

Ahl-e-Hadith Movement in Bangladesh: History, Religion, Politics and Militancy

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Until very recently, very few observers of South Asian Islam, including scholars of the intellectual history of Islam in India, paid any attention to the Ahl-e-Hadith movement. With the rise of the Jamaat-tud-Da'wa wal Irshad and Laskar-e-Taiba under the leadership of the Ahl-e-Hadith scholar-activist Hafiz Ahmad Sa'id of Pakistan, with their reported links with the Salafi and Wahhabi groups in Saudi Arabia, and their involvement in terrorist activities in Kashmir and India, Ahl-e-Hadith suddenly came into the limelight of scholars, journalists, and policy makers in South Asia and in the West. Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh, however, still remained unheard of until a mystery man, popularly known as "Bangla Bhai" (Bengali brother), a hitherto unknown Ahl-e-Hadith activist, hit the title page of The New York Times Magazine in 2005. Even then, many observers, including the Bangladeshi government officials described these reports of underground militancy as "unfounded." Soon, however, Bangladeshi newspapers were full of stories about the murderous activities of Bangla Bhai and his clandestine group Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB – Awake! Muslims of Bangladesh) on almost daily basis. Then, on February 23, 2005, the government of Bangladesh announced the arrest of Dr. Asadullah al Ghalib, an Associate Professor of Arabic at Rajshahi University and the President of the largest and most well-organized Ahl-e-Hadith group in Bangladesh, Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan Bangladesh (AHAB), filing charges of abduction, robbery, murder, bomb blasts, and possession of explosives. But the worst was yet to come: in August 2005, bombs exploded in 63 of 64 districts of Bangladesh at almost around the same time in crowded market places, government offices, and public transport points. This time it was another Ahl-e-Hadith activist, Sheikh Abdur Rahman, the chief of another underground militant outfit, Jamaat-e-Mujahidin, Bangladesh (JMB), who claimed the responsibility for these most well-coordinated terrorist acts.

What was common between Siddiquil Islam alias Bangla Bhai of JMJB, Dr. Asadullah al Ghalib of AHAB and Sheikh Abdur Rahman of JMB was that all three belonged to the Ahl-e-Hadith school, all three had worked in the same Ahl-e-Hadith organizations at one time or another, all three had developed, directly or through the local Islamic NGOs, "Middle Eastern" connections, all three had close contacts with the veterans of the Afghan jihad, and their religio-political and ideological paths had frequently crossed each other.

This paper on the history, politics, militancy, and the religious ideology of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement in Bangladesh is an attempt to answer the following questions: Who are the Ahl-e-Hadith and what is it precisely that distinguishes them from other Sunni schools of thought? What are the religio-political and intellectual wellsprings of contemporary Ahl-e-Hadith movement? Who were the pioneers of the Ahl-e-Hadith school in the Indian subcontinent? What were the ideological contours of the early Ahl-e-Hadith movements during the 19th century Muslim Bengal and what impact did they have on the subsequent development of the movement? How did the Ahl-e-Hadith movement develop in the Eastern wing of the united Pakistan and then in Bangladesh after 1971? What were the specific religious and political factors and the internal organizational dynamics that transformed the dominant sections of the Ahl-e-Hadith from a religious to a religio-political and then to a militant group in Bangladesh? What has been the role of international actors, both governmental and non-governmental – in support of the religious and political activities of some Ahl-e-Hadith factions? What are the different ideological strands and factions within the larger Ahl-e-Hadith community in Bangladesh and what institutional structures – madrassas, mosques, voluntary organizations, and publishing houses – constitute the infrastructural support base for the activities of these factions? The paper will also seek to assess the degree of support for the militant factions of Ahl-e-Hadith in the larger Ahl-e-Hadith community in Bangladesh.

Who Are Ahl-e-Hadith?

In September of 1919, the official organ of the Ahl-e-Hadith in British India, *Weekly Akhbar-e-Ahle-e-Hadith*, announced a competition for its readers to offer a “precise” definition of “who is an Ahl-e-Hadith,” and offered a reward of Rs. 10 for the best entry. Several ulama and laymen participated in the competition from September 1919 to February 1920. One Maulana Muhammad Bashiruddin Bengali from Dinajpur (present day Bangladesh) offered this definition that was widely endorsed by many ulama: “Anyone who follows nothing but the Quran and Hadith in matters of Shariah.” It is not clear from the records whether Maulana Bashiruddin Bengali won the Rs. 10 reward or not, but the editors judged this definition to be “both precise and definitive” (Hafiz Abdullah Amritsari, *Ahl-e-Dadith ki ta’arif*, Ropar, District Ambala, Nazim Madrassa Ahl-e-Hadith, 1926, pp. 3-18).

Maulana Abu’l Hasan Nadvi (d. 2000), a well-known Islamic scholar of India who published extensively on Islamic movements in the subcontinent, identifies four foundational beliefs that constitute the core of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement in India: (a) uncompromising commitment to Unitarianism (Tawhid); (b) complete obedience to the Sunnah (way) of the Prophet; (c) enthusiasm for jihad; and (d) complete submission to Allah (Abu’l Hasan Ali Nadvi, 1972, pp. 87-90)

What really distinguishes Ahl-e-Hadith from the rest of the Sunni community is their rejection of the doctrine of *taqlid* (blind imitation), that is, the doctrine that one must follow either of the four established, orthodox schools of law – Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki,

and Hanbali. Most Sunnis, in matters of religious rituals, personal law, and other issues related to Shariah, identify themselves as followers of one of the four classical jurists, Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi'i, Imam Malik, and Imam Hanbal. The Ahl-e-Hadith insist that the latter generations of Muslims are not religiously bound to follow the legal injunctions formulated by these eminent jurists because they were based on *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ra'iy* (personal opinions). While the entire structure of *usul-ul-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) of the majority of the Sunni community is based on four distinct sources of law or Shariah – Quran, Hadith, *qiyas*, and *ijma* (consensus) –, the Ahl-e-Hadith rely only on the Quran and Hadith and regard both *qiyas* and *ijma* as *bidah* (innovation) in religion (Maulana Hafiz Abdullah Ropri, *Ahl-e-Hadith Key Imtiyazi Masa'el*, Maktaba Darul Hadith, Rajwal, District Sahiwal, Pakistan, 1972). Some Ahl-e-Hadith ulama go as far as to regard following of any jurist (*taqlid-e-shakhsi*) as *shirk* (idolatry).

Ahl-e-Hadith believe that most religious and legal matters have been clearly stated and resolved in the two primary scriptures – the Quran and the corpus of Hadith – and if there are issues on which there is no direct or clear guidance in these two sources, Muslims should exercise *ijtihad* (independent judgment, but within the general guidelines of the Quran and the Hadith). Since the classical jurists and the founders of the four orthodox schools of law were not infallible (*ma'sum*), therefore, we are not obligated to follow their opinions and legal judgments. It is not that the followers of other schools of thought do not follow Hadith; the difference between Ahl-e-Hadith and others schools (*madhaahib*) is that while others, by conviction, accept a given interpretation of the Quran and Hadith as authoritative, Ahl-e-Hadith regard these interpretations as based on “opinions” and thus not religiously binding.

Another important feature of the Ahl-e-Hadith is their reinvigorated emphasis on Tawhid (the unity of God) and their opposition to the popular practices of visiting the shrines of saints, worshipping them, or invoking their names in supplication, which they regard as a form of *shirk*. They are also opposed to all kinds of Sufi doctrines and practices that they hold as un-Islamic. These are precisely the doctrinal emphases that led many of their detractors to characterize the Ahl-e-Hadith ulama in mid- and late- nineteenth century India as Wahhabis, based on the puritanical ideas of the eighteenth century Muslim reformer Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (Murray T. Titus, *Islam in India and Pakistan*, Y.M.C.A. Publishing House, Calcutta, 1959, pp. 186-196).

