

The London School of Economics and Political Sciences

**The ethical life of Muslims in secular India:  
Islamic reformism in West Bengal**

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*In memoriam* Maulana Rahaman Saheb



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## Abstract

This doctoral research explores the complexity of ethical life of the marginalized Muslim minority in the Indian secular state, drawing on 23 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a village in West Bengal. The thesis revolves around the observation that West Bengali Muslims demonstrate and emphatic concern with *dharma* (ethics of justice and order), which is foremost reflected in the increasing presence of Islamic reformism. On the basis of a comprehensive exploration of the vernacular categories, ethics and practices of West Bengali Muslims, from personhood and sociality, to politics and plurality, the thesis demonstrates that Islamic reformism is a particular expression of a desire for holistic ethical renewal. This takes places in the context of pervasive corruption and political violence; a history of ambiguous communal politics; structural inequality; and the sense of ethical failure incited by suspicion and discrimination of Muslims. For Muslim West Bengalis, the crisis of Indian secularism is at once in the denial of substantive citizenship, and in the impossibility of a holistic regeneration of *dharma*. The thesis demonstrates that while these two desires are not inherently contradictory, but embedded in the ‘transcendental social’ of West Bengali Muslims, they are circumstantially contradictory given the secular epistemology of the modern state. Therefore, West Bengali Muslims continue to be denied not only substantive citizenship, but also human dignity.

The thesis presents an analytical approach and theoretical framework that go beyond the categories ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ to bring to the forefront people’s ethical dispositions and practices, and the vernacular engagements with modernity through locally meaningful categories. Taking seriously the conceptualisation and practice of ethical life outside the secular West requires a critique of a secular conception of ethics. Drawing on Maurice Bloch’s model of the ‘transcendental social’, in conjunction with an analysis of virtue ethics and original ethnography, this thesis offers an innovative model of ethical reality that suggests that social imagination is the source of ethics.



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## Notes on transliteration and pronunciation

For the transliteration of Bengali words into Roman script I use the conventional system derived from the transliteration of Sanskrit. In general, 'v/b' is written 'b' when thus pronounced in Bengali. In the course of the text, I keep the Sanskrit version with 'v' for terms of common use largely employed in indological literature. Mute inherent vowels (short *a*) will be marked with an apostrophe, but they will be graphically represented if pronounced.

In the case of proper names, familiar titles, names of places and familiar nouns, conventional spellings without diacritical marks have been followed, for example 'Bengal', 'Adivasi', 'imam', 'panchayat', and 'Maulana' (when referring to a title). Similarly, familiar nouns and proper names derived from Arabic and Urdu will appear in conventional spelling without diacritical marks, for example, 'Quran', and 'Sunnah'. When 'Sunnah' refers to a manner of practice rather than to the actual text, I use italics and diacritical remarks to indicate the incorporation of the word in Bengali. Where secondary sources are cited, the diacritical marks (or lack of them) are reproduced as they appear in these sources.

A brief guide to the pronunciation of key words:

*ā* - as 'a' in 'banana' (e.g. *jāti* is pronounced phonetically)

*a* - as 'o' in 'dorm' (e.g. *dharmā* is pronounced *dhormo*)

*oy* - as 'w' in 'water' (e.g. *dārioyālā* is pronounced *dariwalla*)

*jñ* - as in 'gy' (e.g. *jñān* is pronounced *gyan*)

*ś* - as 'sh' in 'shiver' (e.g. *khuśi* is pronounced *khushi*)

*m̐* - as 'ng' in 'doing' (e.g. *himśā* is pronounced *hingsa*)

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## Introduction

### ‘They are all animals!’

Pratima Bibi<sup>1</sup>, the wife of Rahaman Saheb enters the room where I have come to escape from the scorching sun, panting with the heat fully covered in a black burqa. She is with her 23-year old son Samsuddin, who had just taken her to the doctor on my motorbike. Pratima Bibi suffers from low blood pressure, and several other hard to define ailments. While she undoes herself from a burqa, uncovering one of her best saris, I ask her what the doctor had said. With an air of frustration and helplessness she replies with the typical ‘*kī jāni*’ (what do I know?) while handing me over a bag with several kinds of medicine, clearly unsure as to what they are and how they are supposed to make her feel better. The visit to the doctor and the medicines had cost her several hundred rupees and this is not the first, and will surely not be the last time she makes this futile expenditure.

Pratima Bibi’s son Samsuddin is a talented young *maulānā* (Islamic scholar). After training at local independent madrasas, he finished his degree at the Darul Uloom Deoband madrasa itself (the origin and epicentre of the Islamic reformist Deoband movement) in his early twenties. He now works as a well-paid imam of a mosque in a relatively affluent mining region of West Bengal. As always, he is dressed in a meticulously clean white *pāñjābī*<sup>2</sup> and his upper lip is neatly shaven above the wild beard. Samsuddin is visibly upset about the way in which the doctor had sent his mother away with only vague advice and useless medicines. He claims that the doctor doesn’t care at all about his mother’s health; he’s just out to fill his own pocket. ‘None of the doctors care about the poor people’. Carried away with his agitation, he bursts out into a tirade about the contemporary political situation, which he feels is deeply immoral, and repeatedly says that here, ‘they are all crooks!’ (*‘sabāi badmāś!’*) The problem is

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<sup>1</sup> All names, including place names, are pseudonyms, except for the names of well-known public figures (e.g. Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb) and well known places (e.g. Shantiniketan).

<sup>2</sup> The Islamic attire in West Bengal consists of a knee-long tunic called a *kurtā*, *pāñjābī*, or *kamīz* over wide white trousers, called *salwār*. In Joygram, the *salwār kamīz* of women is usually called a *curidār*, while male tunics are usually called *pāñjābis*. Tunics appear in various forms and styles; when I refer to the white *salwār kamīz* of Muslim men, I specifically refer to the white tunic with wide trousers that distinguishes Bengali Muslim men from non-Muslim Bengalis. Most Bengali Muslims do not wear the specific Islamic attire on a daily basis, and those who do are usually Islamic scholars, imams or active members of the Tablighi Jamaat.



that those in power don't do anything about it because they follow their own rules (*'nījer āin'*). The solution would be, according to him, to implement a very strong law, and employ competent people who would point out the *badmāś* people (crooks) and make sure they are beaten up or killed. I ask him what kind of law he has in mind, an Islamic law? He nods, Islamic law would be the best, naturally, but then he says that the constitution of this country is fine, and emphasises that, according to the Hadith, you have to obey the law of the country you live in. The problem is not *which* law, but the fact that people, including Muslims, don't obey any law. I ask him whether he would first want the Muslims to be punished but he angrily answers that *jāti* (community/caste) doesn't matter here, any *badmāś*, whichever *jāti* needs to be punished. When his outburst continues, however, it does seem that Islam is instrumental, if not essential, to whether one can at all live according to the country's law. After a brief moment of silence and self-reflection, he says: 'Allah's law is good, it has no flaws, and as soon as people don't follow his rules they make mistakes'.

FP: 'But what about the Hindus, they have their *Ṭhākur* (God)...'

Samsuddin: 'Fine, that has some good things too, so let them obey that! Let them obey their *dharma* (ethics), not everybody has to follow Islam. As long as there is fear; people need to fear and obey a *dharma*'.

FP: 'But couldn't it be that you obey not a *dharma* but just a law?'

Samsuddin: 'That would be fine, but nobody is able to do so.'

FP: 'I think that's what the majority of people in my country do'.

Samsuddin: 'But in your country they are also all *badmāś*, worse, they are animals'. He smiles apologetically. 'They should be humanised/made a person' (*Oder'ke mānuṣ kar'te habe*). 'Really they are not *mānuṣ* (human), they are animals'.

FP: 'But I also don't obey a *dharma*!'

Samsuddin: 'What do you obey?'

FP: 'I obey the law'.

Samsuddin: 'Fine. But you are the only one who can do so [obeying the law without obeying a *dharma*], you won't find a second one in the entire world, take some binoculars and look for them very well, but you won't find a single person. Take those doctors; of a 100 doctors, 99 are animals, only one is

actually a doctor. They don't care, they don't cure any patient, and they just give medicines to make money of it. Really 99 of them are animals and only one is a human being (*mānuṣ*)'.

\*

The vignette presented above recounts one of the many conversations I had over the nineteen months I spent with a community of Muslims in a village in West Bengal that I have renamed as Joygram for the privacy of my interlocutors. I choose to open with this conversation because Samsuddin's outburst reflects the anger and frustration I could feel lingering among the villagers and creeping under my skin. However, it also reflects an immense desire and hope for change. It summarises what slowly became clear to me over the many months I spent within this village: that the experience of the everyday life of my interlocutors is deeply affected by the feeling that there is something wrong with this world in which we live in. They feel that many people around them, not least of all the powerful, have degenerated to animals, and that the only way to 'humanise' this world is through a revival of *dharma* (ethics of justice and order).

This thesis is a study of the ethical dilemmas and the variety of responses that arise in a minority community confronted with structural marginalisation in an ambiguously secular democracy. The research revolves around the observation that among Muslim Joygramis the revival of *dharma* is expressed in the rhetoric and aesthetics of Islamic reformism: a large number of my interlocutors, including Samsuddin, are preoccupied with living a more puritan Islamic lifestyle and explicitly aspire for the cultivation of themselves as good Muslims. This observation raises a set of questions: Why are Muslims in West-Bengal preoccupied with the Islamic reformation of the self? In light of increasing suspicion of the Islamic community, why do they choose to emphasise just that aspect of their public identity? Why does it look like the secular policy of the Indian nation-state and thirty years of communist rule in the state of West Bengal have made Muslims 'more religious' rather than 'more secular'? The thesis then goes beyond the fieldsite, as it seeks to contribute to the understanding of the nature of ethical life in the modern world more

broadly. The answers to the questions of this particular study allow me to explore a broader set of questions: what are the sources of ethics? How do people navigate ethical dilemmas and ambiguities? How do processes of modernity impinge on the nature of ethical life?

This introduction is not a summary of the chapters that comprise the thesis; rather it discusses the themes and arguments that run across the chapters. Directly following, I clarify the central concepts and terminology of this thesis and briefly introduce the analytical approach and theoretical framework of the thesis. Subsequently is a discussion of the historical background and how this impinges on contemporary debates about Indian secularism. Next, I gradually unfold how my ethnographic approach follows from, engages with and critiques the relevant literature. Then I discuss in more detail the overarching theoretical framework that is employed to construct an innovative model of ethical reality, and the theoretical arguments that follow from this model. At the end of the introduction is an outline of the thesis chapters.

### ***Dharma***

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Since *dharma* is a crucial category throughout the thesis, it is necessary for me to explore in detail what *dharma* is before I proceed. In West Bengal, Islam is considered a *dharma*, like the other 'religions' in South Asia are *dharma*, yet *dharma* is a category very different from the category religion for the reasons I will explore later in this introduction. I have synthesized the vernacular understanding and use of *dharma* as follows: *dharma* is the potential for order and justice in society; an ethical potential both in the person and in the social environment. As such, *dharma* connotes an aspiration, because harmonious order is an ethical ideal rather than an observable reality. *Dharma* is not a fixed set of rules, but a dynamic disposition that is activated contextually to create and reproduce order. It encapsulates both theory (ideology and theology) and practice by breaking down the oppositional boundary between these categories. This observation does not forestall the fact that a particular rule may be called *dharma*; but the rule is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Similarly, if a person 'has' *dharma* (and every person has *dharma* by definition of the category person) this does not mean that this person is the personification of

harmony and order, but that this person, as an integral part of society, embodies the potential to act virtuously and as such contribute to social order. In short, I translate *dharma* as ‘ethics of justice and order’, denoting both macro-cosmic ideals as well as actual practice.

Upon returning from the field, I found the vernacular understanding to be strikingly consistent with more subtle interpretations of *dharma* in contemporary Indian philosophy (e.g. Chatterjee 1968; Hamilton 2001; Hirianna 1995; Radhakrishnan and Moore 2014; Grimes 1996).<sup>3</sup> In its most literal translation from Sanskrit, *dharma* means ‘what holds together’ (Grimes 1996: 113). As such it points to the inherent nature of a thing, both descriptive and prescriptive (Sharma 2000: 90). From this original meaning, wide ranges of derivative translations emerge: moral law; cosmic order; duty; righteousness; merit; religion (Hirianna 1995: 37-38; Radhakrishnan and Moore 2014; Grimes 1996: 113) and justice (Doniger 2010: 278).

For a coherent conceptualisation, I will consider *dharma* to be operating on two levels (Hamilton 2001). On the macro scale, *dharma* refers to the entire cosmic order as well as to the moral law that sustains the cosmic order. In the cosmic order the natural and the normative are intermeshed; so *dharma* includes natural as well as moral-social law (Chatterjee 1968: 177). So on the macro level *dharma* is both an ontological as well as a regulative principle; it amounts to justice in the broadest sense. ‘Whatever there is, is part of *dharma* in this sense. If things are not as they should be... a state of disorder, or *a-dharma*, exists’ (Hamilton 2001: 27-28).

On a micro-scale, *dharma* is often translated as ‘duty’; the duty to live according to one’s ritual social role so as to reproduce *dharma* on the macrocosmic level and prevent *a-dharma*. However, *dharma* is also righteousness, virtue or merit. Righteousness here is the result of the correct performance of duty, i.e. the act is virtuous in that it reproduces *dharma* in the macrocosmic sense (Hirianna 1995: 37-38). What kind of act is deemed virtuous depends on the context and the person (Laidlaw 1995: 14; Madan

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<sup>3</sup> What follows is necessarily a concise summary, because the question of what *dharma* means pervades millennia of Indian philosophy (Sharma 2000: 91) and various strands of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist thoughts have developed divergent conceptualisations.

1992: 108). The macro- and the micro-level are two sides of the same coin; the universal cannot be separated from the particular.

The vernacular understanding and practical use of *dharma* is fairly consistent with this rough outline of the basic philosophical conceptualisations and my suggestion that *dharma* is an ethical potential (both in the person as well as in the social world) reflects Hamilton's (2001) conceptualisation of *dharma* on a macro-scale and a micro-scale. This is notwithstanding the internal dynamics of this historically emergent category: like religion and secularism, *dharma* is not a natural, static category and I explore the particular historical sense of *dharma* with which my interlocutors operate.

There is a remarkable consistency between the conceptualisation of *dharma* among my Muslim interlocutors, and anthropological interpretations of the vernacular use of *dharma* among Hindus (e.g. Parry 1994) and Jains (Laidlaw 1995). This may be surprising to the reader, however, I would argue that there is more of a convergence between Muslims' and Hindus' understanding of *dharma as ethics* than a theological or social scientific approach to Islam and Hinduism *as religions* would allow. Theological aspects of *dharma* will differ, but ideologies of kinship, for example, are shared. On a daily basis my interlocutors practice and express elements of Islamic theology as well as of local ideologies shared across the subcontinent, and live with the contradictions. They do so through the idiom of *dharma*. I will argue in detail against the analytical purification of Hinduism and Islam as entirely different religious systems later in this introduction.

\*

Before continuing, it is important to make some further notes on terminology. The use of the category of Islamic 'morality' or 'theology' refers to 'the sets of ethical norms, theological commitments and patterns of embodied practices that are demanded from a particular community by a group of religious experts' (Tareen 2009: 526). The 'religious experts' are foremost the 'vernacular theologians' (Fountain & Lau 2013) among my interlocutors themselves, thus 'theology' refers foremost to the local 'ethno-theology', that is 'the indigenous theological speculations and constructions of both laypersons and clergy' (Scott 2005). Importantly, where I use the term morality, or moral

person, it is to refer to the *potential* to live according to abstract rules, without invoking the assumption that people will act according to those rules. People will appeal to abstract rules from within an authoritative tradition, but in the midst of action they can never take an Archimedean vantage point from which to make a judgement. Morality, in my view, is part of the encompassing category of ethics; I have therefore translated *dharma* as ethics and this includes abstract moral imperatives and theological commitments (Das 2010: 377; Keane 2015: 20; Laidlaw 2014). By being embedded in ethics, morality is directly related to macro-cosmic ideals, and to a person's social positionality.

The terms ideology, cosmology and ontology are often used in ambiguous ways. I want to avoid a purely Marxist, Foucauldian or Dumontian interpretation of ideology. I use the term 'cosmopolitics' throughout to refer to the cosmology (including theology) of my interlocutors while implying the power relationships that are incorporated within the macrocosmic vision.<sup>4</sup> In other words, 'cosmopolitics' does not refer to a immutable 'culture', an untranslatable symbolic system, but warrants attention to larger political-economic forces (Gupta & Ferguson 1992). Moreover, rather than a coherent cosmology, a cosmopolitics contains various, possibly contrasting ideologies within; I use the term ideology to refer to a particular set of abstract ideas within the cosmopolitics. By using the term cosmopolitics rather than the term ontology, I do not intend to dismiss ontological status a priori, but I want to suspend having to make such claims. Ideologies, cosmopolitics and theologies all make truth claims and I do not believe myself to be in the position to argue which claims indeed reflect an objective reality and which do not (see Scott 2005).

### **Analytical approach and theoretical framework**

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*Dharma* is central to social justice; the degeneration of justice calls for a revival of *dharma*. From a purely secular point of view, justice in society follows from law and order. Samsuddin would agree that compliance with the law is crucial, but he thinks that it is simply impossible to do so without *dharma*. If

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<sup>4</sup> I do not use the term cosmopolitics in the sense of Stengers (2005; see Latour 2004). 'Cosmo-' in the cosmopolitics in Stengers usage (an elaboration of Ulrich Beck's 'cosmopolitanism') means 'global', beyond the borders of nation-states. In my usage, 'cosmo-' is derived from Sahlin's use of 'cosmology' (see e.g. Sahlin 2000).

operating with a religious/secular binary analysis, Samsuddin could be portrayed as a traditional subject rather than a modern citizen, who cannot possibly conceive of a separation of realms: a reactionary against secular democracy. Such a narrow understanding of religious reform misses the point. Samsuddin perfectly understands the ideology of secularism for what it means in the specific Indian context: it does not mean absence of religion; rather, it means equal treatment and opportunity of all religious groups. Nehruvian secularism – *dharmaniropekṣatā* (neutrality of *dharma*) in the vernacular - is premised on pluralism. Samsuddin has no problem with Hindus living according to the law on the basis of their *dharma*, as he does on the basis of his Islamic *dharma* – but as is clear from the conversation, he does have a problem with a lack of *dharma*.

This observation has to be understood in its historical and political context. Across India, the ‘rural masses’, and in particular the minorities suffer from various forms of structural violence. West Bengal in particular has a history of oppressive communist rule and is currently tainted by corrupt Realpolitik, vast economic inequality and widespread political violence. Joygrami men and women would not cease to comment on the moral bankruptcy they experience in their environment, and there is a constantly lingering sense of impending chaos. I have explained that *dharma* is an ethics of justice and order and that disorder means *a-dharma*; so for my interlocutors a lack of justice and order implies a lack of *dharma*.

The experience of a lack of *dharma* in the political and economic environment evokes an emphasis on *dharma* in every aspect of life. In my fieldsite and beyond, there is a growing popularity of Deobandi Islamic reformism<sup>5</sup> most clearly expressed in rhetoric, shifting aesthetics, and active participation in the Tablighi Jamaat.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, a revival of *dharma* can be

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term reformism for ‘projects whose specific focus is the bringing into line of religious beliefs and practices with the core foundations of Islam, by avoiding and purging out innovation, accretion and the intrusion of ‘local custom’ (F.Osella & C.Osella, 2008a: 247-8).

<sup>6</sup> Deobandi reformism originated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the Darul Uloom Deoband Islamic seminary in Northern India (founded in 1867 in Uttar Pradesh in North India). The imams I knew in Joygram are nearly all educated at the Deoband madrasa. It follows the Hanafi school of thought in Sunni Islam (Metcalf 2003). The Tablighi Jamaat is a transnational voluntary mass movement of lay preachers who engage in *Da’wa* (‘to call towards god’), founded by Maulana Muhammad Ilyad (an alumni of the Darul Uloom Deoband, Sikand 2002)

Islamic, yet it can also be Hindu. The key is that it is only with *dharma* that one can avoid living like an animal in a politically corrupt world. So Samsuddin's emphasis on living by *dharma*, and Islamic reformism in Joygram more broadly, are part of a larger process of social renewal and moral regeneration deeply embedded in the contemporary politico-economic context.

This thesis asks why, if the goal of my interlocutors is a larger form of social renewal, this goal is expressed in the aesthetic and rhetoric of Islamic reformism, and how this phenomenon relates to the secularism of the Indian nation-state. I shall answer these questions with a thorough analysis of, on the one hand, the roots of ethical action (local cosmopolitics) and on the other hand, processes of vernacularisation (of historical, political and economic conditions). Neither local 'culture' or beliefs, nor material and ideological circumstances are sufficient in themselves to explain the modes of ethical renewal taking place in Joygram; a deeper understanding of all relevant forces and of how they interact is required to comprehend these phenomena. To avoid any kind of determinism, while paying due attention to coercive conditions, I will call these forces 'ethical affordances', a term proposed by Webb Keane to denote 'any aspects of people's experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not' (2015: 27).

Throughout the thesis, I centrally draw upon anthropological approaches to ethics, which I discuss in more detail towards the end of the introduction. An analysis of ethics is inevitably based upon the observation that people do not live their everyday life largely unconsciously conforming to cultural norms, whether we call it a doctrine, a religion or a system of ideas (Carrithers 1992; Das 2007, 2013, 2014; Laidlaw 1995, 2002, 2014a; Lambek 2010; Mahmood 2005; Mattingly 2012; Pandian & Ali 2010; cf. Fassin & Lézé 2014; Robbins

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near Delhi in 1927. It shares the Hanafi Sunni normativity (Ali 2003; Metcalf 1989), and its activities are characterised as 'Deobandi *Da'wa*' (Masud 2000b: xlvii), but it contains strong Sufi elements and remains open to all Sunni law schools and sects (Reetz 2006: 33). The Tablighi Jamaat is crucial for the spread of the reformism of the Deobandi school of thought (Ali 2003; Masud 2000a; Metcalf 1993; F.Osella & C.Osella 2013; Robinson 2004, 2008; Sikand 2002). Most of the Tablighi Jamaat members in Joygram that I spoke to did not have an Islamic education at a madrasa; they had learned the Deobandi normativity from the (frequent) gatherings organised by the Tablighi Jamaat.



2004; Zigon 2008). I am not supposing that there are no doctrinal discourses and shared value systems, however, I focus on the practical and discursive aspects of the process of social renewal, which is essentially a process of explicitly reflecting on and reconfiguring *dharma*. *Dharma* is not internally static but changes with the demands of modern life, and the vernacularisation of modern categories impinges on new understandings of *dharma*. Hence, social renewal is not without significant hurdles: the contradictions between actual practices of *dharma*, new understandings of *dharma*, and contradictory ideals of order and virtue create constant tensions and ambiguities in everyday life. In fact, my interlocutors repeatedly say that they ‘just want to live in peace’, but meanwhile they struggle with incommensurable and unattainable ideologies. Moreover, they are aware that they are themselves implicated in the everyday ‘banality of evil’ and the reproduction of structural violence.

The confrontation with the incommensurability of different ideologies, and with the banality of evil, is what I call the ‘ethical tragedy’. With this idiom I do not only want to draw attention to the Greek ‘moral tragedy’ of good people unintentionally doing bad things because of circumstances beyond one’s control. I will also explore those situations where ‘good people [are] acting in ways that they consciously know are bad because they are caught in a tragic conflict because of the presence of two incommensurable ethical claims’ (Mattingly 2012: 168).

Insofar as I seek to convey the ethical complexity of the everyday life of Muslim Joygramis, this dissertation is largely interpretive in nature. However, as it is my ambition to utilise the ethnography for broader, theoretical contributions, the interpretive analysis develops within an overarching theoretical framework and feeds into a number of theoretical arguments. The theoretical framework arises from my reluctance to analyse and explain social life outside the West through historical-cultural categories with a particular meaning originating in the West, in particular the binary opposition religion/secularism. My analytical approach puts at centre stage the vernacular categories through which my interlocutors conceive of ethics. Those categories are foremost *dharma* and *jāti* (community), which significantly differ from

categories in the English academic vocabulary. Through an analysis of vernacular categories, I do address core problems of Islam and secularism in India, in part by showing the problematic nature of these categories themselves. Contrary to approaches that suggest an incompatibility between secularism and Islam, I suggest that the Islamic *dharma*, as understood in the local cosmopolitics (that is, not as a static compartmentalised religion but as a dynamic ethical disposition) offers the discursive and practical grounds for the development of sensibilities usually encapsulated by the category secularism.

In order to make the analysis of vernacular ethical categories relevant for the study of ethics elsewhere, I need a broader framework that accommodates vernacular categories yet allows for cross-cultural comparison. Therefore, I turn for inspiration to the work of Maurice Bloch (2008), who developed a theoretical model of the 'transcendental social' that conceptually encompasses historically emergent cultural categories including religion, secularism and *dharma*. In turn, this model, in conjunction with my ethnography allows me to make a theoretical intervention in the anthropology of ethics: I suggest that (social) imagination is the source of ethics. Towards the end of the introduction the model is discussed in more detail; before I develop my theoretical arguments it is necessary to outline the historical background to the emergence of particular configurations of religion, secularism and *dharma* in India.

### **Religion and secularism in India**

This section discusses the historical and political context of the contemporary situation for Muslims in West Bengal, with a focus on the literature on the distinctiveness of Indian secularism. The emergence of Indian secularism in colonial and postcolonial governance involved the transformation of modes of social identification and navigation through the construction of distinctly South Asian modes of modern categorisation. Therefore, in this history lie the roots of the potential for the particular kinds of ethical affordances salient to the lived reality of my interlocutors today. The literature on the historical context is framed within a discussion of the academic debate on the crisis of secularism in India, as this debate exposes how (post)colonial logics of categorisation have fed into the scholarship on secularism in India.

### **A crisis of secularism?**

In the late twentieth century, a series of events across India sparked a debate on the meaning and proper implementation of secularism. The most significant events were: the Shah Bano case in 1985; the increase in communal reservations recommended by the Mandal Commission in 1989; the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the subsequent communal riots in Bombay; and the pogrom in Gujarat in 2002. In parallel with these specific events, the rise of the Hindu right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since the 1980s (see Hansen 1999), recurrent communal riots across India (see e.g. Basu & Kholi 1997; Brass 2003; Engineer 1989; Hansen 2001; Kaur 2005a; Tambiah 1996; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2006), and the poor socio-economic conditions of Muslims and their lack of political representation (see Sachar Commission Report [SCR] 2006) has led several Indian intellectuals to proclaim a 'crisis of secularism' in India (Sunder Rajan & Needham 2007). Many of them felt that the political success of the world's largest democracy was threatened, and that religion and secularism (as categories or phenomena) were at the heart of the problem. It was not at all clear, however, where to place the blame.

I will not summarise the debate here in detail, as that is done elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Here it will suffice to mention that on one side of the spectrum we find the left-liberal 'modernists' or 'secularists' according to whom the separation of state and religion should ideally foster progress and liberty, and a uniform code of law should harness an egalitarian, modern society. The blame for the failure of secularism is therefore with the Indians who fail to privatise their religious life and fail to prioritise their national identity over their communal identity (e.g. Engineer 2003; Sen 1996). On the other side of the spectrum we can locate the so-called 'communitarians' (e.g. Madan 1987, 1993; Nandy 1999, 2007). They assert that the imposed Western ideal of secularism is not compatible with the deeply religious and holistic Indian society and is therefore bound to fail. The imposition of an 'alien cultural ideology' (Madan 1987: 754) reproduces an 'imperialism of categories' (Nandy 1999: 321). Thirdly, advocates of Hindu nationalism blame the state for a weak 'pseudo-secularism', which implies the appeasement of minorities and excessive intervention in the majority religion

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<sup>7</sup> See for a more comprehensive overview the introductions of and contributions to the edited volumes by Bhargava (1999) and Sunder Rajan & Needham (2007).

(see Bhargava 2010: 2; Tejani 2008: 9). Fourthly, Rajeev Bhargava (2010) argues that the distinctiveness of Indian secularism is its strength, which should be recognised and fostered. His conception of secularism is alike to a spiritual, humanist ideal, a framework that can draw upon values found in any and all religions.

The four aforementioned positions are all problematic, albeit in different degrees and for various reasons (see Chatterjee 1994; Nigam 2006; Tejani 2008: 11). Firstly, and most importantly, '[t]he entire debate has rarely touched on the actual secular practices of the Indian state, what secularism means to ordinary people in India, how it is practised on the ground and so on' (Hansen 2000: 256). Recently, anthropologists have called for more subtle studies of the way ordinary people define, experience and contest secularism (Bangstad 2009: 189; Cannell 2010: 97; Zuckerman 2010: viii). Particular interest has been vested in the way Muslims engage with secular governance, often in response to the alleged incommensurability of Islam and secularism (Mahmood 2009: 836). These works are nearly without exception situated in Muslim-majority countries (Bayat 2007; Bowen 2003; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Tambar 2009) or in a Western context (e.g. Bowen 2007; 2009). Little attention has been paid to Muslims' experience of secularism in India (but see Ahmad 2009; Hasan 2007; Hansen 2000; Williams 2012). In this thesis, I seek to address the meaning and lived experience of secularism for ordinary Muslims in India. This allows me to provide a radically new and ethnographically informed perspective on why there is a crisis of secularism in India, as well as contribute to the anthropological scholarship on secularism more broadly.

Secondly, it would be erroneous to assume (as both 'modernists' and 'communitarians' seem to do) that colonial rule introduced a full-fledged European style of secularism, capitalism, liberalism, etc., ideologically or institutionally (cf. Mamdani 1996: 9). What it did, rather, is introduce colonial versions of the Western ideological constructions that retained and changed elements of pre-colonial ideologies and institutions. I now turn to trace the emergence of Indian secularism to reveal the shortcomings of the debate on secularism in India and subsequently suggest another perspective.

## The colonial encounter

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The crisis of Indian secularism has its roots in the historically very troubled relationship between politics and religion in the British Empire. My focus here is on how the colonial encounter produced the *problem of religious communities*: through colonial categorisation distinct religious communities emerged, whose problematic nature was essential to the legitimatisation of the colonial state as a neutral, secular arbiter. The paradox is that religious communalism, the problem to be solved by secularism, is itself a historical construction particular to the South Asian genealogy of secularism.

The British colonial project in South Asia was famously built on an official policy of religious neutrality and non-interference. In reality, 'the British interfered with every aspect of Indian religion and society' in the shadows of the tropes of secularity and neutrality (Van der Veer 1999: 29, see also Appadurai 1981; Bayly 1999). The interference, however obscured, had great political consequences. Two crucial developments in this regard should be pointed out.

First, both a prerequisite for and a result of the ambiguous colonial approach to non-intervention is the reification of religion and religious communities in public discourse and policy, through modern technologies of governance like censuses and surveys: 'a range of colonial practices in British India...systematically institutionalized a nation of communities' (Metcalf 1995: 954). The definition and taxonomy of caste was central to this process. As Dirks emphasises, the British did not invent caste, rather 'the point is that caste was refigured as a "religious" system, organizing society in a context where politics and religion had never before been distinct domains of social action' (Dirks 1992: 8; see also Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Kothari 1998).

The modern epistemological grammar merged with traditional categorisation as the 'systemizing idiom' of the British rulers created or at least constrained the social identification and legal categories conceivable for Indians (Dirks 2001: 5). The experience of colonial encounters in which Indians had to explain themselves, their action, their rituals, their social relations, in short, their 'culture', resulted in an objectification of their own culture (Cohn 1987:

230). The Bengali intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century aimed for a purification of religious thought and practice to make it consonant with European ideas of rationality, empiricism, monotheism and individuality (Cohn 1987: 226; Van der Veer 1999: 31). Moreover, because the legal categories based upon one's religious community and caste provided the grounds for claims to education, inheritance and governmental and electoral reservations, it was conducive for Indian citizens to actively engage with these categories (Cohn 1987: 231-250; L.I. Rudolph & S.H. Rudolph 1967: 29 – 132; Van der Veer 1994: 19). The secularity of colonial intervention and modern techniques of categorisation effectively produced a particular form of religious communities (and a set of politico-religious institutions) in opposition to the colonial state (Van der Veer 2002: 178).

Second, the colonial state was ultimately a Christian secular state with a civilising mission that allowed for religious communities to negotiate their entry in the public sphere only to incorporate them within a *hierarchical* social order (Van der Veer 1994: 21; Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999: 28). The only 'right kind' of religious community was the Christian secular community. In the liberal tradition as executed in the colonial state, freedom, autonomy and equality is granted 'only to human beings presumed to possess the power to reason...and in this way systematizes domination over all other beings (such as animals or the colonized)' (Skaria 2014: 31, see also Dirks 1992).

As a result, the colonial state effectively created two realms of society: a rationalised middle class and the potentially dangerous masses, and a concomitant separation of politics and religion/culture. Hansen calls this the 'colonial double discourse', which 'depicted the political realm as that of representation of rational interests of elites that were supposed to represent, transform and control 'their' communities, that is the cultural realm of untamed passion and irrationality of the oriental masses' (2000: 257; see also Bear 2007; Dirks 2001; Van der Veer 1994, 2001; Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999). This double discourse is central to the development of the meaning of secularism.

In sum, the crisis of secularism is rooted in the modernisation of traditional categories – such as caste and community - in particular, disjunctive ways. 'The categories of modernity for coloniser and colonised alike are formed in the

imperial encounter itself and thus cannot be understood in terms of the imposition of modern concepts on a traditional society that resists this imposition in its own moral languages' (Van der Veer 2002: 176). The new conceptual grammar and supralocal social horizon allowed for a transformation of existing idioms: 'The transformation of these moral languages is at issue' (ibid.). The nature of this transformation and its implications for Muslims' everyday life is the central focus of analysis of the second part of this thesis.

### **Postcolonial 'anti-politics'**

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Various elements of the ambiguous secularity that emerged in the colonial encounter were reproduced by the postcolonial Indian state. Firstly, in the struggle for independence, the nationalist elite reproduced a reversed version of the colonial double discourse that emphasised a united culture at the heart of the sovereign Indian nation. Hansen calls the production of culture as the pre-political heart of purity and morality 'anti-politics' (1999: 50). The discourse of secularity and neutrality and the necessary reproduction of 'culture' as the backbone of nationalism, required the assertion of the political realm itself as a morally empty space, 'a set of lifeless procedures and alien institutions which only could be given life and indigenous meaning by a vibrant national community beyond the political' (Hansen 2000: 257; cf. J.L. Comaroff & J. Comaroff 2008: 30).

Secondly, the bifurcation between a rational middle class *society* and the traditional, ignorant *communities* was extended. The potentially dangerous masses needed to be civilised and controlled in order to guarantee tolerance and peace, yet peace and the legitimacy for power were preconditioned by the continuity of the communities. This contradiction inherent in secularism is not limited to the Indian state, as Asad observed: 'The secular theory of state toleration is based on these contradictory foundations: on the one hand elite liberal clarity seeks to contain religious passion, on the other hand democratic numbers allow majorities to dominate minorities even if both are religiously formed' (2003: 61). In the Indian case, this means that '[f]or decades democracy and secularism meant protection and extension of social privileges to the educated Hindu middle classes, and condescending paternalism vis-à-vis lower-caste groups and minorities' (Hansen 1999: 8).

Secularism in India is ultimately the attempt to deal with the problem of difference within one liberal nation, in particular the problem of difference between the majority community and the minority communities (Tejani 2008: 11; see also Chandhoke 1999; Chatterjee 1994; Kothari 1989; Viswanath 2014; Williams 2013). 'Unity-in-diversity' is celebrated as if all communities are equally valid and legitimate, and equally vital to the moral foundation of the nation (Hansen 2000: 258; Viswanath 2014: 141), but in reality the principle of secularism is integrated with the nationalist discourse that seeks to subsume diversities and differences within the dominant majoritarian culture (Brass 1997: 279-280; Pandey 2006a; Viswanath 2014: 144-145). In post-Partition India, Muslims were structurally excluded since those living in India are Hindu by default, *unless* specifically claiming adherence to a minority (Viswanath 2014: 144-145). Religious minorities are 'recognized' but fundamentally denied political autonomy as the '*political rights* of religious minorities are replaced by *cultural* protections' (Viswanath 2014: 142, emphasis in original). As a result, 'the kind of subjectivity that a secular culture authorizes' (Mahmood 2006: 328) continues to be a subjectivity embedded in a religious/cultural community. In postcolonial India, the Hindu community is increasingly being valued as the only 'right kind' of community whereas the Muslim community becomes increasingly marginalised as an illegitimate community (Van der Veer 1994; Hansen 2001).

### ***Bhadralok* communism in West Bengal**

The division between an educated elite consisting of upper-caste Hindus, the civilised class, and the uneducated masses that need to be civilised is particularly strong in Bengal, where the British Raj first established their capital. The *bhadralok*,<sup>8</sup> a specifically Hindu Bengali 'class' of self-defined enlightened, cultured and educated avant-garde formed the ruling elite, despite their being a minority (Chatterji 1994). Arguably, the most determining identification in Bengal is the overarching divide 'of being Bengali, yet not a

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<sup>8</sup> *Bhadralok* literally translates as 'gentle-folk'. The term denotes a broad category of relatively wealthy, educated Bengali Hindus, originally *zamindār* (landholders) and public servants of the colonial government, who defined themselves as the intellectual and cultural avant-garde of Bengal. Later diversified and expanded to what could now roughly be called the 'middle-class'.



bhadralok' (Jalais 2010: 173). Although the non-*bhadralok* includes non-Muslims (most significantly Adivasis and Dalits), all Muslims are excluded by default from the *bhadralok*. These two oppositions, *bhadralok*/'masses' and Hindus/Muslims have undergone various forms of configurations and manipulations but have been significant throughout the last century.

The Partition of Bengal in the wake of Independence left 60 million Muslims behind in West Bengal as 'second-class citizens' (Jalais 2010: 164). The Muslims consented that to live safely meant proclaiming 'allegiance to India, to communal harmony and to secularism' (Chatterji 2007: 172). In interaction with the ambiguous modernisation of traditional categories, the religious identity was racialised and territorialised in an ethnic identity, with connotations of blood and soil. This implies by extension that a Bengali is a Hindu and the 'Bengali Muslim...a living oxymoron' (Chatterji 1996: 16) so that a Muslim has trouble making claims to the soil and to the Bengali 'ethnicity' attached to the *des* ([home]land) (Aleaz 2005: 559). Yet, the marginalisation of Muslims was depoliticised and cast in terms of educated superiority and uneducated inferiority, so that 'Muslim' was politically employed as a cultural category denominating the backward, uncultivated peasant rather than a religious category. In these terms, the *bhadralok* found legitimacy in the 'noble' task of guiding the Bengali 'masses' into modern civilisation.

The coming to power of the Left Front (LF, a coalition of communist parties) in 1977 did not structurally change *bhadralok* superiority despite its discourse of radical leftism focused on the annihilation of class (Chatterjee 2009). The homogeneous hegemony of the *bhadralok* in combination with communist politics in fact resulted in a particularly pervasive system of political patronage and developmentalism (Roy 2004: 150; Rogaly, Harris-White & Bose 1999; Ruud 2003). The central paradox of the long decades in which the LF had ruled West Bengal is that despite the intense politicisation of society, communal marginalisation was further depoliticised and structural violence against minorities tacitly reproduced (Chatterjee 1999; see SCR 2006). The *de jure* availability of welfare schemes for all conveyed a sense of political participation and, importantly, a sense of what social justice ought to look like in a modern nation-state. It 'instilled a sense of a moral entitlement to respect...as well as

expectations of becoming entitled to benefit from one or another development scheme' (Hansen 1999: 50). However, the incipient 'quest for recognition and entitlements did not alter the brute fact of continued exploitation and often brutal domination' (ibid.) in villages and urban areas alike. The Trinamul Congress (TMC) finally defeated the LF in 2011 with populist identity politics that capitalised on the unabated deprivation of the Muslims. The rise of the TMC and its identity politics stands in a complex mutual relation with Muslims' increasing awareness of political self-determination, which I will discuss in Chapter 1.

### **The contradictions of Indian secularism**

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Concluding this section, I come back to the debate on the crisis of secularism. Both the 'modernists' and the 'communitarians' reproduce the ideological rather than real bifurcation of politics versus religion/culture and of society versus community, although in reversed versions of each other.<sup>9</sup> The modernists believe that the enlightened and educated 'society', operating from a rational sphere of secular politics could civilise the 'masses'. The communitarians reproduce the anti-politics discourse in their adamant belief that the inherently tolerant and benevolent communities should be given a greater degree of autonomy to rule themselves in their traditional ways, rather than being ruled by a self-aggrandising elite nestled in an alien institution. Several studies have shown how the Hindu nationalists manipulate the idiom of a pre-political pristine culture to further their majoritarian agenda, conceptualised as against the evil 'Other' (the Muslims) (see Hansen 1999; Van der Veer 1994). Rajeev Bhargava attempts to find the middle ground but in his normative liberal discourse he continues to propagate the need of 'the respectful transformation of religions' (Bhargava 2010: 103), whereas, at the same time and paradoxically, the Indian version of secularism should be

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the modernists seem to be concerned with secularism as a decline in social significance of religious beliefs and practices. This notion is usually expressed as part of the 'secularisation thesis', first formulated by the forerunners of modernization theory, Weber and Durkheim (see Casanova 1994; Cannell 2010). Empirically, the secularization thesis has little resonance; Casanova (1994) has argued instead that a 'deprivatization' of religion is taking place. In the perspective of the 'modernists', the 'failure' of the secularisation thesis is at the heart of the crisis of secularism.

grounded in the traditional values shared across communities. As such, he perpetuates the paradoxical colonial bifurcation of society and communities.

I have discussed the literature on the actual genealogy of secularism in India because it informs my analysis of my interlocutors' 'narratives of the decay of public life' (Hansen 1999: 57). Subsequently, on the basis of my ethnography in conjunction with this literature, I offer a reassessed perspective on the crisis of secularism. As Hansen (1999) observes, there is an increasing pressure on the inherent contradictions of the postcolonial democracy as the 'myth' of the two-headed anti-politics is gradually collapsing due to the actual and much messier democratisation of Indian society. From the point of view of the middle classes and elites, the crisis of secularism lies in their dwindling control: the elites have trouble keeping the 'masses' under control as they increasingly demand recognition in the public and political sphere – and as a citizen as much as a Muslim or Hindu. For Muslim Bengalis, the crisis of Indian secularism is at once in the denial of substantive citizenship in secular, liberal India, and in the impossibility of a holistic revival of *dharma*. The thesis demonstrates that while these two desires are not inherently contradictory, but embedded in the *dharma* of Bengali Muslims, they are circumstantially contradictory given the secular epistemology of the modern state. Therefore, Bengali Muslims continue to be denied not only substantive citizenship, but also human dignity. I will elaborate on these claims after I have discussed in more detail the relevant literature.

### **Problems of categorisation**

From the postcolonial critique of Indian secularism transpires the problem of categorisation pervasive in the project of modernity. In this section I address anthropological engagements with and critiques of problematic categories: political and academic discourse often reproduce and mutually reinforce one another in unfortunate ways, and subsequently influence social identification. The literature discussed in this section informs my analytical and theoretical orientations: I aim to deconstruct modern modes of categorisation in order to construct a model of ethics that better reflects the lived reality of my interlocutors.

## The problem of 'religion' and 'Islam'

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I first address the problem of the translation of *dharma* to religion already mentioned in the beginning of this introduction. What would conventionally be called 'religion' or 'religious' in English would be called *dharma* in Bengali, yet a direct translation of *dharma* as 'religion' would be problematic since these terms have very different epistemological and normative connotations. Religion is a category that emerged out of a particular, Christian history and is decidedly secular as it connotes modernist assumptions of separate domains (Asad 1993: 27-54). As an empirical phenomenon, religion does not have a transhistorical or transcultural essence, so an 'anthropologist who 'seeks' religion when trying to understand a place where the Abrahamic religions have not been present will only mislead' (Bloch 2010: 4), especially 'in the common contemporary situations where contact between non-Abrahamic traditions and the Abrahamic religions is present' (ibid.: 5). By using 'religion' as a quasi-analytic term, 'quite different systems [for instance, Hinduism] are being recreated according to Abrahamic lines' (ibid.). Indeed, it has been argued that the conceptualisation of Hindu-ism as a coherent religious system is a product of the colonial encounter (Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Masuzawa 2005; Thapar 1989; Van der Veer 2002) and so is the categorisation of various expressions of *dharma* as different religions (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Oberoi 1994; see also Feuchtwang 2010; Feuchtwang, Shih and Tremlett 2006; and Josephson 2012 for similar processes of the 'invention of religion' in China and Japan).

Whereas it has been widely noted that certain beliefs and practices outside of the Abrahamic religions have been reconceptualised according to the Abrahamic mould, it has largely been overlooked that the same may be true for beliefs and traditions that are already practiced under the name of one of the Abrahamic religions. Islam is not an Abrahamic religion more or less static in form and content: even if Hinduism became Abrahamized as an 'alternative' to Islam (Bloch 2010: 5), (Indian) Islam and (British) Christianity were transformed in this encounter as well (Van der Veer 1999). I embrace Schielke's point that '[f]rom a social scientific point of view, the question of what Islam "is" is a bad one, because the logic of the question already loads the category of Islam with expectations' (2010: 4). It creates Islam as an entity, as a system,

whereas it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Muslims themselves started to refer to Islam as such (as opposed to it being an act and disposition) (ibid.; Hefner 1998; Starrett 1998).

I want to be careful to avoid a conceptual colonialism by projecting the epistemic connotations of the term religion on the vernacular theories of my interlocutors and instead do honour to the empirical reality in my fieldsite. 'Positing (which is also *inventing*) a generic, abstract theology cannot furnish genuine engagement because such a move perpetuates the liberal secular strategy of managing difference and conflict such that meaningful dissent is pre-emptively curtailed' (Fountain & Lau 2013: 231). In particular, analytical and theoretical problems follow from the imposition of a Salvationist theology upon the beliefs and practices of Bengali Muslims, on which I will comment below. I therefore use the term *dharma* rather than 'religion', and Islamic *dharma* rather than Islam.

Some of my interlocutors explicitly express resistance against the definition of their Islamic *dharma* as a 'religion'. However, they cannot always resist operating with the categories imposed on them by the postcolonial state, and this interaction has real effects. The crucial point here is the mutually reinforcing interaction between legal categorisation and socio-political identification. The social scientist should observe this effect but should avoid reinforcing it (Lambek 2012). So I acknowledge that the (understanding of) beliefs and practices of my interlocutors have changed significantly when brought into contact with another Abrahamic tradition, with other non-Abrahamic traditions, and with the category 'religion' in its English contemporary usage. Neither do I assume that *dharma* has been a static category before colonialism, or that local beliefs and practices exist in a vacuum. I take *dharma*, like religion, to be an empirical, not a natural category, and my definition is therefore necessarily arbitrary (Bloch 2010: 4) and like any definition of religion, my definition of *dharma* is the 'historical product of discursive processes' (Asad 1993: 29) and synthesised from everyday practices. Nevertheless, I believe that the use of religion or Islam as an analytical category is particularly problematic when it reinforces power structures already in

place; power structures that may have already significantly altered local understandings of belief and practice.

### **Islam as a discursive tradition**

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In an attempt to overcome the reification of Islam-as-religion, Asad (1986) proposed to study Islam as a 'discursive tradition'. He aimed for a move away from symbolic interpretations so pervasive in the study of religion, to a focus on experiential orientations. Some of Asad's students (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006) and others (e.g. Brenner 1996; Deeb 2006; Henkel 2007) have generated theoretically innovative work by following his line of intellectual thinking in the study of Islamic reformism, in particular of piety movements. These scholars consider Islam as an embodied ethics rather than an abstract system of symbols and rules. This interpretation comes much closer to the lived experience of my interlocutors of Islam-as-*dharma* and I will explicitly engage with some of the theoretical arguments of Asad and Mahmood in this thesis. But while the theoretical merit of the works on contemporary piety movements is generally accepted, many anthropologists of Islam critically engage with Asad's students. Critics, many of whom draw on South Asian ethnography (see the edited volume by F.Osella & C.Osella 2013) note the particular attention to the totalising nature of the movements and claim that the outward performance of ideological coherence has too easily been taken to reflect actual consistency in ordinary life. Schielke (2010: 4) in particular argues that the 'Muslimness' of people's identity is favoured over other ideological engagements. Instead, most Muslims, even the most pious, engage with Islamic discourse and practice in erratic, inconsistent and pragmatic ways (Bayat 2007; Marsden 2005; Soares & Osella 2009; Schielke 2009; Simpson 2008).

This thesis can be situated within the critiques of the alleged coherence and homogeneity of Islamic reformism. However, it aims to go beyond this scholarship. My research is built on the critics' advice to pay attention to contradictions and ambiguity (and this thesis is probably more 'messy but rich' than 'elegant but narrow' [Schielke 2010: 6]), while at the same time, it underlines that there is need for a deeper analysis in order to *understand* the ways in which ordinary people navigate contradictions and ambivalence, as well as the reasons for this ambiguity, and achieve a higher level of theoretical

synthesis. The colonial history and ideological context feed into everyday ethical inconsistency. So rather than claiming once more that everyday Islamic life is filled with ambiguities and ambivalences, I would say that Joygramis live with discordant ideologies on a daily basis, which requires constant discursive and performative labour, to which *dharma* is a central concept, as well as Islam. As such, the Islamic *dharma* is the result of a highly political labour. In addition, I want to account for the ways in which ordinary people and (or *as*) vernacular theologians do strive after ideological and theological coherence in the face of such contradictions, by letting the systematicity of the Islamic *dharma* emerge out of the process of selection and interpretation of my interlocutors rather than to 'force the data into predetermined hermeneutical dichotomies and frameworks' (Scott 2005: 118).

### **Islamic reformism in South Asia**

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Scholars of South Asian Islam have long been aware of the problem related to the definitions of Islam, which are often Middle-Eastern centric and seem to consider Muslims outside this centre of gravity as a shadow of the 'universal Muslim' (Ahmad 2009: 10) or not the 'real' Islam (Masquelier 2009: 26). Islam in South Asia would be a 'Little tradition' on the periphery of the 'real', 'Great tradition' (Redfield 1956; Geertz 1968; Gellner 1981). However, in a problematic reversal of the authoritative definition of Islam, the literature on South Asian Islam has until recently tended to reproduce the dichotomy between a 'real' and a 'syncretic' Islam. A normative preference has been shown for Sufism, as the authentic, benign local practice, in contrast to the threatening, supposedly external reformist movements (Roy 2005; see e.g. Ahmad 1981; Ahmad and Reifeld 2004; Bayly 1992; Ewing 1997; Jalal 2008, Troll 1989; Werbner and Basu 1998; Waseem 2003). It is now being recognised that this dichotomous paradigm is increasingly untenable as it suspiciously reproduces the Islamophobic discourse of the 'good' and the 'bad' Muslim (Lipton 2011: 427). The boundaries between pure and syncretic versions of Islam are crossed and often blurred in practice, resulting in 'sufi' reformism and 'reformist' traditionalism (F. Osella & C. Osella 2008a: 250).

Attention to blurred boundaries and the ambiguity noted above is particularly salient in a study of Muslims, who have often been ‘freeze-framed’ (Latour 2005) in an Islamic tradition; and even more so when it comes to Islamic reformism. Moreover, Muslims in India are hard pressed to avoid negative stereotypes. There is a pervasive idea of the Muslim as the Other, with a particular ‘Muslim mind’ and a ‘Muslim outlook’, which is categorised as communal rather than secular (Hasan 2002: 7). The roots of Islamic reformism are perhaps not ‘lying deep in the Islamic past’ (Robinson 2008: 260), but rather in the colonial past. Indeed, as discussed above, state categorisation had a strong impact on modes of identification and social organisation. By the turn of the last century, Bengali Muslims had started to self-consciously refer to themselves as ‘Muslims’ – that is, as different from ‘Bengalis’ and outwardly distinguished themselves from non-Muslims (through Islamising dress, changing titles and the proliferation of Urdu newspapers, for instance) (Ahmed 1988). These transformations are entwined with the expansion of religious reform movements during colonial rule (Masud 2000*a*; Metcalf 1989; Robinson 2003, 2008).

The emphasis on ‘Muslimness’ (Schielke 2010: 4) by Indian Muslims is as much a political act - an act that emerges from a colonial history in interaction with a vernacularized reification of categories – as it is a reflection of their ethical commitments. Like the success of the Hindu nationalist movement, the success of Islamic reformism could be understood as a “revenge” of colonial governmentality’ (Hansen 1999: 9). In this light, Filippo and Caroline Osella (2008*b*, 2009) and others (e.g. Green 2013) refute ‘any sort of Muslim or Islamic exceptionalism’, arguing that ‘historically specific social and political contexts’ (F.Osella & C.Osella 2008*b*: 320) inflect the orientations of Islamic reformism. Many of the practices of contemporary reformism in India are expressions of a nation-wide development-minded political and social agenda (F.Osella & C.Osella 2008*b*, 2009; see also Soares & Otayek 2007). Indeed, the central tropes of reformist movements like the Deoband are rationality, education, and progress – the promise of becoming modern citizens in this world is as important as the promise of salvation (see e.g. Huq 2008, 2009; Jasani 2013; Marsden 2005: 9, 2008; Simpson 2008).



Against a purified view of Islam, I agree with the refutation of exceptionalism, and I take Islamic reformism in India to be a locally specific, post-secular engagement with the ambiguous Indian modernity (see also Euben 1999; Haniffa 2013). However, I am not satisfied with exclusively contextual arguments as the full explanation for the appeal and form of contemporary Islamic practices and beliefs. In my analysis, I attempt to find 'a cogent and viable middle way between 'object-dissolving' anti-essentialism and over-determined theories of...'culture'' (Scott 2005: 118). Islamic reformism in Joygram has roots in the contemporary political context, but also in particular local ethical frames of personhood. 'Muslimness', I will argue, can be a category that encompasses these various dimensions of ethical life when it is not mistaken to be a 'religious' identification in the modern conception.

### **Ethnographic explorations**

In this section I elaborate on my ethnographic approach. I take an analytical approach that puts ordinary ethics at the centre because it allows me to overcome the problems of categorisation discussed above. An analytical focus on ethics avoids the replication of a whole range of binary oppositions (religion/politics; religion/secularism) central to the ambiguous Indian project of modernity, while it allows me to demonstrate their practical invalidity.

An inspirational predecessor of this thesis is the work of Hansen (2000), who has given an account of the Muslim experience of secularism in an urban context (Mumbai) and shows how the social reality is not dividable into two separate spheres. Instead, on the ground practices are never only cultural/religious or political in nature but cross-cut such divides. Although my data largely supports Hansen's observations, I deviate from his analytical approach. Hansen starts his analysis by looking at the 'political'; instead, I make 'ordinary ethics' central (Lambek 2010), because 'while everything may be political, politics isn't everything' (Lambek 2000: 132). The 'political', I suggest, is not an obvious category, but a category that emerged with a particular connotation out of a particular history. In the postcolonial narrative, the political is rendered morally neutral or invested with cultural symbolism; for the Muslims described in both Hansen's and my work, these acts are highly significant, ethically loaded acts that are political, but cannot be limited to the

political. For this reason, and to do more justice to the motivations of the actors involved, I would prefer to call this kind of action 'ethical'.

In order to take my interlocutors' ethics seriously (Laidlaw 2014a: 52) I choose to approach it analytically in terms that resonate with their ethical reality. Lambek argues that of the three most influential approaches to ethics (deontological, consequentialist and virtue-ethical), a virtue-ethical approach is least prescriptive and most descriptive, in that it responds best to 'what is empirically the case, not only in a vast range of pre- and extra-modern societies, but among ourselves' (2008: 151), and indeed including, as I shall demonstrate, West Bengali Muslim society.

Prominent anthropologists studying ethics build their work on the universalistic premise that ethics is an integral aspect of the human condition (Laidlaw 2014a: 2; Lambek 2010a: 1 -2, 2013: 841); a claim substantiated by ethnography and theorised with reference to philosophy. Indeed, the current engagement of anthropology with ethics is inspired by a revived attention in philosophy to Aristotelian virtue ethics (e.g. Arendt 1958; MacIntyre 2007; Nussbaum 1990; Taylor 1989; Williams 1981, 2011) and, to different degrees, by Foucault's work on ethical self-cultivation (1988, 2000). Drawing on this scholarship, anthropologists express a critique of a Kantian ethics of duty, and argue that ethics should not be considered as a separate domain of life (Laidlaw 2014aa: 2, Lambek 2010a: 2); cannot be reduced to moral law (Das 2010); should not be equated with the Durkheimian social (Laidlaw 2014a: 16 – 23); nor is the special concern of religion (Keane 2010: 79). These abstract accounts of ethics do not tally with the experiential reality (Das 2007, 2013, 2014; Laidlaw 2002, 2014a; Lambek 2010; Mahmood 2005; Mattingly 2012; cf. Fassin & Léze 2014; Robbins 2004; Zigon 2008). Instead, ethics are intrinsic to ordinary acts and speech (Das 2012; Lambek 2010).

Regarding the anthropological approaches to ethics, I have found most useful the work of Michael Lambek (2000, 2010a, 2010b), Veena Das (2007, 2010, 2012, 2014), James Laidlaw (2014a), Webb Keane (2000; 2015) and other anthropological approaches that emphasise the dynamic and contextual nature of ethics and that allow for tensions to remain unresolved, because these

approaches resonate best with my observations in Joygram. I take a neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics, which implies that I consider ethics to be the incessant human endeavour to live virtuously and produce a just society, through situated practice rather than routine obedience of fixed rules and norms (Lambek 2000: 313). To avoid an unrealistic romanticised view of ethical life I take 'as central the human predicament of trying to live a life that one is somehow responsible for but is in many respects out of one's control' (Mattingly 2012: 179). It is partly out of one's control because of the political context – I do not want to depoliticise the ethics of virtue as Laidlaw has been accused of doing (see Fassin 2014: 433). Against Foucauldian poststructuralist accounts that tend to emphasise ethics as the cultivation of the self (e.g. Hirschkind 2006; Faubion 2011; Mahmood 2005) I believe that '[t]he paths to a moral life do not lie...in either rule following or taking recourse to technologies of self making' (Das 2014: 492). The cultivation of the self is only one way of trying to 'keep [...] at bay the skepticism that shadows relations' (Das 2014: 493) because of the demands of everyday life. Indeed, I want to pay attention to the melancholy and scepticism created by the 'difficulty of reality' (Das 2014), the ethical tragedy where there is not one good choice in a 'conflict of values' (Laidlaw 2014a: 169). Through the conceptual lens of the 'difficulty of reality' I will look at the ways my interlocutors deal with their immoral environment and especially with their own (or their relatives' or neighbours') implication and participation.

As mentioned at the outset, my thesis can be analytically divided into two parts: the roots of ethical action and processes of vernacularisation. Below I will briefly discuss the core ethnographic arguments of each part, after which I will demonstrate how my findings feed into broader theoretical arguments.

### **Roots of ethical action**

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The first analytical step in a comprehensive study of ordinary ethics is to go deeper inside the ethnographic field to reveal the roots of social action, which will be the focus of chapter 2 and 3. I have implied that 'Muslimness' is a complex ethical category. In order to deconstruct this category, I start my analysis not with the category 'Muslim' but with the category 'person'. To live

like a human being and not like an animal is to live with *dharma*, which implies that *dharma* is an essential element to becoming a human and a person, a *mānuṣ*.

I have been pressed to de-essentialise the Muslim identity because my interlocutors share the South Asian ideologies that defy the separation of material substances and moral code and therefore do not easily accommodate the idea of an essentialised identity. I demonstrate that the macrocosmic ideologies of the Islamic *dharma* fundamentally address forms of ‘relatedness’ (Carsten 2000): relatedness through bio-moral substances and from within the positionality within the *jāti*. A person, then, is perpetually in a process of becoming through bio-moral exchanges within networks of relatedness among which Muslim *jāti* relatedness is pivotal. I show in detail that the Islamic *dharma* and the community identity (*jāti*) are visceral elements of ‘becoming a person’. Indeed, I suggest that there is no moral personhood outside of relatedness conceived of through *dharma*. To stabilise the fluidity of moral personhood and the threat of chaos outside of *dharma*, a particular *jāti* identity with a particular *dharma* becomes ideologically essentialised in the mutable moral person.

This analysis of personhood has significant consequences for the kind of ethics Bengali Muslims engage in, as well as for the scholarship on religion and ethics more broadly. It demonstrates the deficiency alluded to earlier of a purified Salvationist framework for an analysis of Bengali Muslims. Although there are decidedly Salvationist elements in Joygrami cosmopolitics, I suggest that this does not have the implications that others have anticipated.

In his classic discussion of Mauss’ famous essay ‘*The gift*’ (1966), Parry (1986) argues that the stark separation between this world and the afterlife in Salvationist world religions has allowed for the emergence of a distinction between disinterested and purely self-interested gifts, as opposed to the Maussian gift in which interest and disinterest are deeply intertwined. Parry suggests that the ideology of the ‘free gift’ is made possible by the idea that rewards are delayed until the afterlife, with, as a result, the emergence of a corollary domain of purely self-interested action (the roots to the development of the autonomous capitalist market). According to Parry, the separation of

exchanges directed at this-worldly and otherworldly goals implies a range of other oppositions in Salvationist religions: the material and spiritual, persons and things, etcetera.

Parry's conception of particular values and ideas of personhood attached to particular belief systems fits within a longer philosophical tradition that equates morality with asceticism as opposed to a more reflective ethics. In his conceptualisation of ethics, Laidlaw (2002; 2014) tacitly draws on the distinctions made by Parry regarding Salvationist religions, and combines it with the work of Nietzsche and Foucault. Morality, in Laidlaw's view, becomes equated with a (Nietzschean) self-denying asceticism: the destruction of the worldly self in the pursuit of otherworldly aspirations. Against this, he posits (Foucauldian) ethics, which is reflective and constructive of the self.

Against Parry's generalisation, Cannell (2005; 2013) has convincingly argued that a separation of opposed domains and actions does not reflect the lived experience or the ideology of all people calling themselves Christians, nor, I suggest, of those calling themselves Muslim. A purified Salvationist framework would not explain the cosmology of my interlocutors because the roots of the ethical actions of my Muslim interlocutors lie in *dharma*, which is dynamic and encompasses South Asian ideologies and practices of kinship, personhood as well as Islamic theology. This is not to deny that my interlocutors attach a particular Islamic notion to *dharma*, which includes ideas of Salvationism and asceticism. But in the ordinary, everyday dilemmas that I address, the opposition between a Salvationist religion, a reflective ethics, and a holistic ideology is far from clear-cut.

Despite a law-like Islamic normativity and certain self-denying ascetic practices, my Muslim interlocutors engage in fluid and constructive processes of becoming through bio-moral exchanges, which originate in the cosmogonic act of Allah's gift of life. Indeed, I will demonstrate that the 'contract behind contracts' (Lambek 2010a) with the creator-god allows for the potential for ethics to emerge: the cosmogonic act is primary; from this, relatedness emerges; and finally, only from this relatedness are personhood and ethics derived. Still, having established this causal chain, I go on to demonstrate that the relationship may better be understood as hermeneutic: the macro-cosmic

order stands in a symbiotic relationship to individual virtue, as these are two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, I will demonstrate the centrality of the idea of virtuous judgement (*phronesis*, Lambek 2000: 309), which refutes the opposition of ethicised, otherworldly directed action (in the religious domain) and self-interested action (in political or economic domains): actions are never merely instrumental but always the embodied product of historically contextualised practical judgements. Ethical considerations are integral to reasoned judgement, and reasoned judgement cannot be limited to nor be excluded from either the political or the religious (ibid.: 310).

The local, holistic ideology and the Salvationist normativity are as such encompassed in *dharma*, despite contradictions between the two. People hardly ever hold completely coherent belief systems or ideologies, and ethical life is rife with tension (Das 2007, 2013, 2014; Lambek 2010a; Robbins 2004, 2009; Zigon 2007, 2009). My interlocutors, as mentioned, live with such contradictions on a daily basis. The enhanced stress on Salvationist aspects by Islamic reformists and the ambiguity of modern modes of categorisation however, do create increasing tensions as will be discussed in more detail below.

The implication of this discussion is, on the one hand, that the Islam of my interlocutors is not moulded according to our Western, Christian understanding of a Salvationist religion, but to a regional understanding of *dharma*. On the other hand, perhaps adherence to a Salvationist religion does not imply a dualistic separation between the physical and the spiritual and between this world and the afterlife in the lived reality (see Cannell 2005: 351). That is, the difference between the lived experiences and actual ethics of adherents of various belief systems may not be as great as the oppositions postulated by Parry and Laidlaw seem to imply, and a law-like morality might always be contextualised by sociality and embedded in a dynamic virtue ethics. I return to the theoretical implications of this idea further down.

### **Processes of vernacularisation**

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I proceed in chapter 4 and 5 to contextualise the local cosmopolitics in, firstly, the political and economic environment, and secondly, in the plural,

multi-*jāti* society. The political and economic environment is experienced as deeply immoral as the 'rural masses' encounter structural violence on a daily basis. As my interlocutors are denied substantive citizenship, they recognise the exclusionary mechanisms of the state and consider this due to the destructive idea of a morally neutral political sphere. It is in this context that the desire for a revival of *dharma* in all spheres of life is expressed.

Taking into account the roots of ethical action, it becomes clear why I understand Islamic reformism to be an expression of a broader drive for ethical renewal. If there is no moral personhood outside *dharma*, becoming a 'good person' inevitably implies becoming a good person with a particular *dharma* and a particular *jāti*. So a project of social renewal will rhetorically and performatively be located within the Muslim *jāti*, even though its roots are in *dharma* and its scope and aspiration all-encompassing and holistic.

This kind of ideological essentialisation is further enhanced by the taxonomy of the modern state, as my interlocutors are confronted with the reification of religious identity by the modern nation-state; the uncertainties of modern democracy; and the ambiguous secularism of (post)colonial India. The inherent ambiguity and uncertainty of the secular Indian democracy (Hansen 1999: 16-60) produces a continuous sense of impending chaos in the fragmented life worlds of my interlocutors. The result is mutually reinforcing processes of increasing essentialisation and increasing ambiguity and contradiction. Ambiguity is not just an individual emotion; it is also the outcome of political strategies. In particular, political strategies that curtail the ethical life worlds of the minorities.

The state cannot be trusted to create peace, so it becomes the ethical responsibility of the individual and the community to maintain order. Inter-*jāti* harmony is constantly negotiated through bio-moral exchanges that sustain the tension of living with differences. *Dharma* offers the potential for mutual resonance and peace: currently, the potentially dangerous Other is the political party (thought to lack *dharma*) rather than the other *jāti* that does have *dharma*. However, the burden of responsibility to bear tension is increasingly with Muslims, who are portrayed as the dangerous Other in the Hindu nationalist narrative.

Moreover, my interlocutors are acutely aware of their own unavoidable implication in the reproduction of vicious economic and political practices. Especially for the poor, survival may depend on the willingness to make concessions. The 'householder's dilemma' (Das 2014; cf. Lambek 2013: 845), that is, the impossibility to transcend one's biological needs when living in this world, is particularly great in a thoroughly politicised and corrupt environment, and when resources are scarce. This ethical tragedy, however, becomes interpreted as a moral failure of both the individual as well as of the Muslim community as a whole.

The emphasis on a necessary revival of *dharma* that I observed is a way of taking responsibility, regaining ethical dignity and trying to restore the flaws of the state – as it is for the Hindu nationalists described by Hansen (1999). Islamic reformism takes a very different form, particularly in its representation in the public sphere. Again, the difference is in part a result of colonial and postcolonial forms of ordering society (with the Muslim community lacking in public legitimacy), and in part of the vernacular categories through which Indian Muslims order their social environment. My interlocutors respond in creative ways to the 'decay of public life in India' (Hansen 1999: 57) in a language that is the vernacularised amalgam between the political discourse that they have appropriated, and their habitual sense of justice. The encounters with legal and bureaucratic practices of the state have a significant influence on the configuration of *dharma* in modern society: '[o]bjectification puts actions and actors at risk by giving them semiotic (thus public) form and changing their epistemic and pragmatic status' (Keane 2003: 239). Islamic reformism is an inherently ambiguous response to the modern categorisation and objectification of *dharma* as 'religion': it is a non-political, rationalised and individualised expression of *dharma*, but contains the potential for holistic ethical renewal by making Islam a 'total way of life'. By analysing the shifting grammar of ethics I reveal the fluid processes of vernacularisation: processes where modern sensibilities become encapsulated, transformed, or excluded by already existing (and always dynamic) embodied ideologies and practises.

I want to avoid the idea that my interlocutors are the 'prisoners' of their own traditional categories, and that they lack the 'secular' agency that rational,



secular citizens are ascribed. In this position I follow anthropologists like Mahmood (2005) who convincingly argue that liberal freedom is not the only possible ground of agency or resistance. Mahmood's work, however, lacks a subtle analysis of the roots of ethical action of her interlocutors. On the basis of the analysis of personhood and sociality in the initial chapters of the thesis, the succeeding chapters illustrate the more subtle ways in which Joygramis enact their political thought and agency, rather than merely reproducing the myth of anti-politics, or reacting against it.

