

Relevance of Ibsen to Contemporary Bangladesh: A Study of *Brand*



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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Preamble

Bangladesh's leading theatre group, the Centre for Asian Theatre (CAT) produced Ibsen's *Brand* in 2004. Translated and directed by Munzur-i-Mowla and Kamaluddin Nilu respectively, the performance caught the attention of the spectators and critics for its strong relevance to contemporary society and politics of the country. The fact that the audience and critics alike appreciated the production is emphasised in Nilu's article on *Brand*¹ in which he states that, “they found the production highly relevant for the contemporary Bangladeshi society”. Besides, the findings of a CAT survey² which was carried out during 55 performances of *Brand* over a period of two years reveal that the spectators could see it as a confrontation with issues they encountered in daily life. However, I need to point out at the outset that the spectators who saw the performance as a commentary on contemporary Bangladesh belonged to a small privileged group of the society which can be slackerly categorised as the elite class as per Bangladesh standard. I will talk more about the audience's social background in chapters three and four. The Survey findings demonstrate that forty one percent of the respondents saw *Brand* as a contemporary expression of the use of religion for hanging on to power. Twenty two percent thought that it crystallised how the blind, parochial views could be established as the religious beliefs through misinterpretation of religion while nine percent respondents considered that it showed how the poor, downcast people could be left powerless. The spectators could relate the performance to their time and setting although, in stark contrast to the conventional and popular Ibsen theatre practices, no attempts were made in it to appropriate the Norwegian playwright to make him relevant to today's Bangladesh. The country's Ibsen productions before *Brand*, as I will show later in the chapter, were either totally or partially adapted to make them 'relevant' to Bangladesh.

This aspect of prevailing Ibsen productions in the country led to my choice of the performance that ‘seemingly’ remained true to the 'original' providing me with the platform to advance my argument

1 Nilu, Kamaluddin (2007). “Contemporary Relevance of Ibsen's *Brand*—The Case of Islamic Fundamentalism”. *Ibsen Studies*, Vol. VII, No I. p. 105.

2 “The CAT Survey on *Brand Performances*” Dhaka: CAT, 2006,(in Bangla)For more on the “Survey” see chapter 4.

that the current socio-political dynamics of Bangladesh, faced with the rise of Islamic fundamentalists with their fervent cry to revive their brand of 'pristine' Islam and put an end to the syncretistic traditions of Islam, have been the key to an acceptance and appreciation of the 'foreign' *Brand* by the initiated audience.

This chapter is divided roughly into two parts. In the first part I present the theories in support of my claim with a view to advancing the basic question of the thesis. Then I give a brief account of the literature relevant to the thesis before providing a short historical overview of Bangladesh with a focus on the politics of fundamentalism and offering a short survey of the important Ibsen performances in Bangladesh before the staging of *Brand*.

1.2 Theorising the Claim and the Basic Question

The work of art, as Nygaard³ considers it, is “*concretized* or re-created or co-created by the beholder or reader”. A theatrical production is “always local, locally constructed and biased in the local culture and understanding”. To Fischer-Lichte, a performance is an event creating a protean space for actors and spectators who influence and, more often than not provoke each other in course of a production contributing to its unplanned, unpredictable and dynamic making. Taking the lead from her illustrious compatriot Max Hermann's theorisation of performance, Fischer-Lichte argues:

The performance calls for a social community, since it is rooted in one, and, on the other hand, since in its course it brings forth a social community that unites actors and spectators. Theatre, thus, appears to be an important community-building institution.⁴

As she accounts for performance, it is “the bodily co-presence” of actors and spectators that constitutes it and allows it to come into being. In her understanding the metaphor of 'game' that Hermann employed to describe performance is striking because the metaphor regards the spectators as “co-players” in the game. Fischer-Lichte says, “It is they [spectators] who also contribute to the creation of a performance by participating in the game, i.e. by their physical presence, their perception, their responses”.⁵ Focusing on “the physical acts of the actors and their capacity to

³ Nygaard, Jon (2007). “Nothing comes from the valley except The silken Bow at the tip of your tail”. Article presented at the international conference on “Henrik Ibsen: Transcultural Perspectives”, organised by the Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, Oslo, November 8-9, 2007.

⁴ Fischer-Lichte, Erika (2005). *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring forms of Political Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 23.

⁵ *ibid.*

'infect' the spectators as well as on the 'contagion' occurring among the spectators"⁶, she considers theatre as the most political of all art forms. Fischer-Lichte reiterated her position while addressing the Second International Ibsen Lecture in October 2008.⁷ She observed that any performance is a social process adding that it becomes political when a group presents its ideas and the other group reacts to it. She mentioned that performance is removed from the control of any particular individual. It thus follows that whatever intention or idea a director may have for a production, it is bound to move in a new direction with the spectators' creating or producing it through their responses, reactions and perceptions.

Since the spectators' responses and reactions are my point of interest, the basic question of my thesis is: How a performance like *Brand* with its apparent "foreignness" was perceived and created by the audience in Bangladesh?

Analysing the performance of the play and drawing upon relevant material, I will argue that the performance was enjoyed and appreciated by the initiated spectators because they could relate it to contemporary situations in Bangladesh. In other words, it was because of their awareness of the socio-political complexities of the country that the performance of *Brand* assumed "a local significance" which consequently made them "create" it.

The principal issue that I will address in the thesis is as follows:

--The performance of *Brand* invariably involves the issue of religion, fundamentalism, fanaticism, etc. Bangladesh which is a predominantly Muslim country and which in recent times has witnessed the onslaughts of the fanatics has a 'delicate' attitude towards religion. How did the play negotiate the rather touchy religious issue?

As a by-product of the main issue, I will also ask what opportunities Nilu's *Brand* provided for the emancipation of women because, in most cases women in Bangladesh are rendered mute by the fundamentalists in the name of religion.

1.3 Theoretical Design

In addition to using Fischer-Lichte's aforementioned performance dynamics as a tool, I will employ Rustom Bharucha's and Xiaomei Chen's critiques of interculturalism as the theoretical basis of the

6 *ibid.* p. 30.

7 Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "The Second International Ibsen Lecture" at UiO, Oslo, October 27, 2008.

thesis. To these thoughts I will add Nygaard's idea of co-creation of Ibsen “in another culture”⁸ and my own critical position why I do not consider Ibsen “a Norwegian” any more”⁹ in the globalised world of ours to ground my argument.

For Bharucha¹⁰ “the cultural contexts and actual living conditions” of the people in a given culture is of crucial significance. He questions the legitimacy of the idea of mutual respect and fairness in cultural transactions because power in the form of money would play a decisive role in any such exercise: “The outsiders who give it [money] control the ‘cultural exchange’, and however cosmopolitan or altruistic they may be, they are still figures of authority”.¹¹ As such he is dismissive of those interculturalists who do not confront “the politics of [interculturalism's] location [...] and imagine that interculturalism can transcend the particularities of history”.¹² Bharucha is at odds with Pavis because he “seems to neutralize the intense vulnerabilities and human dimensions of the intercultural encounter”.¹³ He finds Pavis's “discourse” limited and hence unsatisfying for it “rules out the possibilities of doubts, ruptures, blockages or interruptions [...] It is so perfectly sealed, almost closing out any dialogic possibility.”¹⁴ Thus Bharucha accounts for his own directorial engagement with “Peer Gynt [which] was never a 'foreign' text for [him]” because it “assumes a local significance” with his exploration of “the multiple routes” thereby generating the thought that “he (Peer) was already Indian”.¹⁵

Chen in one sense elaborates upon Bharucha's thought involving Peer (“already Indian”) and would emphasise upon local situations for a performance to be understood and appreciated. She holds that “No theory can be globally inclusive and hence conclusive of local diversities and cultural specificities”.¹⁶ She analyses the Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Brecht's *Life of Galileo* and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* to reveal that in these productions the Western dramatists were

8 Nygaard,*op.cit.* 2007

9 Ahsanuzzaman, Ahmed (2007). “Ibsen, No More a Norwegian”. Article presented at the international conference on “Henrik Ibsen: Transcultural Perspectives”, organised by the Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, Oslo, November 8-9, 2007.

10 Bharucha, Rustom (1993). *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge pp. 1-2.

11 *ibid.* p. 37.

12 *ibid.* p. 240.

13 *ibid.* p.5.

14 *ibid.*

15 *ibid.* (2000). *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in An Age of Globalization*. London: The Athlone Press, p. 72.

16 Chen, Xiaomei (2002). *Occidentalism—A Theory of Counter—Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Second edition with a foreword by Jinhua Dai). Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, p. 10.

“appropriated as something 'Chinese' and came to play [their] dramatic role[s] in cross-cultural literary history in early post-Mao China”.¹⁷ To the Chinese spectators, *Peer Gynt* was important because they could understand “its relevance to their situation”.¹⁸ Chen continues, “The production of *Peer Gynt* thus became a dramatic dialogue in which the audiences were transformed into the characters of the play, waiting for an answer from opposing characters who offered a view of life different from that of their own”.¹⁹

The concept of the “target” culture in dealing with Ibsen does not interest Nygaard for he thinks that “Ibsen” or Ibsen's text is not a thing 'to be transported from one culture to another'. He 'insist[s] on inter-cultural Ibsen or Ibsen **between** cultures and that Ibsen is not “received” in another culture, but is re-created, [...] or produced in another culture'.²⁰ This is how Nygaard opines: “The cross-cultural or inter-cultural Ibsen cannot be exported to another culture. It is the need in the other culture that opens for an adoption of Ibsen—and it is based on **their** culture, ideas or needs that Ibsen is adopted”.²¹

I employed an attitude almost similar to that of Nygaard's while offering reasons why Ibsen should not be considered a Norwegian any more in my article, “Ibsen, No More a Norwegian”.²² Building my perspective upon Bharucha's, I offered an elaborate study of Ibsen performances and Ibsen teaching in Bangladesh to argue that the Bangladeshis have created and fashioned Ibsen to suit their purpose. I contended:

In performing and teaching Ibsen, we always make it our concern to locate him in our history as well as socio-political setting. And, this speaks for our interpretation and reinterpretation of him in our classroom and theatre. And, this is precisely the reason that Ibsen does not speak to us as a *foreigner*; instead, through our practices, we have created him to delve into the hearts of millions of tormented Bangladeshi people.²³

I concluded the piece with the thought that in Bangladesh's theatre as well as the academia, we “frequent an Ibsen who speaks to us — not as an outsider, but as one of us”.²⁴

17 *ibid.* p. 47.

18 *ibid.* p. 53.

19 *ibid.*

20 Nygaard, *op.cit.* 2007.

21 *ibid.*

22 Ahsanuzzaman *op.cit.* 2007.

23 *ibid.*

24 *ibid.*

1.4 Selection of Material

a. Performance analysis

The performance analysis of the play will be primarily based around my own recollections of watching the play's première in 2004. To complement the discussion, I will also use the play's video CD (2005). Besides, I will make use of the production photographs. However, here I will refer briefly to the articles by the play's Bangla translator, Munzur-i-Mowla and Sonia Nishat Amin, both being anthologised in *ACTA IBSENIANA V: The Living Ibsen* (2007). While Mowla's essay is preoccupied with philosophical reasoning²⁵, Amin's piece closes in on the Bangla production itself and its creation by the audience. She maintains:

It is at the existential level, perhaps, that the audience will truly identify with the play. The perpetual dilemma of having to make a decision exists for everyman/woman from the humblest villager to the highest official. It may be a matter of whether to sell fish to a corrupt headman or misappropriate from a relief fund—the pens of Ibsen [...] craft this into an artistic mental space where such choices can be made.²⁶

Of special interest is the director's article on the production. In Nilu's perception, *Brand* is “an attack on fanaticism of all sorts, including religious fundamentalism”.²⁷ Here is his argument:

The major back-drop for my interpretation of *Brand* is religious fundamentalism, as observed both in the Bangladeshi political-religious context and in certain aspects of the world political situation, notably ongoing conflicts which overtly or under the surface are about religious hegemony and in particular the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.²⁸

As such, the ending of *Brand* is pregnant with meaning for the Bangladesh director. He interprets “Brand’s death in the avalanche as a metaphor for the burial of extreme idealism or fanaticism”.²⁹ As far as the director of the Bangladesh performance is concerned, the protagonist’s death in the avalanche is nature’s revenge on unnaturalism.

Although the articles are useful for an understanding of the production, I will analyse the performance chiefly on the basis of my own experience of watching the première.

²⁵ Mowla, Munzur-i- (2007). “Ideas about God and other Related Issues in *Brand*.” *ACTA IBSENIANA V: The Living Ibsen*. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, UIO

²⁶ Amin, Sonia Nishat (2007). “*Brand*: Divergent Views from a Lower Latitude”. *ibid.* p. 217.

²⁷ Nilu, *op.cit.* p. 109.

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 107.

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 113.

b. Material on Bangladesh

There are quite a few scholarly books dealing with the subject of the role of religion in forming the identity of the people of Bangladesh. The people's identity on the basis of Bangla language, culture and creed has more often than not been at odds with their Muslim identity. The issue is of vital importance because the religion-based identity, as I will discuss, occupies a very significant place in the country's politics these days. It is precisely because of a firm entry of religion into politics over the years that the Islamic fundamentalists and fanatics have cemented their position in Bangladesh. The books that I will mainly consider for providing a sociolinguistic approach to Bangladesh's history in the next chapter are Upendranāth Bhattācārya's *Banglar Baul O Baul Gān (The Bauls of Bengal and the Baul Songs*, Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1972; in Bangla), Asim Roy's *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), UAB Razia Akter Banu's *Islam in Bengal* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1992), Sk Abdul Latif's *The Muslim Mystic Movement in Bengal 1301-1550* (New Delhi: KP Bagchi & Company, 1993), and Rafiuddin Ahmed's (ed.) *Religion, Identity & Politics: Essays in Bangladesh* (Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers Ltd, 2001). Besides, other sources of relevance which include *Fatwas Against Women in Bangladesh* (Compilation, Lucas and Kapoor, Grabels: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1996) will be used extensively to underscore the formidable presence of the fundamentalists in today's Bangladesh which makes Brand look like one, the people encountered in the recent times. Ahmed's own article in the book he edited and Ahmed Saifuddin's *The Roles of Religion and National Identity in Bangladesh* (Åbo: Åbo Akademy University Press, 2000) will be used mostly in the following section which provides a short account of Bangladesh's history.

1.5 History of Bangladesh—a Short Account

In this section, I offer a short historical account of Bangladesh figuring out particularly the role of religion in national politics. I wish to make the year 1947 my point of departure not because I think that religion did not matter before that point in time. Indeed, as Rahnuma Ahmed³⁰ indicates it in her piece, with an implicit aim to make their rule in India smooth and sustainable, the British colonial rulers introduced religion into state politics. Drawing upon “Talal Asad's thesis—changes in the Muslim family structure caused by the British rule”, Ms Ahmed states that the before the colonial takeover of India “most Muslims and non-Muslims largely led similar lives. [...] Being A

30 Ms Ahmed, *op.cit.* 2008a.

Muslim meant following Muslim rites of marriage and burial, maybe having a Muslim name. Nothing more”.³¹ Nevertheless, with the division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 on the basis of religion, religion's entry into state politics was firmly asserted. The early periods of Bangladesh's history is not considered here because I will devote the next chapter of the thesis to make a comprehensive study of Bangladesh's history since the Muslim conquest. In that chapter, I will discuss at length how Islam was appropriated in Bengal following a harmonious exchange between Islam and Hinduism over centuries, a tradition which Roy³² rightly calls “syncretistic”, largely a contribution of the secularist Muslim sufis (saints) and *pirs* (preceptors), and how the practice of inter-religion 'give and take' based on mutual respect and understanding was suppressed and subdued by the “Wahhabite movement” during the 18th and 19th centuries. As Blanchard explains it, “Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam and is [still] practiced in Saudi Arabia and Qatar [...] that seeks to purify Islam of any innovations or practices that deviate from the seventh-century teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.”³³ In other words, the Wahhabite adherents in Bengal considered the syncretistic tradition of Islam anti-islamic and vowed to instil their version of the “pristine” Islam in that part of the world. The orthodox Hindus played their part to cause the split. Latif quotes Premdas, an influential orthodox Hindu of the 16th century as saying, “In the *Kalikal* (degenerated age) all people have become vicious, its main cause is the *Yavana* (Muslim) conquest”.³⁴ Latif then adds that “Some of the Brahmins [the upper caste Hindus] in their bid to preserve the Hindu ideology remodelled and revived the Smriti Shastras [the Hindu scriptures]”.³⁵ But, as mentioned above, the British colonial masters' intention of consolidating power through realizing their policy of “divide and rule” that would help smooth running of administration played a pivotal role in bringing religion to state affairs. Referring to Michael Anderson (1990), Ms Ahmed³⁶ observes that “In the case of India [...], it was through the legal techniques of colonial rule that the category of ‘Muslim’, often ‘Mohammedan’, acquired ‘a new fixity and certainty,’ in contrast to previous identities that had been ‘syncretic, ambiguous or localised.’ Each individual was now linked to ‘a state-enforced religious category,’ [...] as “Muhammadan” or “Hindu” [...]”. Ms Ahmed further attests, “More recent research persuasively argues that in the interests of controlling and regulating the lives of its subjects, the British colonial

31 *ibid.*

32 Roy, Asim (1983). *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

33 Blanchard, Christopher M (2008). “The Islamic Tradition of Wahhabism and Salafiyya” (CRS Report for Congress, Order Code RS21695, updated January24,2008),<http://www.usembassy.it/pdf>, accessed September 28, 2008, 1500 (GMT).

34 Latif, Sk. Abdul (1993): *The Muslim Mystic Movement in Bengal 1301-1550*. Calcutta and New Delhi: KP Bagchi & Company, p. 96.

35 *ibid.*

36 Ahmed, Rahnuma (2008b). “The familial order, not easily undone”. Dhaka: *New Age*, September 22, 2008.

state had codified ‘the laws of the Koran’ for Muslims, and the laws of the Brahmanic ‘Shastras’ for the Hindus”.³⁷

Bangladesh, which emerged as an independent state in 1971 following a nine-month bloody war, had previously been a part of Pakistan. With the division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the “Midnight's Children”, as Rushdie would sarcastically call them, India and Pakistan were born on the basis of religion. In other words, the creation of India-Pakistan effectively translated into reality the founder of Pakistan, Jinnah's “two-nation theory” that emphasised upon having separate territories for the Hindus and the Muslims. Because today's Bangladesh—erstwhile East Pakistan—is predominantly a Muslim country, it was aligned with Pakistan. However, the religious unity soon proved meaningless and futile as it collided with Bengali nationalism precipitated by “economic deprivation”.³⁸ Saifuddin records:

[...] the federation with Pakistan proved untenable; the interests of the Islamic Brotherhood had to give in to the wish for a utilitarian nationality. The Pakistan Union could not, in the end, be held together by religion—whatever the understanding of religion might have been at that time. The Bengali nationalist movement was a reaction against political domination and economic deprivation.³⁹

Although the religious parties led by Jamaat-i-Islami opposed the 1971 liberation war branding it as 'anti-Islamic' and 'Indian conspiracy to divide Pakistan', Bangladesh's progress through history since its liberation has been rather uneasy with religion playing a significant role in forming its character. The constitution adopted in 1972 mentioned secularism alongside “nationalism [...] socialism, and democracy”⁴⁰ as the fundamental principles of the country. Yet, the entry of religion into state politics was not far away. The founder of the country, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – whose party, Bangladesh Awami League, led the country's liberation war and masterminded the 'secularist' Constitution – banned the religious parties. Rahman's secularist position was deliberately twisted and misrepresented by his political adversaries as “anti-God and anti-Islamic”⁴¹ to which his reply was as follows:

37 *ibid.*

38 Saifuddin, Ahmed (2000): *The Roles of Religion and National Identity in Bangladesh*. Åbo: Academy University Press, p. 2.

