior experiences. The USAID representative referenced his earlier South American experience as a virtual template for Bangladesh. He said that working with Catholic priests and the Catholic Church in South America inspired his interest in, and confirmed the viability of, the program in Bangladesh:

USAID: “In Latin America we always involved the priests—it’s the same in all parts of the world.” (Interview)

USAID: “Before I came to Bangladesh, in Latin America, we found Catholic priests were against birth control methods and so when I saw the imams in Bangladesh I thought, yes, there are similarities here.” (Interview)
He compared imams to priests and the Church to Islam, as these examples show:

USAID: “I’m not a health expert, but imams [in Bangladesh] are more open towards reproductive rights than the Catholic Church in Latin America—except on abortion of course.” (Interview)

USAID: “Imams are forward thinking here in Bangladesh, certainly compared to Pakistan and Afghanistan. We launched imam training there too, but the Church leadership—I mean Islamic leadership—was more conservative. The most success we have with imams is in Bangladesh. Oh and Indonesia, there we have seen success too with Islamic leadership.” (Interview)

USAID: “We have to move beyond religion and look at society in cultural terms to understand domestic violence—in Latin America we found it was a cultural issue and so we needed to adopt a holistic approach, over time it will change here too.” (Interview)

It is interesting how “Church” leadership and “Islamic” leadership are interchangeable in the second remark cited above; as well, that the imam training initiative has been introduced in Pakistan and Afghanistan as well. When I pressed for more information, I was told that these programs were being “re-evaluated”.

The Asia Foundation representative referenced early contacts with Islamic subjects in Indonesia and also “the context in Bangladesh”, specifically, the bomb blasts that occurred in August 2005. The explosions caused panic, disrupted law and order and were attributed to domestic Islamist groups as noted above. The TAF representative linked these incidents to imams:

Many people in Dhaka say to us, what is the value of doing this [imam training]? Religious leaders have no place with us ... Why on earth would you ... suggest there are things they can do as leaders of influence? We ... say to them: madrasah education is not going away; religious leaders are not going away ... it’s better to engage with religious leaders and madrasah educators ... rather than ignore them. That’s the kind of interest we have [in Bangladesh] and it’s similar to the program interests we have in Indonesia. (Interview)

A popular impression conveyed in part by media in Bangladesh, one that is voiced in the NGO community (Abed, Anam, Kabir, interviews), and that The Asia Foundation representative invoked was that mosques, generally, breed Islamist militancy in
Bangladesh, and imams are potential candidates for, or already involved in what may loosely be termed as the “Bangla Taliban”.\textsuperscript{21} My research was not grassroots based therefore my analysis here is of the views expressed by key policymakers. There was slippage between militancy and extremist Islamist groups, Islamic political parties, mercenary groups and criminal gangs generally, and male Muslim subjects, including ordinary imams. As noted earlier, the “mullah” and the “imam” were fused and interchanged, as were mosques and militant hideouts.

What strikes me as somewhat problematic is that policymakers seamlessly draw on engagements that occur continents, religions and cultures apart and fuse these through discourses of Islamist militancy to form a composite, fixed Muslim subject. The differences between a predominantly Catholic society in South America and Sunni Muslim doctrine and norms in Bangladesh are worth considering. Even in the case of Indonesia, there are critical differences. For example, it is well known that although Indonesia is a Muslim majority country, its model of collaboration with Islamic issues and Muslim subjects is regarded to be peculiar to its own history and political circumstances (see for instance, Federspiel, 2007).\textsuperscript{22} A neighbour, Malaysia, which has a majority Muslim population as well, has a strikingly different relationship with Islamic issues and Muslim subjects (Anwar, (2010); also Zainah Anwar personal communication)\textsuperscript{23}. That these differences are not recognized, or if they are, not deemed to be critical matters for consideration is fairly obvious in the evidence that I generated from my interviews.

My aim in citing the above examples is to provide a sense of the dominance of a particular perspective. If we consider these remarks carefully, we find that linkages between Latin America and Bangladesh are presented as self-evident truths through the principles of authority and legitimacy unquestionably claimed by development expertise. What comes to mind in this regard is a particular feature of “development as discourse” that Escobar (1995) identifies. Drawing on Foucault’s well-known work on the prison system, Escobar draws our attention to the “panoptic” gaze, not of the prison guard, but of the development expert who scrutinizes, selects and consigns social actors in any given terrain to processes of “developmentalization” (Escobar, 1995, p. 155). Such is the power and privilege of the expert that the objects in view are “apprehended” (Escobar, 1995, p.
but the development expert remains invisible. Haraway calls such a deployment of power “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (1988, p. 581).

The USAID representative exercises a similar assertive invisibility in his conversation with me when he collapses and homogenizes specific and complex religious institutions such as the Catholic Church and priesthood, not to mention the Catholic Church’s policies on contraception and abortion, with Muslim norms and practices, and Islamic institutions in Bangladesh—and in South Asia as well. The Asia Foundation representative predicates his perspectives on a similar logic. This practice is evident in various textual sources that construct the discourse globally (for example, “Religion and International Development”, 2006).

As far as the UNFPA is concerned, linkages between the agency’s programs elsewhere, and the imam training program in Bangladesh are obvious and powerfully connected to one another. My evidence shows that UNFPA is working internationally with a wide range of religious subjects, groups and institutions at different levels, on development issues pertaining particularly to its own mandate—i.e., population control policies and reproductive health—across the Third World (“Building Bridges” 2002; “Culture Matters”, 2005). It is forging development alliances with (predominantly male) religious elites in Africa, South America, South Asia, West Asia, South East Asia and, also interestingly, with at least one leader of a minority religious community in the United Kingdom (“Building Bridges” 2002; “Global Forum”, 2009). Its program initiatives include working with Uganda’s bishops and Muslim community elders, engaging with Muslim scholars in Iran, “tapping the potential” (“Culture Matters”, 2005, p. 75) of Buddhist monks and nuns in Cambodia, and like USAID, cooperating with the Catholic Church in South America (“Culture Matters”, 2005). It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to explore in detail the UNFPA’s global engagements with religious institutions.24 I will touch on a few points that have a bearing on my study.

A notable aspect of UNFPA’s engagements with religious institutions and agents is that the discourse appears to erase or, at the very least abjure, the politics of the agency’s uneven relationship with religious bodies and viewpoints. The close connection, right from its inception, that the multilateral has with USAID has been noted earlier. When USAID spearheaded a massive population control policy in the 1960s to target population growth
in the South as a major “problem” that development needed to solve (Hartmann, 1999; Escobar, 1995; Akhter, 2005), the UNFPA followed suit. It was pushed to the forefront of an ongoing debate at the UN Conference on Population in Mexico City in 1984, when a United States led lobby introduced an “abortion clause” which (to this day) ties American development funding to stringent anti-abortion adherence by Third World governments (Obama Rescinds, 2009; Hartmann, 1999; “Family Planning, USAID”, n.d.). Women’s groups were angered by this outcome and tensions came to the fore at another UN sponsored International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 in Cairo (Hartmann, 1999). Women’s groups and coalitions, particularly from the Third World, came out in force at this conference in support of abortion rights and their vocal and unified stance resulted in limited yet visible gains for women. The Vatican, initially supported by Islamic groups (Bowen, 1997), mounted its own counter-attack and won back some ground. In the years that have followed, an uneasy truce has prevailed. There have been tense standoffs, such as at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and acrimonious exchanges and funding cutbacks continue to erupt from time to time, especially in relation to US support.

Given this background, it is noteworthy and not a little surprising that the UNFPA is working closely with religious institutions and leaders in what appear to be fairly closely knit alliances and coalitions, in so many parts of the world. The agency not only acknowledges these connections in no uncertain terms, but also promotes the same as evidence of the agency’s “progressive” developmental credentials. In an address to a think tank in Washington D.C. in April 2002, the executive director of the UNFPA remarked:

Over the years, the United Nations Population Fund has partnered with religious institutions and faith-based organizations to fashion groundbreaking initiatives to advance common goals and to save lives. ...In our work around the world, we have found that building alliances with and involving members of religious traditions are factors that can actually determine a program’s success or failure. This is especially critical in traditional societies where women's actions to regulate fertility may disturb a social contract and where [patriarchal] control over women is strong. (“Building Bridges” 2002)

My reason for drawing attention to the statement above is because it demonstrates the instrumental use of, and fusion between largely male religious authority and development
expertise, possibly with different objectives in mind, but coalescing nonetheless over and through the bodies and lives of ordinary women. The principles of gender and development that I adhere to and have noted in Chapter 2, encourage me to critically assess the likely impact of using religious authority to supposedly empower women, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional, religious authority over women. In a broader sense, these issues go to the heart of the development paradigm and its tortuous relationships with religion, secularism and political modernity.

In the speech cited above, the UNFPA director notes that a legacy of tensions in the past, especially after the Cairo conference in 1994, marred relations between religious groups and the UNFPA. But these tensions are now over in a post-9/11 environment. Past conflicts between UNFPA and religious groups evidently reflected an agenda by the North to push universal principles against the cultural and religious values of the South, specifically against Muslim and Catholic interests. The director declares that such old issues have been resolved because of “increasing cultural challenges” (“Building Bridges” 2002) after “the tragic events of 11 September” (“Building Bridges” 2002).

I find the logic in this speech interesting because it juxtaposes the stated objectives of the UNFPA to empower women on the one hand, with its unproblematic justification of alliances with institutional nodes of religious authority and power that have often been pitted against women’s interests. I am not advancing a dichotomous relationship between “secular” women and assumed patriarchal “religious” authority. My point is that the mandate of the multilateral itself disavows these alliances. Thus, when the director states in her speech that “We must navigate [the environment’s] turbulence together so that we will all be safe” (“Building Bridges” 2002), she reveals the perhaps pragmatic salience of (American) geo-political interests and constituencies that emerge from them, rather than an agenda that unequivocally advances the interests of women’s autonomy especially in matters concerning their bodies and their health.

The UNFPA’s global engagements with religious institutions are becoming increasingly seamless and far less hesitant than they were as a result of the fallout from the Cairo conference. For instance, recent activities undertaken by UNFPA include the convening of a “Global Forum of Faith-Based Organizations in Population and Development” (“Global forum”, 2009) that was attended by more than 100 religious
leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations, as well as approximately 60 representatives of UNFPA and other UN bodies. It has led to the setting up of an “Interfaith Network on Population and Development” (“Global forum”, 2009). As well, if we examine the UNFPA director’s speech (“Building Bridges” 2002), we find that she unproblematically references and promotes UNFPA’s activities across far flung corners of the globe from Ethiopia to Guatemala, Sudan to Afghanistan, Iran to Bangladesh.

5.8 The making of male Muslim imams

The USAID-TAF and the UNFPA view imams in broadly similar ways. Their notion of an imam is gendered, that is, imams are normatively male; they are assumed to be similar to formalised clergy in the Anglo-Christian traditions; and they are seen as having moral authority and influence over their “congregations”, that is, ordinary people presumably made up of women and men. Communities are typically characterized as divided into religious and secular ambits, with the imams ingeniously poised to straddle both terrains. Both agencies construct imams as model citizens with the potential to contribute in an exemplary manner to national development. The USAID-TAF discourse constructs imams in general terms, without specifying precise functions for them, as will become clear below. The UNFPA, in contrast, provides specific examples of the kind of activities male imams normatively undertake in society. The socio-economic status of imams is not directly addressed by either agency, but rather implied in various ways.

The two passages below are reproduced from 1) a document circulated in 2006 by The Asia Foundation and from 2) a document published by UNFPA three years before that:

In a country where religious values inform almost every aspect of life, any effective national dialogue on development issues should ideally include religious leaders. As persons of influence at the local and national level, religious leaders of all faiths are ideally placed to serve as interlocutors between local communities and those responsible for development decisions and implementation. They are held in high regard and trusted by members of the communities they serve, and their inputs are sought on a variety of personal and community issues. Religious leaders have extensive knowledge of the needs and interests of local communities that they can communicate to development officials. They can also effectively convey messages on national
development goals and alternatives back to community members in lay terms. ("Bangladesh Leaders Outreach Initiative", n.d. italics added)

The Imams are religious representatives, primarily responsible for leading Muslim ritual prayers in their respective congregations but also involved in sundry customary, religious and ceremonial rites in villages and cities throughout the land. *The importance of the religious community in shaping public opinion and influencing behavioural changes in Bangladesh is a well-established reality.* A majority of the people of Bangladesh are Muslims and have a high level of confidence in the guidelines and interpretations of Islam that are provided by Imams and religious scholars. Members of the religious community are present at a host of events and ceremonies, from the aqiqah or Muslim name-giving ceremony for an infant, to marriage, divorce, remarriage, inheritance and other significant personal changes in people’s lives. They lead and conduct religious meetings such as Milad Mehfils, which are celebratory commemorations of the birth of the Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Waaz Mahfils which are open-ended religious talks often held in front of huge audiences for long periods of time, as well as funerals and other rites held to commemorate deaths. (Das Gupta, 2003, italics added)

The passages elevate religious leaders to a high status, describing them as a “persons of influence” and imbuing them with the capacity to act as “interlocutors” between ordinary people and those in authority. It seems as though imams are a hitherto hidden and undiscovered resource in Bangladesh that only international development can “see”. There is an impression given in these passages of the gaze of international expertise scrutinizing society and “finding” an untapped group of exemplary citizens who are trusted and admired by ordinary people, who know what ordinary people need and who are perfectly placed to act as two-way conduits, effectively conveying both the needs of common people to people in authority, and vice versa. The leaders are distinctive also by virtue of being able to straddle both religious and secular or lay terrains.

I need to pause briefly here to note that my analysis below of the implications of the statements cited above stems from interviews in the field with imams, Bangladeshi policymakers in the development community, academics, and also, from my own experience as Muslim in Bangladesh.

What we see from the statements is that imams are at once leaders and persons of influence, and also positioned in considerably ordinary, grassroots roles. Society, similarly, is divided between clearly demarcated segments of religiosity, each religious group
presumably functioning in total allegiance, not to mention harmonious and trusting relationships, with its religious “leaders”. It is worth noting that UNFPA assigns a primary role to imams, that of leading Muslim ritual prayers, and then specifies other “sundry” responsibilities discharged by them. Disparately weighted acts of doctrinal significance, and acts that are shaped more by custom and tradition, are conflated here. For example, a name giving or aqiqah ceremony does not hold a particular doctrinal or Islamic legal significance and while imams can perform an aqiqah ceremony, so can an ordinary Muslim. Similarly, milad mehfi ls and waaz mehfi ls are informal, customary gatherings, outside the direct domain of doctrinal Islam.

Marriage, divorce, re-marriage and inheritance, however, are somewhat different, as they have complicated histories that stem from Islamic doctrine and jurisprudence, colonial and post-colonial legal systems, and also have social and economic implications. As a matter of fact, and due largely to the legacies of colonial rule, Islamic religious subjects in general have very limited legal influence over social and economic rights and responsibilities of women and men in marriage, divorce and inheritance. Muslim judges or qadis, and muftis who administered Islamic family law in South Asia, were replaced by civil judges under British rule in the late eighteenth century (Hoque and Khan, 2007). Eventually, a qadi, or kazi in Bangla, was left with the sole function of registering a Muslim marriage or nikah. Muslims are not required to marry in the presence of a religious subject such as a priest or pastor in the Christian tradition; marriage is a social contract, binding on two individuals, undertaken in the presence of witnesses and preferably with the full knowledge of their respective families, clans and communities. As well, marriage, divorce, remarriage and inheritance are shaped also by Bengali ethnic traditions.

These differently weighted acts each constitute different spheres of influence. Imams may, as the passage referenced above states, “be present at a host of events and ceremonies.” They may and in Bangladesh they are often asked to give a brief speech and lead a congregation in dua or supplication in order to bless a marriage union. These actions, as well as the mere act of standing in front of men in congregational prayers, imbues imams with some authority and legitimacy undoubtedly (Farida Akhtar, interview), but not in fixed and institutionalized ways. Some communities turn to a pir for
certain kinds of sanction; in other instances, because they are men, imams are not involved in any way at all.

The discourse also reconstitutes a patently gendered Muslim imam in a position of authority. Although gender issues are conspicuously recognized in UNFPA and USAID program initiatives elsewhere, the context of their engagements with Muslim male imams is quite different. The male “imam” is constructed as the subject who interprets and executes linkages between Muslim women and men, and the teachings of Islam. The elevated status of the “religious leader” is ascribed to men, thus fixing what might be a dynamic process whereby women exercise authority in religious matters in less formalized ways. The discourse flattens the diverse ways in which social, religious and cultural actors exercise agency and become aware of their subjectivity, especially in relation to the practices and processes of their life-practices and life-worlds.

On a national level, imams have never occupied significant leadership positions in Bangladesh, for a variety of socio-economic, class-based, and historically specific reasons. Imams are dependent on private sources of funding for their mosques and thus, their salaries, when they are able to earn more than food, lodging and funds for the upkeep of their mosque, are often amongst the lowest in the country; they are, “precarious worker[s]” (Hours, 1991); that is they are largely poor and needy. I found that contrary to the elevated status ascribed to imams in development discourse, the imams themselves appear to acknowledge their socio-economic vulnerabilities and, in fact, stress a need for attention and patronage from both the state and private sources (imams, interview; Khan, n.d.; Mahmood, 2004; Dewan, 1986). My interview with imams and the director of the Islamic Foundation provided this impression, one that is reinforced in the following excerpts from published works disseminated by the Islamic Foundation:

An imam is a broken religious leader in society, at the mercy of those who employ him. We see him as one who is respectable but has little or no clout. (Mahmood, 2004, p.15, italics added)

Imams are the easiest and cheapest religious medium for reaching the masses. (Khan, n.d. p. 22, italics added)

Imams have engaged themselves in improving their socio-economic conditions by setting up cottage industries and cooperative societies. Their
efforts have the potential not only to impact positively on the national economy, but also increase income generation for the imams themselves. (Dewan, et al., 1986, p. 32, italics added)

That said, it must be noted that there is evidence of imams who are also religious scholars or ulema, and/or have other professional qualifications (Hours, 1995). The socio-economic circumstances of imams are not the same across Bangladesh, but the discourse leaves little room for heterogeneity to be recognized and integrated into their profile.

Also significant is the nature of religious processes in Bangladeshi society, including the influence of Sufi thinking which tends to privilege spiritual rather than formal religiosity. It is not so much the mosque but the shrine and the home that are often focal points in rituals and practices. The male circumcision event, for instance, is conducted by the barber—or the doctor—not the imam. The imam is largely a symbolic presence at this ceremony. There are a number of rituals that women undertake, including their daily prayers, devotional acts at weddings, births and deaths, that are never supervised by the male imam.