This thesis aims to demonstrate that the great irony of the Muslims' predicament is in the inherent contradictions of the secular ideology that 'freezes' Muslims in a pre-political 'religious' community only to deny legitimacy to their ethical narrative - and deny their human dignity. The ethical tragedy is in the fact that conversion to Islamic reformism is counterproductive to its *telos* (goal): although reformist aesthetics and moral practice are intended to drive holistic ethical renewal (including ethical political and economic practice, and including all *jātis*), a reintegration of the plural social world on the basis of *dharma* is bound to fail for the Muslim minority living in a country ruled by the majority. In contrast, due to the limited depoliticised space for navigation of Muslims reified in a bounded 'pre-modern' community, reformism reinforces their 'religious' identity and as such feeds into the exclusionary mechanisms of Indian secularism.

The ethical tragedy of this insolubility is the tension Joygramis live with on a daily basis. It is this tension that I hope to have made palpable throughout this thesis. I do not pretend to offer solutions, but rather to give an honest account of the difficulty of social life for a religious minority in the modern world.

### **Theoretical framework**

As stated at the outset of this introduction, my ambition is to arrive at a better insight into the nature of ethical life through the study of the Islamic *dharma* in Joygram. As already explained, the point of the preceding sections has been to explore the value yet also the difficulties of asking this broad question in this very particular context. Here, I want to explore the theoretical framework I have employed to overcome these difficulties.

Maurice Bloch (2008) developed a theoretical frame for the *transcendental social* - the time-less and space-less social organisation of essentialised social roles and groups – that coexists in a mutually dependent fashion with the *transactional social* - the time- and space-bounded domain of everyday exchanges, competitions and power struggles of mortal individuals. Humans are distinctively able to live in the fictional world of the transcendental social where people act towards each other in terms of the essentialised roles and statuses and imagined communities. Indeed, Bloch argues that imagination is the cognitive faculty that distinguishes *homo sapiens* from even our nearest primates. Imagination is essential to the power of rituals and essentialised roles and groups: they are imagined to transcend a specific time and place, and as such they sustain the social reproduction of the community or society. So any human being will live partly within the transcendental social – even if this only really exists in the imagination and is very often unconscious. If we would live exclusively in a transactional social, then exchanges would be merely a matter of competition and accumulation; reproduction would be only physiological. We would, in fact, live like animals.

The transcendental social emerges from the human capacity for social imagination and as such comes analytically before any particular social formation and thus conceptually encompasses religious, secular or other ethical frameworks. I am using this conceptual architecture to enable an analysis of the entire ethical life world of my interlocutors, undistorted by the reified and culturally specific categories of the analyst, with the ambition to open up the possibility of cross-cultural comparisons.

Moreover, this theoretical framework allows me to address one of the key analytical problems in the anthropology of virtue ethics, namely the role of freedom for ethics, following from the assertions that ethics is not reducible to a moral compliance with obligation or convention, nor enacted in the total absence of constraints (see for an overview Heywood 2015). Although the ‘ethical turn’ is mostly about a change in perspective and analytical approach, the question regarding freedom is fundamentally the question whether ethics is a universal capacity of the mind or a result of cultural conditions. In other

words: is there a universal human aspect that allows for ethics to emerge in various ideological manifestations and locations?

Lambek (2010a: 1-2) claims that ‘the bases for the ethical predisposition are no doubt both ontogenetic and phylogenetic’ (see also Keane 2010: 73, 2015). Laidlaw (2002, 2014a) suggests that freedom *is* definitional of ethics – not absolute freedom but the freedom inherent in reflective consciousness (Laidlaw 2014a: 96, 102, 108-9, 149). Neither Laidlaw nor Lambek are suggesting innate access to universal moral laws, but both seem to assume the universality of an innate ability to make practical ethical judgment, whether upon reflection or not.

Nevertheless, we cannot ‘reduce the ethical to human psychology’ (Lambek 2010b: 42), since both Lambek (2010a: 2, 10, 17; 2013) and Laidlaw (2014a: e.g. 149, 162), and including others (e.g. Das 2010, 2014; Keane 2010) attend to the fact that the ethical is social; ‘the ethical is a modality of *social* action’ (Lambek 2010a: 10, emphasis added). So instead, we have to situate ethical affordances between sheer cultural determinism and pure self-invention (Keane 2015: 31). With Keane, and contra Laidlaw, I contend that ‘reflexivity is not a necessary precondition for ethics as such’ (2015: 24-5). Instead, I want to take a clue from my ethnography to make the tentative suggestion that the capacity to imagine may be the universal human predisposition that generates behaviour that is called ‘ethics’.

Bloch (2008) claims that imagination is an innate faculty exclusive to *homo sapiens*. Even if I want to avoid making such a strong ontological claim (not the least because I do not have the expertise to evaluate such a claim) I feel that the imagination is ‘good to think with’.<sup>10</sup> Central to the idea of the transcendental social, is the observation that only by virtue of imagination can we relate in particular ways to particular people, across time and space. The fact that we can imagine others and ourselves to occupy a role, within a group, gives speech and action its ethical dimension. Indeed, in my fieldsite, relatedness is *a priori* the person and society in the ideological construction of the self.

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<sup>10</sup> The term imagination may suggest that what is conceived in imagination is not real. This is not my intention; rather ‘imagination’ is to imply the propensity to transcend time and place. For example, I want to leave open the possibility that god exists. But to conceive of god, one has to have the propensity to transcend time and place.

If imagination is the premise, then the social is not an immutable, deterministic whole, nor is the ethical an innate disposition; ethics and the social are inherently symbiotic. So I venture to suggest that the imagination of the positionality of the person bound up with the construction of the social is axiomatic to the ethical elsewhere. As Keane (2010: 82) argues, ‘the bare fact of life with others [is] at the heart of ethics’; but animals live with others yet are not necessarily deemed ethical. Indeed, Long and Moore (2013) observed, the only aspect that seems to have universal recurrence in distinctively human forms of sociality is the ethical imagination. ‘The ethical subject here is the set of relations rather than an individual’ (Das 2014: 492) because ethics ‘require a self and an other to whom that self owes an accounting’ (Keane 2015: 26); an other who exists in an imaged relationship to the self. Humans are distinguishable from animals because of their innate propensity for imagination, thanks to which sociality across time and space is possible and from which the capability to enact the ethical potential emerges. Religion, *dharma* and secularism are particular configurations of ethical imaginations. As Lambek points out, drawing on Rappaport, ‘...religion works by *realizing* the imagined’ (2000: 311) – and we need to understand religions as particular cultural phenomena that render visible and practical particular ethical imaginations. The imagination, I argue, is the key ethical affordance, from which others follow.<sup>11</sup>

In turn, the anthropology of ethics allows me to further develop Bloch’s model. One of the critiques of Bloch’s model is his inability to explain how the two ‘socials’ relate; the theoretical aim of his later work is to find universal similarities across humanity rather than explanations for variation (see also Parry 2007: 337ff).<sup>12</sup> I suggest that this deficiency is due to Bloch’s lack of

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<sup>11</sup> A caveat may be in order. In chapter 2 and 3 I argue that in the cosmopolitics of my interlocutors there is no conceivable self and no humanity before relatedness. My claim that imagination is axiomatic seems to suggest that there *is* in fact a self; a self that can imagine. Yet my point is this: before relatedness, there is no humanity, but animals. An animal, with imagination, will imagine itself to be related, thus will be human.

<sup>12</sup> Although Bloch has published extensively on ideas informing the theoretical framework presented here (e.g. 1977, 1986, 1992) the particular conceptualisation I use appears only, as far as I am aware, in one article (2008). I have been informed by a seminar series titled “‘Religion’, Cognition and the State’, held at the Anthropology Department of the LSE in autumn

attention to ethics, and his unwillingness to take ethics seriously as a dimension of life beyond the struggle for power. As Lambek observes, in Bloch's view the ritual establishment of the transcendental world serves as a means for alienation and repression, and '[i]mplicitly the ethical subsists outside the transcendent or in the attempts to escape from its shadow' (Lambek 2012: 348).

The aim of this thesis is to go beyond Bloch and to show how in a particular historical moment and in a particular place the universal human predicament is acted upon. To this end, I combine Bloch's theory with an analysis of ethics, to explore the idealised forms of contracts and exchange from which ethical potential is generated. This allows me to turn Bloch's general and abstract point into a more fine-grained analytical framework for exploring the content of ethical imaginations and their consequences for social relations.

I want to argue, in the vein of Lambek, that ethics is derived from rituals and the transcendental social, even if this relationship is 'primarily one of formal entailment rather than of substance (specific content)' (2012: 347). Ethics is always aimed at transcending the human's mortal nature and safe-guarding the harmony and continuity of the social group. If 'religion is nothing special' (Bloch 2008) there is no stark differentiation between this-worldly and otherworldly goals; both are in the transcendental social. By implication, value statements are never *either* grounded in (transcendental) conceptions of human nature, *or* purely contextual (this-worldly); a distinction that some scholars of ethics make (Laidlaw 1995: 10-11). I venture to suggest that the very nature of ethics is the linking of particular acts to larger collective ideals (see also Keane 2015: 18-19).

A study of *dharma* is particularly apt for such an analysis: the multi-level (macro- and micro-cosmic; the collective and the individual) and contextual nature of *dharma* allows it to bridge the transactional and the transcendental social. Actions in the transactional social are *dharma* when they are embedded in the transcendental social. However, I suggest that this bridging quality is not limited to *dharma*: I think that any kind of virtue ethics does just that. Virtue

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2013 where Bloch expanded on the theoretical ideas and empirical evidence. The critiques I refer to here are critiques expressed by colleagues during the seminar series.

ethics, as it has been argued, is highly contextual and indeterminate yet it does not operate in a vacuum; there is a *telos* (goal) (MacIntyre 2007: 175). I suggest that the goal is not (only) compliance with a Kantian moral imperative but to further, through one's actions, the realisation of collectively imagined ideals; ideals that are rendered explicit and shared through ritual.

On the basis of this theoretical intervention, I argue against a secular conceptualisation of ethics that presupposes a sovereign conscience (see Asad 2003: 245). This kind of secular conception of ethics, and the analytical application of this particular understanding of ethics outside of the 'secular West' (see Taylor 2007), is prominent in Laidlaw's postulation of reflexivity as essential to ethics. I demonstrate that this postulation is problematic, as it does not allow for the potential ontological reality of divine sovereignty and therefore fails to take seriously the ethical lifeworlds of some people, including my interlocutors.

## **Chapter outline**

**Chapter 1** offers the ethnographic introduction to the dissertation. Here, I discuss the various contexts and ethical affordances that impinge on the ways in which my interlocutors reflect upon their predicament, and on the ways in which I conducted my fieldwork and interpreted my data. I reflect upon my own and my interlocutors position whilst discussing my methodology.

Chapters 2 and 3 address the roots of ethical action for my interlocutors. I will introduce the most important ideological reference points largely on the basis of ritual practices and people's stories of how life should be lived, because I think it is important to understand both the ideal coherence people strive after as well as the actual incoherence in practice and everyday speech. In **Chapter 2** I aim to provide a deep insight into the cosmopolitics of Muslim Joygramis. In contrast to an essentialist account of Muslim personhood, I will discuss how the Bengali Muslim person is generated out of ritual and everyday exchanges. **Chapter 3** analyses how ethics is conceptualised and practiced among Joygrami Muslims. I propose that they practice a virtue ethics that is embedded in an Islamic framework.

In Chapter 4 and 5 I contextualise the cosmopolitics of Joygrami Muslims and analyse the processes of vernacularisation. **Chapter 4** describes the local

perception of the political and economic context, and the ways in which my interlocutors respond to their environment with a desire for holistic ethical renewal. The critique of economic and political life explored in this chapter reveals ambiguities regarding a separation of domains. **Chapter 5** contextualises the Muslim *jāti* in the plural society. I argue that a shared *dharma* between *jātis* fosters the potential for harmonious yet tense coexistence. Finally, **Chapter 6** discusses how the processes of vernacularisation feed into ethical transitions within Joygram. I argue that Muslim Joygramis foster aspirations for a modern personhood that has global resonances and challenges the hegemonic ideology of the secular Indian nation-state. However, I suggest that the modern ethical aspirations are likely to be unproductive in their quest for recognition and dignity within the Indian nation.

In the **Conclusion** I offer suggestions for further research, in particular the ways in which the model of ethical reality I offer in this thesis might inform deeply engaged and profoundly critical research on ethics and secularism. In addition, it reflects on the debate on the crisis of secularism discussed in this introduction, and reconsiders the causes and experience of this crisis. I conclude the thesis with a reflection on the potentiality for ethical life in secular modern society more broadly, and the potential for us as anthropologists to uncover shared ideas of the good and sources of solidarity.

## 1. Ethical reflections

‘There are no neutral framings...If we constrain agency in an explanatory framing so fully that no individual persons are to blame, then ethical responsibility cannot be assigned. Make everything agency, and local moral worlds lose the sense of powerful social constraints that organize collective experience. ... both moral processes and ethical judgments must be taken into account and understood within the context of politics and social history’ (Das and Kleinman 2000: 16-17).

There are no neutral framings, and I was not a neutral presence in Joygram. I could not possibly be. I am a woman, unmarried, who arrived alone on a bicycle in this village with initially just a basic knowledge of Bengali and determined to stay. I brought my own puzzles to the field, like any anthropologist, and I puzzled my interlocutors with my questions if not with my presence. Both their and my reflections, on each other and our own predicament, were inflicted by various layers of context and experience. In the introduction I focused on the conceptual framework of the thesis; here I introduce the ethnographic context and I address the continuous ethical reflections that both my interlocutors and I have engaged in.

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The main aim of the first part of the chapter is to sketch the forms and contents of information that induce the ethical reflections of my interlocutors. At the same time, tracing the circulation of information is also implicitly a fieldwork narrative and it illustrates the context of the fieldsite. There are no neutral framings; nor is there a neutral context (Strathern 1987, 1995; Huen 2009). One of the things that initially brought me to do this research was my antipathy to the wave of Islamophobia post 9/11 that I perceived in my home country (the Netherlands) and elsewhere through the media. However, although this context of a seemingly global suspicion of Islam and of Muslims will occasionally appear in the thesis, I limit myself here to more locally relevant contexts.

One of the main targets of this growing global suspicion were Islamic seminaries (madrasas), including branches of the Darul Uloom Deoband madrasa in India. Initially, my idea had been to study various forms of



education in West Bengal, to gain an understanding of the choices by Muslims for either religious or secular education. The fieldsite would have been several kinds of schools, both Deobandi and governmental madrasas and regular governmental schools. Soon, however, I was drawn to the larger issues of politics and religion. I felt I had to understand all of the elements involved in these issues before I could say anything substantial about education; I had to grasp the context in which education had become a contentious issue. Meanwhile, I had begun my research; I read the Sachar Commission Report (soon to be discussed); interviewed Muslim intelligentsia and government officials in Kolkata; and I attended political rallies and Islamic congregations.<sup>13</sup> All this provided another context for the study of a Muslim community, as I began to learn the various structures of exploitation at work. The Bengali Muslim community I studied stands in a 'merographic' rather than mereological relationship to global humanity, the Indian nation-state, the Bengali state, and local economic and political structures: they are part of all these 'wholes' but they relate to the different contexts in various ways, depending on the perspective (Strathern 1992, in Huen 2009: 152). I shifted the context from a global to a national/state level, while widening the focus from a school to the entire Muslim population in a village. Now, as Strathern (2002: 308) has reminded us, 'contextualization is inevitably an open-ended process with loose ends, unpredictability and disconnections' (Huen 2009: 164), and my choice of where to begin and end the contextualisation, let alone how to contextualise, is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and has epistemic and ethical implications. Since there is no all-encompassing perspective or all-encapsulating context, all I aim to do in this chapter is to evoke the events that have critically impacted on the way that my interlocutors perceive themselves, as well as impacted my perceptions. These events have constrained and offered particular forms of ethical affordances. In other words, the contextualisation of my fieldwork as described here emerged as most relevant for me as well as for my interlocutors: 'rather than control the contexts according to our (theoretical) preoccupations,

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<sup>13</sup> In the process of widening my perspective I had already started fieldwork, so the presence of various kinds of schools (at least one each under the Department of Education, the Department of Development and the Department of Minority Issues, and an independent madrasa) did determine my choice of fieldsite.

we focus on how others control *their* prefigured contexts in proportion to *their* sense of significance. We learn *from* their contextualizing practices in order to learn *about* them' (Huen 2009: 158). Global events, then, appear in this thesis only when my interlocutors construct them as a significant context.

What is important to note is that the context and the 'contexted' are in dynamic interaction and mutually constitutive (Huen 2009: 150). The context informs the reflections of my interlocutors on their predicament, and in turn their actions inform the context. As the narrative will describe how I gradually came to contextualise my fieldwork, the material presented here functions as a foil for the narrative presented in the chapters that follow.

The aim of the second part of this chapter is to describe how this research came into being, the setting of the research, the methodology and my position in the field. The latter is particularly important in an anthropology of ethics: it requires a high level of critical reflexivity, not least because the puzzles one brings to the field may in fact arise from a discomfort with one's own presuppositions. This discomfort and critical reflection may in itself be considered ethical practice (Caduff 2011: 474). Indeed, '[m]oral anthropology ... should always remain problematic in the sense that it should always pose problems to the researcher both epistemologically and ethically' (Fassin 2008: 341)'.

### **The predicament of Muslims unveiled: the Sachar Committee Report**

In West Bengal, the Left Front (LF, a coalition of parties, dominated by the Communist Party Marxist, CPM) has ruled for 34 years and was toppled by the populist Trinamul Congress (TMC) in 2011, only a few months before I commenced my fieldwork. In the initial years of the regime, the LF successfully improved the conditions of poor and middle-class peasants and daily labourers (see Chatterjee 2009; Rogaly, Harriss-White & Bose 1999). In the last decade of its rule, the LF was increasingly discredited due to a stagnant economy, widespread political violence, and a corrupt political apparatus. To a certain extent, the LF had successfully emphasised class categories at the expense of communal categories. However, in 2006 a report was published that highlighted the alarming economic plight of Bengali Muslims (Sachar Committee Report [SCR] 2006). The SCR drew my attention to West Bengal as

an interesting fieldsite because of the remarkable, counter-intuitive disjunction between a relatively peaceful cohabitation of Hindus and Muslims and an absence of Hindu right wing politics on the one hand but a staggering socio-economic deprivation of Muslims on the other hand.

Within South Asia, social scientists have observed institutionalised practices of discrimination of Muslims and implicit forms of victimisation in a variety of places and forms (see e.g. Jeffery and Jeffery 2006; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Khan 2007; Kirmani 2008; Venkatesan 2012; Williams 2011*b*). There is sufficient literature on Muslims' marginalisation in India, whether this is economic and social marginalization (Alam 2010; Hasan 1997, 2007), lack of political representation (Ansari 2006; Williams 2012), low levels of education and literacy (Alam and Raju 2007), or the particular double marginalisation of Muslim women (Hasan and Menon 2005, 2006). Nevertheless, the report is remarkable, since it was the first time that a governmental body had been given the task to conduct a nation-wide survey on the condition of Muslims in India, particularly regarding education, political representation, and access to government services. The SCR shook politicians, NGOs and citizens alike into awareness regarding the social, political and economic deprivation of the Muslim community in India.

The findings of the report demonstrated that the situation of Muslims in all states, but in some more than others, is deplorable. They lack political representation; they have less access to education, governmental facilities and benefits; and score lower on development indices. In addition to the survey, the committee extensively interviewed representatives of the Muslim community on their perceptions of the conditions of the community and their experiences of public life. By way of concluding the chapter summarising Muslim public perceptions, the report reads:

'The feeling of being a victim of discriminatory attitudes is high amongst Muslims, particularly amongst the youth. From poor civic amenities in Muslim localities, non-representation in positions of political power and the bureaucracy, to police atrocities committed against them – the perception of being discriminated against is overpowering amongst a wide

cross section of Muslims. This sense of discrimination combined with issues of identity and insecurity has led to an acute sense of inferiority in the Community which comes in the way of its full participation in the public arena and results in collective alienation' (SCR 2006: 15).

West Bengal turned out to be one of the states with the worst levels of socio-economic development and governmental representation among Muslims. Recent surveys indicate that, despite explicit and repeated recommendations of the SCR, there have not been substantial changes (Social Network for Assistance to People [SNAP] Public Report 2014).

'In a word, Muslims in West Bengal, as also other disadvantaged groups, have been facing the sort of discriminations that belie the promises of social justice. What this preliminary report suggests above all it is capability deprivation – the lack of opportunities for self-emancipation – that is responsible for the poor socio-economic condition of the Muslims. There is a circular relationship here: their socio-economic fragility impedes the participation of Muslims in the larger socio-political and economic power structure, and in turn their under-representation in the spheres of influence results in policy neglects in areas of core capability enhancements – education, health, employment and so on. No policy actions or social movements concerning the Muslims of West Bengal can afford to fail to take this circular relationship into account. It is central to the demand of justice.' (Association SNAP and Guidance Guild 2014: 13-14).<sup>14</sup>

This paragraph captures, according to my observations, a crucial aspect of the Muslims' predicament in West Bengal. Clearly, the radical left discourse on class has overshadowed the fact that the LF has reproduced or even acerbated the marginality of the rural 'masses', in particular of the minorities due to the circular relationship mentioned in the SNAP report.

### **The awakening of Muslim agency**

The SCR gained wide attention in the media and among ordinary people. I conducted interviews with Muslim officials, journalists, activists, and academics

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<sup>14</sup> Association SNAP and Guidance Guild are independent, non-governmental organizations that bring together Muslims and non-Muslims in the pursuit of social justice for minorities, particularly Muslims. The survey was carried out in response to the Sachar Committee Report, in order to provide more extensive data so as to further the understanding of the causalities involved in the deprivation of the Muslim community in West Bengal.

in Kolkata, who all claimed that the SCR sparked a virtual awakening of Muslim agency, among urban as well as rural Muslims. In a very common narrative, Muslims themselves are blamed for their backwardness: the Islamic culture would prohibit progress. The report showed that the state had a much larger role in the lack of development than was previously acknowledged – it revealed some of the myths of ‘equality’ and ‘diversity’ central to the mode of governance of the developmental state. In this section I will trace some of the important channels through which a specific Muslim agency was stirred in rural areas. I discuss civil society and political parties and the Muslim middle class because, firstly, the data I collected amongst these groups informed my understanding of the position of Joygrami Muslims in the wider Bengali political landscape and offers a sense of the potential generalisability of my findings in Joygram; and secondly, these groups have informed the ways in which the Joygrami Muslims reflect upon their own positionality within the larger political landscape.

### **Public speeches: The Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, the PDCI/AIUDF, and election campaigns**

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The power of public speeches in rural areas cannot be underestimated. As a large proportion of the rural population is not sufficiently literate to read newspapers, and do not have access to a television, speeches are the most important medium of spreading and accessing information. Speeches are not limited to JUH assemblies of election campaigns: any public event, such as the opening of a school, will involve several hours of speeches of various speakers, often including local political and religious authorities. For days afterwards, the content of the speeches would circulate in the village, and even weeks or months afterwards I would hear reference to a particular statement of a particular speaker. This is not to say that all information thus conveyed would be readily accepted; there would be much discussion and deliberation. However, a crucial observation that emerged out of fieldwork is that villagers are not at all isolated and that they become familiar with particular political categories and discourses through public speeches. As Keane points out, “ordinary” discourses and “distancing” discourses ([Abu-Lughod] 1991: 158) do not exist in isolation from one another...the languages of officials, “experts”,

journalists, and so forth saturate so-called everyday speech with varying degrees and kinds of authority' (2003: 240). Various forms of 'meta-'discourse 'neither can nor aim to specify everything socially or conceptually relevant about an action or its context, but only those that are selected by the publicly available terms for the self-awareness of actors' (ibid.). Here I will discuss the most important political and civil society bodies stirring public awareness and inflicting a particular sense of (in)justice, foremost through public speeches.

The Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (JUH), originally a congregation of Islamic scholars borne out of the Darul Uloom Deoband and in practice a civil society organisation by and for Muslims, has been crucial in awakening Muslims to their predicament. The JUH provides a united leadership to Muslims irrespective of sectarian affiliation through an emphasis on common elements and a close relationship with nationalist elements outside the community (Metcalf 1989; Siddiqui 1998). The board of the West Bengal wing of the JUH translated a summary of the SCR into Bengali and distributed it in the rural areas; the JUH has an extensive network of members, mostly imams, madrasa teachers but also ordinary Muslims, across the state.<sup>15</sup> In speeches at congregations the speakers would refer to the report as often as they would refer to the role of Muslims in the struggle for Independence. The JUH speeches convey a sense of indignation and responsibility simultaneously: Muslims are marginalised beyond our fault, but we Muslims have to work hard to earn back the respectable place in society we deserve. As a result of the efforts of the JUH, almost all villagers I met in Joygram and elsewhere know the tenor of the report: Muslims are marginalised all over India and exceptionally so in West Bengal.

The People's Democratic Conference of India (PDCI; later AIUDF) is the political front of the JUH and was founded in 2007 by a coalition of Muslim intellectuals and (mostly Deobandi) spiritual leaders. Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb, who is also the General-Secretary of the West Bengal wing of the JUH, is

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<sup>15</sup> According to the General Secretary of the JUH in West Bengal, Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb, the JUH counted 140.000 members in West Bengal, and 700.000 members in India in 2012.

the chairman of the PDCI/AIUDF.<sup>16</sup> The political party came into being soon after the publication of the SCR, and has included the recommendations of the SCR in its manifesto. Indeed, there was mention of the SCR at every assembly and public speech I attended.<sup>17</sup> The release of the SCR coalesced with the Nandigram agitations, which were a result of forced land acquisitions by the West Bengal state.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the displaced farmers were Muslim, which was considered another proof of the disregard for the wellbeing of Muslims. With references to the SCR and the Nandigram agitations, the PDCI/AIUDF conveyed a sense of injustice to Muslims in particular. During public speeches, injustice would be couched in explicitly secular terms: whatever the issue at hand, it would be emphasised that it is not a 'Hindu-Muslim issue' (*Hindu-Muslim praṣṇa nay*) but an issue of (a lack of) equal citizenship. One of the spearheads of the agenda of the AIUDF is the demand for reserved quota for Muslims in governmental jobs, in order to rectify communal discrimination of the past and ensure equal representation in the future.

The TMC equally capitalised on the bleak picture painted of CPM governance regarding minorities in the SCR, and on the Nandigram agitations. The Muslim population in West Bengal is over 25% (Census 2001), and as such they form an important 'vote-bank' that could potentially make a party win or lose. I closely followed the election campaigns of the TMC during the panchayat elections in June 2013 and the national elections in April 2014. At all the speeches in the predominantly Muslim areas (including campaign events in Farukhbazar, Joygram and in neighbouring villages) the speakers would explicitly make

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<sup>16</sup> The PDCI merged in May 2012 with the AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), which is a political party present in several Indian states, whereas the PDCI was a party limited to West Bengal. Siddiqullah Chowdhury remained chairman of the West Bengal wing of the AIUDF; the all-India party leadership is in hands of Badruddin Ajmal, an MP in Assam.

<sup>17</sup> Over the entire course of my fieldwork, I have closely followed the PDCI/AIUDF. I have conducted several interviews with Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb and with other party members and supporters, and I have attended all significant assemblies and rallies.

<sup>18</sup> The CPM attempted to forcefully acquire land for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Nandigram, which resulted in violent clashes between the police and protesting farmers on March 14, 2007. The forced land acquisition and state violence became symbols of the moral bankruptcy of the Left Front government, and the subsequent protests are widely seen as the beginning of the fall of the demise of the LF. Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb was at the forefront of the protests as many of the duped villagers were Muslims. Mamata Banerjee (current Chief Minister) was also one of the leaders of the subsequent protests. See e.g. articles in *The Hindu*: 'Nandigram victims narrate their tales of woe' (Das 2007) and on the BBC News website: 'Questions over Bengal shooting' (Bhattachali 2007).

mention of the findings of the SCR, and promise various measures of development specifically directed at the Muslim community. The most prominent are the promise to include ten thousand independent madrasas under the West Bengal Board of Madrasa education (which means, most importantly, that they will receive funding) and the promise to provide a basic salary to all employed imams and muezzins (the person who calls Muslims to prayer from the mosque); the latter promise was fulfilled to a limited extent during the time of fieldwork. At the time of writing (autumn 2015), Mamata Banerjee, the leader of the TMC, is being discredited from various fronts for 'appeasing' the Muslim community at the expense of 'genuinely secular' policy.

### **Middle-class Muslim philanthropy**

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Most members of the Muslim middle-class, including members of SNAP, I spoke with emphasise that marginalisation is not a matter of religion, or of community but a matter of class and that most of the deprived and underprivileged peasants just happened to be Muslim because of historical conditions. They would be keen to stress the lack of communal antagonism in West Bengal. It has to be taken into account that the interviews took place in 2011, only a few months after the LF was toppled. Most of the intelligentsia had been supporters of the CPM, and have imbibed the communist ideology even though they may have shifted official allegiance to the TMC. That does not mean that they did not agitate against the deprivation of Muslims, but that they would perceive 'Muslims' as a class, and that they would embed Muslim deprivation in a larger narrative of moral decay. The 'backwardness' of Muslims was lamented in one and the same breath with a lamentation about the selfish consumer society.

Nevertheless, among my Muslim middle-class interlocutors in Kolkata there was a pervasive idea that 'Muslims are the victims of secularism'; the class issue has developed into a communal issue. The trope of secularism, I was told, is used and abused by the Hindu elite to disclose differences in opportunities and access and therewith - indirectly - discrimination. The discourse of similarity conceals the differences. 'Secularism' is also the argument of the Hindu majority against Muslim reserved quotas, which many Muslim intellectuals (including



the JUH) deem necessary in order to gain a more balanced representation in governmental jobs. Governmental representation would reinstall the Muslim leadership, which faced a vacuum after most of the Muslim elite and intelligentsia left for East Pakistan after Partition.

In the context of social and political decay, Islam did come to play an influential role for some middle-class Muslims. Many complained that they had to betray their religious identity if they wanted to be included into the overly Hindu middle-class society. To aspire to *bhadralok* status is to 'culture' oneself – but this culture is predominantly Hindu and continues to exclude Muslims and now they regret their 'hinduisation' (for example, having learned Sanskrit instead of Arabic at school, and foregoing prayer when at work in an office). There is a sense of moral failure here: they expressed regret that they had forsaken their duty to take care of their Muslim 'brothers'. Although most of the people I talked to took personal responsibility for this failure, they also reflected on the external constraints. NGO workers, for example, experienced serious constraints since any form of activism deemed 'Islamic' attracts suspicion and may face repercussions from the police.

The awareness of a particular Muslim deprivation, a perception of social decadence personal experiences of discrimination (particularly ghettoisation), and a vague feeling of curtailed identity and responsibility inspired a particular Muslim philanthropy with a double aim: to uplift the Muslim community, and to revive morality in society (see F.Osella & C.Osella 2008*b*, 2009 for similar developments in Kerala). It is hard to determine where the class issue ends and the communal issue begins. As such, they both reproduce the common 'anti-politics' narrative of 'the decay of the moral fibre of public life' that 'throws back the question of regeneration of public morality into the realm of cultural communities' (Hansen 1999: 57). However, they also spoke out against the idea that Islamic scholars are the only representatives of the Muslim minority. The Muslim middle class strives after a more diversified and modern representation and this aspiration is translated into the forms of philanthropy that it engages in. It is a form of what Williams calls 'defensive agency': like Muslims Ansaris in Varanasi, Kolkatan Muslims establish 'autonomous community welfare institutions rather than publicly contest the state's apparent discrimination',

and they are informed by 'pragmatism, acceptance and resilience in an effort to secure, as well as improve, the future capacities and ambitions of [Muslims]' (2011b: 277).

One of the most important products of this philanthropy is the Islamic Mission Schools: boarding schools that aim to produce Muslim engineers, doctors, lawyers and politicians while imbibing the potential representatives with an Islamic morality. In order to contextualise social and political influences upon and within the Muslim community by governmental authorities and the middle class it becomes important to recognize the impact of educational initiatives on the community.

### **Educational initiatives**

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Various initiatives of the LF government and the TMC government to cater to what they perceived to be the Muslims' needs are only half-heartedly accepted by the Muslim community for various reasons: because the needs are not actually such; because the initiative is considered to interfere with the community's autonomy; and out of fear of getting the brunt of non-Muslims' anger over Muslims' appeasement. The initiative that sparked most debate was that of government madrasas: schools for Muslim children, with various levels of Islamic subjects added to the general curriculum, funded under the West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education (WBBME) (Gupta 2009; Nair 2009). The initiative had a double motivation. On the one hand, there is a recognition that Muslims have on average lower levels of education (and a misrecognition that this is due to Muslims' exclusive preference for madrasas). On the other hand, the expansion of independent madrasas under the Rabiya Board, a madrasa board developed by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, inspired fear in the government for a potential radicalisation of Muslim youth. These initiatives are indicative of the ambiguous secular practices of the Indian state, as Hansen observes regarding the payment of salaries of madrasa teachers elsewhere: 'Instead of expanding and enhancing the quality of government schools in Muslim areas, the government chose to govern through religious institutions, ostensibly to give Muslims the same treatment and possibilities as other communities, while fixing and strengthening the authority of religious leadership among Muslims'

(2000: 260). Muslims, however, do not uniformly buy into this logic of governmentality.

I have visited several WBBME schools across West Bengal and spoke extensively with parents, children and teachers. In some cases the initiative was fruitful, as small crumbling village schools, started by one or the other village philanthropist, found another source of government funding to tap. Opinions of parents and guardians varied. Those who preferred to send one of their children (daughters in particular) to a government madrasa rather than to a standard government school did so because there would be a good '*culture*' (in English; see chapter 6). But most of the people I spoke to were not particularly happy that the local school was officially a 'madrasa'. What most parents want is good education, and these schools are not usually assigned the best teachers, and the curriculum is, according to some, below the standard of the curriculum at other schools. Moreover, the title 'madrasas' at the child's certificate might make the child liable to be excluded in future applications for further education. The children can learn to read the Quran in the local independent madrasa or at the mosque in addition to attending government school. What parents do not want is that their local independent madrasa is converted into a governmental madrasa (unless there is no other educational facility at all in the neighbourhood). Generally, Islamic education and general education are considered to be very different and complementary. A half-baked version of both in one school is considered a form of appeasement, and ineffective. Moreover, they are aware of the growing hostility of the Hindu community over such forms of 'preferential treatment'.

Interference of the government in religious and cultural issues is felt as an offence for their cultural integrity and autonomy. The fact that the Deobandi madrasa in Joygram, the Darul Uloom Jakaria, had accepted state funding had been a great source of contention within the board of the madrasa. So was the 'doling' out of salaries for imams and muezzins. Rahaman Saheb's sons accepted the salaries grudgingly, and made me promise never to tell their father, who would make them pay back every rupee.

In contrast, the Mission Schools are hugely popular in rural as well as urban areas and they are successful in the creation of a Muslim middle-class (Gupta

2009: 126 – 166).<sup>19</sup> The phenomenon started with one Al-Ameen Mission School in Howrah in 1986; it now has 32 branches across the state. The model has been copied by several others initiators, who have again branched out, such as the Al-Hilal Mission Schools. The schools follow the curriculum of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education complemented with a minimum of Islamic subjects. The most important and distinguishing aspect of the mission schools is not its curriculum but its strict regimen and discipline, and the seamless inculcation of an Islamic disposition within the larger project of the making of the modern Muslim citizen.

In January 2013, a girls-only branch of the Al-Hilal Mission School opened in Joygram. The very presence of this school, and most evidently the speeches at the opening day, sparked a particular discourse on the marginalisation of Muslims in the nearby villages. Central to the ideology of the school, as conveyed in all the speeches at the ceremonial opening, is the ‘backwardness’ of Muslims and the need to ‘uplift’ the Muslim community in order to make them respectable and participatory citizens for the betterment of the Indian democracy as a whole. All of the responsibility is relegated to the Muslims themselves.

### **Public figures in the village**

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In the village, local members of the JUH, the Mission Schools and Tablighi Jamaat members (locally known as ‘Tablighis’ or ‘Jamaatis’) are crucial for the spread of information regarding Muslim marginalisation. I have myself visited the Tablighi Jamaat headquarter in Delhi to talk with religious experts there, and found that most of the Tablighis in Joygram largely follow the official discourse but deviate from it as well. Although I found that in the village marginalisation is not generally interpreted as being community specific (as I will discuss shortly), when specific Muslim discrimination would come up, it would be considered a global as much as a national issue. The perceived global hostility towards Islam that some are made aware of through specific events, like the ‘anti-Islam video’ (*Innocence of Muslims*) impinges on how ordinary

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<sup>19</sup> Through contacts in Kolkata I visited several Mission Schools across West Bengal.

Muslims perceive their position in the Indian nation-state.<sup>20</sup> Not all rural Muslims will be directly aware of these events, but some keenly are and this affects the wider sense of what it means to be Muslim.

There was a real sense of incredulity about the bigotry and exclusion Muslims face. In the wake of the 'anti-Islam video' *Innocence of Muslims*, Samsuddin came to me with a deeply tormented expression on his face. 'Why are you doing this to us? Why are you so angry with us?' he asked me, not rhetorically. Similarly, Masiruddin asked me why 'my country' had banned headscarves. In both cases, I could feel their genuine attempt to grasp why Muslims in particular would be treated so differently. Both Samsuddin and Masiruddin spoke highly of the protests against the anti-Islam video – although neither of them went, for very mundane reasons. However, their lack of actual public action does not undo how significantly their awareness is affected by the global and national anti-Islamic discourses: public actions such as protestations are time and cost-intensive, and precarious for a suspicious minority.

Devout reformist Muslims themselves would be the first to acknowledge that there are many 'bad Muslims', and examples range from Saddam Hussein and Syria's Bashar al-Assad to local *gunḍās* (hitmen or gangsters). Usually a lack or an excess of money would be considered the cause of moral degradation. However, Masiruddin also astutely recognised the role of the 'war on terror' and global Islamophobia in the 'making' of 'bad Muslims'. 'If someone calls you a thief', he asks me, 'and then another one does, and another and another, won't you say in the end, fine, I'm a thief, and live up to the expectation?' According to Masiruddin terrorism is a self-fulfilling prophecy in India where Muslims are always under the suspicion of being potential terrorists and where the history of Partition means that their loyalty to the Indian state is always questioned.

The default exclusion of the Indian nation-state, and the circulation of information regarding Muslim exclusion elsewhere, fosters a sense of belonging to the global Muslim community. Like most other Tablighis I spoke to,

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<sup>20</sup> The video *Innocence of Muslims*, 'which portrays Islam's Prophet Muhammad as a fraud, a womanizer and a child molester' stirred violent protests in various parts of the world. See also The World Post: 'Innocence of Muslims' protests: Violent clashes over anti-Islam film break out in 3 nations' (Khan 2012). In India, the protests were limited, see IB Times: 'Indian Muslims stirred, but not shaken by 'Innocence of Muslims' protests' (Shwayder 2012).

Masiruddin idealised the future re-establishment of the caliphate; considered the Taliban 'the most peaceful' people in the world; hoped that Iran would wipe Israel off the map; and was wildly enthusiastic when Al Qaida managed to destroy American property and soldiers in a violent attack in Afghanistan (and ostensibly regretted that they just missed out on the opportunity to kill Prince Harry). In congruence, he was passionately excited about the protests in Libya and elsewhere in reaction to the anti-Islam video. These political events and ideals become global reference points for Bengali Muslims' positionality.

I am telling this story not because everyone in the village is aware of the headscarf debate in France or the Rushdie affair (another issue Masiruddin discussed with me). But Samsuddin and Masiruddin are public figures in the village, who influence the villagers' perception of their own positionality. After asking me to explain the reasons for the anti-Islam video, Samsuddin proudly told me he had given a speech regarding the video at the mosque where he works as an imam, condemning the bigotry against Muslims. Masiruddin has a different sphere of influence: he is involved in local politics; he is a prominent businessman and occasionally joins gatherings of the Tablighi Jamaat. Through figures like Samsuddin and Masiruddin global and national discourses circulate among ordinary Muslims, from villagers with barely any knowledge of international politics or Islamic theology to middle-class businessmen and politicians and devout members of the Tablighi Jamaat. If I often quote my conversations with figures like Samsuddin and Masiruddin this is not because I think their viewpoint is entirely representative for the perceptions of all villagers. But they do inform a direction of action and speech for other villagers, who would often justify their words or actions with reference to imams or Tablighi Jamaat members. These public figures, therefore, do not only form important channels of information but also function as 'exemplars' (Humphrey 1997; Robbins 2015). The imams and active Tablighi Jamaat members are 'native theologians' and for me to understand the kind of Islam that circulates in the village, the native theologians form an excellent starting point for an 'ethno-theology' (Scott 2005; see also Fountain and Lau 2013).

## Fieldwork: access, setting, and methodology

### Access

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I was warned time and again by people in Europe and Kolkata that I would have a terribly difficult time with the supposedly orthodox and dogmatic rural Deobandi Muslims. I was told that I would never be allowed access to their households, let alone their madrasas, those ‘bastions of orthodoxy’. In reality, during the first five months of living in Kolkata and traveling across the state visiting madrasas and Mission schools, I had found the interaction with Muslims dressed in white Islamic attire and with long beards the most pleasurable as they would almost without exception be the most hospitable, humble, eager for conversation while maintaining a socially respectful distance. Moreover, I was struck by the level of sophistication of their rhetoric surrounding politics, and the many layers of their reasoning.

My opinion was shared by Manisha Banerjee, who first introduced me to my gatekeeper Rahaman Saheb. Manisha was a secretary for the AIUDF, the political party chaired by Siddiqullah Chowdhury in West Bengal. Most of the active members and local leaders of the AIUDF are Islamic scholars, so thanks to her position in the party Manisha could access a large network of Muslim colleagues working in mosques or madrasas, amongst whom she was and is highly regarded. She set up a meeting for me with Rahaman Saheb in Farukhbazar, who was at that time the district leader of the PDCI (and later for the AIUDF). I met him and another PDCI member in a dusty room above a friend’s shop. Rahaman Saheb was a small man, enfeebled by diabetes, wearing a white *salwār kamīz*, a skullcap (*ṭupī*),<sup>21</sup> a long white beard and a shaven upper lip.<sup>22</sup> After chatting for a while about the JUH, the PDCI and the madrasas in the area, Rahaman Saheb proposed to have tea in his house in Joygram, just a short ride away. We passed by the Darul Uloom Jakaria, the Deobandi madrasa in Joygram and I asked whether I could go there to study the schooling. He answered that it would not be a problem at all, that I was welcome to come any

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<sup>21</sup> The Islamic skullcap is called a *taqiyah* in Arabic, and *ṭupī* in Urdu and Hindi. My Bengali friends always referred to the skullcap as *ṭupī*.

<sup>22</sup> Hair- and beardstyles among Muslims can demonstrate sectarian affiliation. The Deobandi school prescribes an untrimmed beard and shaven upper lip.

time, but that I could not stay the night there. After arriving at his home, I was served tea by his warmly hospitable wife Pratima Bibi, and one by one I met his sympathetic seven sons as each popped out of the small mud house. All seven were dressed in white *pañjābi* and *ṭupi*, with proud black beards. It then dawned upon me that I had now found my fieldsite.

I went to see Rahaman Saheb another time, with a translator, at his madrasa in Kanur in order to ask for his consent to do fieldwork in the village and at the madrasa. Again, he said it would be no problem at all, and simply repeated, 'come, come' (*eso, eso*). The next morning I arrived at his home in Joygram on my rusty bicycle after an hour ride through winding village paths and across the cattle market. Rahaman Saheb and his son seemed surprised that I had actually come by bicycle and at such an early hour of the morning. Arifuddin, the youngest son, who was still shy with me at the time (but became increasingly chatty - he said to me once that he had never liked to talk, until I arrived in the village and he started to find pleasure in conversation), came to sit with me while I drew up a kinship diagram to hide my uneasiness. Rahaman Saheb's household has been since that very first day one of my 'homes' in Joygram.

Rahaman Saheb was again extremely hospitable and ready to help me, but rather unsure about what to do with this foreign girl who hardly spoke a word of Bengali. He took me to the madrasa in Joygram as I had expressed my interest in the school, but after the usual tea and sweets there I knew I had to venture into the village by myself. With a short household survey in hand I went to one of the houses neighbouring the madrasa. It cannot have been a coincidence that Basir Khadim passed by this house within half an hour of me sitting there, as he was aware of pretty much everything that happened in the village. Basir, the local political leader, familiar with surveys like the census and able to speak and understand a few words in English, soon understood what I was up to and told me to start at the hamlet by the edge of the village, and work my way in. Knowing the villagers very well, he helped me with the first ten or so houses, and made sure I always felt welcome to join his family for lunch. This was the beginning of our friendship, and of my understanding of politics in rural West Bengal. As it turned out, Maulana Rahaman Saheb was the religious authority in Joygram, and his consent was very significant for the other villagers' acceptance



of my presence. But the party worker is more directly involved in the everyday life of the villagers, and has a more direct influence on the affairs in the village. At that time, I did not yet understand the significance of the party worker taking over the role of a gatekeeper from the *maulānā*: the one authority taking over from the other.

## Setting

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Joygram counts, of the 570 households, 247 Muslim households, 71 Hindu and 252 Adivasi households. The different *jātis* (communities/castes) live in different hamlets, but not all of one *jāti* are located in one hamlet. Rather, the different *jātis* are scattered in small hamlets across the village, so that the households of different *jātis* are clustered together in close proximity, often in groupings of extended families. As one follows the path from the main road that leads into the village, one first finds a small Adivasi hamlet on the right, not more than a few shacks built in the shadow of the primary school walls, and tucked away behind a tailor's shop and a tea stall of some local Muslims. Continuing, one finds the large Deobandi madrasa on the left, where a large compound wall is being built enclosing around it. Diagonally opposite the madrasa, five mud houses form together Hazra Para, a small Hindu hamlet.<sup>23</sup> One of the Hazra households runs a small shop that sells basic necessities to the surrounding Muslim households and sweets to the madrasa students. Crossing the small path demarcating the end of Hazra Para, Khadim Para starts. It is the largest and most wealthy Muslim hamlet in the village. One crosses several more Adivasi and Muslim hamlets when following the path, to eventually end up at Rahaman Saheb's house in Mach Para, located just off the main road.

Instead of drawing a map of the village on the basis of demarcations between *jātis* and different Muslim lineages, I could also have divided the village according to political affiliation. There are equally strong boundaries between *pārās* that house different *jātis* as there are between those that support different parties. Khamaipur and Khadim Para are both hamlets with a majority

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<sup>23</sup> *Pārā* refers to a hamlet or a section of a village or town. I use non-italicised and capitalised Para when referring to the proper name of a particular hamlet, e.g. Khadim Para.

of Khadims. They are of different lineages, but more importantly, they largely support different political parties. Khamaipur is 'red'; they are supporters of the CPM. Here is the house of the infamous Farhid Khadim, who was a notoriously violent CPM comrade. Lovokondo, a mixed hamlet of landless Hindus, Adivasi and Muslims, is divided into those who support the CPM and those who have been swayed into joining the TMC. Unwittingly, the geography of my fieldwork had been influenced by demarcations of party politics. Crossing the road to enter the 'red' hamlet Khamaipur felt somehow dangerous and uncanny, and I largely avoided doing so even before I was aware of the different political affiliations. About half of the inhabitants of Mach Para, the *pārā* of Rahaman Saheb's family, are CPM supporters as well (but not as actively so as in Khamaipur because of the mixed presence of TMC and CPM), but Khadim Para was host to the most active TMC supporters and that may have inspired a dread for Khamaipur in me. But it was not until much later that I understood the political tensions that had withheld me.

It has to be noted here that Joygram forms an interesting place because not all Muslims in this village are the prototypical 'marginalised poor'. In Joygram, the Khadims, Maliks (both Muslim lineages) and Mondals are the politically and economically powerful class, who dominate both other Muslim lineages and all the Hindus and Adivasi in the village. A section of the Khadims of Khadim Para own the cattle market across the road, and are very wealthy indeed.<sup>24</sup> The Maliks are 'self-made men' who have in one generation developed from among the poorest to the richest in the village, predominantly through various forms of trade. The Mondals trace their lineage to a wealthy landlord, *jamidār*, who held enormous tracts of land. Most of the land surrounding the village is owned by Khadims, Maliks, and the Mondals of Mach Para, even though most of the other

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<sup>24</sup> The cattle market is approx. 600 *bighā* (approx. 200 acres). The land was donated to the Khadims by a Hindu *jamidār* whose child had allegedly been cured by Champa Bibi, who is buried in the shrine on this land. The property was listed under the State WAQF Board in 1899. WAQF properties are inalienable endowments of the Muslim community, to be used for charitable or religious purposes. Technically, the Khadims are not the owners of the land but they are 'caretakers' (*musualis*), who have to provide official accounts to the State WAQF Board. Currently, the WAQF property includes the shrine, the graveyard (*mājār*), the land used for the cattle market and for a banyan tree plantation and the Eid *ghāt* (enclosed space for prayer on auspicious Islamic days).

Muslims own small patches of land (with the exception of the Muslims in Lovokondo).<sup>25</sup> Two of the Khadims and two of the Mondals have relatively well earning government jobs (*cākri*, which are highest in status and job security).

The majority of male Joygramis, however, work as day labourers in agriculture and masonry,<sup>26</sup> in various kinds of petty businesses, or as hawkers and market vendors, and earn on average 3000 INR a month.<sup>27</sup> The cattle market is a great source of income not only for its owners but for many of the Joygramis. Several men are involved in the cattle trade itself (the majority Khadims); others sell various goods and services at the market. At least half of the Joygrami women (from adolescence upwards) earn some money by stitching embroidery on *salwār kamīz*.

The Hindus and Adivasis in Joygram are generally at the same income level of the poorest sections of the Muslims, and the vast majority are either subsistence farmers or landless day labourers.

In Joygram as well as in the Farukhbazar Block<sup>28</sup> as a whole, Muslims form a majority, have most local political leverage and most of the local political leadership is Muslim. However, Hindus occupy the largest number of governmental posts, and both the Block Development Officer and the Superintendent of Police are Hindu. This 'glass ceiling' does signify the problem of central recruitment processes, which are hard to penetrate for Muslims due to historically powerful networks among Hindus through which government jobs circulate.

Like many anthropologists, I tend to find that 'the dominated are more interesting and valuable than the dominators' (Bloch 1994: 283), and I initially lamented choosing Joygram because it was too big and too rich. But the different levels of wealth, poverty and power within the village turned out to be very revealing because it allowed me access to different perspectives, and to put these into a relational comparison. Within the microcosm of Joygram, Muslims

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<sup>25</sup> As a result of the land redistribution schemes of the CPM (see Rogaly, Harriss-White and Bose 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Including labour under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 (NREGA), locally known as 'hundred days work' (*ekśo din kāj*) because it is supposed to provide at least one hundred days of work to all Indian citizens.

<sup>27</sup> At the time of fieldwork, 2011-2013, 3000 INR is  $\pm$  £30.

<sup>28</sup> Farukhbazar Block is an administrative area encompassing 17 villages, including Joygram.

are both dominators and dominated: power relations existed between the wealthy landowners and the landless labourers, and between different party affiliates. The extreme monetary inequalities and exploitation within the village, if not within families, forestalled any form of romanticism of the 'poor oppressed Muslims' as a homogeneous group. In fact, I was forced to sympathize with the 'oppressors' as well, and got an insight into their deliberations (sometimes not without me squirming in indignation). This helped me to see where issues were experienced differently depending on political economic position, and where experience and practice were similar among all Muslims in Joygram.

Moreover, I had often felt wary of the ways in which my focus on the 'Muslim' aspect of the social situation would reproduce a problematic categorisation. The heterogeneity of the Muslims in Joygram did bring many other salient issues to my attention. I have described the setting of the village deliberately in two ways, on communal religious determination and political affiliation. Most of the time I felt that party politics were a much stronger determining factor in everyday life than communal identity. That is, until I understood the more subtle ways in which *dharma* encapsulates all aspects of social life.

A caveat is in order, as it might be true that in other villages, where the dominant group is Hindu, certain perceptions and evaluations may differ from the perceptions in Joygram. Some of these differences are reflected upon by Joygramis and I have included these in the thesis where relevant. It would be remarked, for example, that there is less freedom for Muslims elsewhere (here, the Khadims can slaughter a cow every Saturday in the centre of the village – this would not be possible in a village dominated by Hindus), or that there is more communal trouble elsewhere (these remarks could be made in comparison with other villages, with other districts, or with other states such as Tamil Nadu, where several young men from Joygram had migrated to work).

Another aspect of my fieldwork that I deeply lamented at first but turned out to be highly beneficial is my interlocutors' refusal to house me in the village. Rahaman Saheb's house was too small even for his own family hence I could not stay there, so in the first few days I had started to tentatively ask around if there

was a spare room anywhere. All hospitable invitations started to fade when I became serious and on one day arrived in the village with a backpack. Finally, Basir took me aside and explained to me that I could not stay in Joygram, because the villagers feared that my presence would attract trouble, in particular trouble from boys who'd come from far and wide. Moreover, with Shantiniketan (a small university town) just some 20 kilometres away, they saw no reason why I could not stay there. Deeply disappointed, but not in any way wanting to enforce my presence, I settled in at Shantiniketan and continued cycling to Joygram every day (and soon bought a motorbike). My nomadic presence in Joygram, however, came with the advantage that I had no ties attached to a particular family, or even to a particular *pārā*. I was completely free and used this to my advantage to eat, nap, bath, cook, and gossip in dozens of different households, from the destitute widow in her single room mud hut to the descendent of a *jamidār* with a grass garden around his mansion. Soon enough, people had gotten used to my wandering presence and I was invited to stay over for the night (again, in different households) when my motorbike had broken down again, or when it had inadvertently become too dark to still cross the dangerous forest between Joygram and Shantiniketan, or on special occasions (I spent almost all of Ramadan, during which I fasted too, in different households across Joygram). My choices of where to eat and where to sleep (I always had more invitations than I could accept) were the topic of much deliberation in the village, and although at times exasperating, the politics surrounding my presence provided illuminating insights.

### **Reflections on methodology**

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I have mentioned that one of the motivations for choosing to study the problematics surrounding Islam and secularism was my antipathy to Islamophobia, including the idea that 'those Muslims' are incapable of 'our secularism'. At the same time, I suppose I encountered a MacIntyrian moral vacuum in liberal modernity, and I was in 'search of fullness' (Taylor 2007: 19). I was attracted to the conviction of Islamists and non-political Islamic reformists alike as they seemed to share my desire to revive a public morality. But in all honesty, I fostered a mild antipathy to what I perceived as the

totalitarian and constraining aspects of religion since my only personal experience with religion was that of an oppressive, guilt and fear-inspiring Calvinism in the rural Netherlands where I grew up. I wanted to reconcile the disjunctive feelings of antipathy and attraction through an understanding of why people would choose this kind of response to the moral vacuum of modernity, if that is at all a valid interpretation. The kind of ‘methodological agnosticism’ (which has long been, and arguably still is, the disciplinary ‘rule of thumb’ [Bowie 2006: 4]) I brought to the field has been criticised for being condescending and impeding meaningful interaction (Kahn 2011: 80-82), ultimately failing to take seriously the religious life of others (Cannell 2006). In contrast, my explicit position in the field as an agnostic doubting the existence of a god or the afterlife, but in search for a meaningful narrative created a space for learning and genuine discussions; for a truly engaged anthropology. To make things easier, I could have said from the beginning that my *dharma* was Christian, but that would have forestalled the endless confusions on their part about my lack of *dharma*, the confusion on my part of their insistence on the impossibility of living without *dharma*, and the slow understanding that grew between us. Villagers’ reflections on my curious position in the village, and finding the fine balance between honesty and immersive participation also taught me about the complex layering of *dharma*: its universality on the one hand, grounded in notions of human nature, and its flexibility and contextual applicability on the other hand.

I cannot claim that my anthropology is entirely ‘symmetrical’ (Latour 2012), but I have aimed for a true engagement with ‘vernacular theologies’ through interactions that involve ‘[c]ritique, transformation, affirmation and negation’ (Fountain and Lau 2013: 231).<sup>29</sup> One of the most transformative moments during my fieldwork was a long conversation with Wahed (an inspired Tablighi Jamaat member). He tried to explain to me that if one truly experiences real and deep *imān* (faith), one can truly see that Allah is not an anthropomorphic ‘god above’ but immanent in everything that surrounds us. In the midst of wedding celebrations, surrounded by dozens of people, I could suddenly feel a rush of

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<sup>29</sup> With ‘critique’ I do not mean criticism, but critique ‘that grows out of juxtaposition of multiple, ethnographically grounded perspectives’ (Fischer and Abedi 1990: xxxi). As such, I position myself in a tradition of ‘critical anthropology’.

effervescence through my body, and finally started to understand Allah in a manner very different to the anthropomorphic Christian god I had grown up with.<sup>30</sup> I started to have a visceral sense of a different conception of the empirical reality, one in which the sacred is not separable from ordinary life. This, in turn, impacted my shifting conception of ethics as integral to action and speech, rather than as a modality of particular kinds of actions.

Another crucial moment was when my interlocutors realised that despite such experiences, I refused to officially convert to Islam. For example, my partaking in Arabic classes in the village was cut short when they felt that I only took part for my research, not because I believed in the power of the recitation of the Quran. Some of my interlocutors felt, indeed, that I had been condescending and had an arrogant, even abusive attitude towards a practice considered sacred to them. Others felt that I should be allowed to continue the classes because it could still have a transformative effect, as they believed I had a genuinely open position rather than an *a priori* dismissive attitude. These kinds of engagements and encounters, ‘arguments as well as rapprochement’ (Fountain and Lau 2013: 231), were only possible because I took seriously the vernacular theology of my interlocutors while also occupying a (transient) ‘theological position’ myself, which is ‘inevitably a messy and complicated business’ (ibid.).

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The reader will find that I draw a lot upon conversations with my interlocutors, in which my voice is present. One of the reasons for this is due to my interest in vernacular theology, and I want to convey the mutual understanding that grew out of conversations. The other reason is very practical: as I did not have my own house in the village, I remained a visitor, and it was really only in the households of Basir and Rahaman Saheb that I was even allowed to contribute to daily chores like cooking, nursing babies and sweeping floors. So I ended up spending a lot of time wandering from house to house chatting with people while they would go about their work or share tea. Another reason is that, as is well known, Bengalis love to chat, gossip and

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<sup>30</sup> Obviously, the Christian god could be explained in the same way as Wahed explains Allah to me here. I merely mean that I had (unwittingly) projected my anthropomorphic understanding of the Christian god upon the way my interlocutors see Allah.

discuss intellectual or political matters over tea – the latter a particular kind of activity called *āḍḍā* (Chakrabarty 1999; Sen 2011; Sil 2013). *Āḍḍā* has been recognised to contain a sense of nostalgia and melancholy among the middle classes, and talk about the economy or politics will most definitely be negative. In the villages, *āḍḍā* can be a moment of nostalgic grievance, but also of vigorous debate and a playful banter. I am aware that my presence added a more reflexive element to *āḍḍā*: I would not just observe but actively engage in the conversation, ask provocative questions and make ironic comments. The data that I present here, then, emerges from these conversations, equally from the reflections of my interlocutors on their position and worldview, and from my reflections on my own.

One of the problems of using conversations as data is that people often do not say what they do, and much less do what they say. The analysis presented here often explicitly refers to conversations, but is implicitly drawing as much upon observations of and participation in practice and this thesis would not look the same if I did not also spend nineteen months observing the discrepancies between speech and action. But I also do not want to make an absolute distinction between what people say and what they do: ‘What...villagers say they ought to do and think, is part of what they do, observably, do and think. Their thinking and saying is plainly part of what they do’ (Laidlaw 1995: 11). Language is part of behaviour.

What is equally interesting is the various ways in which people say things. Villagers say what they ought to do or reflect on their actions in various modes of speech, or speech registers (see e.g. Gilsenan 1988; Hirschkind 2001). One speech register is the *Da’wa* (proselytization) of the Tablighi Jamaat members in Joygram: ‘*Da’wa* defines a kind a practice involving the public use of a mode of reasoning whereby the correctness of an action is argued and justified in the face of error, doubt, indifference or counter-argument’ (Hirschkind 2006: 116). It is a kind of performative ethical speech, ‘deployed in order to construct moral selves’ (Hirschkind 2006: 113). I would engage with these men in this kind of ethical deliberation, and the content of the *Da’wa* taught me about the kind of Islam they aspire to live according to, and the kind of men they aspire to be.



Other speech registers, beyond ordinary conversation, are for instance Dada's storytelling about his encounters with *djins* (beings of smoke featuring in the Quran), the pervasive ironic banter or the blatantly inaccurate accounts I would at first consider lies, later performances of another kind of potential truth. These modes of speech, whether public ethical speech, storytelling, or banter, create opportunities to transcend the everyday plight and its endless concessions and ambivalences, even though 'the wider balance of forces in the socio-political field are always in play' (Gilsenan 1988: 196). The *Da'wa* I encountered is beaming with optimism - a better self is possible - yet, the performance is always vulnerable to scepticism and pessimism. Even if I would listen attentively to performative speeches of Tablighi Jamaat members, *maulānās*, and other men engaging in storytelling, I would eventually try to challenge or provoke, and I would often act as a 'joker' (Gilsenan 1988) in an attempt to penetrate the layers of performance and come to personal revelations. However, I was keenly aware that a potential pessimistic interpretation was at risk and some friends would refuse to confront this risk. I also had to learn that sometimes there was no truth behind the performances. Often my friends and I would engage in reflective conversation and the discrepancy between our speech and actions would become explicit in our discussions.

Das would argue that social suffering and the experience of structural violence is 'on the edges of conversation', not in the 'mode of public performance' (Das 2007: 10). Perhaps one may come closest to a phenomenological understanding of the subjectivity of the other at the edges of personal conversation, and 'see the other person as she/he actually dwells in the world' (Hansen 2012: 19). Still, the 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein 1953 in Das 2007) that we anthropologists study emerge, I believe, through all modes of speech, including performative speech and banter. I am interested in the 'difficulty of reality' of the ordinary, which I feel is pervasive as much in the optimistic yet vulnerable public moments as in the pessimistic yet hopeful private moments. Like Hansen (2012: 19-20), I take the ordinary to be in everyday speech and action, whether whispers or public outrage, not hidden in

a reality beyond the limits of language, or in a 'semivisible ontology waiting to be divined' (ibid.: 20) by an anthropologist, as Das (2007) seems to suggest.<sup>31</sup>

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Throughout the interactions with Joygramis, I was struck most of all by the humble attitude of ethical responsibility. As I mentioned in the very beginning of the introduction, I could sense genuine anger and frustration, and the longer I spent in West Bengal, and the more I was confronted with stories of violence and rape, and experienced various forms of harassment myself (from tedious bureaucratic processes, corrupt government officials to physical harassment by a police officer), the more I gained a deeper sympathy for the people whom had to undergo these kinds of violences on a daily basis, and shared their anger and frustration.

I could not help but take my anger to the field, and express it in conversations with my friends, particularly concerning politics. When I would become too upset, I realised my friends would turn away, and initially I felt disappointed that they did not want to see the real nature of the tragedy of Indian politics. But then I learned that a comment like 'India's democracy is great', would not only serve as a means to end further conversation, nor as a reflection of reality or opinion, but as an imaginative reference point, as an ideal to hold onto, an ideal that keeps one from falling into a paralysing scepticism. Looking over the edge of the abyss may incite one to jump. Initially, I would often ask girls what their desires or ambitions were, or what they would do when they had all options open. They would look away and say 'my mind/heart (*man*) doesn't even go there', and would turn into silent annoyance or cynical remarks if I would push. Only once I received a direct answer, from a 16-year-old girl. 'I would just sit' (*em'ni base thāk'tām*), she said, gazing at me provocatively, as if to say, 'what did you expect?' More than once, close friends in Joygram told me they wanted to die. But they would only allow as much as a flicker of seriousness in their eyes, before they would undo the statement with an ironic comment. Irony and cynicism are ways to accept the parameters of action, while demonstrating these parameters are not taken for granted or

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<sup>31</sup> Das seems to suggest so in her theoretical and methodological discussions of Wittgenstein and Cavell. I think her ethnography shows otherwise, and it is through reading her ethnography that I was inspired to use the idiom 'difficulty of reality'.

considered just. Maybe Žižek is right that '[c]ynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*' (Žižek 1989:33, emphasis in original) – but it is therefore not so much a sign of blindness as a mockery of oneself, a self-irony. Moreover, in a position of being subjected to structural violence, one does not have much of a choice. Refusing to look over the edge of the abyss is not a turning away from 'reality', it is not cowardice: it is an everyday labour. Most of all, I was awe-struck by this emotional, mental and physical labour that is performed every day to try to keep going and 'be good'.

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I choose to take the reflections of my interlocutors seriously, as an ethical practice in itself, and as such not only as an object but also as a direction for anthropological analysis. There is no Archimedean point from which to view the ethical, and presenting conversations is a way of conveying the first-person perspective of my interlocutors (see Mattingly 2012). However, it is also a way to genuinely enrich our anthropological understanding of the complexities of an ethical life. To quote Laidlaw at length here, a truly 'ethnographic stance' requires

'in a specific sense *taking seriously* the forms of life we describe: regarding them – and therefore describing them – as something we learn from as well as about; and it involves learning to think with as well as about its concepts, such that they become resources in our own critical reflection and self-constitution. Not all conceptions currently being canvassed in the anthropology of ethics ... allow equally for taking the forms of life we study seriously in this way, but it is a precondition, I think, for anthropology as ethical practice' (Laidlaw 2014a: 45-46).

To the extent that I aim to understand (*Verstehen*) the ethical categories, speech and actions of my interlocutors within their local cosmopolitics, this thesis is in part an ethnography of the particular that embraces an 'epistemology of intimacy' (Keane 2003). But, with Keane, I believe that an epistemology of intimacy is not sufficient, and needs to be complemented by an 'epistemology of estrangement'. Understanding of local discourse and categories of understanding 'offer[s] poor purchase for certain kinds of critical

insight, help in sorting through the unequal relations among counter-claims, or understanding which of them wins out' (2003: 232). When interpretation moves too directly 'to "meaning" without, for example, analysing how those meanings are objectified and circulate in public' (ibid.) crucial contextualisation and theoretical potential is forestalled. I turn, the epistemology of intimacy is a crucial component to the epistemology of estrangement as the potential determinism of political economic, evolutionary or psychological models 'cannot tell us why *these* are their objects, why their explanations *matter*, and *for whom*' (ibid: 242). In my quest for a truly engaged ethnography that takes seriously the ethics of my interlocutors, as well as a profoundly critical analysis, I therefore seek to find a synthesis; a 'dialectic between estrangement and intimacy [that] continually passes through' the ethnographic encounter.

### **Reflections in the village**

In the remaining part of the chapter I trace how the SCR and middle class perspectives in conjunction with ideas of moral failure and ethical responsibility inform the multi-layered perceptions in Joygram; and I briefly discuss how the positionality of the Joygrami Muslims informs a desire to craft the image of the 'good Muslim citizen'; an observation that will return time and again throughout this thesis.

In Joygram, like in Kolkata, the awareness of Muslim marginalisation was embedded in the narrative of moral decay, sometimes with explicit reference to Western influences and consumerism, sometimes with reference to local practices of corruption or greed. Yet more than amongst the middle class, the narrative of moral decay was expressed in conjunction with direct experiences of injustice cast in terms of economic exploitation and a lack of poverty alleviation and opportunities. The SCR found that the 'sense of insecurity and the crisis of identity makes Muslims perceive these problems [e.g. poor civic amenities; lack of political representation; discrimination; higher poverty levels] as community-specific and they need to be attended to' (SCR 2006: 25). In contrast, most Joygrami Muslims seem well aware that the problems mentioned are not community-specific, and this may have to do with the fact that the greatest burden of poverty in Joygram is shared by Muslims, Adivasi and lower caste Hindus alike. Muslim deprivation is more often explained as a

negative side effect or symptom of the actual problem of structural inequality and a violent political culture, and only in some cases as community specific. There is 'insecurity' as a result of communal antagonism but communalism does not determine everyday life quite as much as vicious party politics do – it would only be vote-hungry politicians who would politicise an otherwise negotiable problem of cultural difference. At other times, the insecurity inspired by an increasing suspicion of the Muslim community in India, due to, among other factors, Hindu right wing politics, the Mumbai attacks in 2008 and the 'war on terror', is experienced or at least expressed as an abstract sense of unjust prejudice.

My interlocutors are aware of the particular 'backwardness' of Muslims but this awareness sparked a different emotion and served a different purpose: lamenting and shame for Muslims' inability to 'do well', a sense of moral failure and responsibility, and the desire to uplift the community. It is impossible for me to say whether the double emotion of indignation and responsibility has 'trickled down' or grown 'bottom-up', but in any case there is a remarkable synchronisation of responses. The difference with the urban Muslims I spoke to is that the epistemological frame of reference is different. Class is not the most important point of reference; *dharma* is. It is for this reason that Chapter 2 and 3 will extensively elaborate on the vernacular meaning and practice of *dharma*. I will have to, as it were, zoom in on the vernacular cosmopolitics (with an epistemology of intimacy) before I can again zoom out and interpret the position of the Joygrami Muslims within the larger political landscape (with an epistemology of estrangement).

### **Multi-layered positionality**

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By way of ethnographic introduction, I will illustrate the multi-layered reflections on the Muslims' predicament through a conversation with one of my interlocutors. Fuaduddin is Samsuddin's elder brother and like him, Fuaduddin is trained at the Deoband madrasa and teaches at his father's madrasa in a neighbouring village. He also works as the imam in the mosque of his father's ancestral village. Fuaduddin had a much quieter piety than Samsuddin, but over time, he seemed to have grown increasingly politically aware, and increasingly

bitter. Partly, this observation is influenced by the fact that he had also become a closer friend and opened up more to me.