On the face of it, the Ahl-e-Hadith position on matters of Shariah thus seems more progressive since it frees Muslims from the rigid *taqlid* or the following of legal opinions formulated by the jurists hundreds of years ago. It would also appear that by rejecting the *ijtihad* of the classical jurists as final authority in matters of Shariah, the Ahl-e-Hadith position would encourage believers to follow their own interpretations of the Quran and the prophetic traditions, provided they are sufficiently knowledgeable about the scriptures. Similarly, by rejecting the notion of *ijma* (established practice of the community based on general agreement), Ahl-e-Hadith would be inclined to the view that the learned scholars of every succeeding generation of Muslims should form their own

interpretation of the Quran and Hadith, and not rely on the taqlid or blind acceptance of the interpretations of their predecessors (Murray T. Titus, op. cit., pp. 196-197).

However, because of its rejection of the very principles of the use of analogical reasoning and independent judgment, and, also in its practical application, the Ahl-e-Hadith position on Shariah has resulted in the most literalist and exclusivist readings of the Quran, and especially of the Hadith texts. As a matter of fact, Hadith text is literally and directly taken as a source of law without any regard to the context in which the Prophet did or said something. In their view, even a weak or suspect (*za'if*) Hadith is to be preferred to the opinions of the classical jurists.

On the basis of this doctrinal position, Ahl-e-Hadith distinguish themselves from the Hanafis, Shafis, Malikis, and Hanbalis on several matters of the practice of religious rituals, personal law, and some matters of Shariah that have become the hallmark of their sectarian identity. Known as “the distinctive practices of Ahl-e-Hadith” (*Ahl-e-Hadith key imtiyazi masa'el*), these may seem ridiculously trivial to outsiders but are taken quite seriously by their practitioners. For example: for Ahl-e-Hadith the recitation of Surah al-Fatiha is obligatory even when the imam in a congregational prayer is reciting, while the Hanafis believe that the recitation by the imam is enough on behalf of all of the congregation. Ahl-e-Hadith raise their hands during the takbir in the ritual prayer, while the Hanafis do not. Ahl-e-Hadith fold their hands on the chest during the standing posture of the ritual prayer, while the Hanafis fold their hands under the navel. Ahl-e-Hadith say “ameen” loudly after the imam recites Surah al-Fatiha, while the Hanafis say it softly. Other differences, similarly, relate to the “correct postures” during the ritual prayer and to the number of voluntary units of prayer during Ramadan. There are also differences on what would require refreshing the ritual ablution (*wadhu*) before one offers ritual prayers. Ahl-e-Hadith, for example, believe that touching of genitals and woman would require refreshing the *wadhu* while the Hanafis do not.

Howsoever trivial these differences may seem, they have engaged Muslim jurists, like their counterparts in rabbinical tradition of legal hairsplitting, for centuries and have created sectarian strife, especially in Muslim South Asia. What emphatically defines the theocratic particularism of Ahl-e-Hadith in the Indian Subcontinent, however, is not the specificity of their ritual practices, but their uncompromising position on Tawhid and their outright rejection of the doctrine of taqlid.

It is also important to note that most of these Ahl-e-Hadith practices developed in polemics against the Hanafis, rather than the other three schools of Islamic law. Ahl-e-Hadith have fought incessant sectarian battles against Hanafis on issues such as the proper performance of religious rituals and on matters pertaining to marriage, divorce, and custody. Compared to the other schools of law, however, Ahl-e-Hadith have much in common with the Hanbali school since one of the most important of their theological mentors, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the 18th century Arabian religious reformer, was also a Hanbali scholar, although Ahl-e-Hadith ulama would be reluctant to admit that they prefer any one of the four classical jurists to the other.

Ahl-e-Hadith in the Indian Subcontinent

Ahl-e-Hadith trace their origins in India to the works of Shah Waliullah of Dehli (d. 1762), the great theologian and socio-political thinker of the 18th century Indian Islam (Naushahravi, op. cit., pp. 14-16). It was Waliullah who revived the teaching of the Quran and Hadith in the madrassas curriculum as against the traditional emphasis on the teaching of fiqh. His Madrassa Rahimiyya in Dehli became the center for the study of Hadith, a tradition kept alive and strengthened by his four illustrious sons, Shah Abdul Aziz, Shah Abdul Qadir (who first translated the Quran in the Urdu language), Shah Abdul Ghani, and Shah Rafiuddin. They trained hundreds of scholars in the Quranic and Hadith sciences who spread all over India to establish their own seats of learning. Shah Abdul Ghani's son Shah Ismail Shaheed, probably the first one in India to be called a "Wahhabi" by his religious distracters – and by the British authorities – because of the close proximity of his puritanical ideas with those of the 18th century Arabian theologian Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, later joined the Mujahidin movement of Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi and died in 1831 in the battle of Balakot against the Sikhs. Professor Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi argues that, in fact, it was Shah Ismail Shaheed whose ideas, when carried further, created the sect of Ahl-e-Hadith in India (Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics*, Karachi: Ma'arif Ltd., 1974, p. 150).

The most important name in Ahl-e-Hadith movement in the later half of the 19th century is that of Miyan Sayyid Nazir Hussain (d. 1901?) who taught for almost 50 years in his madrassas in Delhi and trained hundreds of ulama from Punjab, UP, Bihar and Bengal. It was Miyan Nazir Hussain who, in fact, for the first time, articulated a distinct theological identity for Ahl-e-Hadith and clearly identified the specific theological and Shariah-related issues and practices on which differences between Ahl-e-Hadith and the followers of the four classical schools of law were deemed to be irreconcilable. Miyan Nazir Hussain's students, especially in Delhi, Amritsar, Ambala, Batala, Sialkot, Qasoor and Gujranwala in the British Punjab, and in the Muslim majority districts of Bengal not only established Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas and publishing houses (that ushered in an era of Ahl-e-Hadith religious journalism), but also helped create an all-India Ahl-e-Hadith identity.

Because of their almost exclusivist emphasis on Hadith as a source of law and religious beliefs and practices, Ahl-e-Hadith ulama are most well-known for their Hadith scholarship and have produced valuable and voluminous literature on Hadith sciences in the Indian subcontinent. Maulana Imam Khan Naushahrarvi and Maulana Muhammad Hanif Yazdani have compiled a list of more than 150 major works of commentaries on the standard Hadith texts written by the Ahl-e-Hadith scholars in India up until 1970 (Naushahravi, op. cit., pp. 41-51; 195-220).

The first regular Ahl-e-Hadith publication was the weekly *Akhbar-e-Ahl-e-Hadith* that was started by Abu'l Wafa Sanaullah Amritsari in 1903 (Naushahravi, op.cit., p. 29). The first All India Ahl-e-Hadith Conference was held in Delhi in 1911 that was attended by hundreds of prominent Ahl-e-Hadith ulama from all over India. It continued to meet

every year in various cities of British India until 1947. Its 1916 session was held in Calcutta that gave a considerable boost to Ahl-e-Hadith activities in Muslim Bengal.