39 *ibid.*

40 *ibid.*

41 Ahmed, Rafiuddin (2001): “Introduction: Towards a National Identity”. *Religion, Identity & Politics—Essays on Bangladesh*. Ed. Rafiuddin Ahmed. Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers Ltd, p. 26.

The slanderous rumour is being circulated against us that we are not believers in Islam. In reply to this, our position is very clear. We are not believers in the label of Islam. We believe in the Islam of justice. Our Islam is the Islam of the holy and merciful Prophet... (quoted in Ahmed).⁴²

Yet, the entry of the religion into state politics could not be stopped. With his brutal assassination in 1975 followed by the military juntas taking over the state power in the succeeding periods, the ban on religious parties and religion-based politics was lifted and the religious parties gradually but skilfully cemented their position in national politics. Ahmed describes the phenomenon as follows:

Orchestrated by the military rulers [...] and influenced by [...] developments in the Muslim world, especially since the Revolution in Iran in 1979, Islamic symbols have regained political influence in the country in recent years, although this by no means suggests that the people of Bangladesh have opted for a religious ideology again.⁴³

The irony is that, contrary to the nation's expectations, the people in power in order to consolidate their position used Islam as a weapon time and again. Taking cue from his military boss Ziaur Rahman who had earlier stripped the Constitution of its secularist garments, General Ershad who seized the state power following a military coup in 1982 declared Islam as the “State Religion” “to create a popular base for his rule”.⁴⁴

The periods following the restoration of parliamentary form of government in 1991 to 2006 offered further opportunities to religious parties to consolidate their positions in state politics. The fundamentalists and fanatics made their terrible presence felt throughout the country especially between 2000 and 2005. The security of the state was at stake because of the declared assault by the fanatics. One could see their mighty presence everyday in the media. By misinterpreting the message of Islam, which does not permit shedding of the innocent blood, the so-called ‘Islamic’ fundamentalists killed many in its name. They openly expressed their disregard and hatred towards the state’s institutions, including the judiciary, and declared that they would raze them to the ground as these, according to their interpretation, did not conform to the Qur’anic strictures. The court became the prime target of their bloody attacks and two judges were literally blown away on their way to the court. A section of journalists also suffered because they published *damaging* reports about their (the fanatics’) activities. August 17, 2005 will be remembered as a black day in the history of the country because, on this day, the extremists carried out a series of nearly simultaneous

42 *ibid.*

43 *ibid.* p. 27.

44 *ibid.*

bomb attacks at sensitive places in all district headquarters, including the capital. Blessed by their politician bosses who, arguably, featured in the then government, the religious bigots were prepared to do everything for establishing 'the rule of God'. They refused to allow any faith or creed other than theirs to be in place.

Against the backdrop of the rise of fundamentalist forces, the bitter feud between the party in power and the opposition party soured further in 2006 to such an extent that the state machinery virtually collapsed, and dictated by the powerful military the country's president declared a state of emergency on January 11, 2007 to "restore law and order". The current situation in Bangladesh is such that it has barely escaped imposition of 'martial law', but in practice, the military calls the shots. However, with the national elections billed for December 2008, the fundamentalist forces have regrouped themselves and found a ready ally in Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the party which came to power in 2001 through forming an alliance with Jamaat and other fundamentalist parties.

1.6 Politics of Fundamentalism and Women in Bangladesh

In Nilu's understanding, "Brand [...] provokes Agnes to commit suicide" and that is why in his production he "made her suicide explicit".⁴⁵ Agnes's suicide caused by a religious fanatic has reverberations in recent history of Bangladesh with quite a few women either committing suicide or receiving harsh treatment in the hands of *mullahs* for their alleged violation of Islamic codes. "At least 12 women of very young age have been made subject to Fatwa [rulings by a section of Islamic fundamentalists which do not have any approval in Bangladesh's legal system] and, in some cases amounting to death, in the year 1994 in different parts of Bangladesh".⁴⁶ The death of Nurjahan is a case in point. Nurjahan, a woman of 21 from Sylhet, a divisional city of the country, Sultana Kamal informs, "was found guilty by the local salish [...] for contracting an illegal second marriage [for which it] sentenced her [...] to death by public stoning. Nurjahan survived the stoning, but committed suicide in humiliation".⁴⁷ The following is another example of victimisation of women by the die-hard religious fanatics' fatwa :

45 Nilu, Kamaluddin. *op.cit.*, 2007. p. 109.

46 Lucas, Marie-Aimee Helie and Kapoor, Harsh (Compilation, 1996): *Fatwas Against Women in Bangladesh*. Grabels: Women Living Under Muslims Laws, p 76.

47 *ibid.*

A woman of 19 years called Rina committed suicide following caning order by Fatwa. This happened on 17th December 1994 in [...] district Feni. She was [...] accused of immorality and fatwa was announced to cane her because of her pregnancy outside marriage. The shalish members were Masjid Imam (chaplain) Shahidullah and his students.⁴⁸

Dulali's ordeal is another instance of violence against women in the name of religious sanctimony. Ms Ahmed quotes from Amin and Hossain (1996):

Dulali, age twenty-five, became pregnant during an extramarital relationship with Botu, another resident of her village. On discovering her condition, her family arranged her marriage to another man. Her husband, on confirming his suspicions that she was pregnant, however, divorced her. Dulali's family then reportedly called upon local elders to hold a shalish in the matter. At the shalish, Dulali was accused of zina and sentenced to be caned 101 times, to be administered seven days after the delivery of her child. No accusation was made against Botu, the man involved. [...] national women's organisations intervened and the presence of the police on the day Dulali was to be punished, acted as a deterrent. Later, the villagers denied that the incident of shalish and the pronouncement of fatwa had taken place. Although not punished for the alleged sexual improprieties, Dulali was no longer able to live in the village.⁴⁹

Confinement of women in the name of religion is by no means new. The custom of *purdah*, a convention to keep women in the *zenana* thereby restricting their mobility is well-documented by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), the first Bengali Muslim woman feminist writer, in her *Avarodhbasini* (literally meaning women living in the *zenana*, The Secluded Ones) which was published from Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1931. Although there is still debate among the Islamic scholars and theologians with regard to the meaning and range of *purdah*⁵⁰, Rokeya's 47 reports (based on incidents she witnessed herself or gathered from authentic sources) in the book show how women were victimised and often left helpless at the altar of tradition. I quote below Report 9 from the book to show how brutal and inhuman the convention could really become:

Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewelry in a hand-bag and hurried out of the bedroom. But at the door, she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under her bed. She burnt to death but did not come out. Long live *purdah*! ⁵¹

48 *ibid.*, p 78.

49 Ahmed, Rahnuma (2008a). "Our Inheritances". Dhaka: *New Age*, April 28, 2008.

50 For more on the custom of *purdah* and Rokeya's observations see *Inside Seclusion: The Avarodhbasini of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, edited and translated by Roushan Jahan, Dacca (Dhaka): Women for Women, 1981, pp 1-32.

51 *ibid.* pp. 42-43.

With the fundamentalists' fierce opposition to the issue, emancipation of women thus remains a far cry. Indeed, the present caretaker government, the Chief of which announced “National Women Development Policy 2008” on the eve of International Women's Day '08 giving women equal rights to inheritance, backtracked from its position following street agitation and violent protest by the religious forces who termed the policy “anti-Islamic”. The government formed a 20-member committee 'to identify inconsistencies in the policy as per Islamic rules and [to] suggest steps' (qtd by Ms Ahmed).⁵² The committee stated in its recommendations that “Any decision regarding women's rights [...] should be taken 'in the light of Qur'an and Sunnah’”.⁵³

1.7 Ibsen Performances in Bangladesh before *Brand*

In this section I give a brief account of the major Ibsen productions before the staging of *Brand* in 2004. As stated already, the Ibsen plays before *Brand* were either totally or partially adapted to make the Norwegian playwright relevant to Bangladesh. The discussion is based around a “Stock-taking of Norwegian Literature”⁵⁴ by Kajal Krishna Banerjee of the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Besides, the programme notes of the performances have been taken into consideration.

Although plays by Ibsen had been translated, published and occasionally staged in the 1960s, regular staging of Ibsen began in 1993, more than two decades after Bangladesh's liberation, with an adaptation of *A Doll's House* by Kanthasheelan, a capital based theatre group which is still active. The group chose India's legendary theatre personality Shambhu Mitra's acclaimed adaptation named *Putul Khela (A Doll's House)*. Mitra appropriated Ibsen in 1958 for the Kolkata-based pioneering theatre group Bohurupee and it had a run of three decades. The benchmark feature of Mitra's adaptation is replacement of the Norwegian locale by the Indian and particularly the Bengali setting. The characters are given Bengali names and the Christmas is replaced by the *Durga Puja* festival, the biggest Hindu festival in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Nora's dance of tarantella is substituted by a recitation of a Tagore poem called “Jhulan” (“Swaying”) by Bulu (Nora). Directed by Khaled Khan, Kanthasheelan's production had 24 successful shows.

52 Ms Ahmed, *op.cit.* 2008a

53 *ibid.*

54 For more on the subject see Kajal Krishna Banerjee's “Stock-taking of Norwegian Literature in Bangladesh with Special Emphasis on Henrik Ibsen”. Dhaka: The Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bangladesh, 2004.

Nonetheless, as the aforementioned “Stock-taking” reveals, “It is CAT (Centre for Asian Theatre), Dhaka, which has done more than any other theatre organisation to present Ibsen and his plays, ideas and thoughts before the people of Bangladesh”.⁵⁵ The first Ibsen play the group produced was an adaptation of *Ghosts, Krishnabibar* in 1996. Directed by Nilu and brilliantly adapted by Ahmed Reza, it dealt with “women’s struggle for their cherished emancipation from the inhibitions of society as Ibsen depicts in the play. The production created great enthusiasm among the women audience of the country; for, they could find a message about their liberation in the play”.⁵⁶ In the “Programme Notes” Reza mentions, “[...] while reading Ibsen's *Ghosts* I could see in my mind's eye the social-cultural situation of my country. I find the picture of our contemporary society through the characters and events of this play”.⁵⁷ The hypocrisy of the institution of religion and oppression of women in the name of religion strongly figured in the adaptation which was staged 40 times. The adaptation was strongly condemned by the fundamentalists.

Three years later in 1999, CAT brought to stage *Bunohans*, an adaptation of *The Wild Duck*. It was adapted by Khairul Alam Shabuj of Bangladesh and directed by MK Raina of India. “*Bunohans* created a great stir in the theatre arena of Bangladesh and was appreciated by the theatre scholars, practitioners, theatre students as well as [the] general audience”.⁵⁸ In the “Programme Notes” Shabuj argues that *Bunohans* is not an adaptation in the strict sense of the term and that it could be called more or less a translation and that he just made “some minor changes” like giving characters Bangladeshi Muslim names, altering their professions and changing the name of the place, etc.⁵⁹ In the words of Banerjee, “The purpose for staging the play was to give the audience a clear concept of Ibsen’s idea about gender disparities, and the sense of love, respect and responsibility that women show towards their male counterparts through a sacrificial way”.⁶⁰

In 2000, CAT produced *Peer Chan*, an adaptation of *Peer Gynt* by Bangladesh's renowned poet, playwright and novelist Syed Shamsul Haq. Directed by Nilu, it was transformed into a sheer Bangladeshi experience. As Haq perceives it, Chan's mother is the symbol of eternal mother image of Bangladesh; she dies only to be reborn in the guise of Shohagi (Solveig). She has been oppressed for centuries. Chan's coming back to reality from the world of dream is brought about by his realisation that the country—his mother—needs to be freed.⁶¹ According to Banerjee, “*Peer Chan* is

55 *ibid.* p. 6.

56 *ibid.* p. 7.

57 Reza, Ahmed. “On adapting *Ghosts*”. “Programme Notes” of *Krishnabibar*. Dhaka: CAT, 1996; my translation.

58 Banerjee, Kajal Krishna, *op. cit.* 2004, p. 7.

59 Shabuj, Khairul Alam. “On Adaptation”. “Programme Notes” of *Bunohans*. Dhaka: CAT, 1999; my translation.

60 Banerjee, Kajal Krishna, *op. cit.* 2004, p. 7.

61 Haq, Syed Shamsul. “*Peer Chan*: a Note on its Composition”. “Programme Notes” of *Peer Chan*. Dhaka: CAT, 2000; my translation.

an experimental production of CAT Repertory Theatre, wherein techniques and devices of the theatre in the East and the West have been used so as to create a new theatrical language".⁶²

In 2001, CAT staged *Putuler Itikatha*, which "is an experimental production of CAT, wherein songs have been used and attempts made to create a new theatrical language by using a combination of theatre techniques and methods of the East and the West".⁶³ So far as the dialogue is concerned, Nilu followed the Ibsen text; he did not change the character names either, nor did he replace the dance of tarantella. Seen from this perspective, the performance cannot possibly be called an adaptation. But then, the production used songs and introduced three shadows of Nora as well as prologue and epilogue which surely made it an exercise in adaptation. However, as Nilu looks at the performance: "One major issue is whether *A Doll's House* questions the marriage institution as such or whether it is merely an attack on marriages based on an unequal relationship between man and woman and lack of openness and trust. My interpretation of the play is in line with the latter view [...]". In defence of his omission of references to Christmas, he says, "[...] Christmas is not an important point of reference for the majority of the Bangladeshi audience. This change can be done without affecting the content, as religion is not an issue in the play".⁶⁴ Hence, it is apparent, that the production made certain changes, alterations to make it 'relevant' although it was not located in any specific time or place.

The foregoing brief survey of the Ibsen productions in Bangladesh has revealed that in most cases Ibsen was thoroughly transformed by the Bangladeshi playwrights and directors to make him a dramatist of the country who speaks to us as one of us. Nilu's explanation for adapting Ibsen is worth quoting:

We consider Ibsen's plays as a tool to depict and describe social inequalities and suppressive forces in our contemporary society. This is why "adapted Ibsen" is more important than "translated Ibsen". Through adaptation the message inherent in the drama comes closer to the audience. In adapted versions of Ibsen's plays people can understand the message within the frame of the social conditions they are a part of and their own thoughts, culture, rituals and traditions. That is why we are still going back to Ibsen's plays and why our modern playwrights are still being influenced by Ibsen.⁶⁵

Adaptation in theatre is of course a well-established and viable way of effective communication. And that is the reason for which Ibsen has been adapted. Nevertheless, in his production of *Brand*,

62 Banerjee, Kajal Krishna, *op. cit.* 2004, p. 7.

63 *ibid.* p.6.

64 Nilu, Kamaluddin. "Director's Note". "Programme Notes" of *Putuler Itikatha*. Dhaka: CAT, 2001.

65 *ibid.* "Preface". *Proceedings. Seminar and Workshop on Gender Issues in Ibsen Plays*. Dhaka: CAT, 1997, p.3.

Nilu did not feel that adaptation of it was necessary as the spectators with their knowledge of contemporary times was able to create *Brand* and as such locate it in Bangladesh of the twenty first century.

1.8 Relevance of *Brand*

The events and incidents presented in 1.5 and 1.6 of the chapter strongly testify to socio-political relevance of Ibsen's *Brand* to contemporary Bangladesh. The socio-political setting of the country provided with the audience ample opportunities to create the performance in its own terms. Hence, the audience could easily associate Brand with an extremist who refuses to accept that there can be other beliefs equally important to their believers and followers. The production in the Bangladesh context crystallises the disturbing fact that it does not matter whether you are a Christian bigot or a Muslim extremist, or for that matter a Jewish fanatic or a Hindu revivalist, when you are a 'righteous' self, your vision has to be blurred by prejudices. The religious extremists like Brand, with their conceited and parochial views, have retained, irrespective of time and place, their characteristic traits of not being accommodative or understanding. Thus, to the initiated audience, *Brand* became extremely topical and relevant against the backdrop of the rise of fundamentalist elements in the country in 2004.

Chapter Two

Bangladesh's History: a Sociolinguistic Approach

We have not appointed thee [Prophet Muhammad] a keeper over them [non-believers] nor art thou their guardian. *Revile ye not those whom they call upon beside Allah [God], lest they, out of spite, should revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have we caused their conduct to seem fair to every people.* Then unto their Lord is their return; and He will inform them of that which they used to do (*The Qur'an*, 6: 107-109, my italics).⁶⁶

Proclaim: Hearken ye who disbelieve [in Allah]! I do not worship as you worship, nor do you worship as I worship. I do not worship those that you worship, nor do you worship Him Whom I worship; *that is because your faith directs you in one way and my faith directs me in another.* (*The Qur'an*, 109: 2-7, my italics)

Though cows are brindled and of many hues

The colour of their milk's the same.

I wander through the world, but everywhere

I see one mother, many sons (English translation of a Bengali Mendicant's Song).⁶⁷

2.1 Introduction

Because I think that knowledge of Bangladesh's history and politics played the key to a creation of *Brand* by the privileged audience as a local performance despite its seemingly "Norwegian" locale, in this chapter I intend to present the socio-political history of the country. I basically make a

⁶⁶ This section of the verse and the verse that immediately follows it are excerpted from the English translation of the *The Quran* by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, 1971). The excerpts doubtlessly reveal the inherent spirit of Islam which is one of tolerance and which is against forceful conversion of peoples belonging to other religions. This non-aggressive and tolerant attitude of Islam to other religions, as the present chapter will emphasize, was primarily responsible for the the syncretistic tradition of Islam in Bengal.

⁶⁷ The song is used as an epigram in Chapter 2 (p. 38) of the folk-ballad, *Sojan Badiar Ghat (Gipsy Wharf)* by Jasim Uddin (1903-1976), who is known in Bangladesh as *Palli-Kavi* (the poet of rural Bengal). The poem was originally published in 1933 and its English translation by Barbara Painter and Yann Lovelock appeared with an introduction by the former in 1969 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd). The anonymous mendicant's song points to a fundamental tenet of non-communal, secularist life in Bangladesh. Indeed, Uddin's poem gives an eloquent picture of the Hindu-Muslim harmonious co-existence prevailing in rural Bangladesh since time out of bound. The ballad as well reveals the disturbing fact that the communal conflicts are masterminded by the privileged class for their gains and that the deprived, the poor of both ethnic groups fall victim. This issue of Hindu-Muslim peaceful living will be taken up for discussion at the appropriate place of the chapter.

sociolinguistic approach to study Bangladesh's society, culture, literature, politics and account for the “syncretistic” tradition of Islam which developed over a period of more than five hundred years and which fell in the face of stiff challenges, agitations and movements by the Muslim puritans and the Hindu revivalists culminating in the division of India and the birth of Pakistan in 1947. The chapter records briefly how during 24 years of Pakistan, the Islamic fundamentalist forces spearheaded by Jamaat-i-Islami, a party founded in 1941 by Maulana Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi (1903-79) who was influenced by the preachings of Wahhabism, gained ground in erstwhile East Pakistan. Islamic fundamentalism has been chosen for consideration because Bangladesh, with a population of about 140 millions, is a predominantly Muslim country where other religious communities do not have any significant say in matters of state and politics. The chapter then presents the recent socio-political developments creating a protean space for the emergence of Jamaat as a key player in national politics with its declared aim of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh.⁶⁸ The chapter makes an analysis of Wahhabism and its impact on the Muslim-led movements in Bengal in the 18th and 19th centuries against British colonial rule. The chapter closes with a critique of the Jamaat-backed fundamentalism which makes Brand appear as a contemporary to the people of Bangladesh since his dogmatic beliefs and practices have strong reverberations in the sayings and workings of religious fundamentalists and fanatics of the country.