In this conversation, he laments the difficult situation of the Muslims in the state. He easily slips between ascribing responsibility to the CPM; the Muslims themselves; and politics in general. I will transcribe the conversation here in its original chronological order, to convey the way in which Fuaduddin constantly switches the direction of accusation and responsibility.

‘We don’t have any freedom’, he starts. He feels that he, with his obvious Islamic attire and reformist style beard, is given a harder time than others. ‘It’s tough for the ‘bearded ones’ (*dārīoyālā*). At the train, for example, they only search us, they think that we have a bomb, that we are terrorists’. He claims that 48000 Muslims died during CPM rule because they were used by the CPM to work as *gunḍās* [mobsters/hitmen].<sup>32</sup> The next thing he says is however very significant: the Muslims are stupid to work as *gunḍās*. I ask him why he thinks the Muslims are stupid. He repeats, ‘the Muslims are dumb!’ (*Muslim’rā bokā*). ‘They claim they are knowledgeable, that they are *paṇḍits* [learned person]<sup>33</sup> but they are less educated; the Hindus are much better educated.’ Here he assigns responsibility to the Muslims themselves. But then again, it’s not only the Muslims’ own fault: ‘Yet, there are a lot of Muslims with a BA, or an MA, and they are sitting at home. They are unemployed; they aren’t able to get a government job [*cākri*]. They [non-Muslims] say, ‘they aren’t educated, they are crooks [*bad’mās*]. But even without education, we could sweep the floors!’ [implying the fact that also in the lowest tier governmental jobs the percentage of Muslims is disproportionally low, as the SCR shows].

Fuaduddin says that in Gujarat, the Muslim population is much smaller relative to the Hindu population, yet they can pressure them more here

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<sup>32</sup> He also mentioned that 6000 members of the lower castes died because of the same reason. I cannot verify the exact numbers Samsuddin is giving here, but other sources confirmed the information. It is also alleged that a disproportionally large number of those detained in jail without trial are Muslim. Fuaduddin says he had heard this information from Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb, the General Secretary of the JUH; this means that Siddiqullah must have mentioned it in a public speech, and that more Muslims are aware of this information.

<sup>33</sup> Significantly, he uses the Hindu term, implicitly associating civilization, culture and education with the *bhadralok*.

[because here they are kept in a marginalised position and are not united]. 'They call me 'uncle' (*cācā*), they are trying to make me feel small. While I offer them so much respect! I know how to love others!' I provokingly ask him what he wants; to unite the Muslims and cause a riot? Fuaduddin bursts out: 'communal riots don't have any benefit! That is just a political issue, and politics is just the whims of political leaders; they stage riots so that afterwards they can say 'look how good I am, I solved the riot!' Just like Didi [Mamata Banerjee, current Chief Minister of West Bengal], she came in power because of her action in Nandigram, but now that she's in power, she doesn't do anything, instead, she tries to take the land herself!'

This conversation with Fuaduddin exemplifies the multi-layered positionality of Muslims in their current predicament: there is suspicion of terrorism and disrespect for Muslims; a lack of education but also a lack of jobs; a demoralised Muslim population willing to commit violent acts for money; and immoral politicians willing to stage riots for votes. In this scenario the desire to uplift the community is, importantly, both a moralising as well as a modernising mission.

The various layers in Fuaduddin's account show that the double discourse of the villagers is very different from the double discourse of the postcolonial state even though it may seem that the moralising mission is a duty of the community, and the modernising mission a duty of the state. Where it differs, however, is that the two missions are integral to each other from the perspective of the villagers. Initially, the villagers' incessant emphasis on *dharma* and references to Islam as a source of value and morality, made the account of Madan (1987) and Nandy (1998) seem plausible. But the ethical renewal Muslim Joygramis aim for is very different from the symbolic regeneration of public morality from 'the realm of cultural communities, as if they remained reservoirs of values untouched by the larger transformations of Indian society' (Hansen 1999: 57). Both the self and society need to be moralised, and both the self and society need to be modernised. Politics would ideally be re-embedded in *dharma*, but at the very same time, Muslims have to become both better Muslims and better citizens. The content of *dharma*, then,

has to be reconfigured to the extent that it can accommodate modern politics and Islamic subjects within one moral framework.

In sum, the transformation of Islamic practices is a result of everyday violence; a response to contemporary transformations in the global politico-economy; and a corollary consequence of the reformation and cultivation of the ethical self. As Das and Kleinman describe it cogently:

‘Violence creates, sustains, and transforms [the] interactions [between moral processes and emotional conditions], and thereby it actualizes the inner worlds of lived values as well as the outer world of contested meanings. Neither are social violence and its consequences only of one kind. Multiple forms and dynamics of social violence animate local worlds and the individual lives in them. From this perspective, the social violences of day-to-day living are central to the moral order: they orient norms and normality’ (2000: 5).

The sense of moral failure and consequent responsibility does not only come from an antipathy to the violence in one’s environment, but also because of one’s own involvement. Politics is trouble, the economy is vicious; but in a deeply corrupted society, engagements with the immoral environment are inevitable. One cannot locate oneself outside the narrative of moral decay. Moreover, it is hard, if not impossible, to change one’s environment, especially when it would involve fighting structural violence and corruption.

Still, hope would remain. ‘We just want to live in peace’, (*ām’rā em’ni śānti thākte cāi*) was uttered innumerable times. Starting with the small practices of everyday life, people try, in their own ways, to become a better person, a better Muslim, a better citizen, and try to live in peace.

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My political position in the field was not neutral, and many of my interlocutors knew this. I have always been very frank towards my interlocutors; as I believe that we cannot expect our interlocutors to be frank if we are not frank ourselves. This is as much an ethical choice as it is a methodological strategy. Most of my interlocutors explained my presence in the field by assuming I wanted to learn the Bengali language and culture, even when I tried repeatedly to explain my research in more subtle terms. Some thought I was working for the Crime Investigations Department; some were



hoping I collaborated with the government or NGOs and pleaded me for BPL cards or simply money. Some of the men and women I was closest to were aware of my motivations and my own political stance. They understood that I was not going to bring any measures of poverty alleviation to the village but they valued at least as high how they interpreted the goal of my research: to tell their story. Masiruddin's plea summed it up: 'Please tell them over there that we are not terrorists. Islam means peace, we are peaceful, and you know it, you have experienced it, you have seen it with your own eyes. So please go and tell the story'.

So this is the story. It may not be the story that Masiruddin would have liked me to tell. But I think, and hope, that when he would get to read it, he would shake his head, and ultimately say with a sigh, 'yes, it's the tragic truth'.



Fig. 1. Khadim Para seen from the paddy fields, soon after the harvest.



Fig. 2. In the front, the concrete houses and tractor of Malik Para; in the back, the mudhouses of Mondal Para.

## 2. 'There are no people without *dharma*': Becoming a Muslim

### Introduction

In Joygram, not a day would go by without at least someone saying something about *jāti* (community/caste/'genus')<sup>34</sup> or *dharma*. The notion of *jāti* soon turned out to be extremely important since the indexation of the social context occurs through this idiom. My friends went to great pains to find out which *jāti* I belong to, and I often answered that I am simply *mānuṣ* (human/person), which would evoke laughter and disbelief. Usually there was astonishment: how can one be *mānuṣ* without a *jāti*? I had to concede to belonging to the *jāti* of Dutch people, despite my explaining that the concept '*jāti*' would not be that easily translatable to the environment I grew up in. I was also soon allocated the Christian *dharma* because a human without a *dharma* is like water without gravity; simply impossible in this world we live in. My insistence on a lack of Christian belief and worship posed an unresolved conundrum; my inclusion in the Dutch *jāti* included me by default in the Christian *dharma*, and I was considered a morally righteous person so surely I could not be called an immoral atheist (*nastik*). 'There are no people without *dharma*' (*dharma chārā mānuṣ nei*), Habiba Bibi said conclusively after another puzzling interrogation from her side, while vigorously shaking her head. Through these personal confrontations, it soon became clear to me that one cannot be a *mānuṣ*, a full human person, without both a *jāti* and a *dharma*.

What struck me as a conundrum, however, is that in this sense *jāti* and *dharma* are considered 'essential', natural categories, yet people from different *jātis* are not physiologically different beings. Some friends, often the better educated, would recognise my claim to be *mānuṣ* without a *jāti* as reminiscent of the ideas of the anti-caste social reformer Rabindranath Tagore, and would point out that indeed, we have the same blood, and we are all *mānuṣ*. But this often turned out to mean that they and I, *despite* our different *jāti*, have the same blood. While in some contexts Hindus and Muslims would be designated

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<sup>34</sup> *Jātis* are the units that constitute the social world in Bengal. The Bengali *jāti* is often translated into English as caste, but it goes far beyond this limited category. Therefore I translate it here as 'genus', and I will go deeper into it as I proceed.

as belonging to different *jāti*s, in other contexts they were described as *bhāi-bhāi*, brothers, sharing the same blood.<sup>35</sup>

The concept of *jāti* is further complicated by the question of whether someone is born as a Muslim or how otherwise one becomes included in the Muslim *jāti*. When posed to my interlocutors, this question was met by a lot of bewildered looks. Most would initially answer that they are just Muslims; they are born like that and couldn't have been anything else. Yet others would deny this, or would do so on second thought. Clearly, my question missed the point, as so many of my ignorant, Eurocentric questions did. I asked my friend Milon and Basir's mother Parveen Bibi, who had at first claimed that babies are born Muslim, what would happen when a baby of a Muslim family would be interchanged with a baby in an Adivasi family. They reckoned after some bewildered deliberation that the former would become an Adivasi and the second would become a Muslim. Yet it turned out that it would be an ethnocentric error to conclude that *jāti* is consequently not 'in the blood' or 'genetic'. Rather, blood is mutable and inseparable from the category of *jāti*.

This chapter engages with the question of what it means to be human, to be a person, and to become a Muslim. As such, it lays the groundwork for the exploration of the ethical life-world of Muslim Joygramis on the basis of locally meaningful categories: *jāti* and *dharma*. I will demonstrate that these indigenous categories do not fit a physiological/natural versus social/cultural divide, from which follows that they do not fit secular/religious or immanent/transcendent dichotomies. I will do so through an analysis of cosmogony, personhood and exchange.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. In the section directly following, I discuss anthropological theories regarding personhood in South Asia, and develop my arguments in relation to this literature. I then move on to discuss

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<sup>35</sup> Local ideas of shared blood have influenced, and are influenced by, philanthropists and reformers in Bengal, like Tagore, Ram Mohan Roy, and Kavi Nazrul Islam, who would all try to breach through communalism. The legacy of elite intellectuals, foremost in the form of poetry and songs, is widely spread knowledge: a daily labourer once told me about Kavi Nazrul's observation that Hindus and Muslims are just different branches of the same tree; this testifies that the philanthropist's preaching reaches far beyond the elite. Interestingly, while the poetry of Kavi Nazrul is likely to have been inspired by rural ideology, rural ideology is now legitimized with reference to Kavi Nazrul's poetry.

Qurbani, the cosmogonic ritual sacrifice. I suggest that the sacrificial ritual (re-) enacts the 'contract behind contracts', and (re-)establishes the key ethical principles according to which exchanges within Muslim relatedness are constituted and evaluated: equality and solidarity. These, then, are the abstract values central to Joygrami cosmopolitics. The third section discusses the key rituals that generate the Muslim *jāti* identity: rituals pertaining to birth; male circumcision; food exchanges within the household; and marriage. Finally, I suggest that (physiological) kinship is played down in favour of *jāti* relationship. I will conclude with the suggestion that there is no moral personhood outside *jāti/dharma*; however, this argument will only come full circle in the next chapter. This chapter reveals the visceral inculcation of *jāti* according to the ethical principles central to the Islamic *dharma*; the next chapter considers the visceral inculcation of *dharma* and the concomitant faculties that allow for ethical action: the two chapters together comprise the roots of ethical action and allow for the suggestion that in the ethical imagination of Bengali Muslims there is no conceivable self that exists before relations organised by *jāti* and *dharma*: before *jāti* and *dharma* there is no sociality, thus no morality/ethics, thus no humanity.

### **Theoretical orientations: personhood in South Asia**

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This chapter offers a novel intervention into the literature on personhood, kinship, and *jāti* in South Asia. Personhood and kinship studies in South Asia have long been influenced by the Chicago ethnosociologists (Inden and Nicholas 1977; Marriot and Inden 1977; Marriot 1976). The latter followed in the footsteps of Schneider (1968, 1984) who had been decisively influential in shifting from a formalist approach on kinship in terms of descent, lineage theory and alliance to an analysis of the biological and social elements of kinship. Schneider suggested that Americans perceive a fundamental distinction between 'substance' (nature/blood) and 'code of conduct' (law). In contrast, it has been argued that in South Asia the opposite is true: society is conceived as a single order of being in which 'no distinction is made...between an order of "nature", defined by shared biogenetic substance, and an order of "law," defined by code of conduct' (Inden and Nicholas 1977: xiv; cf. Marriot 1976).

Consequently, the majority of South Asians supposedly consider the person to be constituted by a malleable amalgam of biological substance and moral code. Moreover, from this proposition it emerges that the South Asian person is 'particularistic' and 'divisible' as opposed to the bounded Western individual: the protean South Asian person is made up of 'circulations and combinations of particles of substance-code [that] are continually occurring' (Marriot 1976: 112).

More recent studies have gone beyond Schneider, and beyond the opposition of the Western and the non-Western person and understandings of kinship. Several anthropologists argue that beliefs and ideologies of both Western and non-Western people have been over-systematized and mistaken for people's a-historical ontological reality (Bloch 1993; Good 1991, 2000; Keesing 1985; Lambek 1998, 2013; Parry 1989*a*). In particular, kinship studies have been criticized for relying too much on a stark opposition between Western understandings of kinship (based on blood relationships), and non-Western forms of relating to one another (Appadurai 1986; Carsten 2000, 2004; McKinnon and Cannell 2013). Even though I want to leave open whether particular ideologies are reflections of an objective ontological reality, I do take to heart the observation that the nature of ideologies is often not as totalizing as it has previously been assumed. If in the ideology of the monistic, protean person kinship would be totalizing, kinship would not be recognized. But South Asians do distinguish between different forms of kin and non-kin relationships though not in a strict sense: in both cases substance-code is malleable and constituted and transformed through the exchange of bio-moral qualities (Inden and Nicholas 1977: 20).

Carsten suggests the term 'relatedness' 'in opposition to, or alongside, kinship, in order to signal an openness to indigenous idioms of being related' and 'to suspend a particular set of assumptions about what is entailed by the terms social and biological' (2000: 4). I will use the term 'relatedness' here for that reason; again, not to reflect an ontological reality but because it offers the space for an analysis of locally meaningful categories. The 'essentially processual' nature of the category 'relatedness' (Carsten 2000: 16) makes it

appropriate for an analysis of the South Asian context, where relationships never 'are' but always 'become'. The circulation of substance-code and the instability of the protean person require a constant and vigilant sharing and exchange of substances and gifts, as different forms of relatedness are continually fostered through physiological, social/cultural and affective transactions (Lambert 2000; Carsten 2000; Bear 2007).

Going beyond domains (Carsten 2000: 4), the idiom of relatedness allows us to open up the scope and consider *jāti* as standing in a continuum with kinship as different kinds and forms of relatedness. *Jāti* does not have to refer exclusively to the communal identity. In her study of the Anglo-Indian community in West Bengal, Bear draws attention to the manifold, historically produced meanings, associations and connotations that *jāti* can have: '[...] *jāti* can be broadly understood as referring to a type, sort, or class. The type it indicates can be anything from nation, race, religion, tribe, lineage and region to breed, pedigree, community, species and caste' (2007: 287). *Jāti*, then, connotes a node of relatedness; relatedness in various segmentary groups, the members of which share particular substances and codes. Nonetheless, I will demonstrate that the essentialised Muslim *jāti* identity is more important than other forms of relatedness, for example the household.

Although the anthropologist should be wary of over-systemizing people's (kinship) ideology and projecting stark oppositions between Western and non-Western ideologies, it should equally be recognized that relatedness is informed by a locally specific cosmopolitics. I think it is most useful here to turn to Parry (1989a, 1994), who makes a strong case against an easy dichotomy between the individual, bounded Western person and the divisible, constitutionally volatile Indian. He argues that these are ideological differences rather than ontological differences. If all Indians indeed believed that the person is constitutionally volatile, how could there be essentialised, bounded caste identities? His answer to this conundrum is that 'the protean construct of the person...acts as an "ideology" in the classic Marxist sense' which, bearing a constant threat of chaos and disintegration, 'creates and sustains the world of



order and regulation' (Parry 1989a: 514).<sup>36</sup> That is not to deny the salience of the ideology for the experiential reality: 'castes *are* regarded as units of equivalence composed of people of the same general kind; and persons *are* seen as having a transformable bio-moral substance which is continually modified by the transactions in which they engage' (Parry 1989a: 494, emphasis in original). Parry thus recognises in the Hindu cosmology two constructs of the person that are not mutually exclusive.

I suggest that a similar binary ideological construct is in operation among my Muslim interlocutors. In line with Parry, Lambek suggests that the continuous, 'forensic', monadic modern person and the 'mimetic', discontinuous *personage* are best understood as 'two alternative ways to conceptualize persons and...as two dimensions of active personhood that have universal relevance but carry relative weight or salience in different societies' (2013: 837). Here we see the two constructs operating in *one* society, and in the course of this thesis, I will suggest that the relative weight and salience is shifting from the *personage* to the modern continuous person.

In this chapter in particular, I will demonstrate that, just as among Hindus, among my Muslim interlocutors *jāti* is the category that creates order in the threatening chaos of bio-moral exchanges. But the ideological content is different. Whereas Hindus are subdivided in hierarchically ordered *jātis*, the Muslim *jāti* in its entirety (like each one of the Hindu castes/*jātis*) is an essentialised unit composed of equal persons, created by Allah.<sup>37</sup> *Jātis* – whether referring to Hindu castes or to an entire community – have to appear as essentialised groups in order to create the illusion of a well-organised system whereas in mundane reality this is constantly negotiated through transactions

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36 For an unraveling of ideology/belief on the one hand and practical knowledge on the other hand elsewhere (considering biological and social elements of kinship and gender), see Astuti (1995, 2009).

37 It has been argued that hierarchically ordered castes among Bengali Muslims exist in the same manner as among Hindus, due to the many years of cohabitation (see e.g. Ahmed 1988; Bhattacharya 1973; Roy 2014). Although the Muslims I spoke to recognize the fact that something alike castes have historically evolved among Muslims, they resolutely refuse to give it any ritual significance. Castes are manmade, Joygrami Muslims argue, that is, castes do not transcend the transactional social. So whereas Hindus have many *jātis*, Muslims are united in one *jāti*. Sectarian difference (e.g. Hanafi, Alh-i Hadith), which is, importantly, not essentialised in the same way as caste difference, seemed more important than caste. Marriages, for example, tend to be endogamous with regard to sect (rather than caste), but even within Joygram there were plenty examples to the contrary (see chapter 4).



(Parry 1989a: 513-514). The exchanges between protean persons create constant, contextual and temporary hierarchies; a situation that is countered by the idealisation of the Muslim *jāti* as internally equal, but in a hierarchical relation to other *jātis*. The two ideologies - one of chaos and one of order - are intricately related: they sometimes act as balances to each other, and at other times perpetuate productive ambiguities. The interrelatedness of these ideologies implies that in the cosmopolitics of my interlocutors, the person is simultaneously created by Allah and generated out of relational exchanges.

This interrelatedness is underscored by the fact that both ideologies are encompassed by *dharma*. The two seemingly incompatible ideologies - that of a holistic macro-cosmic order in which there is no difference between substance and code, and the cosmogony of the creation of the world by Allah - are united within *dharma* if we understand the creation of humanity by Allah as an exchange, that is, the first establishment of a form of relatedness and the potential for differentiation within the amalgam of bio-moral substances. From this exchange, other forms of relatedness follow, and particular kinds of human persons can be generated. In the next part of this chapter, I will argue that the foundational exchange with Allah, re-enacted in the sacrificial ritual on Qurbani, is the 'contract behind contracts' from which subsequent ethical contracts are derived.

As in the Christian cosmogony (Scott 2005: 119; cf. Cannell 2006), a contradiction remains that the creator-god created all beings equally, but only those people who recognize the creator-god are worthy of salvation. This contradiction is enhanced by the idea that protean persons are constantly mutable by exchanges.<sup>38</sup> It has been suggested that people will desire logical coherence in the face of such contradictions (Scott 2005: 115), and the discussion about rituals that follows will show how the elements of both ideologies are incorporated. This chapter will reflect my interlocutors' coherent ethno-theology, which provides the grounds for negotiating contradictions, although some contradictions cannot be overcome, and these will be further discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

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<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Scott (2005) for an excellent discussion of a similar contradiction between two ideologies (or ontologies, in his words), in that case the poly-ontology of the Arosi (Solomon Islands) and the Christian mono-ontology.

This chapter will also consider the ritual generation of Muslimness and *jāti* relatedness. Drawing on Lambek, I suggest that the cosmogonic sacrificial ritual as well as life-cycle rituals and other kinds of ritual exchanges establish ethical principles. Whereas for Parry (1989a, 1994), the protean construct of the person is an ideology in the *Marxist* sense;<sup>39</sup> and whereas for Bloch (1986; 1992) the rituals that generate groups and roles are the instruments for the authorisation and legitimation of power, I suggest that there is a *sui generis* ethical dimension to the ideological construction. Even if we adopt a secular approach, and consider (religious) narratives of being and becoming as ideologies or cosmological conceptualisations rather than as an ontological reality, I am not satisfied with the interpretation of religious rituals only as the legitimation of power. Lambek argues that ‘morality is a significant third domain alongside power and desire; if not to be invoked with “innocence,” neither is it reducible either to power or desire, or to refereeing the struggles between them’ (Lambek 2000: 313). Rituals and narratives may be mystifying, repressive measures but they (also) serve to establish truth; to cope with the predicament of humanity (our mortality); and to establish ethical criteria and hence generate the possibility for evaluation – and value (Lambek 2012: 348). In this sense, narratives and rituals attempt to go beyond power, to transcend the Nietzschean self.

People may not be consciously aware of the ways in which the sacrificial ritual instantiates ethical reference points, but that does not change its consequences. Bloch (1986, 1992) has convincingly argued that ritual is effective in the production of ideology (and, I suggest, of ethics) through its very performance, *notwithstanding* individual enthusiasm, doubt or indifference. I do accept that the experiential aspect may be important (e.g. Cannell 2007), in the sense that certain ethical criteria are being reproduced and *embodied* through ritual, whether enthusiastically endorsed or not. So far Lambek (2010b), following Rappaport, seems to agree with Bloch:

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<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, Parry’s use of the term ideology is ambiguous, as it contains elements of a Marxist as well as Dumontian meaning of the term. Here, however, he explicitly refers to the Marxist meaning of ideology.

‘Rappaport argues that by submission to its bodily demands...the participants performing or undergoing a ritual demonstrate to others and to themselves their acceptance of both its message and its form. They do so whether or not they “believe” in any specific propositions associated with it; hence the outward, public consequences prevail irrespective of the inner state of the participants’ (Lambek 2010b: 45).

However, the sacrifice of freedom in exchange for order, in Bloch’s words (1986: 171), does not only serve the production of power. Participation in a ritual is an act of public commitment (notwithstanding internal ambiguity) with public consequences, and thus fundamentally an ethical matter (Lambek 2010b: 47). In such public moments, courses of action and criteria are being established, and subsequent acts of exchange are evaluated in the light of this commitment. Submission to the creator-god is therefore not about piety narrowly defined, but about the demand for an ethical relationality of exchange that is pervasive throughout everyday life.

Thus, I consider the rituals described in this chapter not as symbolic representations separated from mundane action, but as constitutive performances that inculcate truth and virtuous disposition (Asad 1993: 55 – 170), ‘through which the subject’s very will, desire, intellect, and body [comes] to acquire a particular form’ (Mahmood 2001: 834). In the next chapter, I will further elaborate on ethical practice and the ethical mind/body.

For heuristic purposes, I make the empirically rooted analytical distinction in the murky waters of identifications between two conceptions of Muslimness (as a form of relatedness) that operate in parallel, being dependent and even conditional upon each other. One is the generative Muslimness that is generated by being born into a Muslim family and carrying an Islamic name, or by conversion; it is the *jāti* as discussed above. Bear argues that ‘[*jāti*] is a term that suggests that in the flow of social life there exist hidden, shared, and often inherited essences that are revealed by personal demeanor’ (Bear 2007: 287). However, I suggest that the ‘inherited essence’ is better understood as a potential than a static essential substance already present. Generative Muslimness contains the essentialised potential; it connotes descent,

consanguinity (even where actual consanguinity is absent) and race and is related to a notion of locality (*deś*). I will show in this chapter how particular rituals and exchanges invest people with this potential. This Muslimness becomes essentialised during the process of ‘making a human person’ (*mānuṣ karā*).

The other sense in which I analyse Muslimness has to do with actual practice and belief, that is, with the Islamic *dharma*. It is explicitly conceived as dynamic, processual and claims to possession are subject to reflection and contestation. In fact it is the ideal of the ‘good Muslim’, of the ‘Muslim as he/she ought to be’, that can hardly ever fully be acquired yet people constantly strive towards: it is the ethical dimension of life. I will refer to the second sense of Muslimness as ‘ethical Muslimness’. Importantly, the two categories stand in a symbiotic relation to each other: failing to acquire a certain level of ethical Muslimness may annul one’s claim to Muslimness in the sense of *jāti*. Generative Muslimness is therefore also a process of becoming; a potential.<sup>40</sup>

Importantly, the potential of generative Muslimness is what makes one human and what as such collapses the ideological separation of the human being and the moral person prominent in the Cartesian philosophical tradition (see Taylor 1989). Even recent work that dissolves biological and social elements in kinship, or, for that matter, relatedness, seems to imply a human being *before* the act of exchange. My ethnographic data, however, requires me to go a step further. If biological and social substances collapse, the human being and the moral person collapse; I therefore speak of the ‘human person’. I shall suggest that ideologically, no element of a priori ‘natural’ human being can be distinguished; personhood is always embedded in an order of social

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40 I use the idiom ‘generative Muslimness’ rather than ‘nominal Islam’ or ‘Nominal Muslims’ as the latter terms are products of British religion-ethnic classification (Masud 2000b: xxxvi; Roy 2014: 5). For their own reform agenda, reformist Muslims apply a similar logic. I attempt in this analytical distinction to reflect the vernacularisation of the colonial classification as it has become locally meaningful, while being careful to avoid a reproduction of the (neo-)essentialisation of Muslim identity in my demonstration of the dynamic, social and generative character of non-essential Muslim personhood and relatedness.

relations and therefore always a moral position that is inseparable from a 'human being'.<sup>41</sup>

In the following sections I develop these arguments through an analysis of sacrificial and lifecycle rituals, and the organisation of social relations.

### **Exchanges in the name of Islam**

On an auspicious warm October afternoon I am wandering through the Muslim *pārās* of Joygram, with the smell of fresh meat penetrating my nostrils. Groups of men and women are gathered around carcasses of beef, removing the meat and cutting it into pieces, piling it up in small heaps: here the intestines, there the skin, here the stomach. The heaps of different kinds of meat are then divided into several parts, ready for distribution.

It is Qurbani, the day on which all Muslim households that can afford it will sacrifice a cow.<sup>42</sup> The previous evening, the women prepared the typical rice pancakes (*piṭhe*), and continued in the morning with the preparation of sweet dishes typical of Islamic festivals in West Bengal. From early morning, the imams of the mosques have been calling all men over the loudspeakers to prepare themselves for the prayers at the Eid *ghāt*.<sup>43</sup>

At the Eid *ghāt* there is some pleasurable commotion since Qurbani is one of the few occasions where nearly all the men of Joygram and the neighbouring village meet; and especially since young men usually studying or working elsewhere will have come home for the occasion. Many of the children and teenagers have also come, as a miniature fair (*melā*) has established itself opposite the Eid *ghāt*. Here, children buy sweets and their most favoured uncommon snacks, and are given balloons or little toys by their fathers or elder siblings. Meanwhile the Eid *ghāt* is filling up, and still more men arrive while the imam has already started the prayers. Quite a large number of men arrive late

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41 This is not the same as the idea that the person or the body is a 'microcosm of *relations*', as Strathern argues for Melanesia. Persons are complete in themselves but always already connected through flows of substance (Busby 1997: 273-276).

42 Qurbani means sacrifice in Arabic. The official name of this festival is Bakr' Id or Eid ul-Adha. Although some Muslims in Joygram would refer to the festival with 'Eid', this is usually the short name for Eid-ul-Fitr, the festival that marks the end of the fasting month, and Qurbani is the most common local denomination for Bakr' Id, the day I am describing here.

43 The Eid *ghāt* is a walled space constructed specifically for the purpose of collective prayer on Eid -ul-Fitr and Qurbani (see fig. 3).

and while hurriedly putting the Islamic cap (*tupī*) on their head they take their position in the *ghāt*. Many do not seem to be in the habit of praying; there is a lot of incongruity in their movements.

After the prayer, some men linger around to chat with friends and wander around the *melā*, some others proceed to the burial ground at the other side of the road, to say prayers (*du'a*) at the graves of their ancestors. But most hurry back home in excitement, to where the cow is waiting to be sacrificed. Once at home, the men run back and forth to different neighbours' houses, excitedly screaming that here or there the throat has been cut already. When I arrive at Rahaman Saheb's house, the sons and brother of Rahaman Saheb are already bringing the cow into the courtyard. One is digging a large hole in the ground, for the blood to flow into. Rahaman Saheb is giving directions from his stool on the side. When the cow is put to the ground and kept still by considerable manpower, the eldest brother, Nasiruddin, finally cuts her throat, while he utters the appropriate invocation (*du'a*).

### **The 'contract behind contracts'**

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Qurbani is one of the most auspicious days of the year for the Muslim Joygramis, as the sacrifice of the animal is the ultimate testimony of man's submission to Allah. The story behind the ritual is well-known: God called upon Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and he obediently went into the woods with his son. Isaac also showed willingness to be sacrificed in the face of God's demand. At the last moment, God sent a deer and told Abraham to sacrifice the animal instead. This story is one of the foundational myths of the Abrahamic religions and the ritual of the sacrifice re-enacts and commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for God. But a ritual is always more than merely a 're-enactment'; it does several things at the same time and has a creative force. In this section, I will introduce Joygrami cosmogony through the ethnographic lens of Qurbani. The ritual firstly demonstrates the pivotal importance attached to submission to Allah and humanity's perpetual indebtedness to the creator-god; it is the foundational act of the "contract behind contracts" and as such creates society; and it establishes rules of exchange to enact equality and solidarity. The idea of the 'contract behind contracts' becomes clearer in its

details with reference to one of Dada's 'lessons', but not before I have introduced Dada himself.

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Dada (which means, elder brother) was one of my most emphatic teachers. Habiba Bibi, Dada's wife, has consistently spoken about her husband as 'your elder brother' (*tomār dādā*), after which Dada himself started to call me his sister.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, I call him Dada throughout this thesis. Dada and his wife and children live, and have lived since marriage, in a small mud hut consisting of two rooms downstairs, a space for sleeping upstairs, and a small porch on the front. The courtyard is divided into a cooking space, a shed for the cows, a small garden and a shed functioning as toilet. The two daughters had been married off at the age of 14 or 15; the eldest of the sons was married during my fieldwork, while the youngest son (a twin with the youngest daughter) is still going to school.

Not having enough land to live off, Dada has worked as a truck driver in various parts of the country, wherever the wage was highest. Ever since my arrival, he had been talking about his anticipated move to Kuwait, where he would earn much more as a truck driver. He had already paid 80.000 INR to a broker, who was to arrange a passport and visa. A year later, this turned out to be a scam, and finally, with the help of his neighbour Masiruddin (who had put him in touch with the broker to begin with) he did get his money back. Meanwhile, he was doing odd jobs in the neighbourhood to get by, supplemented with some occasional money from his sons-in-law. Just before I left Joygram, when the dream of Kuwaiti fortune had already been scattered, Dada began a small restaurant at the cattle market.

Despite his lack of formal Islamic education, and an inability to understand Arabic, he is a respected man in the village for his closeness to Allah. Every once in a while, he would be possessed by a *djinn*, beings of smoke that are mentioned in the Quran and live in a parallel world to ours. From them he learns about Islam and the righteous way of living. Because of this gift, he is one of the few

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<sup>44</sup> Spouses do not usually mention each other's name, and women are not supposed to pronounce their husband's name at all. The habitual way of getting around this is to say, 'father of [name of son]', or simply '*or ābbā*', meaning 'his/her father', implying the son/daughter even in absence. Habiba Bibi circumvented the name of her husband by calling him 'your brother'.

people in Joygram able to carry out particular sacred practices, like the healing of children by blowing over their face while pronouncing a *du'a*, and transforming water into a healing substance by doing the same. Usually this act would be preceded by Dada communicating with the *djins* while being possessed, to find out the reason for the affliction in order to proceed with the right treatment.

According to Dada, the source of his knowledge and the informal teachings he gave me are the *djins* themselves. He would often talk about the basic ideas of Islam and righteous living; for specific questions he would refer me to the *maulānās* who could read Arabic and would know the precise answer, because he did not want me to learn and spread any incorrect knowledge.

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One afternoon, after I had a nap on Dada's porch, Dada walked into the courtyard wearing a blue checkered *gām'chā*<sup>45</sup> rolled up over the knees, his vest drenched with sweat from thatching the cow shed. Having just sat himself next to me in the shade, he started to profess.

'Consider this. Allah has created us all, and everything around us, that's a *free service* [in English]. We can never pay back, and we can never give enough gratitude and praise (*praśamsā*) for this. Imagine you would have to pay for water forever; you would not be able to pay that. And consider your hands, your eyes, the fact that you can see! Five times a day we pray *nāmāj*, but still it is never enough. The only thing we can do, is thank him from our heart, and believe in him from our heart. ...There is no image of Allah (*nirākār*), because you have to believe blindly.<sup>46</sup> ...Allah has said that if, of all the millions of Muslims in this world, there is one that really, fully from the heart believes in him, and really believes that all that there is, is Allah's creation, the 'end of the world' does not have to take place (*dhwaṃsa hobe nā*). Then everyone would have a good life, because Allah would give us everything we need. So the most important thing is *imān*, blind faith (*andhobiśwās*). The most valuable thing in the world is a

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<sup>45</sup> A *gām'chā* is a cotton towel, used for drying oneself after a bath but also regularly worn as a knee length loincloth, or tied as a headscarf.

<sup>46</sup> *Nirāk-ar* literally translates to 'without a form'. In Dada's explanation, in words and gestures (covering the eyes with his hand), the formlessness of Allah implies the requirement for blind faith (*andhobiśwās*).



Muslim, *ek'tā imānoyālā* [someone with *imān*], because he is Allah's creation and the *imānoyālā* is aware of that'.

After a brief pause, I hesitantly ask, 'and what about those people who don't believe?' Dada answers resolutely, 'They are worth nothing, less than a fly'.

Dada points out very neatly what anthropologists have theorized in a variety of ways ever since Mauss suggested that there could be no 'pure' gift. Humans are forever indebted to god for the gift of creation, which is impossible to return in full. He also points out that what humans *can*, and therefore *should* do, is to accept and acknowledge the gift – otherwise one negates the very creation that we are and live in. If Abraham had in fact sacrificed Isaac, he would have given back life to the creator – which would be the only gift equal in kind. But he could not have done so because he would have destroyed humanity – killing a son is killing the possibility of (biological *and* social) reproduction – and in so doing he would have destroyed the gift. Instead, an animal life was offered, which is an alternative to the offering of one's own offspring. So the '*free service*' Dada refers to is in fact an 'impossible gift', and Allah derives his authority from the 'impossible' gift that he has given humanity because the indebtedness is perpetuated and always will be.

Qurbani is the performance of this cosmogonic act. Yet as such, it must be stressed that Qurbani is not an isolated ritual but rather represents the 'primordial act of sacrifice that founds the system of value and exchange' (Lambek 2010a: 18). That is, from the perpetual indebtedness to Allah all other promises, debts and exchanges follow; it is the 'contract behind the contract', the 'debt behind the debt' (Lambek 2010a: 18), and as such the foundational act of *dharma*. Let me quote Michael Lambek at length here to clarify this point.

'In all this there is apparent the recognition of a close, if not intrinsic, relation between ritual and ethics. Giving and receiving are not merely Durkheimian (or Kantian) moral *obligations*, but the active and formalized fulfilment of those obligations. Hence they are simultaneously *acts*, embedded in a cycle of the production and cancellation of particular personal, interpersonal, and collective states and re-establish the criteria through which persons and relationships are constituted and evaluated

and the world renewed. Moreover, it is the ritual framework that establishes the authority and meaningfulness of any given act, that is, the “the contract behind the contract”.’ (2010a: 18)

As Lambek points out elsewhere, ‘[a]mong the most significant and pervasive criteria are those that establish the basic humanity of persons – as being mutually subject to criteria and hence to be acknowledged as ethical subjects in their own right’ (Lambek 2010b: 62). For my interlocutors, it is the acknowledgment that humanity is a gift that establishes ‘the basic humanity of persons’; they are ‘subject to criteria’ and thus ‘ethical subjects’ from the very moment of the creation of humanity until eternity. This acknowledgment is in the act of the sacrifice and in the speech act *Bismillah Allahu Akbar* (In the name of Allah, Allah is the greatest), which has the illocutionary function of the actual enactment of *imān*<sup>47</sup> (faith) (Lambek 2013: 844). Faith is the fundamental obligation of humanity (cf. Lambek 2010b: 18). Qurbani is the classic sacrificial ritual through which people ‘sacrifice freedom for the sake of order’ (Bloch 1986: 171).

Dada’s emphasis on the need for *blind* faith, also points to the pivotal role of the imagination. Bloch (2008) argues that we are predisposed to imagination and this distinguishes us from other animals. The creative potency of the imagination allows us to conceive of the ‘system of value and exchange’, that is, of a society that is an ethical community rather than an unruly herd of animals, and faith (the acknowledgment of our indebtedness) is the crucial difference between the two. I will now turn to a discussion of the core values of Joygrami cosmopolitics, and which are publicly performed on the day of Qurbani: equality and solidarity. These are the pivotal criteria according to which the exchange relationships between essentialised persons and groups within the *jāti* are evaluated.

## Equality

A significant element of the ritual of Qurbani is the fact that all Muslims, provided they have the means, are obliged to sacrifice an animal. In Joygram, every household that can afford it will have bought a cow in the months or

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<sup>47</sup> In the next chapter I will work out the content of the term *imān*, and explain that *imān* is the cultivated habitus of faith (Asad 2003: 90).

weeks ahead. The cattle market across the road has been doing good business, and more often than usual I have been seeing men walking alone bringing home a single cow, however poor their appearance. Some villagers have been showing off their cow to me, asking whether it was looking good enough to be sacrificed.<sup>48</sup> The requirement for all to sacrifice makes all Muslims stand equally in relation to Allah; they are equally responsible for the reproduction of society. Each Muslim is in a direct, that is, unmediated, contractual relationship with Allah and thus each Muslim falls under the same ethical criteria.

As my interlocutors render explicit, the principle of equality is one of the central distinguishing features of the Islamic *dharma*, and one which especially contrasts with the Hindu *dharma*. Ritual hierarchy, so fundamental in Hinduism, is believed to be absent in Islam. All male Muslims pray together and all male Muslims can carry out (most) rituals. This is most visibly mobilized on Eid and Qurbani, because all men pray together at the Eid *ghāt*, but it is also instantiated on a smaller scale in daily prayer. During Ramadan, the month of fasting, all Muslims have to fast, no matter how wealthy or poor they are. These ritual acts do not stand in isolation from everyday life, considering that rituals are instantiating ethical criteria that are subsequently pervasive in social life (Lambek 2010b). It follows that the ongoing practice of exchange within the *jāti*, which creates relatedness, should theoretically be an exchange between equals.

It has to be stressed, however, that equality is an ideal pertaining to human dignity, rather than an edict concerning material wealth or worldly status. The people involved are aware of the actual inequality between themselves and of the Machiavellian power games so pervasive in everyday village life. But through these rituals, the constant negotiation of contextual hierarchies between ‘discontinuous’ persons, as well as power struggles more broadly, are made ideologically subordinate to the ideal of equality between ‘continuous’ persons within the *jāti* (see Lambek 2013). Indeed, it is the ritual’s negation of the inequality in the everyday transactional social practices that makes the ritual so powerful (Bloch 2010).

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<sup>48</sup> There are very strict rules as to what animal is appropriate for the sacrifice: if more than a third of an ear or tail is missing then the animal is not suitable for sacrifice.

## Solidarity

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Equality is the most important value actualised during the festivals. Following from the principle of equality of human dignity, solidarity is the key criteria pertaining to exchange. Similarly, solidary distribution is highly formalised and ritualised during the main festivals. Both Eid and Qurbani revolve around exchanges, not only with one's kin and neighbours but also, and emphatically so, with other Muslims poorer than oneself.

After the ritual sacrifice on Qurbani, the meat of the animal is to be distributed according to a specific set of rules. That the meat offered to Allah is given to society is not a paradoxical intention: if society is a manifestation of Allah, then it is inherently the same to offer it to Allah and to distribute it in one's society. So the same act is carried out on two planes; once on an abstract level, and again on a concrete one.

The distribution is carried out meticulously. Per each household of maximum seven members one animal has to be sacrificed.<sup>49</sup> The meat of each sacrificed animal has to be divided into three equal portions, which means that each of the three should contain the same amount of the various parts of the animal, so that no portion will contain only, for example, liver and intestines.<sup>50</sup> One portion is for consummation by the household itself, one is for friends and relatives, and one is for the poor and needy. We can see again the principle of equality at work here; no one can make a claim to a better piece of meat, and kin and unrelated poor are each receiving an equal portion of the same content. This is however not a strict obligation; rather, it is a strong recommendation. So rather than a moral code one has to follow blindly, it poses an ethical ideal that one is encouraged to follow. In Joygram, as far as I could see, people did follow the instructions and they also felt a certain pride in it, because they knew they chose themselves to do the right thing. There is a significant element of ethical autonomy here, as shall be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>49</sup> So a household with more members has to sacrifice two animals, and two or more smaller households of up to seven members in total can sacrifice one animal together (but they can also sacrifice an animal each).

<sup>50</sup> If one is to distribute the meat among households or household members first, each 1/7<sup>th</sup> has to be further divided into three.

Exchange and gift-giving is perhaps even more central to Ramadan and Eid ul'Fitr than to Qurbani. Ramadan is the month of fasting, and Eid marks the end of the fast. Ramadan is an interesting month for my analysis, in respect to the contrast between fasting and feasting. On the one hand, it is the time of complete abstinence. During the fasting times it is forbidden not only to eat and drink but also to have sexual intercourse and one is emphatically encouraged to stay clear of strong emotions. In fact, it is best to stay away from unnecessary social contact, and instead spend the day reading the Quran in as secluded a manner as possible.

On the other hand, Ramadan is a time of intense circulation of goods, money and food. During this month, *zakat* (almsgiving) has to be offered; fasting and almsgiving are two of the five pillars of Islam, and therefore are in principle obligations for every Muslim. *Zakat* technically means the gift of 2.5% of one's income to (in this order) relatives, friends and neighbours, and poor and needy Muslims. It can be given in money as well as in kind, and most Muslims in Joygram would do a combination of both. For example, a proportion of the rice harvest would be saved in order to be donated, in smaller portions, to local madrasas in due time. Representatives of the madrasas come to the villages for collection during Ramadan. They write slips for all the alms received, so that the donors can maintain an account of their gifts.

Besides the charity of *zakat*, Muslims engage in other forms of gift-giving during Ramadan. Labourers and their families are bestowed with new clothes by their employers, as it is a norm to wear new clothes on the day of Eid (as on Qurbani).<sup>51</sup> They also often share in the feast that is consumed with the breaking of the daily fast. All the acts of sharing are the re-enactment of the ethical principle of solidarity established in the 'contract behind contracts'.

Eid and Qurbani are naturally not the only days when exchanges of this sort take place but these rituals establish the principles and the potential for evaluation in subsequent exchanges. The ritual of Qurbani is the acceptance of

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<sup>51</sup> Gift-giving of cloths between patron and worker on particular festivals is a South Asian custom in general, not limited to Muslims. Hindus are also supposed to wear new (and thus 'pure') clothes on auspicious days such as Durga Puja and *paylā baiśākh* (Bengali New Year). See e.g. Sen (1998).

one's *nomination* as a Muslim: in an emulation of Abraham, who, when he answered to the call of God, accepted his nomination and all that was entailed in that nomination (Lambek 2010b: 59). This acceptance of nomination is a processual act through which one becomes a particular kind of person. It is an ethical act rather than the acknowledgement of a primordial state of being; and this singular act is repeated by ordinary Muslims in ritual performance, *and* in subsequent ongoing actions. Indeed, I suggest that exchange is an ongoing practice from which personhood and relatedness are generated. I have stressed the principles of equality and solidarity at work during the rituals of these festivals because the rituals are the public performance of the ethical relationality of exchange and the commitment to a particular kind of personhood, according to which subsequent ordinary acts can be evaluated. Having addressed the cosmogonic creation of ethical relatedness and exchange, I now consider the ways in which the Muslim human person is ritually generated out of this network of relatedness.

### **The ritual generation of Muslimness**

How does one become a human person, and how does one acquire Muslimness? This section attempts to answer these questions. To recapitulate, bio-moral substances are inseparably merged to such an extent that blood, since it is not a substance separate from moral substances, is itself considered mutable (Östör and Fruzzetti 1982). So in line with these conceptions, everyone is endowed with the potential to become a Muslim, and depending on the circumstances of one's birth (and life-course), he or she will become bio-morally constituted as a Muslim.<sup>52</sup> However, everyone equally runs the risk to lose Muslimness because of the volatility of the discontinuous person. To acquire generative Muslimness is however very important as one's very humanity can only be engendered from this web of relatedness; moreover, only

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<sup>52</sup> This idea is comparable to the theology of the Brahmins Parry (1989a) worked with: 'All human beings [...] are equally Shudras by birth. Brahmins are not born, but made by the life-cycle rituals through which they pass' (ibid: 498). The important distinction, however, is that anybody can acquire full Muslimness (through conversion and subsequent ethical action) - those born within a Muslim household just have a higher potential - whereas becoming a Brahmin is more exclusive and has deeper biological roots: 'Only the product of Brahmin seed has the capacity for such transformation, however. Only whose father and father's father were Brahmins can learn to pronounce Sanskrit with the inflection necessary to please the gods and ancestors' (ibid.). The Islamic cosmogony seems in this sense more compatible with the ideology of the protean person than the caste ideology.

Muslims have a chance to enter paradise after death. All the rituals considered in this section are attempts to essentialise and stabilise the *jāti* identity in the discontinuous, volatile person. Firstly, however, I will address the idiom central to becoming a human person: *mānuṣ karā*.

### ***‘Mānuṣ kora’/making a human person***

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Because the ‘physiological human’ and the ‘cultural person’ are not oppositional categories, birth is not a complete action but only the beginning of the attainment of full personhood, the ‘minimum quantum of personhood’ (Fortes 1987: 261). When talking about bringing up a child, my interlocutors use the Bengali *‘mānuṣ karā’*. *Mānuṣ karā* in its most simple connotation means to take care of a child (*bāccā*) until he/she physiologically becomes a man/a woman able to sustain him/herself independently. I want to draw attention here to the fact that the idiom infers simultaneously ‘to make [one] a human being’ or ‘to make [one] a person’.

Like ‘rearing’ a child, *‘mānuṣ karā’* can include every aspect of a child’s nurturing and education, yet it does not necessarily involve every aspect. In any case, it does by no means have to be the biological parents who ‘make the child a person’; it is often a cooperative effort; and people are usually very conscious of whom it is that ‘made them a person’. By whom one is fed rice is often mentioned as an indicator for the ‘foster’-parent, and in particular the breast milk is an important substance through which kinship is constituted and by which the child is becoming ‘humanised’ (cf. Fruzzetti, Östör, and Barnett 1982: 13; Lambert 2000: 80-82).<sup>53</sup> It is, for example, not entirely unusual for a child of a young mother to be brought up by the mother’s mother, when the mother has other young children that demand her attention, does not have breast milk, or is for other reasons not financially or physically capable to raise the child. I have found these grandmothers to, when introducing the grandchild, proudly emphasise that they raised the child (*‘āmi oke mānuṣ karechi’*). Similarly, young

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<sup>53</sup> This is a common imaginary throughout the sub-continent and not only limited to Muslims or Bengalis. Reddy (2006) describes the symbolic centrality of breast milk and feeding for *hijra*’s, and Bear (2007) does the same for Anglo-Indians.

boys may be brought up by their mother's brother and his wife,<sup>54</sup> and these boys, when mature, would acknowledge their foster parents by saying, '*orā āmāke mānuṣ kareche*' (they brought me up/ 'made me a person'). There is often a sense of significance and indebtedness attached to this utterance. I was at first surprised to find out that Arifuddin (Rahaman Saheb's youngest son) did not think much of disobeying his venerated father, while he always obeyed the senior *maulānā* who had been his teacher for many years when he was still a young boy studying in the madrasa. Arifuddin explained his behaviour by saying that this senior *maulānā* 'made me a man' (*āmāke mānuṣ kareche*). To emphasise the depth of their bond, Arifuddin recalls that he had been the preferred student to serve the teacher his food and massage his feet, while in turn he had been repeatedly hit on the hands with a bamboo-stick. Through the substances of food, and affectionate and disciplining physical contact, their relatedness had come to be so significant as to trump the relationship with his father.

Following from the recognition of the monistic nature of bio-moral substances, it makes sense that the two meanings of '*mānuṣ karā*' ('to humanize', and 'to make a person') are not used dichotomously; i.e. becoming a physiological human being and a moral person are inseparable processes. The one follows naturally after the other. The temporality involved is therefore important: '*mānuṣ karā*' is an idiom used only for children and young people, who first need to be 'humanised' in the early stages of childhood, made into a full human being, and they will, in an overlapping process, become a person. It is a process of cultivation that is directed, from the ('foster-')parents upon the children, which involves the exchange of various substances and rituals and which is more or less completed once one is considered a full adult. To 'make' the person is not metaphorical: it is the actual generation of life in both its physical and social form. While the child is growing physically, she is also made into a 'moral person' within a social group and as such Muslimness is generated. There are various local rituals that mark the transition of a child into adulthood,

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<sup>54</sup> This is often the case when land is involved; brothers usually live on their parents' land while sisters marry out. The land entitled to the mother will directly pass on to her son if he is raised on the land of his maternal grandparents.



and thus mark the completion of '*mānuṣ karā*', but these rituals can only take place after deliberation among the ('foster-')parents on whether the child is indeed 'made a person' to a sufficient extent. The actual age of 'completion' will therefore vary per individual child and is not exclusively dependent on biological factors like age or a girl's first menstruation. Some boys' marriage may be arranged at a young age, when they are already taking up the responsibility that comes with an adult *mānuṣ*: contributing to the finances of the household,<sup>55</sup> taking the responsibility for the harvest of the paddy fields and all the labour and finances involved, and taking part in discussions within the household. However, others may at the same age not be considered ready yet, as they only 'hang around' or have not finished their formal school education yet.

There are two points that follow from this context. First, becoming human and becoming a person are deeply interrelated and inseparable processes. One is only fully human when one is not only physiologically mature but also morally mature and ready to take up his or her social and moral role in the group. As such, the generation of life and the regeneration of the group are closely interrelated. Second, the humanisation of the child and the cultivation of the person, in the sense of '*mānuṣ karā*', stretch over time yet are explicitly limited to a certain period of time. It is an activity that must be understood separately from the 'cultivation of the self', a concept I will address at a later stage (see Chapter 3 and 6), which is an activity consciously exercised on oneself, and in a later stage of life. In short, the generative process of becoming *mānuṣ* has to precede the conscious cultivation of the self.

### **Birth and becoming**

The first step in the process of *mānuṣ karā* is the ritual inclusion of newborns into Muslimness in Joygram. Firstly, the father, grandfather or another

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<sup>55</sup>Although sons usually stay with their parents, also after marriage (Bengali Muslim society is virilocal), it is the norm that each son contributes a monthly amount to the household, often depending on their income. Once the sons are married and have children, it is not unusual that, although still sharing a house, they may prefer to run a separate (financial) household within the (physical) house.

close male kin whispers the most fundamental *kalimah*<sup>56</sup> in the ear of the baby very soon after his/her birth. This is the initiation of a life-long ritual of acquiring, belonging and recognition. It is considered to be a traditional requisite in order to initiate the learning of Arabic and the memorisation of certain Arabic verses. Through the whispering, a male elder includes the baby instantly in the contractual bond with Allah; and in a male line of ancestry perpetually indebted to Allah. Throughout life the *kalimah* will be repeated, and one will be called to acknowledge the covenant with Allah again even after death. After death, an angel will come to the grave and ask the deceased three questions in Arabic ('Who is your God [*mālik*]? Who is your Prophet [*rasul*]? What is your *dharma*?') and one needs to answer these questions correctly in order to have a chance to enter paradise, as it will prove that the person is a Muslim. 'So if you don't know Arabic', one man rhetorically asked me, 'how will you answer?' The angel may not accept you as a Muslim. The answers are tantamount to the *kalimah* whispered in the ear of the new-born. It is, again, an illocutionary act of *imān* (faith), of the recognition of Allah as the creator-god.

Secondly, forty days after birth, the new-born's hair is shaven and weighed on a scale with gold, after which the hair is thrown away. According to some, the hair is shaven to rid the child of the polluting substances of the womb. On the same day, the mother washes herself entirely, including her hair and her clothes, to purify herself. After this day, she may again pray, touch the Quran, and visit other households: actions that until then had been forbidden to her because of her polluted status.<sup>57</sup> Most important for my analysis is that with the equivalent value of the gold, the father will buy and distribute meat in the *pārā*. Through the distribution of food, the child becomes included within a reciprocal social group.

Related to the ritual of shaving the hair, and preferably performed on or around the same day, is the act of giving the name. The parents offer a goat or

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<sup>56</sup> The *kalimahs* (Ben. *kal'mā*) are verses from the Hadith that comprise the basic lessons of Islam, and are memorized and recited in Arabic. The *kalimah tayyibah* is the most fundamental verse, also proclaimed by a convert at the moment of conversion: 'There is no god but Allah, [and] Muhammad is the messenger of Allah'.

<sup>57</sup> See for comparison Blanchet (1984) on rituals of birth among Muslims in Bangladesh.

cow (depending on one's economic conditions) with the name of the child written on a piece of paper that is attached to the animal. This ritual assures that the child's name is known by Allah and the angels, so that she is on the 'list' of people whose account will be made up at the time of their death, and whose graves will be attended by the angels. Within the Islamic *dharma*, this ritual can be understood as a way to 'reserve' a place in paradise.<sup>58</sup> What is most important is that the meat is again distributed amongst the people of one's *pārā*.

The child is generated as an individual *moral* entity from relatedness through the rituals of purification, sacrifice and exchange. Firstly, the child is reborn: the removal of the polluted hair is the undoing of the birth from the womb, and the child becomes a direct creation of Allah through the giving of the name and the sacrifice: the sacrifice is a 'birth done better' (Meyer 2005: 163). Secondly, the animal is sacrificed as a substitute for the child. Sacrifice here is the same act as the sacrifice on Qurbani: whereas the child should be given to Allah to reciprocate the gift of human existence Allah has given us, this cannot be done because it would undo the gift itself. The child, through the act of sacrifice, becomes included in the sacred covenant with Allah and, thereafter, she directly enters in bonds of exchange with her surroundings through the gift of the animal's meat. The humanity of the child's personhood is instantiated through these rituals of exchange; before this, the child did not have a name and was not formally an individual entity (cf. Lambek 2010b: 62). So, thirdly, the child is reborn again, this time as a moral person embedded in contracts of relatedness. Newborns are as such included in the *jāti*. 'Persons are only persons in the context of and in relation to other persons' (Lambek 2013: 838); *jāti* denotes the kind of context and relationships, so once a human being becomes a person, she becomes inevitably a member of a particular *jāti*.

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<sup>58</sup>In one instance, a woman had not been financially able to offer an animal at the time of her son's birth. The son is nineteen now, and she hopes to soon offer a calf of the cow she owns, because otherwise, she says, he won't know she is his mother when they meet in paradise. So she did not exclude the possibility of her son going to heaven (despite his name not being on the 'list') but rather acknowledged the fragility of kinship ties, something that apparently lasts into the afterlife. As I will soon discuss, the circumcision ritual detached the son from the mother, and attaches the son directly to Allah. The mother has to ritually communicate (and re-establish *via* Allah) her relationship to her son, if kinship ties are to be continued after death. This alternative interpretation of a ritual demonstrates the fluidity of ideological content ascribed to one and the same ritual.

## Circumcision

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Despite the ritual essentialisation of the Muslim child from birth, the lack of inherited essences make identity inherently unstable and further ritual inclusion is required. Hence there is the initiation rite of the Muslim boys, the circumcision, to physically ensure their Muslimness. Significantly, the Muslims in Joygram (and elsewhere, see Mehta 2000) call this ritual *musal'māni karā* ('to make Muslim'). When, right after the circumcision of her grandson, I asked an elderly lady about the meaning of the ritual, she simply exclaimed, 'he has become a Muslim now!' (*ekhan Mus'lim haye giyeche!*). Upon my asking what he would have become had he not been circumcised, (perhaps a Bengali, which would imply Hindu?), she looked baffled and replied in a confused and contradictory manner that 'yes, he would be Bengali, but well, he was Muslim already anyway, but...we just do this!'

The circumcision ritual combines the verbal and the corporeal: it would not be considered *musal'māni* if the proper *kalimah* was not uttered at the same time; the illocutionary force of the *kalimah* is absolutely vital for the subjection of the person to ethical criteria (Lambek 2010b, 2013).<sup>59</sup> As such, circumcision 'establishes a relationship of identity between the spiritual and the corporeal' (Mehta 2000: 81); it fuses substance and code. It domesticates the male body, changing its metaphysic from an unrelated, bestial nature to an ethical body socialised within the male Muslim community.

The collective element is very important, as 'participation in the *ummah* (brotherhood) arises only after the ritual has been presented to the witnesses' (Mehta 2000: 94). Although there is not a feast, as I expected (since this is usually the case when I am notified days ahead that an auspicious moment is imminent), the circumcision is a public ritual. As soon as the doctor arrived, word would go around the village of the where and when of *musal'māni*. Most women of the *para* gather around the place of the act, pushing and shoving to not miss a glimpse of the very moment the doctor removes the foreskin of the child's genitals. Whether I wanted to or not, I was urged to push myself forward with my face peering through the gate of the veranda where the loudly whining

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<sup>59</sup> On the crucial role of language in ritual, see further e.g. Bloch (1986, 1992) and Keane (1997, 2010).

youngest son of Wahed was being held on the floor by Wahed's sister's son and Wahed's brother. The women would repeatedly ask me whether I could see it properly, and whether I could hear what was being said. While the doctor carries out the physical circumcision, it is the public gaze that completes and legitimises the ritual act. Through the witnessing of both sight and sound, the physical pain as well as the spiritual elevation is shared by the entire community. This sharing has clear *jāti* boundaries as the circumcision marks a fundamental difference between Hindus and Muslims, and it is through the establishment of these boundaries that the Muslim *jāti* continues to be generated. The public witnessing continues after the ritual itself: for days ahead, the boy would walk around without pants. This is partly because the fabric may hurt the sensitive skin, but also to show his circumcised genitals: 'look', the mother or another female relative would say, pointing to the child, 'he had *musal'māni* done' (or *musal'māni hayeche*). The ethical subject that is created becomes accountable to and subject of evaluation by the public that witness the act (Lambek 2013: 841-2).

Bourdieu's influential interpretation of circumcision is that the central importance of the rite is the institutionalization of the social difference between men and women (1992: 81). This would imply that the Muslim person that is generated through circumcision is male, and the centrality of circumcision begs the question whether Muslimness is foremost a masculine personhood. Although my focus here is not on gender, I have a few comments to offer. Firstly, I think that the paramount importance of the rite is to institute a separation of the boy from his mother, rather than from women in general (see also Mehta 2000: 83 – 85). The rite is in this sense a continuation of the 'birth done better' as the boy is further incorporated in direct physical/spiritual relatedness to Allah. Secondly, the rite may socially differentiate women and men, but it also functions to unite all members in a singular collective body (Mehta 2000: 80). Witnesses, I have mentioned, are essential to the rite, and most of the witnesses are women, and as such they are included in the rite. Moreover, I have not heard reference to the ritual as having the purpose to make one a 'man' or 'masculine'; the purpose is to make one 'Muslim'. I contend that the context is very important for the particular significance attached to the circumcision

ritual. In Joygram, the threat of bio-moral volatility and disintegration; the heightened sensitivity of the communal identity; and the anxiety concerning fluid *jāti* boundaries, together serve to make the institution of communal distinction more salient than gender distinction. Thirdly, notwithstanding my first and second point, the circumcision ritual allows for a stronger and more stable generative Muslimness among men than among women. Women's personhood remains more volatile and precarious: she is not publicly and physically mutated in the way that men are. Women are most firmly included in the *jāti* through the ritual of marriage; until then she could more easily become a Hindu than a circumcised male can. A girl married off is a relief for her parents for several reasons, a pivotal one being that her Muslimness is further essentialised – although it is never entirely. One of the reasons for the limited mobility of women is to avoid exchanges with 'dangerous others' for fear of bio-moral mutation (more on this point in the next chapter). Because the generative Muslimness among women is more fragile, there is more pressure on the cultivation of ethical Muslimness. There are various means for the generation of ethical Muslimness among women: Islamic ritual practice (prayer and everyday piety); a particular bodily disposition; dress (the covering of the hair, and, increasingly, the *salwār kamīz* rather than the sari); and the engagement in particular forms and substances of exchange, like the preparation and feeding of meat. For example, the adoption of 'Hindu' dress habits among girls is a great concern as the fear is that they are 'becoming Hindu'. I will elaborate further on matters of distinction and inter-*jāti* exchange in chapter 5. So the aim of circumcision is to become a Muslim rather than a man, and although circumcision's being exclusively male indicates a clear distinction between men and women, still the point is that both men and women are cultivated towards the same end, namely, Muslimness.

Rituals are the key practices through which practical understandings of the world ('everyday cognition') are negated in order to establish the paramount significance of the idealized world, the 'transcendental social'.

'In rituals, ... certain fundamentals of practical understanding concerned with time and the processes of life are apparently negated, but, as is

inevitable in all negations, these understandings are predicated on what is negated. The negated practical understandings are universal because they come from the interaction between minds and the world in its most fundamental aspects' (Bloch 2010: 9).

For instance, the initiation rituals described above negate the understanding that the child has come from the mother's body, as well as the understanding of physiological kinship more broadly. Nevertheless, these understandings are unavoidable underlying premises for the ritual to be effective: the ritual can thus represent the child as a creation of Allah and a procreation of the *jāti* as a whole. Similarly, the ritual negates the ideological construction of the protean body. The awareness of the fragility of *jāti* boundaries (generated only out of constant exchanges, rather than being primordial) gives the ritual even more ideological force. The ritual derives its power from the establishment of a contrast between the transcendental and the transactional social; the former is predicated on a negation of the latter.

In sum, rituals create a visceral belonging to the Muslim *jāti* while regenerating the latter. Personhood and *jāti* have come to be intrinsically linked: the first step towards 'making a person' is through inclusion in a *jāti*, and therefore the *jāti* identity gains an air of essentialism. The *Muslim jāti* is the pivotal 'essentialised group', in which members are socialised through ritual and members come to occupy 'essentialised roles' within the transcendental social primarily as Muslims.

### **The function of food exchange**

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As the discussion of Qurbani indicated, in addition to life-cycle rituals, feeding and sharing food is an important element in the process of the ideological construction of both the protean person and the essentialised *jāti*: 'Foods are regarded as important media of contact between human beings; in a society that rests on the regulation of such contact, food is a focus of much taxonomic and moral thought' (Appadurai 1981: 495; cf. Janeja 2010).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> There is an abundance of literature on the fact that nowhere in the world the social consequences of food transactions are so political and the moral implications so powerful as in South Asia. See e.g. Cantlie 1981; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977; Khare 1992; Laidlaw 1995; Marriott 1968; Parry 1985; Raheja 1988. See further chapter 5.

For example, food exchanges are at the core of the forging of marital relationships. For most South Asians, marriage is a highly structured long-term relationship of exchange between two groups of affines, involving the transfer of goods, services and people, and some may be highly aware of this. The exchanges generate a particular kind of intra-*jāti* relatedness to which pertain particular ethical criteria. The example directly below shows that exchanges between two families in the process of becoming kin are supposed to be equal.

One afternoon, Rehan (a bright young man of twenty aspiring to go to college) and I are sitting on his doorstep, overlooking the pond and the path leading around it to Rahaman Saheb's house. Fuaduddin is approaching us on the path back home, having just dropped off his future wife's sister's husband. The latter had come for lunch, just Fuaduddin and some of his close kin had previously gone to them for a meal. This is after the marriage had been formally arranged and agreed to by all parties. Fuaduddin stops on his way and tells us grinning wide-eyed that the guests (*kutum*, i.e. kin, in a broad sense) had brought enormous bags of uncooked vermicelli and rice to prepare the sweet dishes on Qurbani. When Fuad is gone, Rehan chuckles. 'Isn't it funny, the *system* [using the English word]. So now one of them has come here, and they have prepared a lavish meal for him. He has given them vermicelli, which they will prepare and eat on Qurbani, and will send a portion of the cooked vermicelli back to the *kutum*. And the other way around the same'. I sum up: 'So basically, they both prepare the same food but prepare what the other gave and eat what the other prepared?' Rehan chortles and nods. 'So why did he actually come, just to bring the vermicelli?' 'Yes', Rehan answers, 'now relationships are being forged'.

On the basis of his work that focused on Tamil Brahmins, Appadurai argues that food in South Asia can serve 'two diametrically opposed semiotic functions. It can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or it can serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation' (1981: 496). As for Bengali Muslims, the semiotic function of food exchange between *jātis* sustains hierarchical relationships; exchange *within* the *jāti* is to sustain equal and solidary relationships.



Furthermore, intra-*jāti* exchange is geared towards homogeneity and intimacy, whereas inter-*jāti* exchange creates differentiation in the negotiation of proximity and distance.

I will further elaborate on food exchanges and inter-*jāti* relationships in chapter 5. As for intra-*jāti* exchange: the semiotic functions aforementioned are notwithstanding actual ranked and otherwise unequal relationships within the *jāti* (in particular, gender inequality); food exchanges, if ethical, are to counter these kinds of hierarchies. Sharing food, then, is not only a way of creating relatedness, but also of instantiating a *particular kind* of moral relatedness, and continually generates the people involved as particular kinds of persons. Restrictions on relatedness can be manipulated by the sharing of substances to challenge dominant scripts. One can 'share up' in order to pull oneself up on what is felt to be a hierarchical relationship, or to reconstruct a sense of equality. Muslims are aware that sharing food across boundaries of rank or wealth goes against the grain of the hierarchical ordering of relations established in the dominant Hindu culture. As Bengali Muslims became more aware of typical Islamic values and where they differ from Hindu values, through the wave of reformism spread by Deobandi educated imams and Tablighi Jamaat proselytisers, following the distinctly 'Islamic way' came to be more explicitly considered a virtue (see also chapter 6).

For example, there is a tendency among reformist Muslims to refuse a dowry and other material exchanges. This is considered not only too 'Hindu' but also (or because of that) too instrumental and therefore devoid of ethical content, while the Quran celebrates the spiritual aspect of the union. Most are still afraid, however, that the lack of material exchange would result in too volatile a relationship with the affines, and fear for the well-being of their daughter if they do not send enough money and goods with her. Especially in the case of a marriage with a formerly unrelated family (rather than between kin, as is often the case), the need to 'forge relationships', as Rehan put it, is highly salient to counter the instability of the relatedness. One wants to ensure the reproduction of the lineage and of the *jāti* in general by way of offspring. So in the case of Fuaduddin, himself an imam and madrasa teacher, no dowry was exchanged, but a motorbike was, and all the more attention was given to rich

and lavish meals. The father was not to know about the motorbike, as the pious and puritan Rahaman Saheb would have considered any material exchange un-Islamic, but the parents of the bride had insisted on the gift. The exchange of food, however, is strictly according to the principle of equality, which ensured a continuous back and forth of visits and food-gifts to maintain the balance. Here, several ethical criteria are in play, which requires active negotiation and monitoring on the parts of the involved in order to establish secure bonds and preserve one's ethical self. One can increase one's claim to 'ethical Muslimness' through a more Islamic way of living, but one fears for the roots and boundaries of the generative Muslimness.