Ahl-e-Hadith in Muslim Bengal

The true forerunner of Ahl-e-Hadith school in Muslim Bengal was Haji Shariat Allah (d. 1830) from District Faridpur, who founded the Faraizi movement in the early years of the nineteenth century. He went to pilgrimage to Mecca while he was still very young and stayed there for twenty years to study with Shaikh Tahir as-Sunbul al-Makki, the head of the Shafi'i school in Mecca. It was during his long stay in Mecca that Haji Shariat Allah came under the influence of the ideas of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab and returned to his homeland to fight against the popular superstitions and "corrupt beliefs and practices" that Bengali Muslims had retained from their Hindu pasts (Khaleda Manzur-i-Khuda, *Islam: The Formative Background of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, Academic Press, 2004, p. 20; Hidayat Husain, *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, as quoted in Titus, op. cit., pp. 186-187. Dr. Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, in his seminal study on Haji Shariat Allah, argues that despite his reformist, Wahhabi ideas and orientation, Haji Shariat Allah remained a follower of the Hanafi fiqh in most religious issues. See, Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, *A History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal*, 2nd edition, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1984). His movement came to be known as Faraizi movement because of its emphasis on Faraiz (basic obligations) enunciated in the Quran and Sunnah and because of its rejection of the popular practices associated with folk Islam in Bengal. Like his contemporary North Indian scholar-activist Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi, Shariat Allah believed that moral and spiritual transformation of Muslim masses was a necessary prerequisite for establishing "Dar-ul-Islam" in India (Khaleda Manzur-e-Khuda, op. cit., p. 20). Although Shariat Allah confined his teachings to purely religious matters, he was, nevertheless, able to lay the foundations of a "political consciousness" among the Muslim peasantry of Bengal (Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 216).

Haji Shariat Allah was succeeded by his son, Muhsinuddin, popularly known as Dudhu Miyan (1819-1860), who preached his father's Wahhabi doctrines and spread the movement further in various districts in Eastern Bengal, dividing different parts of the region in halaqas (circles) and appointing his khalifas (deputies) to recruit new followers. His main contribution, however, was to convert a religious-puritanical movement into a Muslim peasant movement against the landlords, who were mostly Hindus. His emphasis on egalitarianism and on the welfare of the poor Muslim peasants set him up in confrontation against both the Hindu landlords and the British administration in Eastern Bengal. Aziz Ahmad argues that much of the popularity of the Faraizi movement owed to "the upsurge of suffering, impoverished, ruthless exploited Muslim peasantry," uprooted by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 introduced by Lord Cornwallis and Sir George Shore (Aziz Ahmad, op. cit., p. 216). Ira Lapidus also argues that it was the oppression of

the British indigo planters and Hindu landlords that helped the Faraizi movement attract a large following among Muslim peasants (Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 623).

Dudhu Miyan preached that all land belonged to God and should be owned by those who cultivate it. He told his followers that, according to Islam, they had no obligation to pay taxes either to the landlords or to the government. He raised *lathials* (baton-carriers) as a para-military force from among the Muslim peasants and trained them in order to defend themselves against the excesses of landlords and foreign indigo and tea planters (Khaleda Manzur-e-Khuda, op. cit., p. 20). He wanted to make every Muslim peasant into a “mujahid,” capable of defending his rights as well as Islam. Dudhu Miyan also established separate Shariah courts for the adjudication of disputes among Muslims and asked Muslims not to go to the courts established by the British Government. In fact, he legitimized the persecution of those Muslims who relied on the government courts or disagreed with the decisions of the courts established by him, or who did not embrace the doctrines he preached (Titus, op. cit., p. 185). This position seems to be the first clear articulation of the Islamic justification for the use of violence in enforcing one’s religious doctrine on other Muslims and it is possible that the present-day militants among the Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh might also have been influenced by the ideas of early Wahhabi thinkers like Dudhu Miyan. Aziz Ahmad believed that he was “well on the way of organizing something like a parallel government in some parts of Bengal” (Aziz Ahmad, op. cit., p. 216).

A more militant predecessor of the present day Ahl-e-Hadith radicals is the movement of Titu Mir (d. 1831) in Muslim Bengal who also spent some time in Hejaz from where he returned in 1827 and launched his own movement of religious reform and political activism (Aziz Ahmad, op. cit., p. 216). As W.W. Hunter observes, the oppression to which the Hindu landlords subjected Titu Mir’s followers, who were mostly peasants, “placed him at the head of an infuriated peasant rising” (W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans*, London, 1871, p. 45, Reprint Edition, Lahore, 1973). Titu Mir challenged the legitimacy of the British rule in India on the ground that it was protective of the oppressive landlords and rendered no justice to the peasants (Hunter, op. cit., p. 45; Mihr, op. cit., p. 216). Titu Mir’s armed peasant rebellion became so successful that at one point it came to control three districts of East Bengal and was able to defeat several British expeditions that were sent to confront him. He was later defeated and killed in a major British assault on his followers in 1831.

What is instructive to note here is the kind of legacy that Titu Mir’s movement of armed rebellion against the powerful British raj has left for the later generations of Muslim radicals in Bengal. The lesson learnt is that, through a well-organized, tightly-controlled clandestine movement of armed activists under a strong leadership, it is possible to terrorize the government authorities and force them to yield to the movement’s demands – and even establish the Shariah system in the “liberated” districts. It is not uncommon among many Ahl-e-Hadith ulama to refer to Haji Shariat Allah, Dudhu Miyan and Titu Mir as their noble heroes and to present them to their students in the madrassas as role models.

Another important link of Muslim Bengal with the jihadi strand of Wahhabi ideology was through the Mujahidin movement of Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed Brelvi and Shah Ismail Shaheed – Shah Ismail being the most ardent follower of ibn Abdul Wahhab’s puritanical ideas -- who mobilized Muslims from many parts of India to launch a religious reform movement of Tariqah-e-Muhammadi (the Muhammadan Way), and to wage jihad against the Sikh rule in Punjab and the north-west frontier areas of the Indian subcontinent (Aziz Ahmad, op. cit., pp. 209-217). Many of the followers of Faraizi movement, especially the disciples of Haji Shariat Allah’s son Dudhu Mian, later joined the Mujahidin movement of Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi and served in the short-lived mini “Islamic state” established by him. Several of them fought in the last and fateful battle of Balakot (the city in the NWFP that was most severely affected by the recent earthquake in Pakistan) in 1831 in which all of them were killed along with the entire leadership of the movement. There are many Ahl-e-Hadith families in North Bengal as well as in Noakhali and Sylhet who, after several generations, commemorate the legends of the heroic sacrifices of their forefathers in the battle of Balakot. During his visit in 2000 to the Al-Markaz al-Islami al-Salafi, Rajshahi, the central and one of the largest of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Bangladesh under the leadership of Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, now in jail on charges of involvement in “terrorist” violence, the present author was shown several artifacts, displayed in a glass shelf in the main office of the madrassa, of the Mujahidin movement of Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi, including a sword believed to have belonged to one of the Bengali mujahids who died in the battle of Balakot.

Aziz Ahmad’s comments, made in 1964, on the emergence of the Mujahidin movement in the north-west and of Titu mir’s movement in the north-east of the Indian subcontinent at the same time in the history of Islam in India are quite apt:

It is a curiosity of history that over a century before the creation of Pakistan, two Miniature Muslim states struggled to emerge vaguely on the horizon of realization, if only for a short while and against overwhelming odds, but ideologically linked together, and situated in the same Muslim majority areas which today constitute Pakistan (Aziz Ahmad, op. cit., p. 217).

The earliest effort by the Bengali Ahl-e-Hadith ulama to organize themselves was by the students of Miyan Nazir Hussain of Dehli from Calcutta who, in 1919, established a Bengal-Assam branch of the Dehli-based *Anjuman-e-Ahl-e-Hadith* (Society of Ahl-e-Hadith). According to Dr. Muslihuddin, the Acting President of the *Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh* (AHAB), however, the earliest organization of Ahl-e-Hadith in Bengal was *Anjuman-e-Ahl-e-Hadith Bangala* that was established in 1913 (Interview with Dr. Muslihuddin, 8 January 2006, Dhaka). Later, an independent organization called *The Nikhil Banga O Assam Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith* was formed by Maulana Abdullah Kafi (d. 1960) in Calcutta, with branches in many districts of North Bengal (Interview with Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, 2000, Rajshahi). Maulana Naushahravi reports that there were four Ahl-e-Hadith newspapers that were published from Calcutta alone during 1910-1937 (Naushahravi, op. cit., pp. 101-103; 221-222). Maulana Kafi moved to East

Pakistan after the partition of India and the head office of the organization shifted to Pabna in East Pakistan.