The material on Bangladesh's history has been specified in the previous chapter. Below I give a short review of the literature with a view to presenting the socio-political dynamics of Bangladesh.

2.2 Bhattācārya's Study

Bhattācārya's voluminous book consisting of an elaborate discussion on the origin and development of the *baul* (folk) philosophy and songs is an indispensable document of the medieval Bengal history. The *baul* tradition and songs evidently developed with a call to synthesise all

⁶⁸ The idea of an Islamic state, as Tarek Fatah argues in his recently published book, *Chasing a Mirage: The Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State* (2008), does not even have any historical justifications. A Pakistani by birth, Fatah, the co-founder of Muslim Canadian Congress, shows that 'the historical Islamic states were not organised around Islam, but ethnicity (Arab over non-Arab), power, and expansion (both through conflict and conversion).' Hence Fatah's conclusion is that 'the Islamist idea of an Islamic state is just a mirage. It is neither corroborated in the original sources of Islam - the Qur'an and the prophet's practice - nor in the actual practice of the first generations of Islam. www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/apr/18/historylessons.mht, accessed September 29, 2008 at 2200 (GMT).

Fatah begins his book with a note of agony: "I write as a Muslim whose ancestors were Hindu. My religion, Islam is rooted in Judaism, while my Punjabi culture is tied to that of the Sikhs. Yet I am told by Islamists that without shedding this multifaceted heritage, if not outrightly rejecting it, I cannot be a true Muslim." <http://chasingamirage.com/>, accessed October 5, 2008, 1700 (GMT).

religious traditions—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity—for the principal philosophy of the *bauls* was to look for unity in diversity. Bhattācārya quotes Nobel Laureate Tagore, who himself was greatly influenced by the *Baul* thoughts and who brought Lalon Shah—a *baul* from rural Bangladesh to limelight—as saying: “It [the Baul literature] is of both the Hindus and the Muslims, the two races got united, but did not attack each other. [...] The Hindus and the Muslims became one through the lyrics and melody of the songs; no conflict arose between the *Qur'an* and the Hindu scriptures”.⁶⁹ Having made a survey of Bengal's traditional religious practices and Islamic syncretistic tradition, Bhattācārya remarks that both the Hindu and the Muslim saints made it their vocation to preach that “divisions between religions were tantamount to ignorance” and that “the fundamental aspect of all religions was devotion to God”. “The preachings effected an unprecedented birth of spiritualism in medieval Bengal”.⁷⁰ Referring to the practices of mystic philosopher Kabir (whether Kabir was a Hindu or a Muslim cannot be established beyond doubt, but the tradition has it that he lived longer than 120 years during 1398-1518 influencing Indian philosophy and Hindi poetry), he says that although he did not approve of idol-worshipping, he believed in the Hindu concept of reincarnation, a belief which was in dire conflict with the orthodox Muslim faith. Bhattācārya is also of the opinion that “Kabir did not see any difference between Ram [Hindu *avatār*] and Rahim [one of the attributes of Allah], the *Qur'an* and the Hindu scriptures as well as the *kābā* [the Muslim holy place of pilgrimage in Mecca] and *kāilāsh* [the sacred place for the Hindus in India]”. He then categorically states that “attempts to unite the Hindu-Muslim cultures received a firm foundation with the Muslim saints' arrival in India”.⁷¹

Bhattācārya also discusses the great secularist Mughal emperor Akbar's attempt to establish a new religion called “Din-e-Elahi” synchronising the basic preachings of the *Qur'an*, the Hindu scriptures and the Bible as the emperor was influenced by the Sufi ideals in his early life and because he was convinced that the essence of all religions was one. Akbar's intention to unite religions was condemned by both the orthodox Muslims and the Christian priests. Their fundamentalism led them to accusing Akbar of forsaking Islam at the later stage of his life although, as Bhattācārya notes, “Akbar never deviated from the basic principles of Islam”.⁷²

Akbar's grandson, Dārā Shikūh, himself well-versed in the *Qur'an* and the Hindu sacred texts like the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* wanted to unite the two religions. His book *Majma-ul-Bahrain* (The

69 Bhattācārya, Upendranāth (1972). *Banglar Baul O Baul Gān* (The Bauls of Bengal and the Baul Songs), Calcutta: Orient Book Company, p. xii, (my translation).

70 *ibid.* p. 137, (my translation).

71 *ibid.* (my translation).

72 *ibid.* pp. 137-38, (my translation).

Migling of the Two Oceans) attempted a fusion “of the truth and wisdom of two Truth-knowing groups” (qtd by Bhattācārya).⁷³ With Aurangzeb's accession to power, the tradition of inter-religion exchanges received a severe blow as he was an orthodox Muslim. Some historians even suggest that the new emperor hanged his own brother Shikūh for writing the aforementioned book.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, geographically located quite far away from Delhi, the seat of the Mughal Empire, Sufism and the *baul* tradition continued rather undisturbed in Bengal.

2.3 Roy's Book

Roy ascertains 'the nature and development of the Muslim [syncretistic] tradition which came under fire of the Muslim reformists, purists and political separatists” that culminated in an introduction of “new elements in the Muslim religious life, the cumulative result of which was to create a chasm between Muslim's “Islamic” and “Bengali” identities':

The syncretistic tradition had blended both these identities well. All through the period when the syncretistic tradition remained dominant, the exogenous Islam and its adherents remained aloof and indifferent from, though disapproving of, syncretistic development. A Bengali Muslim was, therefore, not confronted with a problem of identity. In contrast, the reformers and revivalists unleashed a vicious and vituperative attack. The persistence and vigorous insistence on a revitalized Islamic consciousness and identity, with its corresponding denigration of Islam's local roots and associations in Bengal, sapped the very basis of the syncretistic tradition and of the Bengali identity in general. [...] The first few decades of the present century [20th century] saw the emergence of a number of Muslim journals in Bengali under the control of the Muslim theologians (*ulamā*), [... calling] forth Muslims to refurbish their faith and Islamize their lives.⁷⁵

Roy investigates into the social origins of the Bengali Muslims, “The Syncretistic Great Tradition”, history, myth, mysticism, the poetry of the period under scrutiny along with the tradition of “Pirism or the Cult of Pir” in his study to prove that a vibrant cultural exchange at work between “exogenous” Islam and “endogenous” religions and traditions over centuries has been the key to the gradual flowering of the Islamic syncretistic tradition. Nonetheless:

[...] beginning from the early nineteenth century, the fundamentalist and the revivalist forces in Islam, stirred by a massive combination of diverse forces, sharply focussed on the need for a deeper Islamic consciousness, and launched a vigorous assault on the syncretistic and acculturated tradition. [...] Bengal's Muslims were gradually drawn toward the heterogenetic

73 *ibid.* p. 141.

74 *ibid.*

75 Roy, *op.cit.*, 1983, pp. ix-xxii.

model of classical Islam [...] with the consequence of widening the hiatus that already existed between the exogenous Islam and the indigenous Bengali culture and of deepening the crisis of Bengali Muslim identity.⁷⁶

2.4 Banu's Findings

Banu has made a “socio-political study of Islam in Bangladesh”⁷⁷ and in so doing she has benefited from previous researches on the subject including that of Roy's. Banu's work carried out “within a larger and comprehensive Weberian framework”⁷⁸ offers a “sociological analysis of Islamic religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Bangladesh”.⁷⁹ It also attempts to “understand the impact that the Islamic religious beliefs have on the socio-economic development and political culture in present-day Bangladesh”.⁸⁰ One of Banu's chief findings is as follows:

[...] a frustration in self-fulfilment during the Pakistani period led the Bangladesh Muslims to reassert their “identity and authenticity” in language, land and ethnicity, and that both modernist and orthodox religious Islamic beliefs in Bangladesh seem to be supportive of this largely secular national identity of present-day Bangladesh. Since Islam does not seem to play the dominant role in the identity complex of present-day Bangladesh Muslims, and as the Hindu minority does not pose any threat to social, economic and political domination of Bangladesh Muslims, both the modernist and orthodox Muslims in Bangladesh seem to have some appeal to the Muslims holding popular Islamic religious beliefs [as opposed to the Wahhabite preachings and practices of the same].⁸¹

Another significant finding of Banu's research indicates that both the rural and urban populace of the country are still in favour of separating “politics from religious leadership”. Banu elaborates:

The majority of our respondents in both the rural and urban samples want to vest political power with English-educated-cum-religious-minded [liberal] people, rather than with religious leaders [...]. They seem thus to prefer separation of religion and politics, which is contrary to the classical political theory and practice of Islam. Consistent with our findings regarding the secular and primordial elements of Bangladeshi national identity, here again modern and orthodox religious beliefs and higher levels of modern education seem to be significantly associated with our respondents' inclination to separate politics from religious leadership.⁸²

76 *ibid.* p. 253.

77 Banu, UAB Razia Akter (1992). *Islam in Bengal*. Leiden: E J Brill, p. xiii

78 *ibid.*

79 *ibid.* p. xiv.

80 *ibid.*

81 *ibid.* p. 183.

82 *ibid.* p. 169.

2.5 Latif's Conclusion and Roy's Elaboration

Latif's study "is essentially an attempt to prepare as comprehensive an account of the sufi movement in Bengal as possible"⁸³ duly emphasising the rise and expansion of "the mystic ideology" which gave birth to "*silsilahs* (orders), generally named after a teacher [*pir*] of substantial following".⁸⁴ With a view to presenting the Sufi tradition, Latif provides a brief description of the Muslim settlement in Bengal which paved the way for it. Latif writes, "Cultural and religious activities of the Muslims had started in Bengal long before Ikhtyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtyar Khliji (The Delhi Sultan Qutubuddin Aibak's general) captured Nadia in 1203 A.D".⁸⁵ Although Bengal had been conquered, it mostly remained "independent of Delhi till the conquest of the region under [the Mughal emperors] Akbar and Jahangir" as the Bengal rulers and governors "did not depend upon the Delhi Sultans for military support" and as "They had learnt to draw support from [...] the local population, Hindus and Muslim alike, [...] The obvious result was that there was more cultural fusion in Bengal than in any other region of northern India, and different patterns of culture"⁸⁶ evolved.

The Sufis, as Latif reveals, "established close contact with the masses, Muslims as well as non-Muslims"⁸⁷ thereby paving a fertile platform for the advent of a popular Islam which came as a welcome relief to the oppressed Buddhists and low-caste Hindus who immensely suffered owing to "Brahmanism [...] with its strict emphasis on caste regulations".⁸⁸ Sufism did not object to absorbing Bengali beliefs and practices into its faith which resulted in a rich fusion of Islam and local religions, especially Hinduism. He elaborates:

Several cults with common beliefs and practices emerged as a result of the close social contact between the Hindus and the Muslims. Certain Hindu rites and customs were continued by people newly converted to Islam. They retained many Hindu customs and institutions.⁸⁹

As an offshoot of the aforementioned 'blending', various cults emerged cementing the bond between the two religions. The cults of *Satyapir* and *Satyanarayan* are cases in point. "God here is called *Satyapir* (i.e. Truth, the pir) by the Muslims and *Satyanarayan* (i.e. Truth the Narayana)" (E

83 Latif, *op.cit.* 1993, p. vii

84 *ibid.* p. 1.

85 *ibid.* p.2.

86 *ibid.* pp. 2-3.

87 *ibid.* pp. 87-88.

88 *ibid.* p. 87.

89 *ibid.* p. 91.

Haq quoted by Latif).⁹⁰ The growing impact of the *Satyapir* cult in Bengal is evident in the following description by Bharat Chandra, an eighteenth century Bengali poet of repute:

A Brahmin was told by a *faqir* (mendicant) to offer *shirni* (sweets) to him. When the Brahmin failed to oblige him, he left and came again in the guise of the Hindu god, Hari. Thus being convinced that Hari and the Muslim *Pir* were in fact spiritually one and the same person, he adored him and offered him *shirni*" (qtd by Latif).⁹¹

What is imperative from the saying is that the Muslims and the Hindus found a common ground and that they formed a rapport, thanks to the works of Sufism, which led them to think that the Muslim God and the Hindu Hari were indeed the same entity, an idea which is bound to be vehemently opposed and challenged by the orthodox practitioners of both religions.

Another important cult emerging out of "the social contact between the Hindus and the Muslims was the cult of *Pāncha Pir* (Five Pir)" which was possibly built around Islamic mysticism and ritualistic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.⁹² So overwhelmingly popular it was and still is that "The sailors of East Bengal [Bangladesh of to-day], Muslims as well as Hindus, even now invoke the blessings of *Pāncha Pir* for their safety".⁹³ Latif quotes the 'invocation' appearing in *East Bengal District Gazetteers, Chittagong of 1908* to depict the magnitude of the cult:

Every sailor while going to sea says, [...] We are little children, Ghazi and Gangā [the sacred river] are our protectors. We bow our heads to thee, O Ganges Help us. O Five Saints, We invoke you in the name of Badr Badr.⁹⁴

The prayer that grew out of "extreme reverence to the *Pir*"⁹⁵ is however a gross deviation from the orthodox Islam which demands that a Muslim should only seek the blessings of Allah. Nonetheless, Islamic mysticism's absorption of indigenous values and beliefs worked towards making Islam very much a local religion, a fact that drew the Bengali people in thousands to its fold. And this feature perhaps speaks for "the Muslim preponderance" in places of Bengal which were geographically far away from "the important centres of Muslim power in Bengal".⁹⁶ The Muslim preponderance in rural Bengal nullifies 'the "fire and sword" theory of conversion"⁹⁷ and, reveals, on the contrary,

90 *ibid.* p. 92.

91 *ibid.* p. 93.

92 *ibid.* pp. 93-94.

93 *ibid.* p. 93.

94 *ibid.* pp. 93-94.

95 *ibid.* p. 94.

96 Roy, *op.cit.* 1983, p. 20.

97 *ibid.* p. 21.

that people were drawn to Islam voluntarily. With reference to Gait's "Census Report of 1901", Roy writes that "Cases of forcible conversion" were "by no means rare", but it seemed "probable that very many of the ancestors of the Bengali Muhammedans voluntarily gave their adhesion to Islam".⁹⁸

Roy studies the Muslim Bengali works of the medieval period and shows that the Islamic syncretistic tradition was manoeuvred by the Muslim writers "to present Islamic tradition in terms meaningful to the world of the Bengali believers. [...] Significantly enough, Muhammad was introduced as *kali-avatār* by the Bengali Muslim writers: "...concealed in the *arsh* [the holy seat of Allah], he [...] became manifest in *kali* and was born in Abd Allāh's family.... Muhammad *nabi* (prophet), let it be known, is the *kali-avatār*".⁹⁹ Influenced by mysticism and with that same desire of absorption in mind, the Muslim poets richly contributed to the Radha-Krishna cult which has come down to be known as *Vaisnava* poetry in Bangla literature. Here is an illustrious instance from Saiyid Murtaza, a reputed Muslim poet:

Śyām-bandhu [Krishna], you are my life. I cannot forget the great day when we met each other. I cannot suffer to be patient as I behold that face like the moonOh, Kānu [another name of Krishna], my heart, have mercy on me. Give me shelter under the shadow of your feetSaiyid Murtaza submits at the feet of Kānu, "I forsake everything and remain at your feet in life and death (qtd by Roy).¹⁰⁰

2.6 Lalon Shah's *Baul* Songs

I have already mentioned that Tagore championed Lalon Shah (1774-1890), a *baul* from the rural Bangladesh. Firmly rooted in the Bengali tradition of age-old communal harmony, love and respect, Shah, who is said to have born in a Hindu family and who found refuge in a Muslim family, accepted and pioneered the *baul* philosophy which lays paramount importance on man. The *baul* culture which seemingly grew out of an intimate and exuberant fusion of Sufism and *Vaisnavism* with the latter fostering the *Sahaja* ("inborn, spontaneous")¹⁰¹ cult. The *Sahaja* cult was also practised by the Bengali Buddhist mystic poets as a means of attaining the cherished state of *nirvana* which found brilliant expression in *Caryāpadā* (Buddhist Mystic Songs detailing the ways to be followed). Discovered by Pandit Haraprasad Shastri in 1907, *padā*, meaning songs or poems

98 *ibid.* p. 22.

99 *ibid.* p. 98.

100 *ibid.* p. 200.

101 Bhattacharya, Deben (1967). *Love Songs of Chandidās*(Trans.). London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, p. 44.

in this oldest piece of Bengali literature, were composed between eighth and twelfth centuries. Shahidullah explains the cult along with translation of a fragment of a poem from the volume as follows:

[...] Neither the preceptor who is just like a dumb person, can instruct it, neither the disciple who is just like a deaf man, can hear it. It is beyond the reach of the way of the speech. The very word '*Sahaja*' indicates that it is an easy cult. Darika [a poet] says:
Out with your magic formula!
Out with your mystic science!
Out with your meditations [sic] and explanations!¹⁰²

Developed upon the rich indigenous tradition, the *baul* cult, as it has been pointed out already, absorbed all existing religious beliefs. Abu Rushd notes that, “[...] as a member of the 'Baul' community, Lalon Shah had a liberal attitude to all religions. Even paganism was acceptable to his receptive mind”. What follows is Rushd's explanation of Shah's all-absorbing frame of mind:

The devout Muslim is sometimes puzzled by Lalon Shah's attitude to Islam. The Prophet he regards, like a pagan, as a flower or a tree or a fish; like a Christian, he sometimes looks upon the Prophet of Islam as one with God; frequently, he refers to Muhammad as the person chiefly to be revered in relation to an endless cycle of births—an attitude indicative of the Hindu or Buddhist mind. But Lalon Shah's fervour in regard to the holy Prophet is always the same.¹⁰³

According to Rushd, “The positive aspect of Lalon Shah's belief is that salvation lies in the ceaseless exploration of the Ultimate Being and in complete dependence on him [sic]” and that “One must [...] unwaveringly strive to find out the meaning of existence and the mystery of creation and never swerve from the path of Truth”.¹⁰⁴ Quoted below is a very popular Shah song (*kēy kothā kōyrē dēkhā deī nā*) in Rushd's translation revealing the minstrel's profound mystic mind as well as his syncretistic attitude to religion:

I can hear His voice but cannot see Him.
After the frantic search of a life-time one cannot find Him.
I look for him in the sky and on the earth
I do not know what I am
and move in delusion.
Who am I and what is He?
He may be a Ram, He may be a Rahim,

102 Shahidullah, Muhammad (1966): *Buddhist Mystic Songs: Oldest Bengali and other eastern vernaculars* (Translation with annotations). Dacca (Dhaka): Bengali (Bangla) Academy, p. xxvii

103 Rushd, Abu (1964). *Songs of Lalon* (Translation). Dacca (Dhaka): Bengali (Bangla) Academy, pp. i-ii.

104 *ibid.* pp. iii-iv.