The negotiation of various ethical criteria is already visible in the everyday practices within the household. Because of my nomadic status in Joygram, I have consumed food in at least three-dozen households and tea in every other one. It was considered a great honour for them to have me eat of their rice: sharing their food with me made us closer, and we became more similar, since '[t]he household constitutes an intimate micro-environment within which people are related through the sharing of food' and other substances (Lambert 2000: 84). This is true for both the North-Indian Hindus Lambert worked with as well as the Bengali Muslims I have shared with; in both cases, the ways in which sharing takes place is a significant object of study, and my nomadic status conveniently allowed me to observe a variety of practices. Although the women nearly always cook and serve, they do not necessarily have to wait with their own meal for the male members to have finished eating, as is customary in rural Hindu households (e.g. Östör and Fruzzetti 1977; Raheja 1988). In most, especially the smaller households, husband, wife and children eat together, not sharing the plates of rice but eating from the same bowls of vegetable dishes (*tar'kārī*), meat and whatever other side dishes are present. They were a little hesitant at first, but increasingly proud to show me that they defy the hierarchical Hindu script for sharing food (see Bear 2007 for a similar defiant attitude among Anglo-Indians). In larger households, it is often practically impossible to eat all together, in which case the women eat last. But this is more a practical than an ideological choice.

In the household of Rahaman Saheb, the men are served food by their mother or one of the wives whenever they come in and call out, 'give me rice!' (*bhāt dāo!*). They usually eat from individual plates with rice, lentils (*dāl*) and curries (*tar'kāris*) heaped on it. On special occasions and auspicious days - for instance, when the brothers working at faraway mosques or madrasas are all home, or when an affine is visiting - they may share a large plate of rice or at least share the smaller bowls of *tar'kāri*, meat and fish dishes. Bowls and plates are never shared across gender, unless husband and wife happen to eat at the same time. Whenever Arifuddin has lunch at home, we are served lunch together, though in separate bowls and plates, the other family members appreciating our close friendship. The more often we ate together, the more often our hands would reach across the bowls: he helping himself to my meat, and me taking his vegetables in exchange. He would often polish off the heap of rice I never managed to finish, either reaching over to my plate or me shoving the rice with my hands on his plate. This would usually happen when no one was around and felt intimate, almost clandestine. When, on Eid, he quietly slipped my leftovers of the sweet dishes from my to his plate, in front of his brothers and even his father, who gave it a glance but not a word, I appreciated this as an act of defiance, not intended to be subversive vis-à-vis his father, but rather to undermine the hierarchical ideology of the protean person. In the 'stream of practice' Arifuddin enacts a new performance (Lambek 2013: 844). He demonstrated an 'ideological kinship' between him and me that cut across gender, age, *jāti* and whatever else may have had to be hierarchically ordered, and that he would legitimise with reference to our equality in the name of Allah. Most of the 'gastro-politics' (Appadurai 1981) in daily food exchanges may be a game so ingrained in the everyday dispositions that, even though reflected upon, they are 'as a cultural trait...which one can be sadly aware of having, without this awareness reducing much the extent to which one exhibits it' (Laidlaw 1995: 293). Yet here, Arifuddin's defiance is made possible by the implicit reference to a conflicting ideology.

Most of the Muslim inhabitants of Joygram, however, are not as bold and hesitate to be subversive - or perhaps only in my presence, as they are not sure of the code of my *jāti*. As soon as Nasiruddin, Arifuddin's eldest brother, became

the imam of the Mach Para mosque, he broke away from the extended family and settled down as an independent financial unit with his wife and three daughters. They instantly changed eating patterns: through the half-open curtains of the 6m<sup>2</sup> room that constitutes their house I caught them eating all five together from one large plate in their midst. With a faint self-conscious grin he explained that they would have fewer dishes to wash this way. I believe he did not dare to defend his subversion of the dominant Indian script too explicitly.

### **Scaling up: beyond kinship**

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As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, although Bengali Muslims do recognize differences between kin and non-kin relationships, *jāti* relatedness trumps this distinction. Indian Muslims do not have the same endogamous limitations considering caste, kin and title as Hindus do regarding the choice of marriage partner.<sup>61</sup> So there is more flexibility and scope to produce widely spread webs of relatedness. That is, within the *jāti*: the one rule of endogamy is that the partner has to be of the Muslim *jāti*. I suggest that this is one of the indications that on an ideological level, kin boundaries blur and membership to a *jāti* is more salient to the constitution of moral personhood. But I would also encounter deliberate attempts to undermine kin relatedness in favour of *jāti* relatedness.

As an anthropologist ought to do, I would often sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil in an attempt to draw kinship diagrams. This would easily invite curious glances from onlookers, so initially I thought it would be fairly easy to have people talk me through their kindred. Yet, although many would figure out in a mere minute how the diagram worked and what my aim was, none was eager to help me draw out all the kin connections. Instead, I was actively discouraged, sometimes with an exhausted sigh (only the thought of it!) sometimes with a mocking grin (this silly anthropologist...) because I would never be able to disentangle the highly complex web of kin. It is not only that any piece of paper would be too small, but also that it would be filled with criss-

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<sup>61</sup> There are some rules, for example intergenerational marriage between kin, e.g. a daughter marrying her mother's brother, is prohibited.

cross lines since every person is connected to several others in various ways. 'You are never going to understand', I was told, 'even we don't know exactly'. As it turned out, most people did more or less know how they are related to each other, but they seemed hardly bothered to be clear on whether a particular '*bhāi*' (meaning, very generically, brother) is in fact father's brother's son, or father's father's sister's son's son, or any of the other nearly endless possibilities. My friends were more than once indifferent and annoyed by my endless probing in an attempt to get it right (I often got a affirmative answer to any option I proposed), and more than once I found out later that several people had waved me off with an answer that was either not exactly right (this *bhāi* is not father's father's sister's son's son but father's father's father's son's daughter's son) or at least not the *only* form of relatedness. I came to the conclusion that what mattered in everyday life is that this *bhāi* is a *bhāi*, one's *nijer lok* (own people) never mind the form of relatedness.

The higher level of fluidity in the construction kin and non-kin relation is partly due to the problematic instability of blood relations and partly because an extensive 'fictive' kin network is ideologically useful. Amongst Bengali Muslims, kinship terms are widely applied to the extent that any Muslim is a *bhāi*, brother. Extending kin terminology to any member of the Muslim *jāti* creates not only a moral but also a supposedly physiological connection within the *jāti*.<sup>62</sup> This gives a sense of security, which is highly valued in an environment where the Muslim minority does not always feel safe or at least not equally valued. 'Kinship...provides the one discursive realm that stands for axiomatic certainty' (Baumann 1995: 736). To call this sense of kinship 'fictive' would be misleading because the emotions evoked and the practical consequences are decidedly real (cf. Carsten 2004: 144). It is a 'metaphor we live by' that structures feelings and actions (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). A sense of solidarity and equality is effectively shared with all members of the *jati*,

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<sup>62</sup> Significantly, *bhāi* is a neutral term, not hierarchical like the term used by Bengali Hindus, *dada*. The latter means 'elder brother', whereas *bhāi* more generically means 'brother'. Muslims often use *bhāi* as a suffix to a name where Hindus add *-da* to the name: both suffixes express respect and a certain level of formality, yet significantly the Hindu *-da* is inherently hierarchical where the Muslim *bhāi* is not.

which has highly relevant political connotations. As I mentioned previously, networks of relatedness scale up but this does not necessarily have to happen in one direction. On a global scale, the Joygramis identify with the ‘overlapping webs of relatedness’ (Astuti 2000: 100) that are the Indian nation and the Islamic *ummah*. These circles of relatedness are different in content because of the different forms and levels of exchange that (can) take place. But I am getting ahead of myself. In the following chapters, I will further discuss the consequences of this overlap and its discontents; here I hope merely to have explained how these forms of relatedness come about in the first place.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have exposed how relational exchange is at the core of the imagination of the transcendental social as it emanates from the social contract founded on Allah’s creation of mankind/humanity. Ultimately, all of the exchanges derive their ethical dimension from this sacred covenant. I have shown how ‘[a]ctors are rendered persons through performative acts’ (Lambek 2013: 841) and how ‘ritual performance produces states of affairs, the descriptions under which people act, and the criteria for judgement’ (Lambek 2010b: 54). Subsequent practice is evaluated in the light of these performances, and from practice new performances arise (Lambek 2013: 844). The social contract is all-pervasive throughout all the relations and represents the fundamental element of the ethical self. The fact of being considered a person, or even a human, is premised upon one’s *dharma*. Therefore there can be no secular self, or a self without identity sprung directly from nature, as I will make more evident in the next chapter. This conceptualisation - that one is not only not a person, but also barely human when outside particular social and ethical forms of relatedness (outside *dharma*) - falls very much in line with the Aristotelian distinction between the ‘citizen’ (a person) and the ‘barbarian’ (the pre-humanised animal) (see Lord 2013). This parallel, in turn, will allow me to conceive of Joygrami ethics as a virtue ethics in the Aristotelian sense, as I will discuss in chapter 3.

For the ones included in the Muslim *jāti*, those ascribed to the Muslim category, it is inevitably the Islamic *dharma* that forms the ethical imagination and the transcendental social, within which they aspire for full, moral

personhood. Since the relationship between *jāti* and *dharma* is symbiotic, an increasing emphasis on belonging to the Muslim *jāti* also results in an increasing emphasis on Islamic *dharma*. Vice versa, an increasing aspiration to live ethically, cast in terms of *dharma*, stresses belonging to the Muslim *jāti*. In the next chapter, I build upon the claims made in this chapter, and further elaborate on how *dharma* is axiomatic for the ethical self.



Fig. 3. Collective prayer at the Eid *ghat* on Qurbani. Children from poor families (mainly Adivasi) wait at the entrance in the hope for alms at the end of prayer. Because of the poor management of WAQF profits, the Eid *ghat* has been in the current (unfinished) state for several years.



Fig. 4. Muharram procession and bamboo stick fight at the cattle market.



### 3. 'We don't want your freedom': The ethical imagination

'[Morality] is neither the hypocritical moral code to which Nietzsche took exception nor the naive freedom of liberal individualism but action that is informed by culturally dense understandings of the complexities of judgment, the social contexts of commitments, and the fine line between happy and unhappy actions' (Lambek 2000: 315).

#### Introduction

Finally I had a moment to sit alone with Arifuddin in one of the small rooms surrounding the courtyard of Rahaman Saheb's household. Alone, because he had some secrets to tell me, and because I had to clandestinely hand him a train ticket.

Arifuddin is the youngest son of Rahaman Saheb, around 20 years old, and educated at Deobandi madrasas in West Bengal. At 18, he was supposed to go to the Darul Uloom Deoband in Uttar Pradesh itself, as most of his elder brothers had done. He had refused to go and instead he was now living at home occasionally leading prayers or teaching small children Arabic in the mosque.

We became close friends and after months he confided in me that the reason he had postponed was that he had fallen in love with a girl who was a student at a madrasa in Bardhaman, a town an hour away by train. His plan was to go to Delhi to work in the jewellery shop of a friend of the family, so he could earn enough money to marry this girl and build a house for them here in Joygram. His father would never allow him to deviate from the path to become an Islamic scholar, so Arifuddin had asked me to secretly buy him the train ticket to Delhi, which I had refused to do for weeks. I sometimes had the feeling that he did not take Islam, or at least his role as an Islamic exemplar, as seriously as he was expected to and I did not want to be a factor that would lead him further astray.

Once I confronted him with my worries, after he himself complained that his staying at home without work made him hang around idly with the other boys in the village too much. In a slightly mocking voice, I asked him whether he had 'forgotten' his *dharma* (*tomār dharma bhule giyecho?*). This was one of the rare moments he got genuinely upset with me and while looking me angrily in the eyes he said, 'never, ever say that to me again'. Based on these assurances, I

conceded to buy him the train ticket. But before I handed it to him, I interrogated him once more on the ethical dimensions of his plan in this stuffy, secluded room.

As soon as we are alone in the room, he bursts out, telling me he met his girlfriend again last night. He wanted to be sure she loved him before he would go to Delhi. He had sneaked out of the house in the evening and had met the girl in the crowded bazaar of Bardhaman so as not to draw attention. They had sneaked in a side alley, where she had removed the eye cap of the fully covering burqa, after which he had pulled off the cloth covering the mouth and asked her whether she loved him. She said yes. I cheekily ask whether he kissed her, but he resolutely says 'no, I didn't touch her, that would be a sin'. I exclaim that surely he wasn't supposed to see her face either, to which he sniggers and says that that's fine, she will be his wife anyway.

In fact, they decided on the spot to get married in two years, after she finishes her education at the madrasa. He is radiating joy when he tells me: 'it's so beautiful! That will be, what's it called...*love marriage* [using English term]!' I ask him whether that is acceptable among Muslims. 'Yes, it will be *sunna* [the teachings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammad]. Marriage is *sunna*. And it says, don't leave the one that you love. Go to pains to marry her. So it's fine, it's even very good'. 'And what if your father doesn't agree?' 'Well...then I'd have to listen to my father...' he answers with a pusillanimous chuckle. His father, we both know, is very unlikely to agree, because the girl's family belongs to a different Islamic legal school. Moreover, it is custom for brothers to marry in chronological order, and at that point Arifuddin still had five unmarried brothers above him. These points of contention, however, are according to Arifuddin subordinate to the Sunnah that says that one shall marry the woman one loves.

I am pondering out loud that surely, disobeying his father is a sin (he nods), while he doesn't touch his girlfriend because it would be a sin, even though to me touching his girlfriend's hand seems a smaller sin than moving to Delhi against his father's will. 'Why do you follow the Quran in some occasions, and not in others?' Arifuddin rolls on his back, chuckling. 'You are right! But

touching her would be a much greater sin, because one touch will make you want more, more and more, and that would be a much greater sin than disobeying father'. 'But how do you know which sin is greater? How can one make such a decision, if, like, following one's love implies disobeying your father?' I ask. Arifuddin sits up straight again, and beaming with joy and conviction he says: 'you are right. That isn't written anywhere. That is my own judgment/wisdom (*āmār nijer jñān*). I *know* that if I would touch the girl, it could escalate and become a great sin. I know that from my own judgment (*āmār nijer jñān theke*)'.

Various issues transpired in this conversation. Discussion of a number of these issues will be left until later chapters: chapter 4 addresses the ways in which a lack of money leads to pragmatic choices, and chapter 6 addresses the changing normativity resulting from the conversion from a more customary to a more puritan and individualistic Islam. In this chapter, I discuss the ethics involved in living according to the Islamic morality.

Arifuddin, however much committed to living a life as closely as possible resembling that of the Prophet Mohammad, has to make choices between incompatible imperatives. Following exactly the moral law derived from the Quran and the Sunnah is impossible, in the same way that it has been suggested that most religions are impossible (see Laidlaw 2014a: 126). It is still, however, possible to live *dhārmik*, that is, ethically. *Dharma* includes Islamic morality (the Quran and the Sunnah would be called *dharma*), yet it also includes the situational interpretation of the rules and one's contextual judgement. That is, *dharma-as-ethics* is not mere compliance with moral law, but includes the effort to live virtuously.

In this conversation, I have made Arifuddin consciously aware of the ethical considerations involved in his decisions. One may call Arifuddin pragmatic, but I know him well enough to know that for him the Sunnah is not merely an *a posteriori* justification. Rather, in daily life the Sunnah acts as a shared backdrop from which he makes his independent ethical evaluations. Where do we locate the propensity for ethical evaluation in the vernacular cosmopolitics? Arifuddin

locates it in *jñān*; *jñān* is the faculty that allows him to live with the abstract norms of the Sunnah he refers to.

According to Joygrami vernacular theologians, *jñān* (wisdom) is the ability to choose between right and wrong, which distinguishes us, as human beings, from animals and angels. I often asked why Allah even gave us the faculty to do wrong; could we not have been just ‘perfect humans’? The answer was more or less tautological but revealing nevertheless. Angels can only do right, they can’t do wrong. But Allah put human beings to the test and gave us the ability to choose between the right and the wrong path: He gave us brains so that we are able to acquire and exercise *jñān*. Animals were not given this faculty. If we acquire and exercise the right *jñān* we will eventually be able to pass the test and join the angels in paradise. When I would ask further, why we are given the capacity for *jñān* rather than just making us good right from the start, the final answer would usually be an exclamation like, ‘otherwise we would not have been humans (*mānuṣ*)!’

*Jñān* is the element that distinguishes humans from angels, who are beyond good and evil; and from animals, which act only on the basis of instrumental calculation and instinct. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, every human being has a *jāti* and a *dharma*, that is, every *mānuṣ* has the potential to live ethically. In the cosmopolitics of Bengali Muslims, this potential is generated in the fundamental exchange that generates life: the gift of life by Allah. It follows that human ethics needs to be located within the choice that Allah has given us; it is an autonomy acquired only after the acknowledgment of Allah’s gift of life.<sup>63</sup> It also follows that since relatedness is a precondition for the generation of human persons, relatedness is a precondition for ethics, rather than vice versa.

In the Cartesian liberal philosophy, the pre-moral human being is sprung directly from nature and only after the self and the body are separated, moral

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<sup>63</sup> This element of the vernacular theology I describe here (the idea of the free will embedded in the choice given by god) has obvious parallels with particular strands of Christian theology, see Robbins (2004a) and Cannell (2006). What is distinctive about this context is the combination of the salvationist theology with the local holistic ideology of the protean person.

universals can be constructed by reason, which are subsequently to be followed (see Taylor 1989).<sup>64</sup> In contrast, according to the ideology of my interlocutors, human life is generated by an exchange, which is the fundamental ethical act (Lambek 2010a), since it infuses human life with ethical potential. Thus the human self emerges from relatedness, and ethical potential is integral rather than posterior to the human self. As I will argue in this chapter, this observation has far-reaching consequences for the kind of ethics that people engage in: people act according to an (Aristotelian) embodied virtue ethics rather than according to (Kantian) universal moral imperatives.

In this chapter, I firstly develop a critique of an exclusively secular conception of ethics. Secondly, I analyse the ethnography that forms the basis for this critique: drawing upon the previous chapter, I argue that Muslim Joygramis derive ethical autonomy from submission to the sovereignty of the creator-god, rather than from a sovereign consciousness. The local cosmopolitics creates ethical affordances (Keane 2015) that do not determine but do constrain and allow for particular forms of ethical reflection and action. The key ethical affordances are *imān* (faith) and *jñān* (wisdom), which I will compare to, respectively, *habitus* and *phronesis*. Thirdly, the *telos* of ethical exchange is locally conceptualised as *khuśi*, which means happiness, or, as I suggest, virtue. However, *khuśi* is not only the desired result but also the motivation and the nature of the exchange. Exchange, then, is a total social fact that is not a means to an end but an end in itself: a *khuśi*, harmonious society. Fourthly, I demonstrate that even though absolute freedom is a human impossibility, it features prominently in the imagination of my interlocutors as an actual threat to order and justice in human society. I conclude with the observation that the idea of entering into a secular contract with the state as an entirely free sovereign being is inconceivable, since unconstrained freedom has to be renounced to allow for the emergence of the potential of ethics – and thus for the generation of humanity in the first place.

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<sup>64</sup> The opposition between the self and the body – and of ascetic morality and embodied virtue ethics – has its origins in Platonian philosophy (see Lambek 2000) and takes on a particular form in the work of Nietzsche (see Laidlaw 2002, 2014a).

## **Theoretical orientations: critical reflections on *The subject of virtue***

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In the introduction I have postulated a model of ethical reality on the basis of my ethnography and the theoretical work of Bloch (2008) in combination with two of the most influential advocates of ‘the ethical turn’ in anthropology, James Laidlaw (2002, 2014a) and Michael Lambek (2000, 2010a, 2010b). Ethics, I suggested, is the connection between the transactional social and the transcendental social, as embodied, situational acts are embedded within collective ideals. The precondition for ethics is, then, that humans are able to conceive of themselves as related; as in a particular social positionality within the transcendental social. Therefore, drawing on Bloch (2008), I suggested that the predisposition that allows for ethics to emerge is (social) imagination. Imagination allows humans to live in the transcendental social within which we occupy particular essentialised roles and groups. Since the transcendental social encompasses both this-worldly and otherworldly roles and groups, there is no stark differentiation between ethical acts directed at this-worldly or otherworldly goals; these goals collapse into the collective ideals of the transcendental social.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate in detail how the social imagination and embodied ethics are conceptualised in the cosmopolitics of Joygrami Muslims. The model of ethical reality that emerges from my ethnography requires me to refute Laidlaw’s (2014a) claim that reflective freedom is the essential feature of ethics. In particular, I will demonstrate that Laidlaw’s conception of ethics is not universally applicable because it is ultimately secular and does not allow for Salvationist truth claims.

James Laidlaw asserts that one of the central aims of his work *The Subject of Virtue* is ‘to conceptualize character, freedom and responsibility each as qualities that emerge in social interaction rather than being features in any sense internal to the individual’ (2014b: 501). However, in his poststructuralist interpretation of Aristotelian virtue ethics, Laidlaw equally attempts to recover an innate, individual kind of freedom that allows for the virtuous qualities to be enacted: an irreducible reflective consciousness that constitutes the subject as an ethical being. He acknowledges the limited freedom involved in these

‘processes of subjectivation’ (Foucault 2000): ‘The power relations that constrain and enable, and weaken and empower, some in relation to others are emphatically not mere appearances in contrast with a reality of freedom. They give such freedoms as people are ever able to exercise both their shape and their scope’ (Laidlaw 2014b: 500). Nevertheless, Laidlaw maintains, the constraining cultural and social models do not make ‘the active, reflective freedom involved in actualizing [the processes of subjectivation] any less real’ (2014a: 102).

I wonder whether Laidlaw would consider the relation with a god a ‘power-relation’; whether this power-relation would form an external or an internal constraint to ethics; and whether ultimately Laidlaw’s subject is a secular subject that can only be constrained to a limited extent by this-worldly power that originates external to the subject. In Laidlaw’s model, this-worldly or otherworldly power cannot ultimately constrain the internal, rational capacity of reflection, which is equally available for all. As such, Laidlaw’s approach to ethics contains elements of the Kantian concept of morality as *rational* autonomy; which is a normative expression of a distinctly modern (Western) egalitarianism (Keane 2014: 449).<sup>65</sup> This kind of autonomy inherent to Laidlaw’s idea of ethics is modern and secular as it is premised on a ‘self-sufficing’ or ‘exclusive humanism’ (Taylor 2007), which ‘rejects a cosmological vision of reality’ (Mattingly 2012: 168). Indeed, the idea of a sovereign and private conscience is the precondition of modern secular ethics (Asad 2003: 247). Modern secular ethics, indeed, appears as ‘liberation’ from the shackles of the ‘unnatural’ ascetic morality that Nietzsche so deplored (Laidlaw 2002: 316ff).

Character, in Bengali cosmopolitics, indeed emerges in social interaction, but at the same time becomes internal to the individual, since character and flesh cannot be separated and the distinction between quality/body is blurred. Social and cultural models create *physical* limitations, since the body/mind is

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<sup>65</sup> ‘One reason Williams favours ethics over morality is because he sees the latter to require some supreme figure like God to enforce the laws (Laidlaw 2014a: 112). Working within the dominant secular assumptions of the twentieth-century academy, he has to reject that. But these are normative, not empirical objections: many of the people we want to understand are not egalitarians, and do not reject the guidance of a God’ (Keane 2014: 449).

not only conditioned in a certain way but also *shaped* in a way that it can only conceivably make certain choices and not others. In his model of ethics Laidlaw assumes a shared humanity before the generation of particular kinds of persons, and within this shared humanity, reflective freedom is equally available for all. Laidlaw takes for granted (as a feature of humanity) a mind separate from a body that can ‘step back’ and reflect. Taking this as his starting point, Laidlaw does not have to ask how different configurations of the self may have implications on different conceptions of the ‘mind’, the ‘brain’, or the ‘body’; or indeed on conceptions of the human.

I feel that if, as anthropologists, we really want to ‘take seriously’ the ethical life of others (Laidlaw 2014a: 52) and ‘go deeper’ into the understanding of ethical sensibilities (Lambek 2010a: 3), we have to leave open the possibility that the truth claims of the vernacular cosmological vision from which the ethical is generated have ontological validity, and not dismiss them *a priori*. As I have demonstrated, in the cosmopolitics of my interlocutors, there is no human being before the generation of personhood. Furthermore, this chapter will reveal that only a particular shape of mind can reflect. This observation is an important modification because it shows, not only that a particular generation of personhood takes place *before* we can discern an ethical consciousness, but also that the alternatives between which to choose (Lambek 2010b) from within this ethical consciousness may be limited because of the way in which the person is constructed.

I do maintain that a kind of reflective autonomy is indicative of ethics, but it is fundamentally different from Laidlaw’s reflective freedom. I have mentioned the vernacular concepts *imān* (faith) and *jñān* (wisdom) in passing; here I demonstrate in detail that in the ideology of my interlocutors these are the faculties essential to cultivate virtue. *Imān* is best understood as a *habitus* of faith, and *jñān* is an ethical concept comparable to *phronesis* (judgement) (Lambek 2000, 2010b). *Phronesis* is the most apt cultural translation of *jñān* because *phronesis* is a kind of judgment that ‘is resolutely nonindividualistic’ and is therefore ‘more appropriate than either freedom or convention as the fulcrum of everyday ethics’ (Lambek 2010a: 26). I suggest, then, that the



reflective autonomy central to ethics is an autonomy that emerges from exchanges in relatedness rather than from a sovereign consciousness.

By emphasising the role of judgement as central to a particular kind of autonomy in the ethics of Joygrami Muslims, I contribute to the line of work of several anthropologists who have in recent years argued for attention to ideological manifestations of freedom and autonomy in Islam that differ from the liberal conception of freedom (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005; Marsden 2005; Hirschkind 2006). In addition to reinforcing this argument, I aim to give a broader picture of the generation of this kind of non-liberal autonomy within an example of Islamic cosmopolitics. Here, I give a critical reading of Laidlaw's (2014a) critique of Mahmood (2005), in order to take my argument beyond both authors.

In her ethnography on the Islamic piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood draws on the Aristotelian legacy regarding virtue ethics as it 'allows us to think of ethics as always local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed' (Mahmood 2005: 28). In addition, she draws on Foucault in order to locate agency and ethical subjectivation in embodied forms of Islamic obedience and piety which had previously been understood as the 'docile' subordination to norms (Mahmood 2005: 29). She argues that the internalization of a *habitus* (in the Aristotelian sense) requires the active work of ethical self-fashioning and to that extent implies a free agent.

I do not contest Laidlaw's critique of the apparent coherence of the Islamic piety movement (2014a: 167-173). But perhaps Mahmood's work is best interpreted as an ethno-theology: a coherent model of and for ethics, with its particular interpretation of ritual, the body, and various values such as freedom, which is contested and compromised in everyday reality. She uses this ethno-theology to critique the ways in which the Western ideology has become implicit in anthropological categories. I find value in her ethnography as an ethno-theology and I similarly convey my interpretation of the vernacular model of ethics in this chapter. Nevertheless, I aim to go beyond Mahmood's

work, as I also strive to explicate the ethical affordances that allow for the negotiation of ambivalences and value conflicts.

Furthermore, I suggest that Laidlaw's critique of Mahmood brings to the forefront the former's problematically secular conception of ethics. In Laidlaw's view, the ethnography of Mahmood proves his point that reflective freedom is essential to ethics, yet also shows that Islamic reformism, like other Salvationist religions (2014a: 154), ultimately relinquishes reflective freedom (and thus ethics):

'Tied as it is to the reality of consciousness and the constitution of the subject through socially instituted practices and relations of power and mutual recognition, reflective freedom is a precondition for ethical life in general. But what the reformist projects described by Mahmood and Hirschkind do with that freedom is, quite directly, to subordinate and reduce it in favour of securing a degree of obedience to God that will no longer depend on consciousness but will become as if instinctive' (Laidlaw 2014a: 177).

What Mahmood describes is the ideal mutation of the mind/body so that, in Laidlaw's words, the distinction between moral and physical incapability (to do the wrong thing) collapses (Laidlaw 2014a: 152-154). Laidlaw argues that this observation makes the study of 'ordinary ethics' obsolete, as Mahmood's interlocutors apparently strive after positive liberty: in the Islamic piety movement, 'reflective freedom is exercised towards its own future curtailment, through developing dispositions that restrict what one might be able to choose to do, in favour of the quite different value of positive freedom' (2014a: 154). He continues with the statement that

'such apparently paradoxical dynamics of a self extinguishing moral will are not uniquely a feature of reformist Islam, but are common in ethicized 'world religions'...[I]ndividuals are invited to exercise individual ethical choice to embark on a path of self-formation, the end result of which is the extinction of exactly the capacity for wilful decision that enabled them to take the path in the first place' (ibid.).

In my view, Laidlaw's critique misses the point, partly because of his secular conception of the mind that I critiqued earlier, and partly because of a confusion of the *telos* of virtue ethics. Firstly, I suggest that one requires the cultivation of

a particular kind of mind/body (*habitus*) to work towards the realisation of one's goal. Laidlaw limits the mutualism between the shape of the mind/body and virtuous action because in his idealised conception, the mind is static and constant. Virtue ethics, however, is about the symbiosis between the mind/body and character on the one hand, and virtuous action on the other hand, and *habitus* captures this symbiosis if we allow it to be dynamic.

Secondly, I have already argued that obedience to god may be the precondition for ethics, rather than only a result. I further suggest that probably the *telos* of virtue ethics is the foreclosure of itself. The point of *phronesis* is to make ethics and desires converge, to shape character so that one will act ethically in a non-deliberative way. For Aristotle, 'the good life moves to a climax'; 'the contemplation of the divine', which is achieved in a '*certain kind of life*' (MacIntyre 2007: 175, emphasis in original) – a kind of life in which inclination and virtue collapse thanks to the cultivation of character (ibid: 149). So perhaps the 'paradoxical dynamics' of Salvationist world religions should be interpreted as the apex of virtue ethics, rather than as diverging from virtue ethics. The foreclosure of moral will implies that one has gone beyond good and evil, and virtue ethics becomes indeed obsolete. It is a *telos* that can never be achieved in this life, because the choice between good and evil is what makes one human. But that does not foreclose the fact that virtue ethics is the path towards that goal, perhaps more in Salvationist religions than in any other ethical tradition.

### **From generative to ethical Muslimness**

Joygrami Muslims are continuously preoccupied with the ethical degeneration they perceive in their environment. On an everyday level, this preoccupation is often expressed as a concern with being a 'good person' oneself in contrast to particular others who are considered 'bad people'. Indeed, I found it to be very common among people to make straightforward ethical judgements about others. There are various reasons why someone is 'good' or 'bad', but usually the observation that there are good and bad people is considered a social fact: there are inevitably bad people, just like there are inevitably good people. A metaphor most commonly deployed is that of a hand: Rahaman Saheb's son Wasim answered my query as to why people are *badmāś*

(a generic term implying various kinds and levels of inappropriate behaviour or 'bad' people) with holding up his hand: 'Are my fingers all equal? No, and similarly people are not all the same.' However, *badmāś* people aren't born *badmāś*, he added, it's because of envy (*himsā*). *Badmāś* people will inevitably be there, yet, he claims, it is because of upbringing and education that people become good or bad.

I have in the previous chapter made an analytical distinction between the generative Muslimness closely related to becoming a member of the Muslim *jāti*, and ethical Muslimness, related to the actual enactment of *dharma*. I focused on how a Muslim person becomes generated out of the exchanges within the web of relatedness that is the *jāti*. *Jāti* is a *sine qua non* to ethical personhood but inclusion in the *jāti* is not sufficient to establish oneself as an ethical being, and one needs to cultivate ethical Muslimness to secure one's claim to generative Muslimness. A claim to Muslimness is fragile due to the threat of disintegration inherent in the ideology of the protean person. So being engendered in the Muslim *jāti* does not make one necessarily a good person – it generates the potential to live ethically but this potential has to be constantly cultivated. Which actions exactly generate ethical Muslimness is situational and contestable. For instance, whether I would need to actually practice Islam to become a Muslim was a subject of discussion; some women would say it would suffice to marry a Muslim man, others would say that at least I would have to pray and wear a veil (as that is what makes a Muslim woman, they would say), still others would dismiss any aspiration to become Muslim without believing in Allah and the afterlife. The different opinions, and the fact that there is debate at all, suggest different levels of importance attached to nested forms of Muslimness associated with *jāti* and with *dharma*.

However, the actually tenuous nature of 'being good' is essentialised in particular persons. Similar to the tendency to essentialise *jāti* membership, there is a tendency to essentialise 'good' and 'bad' people. The essentialised *jāti* identity and the essentialised good character do not necessarily correspond: the relationship between being 'good' and being of a particular *jāti* is not taken for

granted but depends on individual behaviour and characteristics.<sup>66</sup> There are, however, essentialised faculties that allow for good character to develop.

In this section, I gradually reveal that *imān* (faith) and *jñān* (wisdom/judgment) are the essential qualities to the disposition and cultivation of ethical Muslimness. The analysis of the ethnography leads me to suggest that the generation of a particular mind/body includes the generation of the potential for faith and judgment/*jñān* to develop. This analysis, in turn, forms the backdrop to my critique of Laidlaw's conception of ethics.

### **Becoming a good Muslim**

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I presented the issue of the essentialised *jāti* on the one hand, and the essentialised good character on the other hand to Ishaque and his mother Parveen Bibi. No one in this household is very explicitly pious, or outwardly Islamic in dress or disposition, but they are respected for their worldly pursuits. Ishaque's father runs a homeopathic medical practice in Farukhbazar and his brother Basir is the local political leader of the TMC. The daughter is married to a well-earning teacher and the other three sons are studying in school and college and doing odd jobs, often as brokers. Currently, Ishaque works in a factory in a town one hour away by bus. Parveen Bibi is pious in her very own way: she is well familiar with the teachings of the Deobandi imams and tries to incorporate them in everyday village life. She often encounters impossible hurdles: how to buy vegetables from the vendor passing through if he is not supposed to see her face? In these moments, she shakes her head and says Islam is very hard (*khub kaṣṭa*), the hardest of all, and continues with her daily chores.

Ishaque, who spends a lot of time with his friends at the *bazar*, admits that some of his friends are rogues (*badmāś*) but claims that he is not, because he knows how to be good 'from the inside', 'with my own wisdom' (*nijer jñān*). His mother, however, laughs and claims that he had learned from her how to distinguish between good and bad: 'from mother' (*māyer kāch theke*). In another conversation, which I recounted in the previous chapter, Milon and Parveen Bibi reckoned that a Muslim baby would become Adivasi and vice versa

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<sup>66</sup> I will elaborate on the judgements considering various *jātis* in Chapter 5.

if they were to grow up in each other's household. After saying this Parveen Bibi immediately added with a sense of drama that it would be a great loss for the Muslim baby to be socialized in the Adivasi *jāti*, because she would 'become bad' (*khārāp haye yeto*) whereas the Adivasi baby is lucky as she would 'become good' (*khub bhālo dharma haye yeto*) by the virtue of the *dharma* she would acquire.<sup>67</sup> But here, in conversation with her son, it turns out that the parents can only lay the groundwork for good *dharma* to develop. Parveen and Ishaque eventually agree that children first learn from their parents, but once they are mature it depends on the person, because nobody can tell an adolescent what to do anymore: 'How will she know whether I go out drinking or doing other mischief?' he asks. 'She can't stop me, so it just depends on me and my own rules (*nijer niyam*)'.<sup>68</sup>

The emphasis on *jñān* as a condition for ethical behaviour came up time and again, as in this conversation with Ahmed and his son Rehan. I had many conversations on *dharma* and politics with Ahmed – not in the least because he was free most afternoons to talk: he is a middle class landowner, whose land is cultivated by sharecroppers (*bar'gādār*), and his household is maintained by his brother, who works as an artist in Gujarat. So Ahmed spent most of his afternoons drinking tea and reading the newspaper on his veranda and seemed all too pleased to have *āḍḍā* with me. According to Ahmed, some 20% of all people will simply be *badmāś*. The rest of the people need *dharma*, as a means to control themselves. Just the control of other people is not enough, and less authoritative because one can evade punishment too easily: Rehan could go out drinking and simply not come home until the smell of alcohol has evaporated, and thus avoid (physical) punishment. Interestingly, Ahmed says that *dharma* is a stronger controlling measure, and more likely to spur ethical action, especially

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<sup>67</sup> Parveen Bibi distinguishes more radically between *jātis* as being by itself good or bad. This has to do with gender in relatedness: see page 109. Moreover, we were talking here about Adivasis, and they are generally considered to be the lowest in any hierarchical ranking in society, including in a moral ranking. They are, in fact, hardly included in the plural composition of Indian or Bengali society.

<sup>68</sup> '*Niyam*' is always a morally charged rule. It is however not agreed upon (also not between the Muslims in Joygram) what exactly are the 'right' *niyam*: some would claim that only the rules coming directly from Hadith are right; some, like Ishaque, claim to be able to live ethically according to the *niyam* that are inspired by Islamic *dharma* though leave space for personal interpretation. I will come back to *niyam* later in this chapter.

because Allah cannot smell Rehan's breath, nor punish him immediately and physically, nor can Rehan see Allah. One has to have the *jñān* (wisdom) to know how to follow 'Allah's command' (*Āllāh'r hukum*). Both father and son emphasise, over and beyond the idea of the external god, that one makes ethical decisions from the inside, because Allah is inside (as they gesture with hands on their chests). From the inside, one will know how to act so that Allah will be 'happy' (*Āllāh khuśi thāk'be*).

What Ahmed implies is that external control may influence people's actions but that control from within is ultimately more important for ethical action. In other words, blindly following external constraint is not ethical; it is only ethical when the choice to act emerges from individual judgement, *jñān*, which in turn is borne out of faith in the invisible god. So *dharma* here denotes both blind faith (*imān*) as well as comprehension (*jñān*) of the value of Allah's command (*Āllāh'r hukum*), which inspires the desire to make Allah happy (*Āllāh khuśi thāk'be*).

When the previously quoted conversation with Ishaque continued, the latter implied the same as Ahmed. I suggest to Ishaque that in line with his reasoning, I should be able to use my own *jñān* to become good or bad, just like him (and here he nods affirmatively). Yet, I continue, so many others tell me it is impossible to do so without a *dharma*. Bemused, Ishaque mumbles, 'Well, you obviously need to fear Allah...(*Āllāh'ke to bhay kar'tei habe...*).<sup>69</sup> Ishaque had assumed it to be obvious that one can only develop *jñān* by virtue of fearing Allah.

One committed reformist Muslim, Masiruddin, had assumed this as well in yet another conversation. Masiruddin would always emphasise the 'rational' aspects of Islam to me, and once concluded one of his lectures on the scientific value of Islam by triumphantly saying that the '*brain*' (in English, pointing to his head) is most important in life. I replied, 'well, that's why I don't feel it necessary to believe in a god'. Masiruddin gazed at me bewildered, as if he wondered whether he had just conceded the ridiculous possibility of an atheist yet humane life. He shook his head and added that it is Allah who has given us

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<sup>69</sup> I will elaborate on the importance of the use of the term 'fear' rather than 'belief' below.

the brain, and without acknowledging that fact through *imān* from the heart (*man*, pointing to his chest), the brain is useless.<sup>70</sup> The brain can only give us *jñān* by virtue of our *imān*. He smiled relieved; an atheist, humane life would not be possible after all.

Wasim and Ishaque already stressed that one's upbringing is a determining feature to one's disposition to live according to *dharma*, and what Ishaque's mother further exemplifies, is the idea that *dharma* is engendered at the same time and inevitably during the process of 'making a person' (*mānuṣ karā*). The tendency to essentialise good and bad people stresses once again that *dharma* – as an ethical potential – is an essential yet mutable bio-moral substance involved in the process of *mānuṣ karā*. Just like any human being is born with the potential to become Muslim, depending on the subsequent exchange of bio-moral substances and the inclusion in the Muslim *jāti*, any human being is also bestowed with the potential to make reasoned judgements from within. When 'humanised', a child is socialised into a *jāti*, and gradually engendered with the qualities of *jñān* and *imān*, wisdom and faith. So when children do things that a Muslim is ought not to do, this is excused because they do not have *jñān* yet. When adults do things that a Muslim ought not to do, this is more often blamed to a lack of fear for Allah, because they are not using *jñān* when they should have. *Jñān* is conditional upon faith, so the potency of *jñān* depends on whether an element of faith and fear has been instilled in us; that is, on whether Allah is acknowledged. It is only because of Allah that true *jñān* can be acquired and that one will feel compelled to act according to one's *jñān*. *Jñān* and *imān* together, then, form the two basic faculties that allow a Muslim to live according to *dharma*.

### ***Jñān* and *imān*: phronesis within a *habitus* of faith**

I have made the observation that *jñān* is conditional upon faith, and that faith is inculcated in the process of *mānuṣ karā*. The potential for *imān* is

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<sup>70</sup> As happened more often in conversations with Masiruddin, his proud use of the few words in English he was familiar with highlighted the problem of translation. The Bengali word *man* famously does not have an appropriate translation in English, as it refers to both the mind and the heart, and is both physical and spiritual. Here I translate *man* to 'heart' because he points to his chest and because he emphatically separates *man*/heart here from *man*/mind by using the English word 'brain' for the latter.



engendered through one's upbringing; it is instantiated, demonstrated and affirmed by the ritual performance of sacrifice and exchange that I have discussed in the previous chapter; and continuously cultivated through ongoing practice. Yet, even though I have not been engendered in a *jāti* through the process of *mānuṣ karā*, I may cultivate *imān*. Many women would say to me that praying *nāmāj* or reading Arabic will shape my *imān*; it will come with the bodily practice. In this light, I need to slightly expand on my use of the key concepts *imān* and *jñān*. I will suggest that *imān* is better understood as a visceral *habitus* rather than a belief that resides in the mind.

Asad's description of the term *imān* is most accurate in this context. He states that *imān*

'is not a singular epistemological means that guarantees God's existence for the believer. It is better translated as the virtue of faithfulness towards God, an unquestionable habit of obedience that God requires of those faithful to him...a disposition that has to be cultivated like any other, and that links one to others who are faithful, through mutual trust and responsibility' (Asad 2003: 90).<sup>71</sup>

I suggest that *imān* as a 'virtuous habit of obedience' is a *habitus* in the Aristotelian sense very much like Mahmood's use of *habitus* (2005).<sup>72</sup> A *habitus* of faith here denotes the embodied disposition that allows for and is the dynamic product of the customary inculcation and the conscious cultivation of virtue.

I have at various times quoted my interlocutors saying that one should *fear* Allah, rather than saying one should believe in Allah. Fear (*bhay*) and belief

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<sup>71</sup> Asad moreover points to the important element of mutuality, which marks again the boundaries of the Muslim *jāti*, and to responsibility not only for oneself but also for everyone within the same sphere of identification. Combine this with the ideology of the divisible person, and the idea of mutual trust becomes even more crucial: 'Since, moreover, one's bio-moral substance extends into other persons – both through one's transactions with them and through the body particles shared with kin – any irregular exchange in which one engages also represents a direct threat to these other selves. In such a world nobody can be allowed to act as an autonomous individual, and all with whom one associates have a directly *personal* interest in monitoring one's conduct' (Parry 1989a: 513-514).

<sup>72</sup> Mahmood points to the Aristotelian legacy in Islamic theology (2005: 137, see also Asad 2003: 251). For instance, there is remarkable congruence in Ibn Khaldun's explanation of the meaning of *malaka* (usually translated as habit) and Aristotle's discussion of *habitus*. To my knowledge, Mahmood does not offer a similar discussion of intellectual congruence regarding *phronesis* so it remains debatable whether Islamic theologians have indeed been influenced by this particular concept.

(*biśwās*) are used indistinguishably in common parlance: '*Āllāh'ke bhay kar'te habe'* (one has to fear Allah) implies belief (*biśwās*) and faith (*imān*) in the omnipresence of Allah, and whenever I asked for the meaning of *imān* (faith), most were quick to answer that it means that 'I fear Allah' (*Āllāh'ke bhay karī*), and would further answer that it means to believe that Allah created the world and to believe in the afterlife. Fear is visceral, located in the mind/body, whereas belief may be interpreted to be located in the mind. The use of the term 'fear', then, points us to the visceral aspect of faith; 'faith' is in this case an embodied *habitus* rather than something in the mind.

Many of the participants in the piety movement in Cairo that Mahmood studied (2005) drew 'the ineluctable relationship' 'between the ability to fear God and capacities of moral discernment and action' (2001: 840; 2005: 142-145). Fear implies the imagination of god and therewith the actor's positionality in relation to god. The actor as such is subject to criteria, and becomes an ethical subject (Lambek 2010*b*). Fear does not exclude deliberation, but it makes deliberation ethical; and 'it is a condition for...the *felicitous* performance of the act' (Mahmood 2001: 842).

In my fieldsite, a lack of *dharma* is often attributed to a lack of fear: without fear, people tend to act according to instrumental motivations, but from the visceral disposition of fear people's judgement gains an ethical dimension. My reading Arabic, and my prayers (as I joined the women in prayer during Ramadan) were considered an empty act until I would start to fear Allah, but they encouraged the practice because it is the practice that inculcates fear. Subsequent actions are then gaining an ethical dimension in light of this fear. Obedience to god becomes a precondition for ethical deliberation. This is one of the main points that Laidlaw (2014*a*) cannot accept because in his conception the mind loses, rather than gains, the capacity for reflection when one submits oneself to a god.

Ethical judgement is opposed to instrumental action: the practice is virtuous in itself rather than a means to an end. For this reason, anthropologists drawing on virtue ethics distinguish the Aristotelian use of *habitus* from the way in which Bourdieu uses it (Laidlaw 2014*a*: 63; Lambek 2010*a*: 16, 2000; Mahmood 2001: 838, 2005: 27). According to Bourdieu (1977), any practice

from within a particular *habitus* is ultimately geared towards the accumulation of various forms of capital. Lambek therefore criticises Bourdieu for limiting the meaning of *habitus* to an instrumental disposition while paying scarcely any attention to the ethical aspect of practice (2000: 316). Lambek uses the concept *phronesis* (2000; 2010a) to conceptually analyse the fundamental difference between the instrumental and the ethical, and to distinguish himself from a Bourdieusian perspective while maintaining a stress on practice. Whereas usually translated as ‘practical reason’ Lambek prefers to translate *phronesis* as practical judgment, and one motivation for doing so is to distinguish it from the praxis of Bourdieu. ‘What Bourdieu emphasises about practice is habit and strategy, whereas for Aristotle *phronesis* is both *intellectual*, in that it entails reasoning, as well as *virtuous*, in that its end is human flourishing. *Phronesis* is not calculative, instrumental reason. The exercise of judgment implies the exercise of *good* judgment (and not merely cleverness)’ (Lambek 2000: 316, emphasis in original).

This discussion brings me to the additional element necessary to cultivate the *habitus* of faith: *jñān* (wisdom). If *imān* is the cultivated, virtuous habit of faith, then *jñān* can be understood as *phronesis*, the Aristotelian ongoing practical judgement.<sup>73</sup> Judgement is conditional upon faith; *jñān* is embedded in *imān*. Ultimately the relationship between *jñān* and *imān* is hermeneutical, because it is upon reflection that the disposition of faith is cultivated. Yet faith has to come first.<sup>74</sup> I make the conceptual comparison between *jñān* and *phronesis* in order to emphasise that *jñān*, although usually translated to wisdom, is not an objectively existing body of knowledge but a socially engendered judgment that can only be a good judgement when made on the basis of faith. It is in *jñān* that we have to locate ethical autonomy.

### The generation of autonomy

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<sup>73</sup> Lambek does translate *phronesis* occasionally to ‘wisdom’, which is also the most common translation of *jñān*. He says that for Aristotle ‘[p]hronesis is central because it describes what practical judgment is, though here a closer translation is “wisdom” (Lambek 2010a: 20; 21).

<sup>74</sup> This is a reiteration of my argument outlined in the introduction regarding the hermeneutical relationship between the macro-cosmic order and individual virtue. First one needs to have faith in the truth claims that establish the macro-cosmic order, before one can exercise judgment and cultivate virtue.

In order to address the theoretical implications of the observation that the *jñān/phronesis* is socially engendered, I describe the perplexity of a group of women over my question whether a baby would have the freedom to be something else than a Muslim in case he happens to grow up not believing, like me. The vignette will further demonstrate that in the dynamic virtue ethics of Joygrami Muslims, there is a symbiotic relationship between the mind/body and the *habitus* of faith and that ideally, the mind/body will be cultivated in the *habitus* of faith to such an extent that virtue becomes its own motivation; even though that is an unattainable ideal.

I am sitting on the veranda with five related women of three different generations, the grandmother cradling a recently born boy. They are elated over the idea that I would become a Muslim (I have been taking Arabic classes now for some time with the youngest of the women present, which has made them think that I am in the process of conversion). I comment that even though I may be ‘doing’ Islam, I do not believe, I don’t have the *imān* (faith). The women look a little puzzled, but soon they say with a self-confident smile that *imān* will come through the reading of Arabic and the praying of *nāmāj*. I fend off further talk about me by pointing to the little boy. ‘How about him, is he already a Muslim?’ Most of the women react befuddled, some nod yes, some no, but the grandmother laughs at my ignorance and says, ‘no, of course not, he doesn’t have any *jñān* yet!’ ‘But will he necessarily be a Muslim?’ I ask. ‘Of course, because he will learn Islam when he grows up’, another woman answers. ‘But does he have the freedom to choose something else?’ After an awkward silence of perplexity, one of the women answers: ‘He won’t want to because he will see that Islam is the best’. ‘But what if he grows up not believing, what if he won’t have *imān*, like me?’ The puzzled faces of the women have by now turned into grimaces of incomprehension. They reassure me again that my *imān* will come with practice, and leave it at that.

This conversation is illuminating in various ways. As I have described in chapter 2, for my interlocutors the body and the mind is a holistic entity that is, as a whole, mutable. This entity is taking shape through the process of *mānuṣ karā*, humanisation. As for the baby boy, his mind/body will be shaped in such a

way, through the generative process of becoming human and the inculcation of *jñān*, that he will not only automatically *be* a Muslim, he will also only *want to be* a Muslim. As the grandmother points out, the boy is not really a Muslim yet because he does not have *jñān* yet – that means there has to be a measure of reflection, and the women expect this reflection to be of a certain nature, viz. to want to be a Muslim.

In the conception of my interlocutors, the mind is not an independent unit with which one can reflect on the existence of a god; instead, god shapes the mind/body, and the mind/body is shaped in subsequent interactions. The conception of the holistic humanisation of the child (during which the potentiality of *imān* and *jñān* are imbibed) precludes the possibility of reflection on one's 'being a Muslim'. The 'learning of Islam' that one of the women referred to, includes the physical mutation of the body during circumcision for men, the incorporation in the *jāti* through food transactions, as well as learning Arabic in the mosque and the everyday interactions in the village, some of which I have explained in more detail in chapter 2. This is how one becomes Muslim. Ideally, the desire to become a Muslim, the visceral disposition and ethical Muslimness collapse into one.

Whereas in my questions to the women with the baby boy I located freedom *outside* Muslimness (asking whether the boy would be free to choose to become a Muslim or not), ethical autonomy is located *within* Muslimness. Being engendered in a *jāti*, acquiring human personhood, and a particular shape of the mind/body becomes the condition for the ethical subjectivation and the *habitus* of faith. We have to take this a step further from the premise that only a particular shape of mind can be ethical, because the shape of the mind is not static, but mutable. Hence it can be consciously cultivated; this is where we can locate *jñān*.

*Jñān* is the faculty that allows for reflection, in order for humans to be free to choose between the right and the wrong paths. Even if, or perhaps because, the choices are limited, this is what makes us human. Muslimness is a non-individualistic concept; it does not exist before sociality, since it is generated from relatedness. If autonomy is located within Muslimness it follows that

relatedness is the condition for freedom. This is radically different from a conception of freedom as located within the individual *before* sociality.

On the basis of the argument that ethical autonomy is embedded in relatedness and is located within *dharma*, we can by implication draw a corollary conclusion. I have suggested that the *jāti* and the disposition to live according to *dharma* is the *sine qua non* for humanity/personhood. The reflective freedom that *dharma* offers, sets the limit of humanity, despite the fact that it comes after the construction of personhood within the *jāti*. So one's claim to being a human person is also constantly contestable on the grounds of one's ethical action, because there is no humanity without ethics.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, ethics located in a sovereign, individual consciousness is a human impossibility because ethics and humanity are both socially generated.

### **The soft mind/heart of women**

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I want to briefly elaborate on the implications for gendered action following from the idea of ethics-in-relatedness. It is no coincidence that the vignette above involves only women. Rural Muslim women usually live within a rather small and contained web of relatedness, and their exchanges are confined to the *pārā*. Indeed, because of the danger contained in morally precarious exchanges, women are actively confined to certain spaces. Their minds/bodies are ideally maintained according to the ideal of *jāti/dharma*. Moreover, or perhaps for this ideological reason, women's minds/hearts are considered to be more conducive to mutate. As argued in the previous chapter, women's generative Muslimness is more fragile than men's. When I asked Ishaque, himself spending most of his time at the nearby town, why women should not be allowed to go to the town freely, he answered that it would be dangerous because the town is full of bad things and the 'girls' mind/heart is very soft' (*meyeder man khub 'soft' āche*). He was, thus, not so much preoccupied that the women would be harmed by the 'bad things', as that they would be influenced and changed by what they would encounter at the town. There is freedom within the mutability of the mind, but men try to limit this freedom of women to a particular space by limiting the

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<sup>75</sup> The obvious question that arises here is whether my interlocutors consider non-Muslims capable of ethical action. I will address this question in Chapter 5.

exchanges they might be involved in. And because women's space of exchange is more limited, it follows that women may therefore have a more static sense of the self and of the way *dharma* is embodied, as is exemplified in the vignette above. Men, in contrast, are continuously in interaction with other *jātis* and have to enter in all kinds of exchanges that may be precarious, and their conception of *dharma* may be more dynamic. I suggest that the cultivation of the self among Muslim men is particularly informed by a modern reformist idea of self-cultivation (see chapter 6) whereas the pressure for the stabilisation of Muslimness (in the face of a 'soft mind/body') is in fact higher, more holistic and more constant among women. This will still take place from within a *jāti* and the visceral *dharma*.

### ***Khuśi* and the 'art of life'**

In this section, I elaborate on the role of exchanges in the Joygrami model of virtue ethics. I argue that ethical exchanges are the enactment of virtue and as such an end in themselves. Lambek argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics 'is not a means to an end but constitutes a happy life' (2010a: 20). This observation has important implications for the value of freedom. Ethical autonomy is crucial for the exercise of *jñān*, and indeed, 'any exercise of judgment presupposes some measure of freedom' (ibid.), but absolute freedom has to be forsaken in the act of submission of sovereignty to Allah for ethics to be generated. So freedom is not a valued goal in itself. As Lambek argued: 'Whereas an ethics of the extraordinary might posit freedom as its end or even its condition, an ethics of ordinary practice does better to stick with happiness' (ibid.). In this vein, I will suggest that in my interlocutors' ethno-theology happiness (*khuśi*) is the *telos* of *jñān*.

The 'art of life' is living ethically for the sake of it, which implies the transcendence of instrumentality (Lambek 2010a: 23). *Phronesis/jñān* is practical judgement that transcends instrumentality because it is located in faith, which implies that it needs to have a motivation that is congruent with the foundational ideas on which faith is based. Individual acts are virtuous insofar as they are in accordance with or contribute to the realisation of the macro-cosmic ideal that amounts to harmony and justice. This is not the same as stating that acts are virtuous when they are according to a law-like morality.

One has to make a deliberate judgement as to what action is most just and harmonious, because one will find that the rules are ‘impossible’ to abide by rigidly, inevitably encountering a conflict of values.

Indeed, the ‘art of life’ entails balanced judgment, which includes finding a fine balance between incommensurable values, between ‘being pious, nurturing, industrious, etc.’ (Lambek 2010a: 23). This is clear in the case of Arifuddin described in the opening vignette: he wants to live a pious life, but he also wants to be able to build a house for his future wife, so he chooses to work in Delhi rather than study at the Deoband madrasa. Specific virtues can be inculcated during one’s ‘becoming a Muslim’, but the ‘meta-virtue’ is ‘simply finding the right balance, both in the circumstances and in life overall’ (ibid.). Judgement (*phronesis/jñān*) is about finding this balance.

I have previously mentioned that norms (*niyam*) denote the moral rules that prescribe how one shall act, but the fact that people (like Ishaque) say that they can use their *jñān* and act according to their own *niyam* (norms) means that there is some freedom of interpretation; this is the situational judgment that *phronesis* entails. Abstract rules in themselves are not necessarily virtuous – the *niyam* (norms) have to be generated out of faith in a framework of *dharma* so that the end of living according to them will be the just and harmonious society; and it depends on *phronesis*/judgment that the actual practice of these rules in a particular situation is well-balanced and therefore virtuous. *Dharma* is enacted contextually, depending on the position of the person and the particular situation one finds oneself in. Ideally, good judgement in any particular situation *will* come instinctively: ‘For Aristotle, living ethically...entails organizing desires in order to develop character so that one is disposed to act virtuously’ (Lambek 2010a: 20).

In the previous chapter I have discussed the centrality of exchanges to the (re-)production of ethical relatedness. I have addressed the abstract rules or obligations guiding the exchanges. In this section I expand on the ethical dimension of exchanges, and suggest that exchanges are virtuous insofar as they are balanced, and are displayed as ends in themselves. The description of such exchanges in the vernacular is *khuśi*, which is generally translated as ‘happy’ but which I wish to translate as ‘virtuous’, since the virtuous and the



happy ideally converge. I will further elaborate on the claim that *dharma* is not foremost a moral code, or about compliance with a moral code, but about the ethical transcendence of instrumentality.

### **The virtue of exchange**

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As I mentioned in chapter 2, Islamic festivals are, in anticipation, invariably described as *khuśi*, which is usually translated as ‘happy’ or ‘happiness’. A common way to refer to the festivals would even be to call it a ‘*khuśi din*’, a happy day. As Ring observes among Muslims of various denominations in Karachi, ‘doing *khuśi* was a familiar diagnostic of, and prescription for, social intimacy...a central pragmatic and symbolic mode of forging, marking, and performing social relationships’ (2006: 75). Similarly, often when I asked after the ‘why’ of a certain practice of exchange, if the answer would not be a ‘this is just what we do’ kind of response, it would be, in one word, ‘*khuśi*’.

The full meaning of calling these acts *khuśi* becomes clearer when I recall that when I would question people on the ‘what’ rather than ‘why’ of the practice (as in, what are you doing? What will you do on that occasion?), the answer would similarly be ‘*khuśi*’. *Khuśi*, then, is an act, the practice itself; one is practicing virtue when practicing exchange. Happiness connotes activity, as Nussbaum observed (Lambek 2000: 314), so means (ethical practice) and ends (the good life) coincide. As I quoted Dada saying in the previous chapter, if there was real *imān* (faith) and people would act accordingly, everyone would have ‘a good life’; acts on the basis of *imān* and *jñān* create harmony for everyone.

A wedding is another kind of event that is invariably referred to as *khuśi*. I never felt quite comfortable attending weddings for the lack of ‘happy commonality’ as I would describe it. I could not attune to the atmosphere during the meal and I felt uncomfortable accepting lavish food from poor families, which I wasn’t quite sure how to reciprocate. Whether there would be chicken, mutton or beef would be commented on from at least a day before the meal, and people would discuss the richness of the several dishes for hours afterwards. However, during the meal itself, there was a detached, indifferent attitude to the food, as if it was any other regular meal.

After the food is consumed, the attending neighbours make a payment: this is public and written down, usually by a young relative who lives in the hamlet and is well schooled.<sup>76</sup> At each wedding, I tried to make this payment, but I was never allowed to: noting down the payments is not just to know how much everyone gave, but mainly to know how much to pay at their wedding in turn, which would usually be the same amount, unless there is a clear hierarchical relation of patronage. I was not part of this 'system', they explained, so my payment would be useless. I have tried to persuade them, telling them I would be happy just to give them money, knowing that this wedding has been a heavy burden on them, and maybe they could just note it somewhere on the side. However, this seemed senseless to them – as if money does not have any value outside this closed system of reciprocity. And indeed, it does not. Although it seemed terribly instrumental to me at first, it is in fact the opposite. Accepting my money would have had an instrumentality to it, but them giving money is, as they say, only because it is '*khuśi*'.

Another example is the Islamic notion of almsgiving, *zakat*, which is one of the five pillars of Islam. I have addressed the notion of *zakat* in the previous chapter, in relation to the principle of solidarity. Here I reconsider the actual practice of *zakat* in light of the concept *khuśi*.

The idea of *zakat* has been variably interpreted in the literature. Some consider it a voluntary act of piety, whereas others consider it an obligation that is ideally centrally organised (much like tax) (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 17; cf. Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003). I suggest it is probably best understood as an ethical act that combines the elements of 'voluntary piety' and 'obligation' within itself: the criterion of equal relationships of solidarity within the boundaries of the *jāti* constituted and renewed. My interlocutors are unequivocally proud of this criterion and say that they feel happy, *khuśi*, to give *zakat*. They are happy to be able to take part in the maintenance and renewal of

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<sup>76</sup> There are several elements to a Muslim Bengali wedding, including several meals. I am here referring to the meal that the family of groom or bride offers to the neighbours of the *pārā*, or, in case they are wealthy, to the entire village. Invitations will have been sent round beforehand; of the invited households usually only one or a few members will attend, to not burden the hosts too much financially.

the criterion, even though it is also considered as an obligation in the face of the indebtedness to Allah. However, this is not considered to be a contradiction. The end of the virtuous practice is 'happiness'. Not happiness in the sense of an elated state of being, but of a state of harmony and order as it is ideally imagined. I observed very little obvious emotional expression of 'happiness' (or something I, from my perspective, would interpret as happy), following from an exchange of gifts whether during weddings or on religious festivals. I suggest that *khuśi* is not an emotional state that results from the virtuous act; rather, happiness and the gift are integral to each other, just like the reproduction of harmony and order is in the exchange and not a separable result of it.

In other words, the act of giving is what is called *khuśi*, rather than *khuśi* being the result of the gift. The gift here is clearly a 'total social fact', and Lambek has drawn attention to the inherent ethical aspect of this (2010a: 18). The illocutionary force of calling the exchange *khuśi*, happiness, attributes it with an ethical dimension, and makes the exchange an end in itself. 'For Mauss...the concept of the gift was also meant to reveal the underlying moral dimensions of social life' (Keane 2010: 79), and calling the gift *khuśi* draws attention to this moral dimension.

It may seem that the end is, if not to redistribute wealth, then at least to forge relationships with solidarity. However, those are derivatives of the intrinsic ethical nature of the act. There will naturally be solidarity through which wealth is redistributed if acts are virtuous. 'One should live in solidarity' is a value that is enacted in the gift (see Keane 2015: 21). Classical anthropological analyses of the gift demonstrate that 'the *source* of well-being and productiveness *is* reciprocal exchange' (Parry 1986: 465, emphasis in original).

Even the rules explicitly phrased in the Quran or the Hadith, some of which I have addressed in the previous chapter, require balanced judgement. The rules of distribution of the meat of Qurbani are not strict obligations, but recommendations, so it requires *jñān/phronesis* to choose to do the right thing. There is a strict prohibition, however, on selling the animal's skin and bringing

the money into personal use. The leather may be brought into personal use, but it is better to give it to a madrasa, or to sell it and give the money to a madrasa. So a purely instrumental act is prohibited, yet a clear obligation is averted as well. I have therefore emphasised the aspect of '*khuṣī*': the exchange is neither an obligation devoid of agency, nor a purely instrumental act. This explains why my interlocutors often say that a certain practice is 'Allah's command' (*Āllāh'r hukum*), and that they choose to follow this command so that 'Allah will be happy' (*Āllāh khuṣī thāk'be*). Essentially, they do not follow the command because it is an inevitable and strict obligation but because they have made the judgment that if they follow the command it would make Allah *khuṣī*, and if Allah is *khuṣī* the act is virtuous and by implication maintains harmony. If all rules would be followed in a well-balanced manner there would be the ideal situation of harmony and order in a just society and that is the end in itself.<sup>77</sup> It is in this sense that I feel that *jñān* is analytically comparable to *phronesis* – the practical judgment that finds the right balance, and that allows one to realise the happiness that is found in living virtuously as an end in itself. It is no coincidence that when I would ask my interlocutors what Islam is, many would not at first give me a list of rules or obligations, but simply say Islam is '*khuṣī*', happiness. Islam is the virtue and the list of rules is secondary.

### **The impossibility of absolute freedom**

In this final section, I discuss the rejection of absolute freedom. Absolute freedom is what Laidlaw, following Flathman (2003) calls the 'soaring' conceptions of freedom: freedom as absence of constraint (Laidlaw 2014a: 96, 102, 108-9, 149). It is the freedom as 'liberation': the absolute freedom of man in nature that has its roots in Christian theology and became prominent in liberal philosophies (Asad 2003; Keane 2007; Taylor 2007). Anthropologists have therefore rejected this kind of freedom as an ideological illusion, but may have overlooked the fact that the ideology of freedom may feature as a reality in our interlocutors' ethical imaginaries. I found 'soaring' conceptions of freedom to feature prominently in my fieldsite, even if it features as an ideal to be rejected. I have found it as such an interesting indicator of macro-cosmic ideals and of how the 'good life' is imagined.

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<sup>77</sup> See for a congruent argument regarding the *fatwa*: Agrama (2010).

My interlocutors reject unconstrained freedom, but they feel that this is the kind of freedom that people in the ‘West’ ‘have’ and they fear that this is the direction their society is going, unsettling the moral order. Many feel overwhelmed by contemporary transformations and ethical dilemmas, but one thing is sure: ‘we don’t want your freedom’, (*tomār swādhīnatā, ām’rā cāi nā*) as Basir told me with a disconcerted gaze. This was Basir’s final answer to a conversation I had with him and his friends about the influence of the West on village life.<sup>78</sup> The young men feel that the social organisation in the villages is good now, but they can foresee how in a year it will already have changed more in the image of the West, because, they say, the West is more advanced and shows the direction their own society is going in. Now village people still take care of their elders, like they should, and do not leave them to their own devices, like in the West. Yet it is changing, and partly because women have become more liberated. According to the men, it is best when women stay home, cook and do the chores, but now they want to go outside as well, like Western women. In response to my increasingly aggressive pushing, Basir contends that women are more or less equal to men, both have equal value as a human, and in principle both can take up jobs, but, he mumbles flustered, ‘there has to remain a difference’ (*kichu ‘difference’ thāk’te habe*). I ask him whether women should not have the same freedom as men have. Now visibly agitated, Basir exclaims, ‘we don’t want your freedom!’ (*tomār swādhīnatā, ām’rā cāi nā*).

The most repulsive, potentially destructive, but equally fascinating, kind of freedom is the idea of *free sex*, as the following vignettes will demonstrate. ‘*Free sex*’ is metonymic for absolute freedom. It is also the most fundamental threat to the transcendental social, as it destabilises the (reproduction of) essentialised roles and groups.

Samsuddin, the young Deobandi imam, at times says that he wants to go to my country, or to London; he figures he could be an imam there as I told him there is a large number of Bengali speaking Muslims in London. At one point, I tell him he may actually find it really hard, because he would not know anyone

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<sup>78</sup> The rest of the conversation appears as the opening vignette of chapter 4.

and he would have to take care of himself. He immediately gets upset, saying 'it's such a bad system' (*system-tā khub khārāp*). Everybody living separately and, particularly, not 'feeding' each other (*khāoyā-dāoyā debe nā*), is most objectionable in his eyes. Curling his lips, he says he would rather stay here; 'here it's comfortable, here I will be taken care of and I will be fed' (*ekhāne ārām, ekhāne khāoyā-dāoyā debe*). Especially the idea of *free sex* disgusts him, it's a result of all living apart and now everyone is just having sex with anyone. *Free sex* has a lot of bad consequences ('*free sex*' *theke anek kichu khārāp habe*); he has read in an Urdu book that in the 'West' ('your place over there', *tomāder okhāne*) all married people have sexual relationships on the side. No, then he would rather stay here, maybe poor and in a small room shared with his brothers, but at least rice is shared and sex is not free.

Whereas it may be considered 'typical' of Deoband-trained imams to have this opinion, it was expressed as well by other people in the village who are on the far other end of the 'piety-spectrum'. Take for example the following conversations with two relatively liberal, well-educated students.

Shamim and I are sitting on the cot in his bedroom. He has taken me to this more or less secluded space because he wants to interrogate me about the *free sex* in my country. He himself is clearly curious to meet girls: he is a bright 20 year old boy studying physical education at a renowned university in Barampur, where he lives in a student hostel. He dresses fashionably, occasionally drinks beer and only wears a skullcap on Eid and Qurbani. Shamim frankly admits he has the desire to 'do' what he calls *free sex* (*khub icchā āche*) and has secretly met up with a few girls, but never 'used' them (*kakhano 'used' kari nī*), that is, never kissed or had sexual interaction with them. Where I come from, he believes, there is the freedom to have sexual relations with girls, but here there would be punishment. 'We have all these rules (*rīti-nīti*), you know, every community has its own rules, and we Muslims have *sunnā* [words and deeds of Prophet Mohammad]'. I ask him whether he would like it better without all the rules. 'Not really', he answers: 'unlimited freedom leads to problems (*abādh swādhīnatā muś'kil habe*). Everyone would just do whatever he likes. But you need discipline (*śrīnkhal*). For justice (*nyāy*) in society you need rules and

regulations'. Moreover, he could run off with a girl but he really does not see the point of that. Firstly, if he would not marry, he would not truly belong to society (*biye nā kar'le, ki kare 'society belonging' habe?*<sup>79</sup>), and secondly, he wants to take care of his parents when they grow older. *Free sex* may sound enticing, but he would not do it even if he had a chance to.