The Pakistan Period

After the partition of India in 1947, *Pakistan Markazi Jamiyat-e-Ahle-Hadith* was organized in 1948 with headquarters in Lahore and a provincial branch in East Pakistan as *Purbo Pakistan Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith* which, for all practical purposes operated as a separate and independent organization with only nominal organizational links with its parent body in the western wing of Pakistan. Another group of Ahl-e-Hadith ulama, mostly immigrants from India, who regarded the practices of the companions of the Prophet also as part of the Sunnah and called themselves “salafis,” organized themselves as *Jamiyat-e-Ghuraba-e-Ahl-e-Hadith*. The salafis had only a small presence in East Pakistan. Maulana Abdullah Kafi remained at the helm of Ahl-e-Hadith affairs in East Pakistan until his death in 1960. He was a scholar of considerable reputation who was respected highly by the ulama of all schools of thought in East Pakistan. He published 28 books on various aspects of Islamic theology and practices, mostly in Urdu and Arabic. His most important work in Bangla was *Ahl-e-Hadith Pari Chiti* (Introduction to Ahl-e-Hadith) which was published in the early 1950s. Another important work in the Bangla language by Maulana Kafi that was published from Calcutta before the partition of India was his critique of the Deoband ulama for their cooperation with the Congress Party, arguing that an independent Muslim state of Pakistan will end all kinds of social and economic inequalities (Naushahravi, op. cit., p.216).

Maulana Kafi was primarily a religious scholar whose politics were limited to his pre-partition support of the Pakistan movement led by the All India Muslim League. In the post-partition period, he focused exclusively to writing, teaching, and giving guidance to the Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas. It was his brother Maulana Abdullah Baqi, who was an active member of the Bengal Muslim League and was later elected as one of its Vice-Presidents, who did most of the organizational work for Ahl-e-Hadith movement. As a leader of the Muslim League in East Pakistan, Maulana Baqi, following the political footprints of Haji Shariat Allah, Dudu Miyan and Titu Mir of the 19th Muslim Bengal, became known for his staunch support for the causes of the poor peasants and fought incessantly for abolition of zamindari system (large land-holdings) in East Pakistan (Mohammad Seraj Mannan, *The Muslim Political Parties in Bengal, 1936-1947*, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1987, pp. 102-103).

Maulana Muhammad Akram (d. 1968) was probably one of the most well-known Ahl-e-Hadith scholars and political figures of Muslim Bengal in the twentieth century. He studied with Sayyed Nazir Hussain of Delhi, the dean of the Ahl-e-Hadith ‘ulama in India at the turn of the century, and moved to Calcutta in 1907 from where he issued the first Bangla language periodical Weekly *Muhammadi* to propagate the ideas of Ahl-e-Hadith. In 1920 he started the *Daily Azad*, a major Muslim voice in Bangla journalism at the time. The newspaper moved to Dhaka after partition and continued until his death.

Maulana Akram Khan came to be highly regarded as an Islamic scholar beyond the Ahl-e-Hadith circles because of his non-sectarian approach to religious issues. He is most well-known for the first comprehensive biography of the Prophet and the exegesis of the Qur'an in the Bangla language. Maulana Akram Khan was a close confidant of Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah on matters of Bengal politics and served as the president of East Pakistan Provincial Muslim League for several years after the partition. He was also a member of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly and the East Pakistan provincial legislature (For details, see: Maulana Abu Yahya Imam Khan Naushervi, *Hindustan mein Ahl-e-Hadith ki 'ilmi khidmaat*, Maktaba-e-Naziriya, Cheecha Vatni, Pakistan, 1970). Maulana Akram was not intimately involved in the Ahl-e-Hadith organizational activities but remained a great source of strength for the movement through his political influence and his reputation as a great religious scholar.

The Post-1971 Phase

Ahl-e-Hadith continued to operate primarily as a religious group after the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent state. The Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith East Pakistan did not take any formal position on the issue of the separation of the Eastern wing of united Pakistan, but many prominent Ahl-e-Hadith ulama, like the ulama of other schools of thought, were not sympathetic to the idea of independent Bangladesh since, in their view, it hurt the cause of Muslim unity. But unlike the Jamaat-e-Islami, which vigorously opposed the break-up of Pakistan and fought side by side with the Pakistan military against the Mukti Bahini – the guerilla army created for the liberation of Bangladesh --, the Ahl-e-Hadith rank and file remained low-profiled during the entire period of the civil war. A few local level ulama of the Ahl-e-Hadith school in some northern districts defied their leadership and joined the pro-Pakistan militias to fight for a united Pakistan. Among them was one Maulana Abdullah ibn Fazal from Jamalpur, father of the founder of the JMB, Sheikh Abdur Rahman. The leadership of their central organization, however, was firmly in the hands of academicians who steered their group safely and unscathed from the then political controversies and turmoil. They were, nevertheless, deeply concerned about the secular-nationalist shift in politics in post-liberation rule of the Awami League under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and rallied their forces with the ulama of other schools of thought to oppose the proposed move by the Awami League government to do away with, or restrict the autonomy of, the private (Quomi) madrassa system. Dr. Abdul Bari, the noted academician, who had done his doctoral research at Oxford in the early 1950s on the comparative study of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia and the Islamic reform movements of the nineteenth century India (Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, op.cit. pp. 80-84), served as the President of the Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith Bangladesh (JAHB) until the mid-1980s. A writer of great erudition, who was highly respected by his peers as well as by the ulama of all schools of thought, Dr. Bari served as the Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University. He was succeeded by his son, Dr. Shamsul Bari, another academician, as the President of the JAHB after his death.

The rise of Ahl-e-Hadith Activism

The transition from Dr. Bari to Dr. Ghalib to Sheikh Abdur Rahman is a transition from scholarly defense of the dogma, to metaphorical Jihad, to the literal Jihad. Dr. Bari and other mainstream Ahl-e-Hadith ulama of the 1950s to the late 1970s were concerned primarily with the preservation and preaching of the Ahl-e-Hadith doctrines and also with the vigorous defense of the doctrine in the wake of sectarian assaults from the Hanafis (Brelvis). The old guard of the Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh – Maulana Abdul Baqi, Maulana Akram Khan, Dr. Abdul Bari – had steered the movement unblemished by partisan politics and had vigorously guarded it against the vicissitudes of Bangladesh’s tumultuous politics during the Pakistan period and after the liberation. They were vigilant against the efforts by the zealots in the movement either to engage in sectarian confrontation with other sects and schools of thought, or to politicize the movement by taking sides in political controversies. Under the leadership of Dr. Bari, the movement focused primarily on managing the Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas, holding occasional conferences, publishing religious literature, and propagating the Ahl-e-Hadith doctrine through preaching. Except occasional confrontation with the Brelvis – known as Hanafis in Bangladesh – the movement remained a peaceful, non-controversial and non-political under the leadership of Dr. Bari.

Dr. Asadullah Ghalib and the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh

The central, or intermediate figure, in the transition of the Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh from the quietism and non-political orientation of Dr. Abdul Bari to the militancy and terrorism of Sheikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqul Islam (Bangla Bhai) is 59 year old Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, the Amir (President) of the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh and the Principal and Chief Administrator of Al-Markaz-ul-Islami, Nawdapara, Rajshahi, the largest Ahl-e-Hadith educational establishment in Bangladesh. Now in jail since 23 February 2005 on charges of involvement in militant activities, Dr. Ghalib was also the Chairman of the Department of Arabic at Rajshahi University at the time of his arrest.