He may be water, He may be fire,
 but this fool is never told the truth.
 You do not know what happens in your own hamlet,
 Why then go to Delhi and Lahore?
 Seraj [believed to be Shah's *guru*], the friend, says “Your mind, Lalon,
 will never be illumined”.¹⁰⁵

The fact that Shah has a huge number of devotees even today and that the leading singers of the country are eager to sing his songs is indicative of his envious popularity which firmly establishes the idea that the people of Bangladesh by and large are tolerant, non-communal and of a secularist mindset, a spirit which is also expressed poignantly in Jasim Uddin's *Sojan Badiar Ghat (Gipsy Wharf)*. Built along the plot of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the ballad depicts the tragic story of love between Sojan, a Muslim farmer's son and Dulai, a low-caste Hindu girl whose father is the headman of the Simul Tolli village where the story unfolds. I will not go into the details of the poem, but cite below a few lines from it which aptly demonstrate the presence of communal harmony in Bangladesh (which in the case of this work is disrupted by the intrigues and machinations of Nayeab, the Zaminder's powerful rent collector finally bringing the naïve villagers of both religions into a bloody conflict):

In Simul Tolli Village, where the trees
 Shake out a breeze, the ground is cool with shade.
 The Namu [the low-caste Hindu] and the Moslem houses stand
 Beside each other, neck and neck;
 [...] The Hindu quarter rings
 With the sound of conch and gong on holidays;
 [...] When Moslem celebrate their festival
 Of Id [Muslims celebrate two Eids a year] both young and old are welcome there
 And the whole village joins the merriment.
 [...]
 The sound of drumming in Chaitra [Hindu ceremony of Shiva] turns
 The village upside down; the Namus dance
 [...] All the people raise their arms
 And join in chanting hymns. And if the noise
 Should penetrate the mosque it is no cause
 For quarrelling. But on the contrary,
 Even a Moslem sometimes has been known
 To sing some couplets at a Hindu feast,
 And I have seen the lips of Moslems touch
 The sweetmeats of the goddess Sharaswati [goddess of learning].¹⁰⁶

105 *ibid.* p. 31.

106 Uddin, Jasim. *Sojan Badiar Ghat (Gipsy Wharf)*. (Translation by Barbara Painter and Yann Lovelock with an introduction by Barbara Painter). London: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 38-39.

2.7 Ahmed's Book (ed.) on Religion-based Politics and Rise of Fundamentalism

Ahmed's book contains ten scholarly essays covering religion, identity and politics of Bangladesh. As Ahmed explains it in the “Preface”, the issues included in the book are:

- (I) the role of religion and/or language in defining the identity of the Bengali-speaking Muslims of Bangladesh
- (II) the contradictions inherent in the debate on secularism and a religious ideology in Bengali Muslim society
- (III) the re-emergence of religion as a powerful factor in Bangladesh politics
- (IV) the rise of fundamentalist Islamic movements¹⁰⁷

References have been made to Ahmed's account of the impact of religion on Bengali Muslims before and after the liberation of Bangladesh in the introductory chapter. To understand how the syncretistic tradition of Islam in Bengal was replaced by gradual Islamisation of the territory resulting in first the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the ultimate division of India in 1947, I will here study the relevant essays in the book and account for the rise of fundamentalist politics spearheaded by Jammāt-i-Islami during the pre and post liberation periods of Bangladesh.

Before considering the essays, it would be pertinent here to offer an analysis of the “Wahhabite movement”, mention to which is made in the first chapter. The analysis of the movement is of significance and in keeping with the conceptual framework of the thesis because, as I will argue below, the Islamic revivalism in Bengal and elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent was primarily influenced by that movement in the Arab peninsula.

Stephen Schwartz, the author of *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Saud from Tradition to Terror*, defines “Wahhabism” 'as an extremist, puritanical and violent movement, that emerged with the pretension of “reforming” Islam, in the central area of Arabia in the 18th century' and it 'declared the entirety of existing Islam to be unbelief, and traditional Muslims to be unbelievers subject to robbery, murder, and sexual violence'.¹⁰⁸ Founded by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703?-1792), Wahhabism, as Schwartz observes, “has always attacked the traditional, spiritual Islam or Sufism that dominates Islam in the Balkans, Turkey, Central Asia, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia” and that it was formed as a result of “an alliance with the house of Saud, in which religious authority is

107 Ahmed, Rafiuddin (2001). *Religion, Identity & Politics: Essays on Bangladesh* (ed.). Colorado Springs: International Academic Publishers Ltd., p. ix.

108 Schwartz, Stephen (2002). “The Good and the Bad” (an interview with “Interrogatory”). www.nationalreview.com/interrogatory111802.asp, accessed September 28, 2008 at 1900 (GMT).

maintained by the descendants of al-Wahhab and political power is held by the descendants of al-Saud: This is the Wahhabi-Saudi axis, which continues to rule today”.¹⁰⁹

The Director of Cultural Institute of Italian Islamic Community, Pallazi associates Wahhabism with “a puritanical uprising based on reinterpreting Qu'ranic law without the enlightened support of expertise embodied in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadiths* known as the *Sunna*”.¹¹⁰ He goes on to describe it as follows:

Wahhabis pay lip service to adherence to the Sunna, but in reality reshape it according to their ideology. Many prophetic sayings which constitute the immediate source of Sunna are rejected by means of captious arguments, as soon as they result in tenets incompatible with Wahhabism. When [...] al-Wahhab [...] started preaching, the mufti of Medina declared [his] belief a heresy and formally excommunicated him by issuing a *fatwa*, the text of which said:

*"This man is leading the ignoramuses of the present age to a heretical path. He is trying to extinguish Allah's light, but Allah will not permit His light to be extinguished, in spite of the opposition of polytheists, and will enlighten every place with the light of the followers of Sunna".*¹¹¹

Pallazi provides following reasons for the Wahhabite hold over the Arab peninsula:

The dismantling of the Ottoman Empire after World War I gave the Wahhabis an opportunity to impose their beliefs and their rule on Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula, which they did not lose. The Wahhabis first conquered the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, transforming these two sanctuaries from centres for the transmission of the Sunni heritage into places for propagating a primitive and literalist cult to Muslims coming from every part of the world. Second, the Wahhabis set up the Saudi state.¹¹²

The aforementioned observations on Wahhabism have perhaps revealed that it is ultra-radical in spirit and that enshrined in it is religious fanaticism and extremism which has evolved and spread under the Saudi patronage. The *Dictionary of Islam* emphasizes ten principal doctrines of Wahhabism out of which the following are mostly incompatible with other Islamic traditions including the syncretistic practice and which are arguably responsible for giving Islam a fundamentalist and extremist look:

109 *ibid.*

110 Pallazi, Shaykh Abdul Hadi (2002). “Wahhabism, the Saudi Arabia-based puritanical heresy at the base of Islamism”. www.eretzyisoel.org/~jkatz/wahhabism.html, accessed September 26, 2008 at 1500 (GMT).

111 *ibid.*

112 *ibid.*

[...]

2. That no one but God can know the secrets of men, and that prayers should not be offered to any prophet, wali, pir, or saint; but that God may be asked to grant a petition for the *sake* of a saint.

[...]

4. That it is unlawful to illuminate the shrines of departed saints, or to prostrate before them, or to perambulate (*tawaf*) round them [;] they do not even perform any act of reverence at the Prophet's tomb at al-Madinah.

5. That women should not be allowed to visit the graves of the dead, on account of their immoderate weeping.

6. That only four festivals ought to be observed, namely, 'Idu 'l-Fitr, 'Idu 'l-Azha [the two annual festive occasions], 'Ashura [the tenth day in the month of *Muharram*], and al-Lailatu 'l-Mubarakah [the sacred night in the month of *Ramadan* when the first verses of the Qu'ran were revealed to Muhammad].

7. They do not observe the ceremonies of *Maulud*, which are celebrated on the anniversary of Muhammad's birth.

8. They do not present offerings (*Nazr*) at any shrine.¹¹³

Thus Wahhabism is a form of belief which is not accommodative and which wants its adherents to follow a strict and rigid code of Islam. It is interesting to observe that Wahhabism was transported to India, especially to Bengal, at a time when the Muslims had lost their power to the British colonisers. The defeat of Bengal's last independent Nawab Siraj-ud-Dowla in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the replacement of Persian by English as the official language in 1837 brought humiliation for the Muslims. These however opened up fresh opportunities for the Hindus who took up English education and began to formidably feature in public administration causing frustrations among the downcast Muslims. The Muslim decline against the rise of Hindus was interpreted by the religious leaders as an “inevitable result of deviations from the fundamentals of pristine Islam [and they] initiated a series of religious movements to extricate the Muslims from this imbalance.”¹¹⁴

Molla continues,

Haji Shariatullah (1780-1840) [...] was one of the first to propagate the ideals of going back to pristine Islam. He started the Fara'idi movement ostensibly to root out practices and beliefs that had no basis in the scriptures and thus to purify the religious orientation of the Bengali Muslims [...] its efforts were designed to make a change in the “syncretic cultural fabric which tied Hindu and Muslim cultivators in a common social life” [...]. One of the objectives of the movement was thus to stress the identity of the Muslims as *Muslims*.

113 *Dictionary of Islam*. pp. 661-62, www.answering-islam.org/Books/Hughes/w.htm, accessed September 28, 2008 at 1730 (GMT)

114 Molla, MKU. “The Bengal Muslims: A Survey of Transition and Transformation”. In Ahmed (ed.), *op.cit.* 2001, p. 188.

The Fara'idi movement grew momentum under the leadership of Shariatullah's son Dudu Miyan (1819-62) and Titu Mir (1782-1831). In course of time the movement “had become vehicles for expressing the poorer Muslim peasants' resentment against the landlords and moneylenders”¹¹⁵ which implies that although the prime objectives of “the religious movements” [another one being *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya*, 'The Ways for Muslims'] were to purify Islam, these “did not set ordinary Muslim peasantry against Hindus [...] nor did [these] divert the Muslim peasantry from economic issues to a sense of solidarity with the upper-class Muslims”.¹¹⁶ The situation changed responding to the changing social “conditions” as well as the changed political conditions involving the Khilafat movement and the “aggressive Hindu revivalism”. As Ahmed explains it:

[...] with the changing conditions in the society [...] and the constant emphasis of the reformers on religious purification, the situation began to change; by the later nineteenth century, we find a considerable section of the Muslim masses in Bengal receptive to communal ideas. Their increasing sense of belonging to a larger Islamic community grew stronger, gradually leading to increased communal polarization.

[...]

The Khilafat movement in the early twentieth century^[117] had a similarly powerful impact on the Muslim masses of Bengal. [...] The Khilafat issue roused them to a new sense of Islamic identity further transforming their attitudes towards their non-Muslims [sic] neighbours. [...] Islam was thus gradually turned into a very powerful symbol of popular agitation, [...] The concurrent growth of aggressive Hindu revivalism (which included agitation against cow slaughter by the Muslims) and the indifference of Hindu leadership towards the genuine grievances of the Muslim peasantry, further accentuated the feeling of communal hostility—offering the Muslim elite the necessary leverage to articulate the Muslim grievances in religious terms.¹¹⁸

115 Ahmed, *op.cit.* 2001, p. 11.

116 *ibid.* p. 11-12.

117 By then several crucial political changes had already taken place: the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58, formation of The Indian National Congress in 1885, the Partition of Bengal into two wings—East and West-- in 1905 by the British with a view to aligning the Muslim leadership with them, establishment of The All India Muslim League in 1906, annulment of the partition in 1911 in the face of stiff resistance by the Congress . These events and incidents played a crucial role in bringing the issue of religion to public life thereby creating a gulf of mistrust between Hindus and Muslims. Indeed, majority of the Muslim leadership was suspicious of Hindu predominance in Congress which resulted in the establishment of Muslim League. Although the Partition had been masterminded by the Raj to “spark Hindu-Muslim rivalry, thereby preserving British rule” in the guise of “sincere administrative reform” and although they had to cancel the partition, their plan to isolate the two communities was certainly achieved. Novak quotes from a government paper written by Herbert Risely as follows, “ One of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule...Bengal divided will pull different waysBengal united is a power” (Novak 1993, *Bangladesh*: 112).

118 Ahmed, *op.cit.* 2001, p. 12.

The years between 1920 and 1940¹¹⁹ further isolated “the two communities” “from each other” that “let loose a series of communal violence all over eastern Bengal, bringing the urban tension to rural Bengal”.¹²⁰ With the Hindu revivalists playing their part, what had initially begun as a movement to purify Islam finally witnessed the division of India in 1947 despite the fact that there were quite a few influential, well-intentioned leaders, belonging to both communities, who had anticipated the ills of the separation. Thus, on the basis of religion, two nations were created—Pakistan for the Muslims and India for the Hindus. Nevertheless, the division instead of solving the communal issue aggravated it further proving how poorly founded Jinnah's theory was. Ahmed notes: “The fact that nearly half the total Muslim population of undivided India had no choice other than stay back in post-independent India is a sad commentary on Jinnah's logic that the Hindus and Muslims of India were two nations”.¹²¹

2.8 Islamic Fundamentalism and Jamaat-i-Islami

In the first chapter, I have identified the crucial events in Pakistan since 1947 that provided the Bengali Muslims living in East Pakistan with a distinctive and complex identity embracing religion and Bengali nationalism which united them in their struggle for freedom in 1971. As mentioned earlier, the Islamic fundamentalist forces led by Jamaat-i-Islami opposed the war of liberation and actively collaborated with the Pakistan Army. It is interesting to note that Jamaat had adopted an “indifferent attitude to the creation of Pakistan” because its founder, Maududi “was [...] critical of the lack of Islamic character in the leadership of the Muslim League and believed that such secular-minded and westernized leadership was not capable of establishing an Islamic state in Pakistan”.¹²² So, ever since its founding in 1941, Jamaat opted for fundamentalism as its basic creed and 'set as its objective “the establishment of the Islamic way (*al-Deen*)”, and to materialise its mission it set out for itself “five programmes”. The fifth programme reads as follows: “To bring about a

119 Congress's “Non Cooperation Movement”—a brainchild of Mahatma Gandhi—in 1920s called for surrender of titles, boycott of government educational institutions, law courts etc. It later involved the *Swadeshi* movement, a movement that aimed to further the use of items made in India and boycott of British goods, became very popular. Added to these movement was “Civil Disobedience Movement” which was launched in 1930 and which aimed at paralyzing the British administration. Then in 1940 Muslim League adopted “The Lahore Resolution” based on Jinnah's “two-nation theory” which demanded separate territory for the Indian Muslim. The Congress agitations and the League resolution shook the very foundation of the Raj, and with the the beginning of World War II the British , who desperately needed the help of local people, were left with no choice than to come to an understanding with the Indians that they would give freedom to India after the War.

120 Ahmed, *op.cit.* 2001, p. 13.

121 *ibid.* p. 20.

122 Ahmad, Mumtaz. “Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asia”. In *Fundamentalisms Observed* (The Fundamentalism Project, Vol-1), ed. Marty, Martin E and Appleby, R Scott. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 467-68.

revolution in the political leadership of society, *reorganize political and socioeconomic life on Islamic lines, and finally, establish an Islamic state*” (Quoted by Ahmad).¹²³

Capitalising on growing ideological differences within Muslim League leadership and the political discontent between the two wings of Pakistan, Jamaat launched a systematic campaign to erase “the political stigma” created by its indifferent attitude towards the creation of Pakistan in the first place. “In marked contrast [with] the views held by the Western-educated, Western-oriented politicians [like the founder of Pakistan, Jinnah], civil servants, judges, and military officers”, observes Ahmad:

The Jamaat-i-Islami insisted that the laws and practices in force in the country that were in conflict with the Qur'an and Sunna should be replaced or amended forthwith in conformity with Islamic law. [...] While the Jamaat-i-Islami defined and formulated the goal of the newly born state in terms of Islamic revivalism, very few politicians and administrators saw the goal as anything other than social and economic development. [...] Maududi demanded that the Constituent Assembly make an unequivocal declaration affirming the “supreme sovereignty of God” and the supremacy of the Shar'a as the basic law of Pakistan. *The existing anti-Islamic laws should be abrogated, and the state, in exercising its powers, should have no authority to transgress the limits imposed by Islam.*¹²⁴

Wahhabite in spirit, Jamaat received support from the *ulema* (Muslim clerics) and the blessings of Saudi Arabia which helped it to consolidate its organisational network. It organised rally, religious meetings, demonstrations etc to reach the masses with its plea to establish Pakistan as an Islamic state. It exerted tremendous pressure on the fragile government and compelled it to impose a ban on airing Nobel Laureate Tagore's (1861-1941) songs on national Radio on the grounds that Tagore was a Hindu and that his songs are un-islamic. Some of its adherents went so far as to replace certain 'Hindu' words like *mahaswashan* (Hindu crematorium) by the 'Islamic' vocabulary of *Gorosthan* (graveyard) in a must read juvenile Qazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) poem. (Both Tagore and Islam are two stalwarts of Bangla literature and they are Bangladesh's national poets). Although gradual awareness of Bengali nationalism and political developments in East Pakistan (references to which have been made in the introductory chapter) jeopardized its mission, Jamaat had emerged as the most important Islamist political party by 1970. Noted political scientist of Bangladesh Maniruzzaman reveals:

Even in the elections of 1970 totally dominated by Bangladesh nationalism, the Jamaat secured about 10 percent of the votes cast [...] and emerged as the second largest party after AL [Awami

123 *ibid.* p. 467; my italics.

124 *ibid.* p. 469.

League] which, of course, received a far larger percentage of the ballot (72.57 per cent). The significance of Jamaat's success could be gauged from the fact that all other Islamic parties including various factions of the Muslim League together secured 7.85 per cent of votes cast.¹²⁵

Because it opposed Bangladesh's war of liberation and because it actively collaborated with the Pakistani Army killing millions of innocent people, Jamaat went into hibernation for a brief period after independence from Pakistan. Nevertheless, as described in the first chapter, it has emerged as a very influential party over the last two decades. It formed a liaison with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the party which along with its allies won two-thirds majority in 2001 general elections, and Jamaat *emir* (the Chief) and secretary general featured in the country's last cabinet. So strong is its organisation across the country that with the next general elections scheduled for December 2008, BNP, founded ironically by a freedom fighter who later held Bangladesh's presidency, has already publicly declared that it will contest the polls with its long-time ally. Interestingly enough, Awami League which led Bangladesh's war of liberation and which is very vocal about Jamaat activities these days, “maintained a paradoxical silence about the past role of Jamaat and were careful enough not to antagonize it”¹²⁶ during its movement against the autocratic regime of General Ershad which reached momentum in 1990. Thus, a lenient attitude to Jamaat by both Awami League and BNP—the two major parties of the country—as well as the failure of progressive secularist forces in orchestrating a massive campaign against it and the patronage of the capitalist world which also includes the oil-rich Middle East countries have contributed towards its emergence as a major political party in the country in recent years. Pakistan's leftist political thinker Lal Khan accounts for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in his country and elsewhere in the world from a Marxist perspective:

In reality Islamic fundamentalism is a reactionary phenomenon representing a peculiar phase of a sick capitalist society, a society that has stagnated due to the organic crisis of capitalism. The failure of capitalism to eliminate feudalism and the existence of primitive forms of human society creates a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism. [...] In spite of the propaganda campaign by the western media against Islamic fundamentalism, US imperialism continues to use these religious fanatics wherever it deems it necessary.¹²⁷

125 Maniruzzaman, Talukder. “Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends”. In Ahmed (ed.), *op.cit.* 2001. p. 84.

126 Kabir, MG. “Religion, Language and Nationalism in Bangladesh.” in Ahmed (ed.), *op.cit.* 2001. p. 130.

127 Khan, Lal (2000). “The Menace of Islamic Fundamentalism and the Hypocrisy of Imperialism.” www.Marxist.com/Asia/islamic_fund_ism1100.html, accessed July 5, 2008 at 1000 (GMT).