Rehan, who towards the end of my fieldwork started studying at the same university as his friend Shamim, similarly expressed a desire for sexual relations. Rehan thinks that the restrictions on sexual relations may be a reason for the staggering numbers of rape and sexual harassment, because, he says, young men like him have an enormous desire yet are not allowed to have sex. He says that in my country there are probably less rapes because we 'have *free sex*'. Here, however, that wouldn't be possible, because there are millions of people and everyone would be fornicating everywhere (pointing to the corners around us, there, there, and there...). It would be complete chaos. So he is willing to control his desire and sacrifice '*free sex*' for a harmonious society.

Neither Samsuddin, nor Shamim and Rehan represent the majority of my interlocutors; they do not because no segment of the Joygrami Muslims constitutes a 'majority'. The Joygrami Muslims are a heterogeneous group of people. Shamim and Rehan are probably at the least pious and most educated end of the spectrum, and they tend to objectify their own society and culture more than most of my other Joygrami friends. Yet they stand in a continuum with people like Samsuddin because they equally feel the need for constraints in their society. Shamim explicitly mentions marriage as a means to belonging to the Muslim society, and therefore absolutely essential (he could simply not get his head around my uncertainty on whether I would ever marry at all). Moreover, he could not imagine eloping with a girl because he needs – and wants – to take care of his parents; it is a *khuśi*/virtuous obligation. On another occasion, Rehan jokes that he will marry a rich English woman, divorce her and take all her money, and then do the same with an American woman, and a Dutch

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<sup>79</sup> We had just before discussed issues of belonging, and he had stated that he belongs foremost to the '*Muslim society*'.

woman, etc. I tell him that they are not that stupid and would marry him only with a prenuptial agreement. He is stupefied that there is such a possibility and comments: ‘nothing is sure in your place, your country is very rough’ (*tomāder okhāne konokichu ‘sure’ nei, khub ‘rough country’ tomār*). Despite his banter, a marriage without exchange literally scares him; that kind of freedom is not desirable but ‘rough’. He eventually rescinds his wild dreams and concludes that it is much nicer to stay here, in Joygram, because here it is ‘happy’, *khuśi*.

My interlocutors would likely agree with Geertz when he said that without constraints ‘we would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases’ (1973: 49). ‘Free sex’ features here as an exemplary lack of constraints, the liberty of fornication anywhere, with anyone, at any time, and is considered deeply problematic. The problem here is the denial of the aspect of sex that implies the social reproduction of a community, as it is now a purely physiological act. ‘Free’ could here be replaced by ‘unconstrained by rules of exchange’, that is, unconstrained by *dharma* – and ‘free sex’ is consequently of a bestial rather than a human nature (cf. Keane 2015: 10-12). Although Shamim in particular mentions ‘rules and regulations’ as means for constraint, what is ultimately most important is that people feed each other and that there is a sense of belonging to a particular society; feeding is enacted and belonging is generated through virtuous exchanges.

In the cosmopolitics of Joygrami Muslims the most fundamental constraint of humanity is the cosmogonic exchange with the creator-god: the gift of life in exchange for a promise to acknowledge Allah and take the ‘right path’, which implies to live virtuously. The gift of life therefore infuses god’s creation with the potential for *imān* and *jñān* and as such human persons are generated. To be entirely free, and to be entirely unfree, comes down to the same: there would be no need to choose between one path and the other, and ethics is absent at this point. Because of the absence of ethical constraints, absolute freedom is indeed a human impossibility, not only according to Laidlaw but also according to my interlocutors.



## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered the ethics of Joygrami Muslims. I have suggested that Joygrami ethics is best interpreted as an Aristotelian virtue ethics: ethical life consists in contextual and balanced practical judgement in the pursuit of a virtuous, happy life. I have argued that the key ethical affordances are *imān* and *jñān*, which I have interpreted to denote a *habitus* of faith and practical judgement, respectively. Absolute freedom has to be forsaken for the generation of the potential for ethics; Joygrami Muslims forsake absolute freedom in their submission to Allah.

To conclude this chapter, I anticipate one of the central arguments of the next chapter, regarding the fear for the 'law of the fishes' (Parry 1994), and in fact go beyond it. The 'law of the fishes' denotes the experiential reality of exchanges bereft of their ethical dimension and rendered purely instrumental. It denotes therefore not only, as the next chapter will point out, the fear for an unconstrained competitive market mentality, but also the fear for the unconstrained freedom that negates ethics more in general. For my interlocutors, unconstrained freedom (*abādh swādhīnatā*) features as a dangerous threat because it is a very real threat to humanity. In the previous section, I quoted Rehan pointing out how people would fornicate randomly, like animals if there were unconstrained freedom. As Rehan's father had put it at another moment, 'if everything was free, you couldn't control anything' (*sab 'free' hale, sab jinis 'control' kar'te pār'be nā*). In fact, more than once have I heard people without *dharma* having been referred to as 'animals'. *Dharma* is the element that allows human persons to transcend from the transactional social where the 'law of the fishes' rules.

To relate this back to my earlier argument about the transcendental social: if people were to live in absolute freedom, this would mean that they would have to switch off their imagination and live solely in a transactional social, which would imply the degeneration of humans to animals. However, real humans are inevitably predisposed to imagination; hence they *will* construct a transcendental social and they will engage with various essentialised groups.

The inherent problem of the liberal ideology of the modern state is that the human is conceptualised as –in origin- entirely free thus *not* in relatedness with

other humans; and this idea is the basis of individual citizenship. The basis of the secular separation of state law from ethics is the idea that ethics resides in the sovereign, private conscience of the individual rather than in embodied relatedness, or in an ethical autonomy derived from the sovereignty of the creator-god (Asad 2003: 235-248). In the postcolonial state secularism takes a particularly violent form because it promises justice as liberation from pervasive communal relatedness. Religion in the public sphere is undesirable because it represents 'unfreedom' (Skaria 2014: 30). What follows from the argument in this chapter is that this idea of 'liberation' (from community, from religion) is a violent act against humanity. Unconstrained freedom has to be renounced for the sake of humanity; the potential for virtue can only emerge from the fundamental relatedness of people. That implies that the limit of freedom, including reflective freedom, is the foundational 'contract behind the contract'; freedom is within relatedness, which in the case of my interlocutors means within Muslimness. Freedom comes *a posteriori* in that it comes after one is generated from the foundational contract with Allah.



Fig. 5. The cattle market



Fig. 6. The shrine of Champa Bibi at the cattle market

## 4. 'Politics is *dharma*, isn't it?' Ambiguous vernacularisations

### Introduction

On a rainy Sunday afternoon Basir Khadim invites me to join him to hang out at the small brick building just outside Joygram that serves as the health centre. It is located at the wasteland owned by his 'uncle' (*cācā*) and friend Irfan Khadim. Several friends of Basir have gathered here: young men around thirty years old, involved in small business and making music in their free time. They wear jeans and shirts; one wears a skullcap. All are Muslim except one, and all live in Farukhbazar except Basir. Over the hours we spent here, munching snacks (*tiffin*) and sipping tea while hiding from the pouring monsoon rains, we had intense discussions about the state of politics in India, and the role that Islam could or should play.

It's not going well in India, all agree on that. Politics is thoroughly corrupted; politicians are bad because once people start to accumulate wealth and power they become 'blind' and only want more. They don't actually care about the well-being of the citizens. Muslims are in a particularly bad position because they are used as a vote-bank: promises are always made and always broken. In the end, India is a Hindu-state (*Hindu-rāṣṭra*); the Hindus rule and Muslims don't have the same rights (*adhikār*) as Hindus do. The main reason that Muslims can be easily swayed by politicians is due to the lack of education among Muslims; and the lack of education is due to the bad economic (*ārthik*) situation of Muslims. It is a vicious circle.

Having said this, they consider the main reason for the lamentable state of both society and politics as being the lack of *dharma*. Ordinary people have lost their faith and therefore they don't do good anymore. 'Can Manmohan Singh [then Prime Minister] see everyone? No, only Allah can'. One's heart/mind (*man*) needs to be controlled by fear for Allah. They give the same reason for the corruption of politics: the state does not accept *dharma* (*dharma 'accept' kare nā*) – in West Bengal the communists have ruled for 34 years, and, for instance, the BJP could not stay in the central Government because it is a Hindu party. Since *dharma* is not accepted in and by the government, politics has

deteriorated. Worse still, because neither the government nor ordinary people fear god, everybody is in a risky situation (*bipad obostha*).

In this chapter, I address the narrative of moral decay so prominent in Joygrami society. I discuss the local perception of the politico-economic environment and the concomitant processes of vernacularisation. As elsewhere, while the 'idea of India' (Khilnani 1997) has taken root in people's hearts and minds, celebrations of India's democracy and secularism (among my interlocutors as much as among academics) are increasingly countered with lamentations of injustice drawing on reports of corruption and political criminalisation (see e.g. Béteille 2005; Gupta 1995, 2002, 2005; Michelutti 2008; Parry 2000). Basir and his friends make a seamless transition from couching injustice in secular-liberal terms (Muslims deserve the same rights as Hindus) to considering injustice to be caused by a lack of *dharma*. If secularism and *dharma*-as-religion are considered contrasting and mutually exclusive categories, then these perceptions of injustice may seem incommensurable. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that rather than contrasting categories, they are embedded categories. A revival of *dharma* does therefore not necessarily exclude but indeed could be considered as a premise for the support of secular-liberal state policies.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. Firstly, I introduce the theoretical framework, which draws on Jonathan Parry's and Maurice Bloch's (1982, 1989) theory of short-term and long-term cycles of transaction. This theory allows me to consider political and economic practices not as pertaining to different domains of life but as pertaining to embedded cycles of transaction. Secondly, I show that narratives of inequality emerge out of complaints about corruption.<sup>80</sup> Following Parry (2000) I suggest that the complaints indicate not (only) that

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<sup>80</sup> Complaining about politics at a tea stall after work, and in particular about corruption, is ubiquitous in India. Academic literature, local newspapers and ordinary conversation across the country suggest a 'crisis of corruption' (Guhan 1997: 15; quoted in Parry 2000: 28). Corruption is a slippery and normative concept and I will not discuss in detail the range of definitions. See e.g. Gillespie and Okruhlik (1991); Gupta (1995, 2012); Haller and Shore (2005); Guhan & Paul (1997). I am here mainly concerned with what Parry (following Paul and Shah 1997) has called 'retail' corruption: 'low-level routine corruption of everyday experience' (2000: 29).

there is actual corruption, but (also) that the Joygramis have, to a certain extent, internalised the universalistic, abstract values constitutionalised by the state. State ideology and classification, then, afford particular kinds of ethical evaluation and action. People do laud the good intentions behind welfare programs like MNREGA (state sponsored labour scheme) and governmental child development initiatives like the ICDS.<sup>81</sup> It is not 'democracy', 'secularism' or the Indian government as such that are the object of critique, but the poor execution of the policies borne from these ideological frameworks. It is generally thought that politicians and people 'doing party' are involved with the accumulation of private wealth and criminal activities and very little with bringing development to those who need it. Therefore, I interpret the critique of the villagers not as an indicator of a disjunction of the villagers' values and the state's values, but as an indicator of the failure of state actors and the criminalised network of 'mediators' to act according to the values that it has successfully imbibed in its citizens.

Furthermore, the third section demonstrates that the infiltration of corrupt practices and an immoral market in the everyday life of ordinary citizens make the latter complicit in the vicious practices they critique. This complicity instils a sense of moral failure. This sense of moral failure, in turn, inspires a desire for moral regeneration.

Fourthly, I analyse the desire for moral regeneration as a critique of the disintegration of society due to the ideological juxtaposition of various spheres of life (politics, economics, and religion) in a modern state. *Dharma*, when categorized as religion, becomes disembedded from political and economic interactions, both between the state and citizens, and among citizens. Therefore these transactions become stripped of an ethical dimension. The lack of an ethical dimension framing the transactions results in the potential opportunity of the everyday violence of structural inequality.

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<sup>81</sup> See Gupta (2001) for a detailed discussion of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), locally known as *anganwadi*.

## Theoretical orientations: cycles of transaction

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Parry writes: 'What I believe my own data, as well as much else in the ethnographic record, would suggest is that Hindu society has often seen itself as engaged in an endless battle against impending chaos and disintegration' (Parry 1989a: 513). Bringing together various strands of the work of Parry (1986; 1989a; 1989b; 1994; 2000) and Bloch and Parry (1982; 1989) I will construct a theoretical framework to analyse this battle against disintegration, which is just as prominent in Joygrami Muslim society as it is in the 'Hindu society' Parry refers to. This battle can be considered to take place on two fronts.

Firstly, in the previous two chapters I have drawn on Parry's (1989a, 1994) argument that *jāti* is an ideological construction that is to protect the self from disintegration due to the fluid and volatile character of the person. The fluidity of the protean person is dangerous for the long-term social reproduction of the ethical community, and the person is therefore essentialised in a *jāti*.

Secondly, the fear of chaos is not only inspired by the fragile constitution of the protean person, but also by people's incessant struggle for physical survival and material acquisitions; this is the topic of this chapter. Individual competitiveness may result in what Hindus call the 'law of the fishes', which refers to the threatening image of 'a world in which big fishes gobble up little ones without any restraint (Parry 1994: 113).' Both the ideology of the protean person, and the 'law of the fishes' are 'symbolic elaborations of lurking disorder which creates and sustains the world of order and regulation' (ibid: 115). Although not using the idiom of the 'law of the fishes', the threat of radical inequality and exploitation equally features as a threat to the cosmic order among Bengali Muslims.

I will analyse the narrative of moral decay, corruption and disintegration within the theoretical framework of embedded transactional spheres as developed by Bloch and Parry (1982, 1989). Bloch and Parry argue that we can distinguish two symbolic transactional spheres in human society that are in interaction with each other: the symbolic and material transactions related to the long-term reproduction of the social or cosmic order and the short-term transactions related to individual competition and physiological necessity.

These spheres are embedded in what Bloch (2008) has later come to call the transcendental and the transactional social, respectively, and which I discussed in the introduction. The observation that the two spheres of transactions are often antithetical creates, according to Bloch and Parry, 'some absolutely fundamental human problems' (1989: 28). The problem is that the individual cannot entirely transcend 'the natural world of biological process or the social world of exchange. To refuse the first would be to jeopardise the physical continuity of the group, while to refuse the second would be to deny society itself' (1982: 38-39). So, 'the ideology has to be put to work in that very world which it denies, and it must therefore be compromised' (Bloch and Parry 1982: 39). There is a limit, however, to the level of compromise: 'When the short-term cycle threatens to replace the long-term cycle then the world is rotten' (Bloch and Parry 1989: 28). My employment of the model of two spheres of transactions is foremost as a heuristic device to give expression to the ways in which my interlocutors try to cope with encountering injustice. I suggest that the social critique of my interlocutors implies that there has been too much compromise of the ethical narrative, and that therefore the world is, in their view, rotten.

In the Bengali context, this means that the imagined cosmic order that could ideally be achieved if one lives according to *dharma* can only exist by virtue of the mundane reality it aims to transcend. In the preceding chapters, I have stressed that in the macro-cosmic vision of Islamic *dharma*, ritual and everyday exchanges should be geared towards reproducing equality and solidarity. Exchanges are virtuous insofar as they are balanced and contribute to the long-term reproduction of the cosmic order. However, the ideology of equality and solidarity through virtuous exchanges has legitimacy exactly because of the equal salience of the perception that people are disposed to individual competitive accumulation. The idea is that people cannot control themselves, but need *dharma* to control their desires, including the desire to accumulate power and wealth (at other people's expense). Not unlike Parry's Hindu interlocutors, my interlocutors expect others to be on a 'single-minded quest for material self-gain' (Parry 1994: 113). Money in particular is thought to make



people 'blind' (*andha*) and create greed (*lobh*) and (violent) envy (*himsā*). Yet as Parry points out with regard to the Hindu cosmology, there can only be an 'anti-market' mentality if there is a conception of a market-mentality to begin with (1994: 49, 113).

Elsewhere, Parry has argued that Salvationist religions allow for 'the ideological elaboration of a domain in which self-interest rules supreme' (Parry 1986: 469), as opposed to a domain of asceticism and unmotivated giving. This would imply that in certain situations, the sphere of short-term transactions is entirely dis-embedded from the sphere of long-term transactions. I have suggested that the cosmopolitics of my interlocutors cannot easily be categorized as a Salvationist religion if analysed according to Parry's theory. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that my Muslim interlocutors do recognize a relatively autonomous sphere of political and economic transactions, but that, as in Hindu cosmopolitics, ultimately economic values (*artha*) are supposed to be encompassed by and subordinated to *dharma* (Parry 1989b: 83). Currently, however, the pervasive idea is that 'the politico-economic domain of *artha* is increasingly adrift from its moral moorings in the religious realm of *dharma*' (Parry 2000: 30).

The relative autonomy of the economic sphere means that the market is a relatively autonomous moral order. In my interlocutors' perceptions - just as Fuller (1989) and Parry (1989b) both argue for South Asia in general - monetary exchanges and the market do not have a negative moral connotation per se; rather the case is that particular forms of exchange (whether monetary or in kind) are morally perilous or immoral. There is, for example, a conception of an ideological difference between being radically equal in the face of Allah, and the acceptable complementary hierarchy in the spheres of labour and the market. Yet still certain ethical principles of justice and order (*dharma*) do set the ethical boundaries to the autonomy of the moral order of the market and policy.<sup>82</sup> It follows that there is no stark Polanyian contrast between either an

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<sup>82</sup> In my perspective, informed by feminist and postcolonial critiques (see e.g. Bear et al 2015; McKinnon & Cannell 2013) the market is never a morally neutral space. Instead, the market is a moral order generated from particular forms of relationality; in other words, it is not confined to the transactional social but is embedded in a particular transcendental social. When the values of the moral order of the market discord with the values of the transcendental social of a particular group of people, it will be conceived of as immoral (as in my interlocutors'

entire lack of boundaries between political, religious, and economic realms versus an ideological model of a liberated market economy, a secular political domain and a private religious realm. Rather than considering these domains as juxtaposed, I suggest that in my interlocutors' worldview they are relatively autonomous yet embedded in the sense that *dharma* is the underlying moral dimension of social life in all its aspects, which may include a free market economy and secular politics. The narratives of corruption I will analyse in this chapter imply that secular-liberal state ideologies are not rejected in and of themselves, but rather that the corruption of political ideals in practice is rejected (see Parry 2000; Gupta 2012). My interlocutors do not conceive of their society as an 'archaic society' (Mauss 1966) antithetical to liberal capitalist modernity. Rather, I suggest that the implication is that *dharma* cannot be limited to the category religion but connotes justice in a much broader sense. In the cosmopolitics of my interlocutors, every human person has equal dignity; the inequality brought about by various forms of structural violence (including discrimination and exploitation) denies them their dignity. Inequality is therefore the hallmark of injustice.

### **Narratives of inequality**

'...in India, narratives of corruption become a pivotal mode for enabling rural citizens and bureaucrats to imagine the state as a translocal and multi-level organization. Analysing stories of corruption gives us insights into how ordinary people construe and construct what state actions are considered legitimate, and how ideas of the rights of citizens and subjects are constituted...Put simply, corruption and the narratives that surround it are central to the understanding that ordinary citizens have of the state' (Gupta 2005: 6-7).

In this section, I demonstrate how narratives of corruption revolve around a critique of political and bureaucratic practices that foster inequality and express an unsatisfied demand for substantive citizenship. I will then analyse

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perception). It is important to recognize that this critique of the immorality of the market in fact implies that the market cannot be a-moral, as a Polanyian model would suggest. There is a slippage in the work of Bloch and Parry (1989) as they at times do seem to suggest that the market is confined to the transactional social. This is a normative rather than an empirical observation.

the narratives of corruption in the vein of Parry's (2000) analysis of corruption rhetoric. Parry argues that the pervasive anti-corruption discourse is testimony not only to the widening experience of corruption, which is 'an almost inevitable corollary to the extended reach of the state', but also to 'an internalization of its norms and values' (2000: 52; see also Gupta 1995, 2005). I follow Parry in this observation, although I add that it is better to speak of a vernacularisation of values, because there must be a resonance between the 'universalistic notions of justice and equity' (Parry 2000: 46) already present (and constantly evolving) in particular localities and those propagated by the nation-state (see also Fuller & Harriss 2001). Following from this observation, I will suggest that the significant implication is that the secular liberal ideology and the Islamic *dharma* are not in principle considered incongruent, but they are in practice because of the degeneration of political practice to the short-term transactional sphere.

### **Bribes, that's what the police take**

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Corruption is understood from a very young age. Akash and Bikash, the sons of Chompa (Wahed's sister) and Hafiz, must be around six and eight years old. We are drawing in my notebook, when some scribbles I made earlier that day caught Akash's attention. Some of the boys in the bicycle repair shop (a favourite local hang-out) helped me with the different Bengali spellings of three very similar sounding words, one of which is *ghuṣ*, which means bribe. Akash points to the different words and says them out loud, and I ask for each word what it means. When we get to *ghuṣ*, and I ask him after the meaning, he answers outright: 'that's what the police eat/take' (*yeṭā puliśerā khāy*).<sup>83</sup>

The general feeling is that the police are the 'puppets' of the politicians, or that they work only for money. As Farok put it, 'the police are for sale' (*'police' becā hacche*). Politicians themselves are not regarded any better. Dada explains and enacts politics to me as follows, while he is just rubbing his hair and beard with mustard oil: 'Politics is dirty (*Rāj'nīti māne nañrā nīti*). It's only the greedy

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<sup>83</sup> In a study on corruption in West Bengal, Ruud (2000: 283) points to the specifically negative connotation of the idioms *ghuṣ* (bribe) and *ṭākā khāoyā* (literally to 'eat' money; to take money). It connotes the power gap between the bureaucrat and the poor peasant, where the peasant has little choice but to pay the sum demanded by the bureaucrat.

(*lobhī*) who do politics. Dirty politics (*nañṛā nīti*) means, those who have oil, will get some more oil, because they don't need very much. Those who don't have it, they won't give it to, because they need too much. Politicians do like this with the poor [waving his hand as if to brush away a crowd of people], while for the rich they do this [he gets up and pulls a chair close to his stool]. And that while Allah gave us, as the only ones, *buddhi* (intelligence) so that we could be aware of those who have less than ourselves'.<sup>84</sup>

What emerges from Dada's account of politics is that corruption is fundamentally a problem of inequality. Structural inequality is reproduced by politicians and pervasive throughout all civic services. For instance, the inequality inherent in the operation of the medical system was made painfully clear by the reflections on the illness of Rahaman Saheb, who had been my generous host until he was defeated by diabetes in April 2013. He had not been able to obtain the right treatment despite the effort of fellow *maulānās* to raise money to have him treated in a hospital in Chennai. During the last hours of Rahaman Saheb's life, I ask his eldest son Nasiruddin why Rahaman Saheb had not been able to access government support available for his medical treatment. Nasiruddin replies with characteristic sarcasm: 'Do we have air conditioning? Do we have a car? Don't you know that those things are only for the people who have an air-conditioned car? Those are the people who need it, after all. We live in mud huts, we just eat rice, we are not important. The big/rich people (*baro lok*), in their air-conditioned cars, they need the medical treatment!'

In the above conversations, as in numerous others, my friends agitate against the structural exclusion from substantive citizenship. The rural masses encounter the state only through 'fixers' and 'brokers', local strongmen, and through the depoliticized channels of development (Hansen 1999: 51). Central to the gargantuan development state that modern India has become, is the panchayat (Ben. *pañcāyat*) system of local governance.<sup>85</sup> The idea of the

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<sup>84</sup> See for very similar rhetoric regarding politics in West Bengal: Ruud (2001).

<sup>85</sup> The panchayat is the lowest level tier of democratically elected government officials, and in itself consists of three tiers: the gram panchayat (*grām pañcāyat*) the panchayat samiti (*pañcāyat samiti*) and the zilla parishad (*jelā pariṣad*). The three-tier panchayat system is administered under the Panchayat and Rural development Department of the government of West Bengal. The elected panchayat members, in collaboration with their 'twin' of government

panchayat system was 'to organize development along "unpolitical" lines, to utilize the innocent energy of the prepolitical communities in order to prepare them for a later entry...into the national-modern world of politics' (Hansen 1999: 51). In reality, the panchayat operates as a machinery of political patronage (Chatterjee 2009) and continues to contribute to the emergence of 'shadow states' (Harris-White 2003: 77). Just as in rural Uttar Pradesh (Brass 1997) and rural Pakistan (Martin 2009), competing networks of local strongmen colonize the local bureaucratic and political institutions, in the name of the political party in power (Webster 1992: 134). The Left Front government in West Bengal was one of the first state governments to operate the panchayat system. A virtual 'party society' (Bhattacharyya 2009) was installed through a capillary network of 'comrades' and 'cadres' in every nook and corner of the state, to which the panchayat system was instrumental (Banerjee 2010: 3). The 'party', referring to the CPM in this context, has over the years successfully permeated every aspect of life. At every level, and behind every centrally employed bureaucrat or democratically elected official there is a party member who holds the reins (see also Jeffrey & Lerche 2000; Harris-White 2003; Corbridge et al. 2005). Local party affiliates have been successful in keeping a loyal clientele for more than three decades by doling out basic life necessities rather than by struggling to ensure substantive citizenship for all. The lack of actual substantive citizenship and the everyday confrontation with corruption, however, does not imply that the 'prepolitical communities' are not aware of what they are being excluded from. Likewise, it does not mean that they have not incorporated liberal values in their *dharma*. The following sections will illustrate this.

### **The system is fine, but the work isn't good**

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The police feature centrally in narratives of corruption. The police are central to the imagination of the state because they are responsible for the implementation of the state's promise of protection: protection of life, liberty and property in exchange for the citizens' allegiance to the state. However, the

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officials, are responsible for local developmental projects, from a village water pump to large-scale infrastructural projects.

local strongmen with political clout have taken control over the police force, which means that,

‘rule in the countryside is not based on abstractions but control over resources and safety. It is a Hobbesian world in which security and safety are not provided by the state, but are themselves values—that is valued objects—integral to and inseparable from the struggle for power and influence’ (Brass 1997: 92-93).

The promise of the state is broken when it is only people with money who are protected. A promise is an illocutionary ethical act (Lambek 2010*b*; 2013); the instantiation of ethical criteria to a relationship. The breach of the promise is the undoing of the ethical relationship. Due to the state not fulfilling its promise of protection, the relationship with the state is no longer embedded in the long-term sphere of transactions but is entirely instrumentalised. The following vignette exemplifies the rhetoric around the failure of the state to protect its citizens. Nevertheless, it also demonstrates that this failure does not break down the ‘myth of the state’ (Hansen 2001).

For the umpteenth time this evening there is a power failure, or, in local parlance, *load shedding*. I am staying the night at Rahaman Saheb’s house and I take the opportunity to ask Samsuddin to join me to catch a breeze at the pond in front of the house. After a while, one of the adolescent boys from the *pārā* joins us. Abu Kalam must be around 16 years old, he has been raised by his uncle here in Joygram and goes to school in Farukhbazar, after which he hopes to join the military. Abu Kalam mentions the rape of a few days ago. In the forest just outside Joygram, an Adivasi girl had been gang-raped and violently attacked by five boys. Abu Kalam doesn’t think they will ever find or punish the boys; they did a post-mortem but it is just a performance, to make it seem as if they do care about an Adivasi girl. Both the rape and the impunity of the perpetrators visibly upset both of the boys. I ask them to tell me more about what upsets them in their society.

Abu Kalam starts agitating: ‘What I don’t like is that when someone has committed a crime, but they can’t find him or can’t arrest him, and then, for example, I just happened to be at the place of the crime and I didn’t do anything

but then they arrest me. And just imagine I have six children and I am the only one with an income, then they also cannot survive. This I don't like (*e to bhālo lāge nā*). Or that they don't even bother to find the criminal, for instance, when there would be a robbery in Samsuddin's house and they just arrest Ahmed Saheb [the neighbour] because he just happens to live nearby'. Samsuddin adds in characteristic zealotry: 'It's because the *dacoits* give the police money so they will never be arrested, so the poor who can't pay the police will be arrested instead, so that it looks like the police do good work. Moreover, those poor won't have money to pay for a court case, and even if they can, a case would last at least two years and in those years how can the wife and children eat? The police are supposed to ensure that we can live in peace. But now, the *dacoits* live in peace and we don't'. In a murmur I comment, 'what a terrible system...' to which Samsuddin vigorously says: 'The *police system* is fine, but the work isn't good (*'Police system' thik āche, kintu kāj bhālo nā*). They don't give punishment, they just take money'. He sits upright, waving his arms wildly, visibly upset and frustrated.

Significantly, Samsuddin stresses that it is not the *system* that is bad; it is the lack of proper implementation and execution. He carries on to point out that the result is a situation exactly opposite to the ideal: the *dacoits* are in peace, but ordinary citizens are not. It is the poor who are victimized most. Nevertheless, Samsuddin pledges allegiance to the 'system', and as I quote him saying in the opening vignette of the introduction to this thesis, his *dharma* obliges him to follow the law of the nation-state. That is, the system is not incongruent with the ideal social order of the Islamic *dharma*; the state ideology can operate within a larger transcendental social. Yet this system has gone lopsided: the short-term cycle of transactions is no longer rooted in the long-term cycle of transactions, so the abstract value of citizenship is subordinated to the competition over money and power.

### **'This is not a democracy'**

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The 'system' that Samsuddin refers to is expected to operate according to a secular-liberal ideology. In the critique on politics and corruption, Joygramis

employ secular ideological frames and in fact demonstrate an unwavering faith in ideological constructions such as 'democracy'. Take for example Irfan Khadim. He is a shareholder of the cattle market, involved with the party in power (TMC) and a local leader of a human rights NGO. Despite his involvement with politics, he is very critical about politicians: according to Irfan politicians '*misuse*' their power, try to make as much money as possible and immediately put this on their Swiss bank account. 'If all that money on Swiss bank accounts had not been stolen by the politicians but used for the benefit of the poor, no Indian would have to be so poor anymore! But they are all cheaters. Is this a democracy? No, this is not a democracy'.

When Irfan says that this is not a democracy, and therefore the poor remain poor, he implies that a well operating democracy would mean a proper distribution of wealth. Clearly, according to Irfan the ideal of democracy is being subordinated to individual gluttony at the expense of the marginalized. Similarly, as the conversation below will demonstrate, Ahmed has an unwavering faith in the 'idea of India' (Khilnani 1997) but unlike Irfan he only grudgingly wants to admit that not everything is like it should be. He remains loyal to the Congress party, in his eyes the originators of the 'idea of India'. Ahmed's position is exemplary of a more wide spread tendency to attribute blame to the communist party specifically.

On a regular afternoon, 4pm, tea-time, a gentle conversation with Ahmed and his son-in-law Jamirul takes a turn to politics. They reflect on how the CPM has ruined West Bengal, made it from one of the wealthiest states in India to one of the poorest, as they stalled any form of industrial advancement. Apart from the communist politics they oppose, they see the large population growth as an obvious problem for development. Ahmed does not seem entirely opposed to family planning, like in the days of emergency under Indira Gandhi, or in China. In China such things can work because there is only one party, but here the people would no longer allow for such dictatorship. But not that China is any better than India! No, Ahmed steadfastly maintains, 'here public speech has power, there it has no power, there you'd be punished if you speak out freely, here you won't'. Yet nothing is changing, because the people are not



'united'. Jamirul jumps in with scepticism, 'the only power people have is the vote'. So, I ask, what is the benefit of free speech if it doesn't actually have any power?' Ahmed gets annoyed, as he typically does when I challenge his bright picture of India. Yet he concedes, 'the problem is that politics has become very corrupted' (*rāj'nīti khub 'corrupted' haye geche*). Of the 100 rupees meant to go to the poor, only 10 rupees get to them'. Jamirul adds, 'and they're happy with that, because 10 is better than nothing, and they are ignorant, so they'll give their vote. Take the people with the ration card, they're supposed to get free rice every week, but even that they don't get. It's not only the rice dealer who takes it, everyone puts a little bit in his own pocket, and nothing is left for the poorest'.

In this narrative of decay, Ahmed reflects positively on liberal values such as free speech and democratic participation. Ahmed's position exemplifies Parry's (2000) argument that anti-corruption discourse is a sign of the internalization of the abstract, universalistic values of the modern state; and, as Hansen suggests, of the salience of the 'myth of the state' as the guarantor of a minimum of social order and justice (Hansen 2001: 222). Indeed, as Williams observes among Muslim Ansaris in Varanasi, 'their expectations of the state to deliver basic provisions equally within society, despite a widespread recognition of its failure to actually do so, reflects a sustained faith in the idea of the secular state' (2012: 986; see also Fuller & Harriss 2001).

It is important to recognize, however, that this is a dialectic process. On the one hand, in West Bengal the language of socio-cultural and economic reform programs of the LF – anti-casteism, social equality of the poor, literacy and land redistribution – infiltrated the villages as a by-product of the intense politicisation of rural society under communist rule. Moreover, increasing corruption and mal-governance notwithstanding, reforms of the communist government like land redistribution, security of tenancy rights, and political decentralisation have had their impact on the social and cultural structures in rural Bengal (Rogaly, Harris-White & Bose 1999; Ruud 2003). Due to these reforms, 'all poor people irrespective of *jāti* [caste/community] have experienced enhancements in their social position, economic well-being, and

political representation' (Ruud 1999: 274). Thus rural people encountered particular ideas of justice and valued them insofar as they benefitted from them. On the other hand, the CPM party affiliates, often including local government employees such as schoolteachers, mediated between the 'society' of *bhadralok* and the rural communities, without breaking down entirely the various local ideological orientations. That is, the local understanding of justice continued to inform political action, under the rhetoric umbrella of a communist ideology (Ruud 2003: 154). So between the socio-cultural models of the peasant representatives of the CPM and the ideology of the party, there developed 'a complex relationship of mutuality and shared values' (Ruud 1999: 270).

As for Joygram, it is hard to determine whether values of equality, solidarity, and redistribution of resources have their sources in Islam or in the state ideology, or are the result of processes of vernacularisation. Certain services and goods, such as care for the poor, may sometimes be considered ethical with explicit reference to the democratic constitution, and at other times with explicit reference to Islamic scriptures. The significant finding here, however, is that the secular democratic ideology is not considered incongruent with the Islamic *dharma* – there is a potential for mutuality. I suggest that Joygrami Muslims have incorporated the conceptual grammar of the modern state within their own cosmopolitics because there was the potential for resonance in the conceptualisations of justice and order.

### **Banality of evil**

Joygrami Muslims do not encounter corruption or vicious economic practices as phenomena external to them. Politics and the market enter into the everyday life of citizens, and corruption makes every citizen complicit in the reproduction of structural violence. In this section I will discuss the ways in which the infiltration of corruption in the villages, and particularly the scarcity and inescapable necessity of money creates the 'horrendous possibility that the individual will become so embroiled in the short-term cycle that he will ignore the demands of the long cycle' (Bloch and Parry 1989: 27). Individuals, here, are not only politicians or brokers external to Joygram, but include ordinary Joygramis.

In the section above I recount how Ahmed and his son-in-law Jamirul condemn the practice of rice distributors to take a share of the rice rather than distribute everything to the poor according to their entitlements as per the ration-card or BPL card. In this part of Joygram, Munirul Malik is employed by the panchayat to manage the ration-card distribution centre; he is the cousin of Ahmed's other son-in-law. Some months after this conversation, Munirul had been caught obscuring enormous amounts of rice (100 quintal, equivalent to 10,000 kilogram), which he had intended to sell on the market. Basir had intercepted Munirul in the process of bribing the panchayat leaders to keep silent. Sheik Muktar, a hawker from Lovokondo *pārā*, had also once caught Munirul doing 'business' with the then panchayat president Laila Khadim (from Khadim *pārā*). Sheik Muktar was outraged when he told me the story, but when I asked him what he had done with the information, he said he had been given a quintal of rice to keep quiet; an offer he could not refuse in his insecure financial situation.

The problem is, then, that corruption is not limited to politicians and the police but, in the words of Jamirul, has spoiled the entire society ('*samāj naṣṭa haye giyeche*') – indeed, because of corruption's inescapable nature. I shall not recount every instance of violation of norms and laws; it is endless (see also Chatterjee 2009). As Sheik Muktar summarised it: 'Here with us, in West Bengal, I feel there is too much *cheating*. There are very few honest people. Nobody can stay clean. There is too much dirty business' (*beśī dhāndhā āche*). Hence, everyone is complicit and everyone is a victim, although in different degrees and at different levels.

Emma Tarlo (2003) recounts that the large-scale violence inflicted through sterilisation during emergency and its rapid normalisation and routinisation, was made possible because a large number of individuals participated within already existing power dynamics and social relationships. She suggests that emergency was a particular time in which such crimes, and the all-encompassing complicity, could become ordinary. However, I feel that the situation she describes, despite its higher level of physical violence and far-reaching consequences, is not fundamentally different from what I have

observed in ordinary times.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps, indeed, rural West Bengal is in a constant 'state of emergency', in the sense Walter Benjamin proposed (see Agamben 1998).

The 'state of emergency' reached a climax during the 'Saradha scam'. The Saradha Group used to run a Ponzi scheme through a conglomerate of more than 200 private companies that accumulated 300 billion INR through collective investments popularly known as 'chits'.<sup>87</sup> When it collapsed in April 2013 and the money mysteriously 'disappeared', it soon became clear that the majority of duped investors were among the most destitute of rural Bengalis, who had invested their petty savings. However, the middlemen were also duped. There was a middle man or two in almost every village, if not working for Saradha then for Golden Life or one of the other chit funds with equally promising names and that equally collapsed in a domino effect. The brokers, who had incited the villagers to sign up for the scheme and collected their payments (for a generous commission), were the first targets of outrage. Most of the duped villagers I spoke to were aware that they were victim to larger forces but because they had no other target for their anger and because they simply needed their money back for survival, the brokers were held responsible. Tarlo writes: 'For it is in the ordinary phenomenon of the market that black and white merge into many shades of gray and notions of responsibility seems to become forgotten' (Tarlo 2000: 265). Worse still, responsibility is devolved onto kin and neighbour when 'larger forces' are too abstract to directly hold accountable. Many brokers fled their homes. Others, who could afford it, paid the investors back from their own pocket, often bankrupting themselves. Either way, their position in the network of relations had become very suspicious.

The muted violence of corruption and the state's penetration into every sphere of life has thoroughly changed the ways in which ordinary life and social relations are experienced. Because of the penetration of the corrupt market and

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<sup>86</sup> See BBC News on 'India's dark history of sterilization' after 15 girls had died in state-run sterilization camps in November 2014 (Biswas 2014).

<sup>87</sup> The newspapers screamed indignation: The Hindu: 'Cheat funds, again' (Editorial 2013); Daily Mail: 'Anger mounts over Saradha fund crisis as thousands of depositors face ruin' (Bhabani 2013).

politics in the village, in forms of delegated responsibility, the scam is an instance in which the 'grounds on which trust in everyday life is built seem to disappear, revealing the ordinary as *uncanny* and in need of being recovered rather than something having the quality of a taken-for-granted world in which trust can be unhesitatingly placed' (Das and Kleinman 2000: 8, emphasis in original). The empty houses of the middle-men (which reminded me of the empty houses of political workers of the opposition who regularly had to flee for safety during elections) definitively revealed 'the ordinary as uncanny'. The 'banality of evil' makes everyone suspicious. It is no longer taken-for-granted that fellow Muslims, even those in one's own *pārā*, will use *jñān/phronesis* and make a balanced judgment in a particular situation – especially because what may seem to be the right choice may turn out to be terribly detrimental. The recovery of trust in everyday life implies the recovery of trust in people's everyday judgments; and this is part of the broader project of the recovery of *dharma* in everyday life.

### **The trouble with money**

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This subsection will discuss the precarious nature of ordinary exchanges involving money. There is an apparent contradiction regarding money: on the one hand, the exchange of money is necessary for the reproduction of the ethical community and the cosmic order and it can foster solidarity; on the other hand, the exchange of money can be detrimental to the cosmic order and create exploitation. The role of money depends on whether money is handled according to *dharma*; in a corrupted monetary economy, money is more likely to further exploitation. People in a disadvantageous financial position are often forced in a position where they have to take part in monetary exchanges that do not foster solidarity. As such, their dignity and ethical autonomy are undermined.

In the following conversation it becomes explicit how Islamic normativity is being subordinated to material acquisition; and thus how the long-term cycle is subordinated to the short-term cycle of transactions. Sharing tea in Dada's courtyard, Dada and his neighbour Hafizul jocularly discuss the controversial

marriage of an Ahl-I Hadith man with a Barelwi woman. Ahl-I-Hadith and Barelwi are two different Islamic sects, which are ideally endogamous. It is, however, not necessarily unethical to marry outside one's sect; it depends on the terms and conditions. Hafizul, a Deobandi himself married to a woman from an Ahl-i Hadith family, justifies his own marriage with reference to the outstanding piety of his wife's family and the ideal unity of Muslims. Sectarian endogamy, Islamic piety and the unity of the Islamic *ummah* can all be considered situational ethical aspirations that are hierarchically ordered; with sectarian endogamy generally situated at the bottom.

In this conversation between Hafizul and Dada, Hafizul recounts how the groom's parents had first objected the marriage, until the woman's parents had made a significant dowry offer. They comically re-enact how the decorous presentation of such an obviously banal thing as a fat blaring goat had overridden the abstract pondering over sectarian differences of the groom's father. Turning to me with callous scepticism, Hafizul says: '*dharma* is the servant of money' (*dharma ṭākār golām*).

There is nothing very unusual about a marriage between members of different Islamic sects, or about the offering of large dowries to persuade a potential groom. But what Hafizul points out here is that a larger problem is at play. *Dharma*, that is, moral principles and the potential for virtuous judgement, has become subordinate to 'money', or in this case a goat. '*Dharma ṭākār golām*' is a common saying, in a typical reversal of the ideal. 'Money'/'*ṭākā*' serves here only as a metonym. The saying itself points to the moral peril in the subordination of the principles organising the long-term cosmic order to the principles governing the sphere involving individual competition and survival, and the negation of virtuous judgement. But using a common saying also reveals that Hafizul and Dada do not (only) blame the groom's father personally, but (also) consider him a victim of the vicious force of money – in a way that is clearly not unfamiliar to them.

Several of my interlocutors felt that the majority in Joygram has become rich with dubious money, locally called '*nambaro dui ṭākā*' (number two money). '*Nambaro dui ṭākā*' includes both money acquired legally but against Islamic

rules (*hārām* money) as well as money acquired via bribery, unlawfully obtained contracts, or the sale of government provided goods intended for the poor, to name a few instances, and includes money earned through degrading work in the informal economy. It is significant that the term ‘number two money’ denotes a hierarchical ranking of work and labour, among Hindus as well as Muslims. A hierarchical division of labour and consequential hierarchical pay rates are not considered problematic in itself, but the discursive recourse to a hierarchical ranking of work points to the illegitimacy of the unequal distribution of work and opportunities for labour. As ‘second rate’ citizens, Muslims are pushed to do ‘second rate’ work, labour without dignity, against their own ethical ideal of equal dignity for all. The discourse of pollution is merged with this egalitarian ethic: ‘second rate’ work is polluting and the money it bears is ‘dirty money’ (*nanṛā ṭākā*). Inequality is a non-normative structural disposition that can be responded to in moral (solidary) or immoral (exploitative) ways. ‘*Nambaro dui ṭākā*’ is money used for exploitative ends, and in ways that go against ideals of redistribution, solidarity and, ultimately, equality.

Muslims are not only victims of exploitative usage of money but also the culprits. One afternoon, Irfan explains me why interest (*sud*) is *hārām* and therefore ‘*nambaro dui ṭākā*’: by asking *more* money back than was lent, the lender abuses the disadvantageous situation of the borrower, because someone would only borrow money when he is in a disadvantageous position. So interest goes against one of the principles of the Islamic *dharma*: solidarity. We sit for a moment in silence, drinking our tea. Then he exclaims, visibly agitated: ‘the majority of the Muslims here are *hārām*, only money, money, money’.

Irfan sees interest on loans as a particular instance where an unequal situation is abused and the marginalised exploited. Inequality is acceptable as long as it maintains a complimentary solidarity, yet interest abuses inequality for personal prosperity at the loss of another. According to Irfan, the majority of Muslims ‘here’ have become so preoccupied with money that they forestall this moral rule; once again, *dharma* has become subordinate to individual accumulation of wealth. Many Joygramis would tell me that money feeds

greediness (*lobh*), an emotion that can at times be overpowering. It makes people blind (*andha*). When overwhelmed by greediness, people can no longer see the necessity of prioritising the sphere of long-term transactions over individual competition and accumulation.

It is because money is such a key ingredient in the cycle of criminality and impunity, and such a tangible expression of inequality, that this 'morally indeterminate instrument becomes something morally opprobrious' (Bloch and Parry 1989: 28). However, money is also a requirement for living according to *dharma* in the first place. As Bloch and Parry explain:

'maintenance of the long-term order is both pragmatically and conceptually dependent on individual short-term acquisitive endeavour. Not only do the latter in fact provide much of the material wherewithal necessary for the reproduction of the encompassing order, but it also has to be acknowledged that this order can only perpetuate itself through the biological and economic activities of individuals' (1989: 26).

In other words, whereas the short-term cycle of transactions requires compromises in the long-term cycle of transactions, the latter can only exist by virtue of the former. This idea is exemplified by a comment of Nasiruddin, Samsuddin's eldest brother, who was educated at a Deobandi madrasa and occasionally works as an imam. Reflecting on my research, he says: 'You want to know what our *dharma* is. And we can tell you that. But actually, we do the opposite (*ām'rā tār ulṭo kari*)'. The usually jocular and sarcastic young man suddenly seemed serious for a rare few minutes. He continues: 'For example, we should be praying five times a day, we should not get angry, boys and girls should not make eye-contact [he grins while looking me in the eyes], we should not play cards [alluding to the daily card games at his neighbours house], we should not drink alcohol ['do you drink alcohol?' 'Everybody drinks alcohol!']. I ask him why he thought everyone is doing the opposite. He replied, pulling a pitiful face with a sarcastic grin: 'we can't, we don't have money' (*ām'rā pāri nā, āmāder ṭākā nei*).

One does not necessarily need money for any of the normative practices Nasiruddin refers to. But I suggest that Nasiruddin refers to the 'householder's



dilemma' (Das 2014; Lambek 2013): the difficulty of living in a world of biological needs, emotional desires and material demands. Joygrami Muslims do acknowledge the position of the householder, and the householder is not entirely discredited as opposed to the moral high ground of the ascetic. It is recognized that acquisitive endeavours are necessary for the reproduction of solidarity, even though it may be contested in exactly what ways. Harmony requires money, but it requires money to be fairly distributed. As one of my friends put it, 'If there is no money, one's mind/heart is not quite right (*tākā nā thāk'le, man ṭhik thāke nā*)', and when in the past there was no money, people started arguing with each other. 'Now that there's money, everyone's mind/heart is right' (*man ṭhik thāke*).

I will address in more detail the acknowledgement of the difficulty of the householder, and the scepticism surrounding asceticism as a withdrawal from this-worldly demands in chapter 6. Here I merely want to point out that there is explicit space for entering individually accumulated wealth into long-term circulation, through provisions like *zakat* (almsgiving). Islamic reformism in particular allows for economic pragmatism and pious sincerity to be merged (F. & C. Osella 2009). I want to add, however, that particularly 'dirty' money, requires a performative form of 'moral laundering' not dissimilar to the 'cooking' of money in a Malay fishing community described by Carsten (1989). Through such actions, the exchanges in the short-term cycle are linked to the long-term cycle, and are rendered morally positive.

A group of Muslim entrepreneurs, involved in the corrupt coal business, directly related their financial prosperity to moral duty. They told me they came to Joygram for an Islamic congregation organised by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind because they want to learn what it means to be a Muslim, to learn the 'formula' of how to live as a Muslim. They say, 'now our financial situation is good' (*āmāder ārthik abasthā bhālo*), so now it is our duty (*dāyitva*) to attend these congregations, learn about Islam, and go home and spread the word'. As among Muslim entrepreneurs in Malaysia (Sloane-White 2011), Kerala (F. Osella & C. Osella 2009), and Southeast Asia (Rudnyckij 2009) economic pragmatism and a pious Muslim subjectivity are merged in the combined project of economic progress and moral 'upliftment' of the Muslim community.

Nevertheless, the idea and the experience that corruption is all-pervasive inspires an insidious scepticism towards moral righteousness irrespective of in whom it manifests. Neighbours become suspicious of neighbours; kin become suspicious of kin. This is particularly the case when there is awareness that fellow Muslims are either suspiciously wealthy, or find themselves in marginalised positions where they are pushed to respond to poverty in morally demeaning ways. Money becomes a sign for the lack of subordination of short-term acquisitive pursuits, and thus of immorality experienced and expressed as inequality. Money does have the potential to become morally positive when it is used for the reintegration of the two cycles in the public domain; however it becomes morally negative when it does not allow for this. In the case of having to do labour that earns '*nambaro dui tākā*' this is most clearly the case: these labourers have to forsake their dignity and exploit themselves, and the result is 'dirty money'. Moreover, the awareness that 'we do the opposite of our *dharma*' instils a deep sense of moral failure and scepticism, and reveals a lack of ethical autonomy. The latter point will be addressed in more detail in chapter 6.

### **Modernity and the reintegration of social life**

In the introduction to this thesis I discussed the ambiguous relationship between politics and *dharma* as a result of the postcolonial anti-politics discourse. Through processes of vernacularization, Joygrami Muslims have to a certain extent integrated political discourses and modern modes of organising social relationships and domains of life in their cosmopolitics, as the first part of this chapter has demonstrated. However, the modern narrative of the Indian state is in itself incoherent and in an attempt to create coherence Joygramis integrate modern narratives within their habitual holistic ideas of justice and order. As a result, people are drawing lines of separation between politics and *dharma* and expressing desires for reintegration simultaneously. This section addresses the resulting rhetorical ambiguity and experiential uncertainty that transpire from ordinary conversations. As such, it goes some way in explaining why Islamic reformism is in itself an ambiguous response to the incoherence and uncertainty produced by the processes of vernacularisation between modern and local conceptualisations of justice.

## Politics and *dharma*

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Two of Rahaman Saheb sons, Fuaduddin and Wasim, say that taking money from the poor is not politics; it is *party*. Or, they correct themselves, it is *kunīti*, a term more often used to describe the actual practice of politics. Fuaduddin and Wasim explain that '*kunīti* means bad work, it means they do the opposite of good politics'. They go on to describe what good, wise politics would be like (for instance, providing good education for all children and providing clean drinking water). Yet when I ask whether doing these good works is like doing *dharma* they resolutely reject this idea. 'Politics is one thing, *dharma* another' (*rāj'nīti ālādā, dharma ālādā*), says Wasim, and Fuaduddin exclaims, as if explaining to a small child failing to understand, 'that's not *dharma*! That's politics!' (*aiṭā dharma nay! aiṭā rāj'nīti!*).

In this conversation, Fuaduddin and Wasim consider politics and *dharma* to be separately delineated realms of society. Similarly, Ruud observed that politics in his fieldsite in West Bengal was generally considered to be about worldly pursuits (*artha*); 'politics is about power and not morality' (2001: 134). This implies that people have become familiar with a legal model of society where politics and *dharma* are declared separate domains. The paradoxical role of the law in colonial power incited 'the fundamental reordering of epistemic constructions of social reality' (Dirks 1986: 309) – the paradoxical anti-politics discourse continues to do so. Nevertheless, even though politics and *dharma* are considered separate domains in certain contexts, it is more often assumed that the ethical source for politics is *dharma*.

The immediate reference point for 'bad politics' (*kunīti*) is the CPM. It is not uncommon to criticise the CPM for not having a *dharma*. Although the communist leaders had to a certain extent successfully played down communal categories, instead stressing class and party affiliation, most of my interlocutors now claim that they have been suffering economic deprivation and a lack of political representation because the communists are atheist; they did not do politics morally sustained by *dharma* and were instead accumulating their own wealth. The internalisation of values propagated by the state and growing political awareness has eventually turned against the LF (Bhattacharya 2009; Chatterjee 2009). It is considered due to its lack of *dharma* that – after 34 years

- the CPM was defeated by the TMC. 'The CPM doesn't have *dharma*, that's why that party is 'useless' (*CPM dharma nei, sei janya oi 'party' bekār* [term to denote general futility]), was an often heard phrase. Some felt that the problem was not only that the party itself was 'atheist' (*nāstik*), and 'goes with Karl Marx' (*Karl Marx niye cal'che*) but also that they won't let ordinary people be guided by *dharma*.<sup>88</sup> The CPM would have prohibited people to follow their own *dharma*, as against the secular doctrine ('*secular māne, sabāi nijer dharma mānte pāre, bāraṇ kar'te pāre nā. CPM kar'to*', lit. 'secularism means, everyone can obey their own *dharma*, you can't prohibit that, that's what the CPM did').

The detractors of the CPM blame the party for the lack of respect of people's *dharma*, whereas the supporters of the CPM praise the party for its respect for local normativity. According to a small group of women from Mach Para, it was much better under the CPM. They complain that the TMC always gets the police directly involved, but the CPM sorted things out with the villagers first. The CPM knew the people of the village, so in contrast to the police they would respect women in *purdah*. And when someone is considered guilty of a minor crime, the CPM would know what kind of punishment would be appropriate regarding the culprit's financial condition, whereas the police would make him pay the standard fine regardless.

It may be significant that the people who spoke out positively about the CPM were mainly women. The women quoted above, and including other women who suggested that the CPM had been better in giving proper punishment to those who deserve it, preferred political parties to operate according to local notions of justice. The more village life is integrated in the political-legal system of the nation-state, the more political relations are disembedded from the locality. The men may have had more access to abstract values of justice and equity, through education, media, and party propaganda, and expect political parties to operate accordingly. They reject the clientelism of the CPM. In both cases, what is understood as justice is expressed through the idiom of *dharma*.

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<sup>88</sup> This assertion probably has its roots in the fact that the then Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya in 2004 expressed himself against Islamic madrasas in a rather hostile manner, which gave rise to huge outrage among the Muslims in West Bengal. Few of my interlocutors referred explicitly to the event, but it is likely that the news had been spread through the channels mentioned in chapter 1: by the JUH and local public figures. See for an extensive discussion: Chatterjee (2006).

*Dharma*, then, can denote an ethics of justice and order that is not limited to an explicitly religious normativity. Good politics, rooted in *dharma*, does not mean Islamic politics. The Shari'a (Islamic law) does not have anything to do with politics in India, I was told repeatedly; good politics here must be according to the Indian law.

Relating *dharma* to politics, Basir (by then the local TMC leader) explicitly refers to politics as care-taking, a practice embedded in *dharma* as an ethics of care. One day he lashes out at the local CPM leader, talking to me in a conspiratorial whisper. 'He is a very bad man. He is a communist, right, so he doesn't have a god, he is an atheist. If you don't have a god, you don't have any values either, so how can you do good politics?' 'But is there not some separation between politics [*rāj'nīti*] and *dharma*?' I ask. 'Yes, we have that separation as well ... it has become like that', he says a little flustered. 'Yet, doing politics is automatically doing *dharma*. Politics is taking care of people (*sebā karā*), isn't it? And that is *dharma*. And everything comes from god above [*uparoyālā*], so it wouldn't be right to do politics without a god'.

Basir explicitly locates the source of virtuous politics in *dharma*. This does not imply that Basir favoured the Muslim *jāti* on the basis of his Islamic *dharma*, but that his political action is infused with the ethics of *dharma*. For example, Basir was most preoccupied with Adivasis as, in Joygram, they suffered most from structural inequality, and because other politicians failed to demonstrate solidarity with Adivasis. In Basir's perspective, the political work of an atheist politician would not display the values of equity and solidarity, as the values in themselves are *dharma*.

### **The market and *dharma***

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A similar ambiguous rhetoric accompanies the idea of the market being separated from *dharma*, yet ideally embedded in *dharma*. In this section I will focus on the individual story of Kelapot Khadim, one of the shareholders of the cattle-market, because it is exemplary of a wide-spread tendency.

When I visit Kelapot Khadim at the cattle market in the early days of my fieldwork, he proudly comments on one of the cow traders being Hindu. Clearly

assuming that I find that curious, he continues: ‘this is work (*karma*)! And that is *dharma*. Whatever you do outside of your work, like praying *nāmāj*, doesn’t have anything to do with the work. So both Hindus and Muslims can do this business, and they can do business with each other, no problem’.

It may help Kelapot Khadim to not be bothered by his deep involvement in a corrupt business to keep it away from the ‘clean’ space of *dharma*. The wealthy Khadim, who have invariably accumulated their wealth on the cattle market, are vigorously critiqued for their allegedly corrupt practices. The cattle market is WAQF land, which means that the land should be put to use for the benefit of the Muslim community.<sup>89</sup> Joygramis have no problem with the land being used for a market involving commercial transactions. Yet it is a recurrent point of gossip and critique whether the shareholders are actually using the land more for their own individual financial benefit and conspicuous consumption than for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Later on in my fieldwork, after he had undertaken Haj to Mecca, Kelapot Khadim took a different stance. He explained his sudden piety by referring to the business ethic over there, and his dismay over broken promises in business here: ‘Say, you have agreed with a salesman that the next day you will buy chicken from him for the price of 700 rupees. If the next person comes by offering to buy the same chicken for 200 rupees more, the salesman would take the offer immediately’ negating the oral contractual agreement just made. What he was actually saying is that he is dismayed over the lack of ethical standards in business here. Previously, this did not seem to bother him as he confined business and labour to the domain of the ‘market’ as separate from the domain of *dharma*-as-religion. The experience of Haj inspired him to hierarchically reintegrate his life and order his daily life and work according to *dharma*, since *dharma*, as he had been reminded, is a ‘total way of life’ and cannot be restricted to ritual practice. Although still a shareholder of the cattle market, when

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<sup>89</sup> On WAQF, see footnote 24 in chapter 1. Profit made on a WAQF property should be used for charitable purposes or used for investment in the property. According to Masiruddin, in particular (private) WAQF properties the caretaker (*musualī*) is allowed to make a profit. In any case, the *musualis* have to deposit a share of their profit in funds for religious festivals; the Banyan tree plantation at the cattle market land; the maintenance of hostels for pilgrims; and the maintenance of the shrine and the Eid Ghat, among other things.

working on the market his attitude expressed ambivalence and he became less involved with the actual handling of money.

Kelapot Khadim differs in attitude and strategy from the coal-mining entrepreneurs I talked about earlier in this chapter. Those entrepreneurs would probably, if I had prompted them, consider *dharma* and work to be differentiated spheres. Yet they acknowledge that the profits gained by work can be re-invested in the long-term cycle of transactions and help them in the 'upliftment' of the Muslim community. Kelapot Khadim takes a more ascetic path and turns his back to work almost entirely. The different attitudes reveal the variable ambivalence towards economic endeavour and the ambiguity on how to relate economic activity with a pious lifestyle.

The desire to create coherence does not only apply to individual lives; it is a desire that foremost applies to society as a whole, as is most clear in the specific critique my interlocutors direct at the CPM. The next section returns to the desire for reintegration on the societal level.

### **Re-embedding *dharma***

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In the opening vignette of this chapter, Basir and his friends lamented the lack of *dharma* in society as a whole and in politics in particular. Like them, most Muslim Joygramis aim for a holistic social renewal, which would mean the reintegration of *dharma* in all aspects of life. I have argued, however, that modern categories have been vernacularised and become locally salient. As a result, the moral regeneration of society is not aimed at an 'archaic' society without any distinct spheres. They are not 'non-moderns', as Madam (1987) or Nandy (2007) would perhaps have put it. I will show this in comparison with a provocative article of Alpa Shah (2014), where she critically assesses Ranajit Guha's analysis of the Birsa Munda movement around 1900, in an attempt to understand the striking popularity of the Shiv Charcha sect (a sect of devotees to the Hindu Lord Shiva) in her fieldsite in the Maoist dominated hills in eastern India. She suggests that the Birsa Munda movement, which has been called 'rebellious' or 'anti-colonial' may actually be better understood as a creative response to the 'disintegrative forces of the Church in conjunction with the postcolonial state' (Shah 2014). The Adivasis aimed to reorder their lives 'in a

search for a more holistic world' (Shah 2014). Similarly, she considers the Shiv Charcha sect 'as a force of integration against the fragmentation brought into people's lives by the spread of Maoist revolutionaries in conjunction with the postcolonial state' (Shah 2014). On one level of analysis the response of my interlocutors to the discordant experience of being in the postcolonial world, is not dissimilar to that of the Adivasis Shah describes. The holistic principle of *dharma* structured a society where politics and religion were not conceived of as separate dimensions of life but formed 'one conceptual and practical realm' (Shah 2014), all together guided by values of redistribution and reciprocity that are central to *dharma*.

A century later, however, the holistic conceptual realm has been reordered according to modern epistemological categories. As the conversations about politics and *dharma* make clear, there is an understanding of distinct spheres in society: politics and the market are practically separate spheres, and religious and political institutions are practically separate. However, my interlocutors agitate against a reductionist understanding of *dharma*-as-religion, and argue for the revaluation of *dharma* as an underlying dimension in all aspects of social life. According to the "moral narrative of modernity" (Keane 2007), 'to treat economics, politics, or even education in moral terms too seriously exhibits a failure to be modern' (Keane 2010: 79). The problem of this modern moral narrative is that morality is treated as the special concern of religion, and religion as a separate sphere (ibid.). In reality, the political and economic realms are always moral orders, notwithstanding the moral narrative of modernity. In the experience of my interlocutors, however, politics and the market are immoral. Lambek suggests that in the modern state, 'bureaucracy has encroached on religious and family ritual, and law has overshadowed ethics' (2013: 842). I suggest that, in my fieldsite, the impersonal bureaucracy and universalistic law are valued in their own right, and leave space for a separate sphere of religion, but the problem is that the ethical criteria established in ritual do not seem to be valid in the areas of bureaucracy and law.

Parry rightfully criticises Dumont for positing a radical separation between the realms of *dharma* and *artha* (the realm of politico-economic power) in Hindu thought (Parry 1989b: 83). He points out that *artha* has the more general



meaning of 'means'; as in, the means to sustain the moral order of *dharma*. Most significantly, '[w]hat Hindu thought rejects is that these means should become an ultimate end. *Artha* must be pursued in conformity with the hierarchically superior dictates of *dharma*' (Parry 1989b: 83). Despite the differences in moral content of the Hindu and the Muslim *dharma*, the idea that *dharma* is superior is the same. To consider the market or politics as a different realm 'cuts it loose from its moral moorings and deprives it of real meaning [...] and to a significant extent it is this devaluation which has condemned the Indian polity to perpetual instability' (Parry 1989: 83). What Parry is getting at may be a much more universal ethical ideal, which he hints at when he says that 'Mauss arrived at his now perhaps not so quaint-sounding moral conclusion – that the combination of interest and disinterest in exchange is preferable to their separation' (Parry 1986: 469). My interlocutors astutely recognise the problem of separation. It is for this reason that they argue that a politics without *dharma* is doomed to fail.

Parry's invocation of Mauss brings me to emphasise what I think is the most pervasive and perhaps most invisible form of structural violence: the sheer instrumentality that is pervading social life, and its inescapability. My interlocutors feel betrayed by the state for its instrumental approach to the exchanges to which they attach great moral significance. With instrumentality, I mean the perception that actions in the political and economic sphere are conceived of as means to ends that are not virtuous (accumulation of wealth and power), as opposed to virtuous actions that are an end in itself, in the Aristotelian sense. The moral principles of the Muslims (as, I would suggest, of any other *jāti* with a *dharma*, that is, of any moral person) do not resonate with that of the everyday politics they are confronted with and participate in. In the previous chapter, I have expounded on the fact that *phronesis* is meant to be guiding 'the art of life', that is, living according to ethical principles as an end in itself, because that is the direct enactment of justice and harmony. However, by cordoning off certain aspects of life from what has come to be called 'religion', the principle idea of the 'art of life' does not seem to apply to those other spheres of life.

The problem that my interlocutors encounter is: how to bring an element of *dharma* back into the spheres of politics and economics when *dharma* has come

to denote a particular religion? Even if it transpires from conversations that for my interlocutors *dharma* can mean an ethics of justice in a much broader sense, they performatively enact *dharma* in their specific, Islamic way, because they have also internalised the idea of *dharma*-as-religion. This is a contradiction that emerges from my ethnography and that I cannot solve theoretically, because it is a contraction that my interlocutors live with on an everyday basis. Moreover, as against the ‘undecidability’ and uncertainties produced by Indian democratic governance, and the indeterminacies of inclusion and exclusion (Hansen 1999: 16-60), the Muslim *jāti* identity is further emphasised as an essentialised identity, despite its inherently fragile nature. However, Islam is not supposed to enter the political or market sphere too much in the Indian state and has to remain relatively private. As such, they are further confronted with and reinforce the idea that *dharma* is limited to the separate domain of religion.

## **Conclusion**

The ambiguous relationship between politics and religion has created a situation that is fundamentally unequal and unjust for the structurally excluded communities. I stress once more that my interlocutors are not traditional reactionaries who refuse to be modernised or rationalised. Islamic reformism is a highly rationalised, modern expression of *dharma* (see also chapter 6). What they do react against, are ‘the flaws inherent in the governing discourse’, so well summarized by Hansen (1999: 23):

‘the inherent contradictions and destructive character of capitalist production, the flaws and incompleteness of taxonomic schemes of classification incapable of comprehending the richness of natural and social life, the incapacity of any narration of the self and the collective to disclose fully the identity it purports to portray’.

Furthermore, by not living up to the promises inherent in the foundational contract of the secular nation-state, society is stripped of its very humanity, because it is fundamentally no longer an ethical or a humane society. In this unethical/inhumane system, not only politicians but also ordinary citizens have become ‘animals’, in Samsuddin’s words. They have to be made human again through a conscious cultivation of *dharma*.

Before I conclude, it is useful to re-introduce the arguments brought forward in chapter 3. The ‘moral narrative of modernity’ forces people to conceive of a world where *dharma* (as religion) is a separate realm, which in reality implies that people are curtailed of their ethical autonomy and disenfranchised of their dignity. I suggest that the expression of a desire for reintegration of *dharma* in all aspects of life is ultimately about the recovery of autonomy, which lays in the freedom that *jñān* offers, and is therefore originally and ultimately borne from relatedness, as I have argued in chapter 3. It is only through a measure of autonomy that one can constitute oneself as an ethical being. In a perhaps paradoxical but corollary process the Muslims reclaim their autonomy from the unethical state through the submission of their sovereignty to Allah. Submission allows for the cultivation of *jñān* (wisdom/*phronesis*), which gives one the freedom to make the ethical choices necessary to re-instantiate justice. This autonomy is ideally constantly re-instantiated through virtuous exchanges, but exchanges are stripped of their moral component when they are isolated and become instruments of the short-term cycle of transactions. As such, transactions seem to constantly reproduce inequality rather than equality – injustice rather than social justice.

In the previous chapter I invoked Lambek’s argument that among the most significant ethical criteria are those that establish the humanity of persons ‘as being mutually subject to criteria and hence to be acknowledged as ethical subjects in their own right’ (Lambek 2010*b*: 62); here I want to add that as ethical subjects, they have ‘dignity, not price’ (ibid.). Furthermore, Lambek argues:

‘one of the chief criteria for maintaining that dignity entails granting dignity reciprocally to others by recognizing them as persons under comparable kinds of descriptions...by standing by one’s word to them...and generally submitting oneself to the criteria established by means of the acts one has undergone or undertaken and acknowledging the engagements of others’ (Lambek 2013: 845).

Dignity is what is lost first and foremost through one’s involvement in the reproduction of social injustice. And as we have seen, the ‘banality of evil’ has made the Joygramis deeply sceptical and critical of their environment. Modern

political strategies may attempt to create an aura of legitimacy 'by invoking discourses on order, security, justice, freedom and equality' (Hansen 1999: 21), but even though the discourses are imbibed by the citizens, the strategies are ultimately unconvincing because of the inadequate representation of reality and the deep incongruences with the experience of everyday life. The political 'crisis in West Bengal' does 'not indicate a lack of faith in local governmental institutions but rather a pervasive distrust in the moral authority of those who claim to mediate, on political grounds, the contending claims to livelihood, fairness and dignity' (Chatterjee 2009: 45). In the democratic arena, the foundations and legitimacy of power are contested and uncertain, and Muslims are cast as illegitimate contestants for power. Moreover, in poverty, there is no escaping the participation in an immoral politico-economy if one is to survive biologically and socially. So how does one recover dignity, autonomy, social justice and a harmonious society?

Joygrami Muslims resort to various discourses: Islamic discourses, South Asian ideologies of order and society, and the state's ideologies of justice and equality, all become encompassed in *dharma*. This curious ideological mix is presented as a coherent cosmic order originating from the contract with Allah, in order to grant it legitimacy, certainty, and an aura of timelessness. These synthesised discourses are aesthetically, rhetorically and practically shaped according to an Islamic reformist discourse; I will discuss this in detail in chapter 6.