Born in 1947 in Satkhira sadar thana in a well-known Ahl-e-Hadith family – his father Maulana Ahmad Ali was an ‘alim and a district-level Ahl-e-Hadith leader – Ghalib attended the Kakadanga ‘Alia Madrassa in Satkhira and the Aramnagar ‘Alia Madrassa in Jamalpur from where he completed his Kamil degree. He then obtained his B.A. degree from Comilla City College and an M.A. in Arabic from Dhaka University, where he was a student of Dr. Abdul Bari. He started his teaching career at Dhaka University as a lecturer in Arabic but moved to Rajshahi in 1980, a city with a solid majority of Ahl-e-Hadith followers. (Biographical profile of Dr. Ghalib can be found in *Weekly Probe* Dhaka, December 23-29, 2005, pp. 14-19, and in *Daily Star*, Dhaka, 24 February 2005).

Described by his colleagues at Rajshahi University as “an ardent sectarian,” “politically ambitious,” and “a religious entrepreneur,” Ghalib, who was not satisfied with the slow pace growth and low-key posture of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement under the leadership of

his teacher and mentor, Dr. Bari, wanted the movement to do more than preserve and defend itself; he wanted the Ahl-e-Hadith to assert their distinct religious (read: sectarian) identity and then translate this religious identity into an organized political movement with a clear religious agenda. In view of the fact that the Ahl-e-Hadith constitute a considerable majority in many northern districts of Bangladesh, Dr. Ghalib's political ambitions were, after all, not unrealistic, if only majority of his sectarian brothers and sisters could be mobilized on a single religio-political platform. Dr. Ghalib knew that the



**Dr. Mohammad Assadullah Ghalib, President, Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh
(photo taken by the author, June 2000)**

Ahl-e-Hadith, being a minority sect, would never be able to capture political power on their own. His political ambitions and goals were more realistic; he wanted the Ahl-e-Hadith to emerge as a major, if not the most influential, regional power broker in Northern Bengal and thus be able to wield political influence in national politics. His model in this respect was the Jamaat-i-Islami which had emerged as a power broker between the two main contenders for power -- the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). While other religious groups -- the Jamaat -e-Islami, the pirs (the Brelvi-oriented spiritual leaders), and the Deobandi ulama (who were organized as Khilafat Majlis and Khilafat Andolan) -- had established a niche in national politics, Dr. Ghalib didn't want the Ahl-e-Hadith to be left behind and serve merely as cheer leaders for them.

It was this dream that drove Dr. Ghalib, first, to organize the Ahl-e-Hadith Jubo Sangha (AHJS) the youth movement, in 1978 -- against the wishes of his leader Dr. Bari -- and, then later in 1994, to disassociate himself formally from the Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith of Dr. Bari and establish his own separate organization known as Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, Acting President of AHAB, Dhaka, 8 January 2006). A skillful institution-builder, Dr. Ghalib soon developed a network of mosques, madrassas, publishing houses, NGOs and dozens of other Ahl-e-Hadith-affiliated organizations, including the Ahl-e-Hadith Mohila Sangstha (Ahl-e-Hadith Women Association) and Sonamoni, a network of clubs for Ahl-e-Hadith children on the

model of the Boy Scouts. With ample funds from both the foreign donors as well as from contributions by the Ahl-e-Hadith business community in Bangladesh, Dr. Ghalib soon overshadowed the rival organizations of Ahl-e-Hadith and emerged as the main spokesman of the sect in the country.



**Children of the Sonamoni club at Dr. Ghalib's Madrassa, Rajshahi
(photo taken by the author, June 2000)**

A combination of factors in the early 1980s led to the steady decline of the hold of the old guard over the Ahl-e-Hadith movement and the emergence of young, politically ambitious and stridently sectarian leadership. Dr. Abdul Bari, the President of the JAHB was an old man by the early 1980s and was also too busy in his official duties as the Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University. Asadullah Ghalib, who was Dr. Bari's student both at Dhaka and Rajshahi universities, kept pressing his teacher and mentor to activate the movement and take advantage of both the domestic political environment created by the then President General Ziaur Rahman's pro-Islamic policies (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, Acting President of AHAB, op.cit.), and the international political environment created by the Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent Saudi policy of patronizing the anti-Shia salafi groups in South Asia and elsewhere in the Muslim World. Dr. Bari rejected the idea of the movement to be drawn into either the domestic politics or in the contest of religio-political power and influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Ghalib, however, went ahead on his own and used his Ahl-e-Hadith Jubo Sangha (AHJS), the youth movement, to mobilize the Ahl-e-Hadith university and madrassas students who, according to Dr. Ghalib, were being “stolen away” by the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Chhatra Shibbir (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, the Acting President of AHAB, op.cit.). Starting from Dhaka, the Jubo Sangha soon had branches in all districts of northern Bengal as well as in major cities of other regions (*Daily Star*, 2 September 2005). In an interview in 2000, Dr. Ghalib said that his youth organization had more than 10,000 members (Interview with Dr. Ghalib, op. cit.). Dr. Ghalib also used his Saudi contacts to send a large number of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassa graduates for higher studies at Medina University who came back with a strong dose of Wahhabi indoctrination and, in many cases, with a reinvigorated jihadi spirit.



**Office of the Youth Wing of AHAB in Dr. Ghalib's Madrassa in Rajshahi
(photo taken by the author, June 2000)**

Dr. Ghalib's efforts to consolidate his hold over the Ahl-e-Hadith movement, ulama, madrassas, and NGOs were greatly facilitated by the generous funds he was able to collect from his Saudi and Kuwaiti contacts – both official and private. From Saudi Arabia, he received “donations” for his madrassas and the NGOs controlled by his organization, AHAB, through the Rabita-al-'Alam al-Islami (the World Muslim League) -- a Saudi government-funded organization to promote Islamic activities around the world – and through Al-Harmain Foundation, a Saudi-based international NGO that has since been blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury Department for its funding of militant groups

in many countries. Other major donors for Dr. Ghalib's various outfits were the Kuwait-based *Al-Jamiyat-ul-Ahyah-asaurah al-Islami* (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society) and *Al-Jamiyat-ul-Ahya-assunnah* (Society for the Revival of the Sunnah of the Prophet), which provided him, as well as several other Islamic organizations and NGOs in Bangladesh, generous funds to build mosques, establish and run madrassas and organize Islamic NGOs in the field of education and social welfare to neutralize the influence of secular, and especially the Christian missionary-sponsored, international NGOs. In an interview with the present author in 2000, Dr. Ghalib acknowledged receiving "Al-hamdu-lillah, several lakhs of Takas" from the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, Society for the Revival of the Sunnah of the Prophet, Al-Harmain Islamic Foundation and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs of Saudi Arabia, but maintained that these funds were intended for building dorms and providing meals to the orphans studying in his various madrassas (Interview with Dr. Ghalib, Rajshahi, 22 June, 2000).

Dr. Ghalib also had close contacts with several rich Saudi Islamic (read: Wahhabi) philanthropists who gave him ample funds to build dozens of new mosques and madrassas throughout the country "where appointment of Ahl-e-Hadis Imams and Muazzans selected by him or his representatives was obligatory..." (Nur Hosain Majidi, "Deviated ideological basis of JMB," *Daily New Nation*, Dhaka, 17 March 2006). There are also reports that Dr. Ghalib used his contacts with Hafiz Ahmad Saeed of the Laskar-e-Taiba of Pakistan to raise funds from the Ahl-e-Hadith business community in Pakistan. Hafiz Ahmad Saeed was "an honored guest" at the 1997 AHAB conference in Rajshahi (Interview with Dr. Ghalib, op. cit.).