Girls are usually taught how to undertake the canonical prayers or nomaj by women, either family members or informal female religious teachers. An important aspect of religious processes in Islam is that most obligatory forms of prayer, fasting, alms-giving and other acts of devotion become fardh or mandatory on Muslims after puberty. Girls need to be introduced to and taught how to navigate several important aspects of personal cleansing related, for instance, to their menstrual cycles, and in turn related to mandatory canonical prayers, fasting and other devotional acts, that a male Muslim imam cannot or rather does not undertake. Furthermore, women in Bangladesh traditionally do not pray at the mosque. The imam’s link with women and girls is indirect and, in the absence of a male relative or husband to establish that link, non-existent.

Simply stated, the reason imams come into being as “imams” in a Bangladeshi context is because one of their professional functions is to act as leader in a group prayer for Muslims. But their role as prayer leaders is not necessarily a paid occupation, nor, in the case of Bangladeshi imams in particular, their main source of livelihood (Hours, 1991; Islamic Foundation, interview). Although being an imam may well be described as a
primary calling for the vast number of imams in Bangladesh, their precise socio-economic conditions are subject to circumstances that lie outside the strict domain of Islamic tradition and doctrine and include socio-economic class, gender and geographical location (rural or urban). In addition to these influences, some imams may be of a higher religious and scholarly standing than other imams and these differences are most likely to be linked to their geographical location in Bangladesh, their educational background and their financial strength (Islamic Foundation, interview). All three elements are likely to be connected to patronage from private and public sources.

5.9 Locally mediated

The Imam Training Programs of USAID-TAF, and that of UNFPA, respectively, are seemingly separate programs. But closer examination reveals interesting connections at the local level in particular. The two agencies train imams through the Islamic Foundation, which has a head office in Dhaka and six branch offices in each of the administrative divisions in Bangladesh (Rashid, 2004). There are officially seven Imam Training Academies in Dhaka and the six administrative divisions of Bangladesh though my fieldwork indicates that most activities take place in Dhaka at the head office. USAID-TAF and UNFPA operate their training programs for imams at the same location, targeting the same groups of imams, and facilitated by the same infrastructural and institutional tools of the Foundation. The Foundation is authorized by the state but runs with an independent administrative hierarchy and, more pertinently, both government and external donors provide funding for it. (Rashid, 2004, p. 122)

The Islamic Foundation runs its own training courses for imams who most often emerge from the government funded madrasah (Islamic educational) system, also known as the Alia madrasah system. According to the Madrasah Education Board, which runs the Alia madrasah system across the country, there are more than a million students enrolled at any given time in its educational institutions (Ahmad, 2007, p. 56). It is generally estimated that there are a minimum of 200,000 mosques or masjids in Bangladesh (Islamic Foundation interview; Rashid, 2004, p. 122) though there could be
some half a million masjids and corresponding numbers of male imams across the country.  

The sheer number of imams, as well as the geographic range involved in the Islamic Foundation’s activities speaks of the enormous size of a grassroots network. The Islamic Foundation’s imam training program comprises of a 45-day course given to batches of 100 imams at each of its seven centres, five times annually (“Islamic Phoundationer Kaajkormo”, n.d.\(^3\)). There are also a number of refresher courses, and specialized training programs (such as on computer skills) listed as part of the Foundation’s regular training activities (“Islamic Phoundationer Kaajkormo”, n.d.). More than 58,000 imams have undergone regular training from 1979 to June 2006 and of these, at least 11 thousand imams have been provided with refresher training as well (“Islamic Phoundationer Kaajkormo”, n.d.).

Given this backdrop, the USAID-TAF and UNFPA programs, respectively, run very closely alongside and, in the case of the American agency, even “[a]s part of” (“Imams Explore Development Efforts”) the Foundation’s own training activities. USAID, by its own account, “sponsors” three-day training sessions (“Imams Explore Development Efforts”) of approximately 100 imams each (interview AF), who are integrated into the 45-day program of the Islamic Foundation in what appears to be a seamless manner:

Three-day Imam Orientation sessions are conducted as a practical supplement to ITA’s [Imam Training Academy] existing 45-day Imam Training Program and shorter refresher training courses. (“Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Program”, n.d. italics added)

The utility of the Islamic Foundation lies “in managing” (“Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Program”, n.d.) USAID’s contacts with imams by working closely, especially in the field (at the grassroots level), with a number of USAID’s development partners in Bangladesh. An interesting set of remarks made in March 2006 by the US charge d’affaires in Bangladesh expands on this theme, as follows:

I know that the Imam Training Academies of Bangladesh are playing a key role in enhancing the knowledge and skills of imams around the country, and that this makes an important contribution to the development of their communities. I am pleased that the United States Government through USAID
is supporting a two-year program to highlight to religious leaders the principles of development and democratic governance, and to promote greater citizen participation in decisions that affect their lives. USAID partners are encouraged to involve local imams in their projects. One of the most striking features from last year’s experience was the value of informal interaction between local USAID partner organizations and participating imams. This enhanced everybody’s appreciation of how local civil society groups contributed to community development efforts. ("Remarks by Chargé d’Affaires", 2006)

US diplomatic representative Judith Chammas spoke at the Islamic Foundation’s Divisional Imam Training Academy in Chittagong, a visit made after the bomb incidents of 2005 when apparently, as cited earlier, the US government felt a need to share common interests with the Islamic Foundation. These interests include, 1) a specific desire for processes that foster close ties between American developmental interests including domestic partners or surrogates of US international development, on the one hand, and male Muslim imams on the other; 2) a direct link between the knowledge and skills of (male) imams and national development objectives; 3) the idea or “truth” that high standards or principles of political modernity both emanate from, and are directly supported by the United States of America; 4) that initiatives reflecting these US initiated high standards impinge on the benefits accruing to Bangladeshi citizens and communities, that all these “truths” shape “decisions that affect [people’s] lives” (USAID-3). Overall, and in a particularly striking manner, these remarks constitute male Muslim national subjects, modernization and international development as a merged, singular discursive “truth”.

5.10 Funding links

It must be noted that neither of the two international agencies, USAID or UNFPA, appear to be providing any significant amounts of funding directly to imams. The Asia Foundation, which implements the USAID Imam Training Program, categorically states that the only financial support involved in its initiatives are a “small per diem or daily allowance” (TAF, interview) provided to male imams during the duration of each brief training period. While in Western terms the allowance may be small, it cannot be ruled out as a material incentive. The status of the imam training program within the UNFPA was
upgraded in 2006. It is now being included within a distinct “gender component” under reproductive health (interview UNFPA) and this could suggest, in my view, the promise of distinct financial support in the future. With regard to USAID’s involvement with imams, there are indications of support being extended to imams in indirect ways such as, for instance, “Computer training with the help of the American centre” (“Islamic Houndationer Kaaikormo” n.d.).

The two development agencies, USAID and UNFPA, are different in certain aspects. The US development agency is a bilateral agency that works closely with the US Department of State to fulfill the government’s foreign policy objectives. USAID is also a bigger agency. It is the fourth largest aid donor to Bangladesh and its contributions in 2007 were US$ 78 million (“Program [sic] summary, USAID”). Historically, a large proportion of American aid to Bangladesh has come in the form of food aid, but the picture has changed in the last four decades as the proportion of project aid to Bangladesh—from all external sources—has increased substantially, from 1.3 per cent of total aid in 1971-72 to 97.2 per cent in 2008/2009 (ERD-3). Among bilateral donors, USAID is second in terms of cumulative disbursement of aid to Bangladesh, with more than US$5 billion disbursed since 1972 (“Program summary, USAID”). In Bangladesh, the offices of USAID are physically located inside the US Embassy, a factor that adds to the power and influence of the agency. The Asia Foundation is comparatively small. It is an American-funded NGO which operates across the Asia Pacific region, mainly providing support through training and dissemination of publications to USAID’s strategic policies.

The UNFPA contribution in dollar terms is smaller than that of USAID (approximately $18 million in 2003-2005), though its role in population control, reproductive health issues and particularly birth control and abortion impact directly on women’s rights and empowerment. The UNFPA falls under the umbrella of what is loosely referred to as the United Nations Organizations (UNO), a group of multilateral agencies, each influenced by a complex network of policies, financial or funding conditions and historically determined affiliations.

Although the UNFPA operates under the aegis of the UN Mission in Bangladesh and, like most UN agencies, has its own mandate and is run by an independent Country Representative, the organization has had severe funding issues in the last two decades or
so, largely because the United States, which sits on a 36-member Executive Board that approves its programs, has held back its financial support ("Who funds & governs UNFPA?" n.d.) Funds appropriated by the United States Congress from 2002 to 2008—some $34 million annually—were withheld by the US administration under George Bush and it is only since U.S. President Barack Obama took over in January 2009 that funding has been restored (Obama Rescinds, 2009; “Does the United States fund UNFPA?” n.d.).

US government funding for UNFPA is related to the former’s stance on abortion which is a major domestic policy issue that divides the right wing Republican Party from the (relatively) more progressive Democrats. In an earlier section, I have noted debates and conflict over contraception and abortion that impact on UNFPA’s relations with religious groups. In the 1980s, although abortion was legal in the US, the US-government led an attack on abortion that resulted in severe aid restrictions to any organizations or governments engaged in abortion work (Hartman, 1995, p. 129, 260). Until this time, US funding was curtailed to some extent if abortion work went on in a country, but in August 1984, at the Mexico City International Conference on Population, a new clause was introduced by the US delegation. This clause prohibits any US funds being given to any agency that is involved with abortions.

It is quite striking how, throughout all documents produced by UNFPA, both in hard copy that were available to me in Bangladesh and also on the internet, there is studious avoidance of the mention of abortion. One has to look at other sites of development to find information on whether abortion is legal or not in Bangladesh. According to the World Health Organization, existing laws in Bangladesh derived from a nineteenth century colonial law prohibit abortion, except to save the life of a woman (Country profile, p. 39). However, induced abortion or menstrual regulation (MR), also known as dilation and curettage (D&C) is widely provided through a network of the government health services since 1978 (Country profile, p. 39). Unsafe abortions are a major medical problem and approximately half of the admissions to gynaecology units in major urban hospitals of the country are for complications of illegal abortion (Country profile, pp. 37-40). But the impact of the US ban on funding, even when it has been lifted, remains a powerful influence, as is borne out by this exchange with the Bangladeshi officer in charge of running the USAID-Asia Foundation Training Program with male imams.
AZ: How do imams respond (during their training) when they visit and look around maternal health clinics?
The Asia Foundation (AF): Sometimes they are surprised. They say, “We thought that abortions are commonly being done here. But we find they are not”. So, they are happy.
AZ: Do they oppose abortion?
AF: Yes, the imams do not agree and nor does USAID.
AZ: Really? (tone shows surprise)
AF: It is strictly prohibited in Bangladesh. If any organization promotes abortion or even gives advice on abortion, their funding will end, this is from the Mexico City Policy.
AZ: But Bangladesh allows abortion to save the mother’s life. And D and Cs are quite common are they not?
AF: It may happen in Bangladesh. But it is their law, USAID’s law.

5.11 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented my evidence pertaining to the emergence of the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh. Two major international development agencies, UNFPA and the American agency, USAID, enable the Imam Discourse through a Bangladeshi state run institution called the Islamic Foundation. Following from Chapter 4 where I drew attention to the complex terrain which imams are located, here I touched on key aspects of the role of imams, as imams. I mapped early engagements between imams and development agencies in Bangladesh and indicated how the discursive construct today has linkages with interventions in the past. By tracing connections that construct and sustain the Imam Discourse, I have tried to show how specific Western interests are the main driving force behind the emerging new discursive construct. My analyses draw attention to the influence on development objectives of a new political agenda that is being shaped by US foreign policy interests and one that subsumes gender issues in persistent though unstated ways. The central focus of the Imam Discourse, male Muslim imams, are implicated and constructed in different ways in the discourse.

Imams are produced as domestic resources that development practitioners have “discovered” and endowed with instrumental importance as tools for the implementation of modernity and development in Bangladesh. The dominance of these discursive elements
serves to subsume alternative gender-sensitive notions of imamhood and Islamic processes and practices, but only in limited ways: counter discourses are evident everywhere. How they become known and what they imply in relation to my study are explained in the next chapter.

1 The document I refer to was posted on the Asia Foundation’s website in 2006. The head of the Asia Foundation told me about the “Leaders Outreach Initiative” when I interviewed him in August 2006 in Dhaka. He gave me a hard copy of the document. I refer to the hard copy because although I saw it several times on the website, it was removed from the website some time in mid 2007. I did not realize at the time that websites are regularly “purged” and dated material is removed without any record of earlier postings being maintained. I have searched in vain for this particular document but have not been able to find it on the Asia Foundation website

2 Page 15, Table 5: Secular Groups Projected Outputs by Results Achieved, lists 94 “Women Leaders” under the column heading “Female Participants”. A note at the bottom of this Table states: “Curiously, 31 of the ‘women leaders’ group were males”. On the same page, in Table 4: Religious Groups Projected Outputs by Results Achieved, we learn that about 140 women religious leaders from Christian, Hindu and Buddhist groups participated in the LOI program

3 There are several references to “imam” in the Qur’an, including the verse cited here where the Creator promises to make (the Prophet) Ibrahim (Abraham) an “imam” or leader of nations.


5 In Shi’ia Islam, Imam (with a capital ‘I’) refers also to a “fixed” number of Imams who are seen as the legitimate spiritual successors of the Prophet Muhammad (Aslan, 2006, p. 181). The four most influential scholars in Sunni Islamic fiqh or jurisprudence are known as Imams – Maliki, Sha’afi, Hanafi and Hambali.

6 According to Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Qur’an into English and his interpretation of this verse, as well as other references to the word imam, its primary meaning is to be “foremost”. Consequently, an imam can mean a leader in religion, in congregational prayer, a model or example, or a book of guidance or evidence6 (Yusuf Ali, 1993, p. 52 fn 124).

7 Sunni Hanafi Muslims in particular do not emphasize congregational organization as much as say other schools such as Shafi’i or Maliki do.

8 Khaleel (1999) traces the Muslim salat to Judaic customary practice.

9 There is a predetermined, minimum or obligatory portion called the fard comprised of a certain number of units or rakat of salat; and each rakat consists of declarations, affirmations, Qur’anic recitations, as well as verbal, cognitive and physical movements such as a genuflection, and complete prostrations.

10 Ismaili Muslims, followers of the Aga Khan, who belong to the Shi’ia sect, apparently did not follow as-salat in the same way as other Muslims. I use the word “apparently” because
information on Ismaili religious practices is hard to come by; non-Ismailis are not invited into the prayer sessions at their Jamaat Khana, the site of congregation and worship, different in many ways from a mosque or masjid. Very little is found in scholarly works on this topic. Anecdotal evidence suggests that since 9/11 Ismaili Muslims have been encouraged by the Aga Khan to adopt the traditional as-salat as other Muslims have done. An acquaintance in Vancouver, BC, informed me recently that her children, 8 and 11 years old respectively, had learned to perform their prayers or sal’at at the Jamaat Khana. I once took the daughter of an Ismaili professor to my mosque during Ramadan because she wanted to join in the “regular” prayers as she called them but had no idea how these were undertaken.

My assessment is based on my personal experiences over many years – growing up in Dhaka; from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, when I lived in the UAE and would visit Bangladesh at least once a year, to a long stint in the 1990s when I was based in and travelled extensively through Bangladesh. I am drawing also on anecdotal evidence and comments made to me by several women in the development community in Bangladesh during my fieldwork.

The precise instruction in the Qur’an is as follows:

*And establish regular prayers*

*At the two ends of the day*

*And at the approaches of the night*. (Qur’an 9: 114 trans. Yusuf Ali, p. 545)

There are references in the Qur’an that recognize women as leaders in explicit terms, for instance with reference to Balqis, or the Queen of Sheba (Surah An-Naml 27: 22-25). This documentary called *Veiled Voices* follows three women imams or shaikha in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria respectively.

Originally known as the Comilla Thana Project under the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) launched by the Pakistan Academy of Rural Development, Comilla.

There are a number of websites dedicated to Khan. See [http://akhtar-hameed-khan.8m.com/](http://akhtar-hameed-khan.8m.com/) [Khan has remained an important figure in Comilla, see](http://www.akhtar-hameed-khan.8m.com/comilla.html)

BBC news August 17th, 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4158478.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4158478.stm), accessed December, 2006; also see Bombs Explode


Since USAID and the Asia Foundation work on the same program, I consider them as a single program; and the UNFPA as a second program.

See Bombs Explode and BBC news above

A popular militant slogan apparently, as told to me by several NGO workers is: “Taliban! Taliban! Bangla hobe Afghan!” Hobe in Bangla means “will become”.

According to Federspiel, (2007), a major difference between the advent of Islamic influence in South Asia and that in the regions now known as Indonesia and Malaysia is that in the former there were political forces, together with conquering armies that invaded, settled and eventually ruled over large tracts of South Asia. In Indonesia and Malaysia, on the other hand, Islamic influences were felt over a longer period of time as Muslim traders arrived in different phases and became settlers. The traders’ religious practices and beliefs were slowly and by inference, voluntarily, adopted by local
populations. Muslim traders did not displace power relations in the same way as Turks, Arabs, Persians and other west Asian settlers did in South Asia.

23 Zainah Anwar was in Vancouver for a public lecture in April, 2010 [http://www.sfu.ca/internationalstudies/lectures/anwar-lecture.pdf]. I did not attend the lecture but was in a smaller group meeting with her on April 11th courtesy Dr Tamir Moustafa, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University.

24 It would be an enormous task entailing a separate research project.

25 For administrative purposes, Bangladesh is divided into 7 divisions or bibhag: Chittagong, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna, Barisal, Sylhet and Dhaka. These are further divided into 64 districts or zila, 6 city corporations, 308 municipalities, 481 upazilas, 599 thanas and some 4,498 unions (GOB – 1)

26 The Islamic Foundation was founded in 1975 through an Act of Parliament.26 The Act defines the rationale for, and the aims of the Foundation to be:

- for the purposes of founding, managing and assisting mosques and Islamic centres, academics and institutes, undertaking research on the contributions of Islam to culture, science and civilization, propagating the basic Islamic ideals of universal brotherhood, tolerance and justice and promoting studies and research in Islamic history, philosophy, law and jurisprudence and to provide for matters connected therewith. (“Act, 1975”)
- The above-noted Act makes explicit provision for external aid from foreign countries or organisations “with the prior approval of the Government” (“Act, 1975”, 12 (1) d. p. 237).

27 There are two madrasah systems in Bangladesh: the Alia madrasah and the Quami madrasah. The first Alia madrasah is regulated by the government. It combines “modern” curricula with religious education, is divided into four distinct levels that correspond to the “secular” levels of high school, college, B.A. and M.A. levels; this system receives major funding from the government. The Quami system, in contrast, is based on an Islamic religious curriculum that is uniform across South Asia and is entirely privately run and funded. For a discussion of the madrasah system in Bangladesh see Ahmad, M., (2007).