Here I want to conclude by stressing that the critique and resistance inherent in the Muslims' preference to enter into the 'contract behind contracts' with Allah rather than with the state does not preclude that they enter into subordinate contracts with the state.<sup>90</sup> Parry paints a bleak picture of the future: in case the belief that corruption is all-pervasive corrodes the faith in the 'idea of India', 'the most likely outcome is that the power of the state would remain, that the victim would be democracy and the end result a new and more sinister species of corruption' (2000: 53). On a more optimistic note, I suggest that another possibility is that *dharma* is reinterpreted as an ethics of order and

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<sup>90</sup> The Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind has officially sanctified the mutual contract between the Indian state and Muslim citizens. The contract is, of course, the Constitution, and Muslims are bound to live by the Constitution on this sanctified ground.

justice that is not limited to any particular religion. *Dharma* can as such be the source for an ‘overlapping consensus’ to which ‘the idea of India’ is central (Bilgrami 2011; Taylor 2011). The dynamic, segmentary nature of my interlocutors’ ethical framework does allow relatedness to be forged with the Indian state, and rights and duties could be exchanged as part of a social contract even though the state’s actors and my interlocutors may do so on the basis of different ideological reasoning. The reasons for subscribing to the values enshrined in ‘the idea of India’ (e.g. democracy, freedom of speech etc.) may vary across *jātis*, and across individuals. This is not problematic as long as there is an acknowledgment of a shared *dharma*, which embodies fundamental ethical principles of fairness and justice. A problem arises, however, when the state favours particular underlying reasons over others, or when the reasons of a particular community for subscribing to the shared ideology are not considered valid. I will elaborate on the problem of majoritarianism in the next chapter.



Fig. 7. The bicycle repair shop, a favourite hangout of Joygrami men, located at the main road separating Khamaipur from the other parts of Joygram.



Fig. 8. A meeting of the AIUDF. Siddiquullah Chowdhury Saheb is standing on the left, at the lectern. Manisha Banerjee is standing far right at the table.

## 5. 'Hindus and Muslims have become one *jāti*': Practising pluralism

'This is neither a story of secularism nor of syncretism but rather one in which the heterogeneity of everyday life allows Hindus and Muslims to receive the claims of each other that have arisen by the sheer fact of proximity, face-to-face relations, and the privileging of aesthetic immediacy of emotions even over the prohibitions emanating from various authoritative discourses of Islam and Hinduism. That we could consider this kind of relational life a form of moral perfectionism in its insistence on the ordinariness of relational life and in the willingness to be educated by each other - that is what is at stake in this essay' (Das 2010*b*: 248).

### Introduction

Shahadat Hussain Mondal is a Muslim man in his sixties, who comes a few times a week on his bicycle from Farukhbazar to tutor Wahed's daughters in general subjects. He is eloquent and relatively well-educated, not a wealthy man, always dressed in a slightly stained *pañjābi*. Whenever I was around, he preferred to tutor me in Islamic theology rather than the girls in English. He particularly enjoyed pointing out the similarities and differences between Islamic and Christian theology (assuming my Christian *dharma*). In our conversations, an ostensible paradox that I came across repeatedly during my time in Joygram would often surface. On the one hand, he glorifies the supremacy of Islam and Muslims, while on the other hand, he is keen to emphasise the unity of all mankind. He uses the analogy of the hand to show how we are all brothers from the same source (Adam). One of the fingers is the Muslim brother; one is the Hindu brother, and so on. He asked me rhetorically, 'would it not be inconvenient to miss one finger?' It would be undesirable and inconvenient (*asubidhā*) to miss one finger, so the principle of pluralism is not only accepted but also welcomed. He acknowledges that in India the harmony between fingers (*jātis*) is sometimes hard to find, and he laments that 'somewhere in history' it went wrong. According to him, there is no harmony anymore in society because 'some people' have become too selfish.

A couple of months later, it becomes clear who Shahadat Hussain had in mind when blaming ‘some people’ for the disharmony in society. The old man surprised me by his presence at the Block Development Office ahead of the panchayat elections.<sup>91</sup> I am surprised not only because this is not usually a place for feeble old men, and less for men in white *pañjābi* preoccupied with matters of Islamic theology. The next time I see him at Wahed’s place he explains that he was there to oversee the filing of nominations. I ask him why he is involved with the dirty party work. He replies, deeply agitated and gesturing wildly:

‘I was there to prevent the CPM from filing their nomination, because for 34 years they tortured everyone who wouldn’t cooperate with them. So now we [TMC] won’t let them come back and take seats. They [CPM] are dangerous; they don’t obey any god. They don’t even obey Allah. They also burnt many Hindu houses, and would come at night to rape young girls, Hindus and Muslims alike. Against them, Hindus and Muslims have become one *jāti*’.

Shahadat Hussain strikingly presents pluralism as a natural fact; as natural as different fingers on a hand. Disharmony in pluralism, in contrast, is a historical contingency. Significantly, there are ‘some people’, not members of a particular *jāti*, who have become selfish, and who put the harmony in society at risk. If pluralism is a natural feature of society, disharmony between *jātis* is a corollary to disharmony in society more generally. But Shahadat Hussain also demonstrates another possibility: that *jātis* unite against the disruptive elements. In this chapter I aim to analyse the different aspects involved with living in plurality that Shahadat Hussain alludes to. The Joygrami political landscape is not marked by intercommunal violence, nor is it marked by religious commonality. Therefore, the Joygrami situation requires – and allows – me to provide a nuanced account of the vernacular experience of pluralism.

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<sup>91</sup> Candidates for the panchayat election file their nomination for the *grām pañcāyat* and the *pañcāyat samiti* at the Block Development Office (BDO). The BDO is open for nominations for seven days. Every day, party ‘workers’ (active members of the political parties) gathered in front of the BDO in order to prevent candidates of the opposition to file their nomination. In the case of the panchayat elections in 2013, only TMC candidates had been able to file their nomination for the lower two tiers of the panchayat in Farukhbazar Block.



The outline of the chapter is as follows. In the first part of the chapter I elaborate upon the research on peace processes in South Asia, while expanding the argument developed in this thesis so far. I consider the practice of pluralism through an analysis of exchange and reciprocity. Subsequently, I demonstrate that the ethical ideals of related personhood and *dharma* are at the roots of the generation and continuation of communal harmony. However, I suggest that these phenomena ought not to be isolated from the particular political environment. In the second part of the chapter, the micro-exchanges that foster communal harmony are contextualised in order to demonstrate that in West Bengal pluralism can only be properly understood when analysed against the foil of local political disharmony.

In the third section, I address the positionality of the Muslim minority within the Hindu majority nation to account for the Muslims' burden of responsibility for the reproduction of harmony. The section demonstrates that secularism, as a state doctrine, is understood to imply state neutrality and equality of religious communities in the public sphere. Hence, it becomes clear how the state's failure to live up to this ideological commitment has severe consequences for the grassroots practice of pluralism.

### **Theoretical orientations: beyond peace and violence**

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West Bengal provides an interesting case for a study of pluralism in practice, because it is not marked by 'spaces of enmity' (Williams 2011a) when it comes to *communal* antagonism and Joygram is not located in an area prone to communal riots.<sup>92</sup> Despite the increasing segmentation of the religious landscape and an intensified stress on differences rather than commonalities, communal antagonism was, until recently, almost absent. There is, however, widespread political violence, marked by party politics.

Studies of pluralism in India have often focused on communalism in areas with a history of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, and there is a plethora of studies

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<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, West Bengal is rapidly losing its reputation as the state with a relatively low level of communal antagonism. See The Indian Express: 'Communal clashes soar in Bengal' (Editorial 2014); and First Post: 'Why Mamata's Bengal is seeing more communal clashes' (Jagannathan 2014).

on communal violence.<sup>93</sup> I want to draw another picture; one that, I anticipate, will bear resemblance with many other places in India not marked by a recent history of communal violence, but where other forms of political violence are an everyday threat to peace. The body of literature that has analysed pluralism with a focus on the everyday negotiation of difference and commonality and the active production of peaceful coexistence – what Williams (2011a) has aptly called ‘processes of amity’ - has lain the foundations for my analysis in the first part of the chapter. I subsequently contribute to this body of work by contextualising communal peace with political violence.

One line of research on peace processes has highlighted those places and moments of not just communal harmony, but active participation and cooperation. This is variably exemplified in the shared worship of deities or saints (Bigelow 2010; Frøystad 2012; Heitmeyer 2011); intercommunal celebration of religious festivals (Assayag 2004); and pilgrimage (Bigelow 2010). The authors are keen to emphasise that the commonality or overlapping practices of worship are not a matter of ‘syncreticism’ (which presupposes a common narrative which diverges from the ‘real’ or ‘actual’ Hinduism or Islam), but complex and negotiated forms of convergences and sharedness, an expression of ‘integrated acculturation’ (Assayag 2004) or ‘religious polytropy’ (Carrithers 2000), where overlapping or different meanings may be attached to a shared practice. This kind of religious pluralism may trump the discursive

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<sup>93</sup> In the wake of the culmination of communal tension in riots in 1992 following the Ayodhya demolition and further violence in Gujarat in 2002, there have been various attempts to explain Hindu-Muslim violence in South Asia (Brass 2003; Engineer 1984, 1989; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2011; Varshney 2002; Van der Veer 1994; Wilkinson 2006), often with a focus on Hindu nationalist politics. Although some works have tended to reify Hindu-Muslim relations as inherently antagonistic and habitually violent, with reference to ‘cultural identity’ (Kakar 1996) or ethnicity (Tambiah 1996, cf. Oza 2006), most point to historical, socio-economic and political circumstances to explain eruptions of violence (Appadurai 2006; Brass 2003; Das 1995; Kapferer 1988; Kakar 1996; cf. Peabody 2000). Significantly, it has been recognized that the police and judiciary made themselves guilty to state-sponsored violence specifically aimed at the Muslim minority (Brass 2003; Das 1990; Mathur 2008; Vadarajan 2002). This is specifically the case in places where the BJP is strong (as during the riots in 2002 in Gujarat, see Engineer 2003; Sarkar 2002; Simpson 2006), but limited neither to these places nor to explicit violence. Institutionalised practices of discrimination and implicit forms of victimization have been observed in a variety of places (Jeffery and Jeffery 2006; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Khan 2007; Kirmani 2008; Venkatesan 2012; Williams 2011a).

reification of communal categories as well as other hierarchical social structures, as it points to the fluidity of identifications and forms of relatedness.

In Joygram, I could observe the residues of the 'religious polytropy'. It has been noted that in the past, various festivals would bring Bengali Hindus and Muslims together in joint celebration (Ahmad and Reifeld 2004; Roy 2014) not unlike the 'integrated acculturation' described by Assayag (2004). The shrine at the cattle market in Joygram is still frequented by Muslims and Hindus alike; beliefs in ghosts abound across all *jātis*; and both Hindus and Muslims wear very similar amulets for the same ends, albeit blessed by different religious authorities.

The religious landscape, however, has undeniably changed. The Deobandi imams preach against attending the shrine and they specifically forbid Muslims to prepare special sweets or rice pancakes (*piṭhe*) on Hindu festivals. In some households I could still observe practices that are increasingly considered 'Hindu' and forbidden by Deobandi imams (for instance, red paint on the soles of women's feet during wedding celebrations), but these practices would always be commented upon with condescension by the purportedly more pious Muslims in the village. In sum, peace is not maintained through the explicit commonality in ritual practices or worship. In exploring pluralism, this chapter is in line with recent works that have helpfully pointed out the need to pay attention to the production of peaceful coexistence beyond the obvious celebration of 'religious polytropic' elements. What is most interesting for my argument here is the recognition of the centrality of dialogue and exchange, not only at the sacred moments of worship, but also in the mundane moments in the course of everyday life.

Exchange is central to the studies of Frøystad (2005), Heitmeyer (2009) and Ring (2006) – and all of them point out that exchange does not go without saying. Focusing on everyday coexistence in a small town in Gujarat three years after the riots, Heitmeyer (2009) demonstrates how the daily exchange of gossip and the normative discourse of communal harmony ('there is peace here') contained suspicion and tension and forestalled the outburst of violence. Reciprocal exchange (*len-den*) is also central to friendships between upper class families and their domestic servants in North India (Frøystad 2005). The

friendships build on both mutual affection and mutual utility, and although circumstances may at times threaten inter-community or inter-caste trust and hamper the routine of exchange, religious differences are often transcended in those very mundane acts of amity. Apart from friendships, and especially in urban contexts, different connections and identities may cross religious boundaries and may give rise to 'network identities' that stimulate and require the active aversion of detrimental communal segregation (Mayaram 2006; Heitmeyer 2009).

The studies discussed above go some distance in breaking down the opposition between peace and violence. In all of these cases, 'the recognition of religious identity does not necessarily denote conflict, but at times only an awareness of difference' (Gottschalk 2000: 151). In Joygram, I suggest that the awareness of difference is what allows for constant, active 'peace-management', infused with tension. One study that has convincingly theorized more specifically the *productive* power of the 'tension' that suspends both peace and conflict is Ring's ethnography (2006; see also Williams 2013). In the ethnically diverse Karachi apartment building that is the setting of Ring's research, peace is not a taken for granted stasis, or the absence of tension. The women carry out the relentless and creative 'labour' (Ring 2006: 178) of daily, neighbourly exchanges in which tension is sustained and managed rather than resolved, and of which a fragile peace is a residual product. I build upon the work of Ring (2006) to develop the argument that the constant management of the disorderly informal exchanges is an ethical end in itself rather than the means to achieve a state of peace.

As I have pointed out in chapter 2, there is a segmentary logic to the forms of becoming and belonging that are generated by exchanges. Here I expand that argument: just as various forms of exchanges generate the human person, networks of relatedness and the *jāti* community, exchanges also generate the plural society. Identifications generated by exchanges scale upwards from the *jāti* to shared identifications with the local *deś* (land, soil, place), West Bengal and Bengali identity to the Indian nation-state (see also Arumugam 2011; Bear 2007; Michelutti 2008). Significantly, relationships of exchange emerge from shared moral substance and generate the differences and distinctions within,

foremost, the essentialised *jātis*. I have also argued in chapter 2 that while intra-*jāti* exchanges are to foster equality, inter-*jāti* relationships of exchange are marked by hierarchy. Inter-*jāti* exchange requires vigilance because the sharing of moral substances generates particular kinds of persons and determines the boundary and the hierarchical positionality of the *jātis*. The substance-code that is exchanged is potentially polluting, physically and morally (Parry 1989*b*), so exchanges are rife with tension. Therefore, and in an elaboration of the work by Ring (2006) and Bilgrami (2011), I suggest that communal relations in South Asia are marked not as much by ‘peaceful tolerance’ as by the ‘toleration of tension’.

From a political philosophy perspective, Bilgrami argues that toleration ‘presupposes disapproval of what is tolerated, and a condescending acceptance of what one disapproves’ (2011: 34). In the aspiration for peaceful multiculturalism, he argues, we need to ‘overcome disapproval’ and go ‘beyond toleration’ (ibid.). Drawing on Ring’s work, I suggest in contrast that the act of toleration, whether implying disapproval or acceptance, binds the pluralistic society. Toleration presupposes what Ring calls an ‘ethic of suspense’ (2006: 31, 179-80). The idiom of ethics points to the idea that, even though the exchanges between *jātis* are negotiations of hierarchy, these negotiations within the ‘cycles of reciprocity’ may be an end in themselves rather than the means to other ends, such as status or various forms of capital (cf. Bourdieu 1990: 98ff). When people with various ideological commitments live in close proximity, the ‘art of life’ (Lambek 2010*a*) may be, indeed, ‘to sustain the tension of the specific social and cultural contradictions that exchange produces in this particular historical circumstance’ (Ring 2006: 77). The moral imperative of reciprocity requires ‘active irresolution’ (ibid.) to bind the plural environment and to protect it from fragmentation.

In order to frame the analysis of the tense toleration in Joygram, I draw on an exceptionally fine-grained analysis by Venkatesan (2012), who explores the many layers of the subjectivity of one Muslim weaver in a South Indian town. She argues that episodic empathetic and antipathetic resonances with the ‘other’ shape a ‘laminated subjectivity’. She follows Holland and Leander (2004), who ‘argue that a person or group is offered or afforded a social

positioning which shapes them as a subject' (2012: 416). Positioning may pertain to almost any kind of identification (class, gender, religion, occupation, and pedigree) and happens constantly, in daily encounters and interactions. Venkatesan suggests that the 'micro-production' of subjectivity through various negative and positive positionings is like the production of a cymbal: it is laminated layer by layer, and will therefore sound differently depending on where it is struck. In this process the laminated subjectivity of the positioned person emerges; a person with particular ethical affordances (Keane 2015). This is not a passive process, however:

'Thinking about subjectivity in this way acknowledges that it is simultaneously emergent and yet shaped by prior encounters and positionings and inflected by memory and learning. There is also conceptual space here for self-positioning, in that people can and do decide what they want to actively respond to and build on' (Venkatesan 2012: 417).

Through the analytical lens of 'laminated subjectivity' I attend to the various ways in which pluralism is conceived and practiced in Joygram. *Jāti* and *dharma* are the indigenous categories through which the pluralistic society is historically experienced and constituted, but I will demonstrate that various ideological inclinations and ethical affordances are at play at different moments and in different situations. I will discuss the various forms of 'resonance' that emerge in order to give a nuanced account of the actual cohabitation of Hindus and Muslims. I borrow the term 'resonance' from Venkatesan to denote 'a certain kind of responsiveness to embodied encounters with others and also to concerns, ideas and discourses that originate locally or from elsewhere' (2012: 401). The idea of resonance draws attention to the potential of mutual understanding, without there necessarily being shared religious practices. Indeed, Das argues that the shared use of concepts, words and gestures, and including the use of the other's theological register, is not evidence of 'syncretism', and that 'the issue at stake is not that of "belief" at all' but is evidence of shared registers and shared ethical affordances, 'buried in the languages of ordinary men and women and that surfaces naturally in the contexts in which Hindus and Muslims are already committed to some kind of a

common life, whether in engaging neighbourliness or in forging political actions to ward off the violence that is always present as a possibility' (Das 2010b: 241).

As the idea of the 'toleration of tension' suggests, resonance may imply disapproval as well as respect; antipathy as well as empathy. This observation is highly significant, because it shows that episodes of disharmony may be productive of long-term harmonious pluralism. In fact, I suggest that disharmony may be *necessary* because the cosmogonic principle is relatedness from which separate identities and *jātis* need to be created. A lack of distinction may be threatening to the self. I use the idiom of the 'narcissism of minor differences' (Blok 1998) to explain why it may be productive for order to create difference. In sum, I suggest that the key to harmonious cohabitation in South Asia may be in the constant struggle for distinction rather than in the aspiration of a 'brotherhood' that attempts to eliminate difference (Bilgrami 2011). These communal negotiations take place in the shared ideological frame of *dharma*.

The neighbourly exchanges in the Karachi apartment building do not take place in a vacuum (Ring 2006: 70-1); nor do the inter-*jāti* exchanges in Joygram. The micro-level exchanges are affected by local factionalism and contain the tension between the state's normative discourse of equality and secularism and the actual practice of communal discrimination. The experience of fear, exclusion, and discrimination is 'folded into ongoing relationships' (Das 2007: 8) and affects the subjectivity and positionality of the Muslims in Joygram.

According to popular perception In West Bengal, the practice of party politics ultimately lacks legitimacy (or at least, ethical validity) as it lacks ideological motivation and is therefore located outside the shared frame of *dharma*. I anticipate that in most places in India violence related to power is a greater threat to everyday peace than communal violence. Communal violence is in most cases an expression of power struggles, rather than an expression of a 'natural' communal antagonism or the inability of India's 'masses' to live in peaceful coexistence (see Kaur 2005b: 23 - 27). To focus only on the communal aspects of violence, is to easily apply a 'ready explanatory framework' (Mayaram 1997); a powerful but deceiving 'master narrative' (Pandey 1990). The situation will be different in places where Hindu nationalist groups are a

prominent feature of the public sphere. In places like Gujarat, a particular *dharma* becomes legitimately associated with the state and with politics, making the Islamic *dharma* entirely illegitimate. The deprecation of the Islamic *dharma* and the discrimination of Muslims in West Bengal are less explicit, but it informs the Muslims' laminated subjectivity nevertheless. Muslims are more vulnerable and therefore carry the heaviest burden of responsibility in the reproduction of order in plurality.

A caveat is in order. I appreciate the fact that, from the ethnographic data presented below, irreconcilable contradictions between the various ideological positions of my interlocutors emerge. Certain universalistic theological claims seem in practice only applicable to the Muslim *jāti*. It is generally assumed that any Salvationist religion will attempt to convert 'nonbelievers', because only believers will earn a place in heaven. As I have spelled out in chapter 2, the ideological discrepancy is something people live with on a daily basis. It may at times seem to inspire scepticism, whereas at other times it seems to be unproblematic. It is unlikely for anyone to have a perfectly coherent value-economy. Ordinary human cosmopolitics will contain, if not necessarily blatant inconsistencies, at least subtle inner conflicts, tensions and dissonances between values (Bilgrami 2011: 24). The aim of this chapter is therefore not to solve or reconcile the inconsistencies, but to bring them to the surface.

### **Toleration of tension**

As many others in Joygram, Masiruddin was always full of praise for India as a diverse, secular democracy. In relation to the great examples of Mecca, he purported to dread not being able to live according to Islamic law, because, 'this is a democracy, a secular country, isn't it, so we can't do it [obey Islamic law]. Here, we have one law all together' (*ekhāne to 'democracy', 'secular country', kar'te pār'bo nā. Ām'rā sab ek'saṅge ek'ṭā āin āche*). Within the confines of the Indian constitution, Muslims try to follow Islamic rules as much as they can, but it would have been better to live in an Islamic country, because 'we could obey even better' (*āro bhālo mānte pār'tām*). Yet, in one breath he continues with an obvious sense of pride: 'India is an enormously special place (*Bhārat biśāl 'special' jāyḡā*), there are so many different religions, so many different languages, and all together we have one law!' Fantasies about a caliphate,



common among Tablighi Jamaat members, are largely utopic and barely impinge on the everyday pragmatics of life.

### **Plurality as a social fact**

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Plurality is not an abstract idea but experienced every day in ordinary life. In West Bengal, members of different *jātis* interact with each other on a daily basis. The vast majority of Bengalis, whether Hindu, Muslim, or of another *jāti*, share the same language, dress, musical preference, and love for *mācher bhāt* and *ālu posta* (rice with fish and potato curry with poppy seeds). Only someone very familiar with or native to the region can distinguish a Hindu and a Muslim daily labourer (on the basis of Muslims' preference for chequered blue *luṅgis*), and will still often be proved wrong. At most tea (*cā*) stalls you will find different *jātis* mingle, smoking the same Bengali *biris* and drinking sweet tea from the much-loved Bengali earthen cups. Women of different *jātis* chat in the queues for the shared water pump, or when they gather to pay the rent on their micro-credit loans. Both men and women of all *jātis* meet weekly at the ration shops, sharing narratives of corruption. Public schools are attended by all *jātis*; here children are served free midday meals prepared by women from different *jātis*.

The everyday experience of plurality has resulted in the pervasive perception that diversity is a social fact. This is illustrated through my interlocutors' reflections on the difference between good and bad people. In a certain discourse, the superiority of the Islamic *dharma* over other *dharmas* is often emphasised, and Muslims may be considered to have more potential to become 'good'. However, when someone's character or actions are ethically evaluated, the *jāti* identity does not play a role. There are *badmāśi* people (crooks) from whichever *jāti* (*ye kono jāti*), and 'bad people' would generically be called *badmāś*, without mention of the *jāti*.

An elderly Muslim man, Sheik Farhan, asserts that there is a necessary balance between good and bad people, just as the interlocutors I quoted in chapter 3, but he makes clear that this does not depend on *jāti*. We were sitting on the roadside near the Farukhbazar BDO during the filing of nominations for the panchayat elections, both dreading the violence that the elections bring

about. I asked him what he thought made people commit such atrocities. He asked me exactly the same rhetorical question as Wasim had done: 'Are all the fingers of a hand the same? If they were the same, you wouldn't be able to put food in your mouth'. He continues: 'In every place there are good people: in the mosque, in the Hindu temple, in the Sikh temple (*masjide, mandire, gurudwāre*)...but like that there are also bad people. Allah has given humans the test; they can choose the path they take. The majority, however, take the wrong path'.

At first glance, Farhan reiterates a paradox I often encountered: any *jāti* member can become good, yet one has to believe in Allah to become good. This conundrum is, however, not so paradoxical if 'Allah' would be replaced with any other god, and Islam with any other *dharma*; Sheik Farhan explicitly links 'good' people to *various* places of worship. So it is not Islam as such, but *dharma* in general that is indispensable for ethical behaviour. Clearly, living according to the rules of one's particular *dharma* is not an obstacle to the achievement of peaceful coexistence; rather it is considered contributory to a peaceful society as it provides the potential for 'processes of amity'. Ethics is *dharma*, but not limited to the Islamic *dharma*.

Both Shahadat Hussain, in the opening vignette, and Sheik Farhan consider plurality as a natural fact, and the balance between different *jātis* as a necessity for harmony and even survival (missing a finger one could not eat!). Significantly, neither Shahadat Hussain, nor Sheik Farhan links the lack of harmony in society or the presence of violence to a specific *jāti*. But when Farhan's balance between good and bad people was distorted, Shahadat Hussain's harmony between *jātis* was as well. 'The wrong path', in Farhan's words, is not the path outside Islam, but outside *dharma*: the problem is that 'somewhere in history' people have gone off the path of *dharma*.

Interestingly, in the transcendent world inhabited by *djins* (being of smoke mentioned in the Quran), there would be various *jātis*, just like here. I have mentioned in chapter 2 that Dada would occasionally enter in a state of possession by a *djin*, and in this state he would be able to visualise the *djins'* accounts of the world in which they inhabit. According to Dada, the world of *djins* is a perfect, ideal version of our world. All people are *good* people – but not

everyone is a Muslim. Indeed, different *jātis* live peacefully together. Even in the idealised world of *djins*, where everyone lives according to *dharma*, there is a pluralism of *jātis*.

### **The content of food**

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The plural nature of society, both in its abstract sense of the society as a nation and in the sense of society as the practical everyday social environment, is a social fact and even a matter of pride. Yet at the everyday level, pluralism requires constant negotiation.

A lot of the negotiation between *jātis* takes place through the exchange of food. Food has been demonstrated to be ‘a highly condensed social fact’, ‘a peculiarly powerful semiotic device’ (Appadurai 1981: 494) and a highly significant substance for constituting kin, as I discussed in detail in chapter 2. Sharing food is a dialectical process of unification and diversification: food unites bodies that eat together and distances bodies that don’t (Bloch 1999: 139). Food makes, unmakes and remakes relational worlds (Janeja 2009: 103). It follows from the fluid overlap of kinship and *jāti* that food is an equally important substance for the generation of the *jāti* identity.

Bear (2007: 194) demonstrates that food may sustain regional and racial senses of belonging: the Anglo-Indian ‘cuisine’ would reflect certain inherent characteristics that are different from both ‘Anglos’ and Indians while still rooting Anglo-Indians in Indian soil. Similarly, food is a means for the Bengali Muslims to distinguish themselves from Bengali Hindus in the one instance and to claim Bengali inheritance at a next instance. My interlocutors would never tire of stressing the importance to eat beef, as it distinguishes them as Muslims. They would invariably claim that beef tastes better than anything else, and that especially men need beef to ‘survive’. On religious festivals nearly all villagers consume beef, but on an ordinary day only a few can afford beef: the consumption of beef is also a symbol of wealth. Moreover, the Joygramis more acquainted with the ‘larger Muslim world’ would make Mughal dishes rather than more regional meat dishes to demonstrate their knowledge of the Islamic world outside Bengal (which is generally considered ‘higher’). However, when affines visit and rich food ought to be offered (cf. Inden and Nicholas 1977: 19),

beef is optional whereas there should be at least fish and chicken: a confirmation of the Bengali *jāti*. Furthermore, rice is not simply the staple food but an identity marker of the *jāti* that cultivates the fertile paddy fields of Bengal, as opposed to the wheat cultivators in Western parts of India.

Moreover, much like the Anglo-Indians, the Muslims see specific features of a community as a result of food habits, and sometimes they even dreaded that the consumption of beef would make them '*garam*' (hot), a characterisation used negatively for hot-headed people. To complicate the matter, my Muslim friends are aware that 'hot' is a feature all too often used by non-Muslims to describe the supposedly more 'aggressive' and 'wild' Muslim as opposed to the 'civilised' but effeminate Bengali Hindu. Blaming beef for hot-headedness (making the trait transient rather than inherent) is a means to distance themselves from the racial character of the allegation.<sup>94</sup>

If food reflects and alters the constitution of the bio-moral person, it follows that exchanging food between *jātis* is a very significant act. It is both a virtuous and a dangerous act, as it establishes commonalities and differences; proximity and distance. I will analyse the toleration of tension in exchanges in detail through a focus on the 'laminated subjectivity' of one woman, Habiba Bibi.

### **Habiba Bibi's 'laminated subjectivity'**

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Habiba bibi, a woman in her forties and Dada's wife, is a maternal figure who treated me as a daughter from the beginning of this fieldwork, caring for me as much as criticising me. She is curious to the point of nosy, and the information she has gathered throughout the day is translated in vicious gossip, articulate opinions and radically generalising statements. The statements do not always inform her practice as much: in any particular situation she shows herself to be both empathetic as well as pragmatic. She seemed to lament her relative lack of prosperity in Khadim Para and would cover her vulnerability with brag about her well-to-do affines. She cherishes local customs, whether

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<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, given the significance of food as a constitutive substance, it may not be surprising that Bengali Muslims consistently use the Urdu word "*pāni*" instead of the Bengali word "*jal*" for 'water' – one of the few words that distinguish the everyday speech of Muslims from Hindus in West Bengal. That is, together with nearly the entire kinship terminology. They would persistently say that it is because they are of a different *jāti* that they use a different kin terminology.

Bengali or Islamic (and she makes little distinction unless she has picked up somewhere that she *should* make that distinction): she is a proud and skilled weaver of mats and an excellent cook; she sings *ghazals* and loves the dancing at weddings. She is ambivalent about the Islamic reformism her husband advocates: more than once I found them bickering about the prohibitions on shared Bengali customs. To please her husband and enhance her status, she started reading the Quran in the afternoons with a neighbour (taught to them by a local madrasa boy) but she showed very little interest.

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On an April morning early in my fieldwork, I am sat with Habiba on her veranda, cutting vegetables for the lunch. She asks whether my parents don't mind that I, as a Hindu, attended an Islamic congregation [which I had done the week before]. I try to explain to her once again that I am not a Hindu as I don't have a *dharma*. Habiba points out that this is not possible, so I ask her what *dharma* means for her. She is not actually straightforward in her answer, needs to think some and mumbles some, does not seem to like me having asked this question. The first point she mentions is to pray *nāmāj* five times a day, secondly, that Muslims don't eat in Hindu houses. Muslims can share tea but not rice with Hindus, and neither would Hindus have rice in their houses. So to Habiba, the second most significant characteristic of her *dharma* is a prohibition on the exchange of food with Hindus. I press her further, asking whether she could also not have a meal with Christians, or any other *jāti*. She backed out somewhat, laughing and waving her hand, and eventually says: 'Yeah yeah yeah...we can have a meal. If we feel like it we can have food' (*He he he...bhāt khete pāri. Bhālo lāg'le khete pāri*). It is not entirely clear from this context what factors could convince her to eat a meal – the people, the food, the particular occasion? But what is clear is that one's subjective judgement of a situation is very important in determining what the actual rules of *dharma* are. The following vignette will be illustrative.

Habiba Bibi could not hide her pride when telling me that she and her family had been invited to a Brahmin wedding in the nearby town. After the wedding, I ask Habiba Bibi and Dada whether the Brahmin wedding was very different from a Muslim wedding. Half ridiculing and theatrically gesticulating, Dada

explains the procedures: how the couple is attached to one another with a cloth, how they walk around the fire seven times, with some ghee here, some milk there... In a more serious tone, he proceeds: 'and then they do what Muslims do as well, as it says in the Quran Sharif: they say that they will love each other, take care of each other, feed each other, that there won't be anyone else.' And then there is food, of course. Habiba and her husband commented in great detail on all the dishes they had eaten (a very common thing to do after attending a wedding). A little later, however, after her husband had left the house, she told me with an expression of repulsion, that the food hadn't been good, it had smelled bad, and, significantly, 'those Hindus don't know how to prepare fish'.

This vignette is significant in many ways. Clearly, the couple took pride in being invited to a Brahmin wedding, in a town. The consumption of large amounts of luxurious food enhances one's capital, hence the detailed description. Even the prohibition of *hārām* food, which Dada had previously expounded to me as if of utmost importance, had been taken lightly. They hadn't eaten meat, as the animals wouldn't have been slaughtered in the *hālāl* manner, however they had eaten fish. Nevertheless, Habiba had felt the need to distance herself by deprecating the quality of the food. Moreover, she dismissed the Brahmins' superiority and re-established a claim to the Bengali *jāti* by saying that the Brahmins had not been able to prepare fish well. Bengalis take great pride in the regional fish preparations, so especially for a woman usually confined to the kitchen it is not surprising that being more or less able to prepare fish gives one a more or less rightful claim to the Bengali identity.

Habiba Bibi positions herself in a subordinate position to Brahmins by accepting their food with reference to the caste hierarchy of purity and pollution but quickly re-positions herself as superior in the Bengali culinary landscape. The disapproval of the fish preparation of the Hindu cook at the wedding importantly demonstrates the resonance between the Brahmins and Habiba Bibi which is possible because of the shared positionality of being Bengali, expressed in culinary preferences. When this sense of mutuality is negated, Habiba Bibi gets upset, as the following vignette shows.

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At the roadside, around the corner from the madrasa, there is a small *pārā* of five Hazra households (scheduled caste Hindus). The small houses are made of mud and *kāmcā* ('raw') brick. One of the women living here, Sundori, is the distributor of wedding invitations in Khadim Para and Sheik Para – her husband is mentally and physically disabled and this work allows her to earn some money. This means that she gets to enter all the houses, and taken that she is very chatty she becomes a walking source of gossip the Muslim women (and myself) all too eagerly tap in to. Sundori passed by Habiba's house earlier that morning to deliver a wedding invitation. They had seemed very friendly with each other, sitting together on the veranda and exchanging news and gossip. Sundori is barely literate, so Dada had helped her put the invitations in the sequence of the households, taking time to tell her how to go through the *pārā* in order to deliver the right invitation to the right house. After Sundori has left the house, I ask Habiba Bibi whether they could have food together. No, says Habiba, and pulling her nose she adds that she did offer Sundori tea, 'but she is very *badmāś*, she would not have anything here'.

The Hindu woman would not want to enter in a relationship of reciprocity with Habiba; not only because she will not want to be indebted to Habiba, but also because she does not want to share a substance with a community that occupies a lower position within the hierarchical social order. Habiba recognizes this and condemns the refusal of exchange. Sundori entering Khadim Para is both literally and symbolically a significant act, as the very exchange of greetings and giving of directions 'domesticates what is potentially an antagonistic, violence-inviting space' (Ring 2006: 89). Khadim Para must feel like an antagonistic space to the Hindus (Hindus do not usually enter the Muslim *pārās*), which Sundori is allowed to domesticate by being employed to deliver the invitations. Vice versa, the symbolic space Sundori occupies by her presence is domesticated by her being in a subordinate (employee) and dependent (illiterate) position. While people may actively seek spaces of positive resonance, this is a continuous labour if one wants to remain in a hierarchically superior position and remain faithful to the theological norms of one's *dharma*. However, the lack of exchange of tea continues to infuse the

relationship with tension, as those with whom one has very little exchange are 'dangerous strangers, potential ill doers' (Ring 2006: 89).

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With the increasing puritanism of the Islamic normativity of the Deoband, the boundaries of what can and what cannot be shared become sharper, often much to Habiba Bibi's discontent.

Ahead of the most auspicious day in the life of the poet Jayadeva (a local Hindu festival), all Hindus prepare rice pancakes (*piṭhe*) to exchange with their affines. I had noticed that in some of the poorer households in Mach Para, the Muslim women were preparing *piṭhe* as well, and they would equally send those to the affines in other villages. I ask Habiba Bibi whether she would prepare *piṭhe*. In a sullen mood, she answers that she won't, because the *maulānās* had forbidden Muslims to prepare the special treats. 'In the past, the elderly women would prepare the *piṭhe*. In my mother's house [ancestral village], there they all do it, in Joydev everyone does it. But here we're not allowed to'. I try to elicit from her why she thinks she is not supposed to prepare the pancakes any longer. She curtly maintains that one should do whatever the *maulānās* say. But, I ask, 'isn't it fun if Hindus and Muslims do things together?' She shakes her head. 'We do our *dharma* and they do theirs. We fast, right, they don't do that, so we shouldn't do what they do either'.<sup>95</sup>

In her interactions with Hindus she takes a situated position from within her 'laminated subjectivity'; one layer of which is undergoing change with the influence of Islamic reformism in the village. As a Bengali woman who cherishes the traditions of her ancestors, Habiba Bibi is morose about the restrictions of this and other traditional practices. Even though the *maulānās* restrict the extent to which resonance with other *jātis* can be *positive*, there is still resonance. Distinction is most important when similarities abound; that is, when there is too much resonance, differences will be emphasised, or created. 'It is those who imagine they have the most in common – or fear that they have, or fear that they may have come to have the most in common – who are most

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<sup>95</sup> The prohibition of the *maulānās* to practice Hindu customs is a clear attempt at 'authenticating Islam' (Deeb 2006: 20).



likely to categorize each other as different' (Harrison 2003: 349). I will return to this point later in this chapter.

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When I talked with Habiba Bibi about women of different *jātis* in the context of the Indian nation-state, another layer of her laminated subjectivity was revealed. We talked about the rape of a young student in Delhi, which by then had received widespread attention in the national and global media. Habiba Bibi is upset and, while roughly throwing potatoes in a pan with water, she exclaims: 'Let them kill them [the perpetrators]! They now say they will hang them; that would be good. If they don't do that, it would get worse. These days, women can't even go out of the house anymore!'<sup>96</sup> I ponder out loud that it seems from the way those rapists treated the girl, that men think women are inferior, or worse, totally worthless. Habiba bites back: *Hat!* [exclaiming her disagreement] Women worthless?? Women can do all kinds of things as well!' (*meyer mūlya nei?? Meyerā o sab kichu kār'te pāre*). I ask her whether there is any difference between the women of different *jātis*. Again, she exclaims in committed tone: 'all women are equal, Hindu, Muslim, *mājhi* [Adivasi]. Everyone has equal value! (*sabāi eki mūlya*)'.

The abstract equality of a women's dignity, no matter what *jāti* she belongs to, is enacted in various encounters with the state. In education, most obviously, but also in the gatherings of the women for their micro-credit loans and in the queue for the polling booth during elections (see also Banerjee 2007). When the women gather to pay their dues to the micro-credit loan, there is no observable segregation and the Hindu and Muslim women chat freely with each other. It is an instance where the tension is suspended as all find resonance in their legal and bureaucratic equality.

### **Diachronic subjectivity**

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The laminated subjectivity of the subject-in-History should be conceived diachronically (Bilgrami 2011: 25-26). There is no moment in time when a person's subjectivity is static; instead it is continually undergoing change. One's substantive values change in the process of history, when external reasons for

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<sup>96</sup> At other moments, she would proudly state that Muslim women do not leave the house.

the support of a particular ideological disposition become internalised and become internal reasons. The idea of women of all *jātis* being equally valuable may have a long history; it may be an idea that is injected by the nationalist ideology or by confrontations with the bureaucratic machinery of the state. The fundamental equality of all human beings may sometimes be justified by tracing a shared genealogy to Adam (as Shahadat Hussain does in the opening vignette); with reference to the idea that Allah created all beings in His image; or with reference to the Indian constitution; the shared land (*deś*); shared Bengali heritage; or simply shared blood. People position their self in various discourses and tap into various socio-cultural resources; whichever seems appropriate for a particular situation.

In the Karachi apartment building, Ring (2006) recognizes the fluidity of the process in which various sensibilities become conflated and interpreted according to the context. For example, a lack of appropriate hospitality is evaluated with reference to various discourses: ‘While the failure to be “civil” is...an imagined function of residual primordial attachments, at other times it is precisely these attachments which are shown to enable “good citizenship”’ (72).

Civility towards other *jātis* is actively encouraged by the official discourse of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, the Deoband madrasa and by local *imāms* educated at Deobandi madrasas. During a congregation organised by the local Deobandi madrasas, each speaker would emphasise the need for cordial behaviour towards other *jātis*: ‘If there is a rock on the road, one should move it, no matter who may be inconvenienced; it is something one should do for any human being’; ‘Judge others by their behaviour, not by their *jāti*’; ‘One should greet everyone with welcome [saying ‘welcome’ in four different languages] and respect, no matter which *jāti*’; ‘One should not attack any other *jāti*’ (*kono jātike āghāt dite nei*); etcetera.<sup>97</sup> After Habiba Bibi had told me that the *maulānās* had forbidden Muslims to prepare rice pancakes on Hindu festivals, I had asked her whether they had said anything else regarding Hindus. ‘They’re not saying anything about the Hindus, they’re not saying anything bad about them. In fact,

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<sup>97</sup> In 2009, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind officially announced that Hindus should not be called *kafir* (infidel) but simply non-Muslims, lest *kafir* is interpreted to have a negative connotation. See Times of India: ‘Hindus can’t be dubbed ‘kafir’, says Jamiat’. This is part of a conscious effort to construct a public image of a ‘Hindu friendly Islam’, see below.

they forbid violence against Hindus (*mārā niṣedh kare*). The speakers and *maulānās* draw both on a theological and a political register; they evoke both the Sunnah and the discourse of nationalism, and both registers become the source of the idea of a civic Muslim self, and of simple exchanges like greetings. This is very similar to the situation Ring describes:

‘Despite the plethora of *hadith* lauding the expression of neighborly affection, the nature of local exchange clearly answers not simply to a kind of religious humanism but to the quality of civility inherent to the national project. This civility, not surprisingly, constructs its universality as an unmarked, *sharif*, Urdu sensibility’ (2006: 70-71).

Joygramis are proud on the neighbourliness between *jātis* in West Bengal, as opposed to the more hostile communal relationships found elsewhere in India. Several young men from Joygram have migrated to Tamil Nadu in search for labour, so Tamil Nadu is a common place of comparison. One of the stories was that one the men, Rohima Bibi’s son, had not been allowed to take part in a game of football, because he is Muslim. ‘In our ‘land’ (*deś*) that would never happen!’, Rohima would claim smugly. It may be Bengalis who are on a moral high ground above the Tamils, or the Muslims who are more civil than the (Tamil) Hindus. In any case, there is pride to rise above ‘the “scourge” of parochialism’ (Ring 2006: 71). Joygramis are well aware of the violent communalism elsewhere and this awareness informs their exchanges in the village; ‘what we see here is an existential pressure to acknowledge and respond to the critical moments that are generated at the level of the household by events taking place at the macro level’ (Das 2013: 219-20). Habiba Bibi may herself not have travelled more than 10 miles beyond Joygram, yet the circulation of information add layers to her subjectivity and informs her actions and discursive justifications for practice. ‘Discursively and pragmatically, neighbourhood and neighbourly exchange are an important site where the boundaries of ethnic and national difference gets articulated and contested and where the content of this difference gets lived, so to speak’ (Ring 2006: 70-71).

Habiba Bibi is able to position herself at times in a tense hierarchical relationship vis-à-vis other *jātis*; at other times in a clearly bounded sphere separate from other *jātis*; and at again other moments in an equal (gendered)

position in a shared sphere. She takes recourse to various idioms and dispositions; various layers of her laminated subjectivity. The positions may seem inconsistent but it is clearly not impossible to live with such inconsistencies. Nor is it a sign of hypocrisy per se. Inconsistency in value systems is probably more a default than an exception (Bilgrami 2011: 24). It depends on particular historical circumstances and ethical affordances, personal inclinations notwithstanding, whether some values take situational precedence over others, and some inconsistencies are resolved whereas others are created.

### **The resonance of *dharma***

I will argue in this section that the ‘vernacular secular’ emerges out of the common framework of *dharma*, which allows for a kind of ‘overlapping consensus’ (Bilgrami 2011; Taylor 2011). As will become clear, the way in which the vernacular secular is conceived and the overlapping consensus established is rather different from the general conception of the secular in the West (Taylor 2007). As argued in chapter 2 and 3, exchanges establish one as a human person with *dharma*; Hinduism and Islam are different normative expressions of *dharma*, but the commonality in becoming and acting from a *dharma* is key. *Dharma* allows for resonance and the ‘toleration of tension’. I consequently argue that the communal ‘other’ is ‘within’ rather than ‘without’ (cf. Peabody 2009).

### **Nerhuvian secularism / *Dharma nirapekṣatā***

In West Bengal, different vernacular terms are used to denote the secular relationship between religion and politics but the most common term is *dharma nirapekṣatā*, and I will explain this term with reference to a conversation I had with Ahmed and Rehan. Ahmed’s and Rehan’s relatively high level of education and access to information (through newspapers and news channels) should be kept in mind. However, on the basis of numerous conversations with other Muslim Joygramis it is safe to say that the gist of his interpretation of secularism is fairly representative.

In one of our conversations, Ahmed once again asserts that *dharma* is a necessity for knowing how to ‘be good’ (*‘dharmaṁ prayojan āche’*). I ask him

how that works on the level of government ('*sarkār*'), as (I say) I thought that there was no *dharma* in the government. His explanation of the absence of *dharma* is, however, strikingly visual. According to Ahmed it just means that in a government office a Hindu is not allowed to put up an image of a deity, as this goes against the Islamic prohibition of visual representations of living beings, and a Christian would also consider it blasphemous idolatry. Similarly, a Muslim would not be allowed to put up Islamic texts. I ask him whether this is what 'secularism' means. He doesn't know this English term, and deliberates with his son Rehan (who at this point in time has just passed class 12 and does know some English political terminology). What we have here, they conclude their deliberation, is '*dharma nirapekṣatā*', which means, according to Ahmed, that anyone can do whatever makes them happy (*'ye yeṭā khuśī se seṭā kar'te pār'be'*), and that everyone is free to practice their own *dharma* and their own rules and norms (*sabāi oder rīti-nīti kare*). This does not mean that people who work in the government do not have a *dharma*; 'everybody has a *dharma* so of course the MPs do as well!' And that their work is informed by their particular *dharma* is not a problem, he thinks, '*kichu habe nā*' (lit: nothing will happen from that) - after all there are many Hindu MPs here as well. I try to elicit his thoughts on whether this is not actually creating a problem, whether he feels there is a Hindu rule (hinting to the BJP's Hindutva politics) that may be detrimental for the Muslims. His mood suddenly turns chagrin, he mumbles something affirmative but unintelligible and turns away from me, not willing to further pursue this conversation. I felt that this was one of those moments where my own indignation clashed with my interlocutors' refusal to open-up a can of worms.<sup>98</sup>

Secularism is foremost understood to mean the aspiration for liberty of worship, and furthermore the equality of different religious communities. In Ahmed's words: 'Even though we Muslims are a minority, we are doing well in this country. We all have the same rights, don't we! The Hindu has a ration-card,

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<sup>98</sup> Ahmed could not possibly be indifferent to the plight of Muslims under BJP rule: his much beloved brother lives in Ahmedabad in Gujarat, and lived there during the 2002 pogrom. On a visit to Joygram, his brother commented on his experiences of the pogrom piecemeal, but in the vein of Ahmed's attitude emphasised the better work opportunities in Gujarat over West Bengal.

so do I. The Hindu has a son at this school, so do I. The Hindu gives his vote, so do I. The Hindu receives a widow's pension, so do I. The Hindu goes to the bazar in Farukhbazar, so do I. Equal!'

Significantly, the vernacular idea of secularism, *dharma nirapekṣatā*, is premised upon the idea that there is a multifarious *dharma* and that there are religious communities to start with. Indeed, the lack of *dharma* rather than the presence of *dharma* is considered problematic, not only at the level of politics but also at the level of society and economics as a whole. Since this point has already been argued in the previous chapter, here I intend to develop it a step further and assert that *dharma* is the *shared* ground for ethical action, across *jātis*.

A salient means for the negotiation of similarity and difference is food, as I have previously illustrated. What is important here is the recognition that food is a salient element in exchanges for *all jātis*. Even though food is a means to distinction, the inherent danger in the exchange of substances is foremost a shared social value. This resonance fosters the potential for toleration. This became very clear when Sohini passed away.

Sohini was an old woman from the Adivasi *pāṛā* just opposite the madrasa. She was considered senile, her old body wrinkled and bent. Her husband had passed away, and her son was a drunkard who had gone elsewhere. She did not have any other relatives, so to get by she did odd jobs in several Khadim households, ranging from plucking chicken to massaging the back of Basir's mother. She would get free meals and cash for emergencies in return and the Khadims prided themselves in their charitable behaviour towards her. After her death, Basir's mother as well as many other Khadims seemed genuinely moved. Dada collected money from all the Khadims so her neighbours could give her a dignified cremation ceremony. Otherwise, Dada thought, they would have just burned her body somewhere, and the dogs would have eaten it - an idea that was so repulsive Dada could not let it happen. 'With this money', he says with satisfaction, 'they can buy the wood and alcohol for a proper cremation'. I chuckle about the fact that Muslims give money for alcohol. Dada, otherwise vehemently opposed to the consumption of alcohol, doesn't seem disturbed by this idea though; 'they drink a lot, and they drink at their funeral. We just give

them the money so they can do the funeral the way it's supposed to be for them, so if they want to buy alcohol, fine, let them go ahead!', he says without a sign of resentment.

There is undeniably an element of patronage here; nevertheless, it is significant that Dada not only tolerates the customs of another *jāti* but is even willing to support them – particularly on an instance so clearly informed by the other *jāti*'s own *dharma*. I suggest he supports the consumption of alcohol not *despite* it being part of the *dharma* of the other *jāti*, but *because* it is, in this contest, part of their *dharma*. He would never support drinking alcohol on any other occasion.

### **Hindu-Muslim brotherhood**

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The resonance of *dharma* across *jātis* allows for the ethical imagination of a 'Hindu-Muslim brotherhood' (*Hindu Muslim bhāi bhāi*), which is a strong normative discourse, almost like a preordained script, across South Asia (Hussain 2008; Williams 2013: 237). I argue, however, that brotherhood among different *jātis* in India does not presuppose the elimination of difference. Similarity is potentially dangerous, as Blok (1998) argues in an article drawing on the implications of Freud's notion of 'the narcissism of minor differences'. I return to Blok's theory after I have discussed in more detail Bilgrami's argument regarding brotherhood.

Bilgrami (2011) critically assesses the ethical ideal of brotherhood in a paper that aims to offer an alternative conceptualisation of secularism, with ample reference to the Indian case.<sup>99</sup> He argues that fraternal relations between members of different faiths is one of the three goods sought after by secular aspirations (the other two being liberty of worship and equality of different faiths) (Bilgrami 2011: 6). Toleration, according to Bilgrami, is not sufficient for the fostering of fraternal relations. He points out that to say "you must be my brother" is paradoxically refusing the other one's truth so as to convince the other of my truth (ibid.: 27). He argues against relativist pluralism as a valuable basis for peaceful secularism because it has an excluding attitude in that it

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<sup>99</sup> See the SSRC blog 'The Immanent Frame' for a wide-ranging discussion of Bilgrami's working paper. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/secularism-its-content-and-context/>

allows each person to have her own truth. The problem of this attitude, according to Bilgrami, is that it perpetuates tension through condescending toleration, rather than confronting condescension in an aspiration for peace. If one aims for truly secular pluralism, the sentiment of toleration should be replaced by either indifference or respect (ibid.: 28). In contrast, I suggest that the containment and the very toleration of tension may be a prerequisite for the process of peace to be continued (Ring 2006). Fraternal relations may only be achieved if one *does* allow for the other's truth, by constructing boundaries rather than breaking them down.

My contention is based on the analysis of personhood and relatedness developed in chapter 2. Bilgrami (2011) seems to base his argument on the assumption that there is a fundamental separation between persons that needs to be overcome. It has been suggested that in a Euro-American cosmopolitics, relations between persons come after the fact of individual personhood, and plurality is the sum of individual human agents among whom there may be socially constructed ties (Strathern 1992).<sup>100</sup> If, however, we take the cosmogony of the Joygramis as the starting point of our analysis, we have to entertain the thought that instead there may be a fundamental sameness from which particular selves and subjectivities need to be generated. Similarity must be undone to generate the self. Distinction is at the core of the social self (Bourdieu 1984), so 'it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos' (Girard 1979: 51 in Blok 1998: 33). As I have argued in chapter 2, essentialised *jātis* need to be generated out of the chaos of the bio-moral substance. Differences and distinctions emerge from relationships of exchange within a shared bio-moral substance rather than from initial separation of substances or identities. The toleration of tension is therefore, importantly, not foremost the fostering of commonalities but the negotiation of distinction, through the establishment of hierarchies, disapproval and condescension. The often tense negotiations take place within 'a network of reciprocity and offers groups the occasion to distinguish themselves within a common framework' (Blok 1998: 37), the latter in this case being *dharma*.

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<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that this is an ideological postulation that may not reflect people's actual experience, neither in the West nor elsewhere.



In Joygram, there may at times be explicit respect, at times indifference, and at times outright condescension. The disapproval and condescension are palpable in the rejection of relations of exchange, but also throughout the discourse of all *jātis* about the other *jātis*. There would be ample talk about the ‘stupidity’ of Hindus for their worship of idols, and the ‘dirtiness’ of Adivasis for their dietary and hygienic habits (and there is no lack of similarly condescending rhetoric about Muslims). Yet, for the perpetuation of harmony these kinds of disapprovals are not necessarily harmful because what matters is that all are bound together in an ‘ethic of suspense’. On this basis, the ‘vernacular secular’ emerges.<sup>101</sup>

The narcissism of minor differences also has the potential for violent escalation (Blok 1998). In the justifications of violence towards Hindus in Ahmedabad, as recounted by Ghassem-Fachandi (2009: 46), ‘images of invasion’ were consistently invoked. The images relate to particular forms of dangerous exchange: ingestion, penetration and dissection. ‘Images of invasion’ stress the fear of the dangerous nature of exchange; but also point to inter-*jāti* relatedness that allows for the exchange to be so precarious (see also Kaur 2005b). This relatedness is hinted at in Peabody’s rendering of the sacrificial element in rioting:

‘sacrifice, as an act of regeneration is premised on foundations that recognize some degree of mutuality, inter-subjectivity, and identification between the sacrificer and the victim. Within this cosmology sacrifice is an act of reabsorption, incorporation, and encompassment of the victim into the sacrificer, albeit within a position of clear subordination’ (2009: 395-396, drawing on Hubert and Mauss 1964; see also Tambiah 1996).

The sacrificer and the victim are fundamentally related; therefore the need for violent separation and subjugation occurs. I will return to the potential for violence when the trope of brotherhood negates differences or assumes too much similarity.

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<sup>101</sup> It is striking that the ‘real enemies’, as some interlocutors say it, are not the Hindus but the Jews, or the Americans and the English. The narcissism of minor differences between Hindus and Muslims is contained in an ethics of proximity and suspense, whereas there is no measure to contain the narcissistic warring between Muslims and Jews (see also Blok 1998: 47).

What unites all the resonances discussed in this section is their ideological reference point: the ideology of the bio-moral protean person; the ideology of secular liberalism; the shared theological registers. They are all incorporated in *dharma*, in the ethics of order and justice, and ‘the other’ is expected to have *dharma* too. The next section will argue that political violence is a more immanent threat to the secular order than communal violence, because, as explained in the previous chapter, politics is conceived to lack *dharma*. Especially when political differences appear more salient, Muslims stress commonalities between *jātis*, as the opening vignette already anticipated.

### **The threat of party politics**

Aleyah Bibi is a middle-aged woman from Mondal Para who is well informed about the political situation. During the build-up to the panchayat elections in 2013, she complains about the violence elections instigate. ‘The violence is so useless’, she says dismayed, ‘in the end, the ministers rule, and they are all the same kind of thieves, only thinking of themselves, and not doing anything for them, the poor villagers. ‘They are sitting in their air-conditioning, drinking tea together but you and I get in a fight’. When I ask her whether there is violence between Hindus and Muslims she waves my question away. ‘It isn’t Hindu-Muslim trouble. It’s all *party - party*’ (*Hindu-Muslim jhāmelā nay. Sab ‘party-party’*).

When the statement ‘there is peace here’ is uttered in Gujarat (Heitmeyer 2009), it can readily be understood to mean ‘peace as opposed to communal violence’. I naively interpreted my interlocutors’ similar statements (*‘ekhāne śānti’*) as such; but I was always mistaken, as what was meant was always that in a neighbouring village there was more violent party politics than here, in this ostensibly peaceful Joygram.<sup>102</sup> This only had to be made explicit to me; for all others it was clear that ‘trouble’ or ‘fighting’ (*jhāmelā, mārāmāri*) refers to violent party politics rather than to communal violence. This is opposed to the situation in places with a recent history of intense communal violence, for instance in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), where political violence rather than

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<sup>102</sup> The only exception to this rule is when explicit comparisons were made with other states, such as Gujarat, or Tamil Nadu, where a Muslim boy is not allowed to play football with his Hindu peers. Yet this was more often cast in terms of ‘we are good and they are not good’.

communal violence is the aberration of order, and political violence is what the people in power are blamed for (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009).

I feel that in West Bengal, therefore, the trope 'Hindu-Muslim brotherhood' is not only or foremost meant to contain the tension 'within' but rather the tension 'without' – it is not as much of a protection of the *jātis* from one another, but of all *jātis* against an 'external evil'. The vicious and violent nature of party politics, in West Bengal particularly associated with the communist parties, is the dangerous example of what a lack of *dharma* leads to. Against this, *jātis*, with *dharma*, stand united. Williams (2013: 244) argues that in Varanasi, violence would also be discursively rendered external and alien to a particular social, political or economic arrangement (e.g. violence as external to the silk industry). Building upon the argument developed in chapter 4, I suggest that the idea of externality has a different meaning in West Bengal; externality comes to mean external to *dharma*. The fear of violence is an existential fear of chaos: when the long-term cycle is replaced by the short-term cycle (cf. Parry 1989a). Vernacular negotiations of justice are being contrasted to 'external' penetrations of injustice in a local and contemporary elaboration of the nationalist project, which purported to 'construct the [moral] community ... against the cold monster of the state' (Hansen 2005: 121). What is most salient in my fieldsite and possibly beyond, is *dharma* against no-*dharma*, rather than Hindus against Muslims.

In everyday life, the experience of disorder is not tainted foremost by hidden communal antagonism but by the lingering tension between political parties and those vying for power. Party politics divide people into supporters or loyalists to one party or another; this identification is highly relevant when it comes to everyday survival as it guarantees access to resources and opportunities. However, it also localizes the tension between parties in the village – one's neighbours can be enemies if they support another party. The tension that penetrates the villages may be deliberately used to instigate communal violence – even if there is not necessarily a correlation between communities and parties. The pogroms elsewhere are usually considered to be orchestrated by power-hungry politicians and hired goons – the vernacular analysis is qualitatively similar to the analysis of Brass (2003). According to the

Joygramis with whom I discussed the riots in Gujarat, the riots were over a political issue, not over a religious issue (that is, not an issue of *dharma*) ('*rāj'naitik byāpār, dharma byāpār nay*'). In West Bengal, 'routine violence' (Pandey 2006b) is related to party politics; and it is party politics that inspires fear, guides action and is most salient in everyday life.

The fear of political violence may inspire one not only to talk about inter-communal brotherhood but also to actively maintain peace between communities as this is within one's capability; whereas peace between political parties seems an unachievable illusion. Both in action and discourse, *jātis* may become united against the political enemy, who is seen to be the personification of bad politics and lacks *dharma*. I talk with one of the in-laws of my friend from Joygram while we visit his wife's village nearby. The village is a reflection of Bengal's plurality: there are various Hindu castes, including Brahmins; there are both Hanafi and Ahl-i-Hadith Muslims; and Adivasis. The man says that there are no problems at all between the *jātis* here. If there is rioting at all, it is not because of *jāti* or *dharma*, but because of political power struggles. Moreover, he adds, if there does happen to be inter-communal trouble (*jāti dharma jhāmelā*), this will be resolved (*mīmāṃsā haye yāy*). Whereas conflict over political power will always be there, it cannot be resolved. Although communal violence is dangerous and deplorable, his optimistic tone of voice when talking about inter-communal trouble contrasts notably with his bitter voice of helplessness when mentioning the perpetual political violence.

### **The dissonance of the political order**

Before I conclude, I want to briefly elaborate on the actual historical and political marginalization of Muslims in India. Harmonious pluralism is a practice inspired by an ethical ideal, by fear of chaos, and also by the minority's fear of exclusion. It has been recognized that the strong Bengali identity excludes Muslims by default, leaving the Bengali Muslim to be 'a living oxymoron' (Chatterji 1996: 16; the idea that a regional identity is by default Hindu is similar in most other states). So the Bengali Muslims are *a priori* excluded from membership to the Bengali *jāti* – and they are always in a hierarchically ordered –lower– position to the Hindus. I have demonstrated in the previous chapter that state ideologies, including secularism, are supported, but that the

politicians and government officials are not conceived of as complying with the ideals.

Like the South Indian Muslim weaver (Mohammad) who features in Venkatesan's ethnography (2012), most of my interlocutors are aware of Hindu hegemony and aware of their vulnerability as a minority. Following the negative positioning as an excluded 'other', Muslims have a heightened sense of responsibility in the toleration of tension. Venkatesan (2012) acknowledges the amount of work Mohammad, the Muslim mat weaver in Tamil Nadu, put into the construction of a public image of himself (and other mat weavers) 'that was designed to portray what [Venkatesan] came to dub a 'Hindu friendly Islam' (2012: 420). She stresses, however, that this labour does not compromise Mohammad's commitment to and genuine belief in the possibility of harmony and tolerance between Hindus and Muslims. His pragmatic awareness of the Muslims' fluctuating position of vulnerability can be understood as the extra labour involved with 'toleration of tension' that Muslims undertake.

The awareness of the precarious positionality of Muslims as a minority is at times expressed in a fear for retaliation. Dada and I talked about the slaughtering of cows – arguably one of the most contentious inter-communal issues. We were squatting in front of his house while he was taking a break from chopping wood for Qurbani, which was to take place in two days. I broached the topic of the ban on cow slaughter, and he commented on the unfairness: 'So maybe the cow is holy for them, it is like a *ṭhākur* (deity). But then we could also say that the goat is sacred to us. The goat is very dear to us: it was very special to the Prophet, and it was his favourite animal, he really loved them' (Dada himself takes care of his goats as if they were his pets, or even children, feeding them milk or even tea by hand). 'So then we could say it hurts us if they kill a goat only for the sacrifice. Then wouldn't there be a riot? Surely there will be a riot!' He continued to mumble half in jest about how Hindus worship just about anything, how even a cow becomes a deity (*ṭhākur*). 'Well, let them go ahead with their silly practices', he concluded, 'but let us also do our thing'. Dada does not seem to have a problem with the theological differences in themselves. What is problematic is the lack of compliance with secular aspirations: liberty of worship and equality of faiths. If laws protect

certain faiths but not others, then laws surpass the toleration of tension within the village and the distinctions of Muslims become illegitimate rather than negotiable.

On another occasion Dada similarly said that there would be trouble if Muslims would start telling Hindus that it isn't right to worship images and idols, as it is said in the Quran. 'And if you would tell them they should become Muslims, they would surely hit you! They can come, and voluntarily convert to Islam. But we can't pressure them. It says in the Quran'. The Tablighi Jamaat members similarly say that they don't approach Hindus because that would be trouble, 'there would be a riot! (*dāṅgā habe!*)'. Significantly, the Quran is, for Dada, the source for civic nationalism, as is the Hadith in the example I quoted above from Ring (2006). Nonetheless, there is fear and threat in these accounts, because the Muslims know that as a minority they are more vulnerable.

Many Muslims I spoke to seek protection in the law: 'we are a minority, so the law is good for us', in particular the 'law' that gives every citizen the right and the freedom to practice their own religion (cf. Williams 2011a, 2012, 2013 for similar observations among Muslims in Varanasi). They include specifically the 'law', as they put it, which forbids one to speak bad about another religion. For example, it is '*beāini*', unlawful, to say something against the cremation practices of Hindus. Similarly, Muslim Joygramis accuse the BJP and Modi in particular to be '*beāini*', unlawful. In the case of the Ayodhya mosque, Muslims had to react; not only to protect their mosque but also to act against the unlawful practices of the politicians. It should be noted here that they don't accuse Hindus in general – they particularly accuse the practices of Hindutva politics. They don't see the attack on the mosque as having been plotted by Hindus or Hinduism in a generalized sense; it is only a certain section of unlawful politicians that receive the blame. Ironically, they hold on to 'secularism' as to a blade of grass, and become the greatest defenders of a system that continues to exclude them.

Ahmed points out that the mutual invitations to weddings serve, indeed, to avoid communal confrontations. 'We may live in different *pārās* here, but we invite each other to weddings. And if the Hindus are collecting money for a *pūjā*, I will give 20, 50 rupees. I could say no, but that would only give trouble. And

communal rows are very...dangerous (*sāmpradāik jhagrā khub....'dangerous'*).<sup>7</sup> It is very different, Ahmed asserts, from other rows; a quarrel in the neighbourhood or between communities is totally different. A neighbourhood quarrel (*paribeśer jhagrā*) is between two people, and a third can come in between and patch up the quarrel. This is much more difficult when it is a communal dispute (*sāmpradāik jhagrā*).

On the basis of research with Muslim Ansaris involved with the silk industry in Varanasi, Williams (2013) argues that the reproduction of peace relied heavily on mutual economic dependency. She stresses, however, that even though all parties are involved in the peaceful management of distinctions and boundaries for a shared economic fate, in the context of Muslim economic marginalisation and Hindu political dominance, 'the responsibility for reproducing peace appeared to rest more substantially on the shoulders of Muslims...who responded through strategies grounded in pragmatism, acceptance and resilience' (Williams 2013: 246). The normative and 'normalizing' discourse here is the rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood, which serves simultaneously as a prescription, a reflection and a veil for the hierarchically structured economic interdependency.

The normative trope of communal brotherhood may be effective to unite *jātis* in the struggle against vicious politics, but it also carries the potential for violent friction between *jātis*. Even though we are inclined 'to consider the fraternal bond as a model of an affective relationship' (Blok 1998: 39), competition may arise particularly among brothers as they have the most rights, functions and obligations in common. This observation brings me to consider the impact of processes of vernacularisation on the toleration of tension.

The aspiration of the liberal political ideology to promote equality as similarity (Girard 1979: 49 quoted in Blok 1998: 39) may actually have an adverse effect on order and peace in a plural society. In practice, the constitutional ideal of equality does not imply equal dignity, but the elimination of difference. As a result, I suggest that distinction is increasingly sought-after in theology because of the purported legal and bureaucratic equality in the

spheres of politics and the market, and the actual negation of difference, and as such, of the dignity of those who deviate from the hegemonic script.

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, 'religion' is categorized as a separate, private, sphere in modern society. So whereas in the public sphere there is ideally equality regardless of one's religion, the private sphere of religion becomes the space where distinction can be cultivated. This is very clearly happening in India. The 'authentication of Islam' (Deeb 2006), that is, in this case, the purification of Islam from Hindu elements, is a prime example. What this means in practice, is that distinction becomes dogmatic, since theology is non-negotiable. Islamic reformism limits the kind of exchanges possible so that distinction cannot be generated out of negotiation but becomes a static state of being.

In a mutually reinforcing process, the Islamic and Hindu reformist projects therefore reproduce the homogenisation and 'freezing' of communities in the postcolonial project. In the latter project, rural people are categorised in religious communities rather than being treated as individual citizens. Equality becomes a matter of equality between communities. Those communities become homogenised and politicised in the modern bureaucracy (Tambiah 1996). 'The relatively small scale, 'face-to-face' communities of the past have given way to the relatively large-scale, bureaucratised communities of the present. These are *lived in* but perhaps not *lived* as they once used to be' (Pandey 2001: 203, emphasis in original), which, I suggest, implies that there is less space for the everyday negotiations to contain tensions. The boundaries and distinctions become frozen in time and they are not sufficiently recognized as 'products of human interaction and the human imagination' (ibid.: 203-4).

Even if one would accept the problematic ideal of equality of groups (rather than of individual citizens), this is an ideal that the practice of politics and the market do not live up to (as demonstrated in the SCR 2006). Moreover, the state is supposed to be an arbiter who promotes the idea of religious tolerance in a pluralist society, through the guarantee of liberty to worship and equality of faiths in the public sphere.

'However, there is a considerable gap between these pluralist intentions and the actual functioning of the Indian state. While it is evident that



conflicting communities do resort to negotiation, arbitrated by the state, it is also clear that the state does not transcend society. Indeed, if there is a shared view of the state in India it is that “others” have captured it and use it against “us”. [...] When a pluralist state can no longer project its transcendent, arbitrational image, conflict can only be solved through violence’ (van der Veer 1994: 23).

This is the tension that Ahmed implicitly referred to when he said that in a neighbourhood quarrel, a third person can come in between and negotiate. He said this is much more difficult in a communal row. Ideally, the objective third party should ultimately be the state, but in reality it cannot be trusted to have this ‘transcendent, arbitrational image’. Whereas the efforts to maintain peace of the villagers do work out in practice, those of the state are not equally effective.