There is no doubt that Dr. Ghalib used the funds that he received from both the official and private foreign sources not only on building mosques and madrassas, but mostly on building networks of his own organization, AHAB, and its affiliated bodies and NGOs. Two of his major operations were the At-Tawhid Trust and the Hadith Foundation that together had in their accounts crores of Takas. At-Tawid Trust was fully funded by foreign donations from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and is reported to have built 600 new mosques, five major madrassas, and several orphanages throughout the country (Weekly, *Probe*, Dhaka, 23-29 December, 2005, p.16; *Daily Independent*, Dhaka, 19 October 2005). In 1989-90, a group of trustees of At-Tawhid trust rebelled against Dr. Ghalib under the leadership of the then Secretary General of AHAB, Rezaul Karim, a lecturer at Bogra Azizul Haq College, and, without Ghalib's authorization, withdrew 1 crore 2 lakh Takas (about \$ 1,70,000) from the Trust bank account. Dr. Ghalib expelled Rezaul Karim and several other leaders from AHAB and the conflict over the control of At-Tawid Trust and its funds lies with the court. Hadith Foundation, a major publishing establishment, is still under his control and is managed by his close associate, Prof. Abdul Latif.

Central Executive Council of AHAB

Dr. Asadullah Ghalib	Amir (President)
Sheikh Abdus Samad Salafi	Senior Naib (Deputy) Amir
Dr. Muslehuddin	Acting Amir
Maulana Nurul Islam	General Secretary
Sirajul Islam	Secretary, Organizational Affairs
Gholam Mosadir	Finance Secretary
S.M.A. Latif	Publicity Secretary
Dr. Lokman Hussain	Secretary, Tarbiyya (Training)
Prof. Abdul Latif	Secretary, Research and Publications
Maulana Hafizur Rahman	Secretary, Literature & Library Services
Maulana Gholam Azam	Secretary, Social Welfare
Prof. Sirajul Islam	Secretary, Youth Affairs
Baharul Islam	Office Secretary

Sheikh Abdur Rahman and the Jama'atul Mujahidin, Bamngladesh

Sheikh Abdur Rahman comes from a prominent Ahl-e-Hadith family of Jamalpur. His father, Maulana Abdullah Ibn Fazal was a well-known Ahl-e-Hadith scholar who was widely respected for his Islamic scholarship. An author of several books on Islam in Bangla, Maulana Abdullah was a popular speaker in Ahl-e-Hadith gatherings, although he never held any formal position in the Ahl-e-Hadith movement. Maulana Abdullah supported the Pakistani forces during the 1971 crisis and encouraged the Ahl-e-Hadith youth to join the pro-Pakistan militia, *Al-Badr* (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, Editor, *Nautan Safar*, Dhaka, 9 January 2006). He was arrested by the pro-liberation Mukti

Bahini armed activists between Dhanbari (Tangail) and Jamalpur in October 1971 and remained in jail long after the liberation. Maulana Abdullah died in 1978.

Abdur Rahman received his early religious education from his father and then attended an Ahl-e-Hadith-affiliated madrassa. After graduating from the madrassa, he came into contact with Dr. Asadullah Ghalib who, by that time, had worked out a comprehensive plan to wrest the leadership of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement from Professor Abdul Bari and to organize the movement as a more activist, sectarian organization. It was Dr. Ghalib, according to several reports, who recommended Abdur Rahman to the Saudi authorities to be awarded a scholarship to study at the Medina University. Abdur Rahman stayed in Saudi Arabia until the mid-1980s and it was there that he came into contact with the Saudi and Pakistani volunteers for the Afghan Jihad. It was also at the Medina University in Saudi Arabia that Abdur Rahman first developed links with the Ahl-e-Hadith activists from Pakistan and India. It is important also to note here that Hafiz Ahmad Saeed, the founder of the Lashkar-e-Taiba of Pakistan – the militant organization that has been implicated in several terrorist activities in the Indian-held Kashmir – was Abdur Rahman’s classmate at Medina University. Some reports suggest that Abdur Rahman also undertook a short trip to Afghanistan with a group of Saudi mujahideen in the mid-1980s before he returned to Bangladesh (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, op. cit). Upon his return to Bangladesh, Abdur Rahman worked for a while as an Arabic-Bangla translator at the Saudi Embassy in Dhaka, along with running a small-scale medicine store. In the early 1990s, he married the sister of Mirza Azam, an Awami League member of the Parliament from Divanganj (Jamalpur) during the prime ministership of Sheikh Hasina. Mirza Azam used his political influence with the Awami League government to help Abdur Rahman obtain a hefty contract with the government-owned Jamuna Fertilizer Factory near Jamalpur that, according to some reports, brought him hundreds of thousands of takas as easy profit (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, op. cit.).

By the mid-1990s, Abdur Rahman was well on his way to launch an underground militant movement, after he had distanced himself both from the pacifism of the mainstream Ahl-e-Hadith movement and the political activism of Dr. Asadullah Ghalib. According to Ashraf Hussain, the Editor of *Nautan Safar*, Abdur Rahman met him in 1996 and told him that those who believed that the Jamaat-e-Islami would bring about an Islamic change in Bangladesh were “gravely mistaken” and would soon be “disappointed.” The Jamaat-e-Islami approach, Abdur Rahman said, would never succeed in Bangladesh because the Jamaat was not willing to comply with the Quranic injunction “to kill and be killed for the sake of Allah.” According to Ashraf Hussain, Abdur Rahman expressed his deep frustration with the failure of both the government of Sheikh Hasina and the Islamic parties to fight against “the corruption and moral degeneration of society” and said that “someone should come forward and “crush those who are responsible for these evils in society.” When asked what he thought should be done, Abdur Rahman said that there was “a lesson for us in the Afghan Jihad. We can launch a Jihad in Bangladesh as well – a Jihad against our internal enemies, the enemies of Islam, the secularists, the communists, the corrupt government officials.” According to another report, Abdur Rahman was convinced that only a “Jihad that involves killing

of the enemies of Islam” could bring about an Islamic change in Bangladesh. When asked how many people he would need to get killed for an Islamic revolution, Abdur Rahman reportedly replied, “Fifty percent of all Bangladesh population (Interview with Shah Abdul Halim, Dhaka, 25 December 2005). Abdur Rahman was convinced that a large number of Islamically motivated young men and several hundred Bangladeshi veterans of the Afghan Jihad would be willing to join his underground movement. “With proper training in militant operations and with Jihadi spirit (*Jazba-e-Jihad*), we can force the authorities to listen to our demands,” Abdur Rahman said (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, op. cit.). According to Ashraf Hussain, Abdur Rahman argued for his Jihadic project by quoting several passages from the Quran and Hadith but his organizational model for his proposed underground movement was that of the Naxalites, a Marxist guerilla movement active in the Indian states of Bihar and Bengal as well as in parts of Bangladesh.

Abdur Rahman’s early recruits for his Jama’atul Mujahedin, Bangladesh (JMB) were the Bengali veterans of the Afghan Jihad from Rajshahi and Sylhet regions, young, unemployed Ahl-e-Hadith ‘Alia madrassa graduates who had already been radicalized by Dr. Ghalib’s rhetorics about the imminent warfare between the forces of good and evil -- although Dr. Ghalib was always careful to add that this “metaphorical warfare” does not imply to engage in actual, physical violence. Nevertheless, according to several reports, a large number of the JMB (and JMJB) militants came from Dr. Ghalib’s *Ahl-e-Hadith Jubo Sangha*, the Ahl-e-Hadith Youth Movement (*Daily Star*, 2 September 2005). A leaflet distributed after the August 2005 country-wide bombing even claimed that JMB is the militant wing of the AHAB (Ibid.).