2.9 Militant Fundamentalist Activities in Bangladesh in the Recent Past

In pursuit of their cherished dream to establish Bangladesh as an Islamic state, the fundamentalist forces carried out massive campaigns and resorted to militant and fascist activities across Bangladesh in the recent past. Although Jamaat repeatedly denied having any links with the extremists, its involvement with them is an open secret. In the preceding chapter, I have cited instances from the recent times to demonstrate how devastating and brutal these people could be once they are effectively brainwashed to accept fanaticism as the creed of their life. The court and the judges became their principal target because the present legal system, as Maududi and the Jamaat leadership had taught them, is un-Islamic which ought to be replaced by a court based on *Shari'ah*. I will cite a few cases from published sources to further my argument that the activities of the fanatics have made people's life miserable, especially those of women. Besides, instances of their atrocities on the minority people and development agencies are also recorded.

Fatwas Against Women in Bangladesh (1996) —a compilation documenting the ugly hands of Islamic fundamentalism—to which references have been made in the “Introduction”, contains evidences of fanatical and fundamentalist acts during 1991-95 when BNP buoyed by Jamaat support was in power. Page 12 of the booklet contains a list of some select actions by the fundamentalists which were carried out in fulfilment of fatwas promulgated from time to time, although fatwas do not have any legal bearing in Bangladesh jurisprudence. I quote a few of them here:

[...]

June 1993: 35 women in [a] village in Serajg[a]nj were ostracized because they used contraceptives.

November 1993: Two imams [chaplains] were suspended from their mosque duties because their wives used contraceptives.

[...]

January 1995: Children deterred from going to BRAC schools [BRAC is the acronym for Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, arguably the biggest non-government organisation (NGO) of the world. The fundamentalist argument, which is of course baseless, has it that BRAC in the guise of development activities carry out Christian missionary works as its money comes from the Christian world].

Imams refused to perform burial rites for children in BRAC schools.

February 1995: Schools were burnt following fatwas.

[...]

March 1994: 10 women were divorced for working with the NGOs and ostracised for working outside the home [..]

[...]

May and June 1994: Religious extremists attacked or committed arson in [sic] several daily Bangla newspaper offices [for publishing, what they considered, negative reports about them]

[...]

June 1992: *Jamaat-i-Islami tables a bill in Parliament to make blasphemy punishable by death*¹²⁸

The imams refusing to perform burial rites for children attending BRAC schools cannot but be seen as an inhuman act which the *Qur'an* vehemently condemns. On the contrary, the holy book repeatedly asks its followers to be patient and moderate and admonishes against transgressing the boundaries. As regards the tabling of the blasphemy bill by the Jamaat chief in the national parliament, it can be safely deduced that ill-intentioned as it was, it aimed “to give a legal cover to [persecute] secular and democratic sectors of society”.¹²⁹ In reality the bill was “in an exact duplication of the provisions entered into Pakistan's penal code”¹³⁰ by the military dictator General Zia ul Haq. Bangladesh's leading lawyer Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed argued that by floating the bill “The fundamentalists are misusing religion for political revenge. Their revenge is against Independence. Their revenge is against the motherland. Their revenge is against our constitution”.¹³¹

Against this backdrop of fundamentalist resurgence, the plights of Taslima Nasrin (1962-), a noted feminist writer of Bangladesh, needs to be considered. In an interview published in the leading Kolkata-based English daily *The Statesman* on May 9, 1994 Nasrin was “reported to have asked for a change” in the *Qur'an*, which she denied and her rejoinder to this effect was duly published in the newspaper on May 11. Nevertheless, the fundamentalist alliances led by Jamaat “demanded [her] execution for her interview [...] and her trial for blasphemy”.¹³² In a letter written to the then Speaker of the Bangladesh Assembly in June, Nasrin reiterated her position that she had not asked for a revision of the *Qur'an* but for a change of laws. The fundamentalists were not satisfied. All regardless of their differences joined hands. A half-day general strike was called and Nasrin was

128 Lucas and Kapoor (compilation), *op.cit.* 1996. p.12, my italics.

129 *ibid.* p. 106.

130 Ahmed, Syed Ishtiaq. “Blasphemy Bill: Revenging the War of Liberation.” in Lucas and Kapoor (compilation), *op.cit.* 1996. p. 99.

131 *ibid.*

132 Lucas and Kapoor (compiled), *op.cit.* 1996. p. 57.

arrested much to the dismay of Amnesty International.¹³³ The present situation is that Nasrin, facing a death-threat from the fundamentalists, is in exile in Kolkata. But even in India, she is being pursued by the Indian counterparts of the Bangladeshi fanatics.

Nasrin became a target of the fundamentalists for her unguarded criticism of the religious hypocrisy and bigotry and their exploitation of women in the name of religion. Her journalistic novel *Lajja* (1993)¹³⁴ further exposed the true character of the fundamentalists in Bangladesh. Set against the background of demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in India by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists on December 6, 1992, the fiction vividly portrays the plights of the Hindus in Bangladesh who were vandalised, killed, the women raped, temples ransacked, houses looted by the Islamic fundamentalists in retaliation to what had happened in India. The narrative is built around the house of one Sudhamoy Dutta, an atheist, who had refused to leave his motherland time and again ever since the division of India. But because his family name is Dutta, he became a target of the fundamentalist attack. His daughter, Maya is abducted; the family members including his son, Suranjan, who used to be optimistic, apprehend the danger and urge his father to leave the country for India. Yet, he refuses to leave his motherland. I quote below the poignant conversation between them:

Sudhamoy roared in anger. 'No, I will not go,' he said. 'You go if you want to.'
'You won't come?'
'No . . . ' Sudhamoy turned his head away in disgust.
'I am asking you again, Baba Please let us go away,' implored Suranjan.
Sudhamoy repeated firmly: 'No.'
The word 'No' fell like an iron rod on Suranjan's back.¹³⁵

But then the inevitable comes and Sudhamoy cannot but yield to it -- he will have to leave:

With his wife's help, Sudhamoy had walked up to Suranjan's bed, where his son screamed in the grip of nightmare. Now, as he sat holding his son, his eyes glowed with a new light.
'Baba?'
A mute question thumped inside Suranjan's heart. It was almost dawn and through the cracks in the window, sunlight streamed in. Sudhamoy said, 'Come, let us go away.'
Suranjan could not conceal his surprise. 'Where will we go, Baba?' he asked.

133 *ibid.* pp. 58-59.

134 The first Bangla edition of the novel was published in 1993 in Bangladesh. Dictated by the fundamentalists the book was immediately banned by the government reportedly for its alleged attempt to disrupt communal harmony. A revised and updated edition of the book was published the same year from Kolkata, India. The novel chronicles the cataclysmic happenings in Bangladesh spanning over a period of 13 days in December 1992 following the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. The English translation was made by Tutul Gupta and it was published under the title *Lajja Shame* from New Delhi, India by Penguin Books.

135 See *Lajja Shame* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 214.

Sudhamoy said, 'India.'¹³⁶

Because she had expressed her thoughts freely and because she had shamefully exposed them, the fundamentalists would chase her tirelessly. What the fundamentalists fear most is the exercise of free thought. And it is the same fear that led them to launch an assassination attempt on the country's leading writer, Humayun Azad (1947-2004) on February 27, 2004 because he too had vehemently condemned fundamentalism and fanaticism in most of his works. The attempt to assassinate Azad occurred following the publication of his novel, *Pak Saar Jamin Saad Baad* (the title of the book is drawn from the inaugural line of Pakistan's national anthem) in which he delineates the brutal nature of the fundamentalists who actively collaborated with the Pakistan Army in 1971 and who still dream that Bangladesh would merge with Pakistan someday.

Thus an uncompromising and unbending attitude is the key element of the Islamic fundamentalist politics in Bangladesh. The fundamentalists cannot stand anything which goes against their interest and thinking. Hence Brand with all his dogmatic beliefs and practices appeals to the initiated Bangladeshi spectators as one whom they have seen and encountered in the recent days.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter I have elaborately discussed Bangladesh's history adopting a sociolinguistic approach. I have differentiated the “syncretistic” tradition of Islam from the orthodox or Wahhabite views of Islam and showed that although most of the people of Bangladesh are non-communal, the Islamic fundamentalists led by Jamaat-i-Islami have emerged as a major player in national politics. Hence, so far as the privileged audience was concerned, *Brand* fittingly expressed the parochial and insular views of the fundamentalists of Bangladesh.

136 *ibid.* p. 216.

Chapter Three

The Performance

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I attempt a performance analysis of *Brand* in Bangladesh to advance my claim that Ibsen was not imported to Bangladesh, but the spectators with their knowledge of the country's social and political dynamics created the performance. As mentioned in the "Introduction", the analysis will be based around my recollections of the première held on December 19, 2004 at the National Theatre of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka as well as the production video CD (2005) and still pictures from the production. I will choose major turning points of the performance to argue how the audience through its responses, reactions and perceptions produced it. I will contend that it was because of this rich negotiation and transaction with the performance that *Brand* in spite of its "foreignness" turned out essentially to be a Bangladeshi performance and its author, Ibsen, a Bangladeshi dramatist of the twenty first century. This is inevitable for, as pointed out in the "Introduction", "Action—or performance—is [...] necessarily local, here and now".¹³⁷ By recasting Bharucha's thought on *Peer Gynt* that it was never a 'foreign' text for him, I want to say that as far as the privileged Bangladeshi audience was concerned, *Brand* had already become a local text assuming "a local significance".¹³⁸

3.2 *Are the Norwegian Elements really Norwegian?*

The "foreignness" of the performance was caused by its *apparent* Norwegian locale. But, the seemingly Norwegian elements in the performance were doubtlessly Bangladesh's perception of the same. To put it another way, the spectators knew that it was Bangladesh presented in a Norwegian cloak. Thus, the set with all its icy mountain cliffs and snowy surface that painstakingly wanted to depict a part of the western Norway by the fjords where the sun is hardly seen was understood in local terms. Indeed, as a member of the audience I could perceive the performance's locale in our known environment. As I can remember even today, the set did not appear to me at all remote from my place and time. It thus follows that Brand's mountain house and his frequent movements to and

137 Nygaard, Jon. *op.cit.*, 2007.

138 Bharucha, Rustom. *op.cit.*, 2000, p. 72.

away from the icy cliffs were Bangladesh's attempts to negotiate with these elements of nature. The avalanche killing Brand made sense as a landslide that kills quite a few in Bangladesh every year. As such, the dance choreography that apparently attempted to capture the Scandinavian folk dance appealed to the audience as a traditional festive dance of Bangladesh. In fact, a dance like that features during the Bangla New Year colourful celebration on *Pahela Baisakh*, April 14. Similarly, the costume apparently modelled on the 19th century Norwegian rural attire did not create any obstacle to localising the characters that wear them. Hence, despite having Norwegian names, the characters—Agnes, Einar, and not to mention Brand—were familiar figures to the audience. Brand's Ma and Arta Nari (Woman) are the images of suffering women in today's Bangladesh. Besides, the play's poverty was easily perceived as a contemporary Bangladesh reality where, more often than not, unable to bear it any further, a parent kills his/her child and then commits suicide. What I am trying to underscore is that whenever a performance is produced in another culture, it becomes essentially *its*—local and *original*—even when it contains a different locale or a different set of associations. It happens because the spectators create the play in their own terms, with their own time and consciousness in the back of their mind.

However, from technical point of view, the production exploited the benefit of employing two innovative closely-spaced perpendicular-stagecraft giving the director the freedom to design his characters and composition. The slope of the set was quite convenient for the performers to acquire the required motion of the play. The set offered further flexibility to the director for creating a different atmosphere by changing a few stagecraft. The slight changes in stagecraft helped create Brand's home keeping the possibility open for the erection of the new church on the mountain-top. The congested rectangular set was also manoeuvred to creatively depict the exits and entries of characters. The window openings of Brand's home provided Agnes with opportunities to connect with the world outside. These enabled the audience to have a peek into their house where during the Christmas Eve candles light the entire place. One of these openings painted with “Christ the Virgin and Saints” from Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* series depicting a young, beardless Jesus with enormous power and energy¹³⁹ from beneath is loosened alongside numerous crosses to the gaze of the audience as Brand lies dead at the kill.

3.3 The Audience Creation of Performance

As stated above, I will select major turning points of the production to discuss how the performance was perceived and created by the audience.

139 Kamol, Ershad. “*Brand: Existential Questions*”. Dhaka: *The Daily Star*, December 20, 2004.

As the curtain rises, a group of pilgrims with crosses in their hands slowly traverses the stage.



Shadowy figures of pilgrims traversing the stage.

They look more like silhouettes than live human beings creating an impression in the mind of the audience that the band of pilgrims is a figment of imagination on the part of Brand who, dressed in black with his trademark staff in hand, enters at the tail of the procession.

It is a stormy day with the wind blowing from all directions. Brand is joined by Krishok (Peasant) and his son. Krishok tells him not to walk that fast adding that they have lost their way. Brand tells them that he is a priest and that this is the way he will be headed adding, “e pathei amake jete hobe”¹⁴⁰ (“I *must* go on”).¹⁴¹ Krishok is afraid and warns him not to risk his life as he knows he would surely drown in the lake to which Brand says rather emphatically that they will walk across the lake as did Christ when he walked the Lake of Galilee. Krishok says that it happened long before and that he will die should he dare do it. Brand affirms that he is indebted to God for both his life and his death and that he will live or embrace death should He so will. Brand reminds him of his dying daughter whom he wanted to see before death and asks him what sacrifice he is ready to make to insure her peaceful death. Krishok says that he is ready to give up whatever he has for the poor girl. Brand catches him rather off guard asking, “deben ki jiban apnar”?¹⁴² (“But give your life,

140 All Bangla citations are from Munzur-i-Mowla's translation of *Brand* entitled *Ibsen er Brand*. Dhaka: CAT, 2005. The present one is from p. 66.

141 All English translations are from John Northam's translation of *Brand*. Oslo: Ibsen. net (e book), accessed January 20, 2008. The present one is from p. 6.

142 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 68

too, have *that* cease”)?¹⁴³ Krishok says that sacrificing his life is out of question as he needs to think about his wife and his son as well as his own. With a wry smile in his face, Brand reminds him that Christ gave up his life. Krishok says that it too happened long ago adding that gone are those days and that no miracles occur these days. Brand dismisses him telling that he does not know the Lord, nor the Lord knows him. Krishok tells him that he is very hard. He does not want to leave Brand alone for fear that in case of his death he would be held responsible. As there was “*hollow rumble in the distance*”,¹⁴⁴ he begins to struggle with Brand who finally kicks him down and frees himself.



Brand treats Krishok (Peasant) mercilessly.

When they are gone, Brand *sees* the shadowy figures of the downcast, struggling pilgrims and gives a measure of his philosophy plainly stating that those who think that 'this worldly life is all' does not

143 Northam, John.*op.cit.* 2007. p. 7.

144 *ibid.*, p. 8.

possess life at all. The common people, he contemplates, exchange 'the truth' for the silly worldly 'comfort'. He is now confronted with the question: can these people be saved? He goes inside the mountain, comes back, sits on the top; and as the soft melodious tune of the flute is heard, Brand starts his soliloquy in which he says that only the valiant will cross the waters and that thousands of cowardly people will be languishing by the shore forever.

As I can still remember, I was shocked at Brand's treatment of the poor peasant. I thought it was brutal. The first image that Brand generated was that he was indeed too stiff, hard and arrogant and that he was indeed incapable of loving. How he could be a Christ when he was so unsympathetic to fellow human beings, I wondered. Brand made sense to me as a Muslim fanatic obsessed with his dogmatic beliefs and values who also repeatedly asserts that his is the only right path and that the common people with their popular beliefs are in the wrong, I mused. I truly sympathised with the peasant who was like one of us. Sitting next to me was a cultural activist of the country whom I had known for some time. He was scuffing his feet. He sarcastically told, "You see, this is how *mullahs* love you and me". In a little distance was sitting a man of about forty. I heard him tell, "*beta bhandu*" ("he is a fake, isn't he?").

Looking back upon the above recollections, I now feel that as involved members of the audience we had already begun to create the performance through our responses to the on-stage actions. We were not passive recipients; instead we were somewhat transformed into actors by the power of performance.

The next scene features the colourful dance of the village youths. The villagers' lively dance to the folk tune irritates, infuriates Brand who with the staff in his hand portends the image of an unmerciful, inhuman arbiter. Einar playfully calls Agnes a butterfly and asks her to come to his arms. Agnes does reply playfully that she will not. Brand finds the merry-making extremely hard to tolerate; he looks backward so that he does not have to see. He loses temper and with fire in his eyes asks them to stop. They ignore him, go on dancing, and say that they are on their way to town where they will have their marriage solemnised. And then Einar says that they will have a fairytale life, a life which will never come to an end. All of a sudden, Einar recognises Brand, goes to him, and calls him his friend. Brand dismisses him by telling that their ways are now different. In a bid to counter him, Einar tells Brand that his God is still his God. Brand cancels Einar's God calling Him old, mortally sick and powerless. He gives a vision of his own God who is young, mighty and powerful like the mythological Hercules. He is the God of storm; He is the God of the Last Judgement Day. He further says that he hears His call and that he does not seek anything new and

that men have created all those different views about religion. He decries the ceremonial aspect of Christianity like the Sunday congregation calling them meaningless. Brand departs leaving them alone. But, the words of Brand have caused a storm in Agnes' soul; she is hardly that playful Agnes any more. She appears to be in a trance with things looking absolutely barren, meaningless and cold. Einar tries in vain to revive her.



A scene from the colourful dance of the youthful couples with Einar and Agnes in the foreground. Standing behind on the snowy peak, Brand angrily looks on.

The scene, as I still remember, had a disturbing impact on the audience. There were whispers all around. A spectator sitting at the back of the theatre loudly said that Brand was a fundamentalist. I could instantly connect him to those extremists who have repeatedly dismissed songs and dances calling them anti-Islamic. These are the people who pronounce *fatwa* to make common people's life miserable, I mused. Who is he to decide whose God is right and whose God is wrong, I wondered. Were not the fanatics like Brand carried out bomb attacks on the *Pahela Baisakh* concert at the Ramna square in Dhaka in 2001, I contemplated. Surely Brand's declaration that he does not seek anything new in religion is reverberated in the fundamentalists' frequent call to revive their brand of “pristine” Islam, I told myself. Brand’s declaration that his is a mission to rescue the true sons of

God also met with disapproval. The cultural activist told me in a whisper who had given him the authority to decide who God's true sons were. It was his insular views towards religion that prompted him to assert like that, I told myself.

The scene introducing the drought-stricken hungry people, Nagarpal (Mayor) as well as Einar and Agnes is significant. Instead of showing compassion to the suffering people, Brand denounces poorly villagers and says that because they lead an irreligious life, God will never respond to their prayers. Einar appeals to Brand to be compassionate. Brand says that if it were required of him, he would have given smilingly his last drop of blood to save them. He however hastily adds that it would have been a sin on his part to do so implying that God's wrath has brought about the present calamity for they have turned away from Him. The action moves to a new direction with the appearance of Arta Nari (Woman). She has come with a plea for a priest who will hear the confessions of her dying husband who has killed his own son and stabbed himself fatally. She has come from a far away village, and to get back there one will have to brave the rough fjord and stormy sea. Brand says that he will hear his repentance. He adds that he needs someone to assist him with the boat. Agnes is impressed and says that she will join Brand.



Agnes joins Brand on the slope as Einar in the foreground is seen appealing. Nagarpal (Mayor) on the mountain-top looks on.