When the state fails to deliver equally to all communities, the potential danger is, then, that communities will vie with one another for rights and recognition. In West Bengal, during the years after my fieldwork, this has had detrimental effects. The TMC is now perceived as appeasing Muslims, inciting the anger of other communities. The result is a further, and more dangerous, communalisation of the society. To a certain extent, the lack of faith in a ‘transcendent state’ motivates the responsibility to continue to negotiate in harmony. Differences and hierarchies can be effectively negotiated within the village, and the tension sustained. However, if differences and boundaries result in the lack of access to resources and opportunities, the tension becomes unbearable. Masiruddin sums it up very well: ‘Secularism is very good! It means that we are all equal. But...secularism is not happening (*‘Secularism’ khub bhālo! Māne, sabāi samān. Kintu...‘secularism’ hacche nā*).’

Secularism is not ‘happening’ because the official discourse is fundamentally flawed. Hansen’s rendering of the idea of secular tolerance will be useful here:

‘Secular tolerance was...part and parcel of the civilizing mission of the modern state vis-à-vis the masses who, until they were sufficiently educated, had to remain under the paternalist tutelage of the state, and under the supposedly responsible leadership of what in Indian political discourse is known as “educated sections.” This discursive structure has also perpetuated the dominant contemporary interpretation of

riots and breakdowns of civic order as the handiwork of ubiquitous criminals, land grabbers, and *goondas* (muscle men) – an interpretation which, needless to say, remains hugely useful for the political parties and agencies of state in this escalating politics of violence’ (1999: 54-55).

I have argued that, in contrast to the official discourse that implies secular tolerance is something that needs to be executed by the state over the ‘uneducated’ and ‘uncivilised masses’, it is the rural citizens who do the labour of the toleration of tension from their complex, laminated subjectivities. The secular practice of the state is a hurdle in the processes of peace in the villages as community boundaries are reified and secular ideals not complied with. The ‘breakdown of civic order’ is in fact interpreted as the handiwork of politicians, or, indeed, of *gunḍās* working for state agencies. As a result, political parties and agencies of state are increasingly delegitimised.

The responsibility to maintain civic order is therefore displaced from the unreliable state to the communities, and the responsibility to continue to bear the increasing tension is particularly strong for the Muslims, as they feel most unprotected by the state. The awareness of their positionality as a minority in a Hindu majority nation-state creates an impetus for Muslims to engage in exchanges and to continue to negotiate plurality. In order to do so, one tries to live according to *dharma* – *dharma* is the source of virtue. A more pious, puritan Islamic lifestyle is inspired both by the increasing need to find distinction in theology and the increasing need to live ethically inspired. A strict adherence to Islamic reformism, then, may be considered as an effort to continue peaceful pluralism in India. The next chapter will explore in more detail the observation that Islamic reformism is a particular mode of engagement with the idea of modern citizenship.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I will outline two apparently contradictory suggestions. Firstly, I have suggested that despite peaceful pluralism, Muslims are aware of their position as a marginalized minority. The paradox is that marginalization feeds into the impetus of exchange to negotiate peace and to ‘tolerate tension’. Part of the ethical project of Islamic reformism, then, can be seen as the effort to

strengthen one's *dharma* to be able to continue bearing this responsibility, and to be included in the Indian nation-state. Secondly, however, I suggest that Islamic reformism may ultimately have a reverse effect. The emphasis on a puritan Islamic lifestyle and disposition goes against the grain of the South Asian ideology of sociality. It increasingly denies fundamental relatedness with non-Muslim *jātis*. This is a process that goes hand in hand with communal politics, which often in the name of secularism emphasise the religious differences between *jātis* over and above the shared elements of *dharma*. The result may be an increasing essentialisation and corollary segregation of *jātis*, as opposed to the very reason that motivated Muslims to reform themselves and their community. It is an ethical tragedy that Muslims become the perpetrators of their own marginalization.

## 6. Ethical transitions: Joygrami context, global resonances

### Introduction

Masiruddin Khadim is a relatively wealthy businessman and an occasional participant of the Tablighi Jamaat. He is the eldest son of Abu Bakr Khadim, by his second wife (both wives have passed away). Abu Bakr is the caretaker of the shrine of Ma Champa, located at the land now used for the cattle market.<sup>103</sup> Since he is of the caretaker lineage, his family runs a part of the cattle market independently. The family owns a relatively large amount of rice paddy land, which is mainly managed by Masiruddin's younger brother Wahed. Masiruddin owns a house in Barakpur, where he spends about half his time, with his wife and two sons. Besides running several small businesses, he is a contractor: he has obtained the tender to collect levies for the transport of cattle over the bridge just outside Farukhpur. Masiruddin is not actively involved with any political party but is prominently present at important political events. He closely follows the news regarding Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb's political party and attends any local Islamic congregations, in particular those of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind.

One day I ask Masiruddin to tell me why he joined the Tablighi Jamaat. Masiruddin narrates that he was an ordinary boy, who didn't give Islam much thought. He had been living the '*lifestyle*', and with a big smile on this face he shows me pictures to testify. Like many rural boys aspiring for urban masculinity, he had his pictures taken in a studio, wearing a transparent shirt, tight jeans, large sunglasses, and a clean-shaven chin. On several pictures he can be seen with groups of similarly dressed friends, many of them Hindu. Together, they had gone many places: Kolkata, Delhi. Although he is a tad embarrassed about his previously un-Islamic lifestyle, he proudly comments that he looked like the actor Salman Khan in those days.

At some point in his twenties, he started on a quest for ethical guidance: however exciting his life was, he felt a moral void. Inspired by his Hindu friends,

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<sup>103</sup> Khadim is a name originally from Persia, meaning guardian, attendant. From being guardians of the shrine of Champa Bibi (Ma Champa), the Khadims have evolved in being the guardians (*musualis*) of the WAQF property that includes both the shrine and the cattle market.

he started to read the Hindu scriptures, and afterwards the Christian Bible. He tells me that he realised that the Hindu scriptures do not provide any norms and values, and that the Bible is written by humans, so it is not very valuable either. He came to the realisation that the Quran, directly given by Allah, provides such a complete system for life, both scientific and ethical, that he had to follow the 'right path' and immerse himself in Islam. Masiruddin went for four months to the global headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi and changed his lifestyle: he now wears a white *kurta*, prays five times a day, fasts during Ramadan and attends all important local Islamic congregations.

He continued, however, to work as a contractor and to be involved in local patronage appearing on political stages. For Masiruddin, these practices are not anathema to his strong belief that Islam is a 'total way of life', as he would say. In fact, his revaluation of Islamic ethics and aesthetics did not only provide him with the techniques for self-cultivation, but also with a morally higher status in the marketplace and the political landscape.

Masiruddin firmly believes that a better society begins with becoming a better person individually. It is for this reason that he speaks very highly of the mission schools. Masiruddin's eldest son is a high achieving student at the Barakpur secondary school, but he is soon to be sent to an Islamic Mission school elsewhere so that he can be highly educated in general subjects while being inculcated with self-discipline, modesty and piety. For Masiruddin, it is important that the mission education does not only benefit Muslims, but the entire country. 'The Muslims lag behind, and thanks to the mission schools they will 'rise up' (*piche theke uṭhe yāy*). India is a democratic country, and I am a part of this country, so if I study better, if I can do a government job (*cākrī*) well, then that's good for all of India. Muslims can't lag behind'.

This chapter explores the presence of the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) and other expressions of Deobandi reformist Islam in Joygram. Foremost is an assessment of the complex ways in which the Muslim Joygrami cosmopolitics elucidated in chapters 2 and 3 are informed by, and in turn inform, the political and economic structures discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Simultaneously, I evaluate the global

resonance of these themes. Throughout the thesis so far, I have demonstrated that Joygramis express a desire for moral regeneration. Moral regeneration involves a revaluation of *dharma* as an ethics of justice in all aspects of life; a project that stands in an ambiguous relationship to the modern categories that have been incorporated into the social imagination. The revaluation of *dharma* is most visibly expressed in the ethical transitions related to Islamic reformism. The expression of moral regeneration is Islamic because Joygrami Muslims are already essentialised in the Muslim *jāti*, and ethical practice is conceived to be possible only after one is generated as a human person through submission in faith. This chapter also investigates in detail the aspirations and implications of the ethical transitions currently taking place in Joygram. I maintain that the ethical renewal in Joygram is not essentially or exclusively Islamic; it is shaped within particular ethical affordances and in fact has resonances with other renewal or regeneration movements elsewhere.

At the outset, I want to emphasise that not all Joygramis are equally self-consciously reformist. Most of the time, the majority of the Joygrami Muslims 'live Islam', bound up with other aspects of life, and as part of a more encompassing aspiration to 'live well' (Marsden 2005, 2009). Yet, a growing number of young men in Joygram join the TJ, and those who do not are influenced by their *Da'wa* (proselytisation). The imams in local mosques are Deobandi, the local madrasas follow the Deobandi curriculum, and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind frequently organises gatherings including sermons. Even though not everyone holds a coherent reformist Islamic theology, I can positively assert that every Muslim in Joygram is influenced by reformism to some extent and most are consciously aware of the changes in ritual practices and Islamic doctrine. I refer to those Joygramis as 'reformists' or 'Deobandi' who explicitly call themselves Deobandi, who dress accordingly, and who explicitly reflect on their Islamic practice in line with the reformist doctrine, including both lay Muslims and clergy. Furthermore, I focus in this chapter on male Muslim Joygramis, since it is almost exclusively men that are explicitly Deobandi reformists or TJ participants.

The chapter is outlined as follows. Firstly, the theoretical orientations are offered that focus on the perceived relationship between Islamic reformism and modernity. Secondly, the literature on Islamic reformism is contextualised with the work of Hansen (2009) and Comaroff (2008). These two works provide two contrasting, and globally salient models of personhood. However, an ethics of conviction, whether 'cool' and rational (Hansen 2009) or 'uncool' and passionate (Comaroff 2008) is central to both models. Third I explore whether Islamic reformism in Joygram resonates with global ideals of modern personhood and the ethics of conviction. Focusing on moral failure and responsibility, I explore how joining the TJ imbues participants with a sense of self-worth. This stress upon responsibility appears strongly linked to an apolitical theology of individual self-reform.

The fourth step in this chapter explores the mystical and embodied elements of the Islamic practice of the TJ. This combination of the rational and the mystical demonstrates the unique and yet globally resonant modality in which the Joygrami Tablighis produce modernity. The fifth step discusses the multiple complex ways in which becoming a reformed Muslim demands change within or a withdrawal from exchange practices generative of relatedness and ethical personhood. I reveal the ambiguous and ambivalent ways in which Tablighis interact with traditional patronage between the nearby hamlets, and reciprocal exchange between households, seeking to transform whilst nonetheless becoming embroiled in these exchanges. These observed interactions crystallise in the sixth concentration of how changes in aesthetics are related to ethical transformations. Exchanges in the community demonstrate clearly that the different levels of conviction within the village lead to accusations, struggle and considerable tensions; I will call these instances of 'extra-ordinary ethics'.

The final section discusses the struggle to improve '*culture*' in order to be included in the modern Indian citizenry. I conclude by exploring how the particular struggle of Joygrami Muslims to navigate local and modern ideologies offers implications for their position within the secular Indian nation-state.

### **Theoretical orientations: a global grammar of modern personhood?**

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The TJ and the Deoband are among the numerous South Asian Hindu and Islamic reformist<sup>104</sup> movements that originated around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in interaction with British colonialism, Christian missionaries and Hindu reformism (see e.g. Ahmad 2009; Bhatt 2001; Hansen 1999; Metcalf 1989; Sikand 2002; Van der Veer & Lehmann 1999). The Deobandi school of thought originates in the Darul Uloom Deoband Islamic seminary in Northern India (Ahmad 2009; Metcalf 1989). Its doctrine is spread mainly through its vastly expanding network of madrasas (Gupta 2009) and through the network of the TJ. The TJ, a transnational voluntary movement of lay preachers, originated in 1927 in Mewat, near Delhi, and has since spread to all countries where Muslims live (Masud 2000*b*; Sikand 2002). The presence of the TJ in West Bengal has been limited until recent decades but is rapidly growing.<sup>105</sup>

Some of the scholarly work on Islamic reformism reproduces a common perception that arises from the Western media, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, namely that Islam and in particular reformist Islam, is the 'antimodern antithesis' to liberal, secular modernity (Deeb 2006: 4).<sup>106</sup> Alternatively, it has been emphasised that reformist Islam is inherently modern because of a variety of aspects considered essential to it: Islam has rationalised and modernised from within as a result of mass education, new media technologies and increased literacy (Eickelman 1992; Eickelman & Anderson 1999; Starrett 1998). In dialogue with modernity, these scholars argue, Muslims have developed a 'heightened self-consciousness' of Islam as a religious 'system' (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 39; Robinson 2008: 276). Furthermore, Robinson argues, there is an end to the authority of the past; a new emphasis on human will; growing individualism; and a process of secularisation (2008: 261).

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104 Following Masud (2000*c*: xxix) I include under the category reformism both revivalism ('restoration of the religious tradition') and faith renewal (the renewal of a faith corrupted), but not Islamic modernism (the reformation of traditional Islam to meet the challenges of modernity). The Deoband and the TJ engage in faith renewal.

105 I was told in interviews (with Siddiqullah Chowdhury Saheb) and conversations (with TJ participants, *maulānās* and ordinary Muslims) that the TJ and the Deoband had hardly any public presence until the eighties. Since then, many Bengali Muslims have gradually converted from Barelwi to Deobandi Islam.

106 See el-Aswad (2013); Morey & Yaqin (2011) for media representations of Islam; see for critiques e.g. Devji (2005); Iqtidar (2011); Mahmood (2009); Masud et al. (2009); Moallem (2002).



Although I sympathise with many of these observations, this scholarship on Islam remains problematic as it reproduces the idea that modernity is a singular and coherent project that originates in and spreads from the West to other places and 'that Muslims are presented as having to 'engage' with modernity, an external force encroaching on and disrupting their lives' (Soares and Osella 2009: 4).<sup>107</sup> The work on piety movements in Cairo (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006) and Lebanon (Deeb 2006) demonstrates, instead, that the kind of modernity that arises from public piety has vernacular origins and meanings, and is indigenously produced rather than a weaker copy of Western modernity. Similarly, studies of participation in and the influence of the TJ have highlighted various motivations and effects: alternative modes of globalisation (Noor 2014), cosmopolitanism (Horstmann 2007b), secularity (Metcalf 2003) as well as new modes of religiosity (Janson 2013). These alternative modes of being in the world have in turn locally salient political effects, contesting intergenerational (Janson 2013), gendered (Amrullah 2011; Jasani 2013; Nisa 2014) and class power structures (Sikand 2002).

These works are valuable in their dismantling of a singular modernity. However, more attention should be paid to individual variability and local conflict. I have found that in my fieldsite, Muslims engage with reformist Islam (the TJ in particular) in much more ambiguous and ambivalent ways than some studies of the TJ suggest (see for instance the studies in Masud 2000a; but see also Horstmann 2007a). Indeed, several studies have emphasised the often inconsistent and erratic perception of and engagement with reformist Islamic discourse and practices on the one hand, and both traditional and modern practices and narratives on the other hand (e.g. Bayat 2007; Marsden 2005; Schielke 2009, 2010; Simpson 2008; Starrett 2010). In the vein of the latter scholarship on 'lived' Islam, I explore in detail the life trajectories of three men (Masiruddin, Wahed, and Faizul) in order to bring to the forefront individual variability and pragmatic, situational motivations. Moreover, to demonstrate the lack of ideological coherence in Joygram, and in fact bring to the surface the

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107 Interestingly, Hansen (1996: n.33) makes the explicit comparison between the postcolonial episteme that posits the postcolonial as the 'incommensurable Other' and Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilization.

tension and incomprehension between villagers, I explore in detail two conflicts that arose in Joygram due to the reformist drive of the TJ.

Notwithstanding contrasting motivations and ambivalent experiences, the narratives of many of the Tablighis equally show commonalities underlying the variability; commonalities in modes of conviction and in aspirational attitude, and their narratives grow more coherent as their conviction grows. Differences in motivations do not undo the remarkable congruence in the *modus operandi* of the TJ across the world, from South Asia (Metcalf 2001; Siddiqi 2012) via Southeast Asia (Horstmann 2007a; Noor 2014) and Africa (Ahmed 2008; Janson 2013) to Europe and North America (see Masud 2000a; Pieri 2015). Across the world, TJ practice is best understood as a 'dialectic between individual self-fashioning and engagement with global processes' (Janson 2013: 263). I want to suggest that underlying the variability in individual self-fashioning, the 'engagements with global processes' reveal shared modes of conviction and models of personhood.

In order to embed the analysis of Joygrami reformism into a wider framework, I draw upon the work of Hansen (2009) and Comaroff (2008). Thomas Blom Hansen, in an article that traces the development of what he calls an ethics of sincerity and an ethics of conviction into a modern 'political theology of conviction', argues that the ideal of a proper self 'equipped with interiority and conviction' has become a globally influential model (2009: 2). The theology of conviction requires transcendence of the lower self and expunging of the unreflexive traditions and conventions of the past, to acquire 'purer, more modern, more interiorized and more reflexive modalities of belief, religious practice, political aspiration and cultural sensibility', in order to become modern individuals guided by 'well-defined and purified cultural, moral or religious principles' (ibid.: 20).

Comaroff (2008) critically evaluates the proposition of Hansen. Across the globe, she observes a 'rejection of the cool passion of modern reason' (ibid.: 3), expressed in a 'hankering for transcendent imperatives'; a yearning 'for a theologico-politics that can inspire a bloodless world with sublime conviction'

(ibid.: 9). This 'anti-modernist' revival expresses 'a discomfort with secular notions of society, politics and morally-neutral public life, a desire to erase the line between the metaphysical and the mundane' (ibid.: 4). This tendency is most visibly present in revitalised faiths but also in the (post-structuralist) scholarship that re-values theology and revives an attention for affect.<sup>108</sup> Whether in scholarship, in neo-Pentecostalism or in policy, Comaroff (2008) observes a move away from social reason to metaphysical reason, to empathy and ethics in the market and in politics; and a revaluation of public emotion, the magical and the transcendent.

While both frameworks tend to universalise Western themes, without necessarily finding proximate actors and agencies through which these themes can be shown to have been transmitted, their discussions of sincerity, conviction and authenticity are nonetheless useful as a heuristic lens through which to explore the particularities of Joygram, as well as the global resonance of the themes discussed. Despite the critiques on the scholarly reproduction of a singular Western modernity addressed above, it equally has to be recognized that normative modern imaginaries (Taylor 2004) have travelled and travel the world to villages such as Joygram with colonial bureaucracies, via mass migration and electronic mediation (Appadurai 1996). The 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000; cf. Hefner 1998) neither only have their onset in Western modernity, nor emerge elsewhere in isolation. Moreover, Hansen emphasises that these proscriptive notions of modern personhood 'exist as moral discourses that enunciate cultural *ideals* rather than deep and fixed cultural *ideas*' (2009: 19, emphasis in original). In this light, I will take both Hansen's and Comaroff's models to be ideal-types to explore the vernacularisation of modern aspirations.

The encounter with modern ideals of personhood through participation in transnational movements like the TJ, and engagements with global forms of Islamic reformism offers new kinds of ethical affordances to Muslim Joygramis. What I foremost want to point out here is that the tendencies of modern

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<sup>108</sup> We could include anthropologists' recent interest in embodied virtue ethics, and a call for a genuine engagement of anthropology with theology (Fountain & Lau 2013).

conviction are not exclusive to Islamic reformism. The work on piety movements has been critiqued for having a 're-exoticisation effect, which sets reformism as a uniquely 'Muslim' way to be modern' (F.Osella & C. Osella 2008: 319). In South Asia, Islamic reformism developed in close interaction with and shares many resemblances with Hindu reformist movements (Metcalf 1989; Masud 2000*b*). Janson (2013: 259-265) observes that in Gambia, the TJ and Pentecostalism mutually influence each other, and some of the young men involved with the TJ refer to themselves as 'born-again Muslims'. Janson's work draws attention to the need to embed the analysis of Islamic reformism in a wider framework. Recent decades have seen many forms of regeneration movements and of cultural, moral, and religious revivalism and reformism, among for instance Australian Aborigines (Cowlshaw 2012); Buddhists in Southeast Asia (Cohen 2000); and including liberation theologies in Latin America (Smith 1991); and charismatic and fundamentalist Christian movements in the USA (Harding 2000; Luhrmann 2012) and elsewhere (Coleman 2000; Gifford 2004; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004*b*).

I suggest that reformist aspirations in Joygram are the result of a hermeneutics between the local cosmopolitics, the politico-economic environment and globally circulating models. The aspirations of Tablighis and reformist Muslims in Joygram are a complex combination of 'cool' and 'uncool' passions; of modern, global forms of reflexive, interiorised conviction with embodied virtue ethics and desires for mystical transcendence. Globally circulating models of modern personhood are not simply imitated but create new ethical affordances (Keane 2015) and articulates a new grammar to the concept of 'the subject', including new kinds of 'ethical autonomy and aesthetic self-invention' (Asad 2003: 225).

Despite the resonance with modern conviction, reformism in Joygram ultimately defies a categorization as 'modern' or 'secular' or even 'religious' in the 'Western' sense because it is rooted in *dharma*. *Dharma*, I have argued, is an ethics of order and justice that entails a holistic macro-cosmic vision as well as a locally particular virtue ethics. Indeed, the ethical transitions in Joygram entail political aspirations of embedding ideologically separated spheres of life in a

*dharma* of justice and order that defies any binary oppositions of sacred/secular, private/public and so on.

The curious combination of 'cool' and 'uncool' conviction in India is rooted in local cosmopolitics, yet is simultaneously a creative response to the ambiguous modernity produced in the Indian nation-state. As I have argued in the introduction to this thesis, postcolonial India never displayed a seamless separation of the sacred and the secular: in the postcolonial anti-politics discourse the communities were meant to be the harbourers of sacred morality and the source of public ethics. 'Religious convictions were not a liability in public life, but rather a sign of moral consistency and patriotism' (Hansen 2000: 258). However, 'religious culture' should not infiltrate the secular space of the Indian state. This paradox simultaneously denied the communities the aspirations for modern personhood, as modern citizenship remained at an arm-length distance from the reified communities, particularly from those deviant from the hegemonic (Hindu) script. Islamic reformism makes Muslims even more obviously different from the hegemonic national culture, so even less eligible for inclusion in the nation-state. As a result, many Muslims in Joygram find themselves in 'an impossible double-bind: faced with a choice between being charged as 'bad Muslims' if they ignore the call to reform or as 'bad Indians' if they choose to follow reform' (F.Osella & C.Osella 2008: 251). Taking this 'double-bind' into account, I want to allow for the tragedy of failure: the aspirations for modern personhood are *a priori* curtailed by the very structure of Indian secular modernity.

### **Narratives of conviction**

The brothers Masiruddin and Wahed, and their kinsman Faizul are exemplary figures when reflecting upon narratives of conviction in relation to reformist Islamic movements in Joygram. I have briefly recounted Masiruddin's story in the opening vignette. To reiterate, for Masiruddin, the TJ first and foremost involved a revaluation of the ethics and ritual practice of Islam, yet this did not signify a radical break with his past. The aesthetics of the TJ and the more pious disposition were woven in with his life as a businessman and a proud citizen of India. The stories of Wahed and Faizul are rather different.

However different the narratives, they bring to the forefront two key characteristics of reform in Joygram. Firstly, the motivations for joining the TJ are grounded in a sense of moral failure and responsibility for the moral regeneration of the Muslim community. Secondly, the stories are marked by a gradual inculcation of an embodied, pious conviction, and a withdrawal from previous practices.

### **Wahed Khadim**

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The first time I met Wahed he made a charismatic appearance, in his clean white *pāñjābi*, white trousers and white *tupī*, a wild beard and hair growing down the back of his neck. His charisma grew as he told me about the TJ with visceral enthusiasm. His father Abu Bakr, in a locally unusual green version of the Islamic dress, with similar long hair and a grey goatee, seemed to listen to him in a similar subdued manner as I did. When I asked Abu Bakr whether he participated in the TJ as well, the answer is that no, ‘I stay at the shrine (*āstānā*)’, and they showed me a dusty picture of a colourful tomblike structure with the father posing in front. Wahed’s smile suddenly turned uncomfortable. It soon became clear to me that this household, with the guardian of a tomb and two TJ participants under one roof, was the exemplary micro-cosmos of the larger ethical transitions taking place in Joygram.

Wahed had been one of the first to join the TJ in Joygram, some eight years ago. He says he had felt inspired by the TJ on an encounter with a group of travelling preachers on a visit in a nearby village. Together with a young day labourer called Ibrahim, he is the driving force behind the TJ’s activities in Joygram. In his daily life, Wahed is foremost preoccupied with the paddy fields, and spends his Saturdays in the office at the cattle market, yet his involvement with the TJ and the outings (Ar: *khuruj*) are gradually taking up more time. During my nineteen months in the village, he went twice for a four-month tour to Delhi; every month for three days to nearby villages; and a few times for forty days to villages in other districts in West Bengal. As he is probably the wealthiest of the regular participants, he acts as a patron: whenever groups of Tablighis from other villages visit Joygram, he takes care of most of the expenses of food and his house is the place where meals are prepared. He

greatly enjoys the solidarity among the Tablighis, as well as the *Da'wa* (proselytization) itself. He is a passionate speaker and an austere teacher of reform to the other villagers, which is not always appreciated.

His wife Pompa, one of the few women to wear a *burqa* when going outside of the hamlet, also participates in the TJ; she has gone for two three-day tours during my stay (in contrast to Masiruddin's wife, who works as a nurse and barely cares to even cover her hair). Pompa showed a genuine interest in learning the Hadith, and spent her rare spare time reading it. I increasingly overheard her passing on to other women in the hamlet what she had learned on the outings, with a newly gained confidence. She never again appeared in a sari or a nightgown, instead wearing a *salwar kāmeez* at all times, albeit somewhat grudgingly.

Wahed has applied for a place at the Al-Hilal Mission School in Joygram for his eldest daughter, long before its doors were open. His youngest daughter will attend the girls' madrasa that has recently opened in a nearby village. He has great plans for his only son: he shall be highly educated both in Islamic subjects as well as in general subjects, so that he can succeed in life, but foremost, so that he can spread Islam across the world, since he will be fluent in both Arabic and English.

Initially, Wahed had been very enthusiastically congenial towards me. Although his hospitality and friendliness never dwindled, he increasingly adopted the 'proper' Islamic attitude of distance towards women: he did not come to sit next to me anymore and avoided eye contact and jocular chit-chat. Especially in public he hardly acknowledged my presence, initially apologetically, but increasingly more sternly. In our continuing conversations about Islam, he ever more emphasised the centrality of *imān* (belief) and the afterlife. His attitude changed not only towards me. After another three day meeting with the TJ, he entered home with a formal *Salaam Aleikum*, eliciting a giggling response from his wife. He lectures her on the Hadith, and scolds his father for singing Arabic verses without knowing the meaning. Wahed became ever more aware of Islamic aesthetics, and whereas Masiruddin would continue to occasionally wear jeans or a shirt, Wahed only dressed in a standard white *pāñjābi*.

## Faizul Mondal

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Faizul has an altogether different story. He used to be professional dancer and appeared in music videos. The work required him to go to Mumbai and Delhi, and other major Indian cities. All the pictures and even his shiny clothes are kept in a box, and like Masiruddin he seems proud about his previous achievements. He also ran a dance school in Barakpur, where he met and fell in love with his wife Titli, a girl from Farukhbazar who went to boarding school in Barakpur.

Despite the pride he could not hide, he told me he felt he was living a sinful life. One night when he was back in Joygram, and just three months before I arrived in the village, he had visited the graveyard (*mājār*) beside the shrine and the cattle market. An angel had appeared to him. The angel had told him that he should stop his sinful life and follow the right path to Allah. Faizul immediately quit the dancing job and moved back to the small mud house in Joygram he inherited from his mother. He started wearing a *ṭupi* (skullcap) at all times, and jocularly introduced himself to me as '*ṭupioyālā*' ('the man with the *ṭupi*') on our first encounter. His disposition and behaviour changed radically over the next nineteen months. Initially, he would not cease to passionately tell me about the virtues of Islam, and expand on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. After his initiatory four months with the TJ in Delhi, his disposition became increasingly sober and pious, even though the flicker of passion in his eyes never dwindled. Like Wahed, his greetings became more solemn and 'properly' Islamic. At the same time, he became more involved in the cattle market, where he had been doing odd jobs, and he grew from a jumpy village boy to a respectable businessman. He remained extremely friendly and hospitable, and continued to teach me about Islam whenever I visited him, but there was less of our youthful banter. His 'uncool' passion, inspired by the revelation of the angel, gradually changed into a cool passion of conviction.

Meanwhile, Titli rapidly grew from an adolescent girl in a pious woman, who cherished her *purdah* like no other woman. She was very happy Faizul had become a dedicated Muslim. His previous glamorous cosmopolitan lifestyle had inspired her with fear that he would meet other girls but now she could trust him. She started a Bachelor's degree but did not seem to like it or care. She is



happy at home, she says, although she deeply enjoyed the occasional outings with the TJ she undertook. When I came back from a visit to the TJ headquarters in Delhi, she greeted me piously: she took my hands in her and said *Salaam Aleikum*, then eagerly asked me how it was. I answered that I had been overwhelmed and inspired by the warm friendliness of the women. She looked me deep in the eyes, with teary eyes herself, and said from her heart: 'I'm so happy to hear it. Now you understand'.

### **Moral failure and responsibility**

One of the aspects that unite the three stories is a sense of moral failure or void, in which conviction arrives as a 'turning point that enables one to become a full person' (Hansen 2009: 14), not unlike Tablighis' narratives in Gambia (Janson 2013: 264) or Pentecostal testimonies in the USA (Luhmann 2004). As Hansen points out, '[s]uch narratives of becoming, of reaching fullness and maturity by acquiring a larger point of view, do indeed have a structure that seems to repeat the Christian...story of living in sin and darkness before encountering the miracle of truth' (2009: 14). In Faizul's case, the miracle of truth was indeed a miracle, and involved surrender to sacred authority (Comaroff 2008: 3). Underlying these stories are pragmatic motivations as well, and I will attend to pragmatism in a later section. But what matters here is not the actual formation of the self but the constructed narrative through which a particular kind of self is created.

In an essay on the 'moral and spiritual striving in the everyday', particularly regarding the physical proximity of Muslims and Hindus, Das (2010b) observes that Hindus located themselves in 'a kind of natural history of morality' when explaining the ethical impossibility of their actions with reference to *kaliyuga* (time of moral decline). Muslims took an active stance of moral responsibility for the time of *fitna* (equally meaning moral decline): 'the sense that the time of *fitna* was their own creation imbued their actions with a greater sense of moral disquiet, if not failure' (Das 2010b: 242). The sense of personal moral failure among Muslims inspires the idea that a better society starts with improving oneself; this is the official discourse of the TJ. Metcalf recounts that 'some Tablighis, in fact, will emphasize Muslim failure to live morally as the cause of

recent Muslim suffering today ... in contrast to those more public figures who explicitly condemn Christian, Zionist, and other oppression' (2003: 146).<sup>109</sup>

The traction of this discourse is obvious if we listen to Sheik Anisul, himself not a TJ participant or particularly pious in everyday life. For him, politics means trouble and violence (*golmāl, mārpiṭ*), and he doesn't like it a bit. He particularly does not believe that politics is the way to a more just society. 'If you want to do good, and want a better society, then you first have to become a better person yourself, then the society will improve as well. That's what the [Tablighi] Jamaat people say'. Clearly, the sense of moral failure and individual responsibility does not only come from an antipathy to the violence in one's environment, but also because of one's own involvement. As discussed in detail in chapter 4, politics is trouble, the economy is vicious; but when corruption has seeped into every corner of society, engagements with the immoral environment are inevitable. One cannot locate oneself outside the narrative of moral decay. Moreover, there is ample complaint (among Muslim Joygramis) that Muslims are poorly educated; that they just want to farm rather than progress; that those Muslims who are educated are 'hinduised' and have forgotten Islam; that Muslim boys work as gunmen; that they just want money; and generally that they live up to the stereotype of being '*badmāś*'. It is, at least in part, the responsibility of the Muslims themselves that the *bhadralok* still rules West Bengal; and that they suffer from violence and exclusion. This narrative always has the same conclusion: Bengali Muslims have forgotten Islam, and they need to be reminded of the ethics and the ritual practices of Islam.

The official doctrine of the TJ is generally considered apolitical (Ali 2003; Janson 2013; Reetz 2006) and 'for millions of participants, the injunction to disseminating individual moral reform is the movement's only mission' (Metcalf 2003: 146). I will problematize the notion that the TJ is 'apolitical' later in this chapter; nonetheless, I have found that most of the TJ participants in Joygram prefer staying away from direct involvement in politics. Wahed could at times become enthusiastic about the political party of Siddiqullah Chowdhuri Saheb

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<sup>109</sup> This discourse has a long history as the Islamic scholars in colonial India considered 'the primary reason for the Muslim decline had been believers' neglect of God's law' (Hefner 2007: 18).

(PDCI/AIUDF), but when I asked why he did not join the party himself, he answered, 'I do Jamaat'. Not that the TJ forbid him to do politics, but he reckons that 'without 'good people' you can't do good politics; even Siddiqullah may have great ideas but won't get anywhere if the people are not 'good'. So Wahed attempts to create the 'good people', and leave the politics to others. This indeed, is a reflection of the TJ official discourse: any kind of reform, including reform of the nation or the society, should start at the level of the individual, not at the level of political structures (Ali 2003: 179).

Islamic organizations do not have much choice but to focus on apolitical individual reform. The TJ and the Deoband have public legitimacy only as a 'benign', 'cultural-religious' organization, and 'the discourse of politics must obey the tacit rhetorical rules of generality and vagueness: to encourage morality in society at large, to criticize selfishness in public life, to deplore moral decay and divisive tendencies' (Hansen 2000: 259; cf. Metcalf 1989). In this vein, the TJ and the Deoband focus on moral regeneration and education within the community and do not usually engage in any political rhetoric.

In chapter 3, I have argued that there is a space for ethical autonomy in the ethno-theology of Joygrami Muslims: Allah has given humans the capacity for *jñān/phronesis* (practical judgement) in order to choose between the wrong and the right path. The autonomy that emerges from divine submission is central to the individual reform project. The idea that Allah has given Muslims the capacity for virtuous judgement means that Muslims have a responsibility for their own choices and for the consequences of their judgement. There is a dialectic between the individual and the community here: one has to make the choice for oneself, through one's own *jñān* (judgement), but one Muslim with real *imān* (faith) could save the world and there is a responsibility for the moral health of the community as a whole (see Asad 2003: 90).

The sense of moral failure is strongly related to a geographical moral hierarchy. Although scholars reject the idea of 'Great' and 'Little' traditions, and centres and peripheries in world religions, this is how reformist Muslims in Joygram see it themselves. West Bengal is the periphery, far removed from the

‘real Islam’ in the centre of the Muslim world, Mecca, or the centre of the TJ (Delhi) and areas closer to the centre in geography and practice. Wahed and other Tablighis are stirred when talking about Uttar Pradesh (Northern India): ‘There the situation of Muslims is much better than here. It looks like an Islamic place’; they wear Islamic dress; the women are all in *purdah*; and the Islamic rules are obeyed. Whereas here in West Bengal, the ‘Muslims are very far from Islam’, especially the ‘dumb’ (*bokā*) people visiting the shrine. This is due to the previous lack of madrasas and, as a result, of *maulānās*, and the absence of the TJ. In contrast, in UP the Deoband madrasa was founded, which instructs and spreads the ‘real Islam’ (*saṭhik Islām*).

Masiruddin in particular also glorifies Al Qaeda and Taliban as the most peaceful people in the world; the living example of Muslims struggling to follow the right path against the evil infiltrations of (Western) capitalism and consumerism. In his view, the Taliban and Deoband are the same. Indeed, as Hansen observes as well, Bin Laden’s credibility lies in his narrative of renunciation rather than in his words, and he has become an exemplary figure for Masiruddin and others because he ‘demonstrates pure political love, sincerity and also a sovereign disregard for danger and death’ (2009: 18).

At the same time, Joygramis are eager to participate in the liberal democracy of India, and therefore it is vital to distance oneself from the image of the ‘bad’ or disloyal Muslim. Masiruddin deeply lamented the suspicion and bad stereotypes of Muslims, in India and in other parts of the world, and wanted to demonstrate that Islam is peaceful, and that Muslims, if they follow Islam properly, foster peace instead of violence.

### **The recovery of dignity and the search for solidarity**

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The above section makes clear that the oppositions inherent in the ‘double-bind’ of ‘bad Muslim’ or ‘bad Indian’ have various corollary and seemingly irreconcilable oppositions, depending on the context (see chapter 1) and the audience (F.Osella & C.Osella 2008: 253): the educated *bhadralok* versus the uneducated Muslim; the indigenous Hindu versus the disloyal Muslim; the pious (Arabic) Muslim versus the wicked (Bengali) Muslim; and as I shall demonstrate

in this chapter, the ascetic, civilised and rational Muslim Joygrami versus the poor, uncivilized and 'stupid' Muslim Joygrami.

The cultivation of a pious self can only overcome some of these oppositions, and reproduces other oppositions. Moreover, the various forms of marginalization have become inherent to the racialised and (de-)moralised identifications. Yet, even if the politico-economic and social marginalization cannot be undone that easily, the practice of self-renewal itself recovers a sense of dignity and self-worth. The sense of marginalization and the involvement with morally degrading political and economic practices have disenfranchised Muslims from their moral dignity and ethical autonomy (see chapter 4). The TJ offers the opportunity for the personal construction of an ethical narrative. All Muslims, and not only those who have access to the *bhadralok* spaces of education and 'civilization', have access to the potential to reform and to transcend themselves, above their older 'inferior' self.

In addition, the TJ offers new spaces of solidarity and equality. The TJ demonstrates a Sufi style of leadership, which 'might be characterised by personal, charismatic and moral authority, based on chastity and sanctity as recognised by others, on erudition in the formal principles and sources of Islam, [and] on the knowledge of the Qur'ân, *hadîth* and the Sunna' (Reetz 2006: 37). The election of leadership on the basis of merit makes a significant break with hierarchical structures, such as those commonly found in Sufi circles, and unequal power relations associated with wealth or descent (Ali 2003). In the previous chapter, I quoted the Deobandi preacher who had encouraged Muslims to judge others according to their behaviour, not upon their *jāti*. He continued by saying that wealth, descent or class should not play a role either. It imputed the Tablighis, in particular the day labourers, with a sense of dignity, which they did not find in anything else. To reiterate my point in chapter 4, as 'second rate' citizens, many Muslims (and other minorities and low castes) are inevitably engaged in exploitative work, and have to earn 'second rate' money with their 'second rate' jobs. During Tabligh congregations and during the proselytizing outings such hierarchies and structures of exploitation do not play a role (see also Metcalf 2003).

As has been pointed out in most studies on the TJ, one cannot underestimate the importance of cosmopolitan opportunities and the inter-state (if not international) network that the TJ offers to its participants (Noor 2014; Masud 2000a; Sikand 2002). What transpires to be the most important for my interlocutors is the inclusivity and ethics of equality that mark the cosmopolitanism of the TJ. After his first four months tour with the TJ to Delhi and other places, Faizul was deeply impressed by the variety of people who participated in the TJ. What he had enjoyed most was the fact that everybody would sit and talk together, doctors and engineers side by side with farmers and day labourers such as himself. Friendships were forged across all hierarchies. With pride, TJ participants claim that on those meetings and on the preaching tours, the men share a deep sense of solidarity; one of the day labourers reflected with a gaze that told volumes of his experience, 'it felt...very...very special, extraordinary' (*khub 'special', asādhāraṇ*).

The value of a sense of solidarity and equality within the TJ network has to be understood in the context of the incessant violence of marginalization and condescension of (particularly poor) Muslims, yet also in the context of their suspicious position in the Indian nation-state. In the normative space of solidarity that is produced by the TJ (and that which extends from the small congregations to the Islamic *ummah* as a whole), Muslims do not have to feel suspect for their convictions and practices, and are full, legitimate persons. The nation-state - as an instrumental structure rather than an imagined community - is being subordinated to the moral project of the global *ummah* (cf. Hirschkind 2006: 118).

### **Conviction: reason and mysticism**

Hansen seems to suggest that the TJ is a perfect example of a political theology of conviction by taking a Gujarati TJ preacher in South Africa as one of the characters in his illustrative stories. This section evaluates whether the TJ as lived in Joygram is equally exemplary of a political theology of conviction. It will demonstrate the resonances between Joygrami reformism and global modes of conviction as well as the limits of resonance.

Hansen argues that in 'our global modernity, self-making is almost invariably concerned with expunging of the past and the embarrassing habits

and predilections of one's community' (Hansen 2009: 20). Indeed, one of the central tenets of the TJ and of the Deoband is the purification of Islam from un-Islamic and un-Sunni practices, as has been observed over decades of Islamic reform (Metcalf 1989; Sikand 2002). There is a strong sense of objectification and rationalisation of Islam among the reformists as they 'seek to improve and reform, they seek to expunge the lower self, the base desires, traces of an irrelevant past, embarrassing servitude' (Hansen 2009: 19). I have given various examples of the 'authentication' of Islam (Deeb 2006) throughout this thesis; later in this chapter I will give specific examples of the rejection of 'embarrassing habits', in particular dowry exchange and shrine worship.

The rejection of 'unreflexive' customary practices is justified with reference as much to science and logic as to Islamic ethics. Similarly, the commitment to the Truth of the Quran, the logic of self-discipline and the associated aesthetics are rationalised to a high degree. Masiruddin in particular was interested in the scientific value of the lessons of the Quran and the Hadith, and he claimed that the Quran is the original source of *bijñān*, science. For example, one time Wahed explained to me that when one gets angry, the Quran advises us to sit down in order to calm down, and if one is still angry, to lie down. Masiruddin was quick to add that this has to do with the blood circulation; that the blood rushes to the head when one gets angry, and that sitting down, or even lying down, makes the blood circulate in a slower pace again. On another occasion, he explained to me how even a banal thing such as drinking water was prescribed on a scientific basis by the Quran; one should put the glass of water at the lips (and not pour the water in the mouth as is common in India, because of rules of pollution among Hindus) and only swallow when the head is in upright and slightly diverted position. The reason is that otherwise oxygen would enter with the water, which could create gas problems. According to Masiruddin, the Quran and Hadith give sixty scientific reasons for an untrimmed beard and a clean-shaven upper lip, and the mode of Islamic prayer is scientifically justified as a healthy exercise. None of this undoes the sacred nature of the scriptures of the ritual practices. Rather, science is sacralised by its attribution to Allah. As I have explained in detail in chapter 3, the brain (as well as the heart/mind) is

essential for ethical judgement, and the brain is created by Allah so positive intellectual endeavour is given a sublime quality.

The rationalization and 'scientification' of Islam by Joygramis is inspired by other Tablighis and Deobandi imams, and it is common for sermons to circulate via Bluetooth on mobile phones (see also Hirschkind 2006), and by Zakir Naik on Peace TV.<sup>110</sup> As the website explains, 'Dr Zakir clarifies Islamic viewpoints and clears misconceptions about Islam, using the Qur'an, authentic Hadith and other religious Scriptures as a basis, in conjunction with reason, logic and scientific facts'.<sup>111</sup> Zakir Naik is very popular among Muslims in Joygram and men and women alike say they are becoming aware of their un-Islamic 'stupid' (*bokā*) practices of the past and try to change their lifestyle according to the guidelines offered on Peace TV.

This kind of 'scientification' of Islam has corollaries in Hinduism (Bénéï 1998) and Christianity (Cunningham 2010). It can be considered the response to the need to justify oneself in light of scientific scepticism of the value of religious scriptures (see Masud 2000c: xiii on the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century scientism on reformism in India). Attaching a scientific value to the scriptures allows the rural Muslims to make universalistic truth claims that those who are poorly educated in general subjects are not otherwise allowed to make. The eagerness of someone like Masiruddin to find scientific knowledge in the Quran suggests that he is familiar with the modernist condescension of irrational belief. In his aspiration to be accepted as a modern citizen, he would need to distance himself from the irrational believer. However, by assigning objective scientific value to the practices prescribed by the Quran, he can at once be pious and modern.

Notwithstanding the rationalization of Islam, I want to account for the fact that the TJ makes a novel combination of both reformist and mystic elements. The teachings are reformist or orthodox in the sense that the TJ seeks to emulate the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad as exactly as possible, and interprets the scriptures literally. Yet, the TJ theology and practice has strong

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110 The website of Peace TV: <http://www.peacetv.tv/en-gb/>

111 <http://www.peacetv.tv/en-gb/speakers/dr-zakir-naik>. Accessed 6.10.2015.



Sufi roots (Ali 2003; Reetz 2006).<sup>112</sup> The magical and the mystic, and the overwhelming emotion of being in unity with god are important elements of the kind of conviction the Tablighis preach. The magical moment of the appearance of the angel for Faizul is highly significant in his narrative. There was another mystical story that was circulating in the Joygram as an important moment of truth and revelation: one Tablighi had, during a small congregation, started to float above the ground. It happened in a village not far from Joygram, and Wahed and Faizul had rushed to the location. It was a moment that deeply strengthened the conviction of the young men.

Most significant for my discussion is the focus on achieving a state of piety and spirituality in the hearts and minds of Muslims through faith and ritual practice (Horstmann 2007*b*; Metcalf 2003). Parkin (2000: 12-22) has made the distinction between orthodox and mystic prayer: the former presupposes a radical separation between the worshipper and god (implying ontological dualism); the latter presupposing a unity of the worshipper and god (implying ontological monism) (see also Reetz 2006: 46). The TJ, Ali (2013) argues, can be considered ontologically monist. Indeed, Masiruddin and Wahed were most vocal on the need for a faith that cannot be put in words – the faith in the unity with Allah, which can only be experienced through practice.

Even though worldliness is subjugated to the sovereignty of Allah and the afterlife features prominently in the doctrine of the TJ, it encourages a move away from text- and rule based, externally enforced morality to an embodied ethics that unites this world and the afterlife in an all-encompassing moral order (see also Ali 2003: 180). That is, the Hadith is followed closely because it provides exemplary guidelines on how to cultivate virtuous character; and salvation only follows from virtuous behaviour in this world. As I have suggested, practices are not either this worldly or otherworldly directed in the virtue ethics of Joygrami Muslims.

The emphasis is on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy based upon texts (Janson 2013: 11). That is, even though the passionate *Da'wa* of the Tablighis is central (cf. Hansen 2009: 15-16), the teachings are based on exemplarity of

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<sup>112</sup> Sufism is tolerated and integrated as long as it is the 'right' kind of Sufism, based on the Shari'a, the Quran and the Sunnah and does not involve *pir* and shrine worship (Reetz 2006: 35).

behaviour rather than upon texts. Tablighis try to embody the Sunnah (Prophet's tradition) in their embrace of an Islam that is highly affective and sensory (cf. Hirschkind 2006).

The combination of rational, logical, embodied and mystic elements makes Islam valuable as a 'total way of life', as Joygramis would always tell me. The totalizing nature of Islam includes a defiance of some well-established modernist binaries: the sacred and the secular; rational science and irrational belief; this world and the afterlife. This kind of binary thinking has been pervasive in anthropology and particularly in the study of Islam but is not easily applicable to the Islamic tradition (Asad 2003: 224). Some Tablighi women compared life in this world with my study at university: it is a 'mere' preparation for the life afterwards but it is nevertheless essential and valuable. Therefore, the scriptures provide guidance on every aspect of this-worldly life. The orientation of Islam is not exclusively otherworldly but encompasses this world.

Reformist Muslims, then, aspire for a kind of sublime conviction that is highly rationalised and purified, but that is equally embodied and mystical. From the accounts of Hansen (2009) and Comaroff (2008), cool and uncool passions appear as two sides of the same coin and are in a complex dialectic with each other. Hansen is likely to agree: 'One may argue that if western intellectual history is marked by an emergent episteme bent on universalist reason, the same history is also marked, and enriched, by the existence of another, though weaker, romanticist episteme' (1996: 60). In Hansen's narrative of conviction, however, the romantic episteme, central to the ethics of sincerity, becomes subjugated in the aspiration for a universalistic, rational truth. It appears from the conviction and practice of the reformists Muslims in Joygram, in contrast, that there are not two opposing epistemes, but rather an episteme in which the sacred and the romantic, and the rational and the logical are inseparably bound. Reason is sacred, and the sacred is logical.

### **Withdrawal from exchange**

I have suggested that the young men and women in Joygram are drawn to the TJ in an attempt to recover their autonomy and dignity in the face of

politico-economic marginalization. However, while regaining dignity and autonomy from the unethical practices in their environment, they also gain autonomy from the bio-moral exchanges in the village. Therefore, the purification of Islam from un-Islamic elements has far stretching consequences for ethical practice. In this section, I shall suggest that even though Joygrami virtue ethics can to a certain extent encapsulate an ethics of conviction, problems and resistance arise when convictions change the proscriptive ideal of a virtuous person. This is the case when convictions make one turn away from everyday responsibilities to one's neighbours and kin, and entail a withdrawal from the virtuous exchanges that reproduce the cosmopolitical ideals. I consider these moments instances of 'extra-ordinary ethics'.

The practice that reformist Islam agitates against most is *shirk* (religious mediation), including the worship of *pir* in shrines.<sup>113</sup> Masiruddin and Wahed rejected their father's practice of mediation between *pir* and worshipper, and they taught him that even though he could still welcome and advise both Hindus and Muslims at the shrine, he could no longer guarantee them the efficacy of his power (as the power is with Allah) and he was no longer allowed to accept money for his services. Masiruddin explained the disapproval of *shirk* as follows: 'Islam is a like a complete system, like when rain falls and it evaporates and goes back to the sky to materialize in rain again. So you can only directly worship Allah, not via a mediator.'

The shrine is moreover the central locus of a 'traditional'<sup>114</sup> system of patronage involving several celebrations that the TJ opposes. The most significant is the celebration of Muharram.<sup>115</sup> Deobandi Islam maintains that Muslims should fast for two days on this auspicious day, as opposed to the traditional fighting with bamboo sticks, self-flagellation, and processions

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113 A *pir* is a Sufi saint or spiritual guide, or the descendent of a saint believed to possess spiritual powers. After the *pir's* death, her/his body is usually buried in a tomb or shrine (*dar'gā*, or *āstānā*) where s/he continues to be worshipped. *Pir* worship was until recently a widespread popular practice in West Bengal (Roy 2014).

114 I use the term 'traditional' here to refer to practices that are 'pre-reform'. I am well aware that these practices are themselves dynamic and may include 'invented traditions'.

115 Muharram is technically the first month of the Islamic calendar, but in common speech refers to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of this month. On this day, the Day of Ashura, Shia Muslims typically mourn over and replicate the sufferings of Hussain ibn Ali; Sunni Muslims usually fast in commemoration of Moses' victory over the Egyptian pharaoh. The Muslims in my fieldsite are all Sunni, but the practice of Islam in West Bengal has historically included Shia as well as Sunni practices (cf. Freitag 1989; Jaffrelot 1998; Zahab 2008).

involving music and dance. In their capacity as caretakers (*musualis*) of the WAQF property, however, they have to invest a part of the profits in the celebration, and provide the (blessed) food, hire musicians, and arrange medical assistance.<sup>116</sup> The Khadims, most of who are explicitly Deobandi and considering themselves the more reformed, educated and civilised, oppose the traditional celebration but grudgingly admit that ‘it has to be done because of the market’. If they would not continue this form of patronage, they fear that the ‘public’ (the poor, ‘uncivilised’ and ‘unreformed’ Muslims in the village) would protest. Indeed, Joygramis from other hamlets who participate in the celebrations greatly enjoy it and steadfastly maintain that they would not let the Khadims stop their stick fights. They attach significance to the stick fights because it is a tradition, a skill passed on from father to son for generations. It is fun, not a matter of *dharma* (*eman-i majā, dharma byāpār nay*). Some do acknowledge that (in particular) the alcohol abuse involved is a deviation from *dharma*, but they consider this aspect an eccentricity that does not hamper their aspirations for good *culture* (see below), including ethical Muslimness and modern subjectivity. On the contrary, for Wahed it was a crucial matter of *dharma*. He was particularly upset about the sacrilegious practices and refused to contribute his share – which in turn incurred him the grudges of the other Khadims.<sup>117</sup>

Besides *shirk*, any practices deemed Hindu are resolutely rejected, and I have mentioned some examples in previous chapters. One of the most consequential acts is the rejection of dowry, as the exchange of dowry is fully integrated in village life. Customarily, the girl’s family would pay a dowry to the groom’s family, a custom that has grown out of proportion with lakhs of rupees (thousands of pounds), fridges and bicycles now being demanded from the new in-laws. Islamic law, however, opposes this practice, so the reformist Deobandis argue against it, calling it a ‘bad Hindu influence’. I will recount in detail a conflict that occurred due to the withdrawal from a dowry exchange.

### A ‘Jamaat’ wedding

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<sup>116</sup> On WAQF: see footnote 24 in Chapter 1.

<sup>117</sup> The next year I was told over the phone that the traditional celebration of Muharram was abandoned altogether.

On a fateful day during the month of Ramadan, Rahaman Saheb had been sitting with his sons on the road side, when their neighbours (Kairul and his sisters and mother) had come up to them and started shouting abusive words (*gālāgāl*), even calling Rahaman Saheb a pig's son. This had infuriated Rahaman Saheb's sons who retaliated with physical violence. It was a shocking event, as Rahaman Saheb's sons were supposed to be exemplars of pious behaviour. The conflict revolved around the marriage of Kairul's brother Azizul, but was fundamentally about the reformist withdrawal from customary exchanges.

Azizul was a devout TJ participant, and in this capacity very close to the sons of Rahaman Saheb who occasionally joined the TJ as well. Azizul got married to a girl he had fallen in love with, against the will of his mother, who opposed the marriage because the girl's family was very poor. So while his mother was hoping Azizul would marry a wealthier girl and she would earn two lakhs by virtue of having a son, Azizul followed Islamic rule and married the girl he had fallen in love with without any money being exchanged. The wedding had been small and sober, a proper Islamic wedding, *Jāmāter biye* as they would say. It had taken place only at the girl's house and not at both households, as is traditionally the case. It had also not involved the distribution of food in the relevant *pārās*.

The fury of Azizul's family was directed at Rahaman Saheb's family because Nasiruddin (Rahaman Saheb's eldest son) had taken Azizul to meet the girl and Jamiruddin (Rahaman Saheb's second eldest son) had married the couple, but, Jamiruddin claims, only after it was uniformly approved during a local meeting of the TJ.

Mediated by Basir in his capacity as a party representative, the two families eventually reconciled. They remained mutually hostile for the remainder of my fieldwork, however, and Kairul's anger did not wane. Months later, I prompt him to tell me why he and his mother had been so upset with the marriage. Firstly, he says, 'my mom didn't even see her face! And how can he choose a wife my mom hasn't even seen yet!' Then he points to the shack behind us. 'Their house is like that. They can't offer their guests anything, not even a place to sit, not even a tea. They can't offer any respect.' Then there is of course the dowry. Already, he explains, Azizul has gotten in trouble. His affines have urged

the couple to leave the house, because they do not have the means to sustain them. Azizul's wife is pregnant but Azizul has hardly any income and isn't able to provide his wife and baby with either a house or food. 'If he would have gotten a dowry, he could have started a small business, invest the money somehow and have a regular income. But he didn't think about it, that when you need 50 rupees to feed one person, you need 100 for two people and 150 for three people. Think of the price of tomatoes, 20/kg, or potatoes, 10/kg, there are so many costs involved in feeding a family. But now he realizes, now he has come back home because he isn't fed there, and he walks in like a dog with his tail in between his legs, eats, and walks out like a dog again.' Kairul displays a sinister smile. 'And they [Rahaman Saheb's family] will also understand that they made a mistake, that you shouldn't create trouble in other people's family. Now that Azizul is in big trouble, they will all realize; they made a mistake.'

### **Extra-ordinary ethics**

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The vignette above demonstrates that the withdrawal from traditional practices and local, 'Hinduised' customs can create considerable tension between villagers and relatives. Below, I gradually address potential motivations for withdrawal, and eventually suggest that this is an instance of 'extra-ordinary ethics', which has more far-stretching consequences than exclusive attention to pragmatic motivations would reveal.

The withdrawal from traditional exchange practices could be interpreted as a change towards an individualistic economy disembedded from local exchanges. In particular changes in the life-cycle rituals may signify a new kind of individual freedom, without the demands and costs of traditional exchange relationships (Horstmann 2007a; Janson 2013) and expensive patronage like on the festival of Muharram. The official doctrine of the TJ condemns the materialism they associate with Western modernity (Masud 2000c: xxix), but reformist Islam does not per se condemn material pursuits, and individual TJ participants may find ways to combine piety with prosperity. Individual prosperity may be included in a broader ethical narrative: among reformist Muslims elsewhere economic success can be considered a virtuous act that is part of the production of the 'proper' Muslim (F.Osella & C.Osella 2009;

Rudnyckyj 2009) as in some expressions of revitalised and charismatic Christianity (Coleman 2000; Comaroff 2008).

I do not want to romanticize the motivations for change or underplay the pragmatism involved. It may be true that for some of the wealthier participants in Joygram reformist Islam offers a 'social framework that legitimises the pursuit of individualised lifestyles' (Janson 2013: 263), and in a later section I will suggest that this may be partly the case for Masiruddin. However, I suggest that the individualistic lifestyle is not the end of the pursuit for most reformist Joygramis. There are more complex ethical transitions that I want to draw out, whether ethical reform is an explicit motivation or an implicit consequence.

On the surface, there is a resonance with the 'householder's dilemma' (Das 2014; see e.g. Burghart 1983; Dumont 1980; Laidlaw 1995; Madan 1988; Parry 1994). The householder's dilemma is the dilemma of how to balance religious conviction with the demands of everyday life. Householders are inevitably embroiled in sinful worldly activities for their survival, so it is impossible to attain the goal of moral perfection. A renouncer dedicates his or her life to the sublime Truth and is considered closer to salvation. Some Tablighis and devout Deobandis aim for a level of salvationist asceticism, and the seasonal and annual travels of the Tablighis offer a space for temporary renunciation (Masud 2000c: xviii). However, at home they cannot entirely escape 'the social world of interdependence and relationships of exchange' (Parry 1994: 269). Kairul makes it very clear that Azizul has disregarded not only his mother's authority, but also the normative relationships of exchange. In his account of the story, Kairul sounds very pragmatic: the disregard of the ways in which material or monetary goods and services are customarily exchanged risks the survival and reproduction of the household. Azizul himself, and the Tablighis who supported him, may come closer to salvation in their renunciation of 'the social world of interdependence', but they have put Azizul's mother in a situation where survival rather than salvation is the main worry. In this light, Azizul could be considered selfish and individualistic; a whimsical *badmāś*.

However, the seemingly disproportionate outrage of Kairul's family points to a deeper issue which comes closer to Parry's observation that 'salvation turns its back on society and disregards its basic axioms' (Parry 1994: 269). I

have argued in chapter 3 that Joygrami Muslims embrace an ethics that is best understood as a virtue ethics; a virtue ethics that is visceral rather than interiorized, and is strongly related to the ethic of bio-moral exchange. The goal is ideally not an abstract utopia (as is the case of an ethics of conviction); reciprocal exchange itself is the source of well-being and productiveness (cf. Parry 1986: 465) and as such, the enactment of virtue and the 'art of life'. The withdrawal from reciprocal exchange is an act of disregard for the cosmopolitics of bio-moral exchange and therefore threatens the reproduction of the social generation of ethical persons. In their aspiration for the cultivation of ethical Muslimness, the reformists who withdraw from exchanges disregard the (re)production of generative Muslimness.

Reformism is by implication a reconfiguration of what is considered virtuous; of what is *khuśi* (happiness/virtue). If *dharma* is the potential of an ethics of order and justice, then reformism does not only re-establish order but also re-configures how the potential for order and justice can be realized. It centralizes a different kind of person: a person generated by the individual pursuit of ethical transformation rather than through exchanges within relatedness. Whereas the 'monadic modern person' and the 'discontinuous personage' (Lambek 2013) were both already valid constructs in Joygrami cosmopolitics, the relative salience is shifting in favour of the continuous modern person. In the process of objectification, rationalisation and individualisation, the ideology of the discontinuous, protean person loses significance. Even though salvation is possibly more important for the reformists, they do not neglect this-worldly virtue. However, the locus of virtue is the individual rather than relatedness. Conviction, for some of the Tablighis, is totalizing, and for them 'being ethically good and sincere in one's care for the 'neighbour' [is] in this view of no real consequence if not embedded in a larger vision of transformation' (Hansen 2009: 16). In their desire to transform their society to a properly Islamic one, and in their desire for salvation, Azizul, Nasiruddin and Jamiruddin disregarded the care for the relationships within the village; and Wahed disregarded both the people of other hamlets who were denied his contribution to Muharram, and disregarded solidarity with the other Khadims.



The Tablighis are mainly opposed to practices that would have been influenced by Hinduism – but they would usually give an extended justification as to why this ‘Hindu’ practice is not virtuous, whereas the Islamic practice *is* virtuous, with reference to science, or with reference to the ways in which the traditional practices are inappropriate in the current social and economic conditions. The reformists would say that they prefer a small and inexpensive, one-day Islamic wedding as opposed to several days of reciprocal meals and celebration as the villagers can simply not afford it; and they oppose the dowry because it is exploitative.

In this light, I suggest that reformism in Joygram does not (only) oppose practices because they have a different conception of virtue, but (also) because those practices are actually –upon reflection - no longer considered virtuous within its own ideological frame. Ideally, reciprocal exchanges take place between equals – perhaps not equals in wealth and power but certainly in dignity and fundamental human value. I suggest that there is an implicit recognition among the reformist Muslims that the staggering inequality in wealth and power within Joygram is eroding the equality between humans. As mentioned, material inequality is not necessarily problematic per se; but it is problematic if it erodes the principle of equal human dignity. The exchanges have become instrumentalised and disembedded from the long-term cycle of transactions. This is very clear in the case of Muharram. As the power of Abu Bakr as a spiritual leader is slowly eroding, Haji Saheb (as boss of the cattle market) and the other shareholders are increasingly taking charge of the ritual patronage.<sup>118</sup> The result is an increasingly instrumentalised patronage, depleted from spiritual meaning, and deeply corrupted at that. Everyone in Joygram was aware that the shareholders kept a double account, and that most of the profits that on paper are set aside in ‘charitable funds’ would directly disappear in the shareholders’ pockets.<sup>119</sup> What the reformists aim to instantiate once again is

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<sup>118</sup> Abu Bakr had fought a court case of fifteen years with Haji Saheb over who is the designated caretaker (*musuali*) of the WAQF property. He lost, and only retained the rights over the shrine, the *mazaar* and a small part of the cattle market.

<sup>119</sup> The *musualis* have to provide official accounts to the State WAQF Board. They do not have to pay tax over the profits set aside in charity funds.

the principle of equality as central to *dharma*.<sup>120</sup> However, it is a different kind of equality: equality between autonomous individuals rather than equality in relatedness.

The irony is that when exchange is not between equals, some can opt out whereas others are dependent on it. The rich are more likely to be Deobandi and to refuse to engage in exchange practices. Azizul is not at all wealthy and cannot afford to be independent from exchange relationships. For this reason, I suggest, Kairul is deeply upset about the fate of his brother: he is not just *badmāś*, but he made a mistake, a mistake that may prove to have grave effects.

In light of this analysis, I suggest that the violent conflict over Azizul's wedding (as well as the fear for conflict over the end of Muharram) is a moment of 'extra-ordinary ethics'; an instant in which ethics become explicit:

'[T]he "ordinary" implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself. When, by contrast, ethics does become explicit, that is generally (1) in respect to its breaches; (2) with regard to ethical problems or issues in which the right thing to do is unknown or hotly contested; (3) in prophetic movements and social or ethical renewal; and (4) among priestly classes attempting to rationalize and educate' (Lambek 2010a: 2).

In this case, the right thing to do is hotly contested, because of a movement of ethical renewal, which is attempting to rationalize the uneducated Muslims. In a time of conversion, ethical transformation, or ethical breach – those moments when ethics become explicit – the contradictions and compromises that one lives (and always have and always will live) with come to the surface (Engelke 2004; Janson 2015; Robbins 2004a). That is, I am not arguing that reformism is an invasion in a coherent cultural system (see F.Osella & C.Osella 2008a) or a complete 'break with the past' (see Meyer 1998). I have already emphasised that Joygrami Muslims live with contradictory ideologies on a daily basis, and

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120 Ironically, the reformists opposing the corrupted patronage and the corrupted shareholders are in most cases the same people: all Khadims blaming their neighbour and kin. I do not think that they are necessarily disingenuous or hypocritical (although I do not exclude the possibility that some are) but it seems as if they cannot help themselves: money makes one blind. Many Khadims do acknowledge this blind pursuit of wealth and power and therefore say they need to reform themselves before anything else.

the gradual transformations that reformism brings about make those contradictions more prominent. At this moment of extra-ordinary ethics the reformists continue to act within a virtue ethics of order and justice but their virtue ethics does not attach the same significance to the idea of bio-moral exchange.

### **Aesthetics and performance**

One of the most obvious and visible changes that emerge from the stories of the three men, and which could be observed in Joygram more generally, is the changing aesthetics involved with the 'conversion' to reformist Islam. It was quite a sight to see a troupe of TJ practitioners walk through the village. They would walk with brisk steps, usually dressed meticulously in long white *pāñjābi* and a variety of *ṭupis* (skullcaps), with their upper lips shaved and their beards waving, as is the prescribed aesthetic of the Deoband. They would have stern looks on their faces, gaze averted (when meeting them in groups, even of those with whom I was close in the confines of their houses, I could not expect more than a stern *Salaam Aleikum*, if I was lucky). Their appearance was one of cleanliness and aesthetic awareness. This is in stark contrast with the usual dress of agricultural labourers: a *luṅgi*<sup>121</sup> or *gām'chā* and a vest.

I found Faizul several times in his room working on his appearance. He would iron his *kurtā* with utmost care and he would not let a single hair make its way on his upper lip. He had brought a waistcoat and a green scarf from Delhi, and he had a particular way of wrapping the scarf around his head that would make him look particularly charismatic.<sup>122</sup> When I announced that I would visit the 'world market' of the TJ as Joygramis call the headquarters in Delhi, he was quick to ask me to bring him a *ṭupi*; the one he brought last time had discoloured.

Small adjustments to dress may make someone look 'closer to Islam' as one tries to emulate the aesthetics of the Prophet Muhammad. To wear a specific 'scent', for instance, is *ssunnā*, and though I had already noticed that madrasa

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121 A *luṅgi* is a waistcloth, usually stitched to form a large tube of cloth. Joygrami Muslim men usually wear a blue checked *luṅgi*, with a white vest.

122 The turban is reminiscent of a practice at the Deoband madrasa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the best students would be honoured by having a turban wrapped around their head (Metcalf 1989).

Islamic scholars like Rahaman Saheb's family would always carry a miniscule bottle of scent with them, it became increasingly popular among the TJ participants, too.<sup>123</sup> Wahed's sudden and abundant use of scent was the object of great mockery of his father. The application of black khol (*kājal*) on the lower eyelid is another *sunnā*. The Prophet had prescribed to apply khol because it would make the eye-white brighter and the eyesight as strong and clear as an eagle's. The young men seemed to be well aware that the black line under their eyes in combination with the long white dresses made their appearance even more charismatic.

To follow the Sunnah closely sometimes means to compromise on previous aesthetic preferences. Soon after coming back from a short tour with the TJ, Wahed had suddenly cut his hair, which had curled well down the back of his head and had been an exact resemblance of his father's hairstyle. He said it hadn't been right to wear his hair long, and since he learned from the TJ to follow the Prophet's exemplary behaviour closely he had cut his hair short. For similar reasons, he had changed his stiffened, gold lace embroidered *tupī* for a simpler one. I later learned from Samsuddin that the haircut was a crucial and very precise matter. It has to be the same length on all sides of the head; for a young Muslim it should preferably be between one and two centimetres. Only an older, learned scholar has the right to wear his hair long. The same with *tupis*; the stiffened, high *tupis* with elaborated embroidery should be avoided by young Muslims and *hafiz*.<sup>124</sup> If a younger or less educated Muslim would wear his hair long or wear a high, embroidered *tupī*, not only had he failed to obey the Sunnah closely, it would also be a sign of vanity and pretention.

Following from the above, I suggest that the aesthetics of the TJ is a multivocal symbol that can not only be interpreted but also employed in various ways, depending on the actor and the audience. Firstly, the ironed white dress

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123 The small bottles would often have Arabic text on them and are considered better if they are imported from an Islamic country, preferably Saudi Arabia. Arifuddin asked me whenever I went to Delhi to bring him *scent*; though the same scents were available locally, he considered the brands available in Delhi more properly Islamic. It is fairly uncommon for ordinary villagers to wear any scent, except for the *body spray* (deodorant) that is slowly becoming popular among the more 'modern'/urban-influenced youth. *Body spray* and *scent* are considered two entirely different things.

124 *Hafiz* is the lowest degree of Islamic scholarship. A *hafiz* is someone who knows the Quran by heart.

can be a symbol of status as it distinguishes one from the tillers of the soil. Secondly, the body and those aesthetics of dress can be employed as a technique for cultivating the inner self and reveal its inner potentiality (Mahmood 2005: 166) since dress has performative force (Tarlo 1996; Tarlo & Moors 2013) and is constitutive of the self (Miller 2010). By dressing like the Prophet Muhammad, one commits oneself to the self-discipline involved with behaving like the Prophet. Initially, Wahed would display a hesitant smile while making use of specifically Islamic (and non-Bengali but Urdu or Arabic) terms and gestures. Over the course of my fieldwork, he gained confidence and lost the initial insecure hesitation; he seemed to have internalised the values that were initially exterior performances.