28 Exact figures are very problematic and not merely with regard to the number of masjids in Bangladesh. There is variance between GOB and development agency estimates. For instance, in the figures provided by the GOB Bureau of Statistics (GOB – 1), the total population as of July 2007 is 142.4 million, and a projection for July 2008 is 144.5 million. According to the UNFPA, the total population of Bangladesh in 2004 was 140 million (“About Bangladesh”n.d.) while the World Bank cites it as 160 million in 2008 (“Data on Bangladesh, World Bank” n.d.). The last Census was carried out by the GOB in 2001 and there are a number of updates available on specific aspects.

29 The number of masjids in Bangladesh and also the number of male imams is debatable. Development agents, both domestic and foreign, provide a range of estimates, from a conservative 200,000 (masjids) to as high as half a million. Several works suggest more precise numbers: Khan, (n.d.), states there are 280,000 masjids and from 250,000 to 280,000 imams, khatibs and muezzins; Rashid (2004) states there are 200,000 “masjid imams” (p. 122). Mahmood (2004) states there are 300,000 masjids in Bangladesh (p. 152). A UNFPA document states that there are 500,000 imams leading prayers in about 250,000 mosques in Bangladesh (Success Stories, 2005, p. 10). In one Bangla document, the
The number of imams who are (potentially) available for development activities is one million, within some 275,000 mosques in the country (Khan, n.d.). If the total population of Bangladesh is more than 160 million as the World Bank estimates (“Data on Bangladesh, World Bank” n.d.), the number of villages in rural areas and mahalla in urban areas will also have to be revised. According to GOB figures for 2001, (GOB-2), there are a total of 130 million people in Bangladesh living in some 87,000 villages and nearly 8,000 mahalla. Revising these figures to correspond to the increased total population (as provided by the World Bank) means that the number of masjids substantially increases. We also need to consider that like other demographic assessments, these are only the number of people who have been enumerated in a census, as there is also a sizeable (100,000 in 2001) “floating population” (GOB-2, p. 3).

30 The document is a typed and also partially handwritten notification in Bangla on the notice board of the Islamic Foundation head office in Dhaka. My thanks to Wahidul Haque for bringing this to my attention.

31 Japan tops the list, and Canada is third in bilateral donors.

32 Also see the pdf file “USAID/Bangladesh Dhaka September 2005” – the link is on the site “Program summary, USAID”.

33 See [http://asiafoundation.org/about/](http://asiafoundation.org/about/) According to this site, in 2009 the Asia Foundation provided program assistance valued at $86 million and distributed books and journals valued at over $43 million worldwide. Its own budget is therefore very small compared to that of USAID.


35 See Bangladesh and the United Nations. (November 1997) for summary of UN organisations in Bangladesh.
6 Chapter: Oppositional strategies and counter discourses

6.1 Introduction: starting point for an opposing strategy

discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a *starting point* for an opposing strategy. (Foucault, 1980/1978, p. 101, italics added)

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the Imam Discourse is also a “starting point” for counter discourses of resistance and difference. A counter discourse is an opposing strategy or set of strategies embedded within and arising in relation to a dominant discourse. There are multiple ways in which counter discourses can emerge but the work they do is similar: they contest or resist that which is being constructed, understood and acted upon as dominant. They open up a discursive space for adversarial strategies, for marginalized voices to “talk back” (hooks, 1989, cited in Moussa and Scapp, 1996). Although counter discourses work in similar ways, they are not identical; each point of resistance is a “special case” (Foucault, 1980/1978 p. 96) emerging as a possibility, a necessity or even an improbability. Counter discourses are facilitated by the nature of power. Power, as Foucault (1980/1978) has incisively argued, is “not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with” (p. 93); but a process that is immanent in the sphere in which it operates (p. 92-102). It is the name we give to “a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (1980/1978, p. 93).

My understanding of counter discourses is predicated on the assumption that “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1980/1978, p. 95). Resistance, however, “is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”(Foucault, 1980/1978, p. 95), by which I understand that counter discourses are relational, emerging within and alongside dominant discursive elements. The dominance of discursive structures is never totalizing or impervious to contestation because the relations of power that invest the discourse with dominance are relational, fluid, unpredictable and themselves constitute multiple “points of resistance” (Foucault, 1980/1978 p. 95). Discourse, for its part, cannot
be understood as a coherent, discretely divided world; (Foucault, 1980/1978 p. 100), so that:

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. (Foucault, 1980/1978 p. 101-102)

Counter discourses thus conceived are not necessarily those that are immediately observable as oppositional but which are present, though subsumed, and always imbued with possibilities for unpredictable outcomes. The discourse of international development and what I call the Imam Discourse are not fixed or homogenous; there are many elements at play within each of these formations, and power relations shape the relative dominance of one or more discursive elements. Talal Asad has remarked, “...because the secular is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly. I think it is best pursued through its shadows, as it were”(Asad, 2003, p. 16); and so, too, with the Imam Discourse. Concepts, practices and sensibilities that are combined in the Imam Discourse have been written into the everyday practices and assumptions of development so deeply that they are not obvious directly; they become easier to discern and describe when we examine elements that are buried within them and emerge in opposition to them.

6.2 “Hidden” in plain sight

As noted in Chapter 2, religion appears to be explicitly or deliberately expunged from development discourse. If we look at how development is defined and how its policies, aims and objectives are outlined in theoretical and conceptual terms, we do not find even a passing mention or recognition of religion. Yet, as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, USAID and UNFPA are engaging with religious groups and religious subjects at different levels—global, regional, national and local. The Bangladeshi state, through its agent the Islamic Foundation, facilitates the Imam Discourse at various levels.

My research shows that the discourse of international development and the Imam Discourse both produce counter discursive elements, even as they privilege dominant
ones. It is a paradoxical situation: religion is both absent and yet also present in development discourse. As the (former) journalist in me would say: religion is “hidden” in plain sight.

The erasure of religion from development is not “a plain and simple imposition of silence” (Foucault, 1980/1978, p. 27) but something more intricate that merits a particular kind of examination. “Silence” in itself does not set limits to what can be said or done, but rather functions within overall strategies (Foucault, 1980, [1978], p. 27) and procedures of exclusion that operate discursively to delimit the boundaries of legitimate knowledge (Mills, 2004, p. 57-60). Two specific procedures of exclusion, the operation of a taboo or prohibition and the imposition of a “will to truth” (Foucault, 1981, cited in Mills, 2004, p. 57-59) are pertinent. A taboo imbues a topic with certain limitations at a particular time and place, but over time, the specificities are eroded and the topic itself is imbued with specific limitations “which become habitual within particular cultures at certain periods” (Mills, 2004, p. 58). Thus, “once a subject is tabooed, that status begins to feel self-evident” (Mills, 2004, p. 58). The “will to truth”, in turn, is an obsessive demarcation of the distinction between “truth” and “falsehood”. The exclusion of religion in development discourse has similar characteristics: its banishment is “habitual” and undeserving of interrogation or debate. Both discursive structures, a taboo and an exclusionary project that rejects all but the “truth” or the “facts”, usually find institutional support and, conversely, also support various power relations. Interestingly, the discourse integrates and renders invisible the “prodigious machinery designed to exclude” (Foucault, 1981, p. 56, cited in Mills, 2004, p. 60) but in sum, what is produced, as discourse, is constituted by these exclusions. “Exclusion is, in essence, paradoxically, one of the most important ways in which discourse is produced” (Mills, 2004, p. 60).

In the discussion that follows, I trace the outlines of counter discourses by demonstrating that while development agents engage with religion in different ways, and along various local, regional and global axes of power-knowledge, there are various kinds of oppositional strategies—denials, erasures, contestations and ruptures—that construct resistance. I trace these counter discursive elements within both the dominant discourse of development and what I call the Imam Discourse. I begin by exploring development discourse as constructed by two bilateral agencies, the Canadian International
Development Agency (CIDA) and the UK Department of International Development (DIFID). My explorations demonstrate the presence of erasures, silences and contradictions pertaining specifically to religion in the discursive structures of development constituted by these agencies. CIDA and DFID buttress my exploration of the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh by showing deep entanglements between religion and international development. I suggest that the silences, erasures and contradictions are exclusionary tools that present distinct possibilities of resistance and contestation that destabilize core assumptions of secularism and modernity embedded in the development mission.

6.3 Development discourse: CIDA and DFID

No, we don’t – we wouldn’t engage with religion or religious issues or groups. We have no interest in it. We’d stay away from religion – unless the host country raised the topic. (Director, Bangladesh Program, CIDA)

CIDA presents a secular face of development, despite deep-rooted and long-term relationships with specific religious bodies, agents and interests. I must note here that although CIDA does not directly engage in the Imam Discourse, linkages between CIDA and religious interests in Bangladesh cannot be ruled out completely. The CIDA example suggests that a contradictory relationship between religion and development is not limited to the policies and practices of the UNFPA or USAID alone, but that such complications may permeate different local, regional and global sites.

CIDA’s stance on religion became evident initially to me at a conference organized by students at the University of British Columbia in March 2006. A senior representative of the organization stated that CIDA does not engage with religion or religious issues. Initially, he denied the possibility of religious links, but when I pressed him further he added: “unless the host country raises the topic.” Nearly two years later, in 2008, a meeting with a senior Canadian development expert working at CIDA, Bangladesh added to this impression. The expert and I met at a social setting when he was on leave in Vancouver. During our conversation, he indicated to me that CIDA was aware of, and keen to explore, Islamic issues and Muslim practices, ideas, traditions and norms in Bangladesh. He spoke at length about the motives behind CIDA’s interest, citing a need to contain
“radical Islam”. The development expert agreed to share several position papers on Islam in Bangladesh that he explained had been sent to CIDA by his counterpart at USAID. I remember (and I was struck by this remark) that he was aware that USAID Bangladesh had undertaken considerable work in this field. After our meeting, I sent an email to him confirming our conversation and my expectations of receiving detailed information from him. He acknowledged my message. Just a month later, however, he wrote that he had misunderstood the situation, that he did not possess and thus could not send me any information on Islam in Bangladesh.

The contradictions evident in the above-noted encounters and responses are reinforced by a brief analytical survey of CIDA’s policy and program documents, as available online. I began this survey during the earlier part of my dissertation research, and continued to explore the same websites over a period of four years; the time frame is important because, as will be evident below, interesting changes and deletions have been deployed on the same sites, over time. My aim in undertaking this survey was to identify the ways in which religion and secularism are positioned within CIDA’s policies, as available to the general public on its online resources. Thus, I looked at a number of CIDA sites, all interconnected, as websites tend to be. I found a dominant discourse that reflected a secular approach to development, while at the same time, I also found a set of oppositional strategies that signaled a less secular proclivity on the part of CIDA.

To begin, I examined CIDA’s main website (CIDA-1) but could not find a single reference to religion. There is a range of program priorities such as gender equality, the environment, human rights, democracy and governance, but there are no priorities that refer to religion (CIDA-1). Yet, closer examination suggested that CIDA did recognise religion, albeit in an indirect, localized manner. For instance, I found that CIDA documents describe Bangladesh as a “moderate Muslim country” (CIDA-2 Part I: Setting & Analysis 1.1.3). This quality of moderation is seen as a distinct advantage: “As a moderate Muslim country, Bangladesh is perceived as a steadying influence in the subcontinent” (CIDA-2 Part III 8:77 Conclusion, italics added). There is an interesting complexity to be noted here: the CIDA document that I last accessed in April 2006 and to which I refer above, is no longer available online (in August, 2010). A different version of the document is now available with the explanation that:
This document is a formal version of the existing Country Development Programming Framework (CDPF) 2003–2008 for Bangladesh updated, in part, to reflect cohesion with evolving Canadian development cooperation policy as well as Bangladesh’s 2005 Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). (CIDA-3, italics added)

It is interesting to note that in the more recent version, references to Muslims and Islam have been deleted. In the new document, Bangladesh is still seen as a strong, moderate, and stable regional example, but without an explicit recognition of religion:

Although a low-income country with many development challenges, Bangladesh is setting a strong example in the region ... of being on a steady, moderately paced path of reform that addresses social and economic issues in a democratic and increasingly participatory framework. Continued social development, good governance, greater transparency, and private-sector-led growth, as proposed in this framework, will not only benefit women and children, the poor, and most vulnerable groups, these will also contribute to increased regional stability. (CIDA-3 p. 21, italics added)

There is no explanation as to why references to Muslims and Islam have been deleted in the recent CIDA document on Bangladesh. My interest in the deletions is not to connect cause and effect in any way, but to understand the importance of erasure as a constituent element in the discourse. CIDA may be trying to remove explicit linkages with religion generally and in relation to Bangladesh, Islam and Muslims, in particular. The agency could be responding also to political considerations related to a heightened sensitivity to Islam.

When I examined actual programs being undertaken by CIDA, I found that the agency’s development partners on the ground, i.e. in program collaboration, include religious NGOs such as World Vision (CIDA-5), the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee of Canada (and the Canadian Mennonite Central Committee or MCC (CIDA-7). CIDA has partnered with MCC to support a Bangladeshi NGO called Prokritee since 1975 (CIDA-7). According to the agency’s own evaluation process, the MCC-Prokritee project is regarded to be one of its successful initiatives (CIDA-7). I also found linkages between CIDA and Christian NGOs in particular. A report published in 1995 by CIDA on its relationship with Christian NGOs (CIDA-4) indicates that the agency has reservations
regarding the proselytizing mandate of Christian NGOs with whom it forms partnerships for relief and development (also see Berger, 2003). This report establishes that CIDA has been working with Christian NGOs since the agency's inception in 1968 and in its own words, “there continues to be a solid basis for continuing this relationship” (CIDA-4 Christian NGOs and CIDA). CIDA is also closely involved with KAIROS, an umbrella organization also known as the Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, whose members include all of Canada’s major Christian denominations (CIDA-8; KAIROS-1). In November 2009, after a “35-year contribution agreement” (CIDA-8, also see CIDA-9), CIDA apparently suddenly cut off all funding to KAIROS. The reason, evidently, for the CIDA move was an apparent “anti-Semitic” (KAIROS-2) attitude on the part of KAIROS.

The contradictory messages emanating from the encounters that took place with two CIDA agents, as well as my perusal of CIDA documents, are further problematized in relation to my fieldwork in Bangladesh. During my fieldwork I met several Bangladeshi development agents who were employed by CIDA, USAID, the European Commission (EC) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). My meetings took place over a period of several months, sometimes at a private venue. Bangladeshi nationals, when they met me at an official venue in particular, tended to become relatively more guarded in their statements than did foreign development experts, especially when asked to provide information that I could cite in my dissertation. On different occasions these agents told me that their respective agencies are carrying out detailed studies on Muslim practices, traditions, customs, and that Islamic texts and Islamic madrasah systems and imams were objects of particular interest. Yet, none of these studies is available for scrutiny. They would not give me any details, especially when asked to provide concrete, written substantiation of engagements with religious interests. As far as I know, the situation has not changed since my fieldwork ended in 2006. Apart from USAID, The Asia Foundation and UNFPA who are undertaking imam training programs openly, none of the agencies that I came into contact with is transparent about its interest in, or entanglements with, Muslim subjects or Islamic issues in Bangladesh.

I turn next to my interview with the social development officer at DFID, a bilateral agency that is ostensibly not engaging with imams in Bangladesh. Even as our meeting began, the expert clarified that she would comment on religion in her personal capacity,
not on behalf of DFID. Selinger (2004) notes that such a request is not unusual. She states that when Ver Beek (2002, cited in Selinger, 2004, p. 525) asked a number of development agencies for their policy on religion, they tried to avoid commenting on the subject in their official capacity. The comment brings to mind also the challenges of “studying up” as I have noted in Chapter 2. In my case, the DFID representative made a similar remark, but as our meeting continued, she disclosed interesting fragments of information on the agency’s activities.

The expert acknowledged that DFID was interested in learning about Islam in Bangladesh, especially in relation to the political situation and the rise of “certain extremist Islamic trends.” They were keen to understand “both the secular and the extremist trends so that [it] could engage in a more meaningful way, and so that [DFID] did not stereotype or generalize issues” (DFID, interview). To this end, DFID was in the process of designing a Terms of Reference to learn more about the madrasah or Islamic educational system, in particular, the motivation behind sending children to these schools, the socio-economic profile of students, the rewards they get and the kind of livelihood they have afterwards. She stated that by learning about madrasah education, DFID would be better informed when working on its sectoral budget to the Bangladesh government for primary education development programs. At this point, the expert implied that the study had been completed. I tried to obtain details from her, as follows:

AZ (Almas Zakiuddin): So the madrasah study will be commissioned—but you said you already had commissioned something?
DFID: We already have commissioned it, actually from our London office
AZ: Can I take a look at that? See the study? What is it called?
DFID: (Pause. She looks away from me). Uh (long silence).
AZ: Okay, can one see that, has it been published, or what stage is it in?
DFID: Uh...we haven’t really published it (pause).
AZ: Okay, but the study has been conducted?
DFID: Its been conducted yes...(pause again)
AZ: Is there any way in which, in the future, one can look at it; do you think it will be available?
DFID: Uh... (She looks away from me). I think there are some studies which will be open to the public, like at the moment we are also in the middle of doing our human security assessment in Bangladesh and some of them of course will be open for all and some will be specifically for DFID staff.
AZ: Has DFID conducted any studies on Islam?
DFID: Yes, that’s [called] something like ‘Engaging with Islam’ but I’m not sure that, we will actually...(long pause; she looks away from me).
AZ: So the study, it is on Islam, but not on education, does that mean it is more general?
DFID: Yes, it would look more at the political aspects of it.
AZ: You mean...?
DFID: That study is more [in order] to understand what the moderate trends and the extremist trends of Islam mean, and its presence in Bangladesh. But I’m not sure that study is actually open to the public as yet, it might be in future but at the moment I don’t think (she pauses)... I can’t comment on that.

I have not been able to access the DFID study on madrasah education in Bangladesh or the one she tentatively identified as “Engaging with Islam”. There is no reference to either study on the DFID Bangladesh website. During the meeting, however, the DFID officer referred to an invitation from the Masjid Committee for Community Advancement (MACCA) that she stated she had responded to that very morning:

DFID: this morning I was responding to one of the requests to participate in a seminar being organized by the Masjid Committee ... MACCA, and this was like a group of religious leaders who are coming [to us] to discuss HIV/AIDS issues and find out how could they be engaged. So this was very positive, that was really good, very encouraging to see that they are coming forward to talk about these kinds of issues that previously we thought were taboo and had a stigma attached. It was very encouraging for DFID to see that they are actively seeking ... to engage with it.

It is interesting to note that MACCA, the group referenced above, has published a USAID-funded booklet called Khutba Guide (2006) and the group also has links with the Islamic Foundation and UNFPA. Furthermore, my meeting with the DFID representative demonstrated not only how (some) development agents become guarded on questions regarding religion, but also that religious groups, activities, and interests are perceived by them to lie outside the domain of development and modernity.