The blocking at this point was creative. As the picture depicts, with Nagarpal on the mountain-top looking on, Agnes, as if she were illuminated by a divine radiance, joins Brand and they begin to slowly climb up the slope while Einar, standing on the flat ground, pleads her not to go.

The scene aroused mixed feeling in the audience. While some groaned when Brand said that God would never respond to the prayers of the poor villagers who, in his opinion, lead an irreligious life, some applauded when Brand said that he would go and hear the confessions of the man. As for me, Brand cemented his position as a fundamentalist by not being compassionate to the poor people. I found his attitude to them ruthless. His declaration that he will hear the confessions of the man did not move me either, for I was convinced that it had provided him with an opportunity to establish his charisma. The tension reached its momentum when Agnes joined Brand on the slope with Einar appealing her to come back. Once again, the audience had a mixed attitude towards the action. Some cheered as Agnes began climbing up the slope while some sighed at the sight. One spectator was all sympathy for Einar as he whisperingly said, “Poor man!”

The next episode discovers Brand inside the mountain house under a window opening as Agnes sits on the mountain-top contemplatively. Brand has kept his promise, listened to the dying confessions of the man. The villagers are impressed. They ask Brand to remain in their village and be their priest. Brand asks them to give up everything they have. They poor villagers are afraid. Brand compares them to fallen Adam. He tells them that he cannot stay in their village because he has a nobler mission to attain which is to correct and save mankind. Then he announces: “amake jetei hobe ei chotto jaigatuku chere - /amar uddam shob, ei jaiga kere nite pare.”¹⁴⁵ (“Out, and seek some greater height; /there's no room here for a knight!”)¹⁴⁶

Once again, Brand appeared to me as an excessively obsessed person. His emphasis upon sacrificing all struck me too. Sacrifice is considered sacred, but does one need to sacrifice everything, I mused. I thought of the *Qur'an* and the relevant verses that readily pervaded my mind were those in which with reference to the Muslim custom of sacrificing animals, Allah says that neither blood nor meat of the animal He seeks; He on the contrary seeks the devotion of the believers. I also thought about the sacrifices the two brothers—Cain and Abel—made. While God approved of Abel's, he did not accept that of Cain because his heart was not at the act of sacrifice. And was not Christ's emphasis on sacrifice based on the same principle that one should not attach oneself to the earthly things, I kept on asking myself. And I really began to fear for Agnes because she was simply overwhelmed by Brand's charisma.

145 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 120.

146 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 31.

The scene depicting Brand's treatment of his aged mother is of crucial significance. It is important to note that Brand has not gone to visit Ma; instead it is she who has come to see him. Ma advises him not to risk his life. She says that she has built everything for her, and that she will give him all. Brand says that she will have to give up everything she has acquired. Ma gives him a poignant account of her life that she loved a youth she could not marry because her father had wanted her to marry Brand's father. She could not marry the person she loved because he had no fortune. She tells Brand that she has known the importance of wealth, and that she cannot part with everything she has. Brand says that she is not yet prepared for repentance. He even curses his birth to which Ma says that her life is a failure and that her soul that lies hidden in the body is also doomed. Tears trickle down her face; but she will not give away everything she has. After her departure, Brand reasserts his position that one will have to be prepared for the absolute sacrifice.



Brand's mother is seen with Brand. Brand tells her that she will have to give up everything.

The scene left me completely agitated. I could feel the ferment of the audience as well. How one could be so cruel to his mother, I wondered. Instead of taking pity on the poor mother, Brand caused her suffering to soar further. Does Islam approve of his action? No, I thought. The *Qur'an* grants the believers the right only to disobey their parents should they ask their children to associate anything with Allah. If it is not the case, which was not obviously the case with Ma, the children are

obligated to be obedient to the parents. I quote below the verses in this regard from the holy book:

The Lord has commanded that ye worship none but Him and has enjoined benevolence towards parents. Should either or both of them attain old age in thy lifetime, never say: Ugh; to them nor chide them, but always speak gently to them. Be humbly tender with them and pray: Lord, have mercy on them, even as they nurtured me when I was little. [...] He is well-aware of all that relates to His servants and sees it all (“The Night Journey”, 17: 24-31).¹⁴⁷

The authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad also lay paramount importance on the duties that children owe to their parents. One such tradition has it that Allah would have asked the believers to worship their parents had He approved of association with Him. Another well-known tradition states that the child’s heaven lies at the feet of its mother. Within this religious framework Brand appeared to me indeed as a dark figure. Besides, Allah does not ask the Muslims to sacrifice all; it is good enough for a believer to give away two and a half percent of his savings every year, I reasoned. Brand talks about the demands of God, but he himself has violated a divine injunction, I told myself. I sympathised with Ma, who, like most of the women in Bangladesh, gets nothing from life. Brand's Ma could not marry the person she loved because her father had decided otherwise. Isn't it the case with a majority of Bangladeshi women who can never assert their rights as individuals, I contemplated.

In another dramatic turn of event, Einar comes running and asks Brand to return Agnes to him. Brand tells him that it is up to her to decide. The blocking here was quite interesting. Agnes stands on the mountain-top, Brand begins to walk down the slope on the left as Einar positions himself in the middle of the slope on the right thus forming a geometric triangular. Einar appeals to Agnes to come back to him, to the known world of the sky and the sea. Agnes says that she cannot as there has developed a great sea between him and her. Einar pleads if she does not want to come with him, she should go back to the village, but should not go with Brand. Brand also asks her to choose telling her that his demand is all or nothing. Then he asks her if she is ready to give her life to him. Action reaches climax when Einar tells her to choose between sunlight and darkness or between life and death. Agnes says calmly with profound resolution, “jabo ami par hoye andhokar,/jabo mrittyu par hoye”,¹⁴⁸ (“I descend into death's night.--/ And beyond the dawn gleams bright”).¹⁴⁹ She departs with Brand leaving Einar alone on the stage.

147 *The Quran* (translated from Arabic by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan). *op.cit.*, 1971. pp. 266-67.

148 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 144.

149 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 41.

The scene left me perplexed. I was sympathetic to Einar. With all my will I wanted Agnes to leave Brand and join Einar who really loved her. By turning him down Agnes who was under a hypnotic spell lost her last chance to correct herself, I thought. I felt that Agnes had made a crucial choice, a choice which would take her to her inevitable doom.



Brand with Agnes before their mountain house with window openings. Brand is explaining the ways of God to her.

Three years have passed. With a Bangla version of the *Bible* in his hand Brand says that he has learned that his mother is in death-bed, but he has not yet heard what he longed to hear all these years that she is ready to give up everything. Agnes tells him to pay her a visit. This is what he will never do because going to her will mean surrendering to customs and conventions. He says that he cannot see her until and unless she has repented. Agnes tells him that she is his mother. Brand dismisses her telling that, seeing her will mean bowing down his head to the earthly, household gods which he will never ever do. Then he says that his decision to stay here in this community and what he has done so far have been prompted by God. Brand tells her that one will have to endure everything and go on trying to be saved by God. But those who will not try are fated to be

destroyed. Agnes goes inside, comes back, holds him and says passionately that she will follow him wherever he goes.

Doctor comes and tells them that the house they have built where the sun never reaches could be an abode for demons. He tells Brand that he is going to see his mother and asks him to come along. Brand reiterates his position that he will not see her until she has repented. Doctor says that he is stone-hearted and love is not there in his world. At this point, Batrabahok (Man) enters, meets Brand and says he has a message from his mother that she is ready to give up half of her wealth. Brand says that she has lost her last chance to repent for he will not visit her. Batrabahok reminds him that it is no other but his own mother who is about to die. Brand tells him that his is a unique rule: “nijer belai ek bidhi,/ anno bidhi annoyur belai,/ e rokom noi”¹⁵⁰ (“I dare not use two scales to weigh/my foes and my family”).¹⁵¹ Brand's declaration is a major turning point of the performance. Not only has it stopped him from seeing his dying mother, but also will it cost, as the action will reveal, first Alf's life, then Agnes' and finally his own. He by his own hand has signed his doom. Once it is signed, as Brand will discover, there cannot be any turning back from destiny. Disappointed, Batrabahok leaves saying that he will tell his mother that God is not as cruel as her son.

Enters Nagarpal, and he politely addresses Brand. He first extends his hand of friendship inviting him to a party of local elites that he will host. Brand tells him in clear terms that their ways are different. Nagarpal tells him that he does neither understand him nor does he understand his conduct adding that his rather enigmatic role has made him suspicious of his intent. He tells him to leave the place, find a settlement in a town where people will understand him well. Then he says that as far as they are concerned, they want to continue the life they have been accustomed to for ages. Brand tells him that God has so willed that he will stay in his motherland and that he will not leave the place. Nagarpal tells him threateningly that in that case a conflict between them is inevitable. He leaves warning him to keep in mind the limit.

Doctor comes and tells Brand that his mother is dead. Brand eagerly wants to know if she agreed to give up everything. Doctor says that she did not. Brand looks desperate as he thinks that there is no way that her soul can be saved. Doctor tells him that she died having said that God is kindlier than Brand. He then goes to the house and comes back hastily telling that Alf will not survive if they

150 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 161-62.

151 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 48.

stay here any longer. Brand asks will he survive if they leave. Doctor assures him. Brand at once tells him that they will leave instantly. Brand's sudden change of mind strikes Doctor. He tells Brand that by his decision to leave, Brand is now violating his own commandment that he does not have different rules for different people. What answer he has to it, asks Doctor. However, he tells him that he likes this changed Brand who is human and who is able to love.



A heated exchange of words between Nagarpal (Mayor) and Brand.

The above episodes caused different responses in the audience. While it groaned at Brand's refusal to visit her dying mother, it cheered him for not joining hands with Nagarpal who, although not portrayed as quite corrupt and bad in the performance, to an extent resembled the corrupt politicians of the country who make people's life miserable. However, I was wondering could the demand of one's belief be that strong which would refrain one from even seeing one's dying mother. I agreed with Agnes and Doctor that Brand was indeed too hard. Brand's inhuman treatment of her mother ironically brought to my mind Peer Chan's (Peer Gynt) tender handling of her dying mother in CAT's production which I had watched. To give her comfort and relief the wayfarer Peer came back home, held her in his arms and told her tales which visibly relieved the old woman and eased her passage to death. It appeared to me that Peer was a better human being than Brand. I felt sorry for him because he was unable to love. However, alike Doctor in the performance I liked the change in Brand at the thought of Alf's danger. Indeed, this was the only moment when he looked human. How I wished he left with Alf abandoning his mission.

Slowly enters Agnes holding Alf in her arms. She says that she is ready to go. Brand tells her that he is yet to decide in which direction he will go. He says that he will have to know which identity of his—the priest or Alf's father—is of foremost importance. Agnes understands what Brand has on his mind. She says that she will carry out his commands and then lifting Alf high in her arms she says that the child is her sacrifice to God. The scene ends with Brand's passionate cry: “probhu, alo dao/amake tomar”¹⁵² (“Jesus, Jesus, give me light!”).¹⁵³

The sacrifice of Alf once again established Brand as a fanatic who will do anything for his beliefs. I saw some members of the audience rose on their feet out of anguish. A woman spectator in a little distance began to sob. I myself was at a loss trying to figure out how one could go to that extent to sacrificing one's child. The sympathy that I had formed for Brand at his sudden change of mind was all gone. I prepared myself to see how far the man could go.

It is the Christmas Eve. Brand tells Agnes to drive away her suffering. He says that they will have to be strong to endure. He tells her not to turn her face away from God. He reminds her that Alf is dead and is living in heaven with God. What remains here is his lifeless body. The revelation is a terrible blow to Agnes. Everything seems blank and cold to her. She is, as she feels, first and

152 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 201.

153 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 63.

foremost Alf's mother. The death of Alf has visibly shaken her faith in Brand's God, who oblivious of man's suffering sits in his castle like a landlord. Then she gives a vivid picture of the last Christmas of unbounded joy when Alf was alive. She even says that with ever inhospitable nature all around, their house is the abode of darkness and death. Such comparison of hers is an ironic reversal because in an earlier scene when Brand described their house employing identical imagery she consoled him by saying that their mountain house kept them warm. With hysterical, shrill laughter, she says that she will now make her best preparations for the Christmas so that God feels at home in their house. The visual image that her departure creates is striking. She closes the window opening and disappears as Brand keeps standing on the slope generating the impression that she has taken a decision to cut off herself from Brand's world. Kneeling down on the slope Brand appeals to God to give him strength to endure suffering and to save Agnes' life. He confesses that his faith is not that strong implying that it will be impossible for him to stand any further test. He then seeks God's blessings to establish His commandment of 'eye for eye and tooth for a tooth' on earth.

So far as I was concerned, Brand's mission to establish the Mosaic code which does not have approval in Christianity further cemented his position as a fanatic who misinterprets the message of religion and brings about untold miseries for the people. The fanatics regardless of time and place have retained their characteristic of being non-accommodative and merciless, I mused.

Brand emphasises upon the idea of sacrifice as he talks to Agnes. Agnes has kept a tiny piece of Alf's garment which is very dear to her. Keeping it close to her bosom she can still feel Alf's warmth. To Brand this is sheer idol-worshipping. He hammers on it and compels her to throw it away. Then Agnes asks what about the image of the boy that she keeps intact in her soul. Brand says that she will have to part with it as well because that too is idolatry. He reminds her of his creed that one should give all or nothing and that there cannot be anything in between. Agnes contemplates on death and says that one who sees God must die. Then in yet another supreme ironic twist by employing Brand's words she tells him to decide: "beche nao. / royecho dariye tumi/dui pather morey"¹⁵⁴ ("Choose; you're where the road divides!")¹⁵⁵ to which Brand resignedly says: "nei, kono path nei..."¹⁵⁶ ("There's no choice for me indeed")¹⁵⁷ The Bangla monosyllabic words in Brand's speech effectively capture Brand's deep agony and frustration.

154 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 265

155 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 91.

156 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 265

157 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 91.

The episodes involving Brand's treatment of Agnes caused further frustrations in the audience. The cultural activist told that the man was crazy, adding that he would not spare anyone. What struck me was Brand's comparison of Agnes' cuddling of Alf's garment to idolatry. How could holding something dear to one's heart be considered idol-worshipping, I wondered. But then I knew that it was how the fundamentalists had always looked at it. The fundamentalists of Bangladesh never place flower wreaths at the national mausoleum or at the monument named *Shahid Minar* (the work of art erected in the memory of those who sacrificed their lives in 1952 for establishing Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan). Instead they have always condemned the custom anti-Islamic because, in their opinion, placing flowers at monuments is tantamount to worshipping idols. I reasoned that the same thinking had led them to attack shrines in different parts of the country. The fact that the people can visit shrines and pay respect to saints out of love and devotion and not out of any intent of worship, has been always deliberately twisted by them, I told myself.



Agnes taking poison

Agnes slowly walks towards the forestage as Brand walks back the right slope. More slowly does she take out the little bottle containing poison, removes its cap and far more slowly she drinks from it. Brand helplessly looks on. Agnes says that her eyes are now heavy and she will now sleep. She goes inside. Left alone, Brand asks his soul to be resolute and still. He wants to find solace in the thought that through losing everything in the world can man be blessed eternally. He then says, “Amen”.

Agnes's suicide was a further blow to the audience consciousness. I could hear spectators' sighs and groans around me. Why she will have to die, one said whisperingly. Another in a soft voice said that instead of choosing death, she should have challenged Brand. What disturbed me much was Brand's inaction. He did not make any attempt to stop her from taking poison. He rather waited with all patience to see the act of suicide done properly. It seemed to me that he stood there to solemnise a ritual. His statement that one needs to lose everything to be blessed eternally shocked me. Did he then want her to commit suicide, I mused.



With the cyclorama revealing an image of the Church, Brand shows the crowd the way to the cherished land of God

Brand's church has been constructed. But he is in total disarray. He looks back on the image of the church on the cyclorama and feels it is not the home of God. He is terribly depressed. This is not what he wanted to build. Nagarpal comes running to congratulate Brand telling him that the hour is at hand. Brand says the church they have built ridicules the struggle they had to create it. Brand leaves only to make his appearance again. He says that he has never felt this lonely. Nevertheless, he firmly declares that he will continue his war with his own flag in hand even if there is no one to follow him. Brand confronts Nagarpal again. Nagarpal tells him that the people have grown

impatient and that they want to see Brand at the head of the ceremonious procession. The mob might go out of control if he does not meet them at once. Brand tells in his face that he does not care even if they decide to crown him or crucify him. The people have come; they want to see a miracle or at least hear something holy and fiery. Brand tells them what they care for are the ceremonies of religion, not religion itself. The padres (Sexton and Deans) begin to instigate the crowd telling them that Brand ought to be ousted as he is not a Christian. Brand silenced them and then responding to the people's appeal he says that they will have to take a long and perilous journey to reach the cherished land of God. They ask Brand how long they will have to struggle, and for that matter, what will they personally get out of that struggle. Brand tells them that the struggle will last so long as their souls remained imprisoned in the worldly cage of profit and loss. The people are not ready to sacrifice and they say that they are deceived. The padres come back and tell them that Brand is an impostor and that they should not listen to him. Manipulated by the clerics they now condemn Brand of misleading them. They demand his death. They run after him and vanish leaving the clerics and Nagarpal on the stage.



The last scene from the performance.

The last scene reveals Brand crawling on the mountain-top with Gerd on his back. Brand is battered. Gerd nurtures him. Lying flat on the left slope Brand asks with his eyes towards heaven why we have to die, why we get destroyed and what our death proves. Passionately he cries out: “dao, dao,/ishwar, uttar dao!”¹⁵⁸ (“Tell me, God, in death's abyss;--”).¹⁵⁹

158 Mowla, Munzur-i. *op.cit.* 2005. p. 367.

159 Northam, John. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 132.

Brand falls down the slope and lies dead. Gerd lies on the mountain-top with her hand stretched towards Brand. The set turns all white. The window opening depicting the portrait of the young Christ on the Last Judgement Day is exposed. Erected all around that image are crosses. The performance ends.

The action-packed final act further baffled the audience. As Brand fell down the slope some spectators stood up and clapped. And with the hall being lighted, I found some sitting motionless, deeply pensive. Were they crying? I could not figure out exactly. The cultural activist told me that Brand's death was inevitable. I was struck by the juxtaposition of the captivating portrait of the beardless Christ with crosses all around. Why did the set turn white at the kill? Why were so many crosses around the figure of young Christ? What did the juxtaposition mean? Did it imply that Brand died confused? Did he have an answer to his dying cry? I was left with no answer.

Nevertheless, spontaneous standing ovation by the audience proved that it was quite a successful performance. I could hear the spectators talking about it while they were coming out of the theatre. I went to the tiny cafeteria downstairs and joined a group consisting of leading artistes and cultural activists of Bangladesh. The cultural activist who sat next to me during the performance was also there. We at length talked about various aspects of the performance. The discussion brought in the subject of the rise of Islamic extremists throughout Bangladesh prompting one to say that Brand was a recreation of Shyakh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai.¹⁶⁰ He observed that Brand was like those ill-educated fanatics who have failed to grasp the basic spirit of Islam which asks its adherents to be forgiving, merciful and tolerant. Failure to understand the essential message of the religion has made them intolerant and hostile, and this is where they resembled Brand most.

What I have tried to underline in the discussion is that the privileged spectators' shared historical background and their awareness of the socio-political dynamics of Bangladesh played the key to their creation of *Brand* as a local performance although it retained apparent “foreignness”.