Some “disgruntled elements” from the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Chhatra Shibbir (ICS) were also attracted to Abdur Rahman’s “Jihadic” mission (Interview with Mr. Abdul Quader Bachoo, Secretary-General, Khilafat Majlis, Muhammadpur, Dhaka, 6 January 2006. Mr. Bachoo, who was the President of ICS in the mid-1970s, later left the organization and joined the ulama-led Khilafat Majlis which is now part of the ruling Alliance.). Shah Abdul Halim, a prominent Bangladeshi intellectual and writer, who is sympathetic to the Jamaat-e-Islami, also confirmed that several ICS and former Jamaat activists had been attracted to the JMB radicalism. “We were aware of that,” he quoted Mr. Qameruzzaman, the Assistant Secretary-General of the Jammah; “That’s why we expelled them” (Interview with Shah Abdul Halim, Dhaka, 28 December 2005).

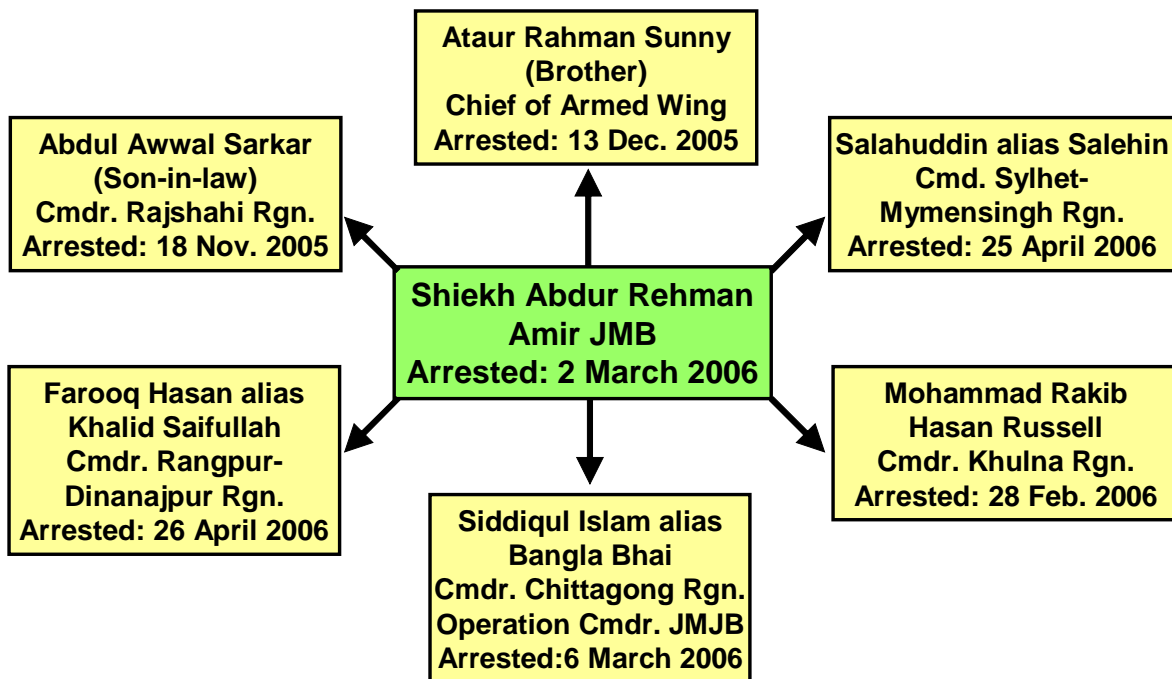
According to several reports, Abdur Rahman organized small scale training camps for his clandestine activities initially in Jamalpur, Rajshahi and Comilla, and then, as he was able to recruit more volunteer jihadis, in Satkhera in Khulna, Bogra, Nuakhali, Mymensingh, Sirajganj, Nairainganj and Tangail as well.

It was in the Fall of 1998 that the JMB was formally launched in Jamalpur by Sheikh Abdur Rahman after series of consultation with his like-minded friends, who later became regional commanders and the *Majlis-e-Shura* (Consultative Committee) members of the JMB (See Table on the JMB Majlis-e-Shura) (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin,

op. cit.). In addition to Sheikh Abdur Rahman, the leadership of the JMB consisted of six Shura members, who were also appointed as regional commanders in charge of local recruitment, training and operations. They were: Aatur Rahman Sunny, Abdur Rahman's younger brother; Abdul Awal Sarkar, Abdur Rahman's son-in-law; Salahuddin alias Salehin; Farooq Hasan alias Khalid Saifullah; Mohammad Rakib Hasan Russell; and Siddiquil Islam alias Bangla Bhai of the JMJB. None of them is a religious scholar but all of them come from Ahl-e-Hadith background and strong links with the Ahl-e-Hadith-affiliated organizations.

The JMB remained underground -- and unknown to most Bangladeshis, including the government authorities -- until its militants were ready to undertake their violent activities -- and take "credit" for them -- in 2004. (It is interesting to note that even the most alert observer of religious extremism in Bangladesh, *The Far East Economic Review* reporter Bertil Lintner, does not even once mention Sheikh Abdur Rahman or JMB in his 2002 paper "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh," Honolulu, Hawaii: Asia Pacific Center for Securities Studies, August 2002).

The JMB Executive Committee



During the early 1990s, Sheikh Abdur Rahman came into contact with another shadowy character, Abdul Matin Salafi, an Indian national from West Bengal who had spent several years in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s, first as a student at Medina University,

and then as a “fund-raiser” for Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas and NGOs in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Abdul Matin came to Bangladesh in the late 1980s with “tens of millions” of takas that he had collected from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait “to support” the Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas and NGOS. Both Dr. Asadullah Ghalib and Sheikh Abdur Rahman were beneficiaries of Abdul Matin Salafi’s generous financial contributions as well as his Middle Eastern contacts. (Daily *The New Age*, Dhaka, 26 February 2005. According to *The New Age*, Mr. Salafi was “black-listed” during the rule of General Ershad. *The Daily Star* (2 September 2005) also reported that Mr. Salafi was a major financier of Ahl-e-Hadith organizations and leaders of Bangladesh, including Dr. Ghalib and Abdur Rahman. Mr. Salafi, whose stay in Bangladesh was mostly without a valid visa, came under suspicion due to his too-frequent border crossings between India and Bangladesh and was subsequently deported by the Bangladesh authorities to West Bengal. According to some reports, Mr. Salafi is the main contact of Sheikh Abdur Rahman (and also of Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai) in West Bengal for smuggling of weapons and explosives (Interview with Maulana Abdul Shaheed Naseem, Dhaka, 6 January 2006; also, interview with Ashraf Hussain, op. cit.; and Interview with Dr. Talukdar Maniruzzaman, Professor of Political Science, Dhaka University, 31 December 2005).

Even as the JMB’s reach expanded to many other cities of Bangladesh, Sheikh Abdur Rahman kept a tight control over the operations of the organization through his younger brother Aatur Rahman Sunny, the Majllis-e-Shura member and the military commander of the outfit, and his son-in-law Abdul Awal, another Shura member and one of the top regional commanders of the JMB (*The New Age*, Dhaka, 20 March 2006). Other Shura members were also close confidants and long-standing allies of Abdur Rahman.