The above-noted instances are not meant to muddy the secular credentials of CIDA or DFID. My interest lies in identifying discursive silences, exclusions and contradictions and to trace the possibilities for resistance within them. I propose that the silences and exclusions traced above are important for a study such as mine since they constitute an important strategy whereby the practitioners of international development in a Muslim
majority society like Bangladesh, recognize and engage the authoritative power of the religious but also attempt to maintain the coherence of secularism as a pre-requisite of development.

The CIDA examples indicate that an agency reputed to be progressive and secular in the development industry\textsuperscript{12} has a paradoxical position on religion. CIDA’s involvement with Christian development organizations is both long and deeply rooted. At the same time, there is a deliberate attempt to purge any formal acknowledgement of, or connections with religion in its policies and processes. Thus, while the dominant discursive structures of CIDA are constructed without specific reference to religious issues or religious subjects, linkages with religion are produced within the same discursive structures in the form of erasures and silences.

Recent erasures of references to Islam and Muslims in CIDA’s country specific program on Bangladesh, and the cutting back of funds to KAIROS suggest that CIDA’s policies are influenced by political considerations, including a global politics predicated on a ‘War on Terrorism’ in a post-9/11 world. It is clear that in addition to a longstanding tension between religion and political modernity, a new element has been added to the discursive mix in the last decade or so. The emergence of a global politics of Islamism has meant, among other things, that the manner in which Muslims and Islam have been perceived has undergone a shift in international development circles in general, and amongst international development agencies working in Muslim majority countries such as Bangladesh, in particular. There is a new element of secrecy and erasure that permeates the discourse and suggests possibilities of counter discourses that are subsumed within it.

The CIDA officer who retracted an earlier (probably unguarded) commitment to share knowledge, and the DFID officer who shifted the central focus of my probing questions into a specific yet unavailable official study, could be extra vigilant because of the circulation of knowledge amongst international development circles about the politics of Islamism. The elements they strive to subsume are potential points of resistance and contestation to the dominant projection of development as a regime of political modernity and stable secularism.

Also noteworthy, in my view, is a particular kind of rationality that is posited by development agencies in order to dispose of certain "problems" in particular ways (cited
in Escobar, 1984, pp. 381-82). This demonstrates, among other things, how power relations produce their effects through their own rationale. An interesting example is the global rationality through which the crisis tendencies of the capitalist system—for example, those that came to the forefront during the recent housing market collapse in the US—are often shifted away from (asking questions about) the system into the discourse of experts and political, public and scientific discourses that “manage” a crisis, leaving the capitalist system fully intact (Habermas, cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 382).

In a similar way, power relations in international development work through a rationality that shifts the “problem” away from open discussion, public scrutiny and debate, into areas that are less likely to disrupt a dominant political and development agenda and are easier to control: detailed studies, position papers, estimates and assessments are carried out to both produce and manage religious issues and religious subjects. The Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh, for instance, produces a range of publications in Bangla that categorize, list, describe and define in meticulous detail a wide range of duties, responsibilities and activities pertaining to imams (Mahmood, 2004; Rashid, 2004; Dewan, 1986; Khutba Guide, 2006). Administrative control could be expected to weaken the potency of “radical” Islam or the rise of “certain extremist Islamic trends” (DFID, interview) in Bangladesh and make such potentially disruptive elements manageable by the discourse itself.

My meetings with DFID and CIDA experts demonstrate how they are keen to assert their agency’s separation from religious issues in language that is studiously apolitical and invokes professional, managerial, official nodes of power and expertise. In the more recent version of the CIDA country framework on Bangladesh, references to Muslim or Islam are sanitized and replaced with terminology that produces Bangladesh as being on “a steady, moderately paced path of reform that addresses social and economic issues in a democratic and increasingly participatory framework” (CIDA-3, p. 21).

I turn now to the Imam Discourse and explore various points of resistance within its dominant discursive elements. I begin by examining tensions pertaining to gender and women’s subject positions evident in The Asia Foundation’s constitution of the Imam Discourse.
6.4 The Imam Discourse: control and resistance

The Asia Foundation (TAF): We haven’t involved women because we felt that the Imam Training Academy, they are not comfortable with women coming in [to the space].
Almas Zakiuddin (AZ): Have the imams expressed their disapproval of women entering the Academy space?
TAF: No, they have requested—but only informally—that for the time being, don’t bring women into the Academy. In time, there will be a better level of comfort and they may come [into the Academy] at that time. But they [imams] have no bar against women being present in the field. (TAF, interview).

The excerpt quoted above is from my interview with two male Bangladeshi development agents at The Asia Foundation (TAF). It denotes how exclusionary tools facilitated by power relations come into play through particular forms of rationality that mask the tools themselves. I ask the agents if they have a policy or understanding regarding the involvement of women in the Imam Training Program. My question is open-ended, not specifying the role of women as imams or development agents. The rationality proffered by TAF is that although women are not involved in the Imam Training Academy, the Foundation is not bound by a particular policy since the imams are making an informal request not to “bring women into the Academy”. The agents suggest that a policy, such as it may be, is contingent on time, and on (the imams deciding that they have) a “better level of comfort”. If we look at the exchange, we see that an outright denial precedes an acknowledgement of a no-women policy, as in the following remark “TAF: No, they have requested—but only informally”. Then, a second remark, that the imams “have no bar against women” being present in the field” is added, to further perpetuate the impression of a gender-balanced perspective.

Counter discursive elements emerge within these same dominant constructs. That women are/need to be prevented from entering the spaces of the Imam Training Academy suggests that their potential to be (taken seriously as) subjects in the same way as the imams is very real and even something of a threat. As the remarks noted above show, women are not barred in any way from being present “in the field”, which implies that as far as the discourse is concerned, the practices and processes of everyday life, as they are
experienced in the villages, homes and communities of Bangladesh, incorporate women as subjects and agents in their own right.

A number of references made by the Asia Foundation officers testify to the reality of women’s presence in various facets of life, for instance, as service providers in the health care field, as experts in development work at the grassroots level, and also as subjects with the potential to be empowered. The Asia Foundation officers told me that during their training many imams express their surprise when they visit health clinics run by local NGOs and are told that the clinic provides health care to men as well as to women and children. The imams’ impression, apparently, is that only women are provided with specialized (and in their view, dubious) forms of female-friendly treatment, including abortions, at NGO-run health care clinics. The presence of women, both as service providers and recipients of a particular kind of health service, namely that by an NGO, is perceived to be a challenge of some sort and certainly as a distinct and discrete node of power-knowledge, albeit in a localized, dispersed way.

The head of TAF reinforced the notion that imams were initially apparently suspicious of NGOs in general and women’s relationships with, and roles within NGOs in particular. During my interview he explained at length how, at the start of their training, many imams assumed that NGOs are “taking women out of the bosti (slum) and empowering them” (TAF, interview), or carrying out activities and events that are “not in the spirit of Islam” (TAF, interview). As well, both the head and the other two agents of TAF intimated that initially virtually all the imams were reluctant to accept the necessity and utility of providing reproductive health care to women because in their minds reproductive health care—by which the imams meant contraception—provided women with greater sexual autonomy.

However, according to the officers, the imams’ perspectives undergo a change during the training so that they are no longer suspicious of, among other things, NGOs, women’s activities and of reproductive health care. A similar “logic” is found in various textual sources authored by the agencies on the Imam Training Program (UNFPA, 2003, 2005), and in relation to imam involvement in family planning programs earlier as well (Uddin, 2000).
It is worth noting that there is no explicit explanation about how the imams’ perceptions change; but that they do change, specifically as a consequence of the training program, is not left in doubt. It does not seem likely, from what the development experts stated to me, that imams come to accept women’s empowerment as a matter of principle. My point here is that contradictions and gaps in the explanations raise several critical questions about the Imam Discourse.

An important question is how relations of power link male agents of development, including TAF officers, with male clients of development, namely male Muslim imams. The Asia Foundation officers, all men, cite “the imams” as a seemingly separate body of subjects who come to the Training Program with suspicions, anxieties and concerns about the sheer presence of women, as well as women’s potential for empowerment through the aegis of NGOs and reproductive health care. The TAF representative remarked at one point that “it would certainly be nice” if women could be a part of the Imam Training Program. The USAID representatives made similar comments to me (USAID, interview). But in spite of these explicit statements, a slippage occurs. I noticed the slippage initially in the agents’ use of “we” when describing the aims of the Imam Training Program:

The Asia Foundation (TAF): ... the imams could be educated about development issues that are relevant to their communities ... they could talk about a range of moral issues as well, trafficking, women’s role in society. We could reference religious texts, what do religious texts say about these issues. How can we—what can we—do to make things better.
Almas Zakiuddin (AZ): Who would reference the religious texts, I mean, what is meant by “we” here?
TAF: I mean the imams.

When the conversation turned to examples of how women’s physical presence inside the all-male Islamic Academy is cause for concern, the slippage becomes more obvious. The head of TAF noted that when several women from USAID’s development projects in the field came into the Academy to brief the imams, there was a level of “raised discomfort” especially because the women “refused to put their scarves over their heads and annoyed the imams” (TAF, interview). In contrast, he described his own impression of imams undergoing training as a “kind of magical thing to observe” (TAF, interview) and
most imams as “very simple gentlemen from remote villages who’ve had very little stimulation of any kind” (TAF, interview).

One of the officers at TAF narrated an incident with a project manager in charge of an NGO in the field. When the imams arrived on a field trip, the manager, who “does not cover her head” (TAF, interview) deliberately “holds back” and does not go out to meet them. The imams are so impressed by the clinic that they want to meet the person who runs it. They seek out the non-hijab female manager and have tea with her. I asked the officer why the female manager “holds back” and does not go out to meet the imams. His explanation was that she is afraid of annoying the imams. “She does not want the imams to react negatively”, he stated (TAF, interview). The Asia Foundation experts also report that, in time, the imams cease to be annoyed; they imply in sundry ways that when we expose imams carefully to the vagaries of women (and their uncovered heads), they demonstrate their inherent egalitarianism and accept the women.

I do not wish to suggest that the imams are inherently unfair or motivated by ill intent. Rather, I want to mark how power relations constitute imams and women subjects and the resistance evident within these constitutions. In embracing the development project, and becoming subjects of development discourse as framed by the imam training project, the trained imams are constituted simultaneously as backward, non-modern and simple men who are, it is implied, understandably suspicious of gender and developmental progress. They are constructed not only as a potential challenge to the development mission but also as subjects being given opportunities to strengthen their (the imams’) gender and religious authority in the service of development, somewhat like “soldiers of secularism”, to coin a phrase. Women’s oppositional strategies are latent in these constitutions. If power relations constitute the dominance of imams as “soldiers of secularism” as it were, they simultaneously provide distinct possibilities of women’s resistance and contestations of the same.

In the next section I discuss erasures evident in the discourse of imams as constructed by the multilateral agency, UNFPA. I trace counter discursive strategies that “talk back” and assert the significance of gender and Muslim women’s agency.
6.5 Counter discourses that disrupt

A tension was evident in my meeting with the UNFPA representative in Bangladesh. The agent entered the meeting room with a large binder in her hand. She told me it was “the” Training Manual for the imam program. She flicked through the Manual during our meeting but would not allow me to look at it. As our meeting was about to end, I tried to obtain access to the Manual.

Almas Zakiuddin (AZ): How do you evaluate the imams, through some sort of feedback, learning outcomes? (I looked pointedly at the Training Manual)
UNFPA: We don’t have much now, maybe in five years we will have some feedback. We can’t give the Training Manual to you, it won’t be of much help anyway. We don’t have copies of handouts and material from the Manual. We can’t give it officially to anyone.
AZ: I will need permission to quote from the Training Manual, right?
UNFPA: There are lots of books at the Islamic Foundation. We have never had a problem at the Islamic Foundation. There was A.Z.M. Shamsul Alam, he used to be with the Islamic Foundation, we brought him in as male platform of zero tolerance under the gender component. (She turned the pages of the Manual as though searching for something, then began to read out loud).
And here you can see it is written: ‘We used to practise ajol [Bangla for the Arabic azl or coitus interruptus] and it was thus revealed [in the Quran] to us that we must take permission from our wives and it is not prohibited in the Quran to do so, nor did our Prophet, may peace be on him, prohibit us either. This means it is personal but not prohibited. What else do you want? (She looked up at me). Those who are practising ajol, they must take their wife’s permission, in this way women’s empowerment is being invoked.
AZ: I see (pause). Perhaps I could ‘borrow’ the Manual for a short while and read it right here inside the UNFPA office?
UNFPA: It is an internal document; our policy is we cannot share internal documents with outsiders (she shut the Manual). (UNFPA, interview, emphasis added)

The aim of reproducing the above exchange is to show how the UNFPA expert undertakes two contrary actions simultaneously: she tries to shift attention away from the Training Manual and also tries to use the Manual as a mechanism of power-knowledge. This behaviour might appear to be contradictory, but it is in keeping with the “rules” of discourse. Discursive elements produce a dominant discourse through exclusionary tools, which are concealed so that the discursive “truth” that emerges appears to be self-evident.
If we look at the exchange reproduced above, we see that the UNFPA agent initially suggests that the Training Manual is not useful or detailed enough to provide information, and then she injects a strong element of official and institutional exclusivity about the item. Her reference to “the male platform of zero tolerance under the gender component,” which is couched in development jargon, and the specific naming of a former director of the Islamic Foundation, invoke administrative and managerial authority, while also underscoring her own legitimacy.

There is also a significant and surprising reference to ajol, coitus interruptus. The remark astonished me and threw me off balance for a few moments. The reference is extraordinary, especially by Bangladeshi standards of sexual taboos. During this meeting, I was accompanied by a Bangladeshi male researcher based in Dhaka who facilitated many of my interviews and with whom I have worked before in Bangladesh. He had great difficulty looking at me. After the meeting, I asked the researcher what he thought of the reference to ajol. He was visibly embarrassed and mumbled below his breath that he would get back to me later. Such is the taboo involved in talking about sexuality in Bangladeshi society, particularly between men and women that he did not bring it up again. That the UNFPA expert brought it up is significant on various levels.

The agent’s reference suggests the presence of powerful elements of gender equality and sexual rights that are not predicated on any kind of instrumental rationality but rather, are rooted in Islamic tradition. Explicit affirmations of Muslim women’s sexual rights in the Qur’an, and in both classical and contemporary interpretations and commentaries, are perhaps not obvious generally. In my experience they are conveyed in woman-to-woman conversations; or by implication, such as when a marriage is dissolved because her husband has not sexually satisfied a wife, as is her right; and through individual study and understanding of the Qur’an. I was fortunate enough to have acquired such knowledge by listening to discussions on these topics within my own home. My point is that I am not sure how Muslim women generally understand their sexual rights in Islam. Certainly, scholarly works are explicit. According to Haideh Moghissi (1999),

Although different interpretations and traditions within Islam make it hard to generalize, it can be said that Islam is a sex-affirming cultural and religious
tradition. The Islamic attitude towards sexual pleasure may, indeed, be a major dividing line between Islam and other traditional religions. (p. 21)

Kecia Ali (2006) notes that the twelfth century Islamic scholar Al Ghazali saw a wife’s sexual pleasure to be her husband’s responsibility; not only was the husband supposed to arouse his wife through engaging in sufficient sexual foreplay, but also, he needed to see to that she reached orgasm (p. 7). Ali states that key Islamic texts present marriage, and sex within it, as a natural and desirable part of human life (p. 6). She refers to the works of several contemporary authors who focus on women’s sexual rights within marriage, in order to prove the importance of female sexual pleasure by highlighting the disassociation of sex from reproduction and the importance of female orgasm (p. 6-7). Ali cites Al Ghazali and contemporary Muslim scholar Sa’diyya Shaikh (2003) to explain that the practice of ‘azl, coitus interruptus, poses problems for Muslims because it can diminish a woman’s sexual pleasure, that is, prevent her from reaching orgasm. In other words, Muslim scholars in the classical tradition and located in contemporary times as well, are clear on the principle that a women is entitled to full sexual pleasure—albeit within the social contract of marriage—and thus, there is “priority given in Islam to mutual sexual fulfillment” (Ali, p. 7). Given this background, it seems that the UNFPA expert could be saying something to me about gender and Islam and her somewhat abrupt yet forthright reference to ajol was meant to remind me of a powerful theme of women’s equality within Islam.

The UNFPA expert’s comments were made in a specific context. Our meeting, as I have noted above, was predicated on an overt assertion of authority on her part; she held on to the Training Manual as a tool of power, exclusivity and expertise. The tone and thrust of my questions on gender issues and imams made her somewhat defensive. For instance, I asked her how imams in the UNFPA program would relate to a salish, an informal village court that has often been the site of unfair and violent “judgements” against women in Bangladesh. Her response was emphatic: “And why shouldn’t the imams speak out against such a judgement, they surely will!” Later during the meeting, when I asked if any women experts were involved in UNFPA’s imam training program, she retorted:
I am. I go and talk to the imams about gender for instance, no problem ... I don’t think it is right to blame imams for gender bias, on the contrary they are very helpful people. And after all, gender issues were not established in one day, they have come down through the centuries—so how can we expect that religious leaders will suddenly start dancing! (UNFPA, interview, emphasis added)

When the UNFPA expert referred to ajol, therefore, it is more than likely that she wanted to stress the egalitarian aspects of Islam in relation to women, and to decry implications of male bias on the part of male Muslim imams. During our conversation, she stopped several times to read Qur’anic verses aloud from the Manual, including a verse that stresses the equality of women’s and men’s labour. Her perspective was direct and unambiguous, as this comment denotes:

I think that if someone believes in the Qur’an, they don’t need anything [else]. Everything is there in the Qur’an.... How much has been developed in Muslim countries because of the Qur’an! (UNFPA, interview)

She described in some detail how, on a visit to Iran—“a progressive and developed Muslim country”—she had met two elderly religious scholars.

They spoke so beautifully. They asked us what is the need for so many people in Bangladesh now, yes in the past it could have been different, but, “What will you do with so many people?” they asked. A person such as an ayatollah asked us, “Is America so populated? How do they manage to run their affairs so well?” (UNFPA, interview)

Her responses could have been shaped in relation to a Canadian-based, Westernized “modernity” that I represented in a Bangladeshi context. They could be seen also as a move to self-identify, in any case, as a “modern” Muslim subject. Recent feminist studies of Muslim women’s agency and Islamic feminist political empowerment and practices of piety are useful in opening up the possibilities of modern religious subject positions, especially in relation to Islam and women (Barlas, 2001, 2002; Shaikh, 2003; Zine, 2004; Jamal, 2005; Syed, forthcoming). These works, as well as the UNFPA expert’s comments, suggest counter discourses of gender and modernity emerging within Islam and in the Imam Discourse.
The complicated erasures evident in the UNFPA framing of gender issues in the imam training program invoked Western technologies and resources of international development expertise, yet also invoked notions of Muslim women’s empowerment through feminist, and “modern” Islamic sensibilities. The UNFPA expert herself provides an instance of an oppositional strategy or an emerging counter discourse. She is not the typical “secular” Bangladeshi subject associated with and targeted by international development; rather she displays an agency that is associated with modern Islamic female subjects.