160 Shyakh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqur Rahman alias Bangla Bhai were two fanatics who spearheaded the militant outfit called JMB, an acronym for “Jaamatul Mujahidin, Bangladesh” which carried out coordinated bomb attacks throughout the country and killed many innocent people in the name of protecting Islam. This extremist group was also responsible for literally blowing away two judges on their way to the court (References to these deadly incidents have been made in the “Introduction”). The group unleashed a reign of terror and anarchy in the country. Both Rahman and Bangla Bhai along with half a dozen of their close aides were found guilty by the Court and were executed in 2007.

3.4 A Note on the Audience

The background of the spectators contributed by their social position, level of education and understanding of the societal complexities is of significance for a performance to be perceived and created. What follows then is that the spectators depending on their background create a performance and that a particular creation does not matter when it travels to another group of spectators belonging to a different social class. More often than not, even a particular performance may cause altogether different responses depending on the sexes of the spectators. The theatre in Bangladesh is primarily meant for the social elites. That is to say that the spectators who frequent the proscenium theatre in the country belong to a privileged class in the sense that most of them have university education and some standing in society. This rather general background of the audience reveals that the theatre in Bangladesh targets those who could be loosely dubbed as country's intellectuals. Indeed, what I can still remember, the first night of *Brand* featured Bangladesh's leading educationists, artistes, cultural activists, women activists, members of the civil society in the audience whose production of the performance moved more or less in a similar direction.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted a discussion on the première of *Brand* in Bangladesh in 2004. The performance analysis has amply demonstrated that *Brand*, in spite of retaining a “seemingly” Norwegian locale, turned out to be a refreshingly Bangladeshi production. Thus, it is no wonder that it could be appreciated as a commentary on contemporary Bangladesh. How? In the next chapter I seek to answer it.

Chapter Four

Relevance of *Brand* to Contemporary Bangladesh

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss how the production of *Brand* and, for that matter Ibsen are relevant to contemporary Bangladesh and how the performance acts as a commentary on the country. With a view to showing the performance's relevance, I will consider the ongoing fundamentalist activities in the country. I will also take into account the social background of the spectators to argue that the local elites could appreciate and enjoy the performance as a critique of Bangladesh.

4.2. Ongoing Fundamentalist Activities in Bangladesh

To establish my argument I will narrate some disturbing ongoing fundamentalist activities in Bangladesh. The narration will reveal that the fundamentalist uprising which created the special condition for the play's appreciation in 2004 has gained further ground during the last four years, making it all the more relevant to today's Bangladesh.

Because I think that the current fanatical activities are integrally linked to the fundamentalist acts in the past, I want to reprise briefly the issues that I have discussed at length in the second chapter. The discussion has revealed how the syncretistic tradition of Islam, largely a contribution of Islamic mysticism and Sufism, which developed over a period of centuries dwindled in the face of stiff opposition and fiery challenge by the adherents of Wahhabism who made it their mission to revive their version of "pristine" Islam in Bangladesh. It has been also mentioned how Jamat-i-Islami, which is Wahhabite in spirit and which is backed by the oil-rich Middle East countries including Saudi Arabia, emerged as the most influential fundamentalist party since the division of the Indian sub-continent in 1947. I have observed as well that despite its open opposition to Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971, it cemented its position in the country's politics capitalising on the prevalent bankrupt politics and the failure of secular forces to launch an orchestrated campaign against it. Here in the first part of this section, I will give an account of the ongoing fundamentalist activities in the country even when it is literally under a state of emergency imposed in January 2007. Then I

will talk about the violence and atrocities the bigots unleashed in not-too-distant a past in the name of upholding 'Islamic' values. The fundamentalist activities, woven together, will uncover why and how *Brand* is strongly relevant to Bangladesh.

a. Dismantling of the Baul Sculptures

The following account of removal of the *baul* sculptures in Dhaka is based on the press reports, editorials, analyses and commentaries which have appeared since the third week of October, 2008.

I begin the score with a Radio Australia transcript¹⁶¹ of October 16 which read as follows:

Authorities in Bangladesh have been *forced* to remove new decorations at the international airport in the capital Dhaka after Muslim protesters threatened to destroy them.

Officials had commissioned the country's best-known sculptor, Mrinal Haq, to produce statues of five local folk singers to cheer up the decidedly drab complex.

But thousands of Muslim hardliners say the *sculptures erected outside Zia International airport were idols, which are strictly forbidden in Islam, and had threatened to attack the artwork with power tools.*

Authorities say the folk singers will now be replaced by a fountain (my italics).

The Radio Australia news item makes it abundantly clear that the Bangladesh government cowed to the pressure of the “Muslim hardliners” who called “the artwork” “statues” [sic] demanding its immediate removal. What is important to note is that these militant Islamists could openly declare that they would raze the sculptures to the ground had the government failed to remove it within 24 hours. The government quickly gave in and hurriedly initiated the removal of the sculptures the work of which was nearly seventy percent complete. The news item lays bare the fact the fundamentalists are quite powerful in Bangladesh. The news of the *baul* sculptures removal is more frustrating because UNESCO included the *baul* genre of music in its list of “Masterpieces of the Oral Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in 2005¹⁶² worthy of preservation. Yet, the sculptures were to be removed because the Islamists considered them anti-Islamic. The news at once reminded me of a nearly similar incident in Afghanistan in 2001 when the Taliban-led government of Mulla Omar destroyed a huge number of ancient Buddhist statues. Is Bangladesh then emerging as a new

161 “Protests over statues at Bangladesh Airport”. www.radioaustralia.net.au/news/stories/200810/s2393516.htm?tab=latest, accessed October 16, 2008, at 1800 (GMT)

162 “Major political parties mum about baul monument removal”. Dhaka: New Age, October 25, 2008, www.newagebd.com/2008/Oct/25/front.html.mht, accessed October 25 at 2125 (GMT).

Taliban state? The question is not out of place because this was not the first time that the current military-backed caretaker government had succumbed to the fundamentalists' pressure. As I noted in the "Introduction", the government refrained from implementing its "Women Development Policy 2008" giving women equal rights of inheritance because of the opposition from the fundamentalists according to whose interpretations the Policy was 'anti-Islamic'. The fear that Bangladesh is being gradually shrouded in a Taliban cloak is expressed in Rahnuma Ahmed's recent piece (2008c): "Two images of Bangladesh are juxtaposed against each other, a secular Bangladesh of the early 1970s, the fruit of Bangladesh's liberation struggle of 1971, and a Talibanised Bangladesh of recent years".¹⁶³ Ms Ahmed quotes Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini—the Chairman of a faction of Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), a fundamentalist outfit, and also the chief of the Committee for Implementation of Islamic Laws as saying at a press conference soon after the removal of the sculptures:

[...] if an Islamic government comes to power, all statues built by [the Awami League] government (1996-2001) will be demolished, since statues are 'dangerously anti-Islamic'. Eternal flames, Shikha Chironton (Liberation War Museum), and Shikha Anirban (Dhaka Cantonment) will be extinguished. Paying respect to fire is the same as worshipping fire. [He also demanded] that the National Women Development Policy 2008, shelved this year after protests by a section of Muslim clerics and some Islamic parties, should be scrapped.¹⁶⁴

Amini's declaration crystallises the disturbing fact that the fundamentalists are adamant to destroy every piece of national art heritage in the name of protecting Islam. As a point of reminder, I want to state what Amini boldly told a public meeting in Dhaka on March 08, 1999: "We are for Osama, we are for the Talibans and we will be in government [...] through an Islamic Revolution".¹⁶⁵ The irony is that Amini indeed featured in the BNP-led alliance treasury bench of the national parliament from 2001 to 2006. As such, the reconfiguration of Bangladesh's political map during the state of emergency leaves Ms Ahmed perplexed quite justifiably:

In the name of bringing 'beauty' to politics in Bangladesh, the lineaments of political reconfiguration undertaken by this military-backed caretaker government are becoming ominously clear: mainstream political parties in shambles, Jamaat-[i]-Islami intact (*'democratic party,' Richard Boucher, US Assistant Secretary of State, 2006*), Muslim clerics and Islamic forces re-emerging as a political force under state patronage, and the exercise of rampant power by western diplomats (my italics).¹⁶⁶

163 Ahmed, Rahnuma (2008c). "Lalon and Terror: Re-configuring the Nation's Political Map during Emergency". *Shahidul News*. Lalon and Terror_ Re-configuring the Nation's Political Map during Emergency « ShahidulNews.mht, accessed October 28, 2008 at 2100 (GMT).

164 *ibid.*

165 *Growing Fanaticism and Extremism in Bangladesh: Shades of the Taliban*. UK: Bangladesh Awami League (UK Branch), June 15, 2005, www.albd.org/aldoc/growing/growing.fanaticism.pdf, accessed October 30, 2008 at 1700 (GMT).

166 Ahmed, Rahnuma. *op.cit* 2008c.

Terming a fundamentalist outfit like Jamaat as 'a democratic party' by the influential US politician is by no means accidental; on the contrary Boucher's calling Jamaat a democratic party only validates Pakistan's leftist political thinker Khan's statement that "In spite of the propaganda campaign by the western media against Islamic fundamentalism, US imperialism continues to use these religious fanatics wherever it deems it necessary".¹⁶⁷

The government's move to remove the sculptures triggered off vehement condemnation and chastisement by the secularist forces. Spearheaded by the country's prominent educationists, artistes, cultural activists and leftist political activists, the protest cries were raised through holding peaceful programmes like rallies, protest march and human chain etc. Following is part of a news report which appeared in a leading English newspaper of the country in its October 25, 2008 issue:

Protests continued at different places in the country [...] to resist religious bigots at every front to safeguard the country's culture and heritage.

The call came from different programmes organised to protest against the dismantling of baul sculptures at the Airport crossing in Dhaka in the face of bigots' threat on October 15.

'Down with the zealots; bring the culprits to justice and safeguard the culture' were among the slogans chanted by the protesters on the Dhaka University campus and elsewhere in the country.

Cultural activists, artistes, sculptors, playwrights and students in general took part in the protest programmes.¹⁶⁸

The same newspaper ran an editorial in its October 17 issue sharply castigating the government for its repeated capitulation to the religious zealots:

WE ARE incensed by the decision of the military-controlled interim government to pull down a monument commemorating our rich baul tradition [...] in the face of pressure from a group of obscurantist Islamists. [...] the project was almost nearing completion when the government capitulated to the demands of the obscurantists, who had themselves tried to pull down the monument on Wednesday before the government appeased to their bigotry. The monument was a depiction of one of the most famous songs of Lalon Fakir, the icon of baul philosophy and one of our earliest progressives, [...] The government decision to pull down the monument [...] appears to be the latest in a growing list of actions which points towards a larger truth: this regime goes out of its way to not only to appease but to nurture and patronise obscurantism and bigotry at the expense of tolerance and progress—political and cultural. [...] This regime talks

¹⁶⁷ cf 127.

¹⁶⁸ "Baul Monument Removal: Call for stand against bigots". Dhaka: *New Age*, www.newagebd.com/2008/oct/25/front.html.mht, accessed October 25 at 2200 (GMT).

about democracy, progress and the secular spirit, but its actions make it absolutely clear that its sympathies are with those who wish to turn us into an intolerant, medieval society.¹⁶⁹

The renowned educationist of Bangladesh Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury told a Dhaka University rally organised on October 18 that “The recent incident is the result of the religion-based politics. [...] The fundamentalists are attacking the art and culture of Bangladesh”. Chairman of the University's Persian Literature Department said, “This kind of removal of art bears no relation to religion or Islam”.¹⁷⁰

But these protestations, demonstrations, criticisms brought no fruit. The reality is that the *baul* sculptures have been removed. The fundamentalists' onslaught on the *baul* tradition expressed through their demand of the removal of the piece of architecture is understandable for, as has been pointed out in chapter 2, the *baul* culture, which grew out of an intimate and exuberant fusion of Sufism and *Vaisnavism* lays paramount importance on man. It champions love and tolerance and practises an all-absorbing philosophy of unity which the bigots cannot stand. Theirs is a conceited and insular view that for its success banks on the ignorance of the masses and applying force. The fundamentalist design can be successful only when the fear of religion is injected sure as shooting into the mind of the populace. It was precisely by employing this fear of religion Waliullah's existential protagonist Majeed of the novel, *Lal Shalu (Tree Without Roots)* deceived the ignorant villagers and made them fearful of the demands of religion which bought him a fortune:

'Your hearts are turned away from God. You live for this world and its pleasures. You never think of the next one, the far more important one, the one which brings life everlasting and where you will be judged by your deeds down here. [...] 'Those who laugh and sing in this world, forgetting God, may not laugh in the next. *On the disbelievers is the wrath from Allah: theirs will be an awful doom*'.¹⁷¹

But, as I have noted in the aforementioned chapter, the *baul* creed that replaced fear by love possesses the ability to embrace even contrasting beliefs and values. The parochial views of the fundamentalists are bound to be at odds with the *baul* cult as theirs have been in perpetual conflict with the syncretistic values of Islam.

169 “Editorial: Govt shows where its sympathy lies, again”. Dhaka: *New Age*, www.newagebd.com/2008/oct/17/edit.html, accessed October 18 at 2200 (GMT).

170 “DU [Dhaka University] rally add voice to sculpture protest”. Dhaka: bdnews24.com, October 19, 2008, www.bdnews24.com.mht, accessed October 19, 2008 at 1300 (GMT).

171 Waliullah, Syed. *Lal Shalu* (1949). (*Tree Without Roots*—a translation from Bangla by Saeed et al). London: Chatto & Windus, 1967, I, pp. 26-32. Waliullah (1922-1971) is an *avant garde* writer of Bangladesh who was deeply influenced by the Western existentialism and absurdism. *Lal Shalu* lays bare the hypocrisy of religion and how the ignorant people can be exploited once the fear of religion is successfully implanted in their mind.

The bankrupt politics of the country once again surfaced with the major political parties including Awami League and BNP and Jatiya Party—which have administered the country since its liberation—keeping virtually mum about the piercing incident of the removal of sculptures. With the national elections only two months away in December 2008, they decided to play safe and not to 'annoy' the Muslim voters. While the League adopted a 'face-saving' motion condemning the incident, BNP which came to power through forming an alliance with the fundamentalist outfits, did not even issue a statement. The rather indifferent attitude of the country's political heavyweights to such a big issue featured in the following newspaper report published on October 25:

Major political parties seem to be indifferent even 10 days after the government dismantled the baul monument [...] bowing down to the pressure of Muslim bigots.

[...] The removal of the sculptures sparked off protests across the country, which, however were not joined by the country's major political parties [...] that hardly miss any opportunity to speak rhetoric about the country's cultural heritage during peace time.

[...] Jatiya Party also issued no statement against the government's decision.

[And] Qamruzzaman, the assistant secretary-general of [...] Jamaat [...] refused to make any comment on the issue.¹⁷²

While Jamaat's refusal to comment on the issue is fairly logical on the ground that it itself is the key fundamentalist party of the country, the 'silence' of those big parties further highlights the disturbing fact that it was their lenient attitude not only to Jamaat, but to other Islamic forces for political gains which to a great extent insured favourable conditions for the growth and flowering of fundamentalism in Bangladesh.

b. Fundamentalists' attack on Mazars and Popular Forms of Entertainment

As has been revealed in chapter two, because of the impact of the Islamic syncretistic tradition a vibrant culture grew in Bangladesh around the *mazars* (shrines and tombs) of *pirs* and their devotees which attracted the people regardless of their religions, castes and creeds. Whether the *pirs* and the *mazars* are genuine or fake is a question on which I will not ponder here. I am rather interested in the fact that the people willingly visited those places believing them to be sacred and passed time there for comfort and solace. The regular evening meetings apart, there used to be big yearly congregations (popularly known as *urs*) at these *mazars* participated by the devotees

172 "Major political parties mum about baul monument removal". *New Age, op.cit.*, 2008.

voluntarily coming from far-off places of the country. However, I do not want to suggest that the tradition has withered away. What I want to say is that the *mazar* culture pitted against the repeated fundamentalist attack saw a rapid decline during the BNP-led alliance government rule. As mentioned in the same chapter, because the fundamentalist Wahhabite adherents consider paying respect to *pirs* and visiting shrines tantamount to idol-worshipping, hence anti-Islamic, arguably under the state patronage they bombed several *mazars* killing quite a few spreading a wave of panic among the devotees. The recurrent bombings and attacks on the *mazars* across the country have brought the mazar culture to a state of virtual extinction. Yet, the people hardly did there anything other than singing spiritual songs and dancing to music played on traditional instruments like *dhol*, *mandira* and *harmonium*. By cementing their position in the political arena, the fundamentalists have eroded into the *mazars*. As a consequence of their decisive interventions, what remains of the mazar culture today is a bare skeleton of its former self. Upon revisiting some of the prominent *mazars* Zakaria thus writes:

The *mazars* of the country have now totally lost the characteristics they used to have in the past. [...] The Islamists have entered the *mazars*. [...] They have replaced the practice of the *mazar* culture by the practices of Islamic *shari'ah* (rules and regulations). These days you will not see the congregations of devotees and hear songs at the major *mazars* of the country.¹⁷³

Apart from attacking the *mazars*, the fundamentalists over the last few years carried out deadly onslaughts on other popular forms of entertainment. In the preceding chapter in course of performance analysis I have pointed out that the militant extremists bombed at the Ramna Square in Dhaka when the traditional *Pahela Baisakh* celebrations were in progress on April 14, 2001. The gruesome attack killed 10 and injured about 50 innocent people who went to be a part of the festive occasion which is being organised by the country's leading cultural group Chhayanaut since mid 1960s. The banned militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami (commonly known as HUJI) carried out the attack because it considered this sort of festivity contrary to the spirit of Islam. Besides, the religious fanatics exploded several powerful bombs simultaneously in four movie houses of Mymensingh, a sleepy district town some 150 km away from the capital, in December 2002 killing 20 and injuring more than 200 people. The only 'sin' those people committed was that they had gone to see films. The militants made the visitors at a folk fair known as *Gurpukurer Mela* and a cinema their targets of bomb attack in Satkhira, one of the remotest district towns on September 28, 2002.¹⁷⁴

173 Zakaria, Saimon. "Bipanna Mazar Sangskriti" ("The Mazar culture at stake"). Dhaka: *Bdnews24.com*, May 28, 2008, www.arts-bdnews24.com, accessed June 05, 2008 at 1600 (GMT); *my translation*.

174 "The Jihadist Terrorism in Bangladesh ." www.muktadhara.net/page77.html, accessed November 1, 2008 at 1745 (GMT).

Moreover, the fanatics attacked the ingenuous popular theatre form known as *jatra* several times. In mid January 2005, their attacks on *jatra* in two rural areas left two killed and more than 60 people injured.¹⁷⁵ As the counting of similar incidents of brutality will only increase the volume of the list, I pause here. What I have tried to highlight in this part of the discussion is that the fundamentalists attacked the *mazars* and other popular forms of entertainment because these do not have a place in their version of Islam.