Mahmood's interpretation of the exterior performance as a means to transform the interior self applies to some Tablighis, but it is not the entire explanation. So thirdly, I suggest the public performance of piety and authenticity itself can be the end of aesthetics. I found resonance with Grosso's observation that 'in Tunis, performance [of ethical personhood] appears to be oriented towards cultivating social relationships and towards maintaining the impression of morality in an atmosphere marked by the fear of moral breakdown' (2013: 249); an analysis particularly appropriate for Masiruddin.

Although many aspects of Masiruddin's lifestyle changed, he continued to do the same work and for this work, being a Tablighi is almost like a useful asset to him. This is especially so in the contractor business, which is commonly assumed to be corrupt; contractors are immoral, greedy people only out to fill their own pockets. Being a business man and contractor, and walking around with sunglasses and transparent shirts would make it very easy for others to consider him to be *badmāś*. It is much better for his social status, and as such for his economic opportunities, to look like a dedicated Muslim. His aesthetics almost seemed to give him an *a priori* protection from critique. Hardly anyone dared to openly talk to me about business, or would do so with an apologetic expression on their face. Masiruddin, instead, jocularly expounded the shady aspects of obtaining a tender, adding self-evidently, 'well, that's how business goes' (*eṭā to byab'sā*). He was himself equally critical of the corrupt political and economic environment, but he admits that involvement is inescapable. So, while

going about business as usual, the participation in the TJ gave him a sense of dignity and respect, while performing respectability to the public eye. Masiruddin seemed to be aware of the performativity of his 'ethical Muslimness': he would sometimes greet me with a flat hand by his face (a 'proper' Islamic greeting but very unusual gesture amongst Muslims in West Bengal), but could never avoid a self-mocking smile. That is not to deny the sincerity of his commitment; he did actively try to cultivate a virtuous character. However, his aesthetics served more purposes than the cultivation of the inner self.

For Joygrami Tablighis and devout Deobandis, the 'public' is the Muslims in the village, amidst whom one acts as an exemplary figure, as well as other Muslims and non-Muslims in the wider public sphere. It is the performative establishment of criteria: the dress tells that 'I am a Muslim, you can evaluate me accordingly' (see Lambek 2010*b*). The public performance in turn impacts the self-cultivation: one has to now act according to the criteria the performance establishes. The performance, however, is not always convincing.

### **The sincerity of the householder**

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Grosso observes a situation in Tunis where 'ethical personhood has become dislocated; the exterior is no longer perceived to be a 'true' reflection of the inward disposition, of whether someone is believed to be a 'good' or 'bad' person' (2013: 249). In similar ways, the sincerity of the Tablighis and devout Deobandis in Joygram is questioned. Tropes of irony and mockery are very common in Joygram, and the Tablighis were not spared. The Tablighi's attitude was considered by some to be condescending and pretentious, with too much importance attributed to aesthetic performance rather than to an actual Islamic lifestyle. It was somewhat common to refer to the supposedly pious ones as *nāmājīs*, roughly translatable as, 'those who pray a lot', or as *dārīoyālā* or *ṭupīoyālā* ('he who wears a beard', 'he who wears a *ṭupī*', with sarcastic undertone). Basir's younger brother Rafiq, who claimed to be a committed Muslim but did not seem to find it at all problematic that he occasionally drank alcohol, met girls and was involved in various dubious businesses, one day said to me: 'those...*nāmājīs*...many just show off...they don't do it sincerely. Does

anyone really pray? Nobody does'. With undisguised sarcasm he commented on the transformation of the boss of the cattle market after his Haj to Mecca: everyone knew he was a corrupted exploiter, 'but now he has become good. *Ṭupi*, beard... (*Ekhan kintu bhālo haye giyeche. Ṭupi, dāri...*). I exclaimed in feigned surprise: 'So those who go on Haj and wear *ṭupis* and beards are the ones who are most *badmāś*!' He laughed nodding his head, 'yes, now you got it...'.

Dada was also critical about the TJ participants being 'very *nāmājī*' who would only be pious 'to show off' (*dekhānor janya*) yet would fail to apply the lessons of Islam in everyday life. The small house of Dada's family is right next to Wahed's house, and one day one of Wahed's regular labourers came to Dada crying. He had been working all day for Wahed, but he had not been given any food, not even a cup of tea, he complained. I overheard Dada grumbling, 'he is working with the [Tablighi] Jamaat, but in his own house he doesn't care for people'. It may well have been that Wahed only punished the labourer today as he was obviously very drunk. Nevertheless, Dada immediately took the opportunity to see an incongruity between the public performance of piety and the lack of actual virtuous behaviour.

Interestingly, Wahed was more often the object of scepticism than Masiruddin. According to many Joygramis, Wahed is somewhat good considering his Islamic lifestyle and appearance (*'ṭupi dāri pare'*, wearing a skullcap and beard) but his sincerity in relations to other villagers was doubted. Masiruddin is 'good in every aspect' (*sab dike bhālo*).

Masiruddin and Wahed are somewhat comparable to the two brothers (Rafiq and Yaqub) featuring in a vignette of Hansen (2009: 21-22) meant to illustrate the tension between an ethics of sincerity and an ethics of conviction. The vignette demonstrates the quandary and sense of failure that can result from the compromises that the desiring self and everyday life-demand of the politics of conviction. 'The element of tragedy, betrayal and inevitable failure in these stories points to perhaps the central paradox of political love – that it never can be consummated and even less realized. Its realization...is always thwarted by betrayals of the cause, selfishness, greed and hypocrisy' (Hansen 2009: 27).

Rafiq, Hansen tells, is a big man committed to Muslim solidarity in a practical way, managing a large network of kin, business partners and ethno-religious institutions; Yaqub is a devout Tablighi, a man of conviction who has surrendered his entire life to the 'unattainable goal' of 'perfect ethical conduct'. Hansen draws out the inner conflict of Rafiq, who 'preferred to commit himself to an ethics of sincerity and to provide neighbourly service to his own community' yet doubted whether his conviction was strong enough in light of Yaqub's ostensible moral high ground.

Masiruddin's decision to become a Tablighi may well have been influenced by his brother's earlier conversion and pious lifestyle; and I believe that many Joygramis are caught in a similar 'inner conflict' (Parry 1994: 270) between renunciation and the life of the householder – when their sense of moral failure impels them to cultivate piety yet they are not sure how to combine this with everyday demands. I have discussed the householder's dilemma regarding withdrawal from exchanges in the previous section; here I want to draw out the implications of Joygramis' scepticism of renunciation for our interpretation of the householder's predicament.

I contend that the scepticism of the Joygramis points to a recognition of the limits of ethics in everyday life. This is what Das (2014) has called 'the difficulty of reality'. The Tablighis, not unlike the Jains described by Laidlaw (1995), would be the first to admit that the goal of emulating the Prophet's exemplary behaviour is impossible, and they would humbly admit that they themselves are only 'more or less good Muslims' (*moṭāmōti bhālo Muslim*). However, in the praise for Masiruddin and scorn of Wahed, there seems to be a recognition that the moral predicament of the householder is more difficult than the renouncer's and hence more praiseworthy: 'that it is not because the renouncer's otherworldly aspirations are impossible for the householder to follow (they are), but that it is inhabiting the world, sustaining it, that is seen as the ethically much more difficult task' (Das 2014: 488-9). The complaints of the Joygramis go beyond the kind of complaints recounted by Hansen (2009: 22); that it is expensive to take care of such a pious brother. It is putting in question the sincerity and value of piety itself. The ethics of conviction is appreciated as long



as it is compromised by the consideration of the immediate consequences of one's acts (cf. Fassin 2014: 433).

There is an affinity here with what Grosso calls 'dislocated personhood – the perception that performance and exteriority may be a mask concealing an individual's true self' (2013: 59). Aspiration for a modern ethical self involves new markers for virtuous personhood, which results in ambiguity and scepticism in the environment. This is particularly salient in the margins of a corrupted society where everyone seems to be at risk to become *badmāś*. Gilsenan talks about a situation where young men at the periphery fall vulnerable to scepticism, because they have internalized the idea of the 'backwardness' of their marginalized position. 'There was a pessimism not least about the performative powers of language. It was as if words no longer were or did and could not possibly be and do what they were supposed to have done (Gilsenan 1988: 220). As in Joygram, '[a]mbiguity had become central, irony sometimes appeared omnipresent' (ibid.). I suggest that the attitude of Joygramis towards Masiruddin was less ambiguous and sceptical, and more respectful, because he was, in Das' words, still inhabiting and sustaining the world. He was not pretending that his piety was uncompromising; rather, he made balanced judgements between otherworldly devotion and this-worldly demands.

I wonder, however, to what extent Masiruddin's performance is beneficial for him outside Joygram and the cattle market business where Muslims are relatively powerful. In his attempt to buy a house in Kolkata, he encountered the harsh reality of exclusion: he could only buy in Muslim 'ghettos'. His Islamic performance hampered rather than helped him in gaining access to legitimate space. Through dress, 'people are involved in *making* classifications as well as in simply following them' (Tarlo 1996: 7); this involves the dual process of identification and differentiation (ibid: 15). The Tablighis want to show, particularly in an atmosphere of suspicion, that Muslims are peaceful, generous and modest through their aesthetic performance and virtuous conduct. However, their Islamic dress further classifies them as Other, and as a dangerous Other, not indigenous to Indian soil. I will elaborate on this aspect below.

## Improving *culture*

Although 'doing Jamaat', as Joygramis put it, is sometimes a straightforward form of ethical self-fashioning, in most cases the motivations are more complex. It can be a form of ethical self-fashioning to counter one's partaking in a vicious economy. But it may also be a strategy of coping and an escape from economic exclusion and exasperation, symbolically as well as literally; or a symbol of cultural capital and a means to gain social and economic capital. What unite the motivations of the Tablighis are aspirations for a modern, more dignified personhood. There is one more aspect that I have so far not paid attention to, and that transpires foremost from Masiruddin's narrative: the desire to 'uplift' the community. Being a 'bad Muslim' is tightly bound up with the idea that the Muslims lack adequate '*culture*' (used in English). Improving *culture* by becoming a better Muslim should, in the view of the reformists, make Muslims more attractive to be included in the Indian nation-state.

Muslims are acutely aware that they have to cultivate themselves as a particular kind of modern Muslim *citizen* in order to make demands on the state. The Association SNAP observed in a summary of their survey findings:

'the issues raised by the Muslims did not in any way take the form of demands for benefits or favours on religious ground; rather the demands were unambiguously connected with democratic rights and social justice – equitable opportunity for self-development and representation at all spheres of social life' (Association SNAP and Guidance Guild 2014: 8).

The pervasive idea is that one has to make oneself an asset to the nation and live lawfully before one can gain recognition and make demands upon the state. Deobandi trained imams or TJ members would not only encourage a stronger obedience to Islamic normativity, but also to Indian law. The law is indirectly encompassed in the Islamic normativity as it is a sin to not obey Indian law, and disobedience of the law has consequences for the afterlife.<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, relegated to the margins of the nation-state, they have to constantly assert their allegiance to the (secular) nation-state: the discourse of

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<sup>125</sup> A *mufti* (Islamic legal scholar) of the Deoband madrasa I spoke to at the TJ headquarter in Delhi confirmed that '*it is a sin not to obey the law of the country where a Muslim lives*'. Even travelling on a bus without a ticket is a great sin (Urdu *guna*) and would cost 'forty days good work' in the accounting system for the afterlife.

the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind persistently emphasises the Muslims' loyalty to the 'idea of India'. There are seven requirements to becoming a member of the JUH, one of which is loyalty to the Indian nation-state. The JUH draws its legitimacy from its participation in the struggle for Independence and the organisation is very careful not to tread on Hindu sentiments or make conspicuous political statements. Williams found that in Varanasi, Muslims actively engaged with the rhetoric of secularism because it offers spaces of recognition and participation in the face of majoritarian discriminatory practices (Williams 2012: 991). In Joygram, as in Varanasi '...being a 'good Muslim' and a 'good Indian citizen' goes hand in hand and it is 'by emphasising the latter that [Muslims seek] to realise justice and the public recognition of the former' (Williams 2012: 989).

In seeking to become a good Indian citizen, Joygrami Muslims seek to improve '*culture*', which is an idiom used to denote both democratic civility and Islamic moral righteousness. I will explain more in detail what this idiom entails after the following vignette.

Nafiz Mondal, a hawker from Lovokondo who had recently changed his working class *lungi* and vest for white Islamic garments and aspired to join the TJ if his means would allow him to do so, told me once that the *culture* here is better than in Pakistan. In Pakistan, he says, people are very antagonistic (*birodhī*). 'If you slap someone there, they will slap you back. Here, if you slap someone, he will ask, 'why did you slap me'? Here, the *culture* is a little bit better (*ekhāne, 'culture' ekṭu bhālo*). Why, I ask? 'There is a better rule here (*ekhāne beśī bhālo cālāno hay*). There, the government is making a mess. Here, there was Indira [Gandhi], and Rajiv [Gandhi]'. 'But that was quite a long time ago?' I ask. 'That's right, and the current government isn't as good. But it's already in the society', Nafiz responds, implying that the culture of argument and dialogue rather than of violence has already been internalised in India's citizens. I press him further on this: 'how do Indian people acquire *culture*?' Education, Nafiz says. Indeed, he sends his son to the High Madrasa so he can learn Arabic, and 'will learn good *culture*' (*bhālo 'culture' śikh'be*).

Williams suggests that in 'seeking the 'right' kind of recognition within the state and society, Muslim citizenship is negotiated through a particular way of being in society that reflects forms of civility, connection and inclusion'

(Williams 2012: 991). In Joygram, I found that the idiom used to denote modern civility is often the all-encompassing concept *culture*. *Culture* is locally infused with Islamic connotations; indeed, I suggest that Islamic reformism becomes a salient vehicle through which to cultivate the rational, reflexive subjectivity that allows for inclusion in the civilised citizenry. So if education allows one to cultivate *culture*, for Muslims it is Islamic education in particular that allows for the cultivation of *culture*, which includes the inculcation of civility. In other words, for Muslims, the 'way of being' that reflects civility is Islamic; for this reason a High Madrasa is a vehicle through which to educate a *culture* that is not fundamentally different to the *culture* inculcated in the Indian citizenry by national leaders. Similarly, the rhetoric around the mission schools focuses around the idea of 'good culture' (*bhālo 'culture'*) in the ambition to include Muslims in the (respectable) Indian citizenry. The next subsection will explain how this vernacular use of the idiom '*culture*' differs from the idea of 'culture' in the Indian nationalist project.

### ***Culture and anti-politics***

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The idea that *culture* provides the moral backbone to the project of the Indian nation-state is, at first face, a seamless reproduction of the anti-politics discourse (Hansen 1999; 2000). In India, moral projects are the responsibility of the communities, which supposedly remain unspoiled by politics and the economy. The communities, indeed, have to foster 'good culture'. It is important to recognise that the idiom of *culture*, when employed by my interlocutors, is infused with not only Islamic content but also with aspirations for modern personhood. That is, 'culture' in the anti-political discourse has a different meaning from 'culture' in the Joygrami discourse. The paradoxes of the Muharram celebrations highlight the problem of this disjunction.

The State WAQF Board<sup>126</sup> is one of the institutions that continue the postcolonial policy of anti-politics, as it is based on the assumption that Indian Muslims form a static and coherent, unpolitical cultural community (Hansen 2000: 269). Through such institutions, as well as through state funded 'secular' madrasas, the responsibility to 'control' the 'irrational masses' is delegated to

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<sup>126</sup> See footnote 24 in chapter 1.

the civilised leaders of the community. Muharram may be hollowed out of spiritual meaning and become a case of profitable tax avoidance and a display of power inequality, but on the surface it looks like the timeless celebration of Indian syncretic culture.

Through such institutions, Muslims are 'thrown back' into a supposedly unified, 'elevated unpolitical cultural community based on the values of the Koran, *Hadiths* and the Personal Law' (Hansen 2000: 269). The irony of Muharram is that it is Indian law that draws the shareholders of the cattle market inevitably back in the practice of 'traditional' ritual patronage. The other villagers participate in the celebrations because it is 'fun' not because of its religious value, and it comes to signify an *aberration* in their aspirations for good *culture* and a civilised, reformed lifestyle, rather than a reflection of culture.

The complexity of the Muharram celebrations demonstrates that in reality there never was a negotiation 'between reified cultural communities with fully formed notions of morality and public ethics and a state driven by 'reason'' (Hansen 2000: 269). I want to highlight two points in this regard. Firstly, *culture* is not static, reified and community-bound; for my interlocutors the concept implies modern, passionate convictions with global resonances. Secondly, good *culture* becomes a vehicle for demands to be included in the civilised citizenry. Improving *culture* means civilising and governing oneself 'in morality as well as law...as befits the citizen of a secular, liberal society' (Asad 2003: 226). So whereas Hansen argues that the TJ, like other cultural-religious organisations, is ultimately inward looking and informed by 'anti-political notions of purification of the community' (2000: 264), I suggest that the TJ could equally function as a vehicle for the outward looking aspiration to cultivate modern civility. The TJ *becomes* a form of 'anti-politics' that reproduces the bifurcated framework of 'dirty' politics and 'clean' Islam because of its limited space of navigation, but that is not the motivation for most of the (rural) participants; in fact it curtails their intentions for holistic renewal.

Furthermore, the TJ doctrine is officially apolitical but it necessarily has political consequences. Wahed, for instance, steered clear of politics, but his aspirations are unmistakably political. He has learned at a recent TJ gathering

the following analogy: the Muslims are like a football, and the political parties are kicking it, playing it around amongst each other. They can do so only because the ball is empty. If there were a stone inside, they would not be able to kick it around. Only a stronger belief and relationship to Allah can make the Muslims like a stone, and until they are, the community will be just a vote-bank for the parties without having to really improve their conditions. Obviously, the analogy reproduces the ideological reification of communities. Having internalised this narrative, the community does become the vehicle through which to demand recognition by the state. Communities increasingly demand legal recognition, ethical policy and moral economic practices and as such desire to enter the public sphere. However, as 'cultural' communities reified in time and space, they are denied this entrance.

### **Post-secular aspirations**

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Metcalf has suggested that 'the Tablighi, living his everyday life in society, can be constructed as truly 'secular' (2010: 178) because of the private, interiorised and individualised character of the religious practice. The TJ, because of what is perceived as political 'quietism' (Moosa 2000: 218), and their 'hatred' of politics (Kepel 2000: 203) may indeed 'mesh' better in secular polities such as South Africa (Moosa 2000: 221), European countries (Kepel 1997) and India than explicitly political Islamic organisations. Yet, I think that the situation is not only more complicated, but also that calling them 'secular' is problematic as this is a normative statement that already assumes different domains in society. Therefore, this categorisation fails to capture the complexity of the motivations and experiences of Joygrami Tablighis, who are informed both by a specific local cosmopolitics that defies such a separation of domains, as well as by globally circulating ideals. My interlocutors, I venture to suggest, are perhaps better called postsecular or postliberal in that they are familiar with modern secular and liberal ideologies but go beyond them in their motivations and aspirations. Reformist Islam should not be misunderstood as pre-modern, anti-secular or secular, because it encompasses those ideologies in vernacularized forms on the basis of a different ideal conception of society.

My reasoning is as follows. The nature of reformist Islam does not fit well in the perception of a society as divided into separated domains. As argued in chapter 4, the moral regeneration of the individual and the community should eventually drive a more encompassing reform of the entire society. If *dharma* is the ethics of order and justice in all aspects of life, economic and political activities automatically would become embedded in *dharma*. In the reformist project, Islam is a total way of life, and comes to semantically occupy all that is *dharma*. Different aspects of life become associated with sacred propositions (see Rappaport 1999), and as such ‘religious cosmological order expands its domains to encompass secular or mundane and social cosmologies’ (el-Aswad 2012: 13). The sacred, then, is not only the ‘ultimate source and arbiter of social order’ within the supposedly static community, but also ‘the very locus from which to issue authoritative challenges to conventional order and domination’ (Lambek 2000: 312): it is a challenge to an ordering of modern society into sacred and secular spaces, where secular politics and a market economy are disembedded from the religious realm.

### **The limits to public conviction**

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I have argued in this chapter that the Joygrami reformists display a combination of cool and uncool passionate conviction, which is, however, less public than the convictions described by either Hansen (2009) or Comaroff (2008). The ‘global modality of action’ (2009: 18) Hansen describes has militant aspects. The ethics of conviction among Tablighis in Joygram does not have a militant aspect, because – even *if* they would aspire to this – they well understand that a militant Islamic conviction has no public legitimacy in India, and is thoroughly counterproductive to the goal of a better society within the Indian nation-state. They enact their conviction within the legitimate confines of ‘anti-politics’. Preaching and individual self-cultivation as a means to a better society are acceptable forms of cultural exhortation and expression. However, they cannot make explicit political statements (Hansen 2000: 259). Taking seriously the aspirations of the TJ participants, which have global resonances, the introspective mode of conviction is a result of the narrow space of

navigation – within the hegemonic conception of ‘culture’ - that the Indian nation-state allows for Muslims.

Tragically, the aspirations of the reformist Muslims are likely to have a counterproductive effect. Governing and civilising the self is encouraged among the upper classes, but the ‘lower classes, constituted as the objects of social welfare and political control, are placed in a more ambiguous situation’ (Asad 2003: 226). The current predicament is that the masses of the majority have gained legitimacy in their quest for ‘sacred sovereignty’ (Comaroff 2008). The rhetoric of Hindutva bodies combine a militant political theology of conviction infused with uncool passion, mobilizing masses with sacred symbols and myth (Kaur 2005b: 22) and this has proven to be a dangerous combination.

In the eyes of non-Muslim Indians, it is unlikely that the Arabic education at a madrasa is providing a Muslim hawker’s son with the *culture* required to be included in the civilized citizenry. Similarly, the *maulānās* in Joygram, already used to a suspicious gaze, are aware of the marginalization – rather than respect - that the carefully groomed aesthetic subjectivity of the reformists will bring them: ‘the rule of the government is: don’t give anything to the ones with *ṭupis* and beards’ (*sarkārer ‘rule’ hacche: ṭupi- dāri-oyālāke kichu nā dite*).

## Conclusion

In order to embed the practices of reformist Muslims in a global context, I have drawn on the work of two scholars who aim to demonstrate that we can observe a global (anti-/post-)modern political theology of conviction. Hansen argues that the (close to) ‘global ideals of proper modern personhood’ (2009: 20) entail the cool passion of reasoned, interiorized conviction; Comaroff responds that ‘in recent decades the hegemony of this rationalist ideology has been disturbed’ (2008: 2) and observes an upsurge of ‘uncool passion’ that deconstructs the liberal ideology of secular reason. I want to conclude with the argument that these models are not mutually exclusive.

Comaroff suggests that ‘it is arguable that a discourse of submission to sacred authority, of relinquishing self-determination to mysterious will and passion...subverts the ideology of rational, free choice, and the image of the reflective, selective subject that is central to liberal understandings of principled belief’ (2008: 3). On the contrary, I have demonstrated that



'submission to sacred authority' does not necessarily stand in opposition to the rational, free and willed subject. Drawing on elements already developing in the local cosmopolitics, reformism in Joygram emphasises that the rational reflective agent is generated by submission to visceral faith. *Da'wa* is merely the communication of the message of Truth, after which the listener has to make the free choice to convert – from *jñān* in one's mind/heart (see also Masud 2000c: xx). So in their aspirations for dignified personhood, Joygrami reformist Muslims produce their own challenges to the hegemonic understanding of modernity.

Comaroff (2008) reminds us time and again that 'uncool passion' is not new, that modernity never really was disenchanted, and that revivalist movements have come and gone over centuries and that their manifestations are tightly bound up with historical socio-economic conditions. Indeed, renewal in Islam has waned and waxed ever since the inception of Islam (Masud 2000c). The sacred never disappeared; it has just been ideologically configured in particular ways (Asad 2003). In a challenging dialectic with the particular modernity of the Indian nation-state, Joygrami reformists make their own configuration of the sacred.

## Conclusion: 'We just want to live in peace'

'Resentment on the part of the weak about being treated cruelly by the powerful is generally a spontaneous human reaction, but learning to see certain practices as insupportable that were not previously viewed as such, and organizing social opposition to them, are steps in the reconstruction of the human' (Asad 2003: 154).

'The reconstruction of the human' may seem like a revolutionary slogan. However, revolution is not the mode of change that Joygramis want. The assertion, 'we just want to live in peace' (*ām'rā emani śānti thāk'te cāi*), is one I would hear over and over again, accompanied with a sigh and a shrug, whether from a pious imam, a poor widowed mother, a wealthy mischievous boy, or a party worker prone to spending his last pennies on alcohol. So how to achieve 'peace'?

In this thesis, I have attempted to come to an understanding of why there is 'resentment' and why the 'social opposition' against 'insupportable practices' takes the form of Islamic reformism. I wondered: why Islamic reformism? Why not political action, for instance? Why not revolt? Why a quietist, apolitical (or 'anti-political') form of social renewal? Why an Islamic form of renewal? Why a form of social renewal that focuses firstly on the cultivation of the self, and is only performatively public?

In order to understand the particular form that 'the reconstruction of the human' takes, I have presented the vernacular cosmopolitics of humanity and sociality, as well as ethics and justice of a Muslim community in West Bengal, along with the contemporary ethical transitions within it. On the basis of the cosmopolitics, I have argued that in the analysis of the current predicament of Muslims in India, we have to go beyond the religion/secularism framework. Furthermore, I have used this ethnographic study to develop an innovative theoretical framework that aims to contribute to the understanding of ethical life both in my fieldsite and beyond.

In this conclusion, I will firstly recapitulate the main arguments brought forward in this thesis. On the basis of my arguments, I will next offer another perspective on the debate upon secularism in India. Thirdly, I will suggest how

the arguments of this thesis can be taken forward in the anthropology of ethics. Next, I will offer suggestions for future research on secularism. Finally, I shall suggest how this thesis is significant for our understanding of ethics, and in particular for ethical life in secular modernity.

### **Thesis summary**

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In my analysis of the forms of ethical renewal that take place in Joygram, I have utilized a two-sided approach. I have argued that we need to understand, firstly, the roots of ethical action (the local cosmopolitics), and secondly, the political and economic environment and the processes of vernacularisation that take place in interaction with the environment.

Firstly, I have asked, what is the conceptualisation of the human in Bengali Muslim cosmopolitics? What are the categories that inform and constitute ethical life in this context? In chapter 2 and 3 I have extensively discussed the local cosmopolitics; the roots of ethical action. I have drawn on studies of South Asian personhood and kinship to demonstrate that in the regional ideology being human and becoming a person are not separate categories; *mānuṣ* connotes both the physiological, mortal human being and the social, moral person. Joygrami cosmopolitics are a combination of Islamic cosmogony (the 'contract behind contracts') with the local ideology of bio-moral holism. From the moment of birth the child's cosmogonic relationship with Allah and the relatedness thereafter with kin and neighbours is enacted through exchange; subsequently becoming and making a person are both physiological and ethical projects in which various people are involved through the exchange of bio-moral substances. Although marriage and family are practically important units, *jāti* is ideologically the more important unit of relatedness. Due to the fluidity of substances, *jāti* is an inherently unstable category and therefore the exchanges that create *jāti* relatedness are closely monitored ethical acts, regulated by *dharma*.

On this basis, I have argued for a non-essentialist interpretation of Muslim personhood. I have analytically separated generative Muslimness and ethical Muslimness and I have suggested that these modes of being develop in mutually

reinforcing relation to each other. The latter point implies that humanity and ethics are categories integral to each other.

The most significant argument here is that there is no moral personhood outside of *dharma*, as the 'human person' (*mānuṣ*) is generated out of exchanges within a particular *jāti*, which in itself is an enactment of *dharma*; without *dharma* one is considered barely human, because one is not within human sociality. I have further elaborated on the sources of ethics of Joygrami Muslims, and I have argued that faith (*imān*) in Allah is the source of the cultivation of the faculties that allow a human/person to develop *jñān/phronesis* (practical judgement) and good character. I have argued that the evaluative autonomy for ethical judgement originates within generative Muslimness and is enacted upon in ethical Muslimness. This means that freedom is achieved only after divine submission; absolute freedom is a human impossibility. I have demonstrated that the local ethics is a combination of virtue ethics (embedded in the ideology of bio-moral holism) and ethicised Salvationism. This implies that human action is ideally directed both and simultaneously at this-worldly and at transcendental goals: these goals collapse into one. All throughout, I have demonstrated how forms of exchange reflect the values of the Islamic *dharma*: exchanges are virtuous (*khuṣī*) if they are balanced and reproduce equality and solidarity.

The finding that the potential for ethics is derived from divine submission and *jāti* relatedness is highly significant and has far-reaching consequences. It means that any form of reformation, self-cultivation and ethical renewal of my interlocutors will always be from within Muslimness. Muslimness does not pertain to the delineated category of religion, but is a holistic form of moral personhood. One can therefore not cultivate oneself as a good secular person as juxtaposed to being a good Muslim, but only as embedded within the cultivation of ethical Muslimness.

On account of this finding, I have argued against the universalisation of a modern, secular conception of ethics as residing in sovereign conscience. Instead, I proposed that the imagination of the social, that is, the transcendental social, is axiomatic for ethics. In turn, ethics link the transactional and the transcendental social.

Secondly, I have contextualised the cosmopolitics in the plural politico-economic environment in chapter 4 and 5, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the motivations for ethical renewal. I have analysed the narratives of corruption and moral decay so prominent in Joygram, within a theoretical model of short term and long term transactions: the world is perceived as 'rotten' because transactions are instrumentalised and no longer embedded in macrocosmic visions of order and justice, and foster inequality and exploitation rather than equality and solidarity. My interlocutors strive after a restoration of the cosmic order and an ideological negation of the competitive individual, so as to recover the autonomous dignity of the moral person and a harmonious society.

I have argued against a conception of Indian Muslims as non-modern since the latter's ideal restoration of an ethics of justice and order incorporates modern ideologies and categories. My interlocutors attach strong significance to the 'idea of India', and to the liberal secular ideology, yet they are confronted with a failure of practical execution. Since they link unethical political practices to the Realpolitik of communist rule, my interlocutors feel that a lack of *dharma* forestalls restoration, and they strive after a social renewal that revives the ethical dimension in all aspects of life.

Furthermore, I have argued that harmonious plurality is the result of the labour of exchange between *jātis*. My interlocutors act from a laminated subjectivity that resonates with other *jātis* from within a shared idea of *dharma*. Against the threat of purely instrumental, exploitative and violent party politics, Hindus and Muslims stand united, because at least they both have *dharma* even though the expression and normativity of their *dharma* is different. The very idea that the other *jāti* has a *dharma* makes that other more reliable to act ethically, and much more so than an 'other' without a *dharma*. Even though in my interlocutors' view the Islamic *dharma* as the only path to salvation, any *dharma* could potentially redeem humanity in *this* world.

I have demonstrated that Nehruvian secularism is locally understood to mean equal treatment of every Indian no matter her *jāti/dharma*. It is based on the idea of a plurality of *jāti/dharma*. For Joygramis, I have argued, *dharma* offers the potential for the 'toleration of tension' that is behind the labour of the

precarious management of inter-*jāti* exchange. Inter-*jāti* exchanges generate 'minor differences' and distinction (within the fluidity of bio-moral substances) and it is the tense toleration of these differences that fosters relative harmony. *Dharma* is as such a prerequisite for Nehruvian secularism, as much as *dharma* is a prerequisite for an individual to be a respectable secular citizen who is able to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society. I have also demonstrated that the discourse of secularism and legal and bureaucratic practices have a significant influence on how the place of *dharma* is understood by its adherents: if *dharma* is limited to the category religion, distinction is increasingly sought in the theological realm, where it is reified in dogmatic difference. Moreover, it is unclear how difference and similarity should be managed in other spheres if the value of everyday exchange is undermined by bureaucratic procedures.

These findings are highly significant because it challenges the hegemonic discourse of secularism as abstract tolerance or bureaucratic procedures. Secularism, if it is to function well, is an ethical labour. In this case, *dharma* is the source of ethics, and thus the source of the secular. If *dharma* would be categorised as religion, by implication religion would be the source of the secular. If religion is not to be the source of the secular, then it remains highly ambiguous what should be the ethical foundation of secularism.

Lastly, I have demonstrated that Islamic reformism in Joygram entails ethical transitions that create tensions in the village; moments of 'extraordinary ethics' in which the values integral to the cosmopolitics are reconsidered. Reformists in Joygram aspire for a kind of personhood that resonates with the local model of virtue ethics, but includes global grammars of conviction that are at once interiorised and rational, as well as visceral and mystical. On this basis, I have argued that Islamic reformism is not a local phenomenon. Instead, it resonates within larger global processes that challenge a hegemonic global culture of secular modernity.

### **Implications for the debate on secularism in India**

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In the introduction, I have questioned the terms of the debate on secularism in India. I have discussed the position of the 'modernists, the 'communitarians', and the normative liberal position of Bhargava, and I have made reference to

the position of Hindu right-wing secularism. I have argued that none of these positions take a sufficiently critical perspective on the actual formation of secularism (as a doctrine) in India and ultimately serve to reproduce the problematic bifurcation of the Indian nation-state into a secular society and religious communities. This thesis brings a new perspective to the debate.

The crisis of secularism, I argue, is rooted in the highly ambiguous formation of secularism in the first place, and secondly, in the lack of ethical practice in governmental institutions. Despite the highly ambiguous configuration of secularism in India and the actual practices of injustice, my interlocutors do not hold the secular *ideology* accountable because they believe strongly in the potential for justice this ideology has to offer. Moreover, I have argued that the Nerhuvian secular ideology is not fundamentally incompatible with the Islamic *dharma*, despite conflicting conceptualisations of, for instance, personhood. Like Muslim Ansaris in Varanasi, Muslim Jogramis ‘appealed to notions of state secularism ... by asserting a language of the good Indian citizen in relation to legal or formal aspects of the state whilst continuing to hold the state judiciary and courts in high regard...’ (Williams 2012: 991). This significantly alters the pervasive idea that ‘misrecognition’ on behalf of the communities and ‘incompatibility’ between the ideologies of the communities and the state are central to the crisis of secularism.

Appealing to state secularism offers space for navigation, and limited recognition, but, like Williams, I am cautious in valorising ‘Muslim autonomy’, which may risk ‘letting the state off the hook, rather than seeking to make it more accountable’ (2011*b*: 278). In this dissertation I complicated ‘Muslim agency’, while seeking to hold the state more accountable: the very structures of the modern political and economic arrangements put some people – excluded minorities most of all – in a position where navigation becomes impossible. Power structures and institutional forces limit Muslim agency – and dignity. I argue that this is the reason that Muslims continue to derive ethical autonomy from the Islamic *dharma* and from within relatedness in the Muslim *jāti* and not because Muslims do not *understand* the secular ideology, or because it is inherently incompatible with Islam. I suggest that for my interlocutors, *dharma* continues to be the root of ethical action, and the covenant with Allah the

‘contract behind contracts’, because there are no other valid options; my interlocutors do not conceive of another foundational contract that is attractive and can form a foundation for humanity to flourish. I do not deny that transformations over time may change what is considered to be the foundational contract – that it is not the contract with the creator-god but with the state, for example. *Jāti* is a segmentary concept and the *jāti* of the nation could potentially be primary to the Muslim *jāti*. However, at this point in time, the secular contractual relationship with the state is embedded within *dharma*. I will clarify the argument here.

One may ask why the contract with the creator-god remains foundational for Muslims in a secular state, if the state ideologies are considered to have ethical potential, and why the Muslim *jāti* continues to be the pivotal transcendent collective if they have imbibed the ‘idea of India’. Alternatives for transcendent collectives are the nation or the Islamic *ummah*. But on the one hand Muslims are structurally excluded from the Indian national imagination, while on the other hand they have to abide by Indian territorial boundaries and can only ‘privately’ be part of the Islamic *ummah*. The latter would sometimes feature as a utopia in the imagination of my interlocutors. Muslims live in a state they call *Hindusthān*; their loyalty to the nation is always questioned, ‘tell a lie a thousand times and it becomes true’ and the Muslim is a terrorist, and the livelihood (and life) of a ‘second-class’ citizen is never secured. As a result of the exclusion and uncertainty of the Indian nation-state, Indian Muslims respond to this challenge upon the very dignity of being human by creating a stronger, more coherent ethical narrative, rooted in the ‘contract behind contracts’ with the creator god.

Furthermore, in the confrontations with the state, time and again people feel disappointed that promises have not been lived up to, and their trust in the state increasingly deteriorates. The exchanges with the state are not experienced as virtuous. In liberal political theory, citizens relinquish their natural freedom, and transfer their sovereignty to the nation-state in exchange for protection of their liberties. This kind of contract is comparable to the contract that Muslims have with Allah: Muslims voluntarily enter into a contract which requires them to give up their unlimited freedom in exchange for the



promise of protection and regeneration of life. However, the enforcement of law and order is highly arbitrary and Muslims feel threatened rather than protected by the state. The lack of law and order makes it seem that the contract with the state still allows people to live in unconstrained freedom – the contract with the state does not generate a visceral social relatedness, whereas social constraint is essential to the generation of the moral person and the capacity for ethical judgement. Muslims do enter into a secular contract with the state, but it becomes embedded in the sacred covenant with Allah because, in their experience, the state contract is not in itself strong enough to generate ethics. I want to further suggest that perhaps humans are always already related – this relatedness is conceptualised in a particular way in the Islamic *dharma* but it is denied by the liberal ideology, as the free individual ('man in nature', Asad 2003: 127ff) enters in a contract with the state. This may point to the inherent flaw in the liberal ideology; I will come back to this point further down.

I want to take the liberty here to make the normative suggestion that it is not necessarily problematic for a secular polity that *dharma* forms the foundational contract. It is problematic only because of the flaws inherent to the ambiguous management of difference in postcolonial India. I want to point out again that my interlocutors allow for a plurality of *dharma*, and idealise a society in which different *jātis*, aspiring to live according to different *dharma*, cohabit harmoniously. This is how they interpret secularism. We can perhaps think of their position in the way that Akeel Bilgrami (2011) explains it: one can only sign onto the secular polity on the basis of internal, not external, reasons and the internal reasons will depend on the individual's moral disposition. Even though the theologies underlying ideas of the long-term cosmic order may differ, there may be agreement on the criteria that need to be met in the short-term transactions. The criteria are fundamentally to circumscribe exploitation and structural inequality. One may subscribe to these criteria for various reasons: one may call it a Kantian universal imperative established by reason; another may derive the principle of equal dignity from the idea that all humans are created after the image of god. In an overlapping consensus, people 'concur on the principles, but differ on the different reasons for holding to this ethic. The state must uphold the ethic, but must refrain from favouring any of the

deeper reasons' (Taylor 2011: 37). So members of different *jātis* could reach an 'overlapping consensus' to justify a secular polity, on the basis of substantive values founded in *dharma*; on the basis of different foundational contracts. I suggest therefore that a secular polity does not have to be in contradiction with the significance attached to *dharma*, including the Islamic *dharma*, and *dharma* could be the source of the secular. In reality, the state is not impartial, and the 'deeper reasons' of Muslims are not considered equally valid to the 'deeper reasons' of the majority.

It is expected, or hoped for, that Muslims will reform their criteria in due time, so that they will come to accept secular criteria and nominations and consider the contract with the state foundational (see Bhargava 2010; Bilgrami 2011). However, in the current political atmosphere it can hardly be expected that Muslims will come to consider the contract of the state more just and beneficial than the contract with Allah. 'A group's capacity to change via internal reasoning requires a great deal of psychological security and self-confidence, precisely what is undermined by the demoralization [of the Muslim minority] caused by such harassment [by Hindu right wing sympathizers]' (Bilgrami 2011: 31).

My interlocutors are well aware of the widespread suspicion of the dangerous Muslim 'Other' and the 'war on terror', which creates indignation and frustration. Reforming the self and the community according to the reformist teachings is a very conscious act of taking responsibility and distancing oneself from the 'bad Muslims'. This act is, however, counterproductive to their ambition to be respected and included in the Indian citizenry, as the outward performance of Islamic ethics makes them more suspicious in the eyes of 'secular' Indians who may be unaware of the distinctions between one form of Islam and another.

I conclude this section with the observation that secularism as a project can only have ethical validity if it allows for consistency in the subjects' ethical imagination. The problem remains that the force of the secular doctrine resides indeed 'not in neutralizing the space of politics from religion but in producing a particular kind of religious subject who is compatible with the rationality and exercise of liberal political rule' (Mahmood 2006: 344) whereas Indian liberal

political rule itself is deeply ambiguous, unreasonable and unjust. It is for this reason that other normative conceptions of justice have more validity, and that secularism in India is in crisis.

### **Suggestions for research on ethics**

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In this section, I outline how this thesis contributes to the anthropology of ethics, and offer suggestions for further research; the ambition of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the nature of ethical life in the modern world and to offer a theoretical architecture that could inform future research on ethics.

The thesis offers an innovative model of ethical reality that suggests that social imagination is the source of ethics. It is only by virtue of imagination that we live in a transcendental social: we imagine ourselves and others to be related in particular ways. This relatedness gives speech and action its inherent ethical dimension. In turn, virtue ethics link particular, time-and space-bound acts to collectively imagined ideals; ideals that are rendered explicit and shared through ritual. This model attempts to resolve the long debate in anthropology on whether ethical action is socially or materially determined, or an innate disposition, and reconsiders the questions regarding the inherent social or free nature of human beings. It allows for a combination of an 'epistemology of estrangement' and of 'intimacy' (Keane 2003: 225) in the study of ethics: it allows for a deeply engaged analysis of the particular, of vernacular categories of understanding, and of vernacular understandings of human freedom and agency, while it also allows for cross-cultural comparison and theorisation *without* reductionist essentialisation.

Therefore, from this model follow two suggestions. Firstly, the anthropological study of ethics needs to explore ethical lifeworlds through the relevant vernacular categories. I have demonstrated that the ethics of my interlocutors (*dharma*) involves complex negotiations operating with various ideological reference points. It would be impossible to capture the nature of the vernacular ethics within purified categories relevant elsewhere, like the modern West. After the nature of the vernacular categories of ethics are

understood, useful analytical comparisons can be made; in this manner, I have compared the vernacular concept *jñān* to the Aristotelian concept *phronesis*.

The conceptualisation of modern ethics follows from a particular historical trajectory, which involved the distinction between modern state law and morality (Asad 2003: 218ff). This distinction cleared the space not only for secular law but also for secular morality; that is, religious morality has become classified and categorised in a secular manner. In the modern, secular classification, ethics is interior/invisible/private, as opposed to the exterior/visible/public nature of law. This secular conception of religious ethics, Asad maintains, is 'at once modern and Christian', as it presupposes a sovereign conscience (2003: 245). 'That conscience is a purely private matter at once enabling and justifying the self-government of human beings is a necessary (though not sufficient) precondition of modern secular ethics' (Asad 2003: 247). Asad argues that in the traditional language of the Shari'a such a distinction is not clear-cut at all, since the central idea of virtue cannot be defined according to binary terminology like this-worldly/otherworldly sanction, or free self-governance/obedience to external authority. Furthermore, Asad argues that the capacity for virtuous judgement is dependent on embodied relationships rather than on a private conscience.

In my research context, the application of a secular classification of ethics would obscure crucial aspects of the ethical reality. I have argued that ethical autonomy is derived from the sovereignty of Allah (rather than from a sovereign conscience). Furthermore, the ethics of Muslim Joygramis is fundamentally social as the capacity for judgement is generated from within relatedness. On this basis, I have rejected Laidlaw's (2014a) conception of ethics because it has the shadows of the modern secular conception of ethics as described by Asad. As anthropologists, we need to be acutely aware of the normativity and historical specificity of such distinctions lest we assume the ethics of our interlocutors to be conceptualised, located and enacted in a certain (secular) manner.

An analysis through the vernacular category *dharma* and the theoretical concept of the transcendental social allows me to suspend the binary categories religious/secular and modern/traditional, but that is not to say that there are

no real differences and changes when people are confronted with secular state institutions, or with circulating idea[l]s of modernity. As Asad repeatedly reminds us, secular and religious ideologies or institutions articulate 'different kinds of subjectivity, [mobilize] different kinds of social activity, and [invoke] different modalities of time' (Asad 2003: 62). I have revealed both the changes and the continuities – these take place in the transcendental social - but without claiming that the one or the other is 'actually' secular or religious, because I do not believe that it is at all helpful to make such an external distinction.

The complexities are clear in the vignette recounted at the very beginning of the introduction to this thesis. To reiterate: Samsuddin's response to injustice is that people should follow *dharma* more strictly in order to follow the law of the nation-state, and I have suggested that modern law is incorporated in *dharma* as an ethics of justice. Samsuddin may be called deeply religious for, in his view, one is not human without a *dharma*. Yet at the same time, Samsuddin's invocation of the law could be interpreted as the sign of a secular sensibility, especially where it concerns his endorsement of state violence to cleanse the public sphere of bad elements (see Asad 2003: 59 – 60). He embraces the idea of the state as transcending and mediating the different identities that are united in an imagined, national community, ruled by constitutional law. Asad argued, 'this transcendent mediation *is* secularism (2003: 5, emphasis in original). Yet again, for Samsuddin it is clearly impossible to be secular in this manner without it being rooted in *dharma*. That is, state mediation has in turn to be transcended by another: a divine authority.

There are undoubtedly different kinds of subjectivity, social activity and modalities of time at play here than we may have found in the pre-modern Bengali landscape; 'words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones' (Asad 2003: 25). I think it is important, firstly, to recognize that these are fluid reconfigurations within larger ideas of justice (a larger transcendental social). Secondly, it is crucial to understand why some practices and discourses do, and some do not change. We could label Samsuddin's position as modern and secular on the one hand, and orthodox Islamic on the other hand. Is this contradictory? Maybe less if we consider that *dharma* is a concept that always contains this-worldly concerns. For this reason,

I do not think it is analytically or theoretically helpful here to make a distinction between the sacred and the secular.

I propose that in the study of ethics, anthropologists should go beyond Asad and suspend the categories 'religious' and 'secular' altogether if we value our interlocutors' categories as equivalent to our own categories rather than subordinated and in need of analysis *through* our categories. I have gone to a great length to relate the local meaning of *dharma*, *jāti*, *jñān* and *imān*. These fundamental ideas related to this thesis help to explain in depth the ethics of my interlocutors rather than categorising them according to religious/secular, belief/reason binaries. Only then have I made the analytical comparison between *jñān* and *phronesis* to open up the possibility for cross-cultural comparison.

So, secondly, I suggest that the anthropology of ethics should have the ambition for a higher level of theoretical synthesis in order to allow for more cross-cultural comparison. What are the categories and forms of relatedness relevant in the transcendental social? What are the ethical ideas and practices employed to realize the transcendental social? What are the aspects of the transactional social that inform particular ethical practices? How does change in the transactional social inform shifting ethical practice and discourse? How do people negotiate a challenge to their transcendental social, or conflicting transcendental socials? In attempting to answer these and other related questions for people across the world, the anthropology of ethics could offer a transparent and comprehensive insight into the nature of ethical life.

Furthermore, I have argued that in the study of ethics anthropologists need to pay attention to the 'difficulty of reality' and the ethical tragedy this involves. Das (2014) used the idiom 'difficulty of reality' to critique Laidlaw (2014a) for not paying sufficient attention to the experiential dimension when it comes to the incoherence of ethical systems. A 'conflict of values' (Laidlaw 2014a: 169) seems to presuppose a choice that can 'resolve' the conflict. However, choice cannot always solve a conflict of values, because values are often incommensurable and often neither option may be considered actually virtuous. I have paid attention to this aspect to a certain extent as the concept of

*phronesis* allows for incommensurability: a virtuous judgement (understood as *phronesis*) is aimed at a non-instrumental balance rather than a black-or-white choice. I consider the conceptual idea of the 'difficulty of reality' to operate analytically in parallel with *phronesis*; it adds the dimension of violence, and the melancholy, scepticism and sense of defeat that accompany the 'impossibility' of a truly consistent and coherent moral life.

The latter observation points to an element that I foremost hope to have made clear in this thesis: that the difficulty of reality is not just the impossibility of living according to religious ideals (Laidlaw 2014a: 126). Everyday reality is highly political, I would think anywhere, however certainly for Muslims in a Bengali village. Das does not make her critique of Laidlaw explicit in terms of a problematic depoliticised view of ethics, but her ethnography (2010, 2012) speaks for itself. She critiques the Foucauldian poststructuralist framework because 'the perplexities raised by the actions of the ordinary men and women... challenge us to think differently' (Das 2014: 494; cf. Mattingly 2012: 174-175). Thinking differently, I feel, is thinking how the political predicament forms the foil of ethical tragedies and how the violences of everyday life are folded into everyday ethical conflict.

I have asked, why is there no revolt? There is no revolt for radical change because everyone is always implicated in the reproduction of violence; such is its perpetual potency. The 'difficulty of reality' is that 'the social violences of day-to-day living are central to the moral order' (Das and Kleinman 2000: 5). The violences are not external forces penetrating the pristine culture of Joygram; there is a circulation of ideas and practices and violences and I do hope to have made it clear that everyone is always implicated – the inescapability (the banality of evil) is a form of violence in itself. To be in peace, is to live the 'art of life'. This is not quite possible in an environment deemed so thoroughly immoral, and when one's ethical autonomy is curtailed.

The impossibility to revolt creates an ethical tragedy, because one becomes implicated in the reproduction of an unethical system. It can create a scepticism so embedded in everyday life 'that guarantees of belonging to larger entities like communities or state are not capable of erasing the hurts or providing means of repairing this sense of being betrayed by the everyday' (Das 2007: 9).

Everyone is confronted with the difficulty of reality, and to 'live in peace' is probably closest to 'living sanely', which does not have to mean living comfortably, but 'being able to overcome the trance-like character that everyday life sometimes takes' (Das 2014: 493). The 'trance-like' character of life is expressed in a deep melancholy and paralysing scepticism. In Joygram, the tone of an ordinary conversation is sarcastic, as if nothing is like it should be, and scepticism is expressed outright in the desire to die. The melancholy of someone like Nasiruddin, when he admits he does the opposite of *dharma*, because he can't do otherwise, is palpable. He was quite literally paralysed - spending days just sitting on the floor - when the truck he manages was involved in an accident because the driver was drunk, but the insurance that had cost him a small fortune did not cover this particular kind of accident; his wife just gave birth to a third daughter; his father was dying of diabetes; and he himself started suffering of the same disease. However, he overcame the scepticism that had taken hold of him in a manner not uncommon to the men in Joygram. He joined the Tablighi Jamaat, and tried to simply focus on living 'the art of life', not to live comfortably but sanely. Reformist Islam offers a way to 'reconstruct the human' and 'redeem humanity' through the re-instantiation of fundamental ethical principles. The law and politics do not seem to suffice because of the violence and instrumentality inherent to it, and because of the constant disappointment that whatever is promised is not happening - and keeping a promise is a most fundamental ethical principle (Lambek 2010).

I suggest, then, that in a study of ethics it is crucial that anthropologists look at all the aspects that allow for particular kinds of ethical action (what I, following Keane [2014, 2015] have called ethical affordances), and all the aspects that obstruct other kinds of ethical action. We have to allow space for scepticism and tragedy lest we romanticise the ethical lifeworlds of others and ourselves.

Attention to the ethical tragedy implies that we have to allow for failure, for double binds, for 'catch-22' situations. Ironically, Islamic reformism further enhances the contradictions in ethical life, because it is not only an answer to but also a product of modernity and the strategies of secularism. The particular expression of Islamic reformism in India is at least in part a result of the limited



space for navigation due to the reification of Muslim identity in a racialised community identity, and the reification of *dharma* into the narrow category of religion. The project of social renewal that my interlocutors desire has its roots in the holistic cosmopolitics of kinship and sociality, and would ideally include all spheres of life, as well as including non-Muslims (all-encompassing justice and order). The purified Islamic reformist form and meaning of *dharma* is counterproductive to this ideal. As the villagers that have joined the Tablighi Jamaat (albeit erratically) advocate the purification of Islam from its supposedly non-Islamic elements, in an attempt to promote a 'systematic' (Osella & Osella 2009: S216) and coherent ethical life-style, they further inhibit the possibility of a holistic social renewal.

Implicitly and unintentionally, Islamic reformist organisations like the Tablighi Jamaat may reproduce the religion/secular politics binary. It is therefore equally counterproductive for the aspiration to be included as a modern citizen, due to the exclusionary mechanism of the Indian secular state. The Islamic aesthetic is meant to be a public performance of piety, of 'good personhood', including 'good secular citizenship'. Yet it deviates from the hegemonic ideas of secular aesthetics and moral practice. Muslims are denied their own, inclusive conception of *culture*. The ethical renewal of Islamic reformism may therefore not have the desired consequences. It is important to allow for this kind of tragedy to play out in our reflections of ethical lifeworlds.

### **Suggestions for research on secularism**

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'Secularism' and its derivatives are 'essentially contested concepts' (Starrett 2010) so utilising secularism as an analytical category is problematic. However, secularism can be studied as an object of analysis. This section will address suggestions for the research of secularism that explores how the 'powers of the secular modern' (Scott & Hirschkind 2006), and in particular of modern categorisation, affect peoples' ordinary lives and their claims to citizenship. To gain a comprehensive understanding of how secular forces create various kinds of ethical affordances is particularly pertinent in postcolonial and postsecular contexts where the public presence of religious groups and their relationship to the secular state is often ambiguous.

This thesis illustrates that a 'secular state is not one characterised by religious indifference, or rational ethics – or political toleration. It is a complex arrangement of legal reasoning, moral practice, and political authority' (Asad 2003: 255). Hegemonic legal and moral discourses (particularly regarding rights and liberties) developed contingent upon the development of a particular conception of the human self (ibid.: 127 – 158). Throughout this history we can see the duality 'nature' and 'culture' – a duality that accompanies the story of nationalism: Mankind is sprung from nature, creates a cultural community that is the nation, and allows this cultural community to regulate his natural freedom (ibid.: 193). Modern liberal political theory presupposes an essence to the human being, from which one draws their sovereignty: inalienable rights. Asad argues that the legal concept of the person with natural rights was constructed not only as a limit to an arbitrary government but 'may also be closely linked to the desire to stabilize the contingent character of the self' (ibid.: 135). The anxiety about the 'porous self' (Taylor 2007: 33) came forth from the increasing transferability of property rights and the ensuing precariousness and volatility of property itself. Subsequently, the human being was conceptualised as a 'buffered self' (ibid.); a '*sovereign, self-owning agent – essentially suspicious of others* – and not merely a subject conscious of his or her own identity' (Asad 2003: 135, emphasis in original).

We need to carefully scrutinise ideas of liberty instead of assuming secular freedom to be 'more free' than non-secular forms of freedom. That is, the freedom that Muslim Joygramis 'have' or experience (the freedom generated by submission to Allah) is not necessarily more limited or constrained than the freedom of modern, 'liberal' secularism, unbound by religious tradition. As Asad observes, "'The room for choice" is not a homogeneous space of which secular liberal society happens to have the most', rather, 'what one gets is a different pattern of constraint and possibility' (2003: 226). Further research should provide insight into how particular conceptualisations of personhood, kinship and freedom - beyond the normative secular/religious binary - inform ideas of liberty and rights in relation to the state and other citizens. What matters most in this context is that anyone (or any community) who holds a different cosmopolitical vision of humanity is likely to have conflicting visions of their

rights, which may result in the structural violence of being denied rights or failing to acquire substantive citizenship.

I oppose the idea that those individuals or communities with different cosmopolitical visions are unable to grasp the discourse on modern rights; rather, I stress the need for research into the ways in which individuals and communities are denied human dignity by being denied the validity of their conceptualisations just because *another* conceptualisation has become hegemonic. First of all, I have argued in this thesis that there is not necessarily a problem of misrecognition or incommensurability; the problem is one of being denied legitimacy. The idea of misrecognition follows from epistemological (or perhaps even ontological) boundaries between 'Indian society' and 'modernity', which I have equally argued against in this thesis. This boundary often falls seamlessly together with the religious/secular boundary.

For instance, the Subaltern Studies project has unfortunately made itself guilty in the reproduction of the religious/secular bifurcation. Their laudable intention to not interpret subalterns' actions through the lens of alien (read Western) conceptual tools, has the unfortunate corollary of delineating subalterns into an enchanted sphere exterior to the rationalized, secular realm of modernity. As a result, the Subaltern Studies project demonstrates 'the scholarly fetishizing of religiosity and its treatment as a foundational worldview that anchors a supposedly autonomous domain of subaltern life' (Subramanian 2009: 24-5; see also Hansen 1996).

We should also not assume that modernity, or the liberal ideology of the state, takes on the same forms everywhere (see e.g. Bhargava 2010; Khilnani 1999). On the basis of ethnography of colonial cases in British India, Das (2006) shows that the range of possible conceptualisations of personhood and rights is wider and more complex than a religious/secular bifurcation. The body produced before the law 'is already constituted as a socio-legal subject rather than a natural body' (Das 2006: 95), with particular implications for the legal approach to gender and kinship.

The manipulation of particular ideological premises may in some cases be closer to vernacular conceptualisations of personhood and rights, or may be

another technique of control and suppression. In modern law, and in modern interpretations of Muslim Personal Law, the monogamous, nuclear family is a core legal unit (Asad 2003: 231ff), which is, as Cannell (2013) shows, grounded in Protestant notions of kinship. In contrast, I have argued that the Muslim self in Joygram is generated from the relatedness within a *jāti*, and that the nuclear family is ideologically subordinated to the *jāti*. The conception of the self and of units and processes of reproduction among Muslims are not consistent with a secular liberal conception nor is it consistent with the socio-legal subject created by the Indian state.

What Das (2006) shows, moreover, is that the execution of the liberal rights discourse is itself highly ambiguous: the court cases show ample space for subjective interpretations rather than seamless rational bureaucratic procedure. The main challenge that Indian Muslims face, then, may be not another kind of coherent collective imagination, but the ambiguity inherent in the production of modernity. The liberal state may operate on the basis of a particular mythical reality (Asad 2003: 127ff) but it does not act with coherence accordingly: as I have shown in the introduction, the postcolonial Indian myth is rife with ambiguities. This political ambiguity feeds and intensifies the ethical ambiguity of everyday life. ‘The difficulty of reality’ (Das 2014) for my interlocutors is not the conflict between two coherent and incommensurable ideologies but the lack of a coherent and legitimate narrative of social reproduction.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I have not been able to draw out in detail the contrasting understandings of citizenship and claim-making this entails. However, I suggest that further enquiry is necessary into how these alternative understandings and segmentary orderings of kinship and relatedness inform notions of citizenship, and how, in turn, the particular cultural construction of kinship in the legal system excludes or denaturalises the claims to citizenship of alternative forms of social subjects.

McKinnon and Cannell (2013) have reminded us that kinship crosscuts domains like the traditional (where it is usually considered ubiquitous and pivotal) and modernity (where it has supposedly been ‘privatised’ and become

irrelevant to other domains). Kinship, and the ordering of social relations that flow from a particular ideology of kinship, are crucial to the ways in which narratives of modernity, of nation-state, citizenship and secularism are made legible and relevant in any society, whether modern or traditional (Bear 2007; 2013). With this in mind, I have used Carsten's (2000) idiom 'relatedness' to allow for the processual, domain-defiant character of locally meaningful categories of belonging.

Michelutti and Forbess (2013) similarly argue that kinship should be central in analyses of processes of vernacularisation (of democracy, for instance, see Michelutti 2008). They propose 'divine kinship' as an analytical tool through which to explore the interconnections between democracy, kinship and religion, and to explore 'how *non-public* domains of social life shape political life' (2013: 5), and vice versa. In my study I demonstrate that the ways in which personhood, kinship and sociality are constructed is indeed central to the possible vernacular engagements with the supposedly modern, secular state. Furthermore, I suggest that these kinds of considerations are key to the study of vernacular conceptualisations of rights, liberty and states' management of demands for recognition and claims to rights articulated in non-hegemonic forms.

One example of research in this direction is Subramanian's study of claim-making genealogies of fishers in Southwest India. In a study of the grassroots rather than the state's perspective, Subramanian explicitly positions herself as against studies that are 'definitively separating modern and nonmodern political epistemologies' and instead aims at 'narrating the circulation of ideas, practices, and strategies within shared arenas of power' (2009: 23). She argues that '[p]ostcolonial citizenship would be not a derivate juridical construct that is a less authentic expression of cultural subjectivity but a dynamic, locally constituted process through which people envision their relationship to nature, community, nation, and state' (2009: 31). Subramanian's project is a step in the right direction, and I hope that more studies of secularism look into the ways in which secular constructions of rights either vernacularise in relation to local cosmopolitics, and/or continue to exclude people with divergent conceptualisations of humanity and rights.

The need for such studies is particularly pressing in a postcolonial context, but also in Western contexts where immigrant groups enter into contractual relationships with the state. The interaction between the state ideology and immigrant groups is too often portrayed as standing in a mutually opposing yet infiltrating relationship to each other. This is prominent in the study of the Tablighi Jamaat, for instance Pieri's study (2015), which aims to reconsider 'the impact liberalism has on how illiberal groups [TJ] practice their beliefs' (2015: 22). A more sensitive approach would go beyond such a binary opposition to draw out the processes of legitimation, exclusion and approximation (see e.g. Bowen 2013; Meer & Modood 2015; Modood et al. 2006).

I propose that the framework that I have employed in this thesis, of the transcendental and transactional social, will be useful to frame the exploration of these kinds of conflict, especially when concerning different conceptions of physiological and social reproduction. According to Bloch, the transcendental social is surprisingly static and unconscious, and only becomes reflected upon when challenged. It is *supposed* to be static, as, in Bloch's view, it is supposed to be purely reproductive of power and social hierarchies. When it is challenged, people fear chaos, which is particularly the fear of non-replacement (the fear that one's children will not follow in one's role).<sup>127</sup> I want to add that it is supposed to be static because it contains the potential for ethics, and thus for justice and order. When the transcendental social is challenged, there is a moment of extra-ordinary ethics, when it is uncertain which values are shared and who can be trusted. This equally incites a fear of chaos and the potential degeneration of humanity.

Regarding this research, I suggest that it is this fear of chaos that incites the emphasis on *dharma*. That is, the Bengali Muslims' predicament is that their transcendental social is challenged: they face competing imaginations of the nature of humanity, and of the reproduction of the collective. The macro-cosmic holistic ideal of *dharma* is alive in the bodies and practices of the villagers and has incorporated modern ideologies. However, the authority of the nation-state and its institutions are perceived to act on the basis of instrumentality rather

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<sup>127</sup> Personal communication, 23.03.2015.

than ethics, thus its promise of transcendence is limited. Many Muslims therefore turn to a stronger, more coherent narrative: Islamic reformism. This, however, equally inspires a moment of extraordinary ethics. The fear of chaos, then, is all-pervasive.

### **Implications for ethical life in secular modernity**

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I have in this discussion so far painted a rather bleak picture of the contemporary conditions. Yet, my interlocutors continue to have hope, and so should I. Therefore, I want to conclude on a more hopeful note, and explore possibilities for shared ideas of the good and sources of solidarity in the ethical life of a secular modern world.

This line of inquiry is relevant and pressing in a world deemed postsecular, postmodern, and postliberal; in a world where the secularisation thesis is deeply contested and religion is back in the public sphere, yet religion in its narrow categorisation does not offer shared ideas of the common good and common grand narratives. Almost all modern nation-states have a religiously diverse population, but the success of secularism as a political doctrine to 'manage' this plurality is questionable. One of the most pressing questions of our time has therefore become: 'what holds us together'? (Bellah 2008).

I believe that the sudden and burgeoning anthropological interest in ethics, and particularly in virtue ethics, is part of the quest for diverse kinds of narratives that can form the inspiration for shared ideas of the good – and of being good without necessarily being religious. It fits within the desire, recognised by Comaroff (2008) and quoted in the last chapter, to find narratives and guidelines for modes of being that transcend the 'bloodless' bureaucratic practices of the state and the instrumentalised market. It fits, as such, within a tendency that can loosely be called 'postliberal', a term mostly deployed in political theology but making its way into political theory, policy and practice. Stacey (2015) attempts to encapsulate the disparate arguments identified as postliberal as follows: as political theory has become dominated by liberalism, ideas of the good have been neglected and replaced by an abstract respect for plurality. Public political responsibility and social duty have eroded, as these have become private matters. The state and the market are supposed to fill the

vacuum but they are built on a contractual logic, and perceived to stand in a zero-sum relation to each other. So, 'post-liberals propose to return to the theoretical moment at which ideas of the good were undermined, and to slowly work from theory through to politics, policy and practice, reawakening our sense of solidarity, and reinvigorating collective action' (Stacey 2015: 19). Postliberals, then, both make the empirical (and normative) observation of our post-Durkheimian predicament and make value-based attempts to usher us into a new era of collective solidarity.

The big question is, of course, what are the 'ideas of the good' and what should be its sources. Prominent philosophers and theologians who could be considered postliberal (and are popular among anthropologists), for instance, Charles Taylor (2007), John Millbank (2008) and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007 [1981]), all implicitly or explicitly seem to suggest that a revival of the Christian narrative is the solution for the moral void we experience in secular modernity. I do not think, however, that it is most helpful to think within a particular religious denomination if we want the question of 'what holds us together' to be genuinely inclusive on a global scale. Public responsibility and social duty could well be reinvigorated through a Christian narrative, yet still we need to think on a deeper level - beyond cultural categories - to find categories that appeal to all of humankind.

Anthropologists have long quarrelled with ideologically hegemonic teleological narratives like the modernisation and secularisation theses. 'We have never been modern', Latour (2012) proclaimed. The studies on kinship I discussed above form one way of dismantling the idea that we are inevitably disenchanted Cartesians. It is unfortunate that the most prominent work on our current 'secular age' (Taylor 2007) does not allow any space for a discussion of kinship. Kinship, and the sacred qualities so often attributed to kinship, therefore has no impact on the 'buffered self' (ibid: 33). Taylor may be right in his postulation that in Western secular society, belief in god is just one option among others (ibid.: 2) and that ideologically, the modern self is 'buffered' (ibid: 33), but this is based on a particular, Christian understanding of belief that may, in fact, not even be representative of the 'Christian West'. In everyday reality, belief and non-belief are very fluid categories, as are the secular and the sacred,



and the transcendental and the immanent. Notwithstanding hegemonic ideas about the secular nature of kinship, the attribution of 'sacred' qualities to kinship is unwavering – for instance, all kinship relations among members of the Latter-day Saints in the USA have a sacred quality (Cannell 2013: 232). Most significantly for my discussion here, Cannell suggest that religious kinship ideas

'may also reveal something truthful about the modern world that is otherwise difficult to see, precisely by evoking a world in which the domains of human experience are not fully divided from and against one another. In this sense, modern disenchantment may be partially transcended through a language and practice of kinship understood as ineffable, a third term, one that escapes from the polarity of substance and legality and remains embedded, like an anti-fetish, hidden in our metaphors of human transmission' (2013: 238).

The sacred manifests itself not only in kinship, but also in other kinds of relationships and ordinary everyday activities (Lynch 2012). The sacred, here, is not best described as something 'supernatural' since this idiom reproduces the modern distinction between a pre-human nature, a constructed culture, and the supernatural as something that is not actually real. Rather, the sacred points to that irreducible dimension of social human life: ethics.

I suggest that there is no need to find new sources or to revive a Christian narrative. I suggest that instead, we need to increase our awareness of those parts of social life that already transcend instrumentality, and to make explicit those tacit ideas in social life that provide inspiration for social solidarity and collective action. The anthropological study of ethics shows, indeed, that ethics are all-pervasive in ordinary speech and action (Lambek 2010*a*, 2010*b*; Keane 2015) and cannot possibly be limited to a particular domain of life. Moreover, as I have argued in this thesis, ethics are inherently social; it is not a private matter but comes forth from our imagination of the transcendental social.

I think that in our quest for 'what holds us together', it is very important – not only for academics but for any human being on this planet seeking to live in social solidarity – to think outside of purified categories, and to think in terms of a larger transcendental social. It allows for the quest for an ethical life to be a quest of humanity rather than of a particular religious or cultural community. Whether the transcendental goal is salvation, rebirth, or the continuation of a

lineage is analytically secondary to the universally shared fact of living in a transactional and transcendental social – that is, of being mortals yet imagining a space- and time-transcending social reality. I have argued that the negotiation between the two is ethics – so we are inevitably all involved in ethical negotiation even though it may seem that secular modernity has created a moral void. A post-Durkheimian social form is for Robert Bellah (2008) a sociological impossibility; not unlike my interlocutors' contention that a social form without *dharma* is a sociological impossibility. *Dharma*, I have argued at length, is an ethics of order and justice rather than a delineated religion of a particular denomination (even though it can *include* that). All human beings, if they are to distinguish themselves from other animals, engage in ethics in the construction and negotiation of the transcendental social, whether we call it Durkheimian collective ideals or *dharma*.

The ideological differences between transcendental socials may seem 'uniquely realistic' (Geertz 1973) and beyond negotiation for the adherents of a particular worldview, but if we open up our myopic perspective, we can see that all humans are engaged in comparable ethical practices: transcending biological mortality and constructing collective ideals that will allow for social reproduction. I think that upon concrete recognition that transcendence in this form is universal, the normative quarrel between secularism and religion, or between different kinds of religion becomes secondary and we can talk about how to construct collective forms of solidarity.

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