The gender connotations of the Imam Discourse are linked closely to dominant understandings of “imam” both in Islamic tradition and in practices in Muslim societies such as Bangladesh. I briefly note below how dominant constructs are destabilized by counter discursive possibilities.

6.6 Any Muslim who is a pious man

Any Muslim who has adequate knowledge about the rules of sal’at 18 and is otherwise fit as a pious man can be an imam—Banglapedia.

The source of the statement cited above is a respected and comprehensive online resource on Bangladesh. There are two interesting assumptions contained within this statement. The phrase “Any Muslim,” is non-gendered and neutral in the sense that it can and normally does refer to women and men. The Arabic language has specific rules of gender that are beyond my expertise (see Wadud, 1999, especially pp. 6-10) but my understanding of the Qur’an, Muslim practices, and explanations such as that by Wadud help me to understand that a word such as Muslim (a believer in Islam) is gender neutral and denotes both men and women, unless it is accompanied by Muslimah, which is an explicit rendering of the female believer in Islam. In the English and Bangla context as provided in the Banglapedia (which is available in both languages), the word Muslim is read in such a way as to privilege a (pious) man. The assumption being made in this text is that being Muslim is a natural privilege of men. It follows then that the normative, implicit meaning of imam is that of a male incumbent. The possibility of a woman being an imam is not ruled out in so many words; rather it is made implicit.
The assumption is not peculiar to Bangladesh. The underlying assumption in Islamic thought has been that the “the male person is the normative human being” (Wadud, 1999, p. xi). Reza Aslan (2006), a scholar whose work is marked by insightful, progressive interpretations of Islamic tradition and practices, states that: “the Imam is the person who stands at the head of the mosque and leads the congregation in prayer” (2006, p. 181, italics added). Aslan does not identify an imam as female—it would be inaccurate to do so because historically, a vast majority of imams has been male; but he does not identify an imam as a man either. He brings in a more neutral subject formation, that of a “person” as an imam and by doing so, he opens up, even if very subtly, a discursive space potentially for women to “talk back” and assert their subject positions as imams. Aslan’s work destabilizes dominant understandings further. He states that Muslim feminists are reclaiming an egalitarian and justice-oriented Islam through a vision based in particular on the ideal Muslim society in the eighth century A.D. in Medina where, among other rights granted to women, the Prophet Muhammad specifically designated women as “spiritual guides for the Ummah” (2006, p.74). Aslan names one such woman, Umm Waraqa. We learn from other sources, including reliable Hadith,\(^{19}\) that the Prophet Muhammad appointed Umm Waraqa as an imam for her family.\(^{20}\) Although Umm Waraqa is seen as an exception, and a vast majority of imams in Muslim societies everywhere, through many centuries, have been men, the possibilities of imams who are women cannot be ruled out or totally subsumed.

My field work in Bangladesh revealed that assumptions of a normative male imam prevail across Bangladeshi society: amongst policymakers in development agencies, in state-funded organizations such as the Islamic Foundation, amongst imams themselves, and also amongst Bangladeshi women and men engaged in development and social activism who self-identify as “secular” subjects. At the same time, there is evidence of resistance to these same assumptions. Among a body of fairly detailed literature produced by the Islamic Foundation, there are several accounts about the role of imams as community leaders, prayer leaders and useful members of society. Here the normative imam is a man, but a married man. His marital status is mentioned specifically in a list of qualities that an “ideal imam” ought to possess. Where a suggestion of resistance emerges is in the description of the kind of wife who adds to the qualities of an imam. It is stated
that a man whose wife is comparatively more beautiful [than other wives] will be given priority over other men to become an imam (Mahmood, 2004). It is important to point out that the Bangla word for beauty, shundor, is also the word for good; in Bangla usage, shundor is used for a range of positive attributes, from an individual’s behaviour, appearance, and virtues, to a pleasant voice, clean clothes or good weather. By describing an imam’s wife as shundor the implied meaning is that she possesses distinct qualities that are desirable and make her stand out in comparison to other women. A publication called the Khutba Guide (2006) provides quotations from the Qur’an that are explicit in framing and directly addressing women as believers in their own right.

In the next section, I examine several “secular” and Islamic feminist contestations that emerge at the interface of Islam and development discourse as both are being reformulated in an era of intense negotiations of “Islam” and “modernity” at the local, national and global levels.

6.7 Legitimacy and agency

Talking about imams, the point is, ...[they] don’t have power perhaps, but they have legitimacy. Otherwise why do people stand behind them and pray? If you are standing behind someone in prayer then that person already has some indirect standing. (Farida Akhter, UBINIG, interview, emphasis added)

Those of us who are secularists, I think we need to move away from rejection and listen to the debate [about religion and Islam]. Often we state our position and don’t want to understand what is happening, why it is happening. There are so many issues, class and status and younger people who may not be overtly religious but don’t want to reject those who are. (Khushi Kabir, Nijera Kori, interview, emphasis added)

As Shelley Feldman (2001), has noted with reference to Bangladesh, “Once thought to be a private matter, greater attention is now focused on how Islamist demands appropriate public discourses to gain institutional control of the state” (p. 209). Like Feldman, I feel it is important to make a distinction between Islamic theology “as a set of universalitic [sic] impulses and asserted practices, and Islam as ideological tool, a form of symbolic capital that is deployed for particular ends” (p. 211). It is also increasingly
evident in the present climate of a powerful resurgence of academic interest in religion and especially Islam that the question that many are asking is, “Does Islam empower women?” (White, 2010, p. 334). It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to engage with this question in detail but it reflects to a large extent the kind of questions that are being increasingly taken up by women of various social strata in Bangladesh. White’s research demonstrates how two deeply religious Muslim women living in the same region in Bangladesh have contrasting views on “both gender and general politics of Islam” (2010, p. 342). It encourages us to look at religious actors, as far as possible, on their own terms.

I found similarly contrasting perceptions evident amongst several women in the development industry. For instance, as the remarks quoted above show, Akhter and Kabir voice perspectives that demonstrate diversity and also commonalities. Both women speak of their own perceptions changing in the recent past in relation to questions about religion and particularly pertaining to Islam. Akhter says she is reviewing her understanding of religion after a recent visit to Canada. Her visit coincided with the arrest of the Toronto 14, a group of young Muslim men of Pakistani origin who were arrested for apparently plotting terrorist attacks on Canada’s political leaders inside the House of Commons.

I met a Christian woman in Canada and though she did not condemn the men she kept saying “How is Muslim society and your Muslim community dealing with the issue?” I thought to myself: “It is as though the very word Muslim means terrorist! Why should this be assumed?” To my mind when a particular religion is targeted, it makes people more religious than before and you can take my example – before this I would not have given such questions much thought. But when something negative was said about Muslims, that bothered me. (She laughs, indicating her own surprise). I took it personally. I mean, this was making me more Muslim than I was before. (Akhter, interview)

The politics of “saving” Muslim women in certain parts of the world infuriates scholars (see Abu-Lughod, 2002) and activists alike. Akhter asserts that while religion is a private matter, one cannot be penalized for being religious. Kabir explains that feminists from the South who live and have been educated outside the South problematize the manner in which Muslims are being demonized and homogenized:

I realize where they are coming from; they need to question this absolutely blanket image of one Islam as rigid and terrorist. And there are scholars too who say there is not one kind of Islam. But the point is, such questions do not
affect women and men who are a majority on the ground in Bangladesh.
(Kabir, interview)

Kabir cautions against a tendency to over theorize the so-called resurgence of Muslim women’s agency within Islam in reference to Bangladesh. For her, a major issue that emerges from recent and increasingly stronger engagements of international development agencies and imams is the centralized, more sophisticated administrative efficiencies that she feels are likely to emerge as a consequence. She cites earlier experiences, in the 1990s, when a spate of attacks by right wing groups, including some led by imams, on NGOs in rural parts of Bangladesh were seen by many to be linked to an organized dissemination of particularly inflammatory and misogynist khutba or sermons by imams during the Friday prayers.

My meetings with several women in the development industry in Bangladesh who did not wish to be identified provided interesting perspectives on religion and gender. I learned from two women that they had recently joined Qur’an reading classes in order to “find out more about Islam” because they did not know much about religion. A third woman explained how she was planning to go on the pilgrimage to Makkah although no one in her family had done so before. Huq and Rashid (2008) write about Qur’an classes held in the home of a diplomat’s wife in Dhaka and being attended by a group of educated, elite women in the city. There are other studies that suggest greater interest in Islamic learning and Muslim practices in Bangladesh. Fauzia Erfan Ahmed (2008) writes about grassroots Muslim feminist spirituality in rural settings in Bangladesh; while Alyson Callan (2008) profiles a woman saint in Sylhet, in Bangladesh.

What interests me in particular in the various discussions and perceptions noted above are the distinctly feminist, gender aware, Muslim counter discourses that destabilize the Imam Discourse. I did not set out to explore counter discourses specifically and my observations in this regard are provisional. I am struck by a core impulse within recent scholarship by Muslim feminists in particular, and other scholars in general, that speak to that which Leila Ahmed (1992) calls the stubbornly egalitarian and ethical voice of Islam (pp. 64-66). It is this core impulse and the emerging body of work in which it is located that offer specific possibilities for excavating and producing women’s leadership and
agency in relation to the dominant discourse of male Muslim imams. An interesting article by Omid Safi (2005) challenges the normativity of male Muslim imams by interrogating Islamic doctrine from within:

To use Islamic language, all of humanity has been born with a primordially pure nature (fitrah), because all human beings have had the spirit of God breathed into them. As the Qur’an records God saying, wa nafakhtu fihī min ruḥī [15:29]. The idea that men have automatic spiritual authority over women is completely inconsistent with this fundamental Islamic (tawhidi) conception of the relationship between God and human creation, and between people amongst themselves. The distinctions in our spiritual rank in Islam should not be derived from gender, but rather from our piety and God-consciousness (taqwa) (Safi, 2005)

Safi’s arguments are premised in much the same way as that of Asma Barlas (2004) who re-reads the Qur’anic text in an attempt to offer “a legitimate countervoice to the authoritarian voice of Islam about which we hear so much these days” (p. 2). Barlas states that if, as Leila Ahmed maintains, “there are ‘fundamentally different Islams’ that arise in different readings, then it is imperative to challenge the authoritarian and patriarchal readings of Islam that are profoundly affecting the lives and future of Muslim women” (p. 2). The practical, real life struggles of Muslim women who are engaging in public advocacy is evident in a documentary film that follows the lives of three women imams in Syria, Jordan and Egypt (Veiled Voices). A recent work by Mohammad Akram Nadvi (2007) provides, for the first time in English, an intricately referenced, biographical account of Muslim women scholars from the earliest Muslim communities in the seventh century A.D. in the Arabian peninsula, across West Asia, into India, up until the 14th century A.D. Nadvi’s work stresses the authoritative and influential role of women in Islamic scholarship and demonstrates women’s significance even within what Muslim feminists have termed patriarchal structures and dominant male institutional authority. His study notes the presence of women in public mixed gatherings, inside mosques “as the men attended” (p. 81); a woman praying with her head uncovered in “the men’s rows” (p. 81) and clear references to women leading other women in prayer. Safi sums up the primary dilemma and its resolution succinctly:
Do we believe deep in our hearts that women are fully human, entitled to their humanity as a precious creation of God, or not? Are women not also the bearers of the Trust (amana) that we are told in the Qur'an is of such cosmic significance that the Heavens and the Earth could not bear it, and so all of humanity took upon itself? If our nobility in the sight of God is not due to race, gender, or national origin but rather to our piety and God-consciousness, then let us pray behind imams who are God-conscious and pious, be they male or female, irrespective of racial and ethnic background. (2005)

The foregoing discussion demonstrates, among other things, how counter discourses emerge in the context of Islamic feminists and modern subjects, as well as from “secular” NGOs. I add to this discussion below by continuing with NGO perceptions. I provide a specific example of how a faith-based NGO called Islamic Relief, Bangladesh upholds dominant discursive elements and simultaneously displays contestations and resistances to the same.

6.8 Faith-based and secular examples

It is not only the imam; religious leaders in other faiths are also influential: if the pope says something it has a huge impact. (Islamic Relief, Bangladesh, interview).

Oh there are two types of ‘faith-based’ NGOs—those that are openly religious and those that try to be more secular. And even mainstream agencies are careful, they don’t raise questions on religion. I think they don’t want to take a position on Islam, in the current situation with the demonization of Islam. (Khushi Kabir, Nijera Kori, interview)

Why is [the present crisis in] Lebanon an Islamic question? If we [progressive Bangladeshi NGOs] consider floggings to be a human rights issue, why can’t we see the killings in Lebanon to be a human rights issue? In Iraq a teenager was raped by an American soldier and he admitted it—but where is the outrage? (Farida Akhter, UBINIG, interview)

The quotations above articulate different perspectives by policymakers from three NGOs in Bangladesh. The country director of Islamic Relief, a faith-based international NGO, invoked similarities with Catholic authority figures to justify his NGO’s links with imams in Bangladesh. Nijera Kori and UBINIG are both Bangladeshi NGOs. Their executive heads referenced political issues in relation to Islam, development and social activism. I
reproduce their comments to illustrate several issues that involve religion, especially Islam.

Development practitioners of differing backgrounds react in distinct ways when they are asked to discuss or explain their relationship with religion, especially with reference to Islam or Muslim practices. By distinct I mean that when the topic of religion and, in my case, specifically Islam, comes up, their postures change; the steady flow of a conversation stops and is interspersed with stronger and more emphatic expressions on their part. Sometimes, as we continue to talk, their responses become less strained; at other times they do not. What interests me are those elements in the structures of authority and knowledge erected by these and other experts that lurk just beneath the surface, so to speak, and where the possibilities of counter-discourse may be assumed. The Country Director of Islamic Relief in Bangladesh, for example, went to great lengths during our meeting to explain that being faith-based meant that they were not “directly working with, or for religious interests” (Islamic Relief, interview), including imams in Bangladesh. He stated:

There is no deliberate attempt from our side that we will go and pick imams to work with; yes, we look for local influential leaders, and sometimes one of them could be an imam. (Islamic Relief, interview)

As my interview continued, he acknowledged that Islamic Relief did work with imams, but not in a “religious” sense such as that of proselytizing or da’awa, but as development work. He rationalized the NGO’s work in instrumental ways, because “The imam has wide communication contacts within the locality and at the village level he [the imam] knows the problems and he has influence. (Islamic Relief, interview).

The project that Islamic Relief’s head in Bangladesh was reluctant to acknowledge at first is called ‘Facts for Life’, a health educational initiative for children funded by UNICEF and implemented by Islamic Relief Worldwide in several Muslim countries, not just in Bangladesh (“Facts for Life UNICEF”). Islamic Relief trains imams in various Muslim societies to become the conduits for disseminating health care messages in their communities (“Facts for Life Islamic Relief”). The project began in 1985, as a partnership between UNICEF and Islamic scholars in Egypt, with the publication of a book called Child
Care in Islam ("Facts for Life Islamic Relief"). The Facts for Life book used in Bangladesh is an adaptation of the earlier Egyptian work ("Facts for Life Islamic Relief"). Islamic Relief has been working with imams in Bangladesh since 1999 when a pilot scheme to train imams was launched and since then, the program has been “expanded to target more imams” ("Facts for Life Islamic Relief").

The Islamic Relief Director went to some trouble to draw parallels between working with imams and working with Christian clergy. He referred to East Timor where apparently “religious issues are very strong and their [Christian] religious institutions like the Church and clergy are used by development organizations as ways of spreading messages more effectively” (Islamic Relief, interview). He rationalized that:

> It is not only the imam; religious leaders in other faiths are also influential: if the pope says something it has a huge impact. (Islamic Relief, interview)

In Chapter 5, I noted how religious leaders are imbued with the capacity to act as conduits between people and the structures of authority. The Islamic Relief representatives stressed the importance of educating imams and imparting to them a “wider knowledge” of the world (Islamic Relief, interview). The Islamic Relief website similarly notes how important it is to build the “capacity” of imams because “with minimal training imams can spread health messages to millions of people in a cost-effective manner” ("Facts for Life Islamic Relief", italics added). The Islamic Foundation has a similar rationale:

> the common masses at the grassroots level can be educated by the Imams very effectively and at a very nominal expenditure. It is in fact the cheapest and most cost-effective medium through which all types of education – formal, informal, and non-formal can be imparted to the people at large. (Rashid, 2004, p. 45 italics added)

An interesting aspect of the Facts for Life project is that the imams in Rangpur who were trained by Islamic Relief were those who had already undergone training with the Islamic Foundation. The Director explicitly noted how the Islamic Foundation had facilitated his NGO’s involvement with imams:
What I am saying is that it was easy for us because other organizations, such as the Islamic Foundation, were doing the same thing in the field. If you have direct contact with the beneficiaries through the health program and then you supplement it with support from imams, that has a wider impact. (Islamic Relief, interview)

Given the clear involvement of Islamic Relief in the training of male Muslim imams in Bangladesh, and links with the Islamic Foundation’s imam training program, it must be wondered why when we began our discussion, the director of the NGO was reluctant to acknowledge any such a connection. As I explained earlier, the director initially stated that the NGO was not engaging with imams. As our discussion continued, he began to acknowledge that Islamic Relief was, in fact, working with imams and he also acknowledged links with the Islamic Foundation. That he felt a need to “conceal” his NGO’s interactions with imams indicates resistance and contestation not merely from him, but in the power relations that sustain the Imam Discourse and shape the discourse in unexpected ways.

Using religion instrumentally, as a means of facilitating the more secular goals of development, implies that religion needs to be made more secular—imams become agents of a secular activity, development and not, strictly speaking, religious subjects. The Islamic Relief director considers working with imams a development activity. But he also exhibits a reluctance to identify Islam as an active element in the NGO’s mandate or activities. This stems, in my view, from the politics surrounding Islam and Muslims. The seepage of a global politics surrounding Islam in a post-9/11 climate could inform and even shape a range of postures, perspectives and actions by development agents, including one of hyper-vigilance by Islamic Relief.