C. Fundamentalists' Attacks on Ahmadyya Muslim Community

Over the last few years the Islamic fundamentalists of the country launched a series of coordinated attacks on the members and mosques belonging to the Ahmadyya Muslim Community of Bangladesh. The fundamentalists independently as well as grouped collectively under a jihadist outfit named *Khatme Nabuwat Anodolon* (the movement to insure the seal of prophethood) which is reported to have links with the Pakistan-based *Khatum -E- Nabuwwat* excommunicated the Ahmadyyas from Islam terming them *kafirs* (non-believers) and repeatedly persecuted them. It is pertinent to note that in Pakistan and some other Islamic countries including Saudi Arabia the Ahmadyyas are banned. Time and again the fundamentalists brought out violent campaigns with lethal weapons and pressed the Bangladesh government to officially call them non-Muslims. I quote below part of an Amnesty International press release issued on November 5, 2004 as an aftermath of the fanatics' onslaughts on the Ahmadyyas:

Amnesty International is deeply concerned for the safety of the Ahmadyya Community in Bangladesh following threats by Islamist groups to attack Ahmadi places of worship [...]
Last Friday the groups attacked an Ahmadi place of worship in Brahmanbaria as a result of which at least 11 Ahmadis received serious injuries. Islamist groups have threatened to carry out the attacks more frequently and without prior notice. They have named the Ahmadi places of worship as the targets of their attacks every Friday during noon prayer time.¹⁷⁶

In the same press release the international watchdog of human rights situation called upon the government to “take decisive action against the anti-Ahmadi agitators who have continued to attack members of the Ahmadyya community. These groups have been allowed to attack Ahmadis with impunity”. What is imperative from the statement is that the BNP government had been soft and lenient with the religious zealots. The government however, did not declare the Ahmadyyas non-

175 “2 killed, 60 hurt in bomb attacks on Jatra shows”. Dhaka: *The Daily Star*, January 16, 2005, www.thedailystar.net/2005/01/16/d5011601055.htm, accessed January 28, 2008, at 1700 (GMT).

176 “Bangladesh: Ahmadyya Community Under Attack”. London: Amnesty International, News Service No:278, November 5, 2004, <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA130212004?open&of=ENG-BGD>, accessed December 8, 2007 at 1800 (GMT).

Muslims, but imposed a ban on their publications. The government move, itself unconstitutional because the Bangladesh Constitution guarantees freedom of speech to the citizens, did not appease the zealots as they continued their attacks on the Ahmadyyas; they even killed an Ahmadyya chaplain. Instead of calling them Ahmadyyas, they derisively label them as *Qadiyaniat* for they consider the Ahmaddya founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was born in Qadiyan in India's Punjab in 1835 and who died in 1908, an impostor and an agent of the British imperialism. In their interpretation, “Qadiyanis are nothing but a gang of traitors, apostates and infidels [and] heretics”¹⁷⁷ and their persecution is thus deemed a 'religious obligation' of all 'true' Muslims. Both groups of the Ahmaddyas, the world-wide 'Ahmaddya Muslim Community' and the 'Lahore Ahmadyya Movement for the Propagation of Islam' despite having differences in opinion between them on some key issues, are unique in their repeated categorical denial of the fundamentalists' accusations. They identify themselves as Muslims and want to practice Islam in their own way. The tormenting question that comes to mind is: Have the fundamentalists have any right to call them non-Muslims when they want to identify themselves as Muslims? The *Qur'an* grants the people the right to exercise religion freely: “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (“The Cow”, 2: 257). Elsewhere in the holy book Allah even permits the people to dissent:

O ye who believe, obey Allah and obey His Messenger and those who are in authority among you. Then if you differ in anything refer it to Allah [...] if you are believers in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best and most commendable in the end (“Women”, 4: 59-60).¹⁷⁸

The above citations from the *Qur'an* establish beyond doubt that the fundamentalists' ways of thinking and subsequent violent actions against the Ahmadyyas are themselves a deviation from the preaching of Allah. In clear violation of God's order which insists on referring any disputed matter to Him, the fundamentalists of Bangladesh have taken the laws in their hand and continued their onslaughts on the Ahmaddyas.

4.3 Relevance of *Brand*: How It is a Commentary on Contemporary Bangladesh

The above mentioned fundamentalist activities have demonstrated that the religious bigotry has had a firm presence in Bangladesh. In this section I will dwell upon the thoughts that the *Brand* performance foregrounded for the initiated spectators to emphasise the fact that the religious zealots of the country with their conceited and insular approach towards Islam have been embodied in

¹⁷⁷ *Khatum -E- Nabuwwat*. (Undated). Pakistan: www.khatm-e-nubuwwat.org/ accessed November 3, 2008 at 2300 (GMT).

¹⁷⁸ *The Quran* (translated from Arabic by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan). *op.cit.*, 1971. p. 82.

Brand. Before talking about those I want to discuss the issues that led the play's director Nilu to consider Brand a fundamentalist in his essay to which references have been made in the opening chapter. Nilu says that he decided to stage the play because he found that “Brand's dogmatic approach is echoed among Islamist fundamentalists, that is, Islamic groupings [of the world including Bangladesh] who want to establish a world order based on Islamic law (Sharia)”.¹⁷⁹ To ground his argument Nilu gives a short account of the rise and flowering of fundamentalism spearheaded by Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh (which I have elaborately presented in the second chapter of the thesis) and elsewhere in the Islamic world. Nilu mentions without elaboration the victimisation of the Ahmadyyas by the fundamentalists as well as the fanatics' call to “stop all kinds of cultural activities, both modern and traditional, as these are considered anti-Islam” and “numerous suicidal and other violent attacks” carried out by the extremist groups. To me the most illuminating part of Nilu's article is that where he presents a striking comparison between Brand's ideas and those of the fundamentalists. Below I narrate the comparisons in full length:

Brand's basic ideas:

1. Brand is of the view that God's will is supreme
2. Brand advocates that belief and life are one—every action should be an act of God
3. For Brand, no compromise is acceptable--'The spirit of compromise is Satan'
4. Brand considers sacrifice absolute and required for personal salvation (reward) and to change people's way of living and society

The basic ideas of Islamic fundamentalists:

- According to Islamic fundamentalist, Allah's will is supreme
- Islamic fundamentalists are of the view that every action should be an act of Allah; life should be lived according to the Qur'an and the Hadiths
- This is exactly the same for Islamic fundamentalists
- Islamic fundamentalists consider sacrifice of life to protect Islam and Jihad (war against non-believers) as absolute duties and required to achieve martyrdom (personal reward) and establish a society based on Sharia (Islamic law)¹⁸⁰

Also of interest is Nilu's list containing the similarities of attitudes and behaviour between Brand and the fundamentalists which further establishes his claim that Brand resembles the fundamentalists.

¹⁷⁹ Nilu, Kamaluddin. *op.cit.*, 2007, p. 105.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.* p. 118.

Although Nilu's essay is revealing in many ways, it, in my opinion, has one significant limitation in that it does not employ the holy books to refute the fundamentalist claims. As for example, though Nilu says that “the ten commandments of Christianity somehow are touched upon the play” adding that “Brand can be said consciously to break the fifth commandment”,¹⁸¹ he does not have anything to say about the Mosaic code of 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth' which his hero wants to establish on earth. Consequently, he does not consider Christ's dismissal of the code as follows:

“You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. [...] Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. [...] “You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rains on the righteous and the unrighteous.”¹⁸²

Had Nilu considered Christ's preaching, he would have been better placed to assert that it is Brand's prejudiced view of Christianity which is responsible for his obsessive fanaticism. And, similarly, had he taken into consideration the verses of the *Qur'an*, which I have cited in the preceding section and elsewhere in the thesis, he could have reasoned firmly that Islam condemns the fanatical activities of the zealots and that the Islamists have misinterpreted the message of the religion for political gains only.

Nonetheless, I am in agreement with Nilu that “[...] the contemporary relevance of *Brand* is basically political”.¹⁸³ The political dimension of the performance enveloped not only an exposition of the country's rotten body-politic but also an inquiry into the burning issues like overwhelming role of religion in national affairs as well as rights of women. As a commentary on local politics, *Brand* could be appreciated as an eye-opener. It exposes the bankrupt politics of Bangladesh where the politicians regardless of their party affiliation make the life of the citizens miserable. The performance emphasises the unholy nexus of the politicians and the canonical religious leaders. The Bangla *Brand* demonstrated that the authority in alliance with the clerics exploit the common people in the name of religion. Although when compared to his Bangladeshi counterparts, Nagarpal (Mayor) would appear rather 'angelic', he too wants to hang on to power by any means. And he finds powerful allies in the clerics who lend support to him. The people of Bangladesh witnessed

181 *ibid.* p. 108.

182 “The Book of Matthew” (5: 38-45). *The Holy Bible* (New International Version). London-Sydney-Auckland-Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979, pp. 8-9.

183 Nilu, Kamaluddin. *op.cit* 2007, p. 105.

such distasteful nexus in the recent past. As for me, the only saving grace for Brand is that he attempts to unravel the political corruption in the country.

As I have stated in the “Introduction”, Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim country, has a 'delicate' attitude towards Islam. How did the performance negotiate this rather sensitive issue of religion? The question was possibly of vital importance to Nilu because he had experienced the hostility of the fundamentalists when he produced *Krisnabibar*, an adaptation of *Ghosts* in 1996 in which the hypocrisy of the Islamic clerics was exposed. The exposition infuriated the fundamentalists. Nilu informs, “[...] The fundamentalist newspaper *Daily Inqilab* [...] demanded the production to be banned because it was seen as threatening to Islam and harmful for the society”.¹⁸⁴ Hence, Nilu had to be more careful about the production of Brand because compared with *Krisnabibar* it was more aggressive and unswerving in its denouncement of fundamentalism and fanaticism. By keeping Brand's identity as a Christian priest intact, Nilu thus made sure that the performance could not be seen as an attack on Islamism on the surface. The ploy worked as it did not face similar censure. Besides, the rather select group of spectators had no difficulty to associate Brand with the Islamists of the country because the contemporary reality overtly pointed their eyes to that direction.

Indeed, an Islamic fanatic like Brand became a reality in 2004. And the recent Bangladesh history bears testimony that once brain-washed effectively, this newly-born Brand could become deadly to the society. In the words of Towheed Feroze, an early reviewer of the performance:

[It] is in fact a look into fundamentalist insanity enveloping a person's outlook on religion. People leave Brand, his wife dies and the Church melts away and in the end holding on to his ideas Brand dies. [...] The message? Let's follow religion as it is written not forgetting that the imperfection in us is not a sin.¹⁸⁵

What the fundamentalist leaders are eying for is an Islamic Revolution in the country. That dream of a Talibanised Bangladesh can be a reality when fanatics like Brand will further cement their position in the country. In fact, the slogan with which the fundamentalists paraded the streets in recent years was “amra shobai taliban, Bangla hobe Afghanistan” (We are Talibans, Bangladesh will be Afghanistan). The fundamentalist heavyweights through their wide network across the country are ceaselessly working towards achieving that goal.

184 Nilu, Kamaluddin (2001). “Staging Ibsen in Bangladesh: Relevance and Adaptation”. *Proceedings of IX International Ibsen Conference*. Larvik: Akademisk Forlag, p. 124.

185 Feroze, Towheed. Dhaka: *New Age*, December 21, 2004.

The same prejudiced perspective of Islam was at work behind the fundamentalists' attacks on the *mazars*, the minority Ahmadyyas; it was because of this 'muzzy' understanding of the religion that they demanded removal of the *baul* sculptures. I find it muzzy because it stopped them from seeing the difference between a piece of art and an idol. Even if it were meant for idol-worshipping, had the true knowledge of Islam prevailed, it would have been spared because Islam is a religion of tolerance, of mercy and of compassion.

How did *Brand* account for the issue of emancipation of women? To rephrase the question in the vocabulary of Holledge and Tompkins, what opportunities Nilu's *Brand* provided for “[...] women in the audience [...] of moving beyond the hegemony of their cultural frameworks to question and disrupt the gender constructions that bind them”?¹⁸⁶

As the performance analysis has revealed, Brand's treatment of both his mother and his wife is inhuman and brutal. In Brand's world, the ordinary people, especially the women do not have any say. His is a patriarchal world view which reduces women merely to the second sex; they can be either mothers or wives, but can never be at par with their male counterparts. The superior position that patriarchy bestows on man allows Brand to dictate terms to his mother, albeit in the name of 'religious' demand although, as I have pointed out, that demand itself has no solid ground in religion. That Brand's mother could not marry the person she loved because her father had decided otherwise is indicative of the fact that the patriarchal values have silenced women in Bangladesh for long. Agnes by her decision to marry Brand resembles those new generation Bangladesh women who think that they have the right to choose their partners. Nevertheless, in some cases, the new generation women face the fate that Agnes encountered in the performance. The pathetic realisation that their husbands, emissaries of patriarchy as they are, will seldom accommodate them in their world as individuals lead them to end life in a manner similar to that of Agnes. The production then crystallized the plights of women in an overwhelmingly patriarchal framework of Bangladesh society. Seen from this light, Brand's mother refusal to give up everything as demanded by him and Agnes' suicide are conscious acts of women to disrupt the patriarchal and fundamentalist hegemony that binds them.

186 Holledge, Julie & Tompkins, Joanne (2000). *Women's Intercultural Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 177.

4.4 CAT's Survey

As has been mentioned in the “Introduction”, *Brand* has had 55 performances during its production run of two years with the last show being held in January 2006. While 44 shows of the play were held in Dhaka, the remaining 11 performances of the play were staged outside of the capital. During the run of the production CAT carried out a survey¹⁸⁷ to measure the audience responses to the production on the basis of random sampling. Because in the first chapter I have included the audience responses revealing the performance's relevance to contemporary Bangladesh, I will not take up the reactions here for discussion again. Instead, I will make an attempt to analyse the data relating to the survey samples to suggest that the spectators belonging to a particular group, the elite class as per Bangladesh's standard created the performance by virtue of their rather shared understanding of the socio-political dynamics of the country.

Out of a total of 220 spectators who participated in the survey, 89 were women comprising forty percent of the audience. The male-female ratio of spectators indicates that in Bangladesh men constitute the majority of theatre-goers. Again, while 174 respondents comprising eighty percent were from Dhaka, the remaining 46 (twenty percent only) were from outside of Dhaka. These 46 persons, although they were from outside of the capital, were not necessarily from the rural areas as all 11 performances away from Dhaka took place in divisional city and district towns. That only twenty percent of spectators were from outside of Dhaka and that they presumably were from municipal localities indicate that the theatre in the country is primarily an urban culture and that it primarily caters to the taste of the city public. However, according to the “Statistics of Bangladesh 2006”,¹⁸⁸ more than seventy five percent of an estimated 140 million people lives in rural regions of the country while only 5.4 million people (less than a half percent) live in Dhaka City Corporation area. Besides, according to the CAT Survey, sixty eight percent of the respondents (150) had university education, fifteen percent (33) had higher secondary education (roughly equivalent to GCE A Level), seventeen percent (37) had either completed secondary school education (roughly equivalent to GCE O Level) or had no education at all. The data once again indicate that those who frequent the theatre in Bangladesh belong to the educated section of the society. As the above mentioned government statistics reveal, the literacy rate (the definition of literacy being age 15 and over can read and write) in 2004 was a little over fifty one percent with less than one percent of the

187 “The CAT Survey on *Brand Performances*”. *op.cit*, 2006.

188 “Statistics of Bangladesh 2006”. Government of Bangladesh: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/stat_bangladesh.pdf, accessed November 8, 2008 at 1700 (GMT).

literate populace having university education. The CAT Survey thus makes it clear that the spectators who watched *Brand* were from a particular privileged group who have their own distinct way of perceiving and analysing the societal complexities. It was because of their vantage position that the spectators could perceive *Brand* as a commentary on Bangladesh and create it in their own social milieu.

4.5 Conclusion

The performance history of *Brand* indicates that it was appreciated by the country's elites who are aware of the socio-political dynamics of the country. Because of their distinct way of understanding social realities, they could understand the seemingly “Norwegian” production in local perspectives and create it in their own terms. The creation was possible because of the actual, local condition that they were faced with.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The basic question of my thesis has been: How a performance like *Brand* with its apparent “foreignness” was perceived and created by the audience in Bangladesh? To answer the question, I have argued that the performance was enjoyed and appreciated by the initiated spectators because they could relate it to contemporary situations in Bangladesh. In other words, it was because of their awareness of the socio-political complexities of the country that the performance of *Brand* assumed “a local significance” which consequently made them create it. Of course, the spectators belonged to a particular class of the society, the educated class which could be loosely dubbed as the elite class as per Bangladesh's standard. This group which constitutes a small cluster of the society has however a decisive say in national affairs as it involves the intellectuals, cultural activists, members of the civil society of the country. Because of its distinct way of receiving and analysing the country's history, culture and problems, this group of spectators could create *Brand* in the context of Bangladesh and as such transform Ibsen into a Bangladeshi playwright of the twenty first century. This aspect of perception validates the claim that Ibsen cannot be transported to another culture; instead the need as felt by the spectators in another culture is responsible for his creation in that culture.

Indeed, as I stated in my article, “Ibsen, No More a Norwegian”:

[...] we have discovered Ibsen in a new light; [...] we have an Ibsen who is thoroughly ours. The Ibsen we encounter, the Ibsen we fashion and refashion tirelessly in our theatrical productions [...] is our Ibsen. In performing [...] Ibsen, we always make it our concern to locate him in our history as well as socio-political setting.[...] And, this is precisely the reason that Ibsen does not speak to us as a *foreigner*; instead, through our practices, we have created him to delve into the hearts of millions of tormented Bangladeshi people.¹⁸⁹

The point that I tried to establish was that when we stage Ibsen, we place him in our own culture and setting “with a view to unveiling ourselves, to understanding ourselves”. To put it in another way, it is the need in Bangladesh culture that contributed towards a creation of Ibsen in the present day Bangladesh.

189 Ahsanuzzaman, Ahmed. *op.cit.*, 2007.

That same need in the local culture and history led to the audience's creation of *Brand* making it a commentary on today's Bangladesh. With their immediate knowledge of the recent rise of fundamentalism and extremism, the spectators created Brand as a Muslim fanatic who with his insular views towards religion wants to revive his brand of "pristine" Islam in the country. The audience's awareness of the fact that the parochial views of the fanatics which are at odds with the principles of all-absorbing syncretistic tradition of Islam practised for centuries on this soil played the key to an acceptance and appreciation of the performance.

Similarly, the spectators' knowledge of the sick political tradition enabled them to create *Brand* as a commentary on the country's bankrupt politics. Their dynamic transaction with the play transformed Nagarpal (Mayor) into a shrewd local politician whose only goal is to accede to power and hang on to it by any means. Because of their obsession with power, the politicians in Bangladesh regardless of their party affiliations remain oblivious of the burning issues like eradication of poverty, freedom of speech, democratic development, good governance and human rights. The mindless politics whose fundamental goal is to secure the seat of power thus witnessed the gradual wilful concession by the major political parties towards the fundamentalist forces. Thus politics has become the most secured business and one's investment in it is sure to fetch one hefty returns in the quickest possible time. Is there any other country in the world where even the student-politicians, not to mention their party heavyweights, can turn into millionaires in less than five years because their party is at the helm of power? Another cycle of five years may see their rivals rise in fortune because the state power now belongs to them. It has been more or less the picture of the country ever since its birth. Hence, Brand's exposure of Nagarpal's politics that does not distinguish between truth and falsehood is perceived by the audience in terms of Bangladesh's political culture which has made the life of the poor populace miserable.

What I have tried to underscore in the thesis is that, so far as the social elites are concerned, Ibsen's relevance and importance to contemporary Bangladesh can hardly be overemphasised. The questions that Ibsen raises in *Brand* are the issues that this group of people confronts in today's Bangladesh. As such, in spite of its "foreignness", the privileged spectators could create the performance in the actual, local condition of Bangladesh. The audience creation of the performance insured that Ibsen became a contemporary playwright of Bangladesh.

Chapter Six

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