In reference to women’s issues and gender concerns, the Director separated Western and Islamic perspectives in a manner fairly similar to the perspectives demonstrated by UNFPA, USAID, the Asia Foundation, and the Islamic Foundation:

Gender is an important point and we do believe it should be taken into consideration and mainstreamed in all our programs and policies also, ... but not from a western point of view, there is—should be—an Islamic point of view. (Islamic Relief, interview)
He specified women’s interests in selective terms, as those which involved mother and child care, widow rehabilitation, divorce, dowry and marriage issues, reproductive health and microfinance. When I asked him how imams could communicate messages to women and girls since mosques were predominantly male spaces, he responded:

At the village level, they [women and imams] know each other very well and imams have greater understanding of issues. I think still that men are influential in the home and if the man understands the message, he can transmit it easily in the house. (Islamic Relief, interview)

The literature on Islamic Relief’s project reinforces the above perspective:

The messages are aimed largely at the men in the community who are encouraged to discuss matters with their wives and use the Islamic code of living to support the health messages. (“Facts for Life Islamic Relief”)

The examples above demonstrate how erasures and denials mark different techniques of “secularizing” Islam; but also how these same erasures and denials also clear a discursive space for opposition and resistance. The secular, as a space and as a way of organizing society, appears to be overtly constituted in the discourse, but its “other”—that is, religion—is also present, though often in indirect, concealed and complicated ways. Gender issues and women’s presence are contained through invocations of patriarchal dominance and privilege within the home. It is also evident that evasions, denials and silences can stem from an assumption that religion in its instrumental guise is subsumed within, and thus can be legitimized as, development. Overall, the examples above demonstrate the intricate and hidden workings of power-relations that, in turn, sustain localized nodes of patriarchal authority and subsume gender and women’s interests within the same.

6.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have engaged in a complex and multi-layered exploration of counter discourses that are embedded in and also work to destabilize and complicate the
dominant discourse of imams in Bangladesh. My starting premise is that dominant discourses are themselves the sites of counter discourses of resistance and difference. In Foucault’s conceptualization, power is a productive force that induces resistance to and within dominant discourses. We can map these counter discourses as latent in the silences and exclusions that accompany networks of power-knowledge within discursive formations. My analysis explicates the ways in which imams are constructed not only as a challenge to the development mission but also as religious subjects who are being positioned with greater authority as newly constituted “soldiers of secularism”.

I explore the ways in which various kinds of silences, erasures and denials problematize dominant development discourse as evident in two bilateral agencies, CIDA and DFID. The complexities evident in my analysis of CIDA demonstrate that although the donor agency presents a seemingly secular face of development, it has deep-rooted and deeply embedded relationships with specific religious bodies and interests. My analysis of DFID’s entanglements with religion displays erasures that constitute resistance and opposition to the dominant construct of secularity in development discourse.

I analyze the Imam Discourse and focus particularly on various points of resistance that emerge in relation to gender and women’s agency within discursive formations facilitated by the multilateral agency, UNFPA and the American NGO, The Asia Foundation. I analyze evidence from my fieldwork with senior policymakers at a faith-based NGO, Islamic Relief, Bangladesh, as well two secular NGOs, UBINIG and Nijera Kori in Bangladesh. I identify counter narratives of gender equality, as well as Islamic feminist interrogations of dominant discursive formations including emerging voices of a Muslim feminist counter discourse that interrogate assumptions of dominant patriarchal structures in Islamic practices and tradition. These display possibilities of resistance and opposition that problematize and destabilize the Imam Discourse.

1 See Fn 3 below
3 “No, we don’t – we wouldn’t engage with religion or religious issues or groups. We have no interest in it. We’d stay away from religion – unless the host country raised the topic” (Director, Bangladesh Program, CIDA). Notes taken on March 8, 2006 at a conference entitled “Bangladesh Canada Bilateral Relations” organized by the Bangladesh Students Association, UBC, at the Graduate Student Centre, UBC. Also see: [http://www.ams.ubc.ca/clubs/bsa/Canada_relations/BilateralRelations.htm](http://www.ams.ubc.ca/clubs/bsa/Canada_relations/BilateralRelations.htm) accessed May 10, 2006. According to the information provided for this conference on this website, the director of the Bangladesh Program at CIDA is the manager responsible for directing and delivering Canada’s second largest bilateral aid program, $57 million in FY2006 to Bangladesh.

4 Email sent by me October 12, 2008; email received October 13, 2008.

5 Email received November 20, 2008.

6 CIDA-1. Originally accessed in 2006. The same url now links to a set of documents/contents quite different to the one I accessed in 2006. The contents of this site reflect CIDA’s updated program with three “priority themes” namely 1) food security, 2) children and youth and 3) sustainable economic growth (ibid); it also lists three additional “crosscutting themes” (ibid), namely environmental sustainability, “promoting equality between women and men” and “helping to strengthen governance institutions and practices” (ibid).


8 See KAIROS-3. Canadian International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda admitted in Parliament on February 15, 2011 that she altered a government document, scrawling the word “not” to prevent a $7 million funding package to KAIROS from CIDA. The reason apparently is because KAIROS supports a boycott of Israel.

9 A Bangladeshi national working for CIDA stated on condition of anonymity to me that CIDA experts are “looking actively” (interview) into the role of religion in society in Bangladesh. Another Bangladeshi national working for USAID, Bangladesh, stated that unlike USAID, which is open about its engagement with imams in Bangladesh, other international development agencies do not acknowledge their interest in religious issues.

But, the agent explained, these agencies are equally keen to study and examine topics related to Islamic doctrine and tradition, madrasah or Islamic educational systems, mosque-based learning and activities, and the activities of imams, in Bangladesh. A Bangladeshi researcher who has produced a detailed study of madrasah education in Bangladesh for the European Commission (EC) declined to provide me with any
information on his study. Repeated calls to the EC office in Dhaka to learn more about the study were met with silence.

10 I requested a meeting with the head of DFID but he forwarded my request to this officer, a Bangladeshi national who implied that she did not have the authority to disclose much to me regarding DFID’s interactions with religious issues or groups.


12 This assessment is based on my work with the UN system in Bangladesh in 2002. I was commissioned to write summaries of all the UN agencies in Bangladesh for an expected visit of the UN Secretary General. Among the bilateral agencies, the Nordic countries and Canada are seen as being more progressive and relatively more independent of political influence. Britain, Australia, Japan and the EC group occupy a more central position, sometimes prone to political influence especially from the right. The American aid agency, USAID and some multilaterals such as the World Bank and the UN group as a whole, are seen as more porous to political and especially internal or domestic exigencies. USAID, for instance, does not fund abortion or support any programs involving abortion and provides limited support to reproductive health programs unless explicit directives come down from a Democratic administration.

13 “The attitudes of many religious leaders have changed dramatically, and they, in turn, have changed perceptions in their communities” (UNFPA-2005, p. 12).

14 My thanks to Dr Amina Jamal for framing it thus in a conversation with me.

15 The sentence was rendered thus in Bangla: “eita-ee amaader Training Manual”. The suffix ‘ee’ added to ‘this’, which is the first word in this sentence, emphasised the uniqueness of the object. The sentence could be translated as: “This-only is our Training Manual” Or “This is our Training Manual, only”. Emphasis is often translated by using the English word ‘only’. Similar patterns are found in other South Asian languages like Hindi and Urdu.

16 Interestingly, the phrases and terminology are in English, interspersed with Bangla words.

17 As a teenager, I recall my mother remarking that a female friend or relative was seeking divorce or khula as it is called because of the absence of intimate “relations” with her husband.

18 Islamic canonical prayers. According to Khaleel, 1999, the correct grammatical form is as-sala’at in Arabic which means ‘the prayer’; sal’at or as-sal’at refer to prayers enjoined at specific times on Muslim adults and believed to have originated in the Qur’an. These are distinct from prayer, in the Anglo-Christian sense of the term, which is dua in Arabic, as well as in other languages such as Bangla, and is translated as supplication.

19 Ahadith (the plural form of Hadith) are classified according to their authenticity, which is based on their respective chain of narrators, or isnad. The most authentic are known as sahih or reliable, hence the use of the word reliable here. Barlas, (2004, pp. 42-50) discusses the critical importance of reliable Hadith for Muslim feminists in particular.


21 He was a foreign national, from a Muslim country

22 It is interesting to note that the transition from Egypt to Bangladesh took place via the Philippines where a new work was published entitled: Facts for Life for Religious Leaders (Facts for Life Islamic Relief).
Mention was also made of making imams feel more confident because they were being sought after and shown more respect by various institutions (Facts for Life Islamic Relief; also interview notes).
7 Chapter: Conclusion: Disentanglements and postcolonial futures

7.1 Introduction: “Soldiers of Secularism”

In this work I have proposed that the (trans)formation of male Muslim imams or congregational prayer leaders, and through them, of Islam itself, into (more) amenable subjects of Western political modernity preoccupies particularly significant segments of contemporary development discourse. My dissertation disentangles the systematic, deeply imbricated processes and procedures that coalesce in the discursive reconstitution of imams as subjects and objects of development in Bangladesh. I have demonstrated in this dissertation how tens of thousands of imams are being simultaneously elevated and fixed as “soldiers of secularism” in Bangladeshi society, with newly denoted claims to authority and legitimacy over women and men in secular and religious domains. I call this the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh.

My research explicates how a powerful coalition of experts in the international development industry are engaged in a sizeable, ongoing development program for the training and empowerment of imams in urban and rural communities across the country. Two major international organizations, the bilateral agency USAID, together with an American NGO, The Asia Foundation, and a multilateral agency, UNFPA, have been operating through the Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh, a quasi state-run body that has had its own training program for imams in Bangladesh since the 1960s. USAID and UNFPA have been training imams in a range of developmental activities since 2004 and 1999 respectively. My fieldwork shows that as of 2006, approximately 65,000 imams have undergone specialized training under the aegis of these development organizations at the headquarters of the Islamic Foundation in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

7.2 Initial explorations

My dissertation began with an initial research “puzzle” that emerged from a personal experience. I was struck by the presence of religious subjects, namely male
Muslim imams or congregational prayer leaders, as well as other authority figures, at an explicit demonstration of women’s contraceptive control methods in a rural setting in Bangladesh. The event was a training workshop for about 30 village women organized by medical and local government personnel based at a state run rural clinic supported by the United National Population Fund (UNFPA). There was a powerful element of authority and expertise at this event. A senior male government official from the Bangladesh Ministry of Health conducted the training, in the presence of two male imams. All the trainees were Bangladeshi village women, many fresh out of high school, and some in their late 30s and early 40s.

My surprise at a clinical demonstration of inter-uterine contraceptive devices on a model of female genitalia at this training workshop was matched only by a sense of dismay at the co-mingling of male authority figures drawn from the international development industry, the Bangladeshi state, and from Islamic tradition, on the same platform so to speak. That these rural Bangladeshi women were positioned in, and directed to comply with the male doctor’s commands in terms that scripted them as subordinates, disturbed me. I wondered if imams, the state and development practitioners were entangled in similar projects of training and teaching and with what frequency; and what such linkages meant for the project of gender and development.

It is necessary here, I feel, to locate my surprise contextually. My consternation, I now understand, stems from my expectations of a secular integrity, as it were, within development; and it combines with my sensibilities as a Bengali-Muslim woman. As a gender scholar and feminist, my assumptions are that development eschews a prerequisite of legitimacy and sanction from religious authority, specifically one that reinforces patriarchy. Male imams embody the exclusion and seclusion of Muslim women in the life-practices of Muslims generally and in Bangladesh in particular. That the dominance of male imams is being challenged and destabilized in contemporary times further signals their power and authority. As well, gender and development, both conceptually and as a practical framework, imbues my perspective such that hierarchies of power and expertise in relation to any subaltern subjects, men or women, are a problematic to be addressed. Finally, as an observant Muslim woman, I am particularly aware of certain norms of modesty pertaining especially to physical demonstrations of women’s sexuality that
Bengali-Muslim women and men practise in their life-worlds. The notion of a “purdah of the mind”, signifying modesty and privacy in relation to respectfulness and even courtesy, was summarily breached when an explicit display of women’s genitals, even in the form of a plaster of Paris model, became the focal point of a mixed gender gathering as I observed on that particular occasion in Comilla, Bangladesh.

7.3 Theoretical and methodological questions

A more detailed discussion of the theoretical elements of my work will be provided below. Here I will note that the thrust of my dissertation rests on critical analyses of key concepts and assumptions related to political modernity, international development, secularism and religion. I have drawn on the work of postcolonial scholars such as Asad (1993, 2003), Chakrabarty (2000), Stuart (1992) and Escobar (1995), to name a few, in order to interrogate the complicated and contradictory elements that constitute the dominant development paradigm, in particular the assumptions of a strict separation between the public secular and the private religious spaces of the social. My perspective has been informed and influenced also by a number of feminist scholars including Mohanty (1991), Kabeer (1994), Feldman (2001), Kirsch, (1999), and by the ethical goals of undertaking research in order to explicate processes and practices that will contribute to social justice for women and men, especially those who are marginalized by dominant structures of power-knowledge.

An important theoretical question that I grappled with after my experience at the reproductive health workshop in rural Bangladesh was whether, in the first place, religion and development were linked in any way at all. I will come back to this quandary below, but briefly I began to wonder if development and religion could be entangled at the grassroots level on a regular basis; if so, such connections contradicted dominant—and foundational—assumptions about the “secular” logic of political modernity and therefore also of international development. As far as I was aware, development interventions are deliberately mediated through the nation-state and public institutions because, among other things, these are overtly secular institutional sites. The realm of religious observances, ritual, behaviour and belief lies clearly outside the mandate of development
programs. My initial explorations, however, revealed an interesting paradox: the presence of religion in development processes and policies is deep and complicated. What is more surprising, perhaps, is that religion permeates diverse levels and sites of development in fairly open ways. As I continued to explore further, I began to discern the contours of the Imam Discourse.

A Foucauldian understanding of “discourse theory” and specifically, Foucault’s work on sexuality (1980/1978) has shaped my methodological and theoretical framework. Foucault’s explication of how, in European experiences from the seventeenth century onwards, regimes of sexual repression were in fact regimes of sexual regulation, opened up possibilities for my work in very interesting ways. It led me to explore how religion is both banished and also specifically regulated and invoked in development discourse and how the contours of regulation and control become clearer when they are delineated against resistance and the forces that oppose them.

I embarked on an interdisciplinary, qualitative study involving research from 2005 onwards, undertaking fieldwork in the summer of 2006 in Bangladesh. An important characteristic and goal of my research has been to “study-up”. Rather than focus on grassroots encounters, as is often the case in development studies, especially when feminist scholars undertake such studies, I turned my gaze on policymakers. I also generated evidence from various textual sources in Bangla and English. The latter included a collection of print and electronic documents authored by USAID, TAF and UNFPA and the Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh. I conducted interviews with policymakers and senior international development practitioners in USAID, CIDA, UNFPA and DFID; with government officials and heads of international and Bangladeshi NGOs: with senior researchers and university professors; and with several Bangladeshi development workers whose identities have been concealed at their request. I also held a focus group meeting with imams and the director of the Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh.

7.4 Spatial, temporal and partial perspectives

A critical question that I have addressed in my study is how the Imam Discourse has emerged within a specific spatial and temporal context. I have traced the ways in
which it has been constituted through a convergence of developmental, geo-political and national interests and influences shaped particularly by exigencies of global or American hegemonic aspirations in a post 9/11 context. The discourse has coalesced within what American and Western interests categorize as a climate of “moderate” Islam in Bangladesh. The classification of Muslim societies in relation to their respective degrees of “Orientalism” or latent malevolence is not entirely new as Edward Said (1979) has shown, but the manner in which they are being labelled today directly reflects American ambitions and self-interest. In ways similar to the designation of various “threat levels” in the American homeland, both Muslim societies and Islam itself are being scrutinized and appraised in relation to American and Western interests. From such a perspective, Bangladesh offers a platform conducive for aid organizations to test drive new initiatives. It is a Muslim majority country that is heavily dependent on donor support, and does not exert the kind of clout that might upset oil supplies or strategic alliances in a geo-political sense. In this reading, notions of “moderate” Islam become those of more compliant (to American interests) varieties of Islam.

As I began to analyze my evidence, I realized that while it is important to explore the complexities of Muslim subjects such as imams, and the role of Islam in Bangladesh, it is also important to resist producing works of homogeneity and uniformity, to satisfy a dubious imperative. By this I mean that this research is not meant to define imams or indeed Muslim subjects in fixed or definitive ways, nor hopefully to provide ways of appropriating Islam in order to serve instrumental needs of development and the exigencies of global power. The latter point becomes relevant as there is increasing conflation of Islam, “terror” and “terrorism” in a post-9/11 environment. As Talal Asad (2003) has commented, questions that crop up persistently in the media and from various public intellectuals about the so-called “Islamic roots of violence” (p. 9) are in reality thinly disguised ways of lecturing the Muslim world “yet again on its failure to embrace secularism and enter modernity” (p. 10). The ways in which Islam and its followers are being scrutinized and framed has striking similarities to Michel Foucault’s (1980/1978) description of how in an earlier century in Europe sexuality was “taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite” (p. 20). I
trust that my study will help map the ways in which dominant discursive constructs can be interrogated, delineated and problematized in nuanced and also ethical ways.

The reconstitution of imams in the service of development is problematic on several levels. The discourse confers on imams a status that has been authorized by a powerful international development regime with which an aid dependent Bangladesh state has a less than equal power relationship. The status itself is extremely interesting; it is suggested that imams are potentially radical Islamists who must be reigned in or diffused by exposure to Western modernity or development; it is simultaneously implied that imams are a hitherto hidden and largely neglected human resource that may be successfully harnessed for progress and national development; and it is also indicated that imams are the preeminent authority in all aspects pertaining to Islam and Muslim religious practices and requirements in Bangladesh. The discourse grants imams a homogenous subject position that is reductive and unreal. Imams are not pre-existing, pre-set and unchanging subjects; they are embedded in fluid and unstable ways within complex life-practices and life-worlds in Bangladesh. This is not to say that imams are false claimants or inauthentic and incoherent subjects, but that the work that imams do is contingent on the specificities of their location and circumstances. The Imam Discourse constructs male imams as a vanguard of grassroots development, reifies them as religious “Leaders of Influence” and in so doing, also produces Islam in gendered and non-egalitarian ways.

As I have discussed in the foregoing chapter in particular, gendered connotations of Islam—and also, of imamati or imamhood—are by no means foreclosed in Muslim societies, and especially within the ranks of an emerging coalition of Muslim feminists, secular activists and gender scholars. Their compulsions and interrogations combine to highlight the religious work that women do and have been doing, without necessarily being recognized formally as imams. Amina Jamal’s (2005) examination of Jamaat-i-Islami women in Pakistan who position themselves within modernity, as Muslim subjects, is one such compelling study.

My research demonstrates the salience and potential of counter discourses that are both embedded within Imam Discourse and also run parallel to its discursive structures. These counter discourses include recent, progressive and for the most part feminist conceptualizations and processes of empowerment for Muslim women that interrogate
and subvert Islamic patriarchal doctrine and processes. The significance of these counter discourses for and by Muslim women and men is also that they reference Islamic textual sources in order to validate women’s rights and equality within Islam. The field of Muslim women’s counter discourses is new and provides important preliminary insights on which we can build in the future. I also highlight, in different ways, throughout this discussion, how gender concerns and feminist perspectives enable us to deconstruct assumptions and demonstrate the specificities of policy processes as they are understood from different gender, class and other socio-economic perspectives.

7.5 The logic of modernity

As noted earlier, the thrust of my dissertation rests on critical analyses of key concepts and assumptions related to political modernity, international development, secularism and religion. As I stated in my introductory chapter, the core elements of my study emerge from, and are intertwined with issues pertaining to relationships between religion and development. In Chapter 3, I noted that although development practitioners recognize and are concerned about the limited success of the development project in the South, they tend to direct their energies towards improving the nature of development, not towards an interrogation or problematization of the notion of development. I propose in this dissertation that it is the latter aspect of development, and specifically, the imbrication of religion and its simultaneous disavowal within the development paradigm that merits critical and sustained interrogation.

I explained in Chapter 3 that the basic “logic” of the dominant development paradigm has remained unchanged since its inception. By “logic” I refer to a set of core assumptions on which development is built and justified. One of these is the promise of political modernity, a promise that tells us that modernity is accessible and attainable to all, though some attain it earlier and better than others (Chakrabarty, 2000). A core assumption of political modernity is “secularism”. Secularism implies a clear separation between the public and private spheres of influence, the former being the domain of the secular, and the latter of the non-secular, or religious. Furthermore, secularism is something which societies of the North claim to have successfully and comprehensively
attained. The premise of a Western liberal democracy, the presence of civil society, the successful introduction of good governance, are all predicated on the attainment of “secularism”.

But exactly what is meant by secularism? How is a secular society different from a non-secular society? What makes Western societies “secular” and non-Western societies “non-secular”? How or what are the core attributes of a “secular” space or project, and how are these different or similar to a religious space or a religious project? The relevance of such conceptual dilemmas for Muslim societies in particular, is expressed rather well by John Esposito:

The clear goal and presupposition of development was that every day and in every way things should become more modern (i.e. Western and secular), from cities, buildings, bureaucracies, companies, and schools to politics and culture ... Western analysts and Muslim experts alike tended to regard a Western-based process of modernization as necessary and inevitable and believed equally that religion was a major hindrance to political and social change in the Muslim world. (Esposito, 1999, p. 7)

The development paradigm reinforces the dichotomy of the West as secular and the Muslim world as non-secular or religious, and such an assumption is fairly widespread. Edward Said remarks:

One of the major failures of most Arab and Western intellectuals today is that they have accepted without debate or rigorous scrutiny terms like secularism and democracy, as if everyone knew what these words mean. (2003, paragraph 13, italics added)

As noted in Chapter 3, two scholars in particular provide important insights that frame my theoretical ideas and are particularly relevant to the conceptual questions that I have outlined thus far. The scholars are Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and Talal Asad (1993; 2003). Asad contends that we cannot assume a “straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular” (2003, p. 1), in part because religion is not disappearing in the modern world, and in part because what we mean by “the secular” and “secularism” are increasingly problematic.
According to Asad, secularism arose as a political doctrine in “modern Euro-America.” Secularism invoked new conceptualizations of personal morality and forms of subjecthood that were linked, as Foucault has explained, with new forms of classification and calculation. These modes of governmentality were different in that they invoked a subject with a “worldly disposition” (Asad, 2003, p. 24), as different from the medieval conception of a social body of Christian souls. The process by which secularism arose was facilitated by “the secular”, adds Asad, but the latter is not the same as the former. The secular is in many ways the “other” of the religious, but both religious and secular are not fixed categories. In other words, what Asad is saying is that secularism is a specific political doctrine that includes the “separation of religion from power” (p. 28). It is “a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history” (Asad, 1993, p. 28). Secularism is easier to grasp than the secular, which is “neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions” (Asad, 1993, p. 25).

Asad’s critique of the relevance of secularism to all societies is useful. He refers specifically to a perspective advanced by the influential philosopher, Charles Taylor (1998). Taylor has argued that although secularism arose as a specific response to political challenges in Western Christian society in early modernity, especially during the terrible wars of religion, it has become relevant to all societies that have become modern, including non-Christian societies.

For many Muslims ... [secularism] is seen as a creation of Christendom, and the attempt to apply its formulae in Muslim countries is perceived as an attempt to impose on them an alien form, most dramatically put, as a continuation of the crusades by other means. (Taylor, 1998, p. 31)

Nevertheless, Taylor argues “it is wrong to think that this limits the application of its formulae to post-Christian societies” (Taylor, 1998, p. 31). Taylor’s claim that secularism has global relevance today is further linked to the notion of the modern nation-state and the “modern imaginary”, the argument being that these are both constituted by democratic processes that provide equal and direct access to all citizens and are locatable in secular, homogenous time. Taylor argues that while in pre-modern societies individual access or
forms of belonging were mediated by various “other states of being” (1998, p. 39) such as the parish, town, cloister or manor, “modernity has involved, among other things, a revolution in our social imaginary, the relegation of these forms of mediacy to the margins, and the diffusion of images of direct-access” (p. 39).

Asad contends that secular space in modern society is not freely accessible, and furthermore, does not facilitate direct access for all citizens equally:

There is no space in which all citizens can negotiate freely and equally with one another. The existence of negotiation in public life is confined to such elites as party bosses, bureaucratic administrators, parliamentary legislators, and business leaders. The ordinary citizen does not participate in the process of formulating policy options as these elites do – his or her participation in periodic elections does not even guarantee that the policies voted for will be adhered to. (Asad, 2003, p. 4)

When Taylor makes the point that citizenship becomes the primary principle of identity in the modern state, transcending other considerations such as class, gender, religion, Asad responds that in an important sense, this “transcendent mediation is secularism” (Asad, 2003, p. 5, italics in original). He further argues that far from being simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring peace and toleration, secularism is “an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion” (Asad, 2003, p. 5, italics in original). In other words, according to Asad, liberal democracy does not usher in a direct-access society. Thus, the notion that secular space in modern society is freely accessible and that it has no political mediatory elements with which it is sustained and made possible is clearly problematic.

Furthermore, although the forms of mediation in modern society are different from those in say medieval Christian times, the difference is not a mere absence of “religion” in the public sphere of the nation-state but something more complex. Even in the modern state, the place of religion varies in France, Britain and America. These nation-states might have similar forms of secularism, but “the mediating character of the modern imaginary in each of them differs significantly” (Asad, 2003, pp. 5-6). America’s founding sense of nationalism from the eighteenth century onwards has combined religious fervour with the
belief that America is the last hope of liberty in the world—so that those who oppose America become “enemies” who are opposed to the “good” (Asad, 2003, p. 7). How can we understand this foundational character of America in terms of its religious origins, given that there is much that is secular in America in its political activity and in the undeniable fact that it has a “model secular constitution” (Asad, 2003, p. 7)? In Asad’s view, the repeated explosions of intolerance in America are “entirely compatible (indeed intertwined) with secularism in a highly modern society” (2003, p. 7). This is a compelling argument that problematizes the assumption that secularism and modernity automatically and normatively equal religious tolerance, religious harmony and the de-coupling of religion and politics, especially when they are assumed to occur in societies of the North.

Asad’s characterization becomes exceedingly interesting when we consider the ways in which the modern imaginary includes within its secular space certain subjects (of modernity) as authentic and excludes others as inauthentic, primitive, regressive or false. Saurabh Dube discusses one such instance in an essay entitled “Enchantments of Modernity” (2002). Dube’s emphasis is on the “hierarchies of modernity” (p. 731) that repeatedly reinforce what he calls “fundamental ruptures” of modernity with everything that is deemed to be non-modern. Institutions, ideas and peoples are all plotted against the norm of a singular modernity, with some being dismissed because they “have missed the bus of universal history” (Dube, 2002, p. 731). He discusses the well-known incident when the Taliban destroyed giant statues of Buddha in Bamiyan in January 2001. The incident sparked worldwide condemnation of the Taliban:

Not surprisingly, when the Taliban departed from this main thoroughfare of history, revealing themselves as neither noble tribal nor the tolerant exotic, it followed that the ineluctable hierarchies of modernity came into play, naming their action as savage, backward, uncivilized – in a word, medieval.” (Dube, 2002, p. 731 italics in original)

Dube argues that the neat demarcation of the two worlds, the one “medieval” and the other “modern” revealed, in part, the ideological nature of the fault line between the two, but also told us a great deal about the enormous significance allotted to the condition known as “medieval” (2002, p. 730) The accusations of medievalism levelled at the Taliban drew upon certain assumed, critical and dominant characteristics of modernity, as well as
popular contemporary demonizations of Islam (p. 732). Their easy, unproblematic expression, argues Dube, reinforced the presupposition that since the Protestant Reformation, religion in the modern West has undergone a “profound transformation, becoming a largely tolerant and broadly private affair,” to the extent that “distinct intermeshing(s) of religion and politics in the modern West” have been elided and seen as deviations from the true, tolerant, Western norm (Dube, 2002, p. 732). Dube interrogates the premise upon which certain subjects, such as the Taliban, are excluded from modernity, not because he thinks they are modern, or need to be counted as such, but because their exclusion explains the ways in which certain subjects are “fashioned” as modern and some are not (2002, p. 733).

Imams, as I have demonstrated in this work, are being inducted into the service of secularism as Muslim male subjects who by definition are pre-modern or, to use Dube’s explanation, “medieval”. This is not to claim that imams are necessarily modern, but to suggest that exclusions thus fashioned raise questions about what kind of work the exclusions are doing, and with what objectives and consequences. In a similar vein, Bangladesh is being scripted both in development discourse and in the Imam Discourse as an example of a society that has produced a “moderate” variety of Islam. One of my research participants, Khushi Kabir, commented specifically on this fairly recent positioning of Bangladesh by Western donors, her point being that a particular level of religiosity that is being invoked in relation to Bangladesh denotes something else, an agenda or interest that is premised, as Dube suggests, on a need to fashion certain subjects in certain specific ways.

The implication here also is that other Muslim nation states, such as Pakistan for instance, are not suitably or as yet “moderate”. During my fieldwork, I was told by several development practitioners that USAID had initially tried to launch its Imam Training Program in Pakistan but it had had limited success. USAID denied this claim. However, there is recent anecdotal evidence that the Imam Discourse, as I describe it, has found a foothold of sorts in Pakistan recently.

What these examples demonstrate is that measurements of secularity are not always unproblematically secular. Secularism is a means of defining subjects by an authoritative entity. It demands that private reason and public principle are distinctly
separated; it also demands the “placing” of that which we deign to be “religious” within the regulatory ambit or (the political canon of) secularism through a conceptual framework that we call “the secular” (Asad, 2003, p. 8). This further means that theoretical and practical definitions have to be made: we need to know what these categories entail. What makes a discourse and an action “religious” or “secular” is that someone, or some institution, decides this question authoritatively (Asad, 2003, pp. 8-9).

These distinctions are important because, as I understand it, the basic idea of “the secular” is a conceptual and apolitical distinction that many societies, including Muslim societies, have conceptualized and acted upon (Asad, 2003, pp. 1-2). Historically, Islamic political power has been mobilized and appropriated within the domain of the secular and separated from that of the religious; it has also been fused or combined with the religious. A diversity of arrangements and negotiations between various political, social and economic actors in nation-states such as Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh provide interesting examples of how secular spaces are found both within and exterior to spaces defined as religious; and there is overlap between them as well. In Shi'a Islamic tradition, for example, religious/spiritual and political power have been negotiated over decades between the Imam (with a capital I), believed to be endowed with a spiritual authority above any earthly ruler, and a secular ruler (Aslan, 2005). In Bangladesh, village level courts called salish were initially secular spaces but in contemporary times religious actors such as imams, mullahs and hujoors have entered these sites working with secular interests or against them (Hoque and Khan, 2007).

Secularism, as Asad advances the meaning and implications of the word, is specific to a particular Western genealogy. This does not mean that Muslim societies cannot appropriate Western models of secularism. The government of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey deliberately adopted secularism as a specific political doctrine originating in and founded on the dominant European meaning of the word, not in order to exclude Islam, but to define and regulate it (Sayyid, 1997). Each instance of secularity is distinct and has its own genealogy; secularism, as political doctrine and a core assumption of modernity and development, needs to be problematized, especially in relation to assumptions about societies in the South such as that in Bangladesh. As well, if political modernity promises to
usher in democracy, then it is pluralism, not secularism that might better define democracy (Aslan, 2005, p. 262).

### 7.6 Genealogies of religion

I probe a little more into Asad’s (1993) explanation of religion because as I have noted in Chapter 5, development policymakers “measure” Islam and Muslims through an Anglo-Christian lens. Given Asad’s arguments regarding the specific roots and characteristics of secularism, it is not difficult to understand that the genealogy of Christianity in the West has a distinct bearing on the ways in which modernity and development relate to religion. Two points are worth noting in this regard. First, the medieval Christian Church was the authority before the Reformation for what was religious and what was secular and the power of the Church remained pre-eminent.\(^2\) As well,

> The medieval Church did not attempt to establish absolute uniformity of practice; on the contrary, its authoritative discourse was always concerned to specify differences, gradations, exceptions. What it sought was the \textit{subjection of all practice to a unified authority}, to a single authentic source that could tell truth from falsehood. (Asad, 1993, p. 38, italics added)

Later, with the rise of modern science, modern means of production, and the modern state, religion and secular spaces were bounded by individual “belief”, “conscience”, and “sensibility”. But the need for a body or an authority to explain what was meant by religion did not go away: \textit{“theory would still be needed to define religion”} (Asad, 1993, p. 39, italics in original).\(^3\) The Church would no longer remain the pre-eminent authoritative body in relation to Western society. But there are continuing tensions, legal battles and conflict between supposedly “secular” Western nation states and their Muslim populations, especially after 9/11. In these entanglements, secular nation states and their institutions, such as the French justice system, for instance, have been forced to decide what is religious and what is not. Joan Scott (2007) notes how the hijab and the veil have become conflated and embroiled in complicated, gendered politics in France:
For a small piece of cloth, the veil is heavy with meanings for French republicans who are worried about schools and immigrants, freedom and terrorism. Having an opinion about it serves to establish one’s credentials on the heady topics of individualism, secularism and the emancipation of women – it is an ideological litmus test. (p. 17)

Similar authoritative lines have been drawn in Canada, over the introduction of Islamic shariah as an optional means of arbitration for Muslims in Ontario (Syed, forthcoming) as well as in relation to questions of “Reasonable Accommodation” being extended to Muslims in Quebec (Sharify-Funk, 2010). The point here is that religion may be thrust into a private “secular” space, but it does not go away, nor become less formally recognized or less regulated in Western societies.

The second important point relates to why Western notions of modernity premise or understand “religion” as a universal category. It was in the seventeenth century, after the Roman church’s authority and unity had been disrupted, and after religious wars had occurred, that the earliest systematic attempts to define religion in universal terms were made in the West (Asad 1993, p. 40, italics added). The concept of “Natural Religions” held that all societies had to have some kind of belief(s) about a supreme power; practices of ordered worship; and some sort of ethics, or a code of conduct based on reward/punishment in the afterlife (Asad 1993, p. 42). What this meant in practical and conceptual terms was that Christian missionaries had to equate other religious and spiritual practices in terms of a Christian lexicon. “When Western scholars study Islam, for example, there is an implicit comparison with Christianity. In this comparison, both Christianity and Islam are subsumed under the third term, religion,” comments Syed Farid Alatas (2007, p. 516) in an essay that identifies and analyzes dominant Christian articulations of the “problem of Islam” (p. 508). Asad (1993) sums it up thus:

I want to emphasise that the idea of Natural Religion was a crucial step in the formation of the modern concept of religious belief, experience, practice, and that it was an idea developed in response to problems specific to Christian theology at a particular historical juncture. (p. 42)

In the late eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant proclaimed that although there could be many historically valid ways in which religion had expressed itself and evolved, and
there could be many religious books such as the Koran [sic] or the Vedas that spoke of religious truths, “there can only be one religion which is valid for all men and at all times” (Kant 1991, p. 114, cited in Asad 1993, p. 42, italics in original). This view of religion emerged at a specific time and place; it is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history.

“Our view of religion emerged at a specific time and place; it is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history.

“From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized.” (Asad 1993, p. 42, italics added) In this changing notion of religion, we have “change in the modern landscape of power and knowledge. That change included a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject” (Asad, 1993, pp. 42-43). Finally, Asad's explanation offers ways in which we can unpack notions of “the religious” and “the secular” that have been implicated in producing the discourse of development:

What interests me particularly is the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place, and non-modern peoples are invited to assess their adequacy. For representations of “the secular” and “the religious” in modern and modernizing states mediate people’s identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences. (Asad, 2003, p. 14, italics added)

7.7 “Life-Worlds” in the South

If the secular is part of the modern imaginary, as Asad contends, what or where is the imaginary of religion located and how do we understand it? I draw on Chakrabarty (2000) to explicate my understandings of where religion is located in the modern imaginary and how it informs and influences development discourses in the North and in the South. In Provincializing Europe (2000) Chakrabarty unpacks modernity as a European condition that is one of many elements that are imbedded in South Asian thought. The significance of modernity lies in that it is rooted in a specific, European, historicist paradigm. This historicist paradigm informs, influences and even shapes the intellectual and emotional framework of the South Asian subject, at the same time as there are “other histories still living among us” (Dube, [citing Dipesh Chakrabarty] 2002a, p. 867).

There is always a necessary tension or struggle as post-colonial subjects try to come to terms with these simultaneous understandings. As mentioned earlier, we are
forced to engage with a European intellectual tradition because this tradition is the only one considered to be truly alive in a very particular sense within modern universities (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 5). We know that there is no such thing as a single unbroken European tradition, but we think within this framework; the genealogy of thought that informs social sciences today is of living European intellectual traditions, often referencing scholars who have been dead for many years.

In South Asia, the intellectual traditions established by Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian traditions—once unbroken—are now only matters of historical research. Social scientists treat these traditions as truly dead, as history (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 6). The invocation of linear progress through time—historicism—aids this conceptualization by inferring that whatever happens in the world, happens “first in Europe, then elsewhere” (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 7). In this script, actions that invoke gods and spirits or that are organized along axes of kinship or religion remain in a consciousness that has not come to terms with “the secular-institutional logic of the political” (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 11-12).

In my perspective, the recognition of a non-European life-world as a living entity in modernity provides a pertinent basis to the understanding of the modern imaginary, and the often overlapping, always unstable spaces of religion and secularism, in the South. Chakrabarty further explains his objectives:

the point is not to reject social science categories but to release into the space occupied by particular European histories ... other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices ... For it is only in this way that we can create plural normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities. (2000, p. 20)

His primary argument is that the imaginary of Europe is built into the social sciences in deeply rooted ways, for example in how we understand time—in secular terms, as historically denoted, and/or as a non-secular or religious process that lies outside history, so to speak. Other examples are to do with how the experiences of living are understood, as those that are totally “disenchanted” and experienced within individual, human autonomous, or those that embrace “enchanted” life-practices as well. As a result of the dominance of a European imaginary, we construct historicist interpretations of non-
Western life-worlds; such interpretations are essentially incomplete. Chakrabarty does not reject all things Western, nor does he deny the presence and significance of institutional Western colonial constructs that are an integral part of the non-West and of which he, as well as countless other postcolonial subjects, are pertinent examples.

Yet, Western constructs, as noted above, cannot by themselves provide the lens through which we can understand the non-West. To understand the non-West, we need to peel away some of the assumptions inculcated by historicism, including the fundamental assumption that everything can be understood in the linear, secular, homogenous time of history. When non-Western societies are read through this primary and dominant lens, they can only measure up as pre-modern, or pre-capitalist or even if in transition to capitalism, then in an incomplete state of transition to capitalism.

In summary, what Chakrabarty is saying is that we cannot understand modernity “simply as a sociological problem of historical transition but as a problem of translation as well” (2000, p. 17 italics added). Thus, the fundamental ways in which we, in the social sciences, and in the academy, understand religion, spirituality and other “life worlds” must necessarily be interrogated, revisited and revised. The founding assumption of Chakrabarty’s thesis, in my view, is that the secular and the religious are always present, everywhere:

One empirically knows of no society in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them. Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks – if not actually “died” – in the nineteenth century European story of “the disenchantment of the world,” the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called “superstition” have never died anywhere. I ... think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits. (Chakrabarty 2000, p.16)

Chakrabarty’s perspective helps us to account for the elements that are variously described as “enchanted”, “magical”, or “spiritual”, as “gods and spirits”, or simply as “religion”. In my perspective, the presence of simultaneous life-worlds is the essence of living and this cannot be intellectually grasped or explained through the dominant lens of Western modernity.
7.8 Strengths, limitations and future directions

At the end of a comprehensive work on feminist methodology, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) conclude that feminism remains “inherently contradictory because gender is only part of people’s lives. In order to transform unjust gender relations, more than gender must change” (p. 168). Explicating the many complicated layers of a gendered, neo-liberal, patriarchal discourse, involving thousands of male Muslim subjects in a Bangladeshi location has been both challenging and productive. My dissertation has provided a first and important step towards critically assessing and problematizing what I identify as the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh, a discourse that is facilitated by powerful American and international development interests to produce and empower thousands of male, Muslim imams as normative “leaders of influence” in Bangladeshi society. At the same time, my dissertation provides only one particular and partial account of the topic. My overall aim has been to unpack the Northern and Eurocentric assumptions that inhere in the project of political modernity and its compliant advocate, the dominant discourse of development. I have undertaken a case study of a relatively under-theorized and unexplored dynamic in the South: the ways in which a power-knowledge nexus of development, neo-liberal interests, patriarchy and geopolitical Western self interest constructs and produces specific, gendered and at the same time, religious male subjects in the South.

As I have mentioned briefly in Chapter 1 and explained in detail in Chapter 2, the discursive construct that I call the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh emerges from a study that turns its gaze “upwards” to scrutinize policy and processes undertaken by powerful, predominantly male experts authorized and legitimizied by the North. There are critical difficulties that researchers encounter when they attempt to “study-up”. They need to access and interact with people in positions of power and influence and pose questions that may not always be well received or even respected. Access to powerful people is often restricted and authority figures typically do not respond well to close scrutiny of their spheres of influence. Gender, class, language and other attributes are important as well. Despite my personal and family contacts, I had limited access to policymakers and policy documents.
The practice of “studying up” is also a distinct strength in my work. Although it has been suggested that researchers ought to interrogate “the reach of power in the hope of clarifying it for those who are subject to it” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. ix), not many have undertaken the processes of “studying up”, especially from feminist and postcolonial perspectives. There are limited methodological guidelines for researchers who aim to examine the viewpoints and biases of people in positions of power and authority, particularly in development studies. My study has the potential to serve as a preliminary step for future scholarship to bridge the above-mentioned gaps.

As far as international development is concerned, my dissertation highlights the workings of a particular band of development actors, many of whom are uncannily similar to what Majid Rahnema has described as “the old guard” (1997, p. ix) of the late colonial and early postcolonial era. It is interesting to note how these development actors simultaneously straddle Western/Northern particularities while claiming universal/global ambiguities and authority. The “Obama Imam Video” that I referenced at the start of this dissertation, in Chapter 1, provides a contemporary manifestation of the facilitation of these forms of authority and knowledge.

As an initial foray into the policies and practices of decision makers and authority figures in the development industry and the Bangladeshi state, my dissertation raises several further questions. For instance, my study does not explore the role of subaltern women and men in what I describe as the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh. I refer here to two broad groups of subaltern subjects, most of whom happen to be women. We know from the rich literature on the subject that a majority of poor Bangladeshi women are the clients or beneficiaries of development. We are also aware, in part from the literature on the subject and more particularly as a result of my study, that Bangladeshi women are present as development practitioners within both large international development organizations and non-governmental organizations. Several recent studies in particular have focused on how women at a grassroots level face the challenges of patriarchal Islam and the Bangladeshi state (see Naher, 2010; Siddiqi, 2005; Karim, 2004; Shehabuddin, 2008), but there is a need for scholarly works on the second group of women noted above. It would be important to probe how women in middle and senior management levels
engage with development issues pertaining to a patriarchal Bangladeshi state, religious issues and in particular to the Imam Discourse.

Another question that comes up pertains to the subjectivities of male Muslim imams. I generated evidence from various interviews including a focus group meeting with several imams and the head of the Islamic Foundation, another meeting with the head of the Islamic Foundation, and also through a close examination of textual sources pertaining to what I call the Imam Discourse. My study does not delve deeply into how imams understand their own location, agency and subjectivities. A question that I would like to pursue in the future is how imams in Bangladesh respond to the USAID and UNFPA training programs in terms of their perceptions about themselves and their activities as “leaders of influence” in society. It would be useful also to explore male Muslim imams’ subjectivities in relation to that of women imams, if any; and those of Bangladeshi imams with Muslim imams in other societies.

Finally, my research raises questions of how and in what ways Bangladeshi Muslim women are responding to new understandings of Islam including the Imam Discourse, especially in a climate of so-called “militant” or “fundamentalist” Islam fuelled by Western geo-political interests. There is emerging literature about Bangladeshi Muslim women who self-identify as religious healers, teachers and members of Islamic political parties; there is also mention of women who self-identify as secular or “moderate” Muslims interested in relating to Islam on diverse terms. It would be interesting and useful to further explore these topics. The questions noted above show that the terrain covered by my study is heterogeneous and fluid and informed by a range of influences. While my study has distinct strengths and also holds several limitations, it provides an initial basis for further exploration. Research in the future will enable us to better understand the impact of the (trans)formation of imams in Bangladesh on subaltern subjects, and also problematize new ways in which dispersed nodes of authority and expertise, or “power-knowledge”, facilitate and sustain development discourses such as that which I identify, explore and describe as the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh.

Development is a paradox of sorts—it is an “invention” (Escobar, 1995, p. 11) but it has been constructed in the social imaginary not as an option, nor as a historical and cultural Western “myth” (Tucker, 1999, p. 2), but as a “fact” (Escobar, 1995, p. 5).
insidious presence of development is embodied in development experts, institutions, policies and interventions that occupy spaces and shape the modern imaginary, i.e., the ways in which peoples see others and themselves. This powerful apparatus is difficult to unpack. Scholars, including feminists who have been concerned by the realization that women in the Third World have been disastrously affected in spite of, and even because of development (Cornwall, 2007; Pearson, 2005; Saunders, 2002; Kabeer, 1994; Parpart, 1995a), have grappled with the limitations and flaws in the foundational logic of development. At the same time, they have been reluctant to undermine the notion of development because of an anxiety that development is irreplaceable and no comparable substitute is available to take its place (Saunders, 2002, pp. 16-17). Yet, it is increasingly obvious that something is missing in all our conceptualizations of development.

It is evident that development as a by-product of modernity has been a specific outcome of what might be described as Western authorizing discourses, and that historicist understandings of “progress” leave out or subsume critical aspects of both Western and non-Western societies. Issues related to religion and secularism are greatly influenced by dominant understandings of “modernity” and such understandings appear to permeate the domains of international development policy and process. My qualitative study of the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh has been informed by these theoretical understandings.

As explained in Chapter 1, I have suggested in this dissertation that the Imam Discourse in Bangladesh is an emerging discursive construct that demonstrates in powerful ways contradictory relationships between religion and development that continue to haunt development interventions made by the North, in the South. These contradictions exemplify several fault lines that run through the North’s imaginary of development. I have unpacked these imperfections, particularly as they relate to dominant assumptions of political modernity as a foundational premise of the development paradigm. I have undertaken a case study of a relatively under-theorized and unexplored dynamic in the South: the ways in which a power-knowledge nexus of development, neoliberal interests, patriarchy and geopolitical Western self interest constructs and produces specific, gendered and at the same time, religious male subjects in the South.
The terms “secularism” and “secularist” were introduced into English by “freethinkers” (Asad, 2003, p. 23) in the middle of the nineteenth century to avoid the charge of being “atheists” or “infidels.”

According to Asad (1993, Fn. 22, on p. 39) in the early middle ages, from the sixth to the twelfth century, the term “religious” applied only to those living in monasteries. It is interesting to note that when the term religious was extended to “lay” sections of society after the twelfth century the meaning of what it meant to be religious also changed (it became quite complicated in a lay context). At the same time, the Church’s authority became more complex, pervasive and contradictory.

As I understand these remarks, Asad is suggesting that the doctrine of secularism entails the “placing” or authorizing of religion, as religion, by the (power of the) secular. Secularism thus conceived fulfils a specific role, namely to regulate or define religion.
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**Primary Textual Sources**

**Bangla**


**English language**


### Appendices

Appendix A Interviews conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Name* of Participant</th>
<th>Position &amp; Organization</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bilateral organizations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Todd Sorenson</td>
<td>Director, Office of Democracy, Governance and Education, USAID</td>
<td>20/08</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Rezaul Haque</td>
<td>Democracy Team leader, Office of Democracy, Governance and Education, USAID</td>
<td>20/08</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Shahla Rahman</td>
<td>Social Development Advisor, Governance Team, DFID</td>
<td>7/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Gule Afruz Mahbub</td>
<td>Gender Equality Advisor, CIDA</td>
<td>23/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multilateral organizations</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Asma Akhter</td>
<td>Program Associate, Gender &amp; Advocacy UNFPA</td>
<td>20/08</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Government of Bangladesh</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>6 C Q K Mustaq Ahmed</td>
<td>Director General NGO Affairs Bureau, GOB</td>
<td>25/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Abul Khair</td>
<td>Director, Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh</td>
<td>16/08</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Abul Khair</td>
<td>Director, Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh</td>
<td><strong>Focus Group Discussion</strong> 21/08</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imams; names not to be disclosed at their request.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>International NGOs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Kim McQuay</td>
<td>Representative, The Asia Foundation</td>
<td>13/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 10 Nazrul Islam</td>
<td>Program Manager, Leaders Outreach Initiative &amp; Education Advisor, The Asia Foundation</td>
<td>14/08</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mir Junayl Jamal</td>
<td>13/08</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Ahmed T A Nasr</td>
<td>Country Director, Islamic Relief, Bangladesh</td>
<td>2/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position/Role</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Anamul Haque</td>
<td>Head of Emergency Relief Department, Islamic Relief, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fazle Hasan Abed</td>
<td>Founder &amp; chairman Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Farida Akhter</td>
<td>Founder &amp; Coordinator, UBINIG</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Khushi Kabir</td>
<td>Founder &amp; Coordinator Nijera Kori</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Shaheen Anam</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tahira Yasmin</td>
<td>Development Consultant</td>
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**Bangladeshi NGOs**

**Consultants/Academics**

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<td>Meghna Guhathakurta</td>
<td>Executive Director, Research Initiatives Bangladesh</td>
<td>20/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Dr Abdur Rob Khan</td>
<td>Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies</td>
<td>23/08</td>
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* I have not identified several participants at CIDA, UNFPA and USAID even under assumed names
Appendix B  Focus Group Discussion questions for imams

1. Why do you think USAID has shown an interest in involving imams like yourself in development activities?
2. What could be the aims and objectives of USAID for undertaking this project, in your personal view?
3. In what ways has the training influenced you or had any kind of influence on you?
4. How has it changed your understanding of society?
5. How has it changed your understanding of your role in society?
6. Please give us some examples of the kind of new information or knowledge you have gained as a result of this training.
7. As an imam, do you believe you are responsible for communicating important messages and concepts to women or only to men, especially since women do not generally attend prayers in the mosque?
8. Do you think women should be given the same kind of training as you have been given by USAID? Please give us some reasons to explain.
9. How have you felt during this training period—have you been enjoying it or not, and if so, please give examples to help us understand what you mean.
10. What have you liked the most about the training experience?
11. What have you not liked or liked the least?
12. How do you think development might change Bangladeshi people in relation to religious ideas, practices? Or how do you think religion can change development—that is, do you think you can make a difference to national development, and if so, how?
13. How do you think development might change the status of women?
14. In what ways can women in Bangladesh benefit from development, in your opinion?
Appendix C  Invitation to participate in semi-structured interview

ALMAS ZAKIUDDIN
The University of British Columbia
Centre for Research in Women’s Studies and Gender Relations
1896 East Mall
Vancouver BC V6T 1Z1
Telephone 604-822-9171 Fax 604-822-9169

Subject: Invitation to participate in a study entitled: “Religion and Gender in International Development: A Case Study of Bangladesh”

Dear Sir/Madam,

I have located your name and address from the website of your development agency.

I am a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Research in Women’s Studies and Gender Relations, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. I am undertaking a qualitative study of gender and religion in development discourses in Bangladesh for my doctoral dissertation. My aim is to examine how development discourses engage with the subject of religion in a Third World Muslim society such as Bangladesh and the impact of these on women and men in Bangladesh.

An important component of this research is to identify and understand the ways in which development experts such as you perceive, define and conceptualize issues of religion and gender in the processes of development.

As an expert in this field you have unique knowledge of development processes and practices.

I am writing to invite you to participate in this study and share your professional perspectives and knowledge of development practices as they relate to these issues. I will
be in Dhaka Bangladesh from 1st August to 25th August. If you agree to participate in this study, I request a one-on-one meeting with you as soon as convenient, and I also invite you to take part in a focus group meeting with other development experts in the second or third week of August.

The Principal Investigator of this study is the chair of my Thesis Committee, Dr Dawn Currie, Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, and Faculty Associate of the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Relations, UBC.

The findings of my study will be reported in my doctoral thesis which will be a public document. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality and protect your privacy, as per the ethical rules and standards of UBC. You will be free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I hope that you will agree to participate in my study. If there are any questions which you would like to ask, please do get back to me and I will endeavour to respond as quickly and with as much clarity as possible.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Thanking you,
Yours faithfully,

ALMAS ZAKIUDDIN
PhD candidate,
Centre for Research in Women’s Studies and Gender Relations,
University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC
Appendix D  Semi-structured interview guidelines

BACKGROUND AND TENTATIVE QUESTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

ALMAS ZAKIUDDIN
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1896 East Mall
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Telephone 604-822-9171 Fax 604-822-9169
Dhaka Telephone:
(8802) xxxxxxx and Mobile: 0172-xxx-xxxx
E-mail: xxxxx@xxxx.xx

Subject: Invitation to participate in a study entitled: “Religion and Gender in International Development: A Case Study of Bangladesh”

The purpose and objectives of the study:

The purpose of this research is to generate data for the researcher’s doctoral dissertation by undertaking a qualitative study of development discourses in Bangladesh. The main objectives of the doctoral research are to identify and analyze how issues pertaining to gender and religion are formulated in discourses of development in Bangladesh, a developing and predominantly Muslim society.

The research entails identifying and analysing how international development discourses in Bangladesh, as expressed by representatives of development agencies, academic experts and media, define, debate, discuss, conceptualize, and formulate issues pertaining to religion, i.e. Islam, and how these are related to, and impact on gender interests and concerns.
Tentative Interview Questions/Semi-Structured Interview Guidelines:

The tentative interview questions given below will serve as guidelines for discussion. They will be used to stimulate comments from individuals and in group discussions. They will not be adhered to rigidly.

1. In what ways does your development agency or NGO engage with religious questions in Bangladesh?
2. In your view, how do issues of religion relate to Bangladeshi women’s ability to be mobile outside the home, have free access to employment, have decision-making authority over their own lives, and over their reproductive functions?
3. Can you think of any other ways in which religion is related to Bangladeshi women’s lives?
4. Can you provide examples of the ways in which religious issues are related to Bangladeshi women?
5. In what ways are development processes in Bangladesh involved with religious issues?
6. What are the aims of development discourses in relation to social customs that are linked to religious beliefs and practices in the context of Bangladesh?
7. What are the policies adopted by your organization in relation to religion and development, especially with reference to women’s interests and concerns in Bangladesh?
8. Can you provide concrete example of these policies?
9. What kind of development processes do you suggest for issues of religion in Bangladesh?
10. Can you give us examples to illustrate these suggestions?
Appendix E  Imam Training by USAID and The Asia Foundation

This information was not available to me in detail during my fieldwork. It has become available recently (USAID Mission, Dhaka Bangladesh 2011):

Operationally, the LOI program consists of:

- Conducting a three-day orientation training program for religious leaders and secular leaders.
- Promoting outreach activities with representatives of the print and broadcast media for producing articles or media segments on local development efforts for dissemination to a wider national audience.
- Supporting international exchange programs; and
- Implementing robust monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Table 1: LOI Partners by Type

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Rupantar (Local elected officials)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy Watch (Democratic local governance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCCP (Bangladesh Centre for Communication Programs; materials and outreach events)</td>
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<td>Data International (Baseline and End of Project Surveys)</td>
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<tr>
<th>FACILITATING PARTNERS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hindu Religious Welfare Trust; Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust; Christian Diaspora (CCDB and Caritas); Teachers, YWCA, Rotary &amp; Lions Clubs, BCDJC (Bangladesh Center for Development Journalism &amp; Communications), Chambers of Commerce, Women, Youth and Professional Associations</td>
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<tr>
<th>SELECTED PARTICIPATING USAID PARTNER PROGRAMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smiling Sun Franchise Program (SSFP), Family Health International, Save the Children USA, CARE Bangladesh, National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), Grameen Shakti, Rights Jessore, Winrock-MACH, and other partners as available.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>