Bangla Bhai and the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB)

Siddiqui Islam, popularly known as Bangla Bhai, who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s against the Soviets (Muhammad Qamarul Islam, “Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh,” *Bangladesh Observer*, Dhaka, 18 March 2006), also came from an Ahl-e-Hadith family. He taught Bangla at a private college upon his return from Afghanistan started his activities in Rajshahi area in the late 1990s with the full knowledge of the local authorities and politicians by organizing his followers to fight against the “anti-social” elements in the city and in surrounding villages and towns, especially against the activists of the left-wing underground movement known as Sarbaharas (Have-nots). Bangla Bhai used to hold summary public trials of common criminals, leftists, *mastans* (musclemen) and sex offenders under the Shariah laws and, in most cases, awarded severe punishments, including death by hanging. He continued these “cleansing operations” for more than three years in Bagmara, Raninagar and Atrai with the full knowledge of police and civil administration, which, according to several published reports and interviews, were quite supportive of his vigilante activities. In most cases, Bangla Bhai’s crusade, or jihad, against the leftists and the criminal elements, which had terrorized the local population while the police stood by in helplessness, was enthusiastically welcomed by the people of the area. According to one report, when the Prime Minister Khalida Zia was

briefed about Bangla Bhai's vigilantism, she asked the officials "to leave him alone" (Interview with Dr. Talukdar Maniruzzaman, Professor of Political Science, Dhaka University, op. cit.).

Despite protests by several NGOs and civil society institutions against his rough-shod "justice" and summary trials and executions, the authorities, including the ruling party politicians, continued to give him their tacit support. Some politicians said that he was doing an important "social work" by rescuing the oppressed of the regions by eliminating the criminals and the Sarbaharas terrorists (Interview with Shah Abdul Halim, op. cit., see also, *Daily New Age*, Dhaka, 25 March 2006). Siddiqui Islam became so powerful in the northern districts that at one time, when a close relative of a Parliament member of the ruling BNP was kidnapped by some booty hunters and the police failed to recover him, the police and the said politician approached him for help and the legendary Bangla Bhai was able to rescue the victim in a few days. After his dramatic arrest from Mukagachha in Mymensingh district in March 2006, on charges of masterminding the attack that killed two judges in February 2006, Bangla Bhai told his interrogators that there do exist in government "some rats" who would come out if "Hamelin's pipe is blown" (Quoted in *Weekly Holiday*, Dhaka, 5 May 2006). "If we blow the whistle none of the government's rats will be in place; each and everyone shall have to come out" (Ibid). According to a report in the *New Age* (25 March 2006), Bangla Bhai told the Task Force for interrogation, "Now you say we carried out massacre. But it was the administration and police, who were around us, saying nothing."

Surprisingly – or rather not so surprisingly – the government of Bangladesh remained publicly in total denial of not only Bangla Bhai's activities but even of his existence. When *The New York Times Magazine* published a cover story in early 2005 on Bangla Bhai's extra-judicial killings and his Islamic militancy, the Bangladesh government's reaction was that the report was based on the Indian-inspired propaganda to tarnish the image of a moderate Muslim country. The Jamaat-e-Islami Amir, Maulana Matiur Rahman Nizami, who is also the Minister of Industries in the current government, said that "Bangla Bhai is a creation of anti-Islamic and pro-Indian newspapers who are bent upon maligning the present government" (*Daily Prothom Alo*, Dhaka, 25 February 2005). On January 26, 2005, the BNP Minister for Home Affairs Mr. Lutofazzaman Babar told the BBC that "We have no official knowledge of the existence of JMJB. Only certain so-called newspapers have been running reports on it. We have no report that any such group has [been] formed" (Quoted in *Daily Star*, Dhaka, 24 February, 2005). Little did the government authorities realize that in addition to his overt "social service," Bangla Bhai was deeply involved in covert militant activities.

Bangla Bhai came into contact with Abdur Rahman sometime in the mid-1990s and was among the first to join his *Qitaal* Party (Killer's Party) in 1998 that later came to be named as the JMB. It was also in the 1998 meeting between the two that the decision was

made to appoint Siddiqui Islam as the Operation Commander of the JMB and also as the Chief of the affiliated organization, Jgrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB: Awake! Muslim People of Bangladesh!). The idea to have a separate organization by the name of JMJB was based on two considerations: first, it was meant to transfer the “good will” and the grass roots support that Bangla Bhai had gained for his vigilantism to his new organization; and second, to give the impression as if several militant organizations were operating simultaneously. The JMJB was specifically assigned certain areas of Ahl-e-Hadith concentration for its militant activities, which included Rajshahi, Bagmara, Chapainawabganj, Shibganj, Gaibandha, Thakurgaon, Joypurhat, Bogra, and Natore. When the government finally decided to ban both the JMB and JMJB on 23 February 2005 by declaring them illegal organizations, almost all of the JMJB activists were arrested from these cities and towns.

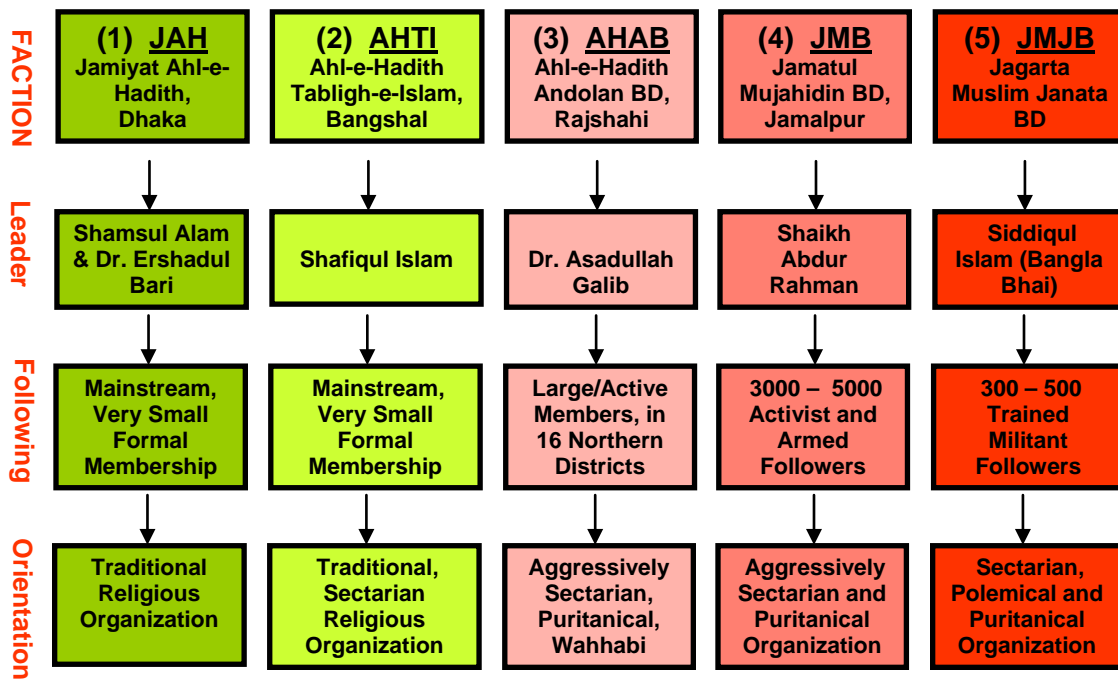
Bangla Bhai’s models for his operations were his erstwhile adversaries: Sarbahara, Jan Juddah (a Marxist underground guerilla organization) and the Naxalites. He used his Afghan experience, and his Afghan cohorts, to train his followers in organizing clandestine cells and activities, and in the use of weapons and explosives. Most of his followers came from Bagmara, in Rajshahi, his home town and the center of his operations in the initial phase of the JMJB. Most of the funding for Bangla Bhai’s operations came from Sheikh Abdur Rahman, but he was also able to raise considerable funds as protection money from local business people and wealthy land owners who were being terrorized by the Sarbaharas.

Ahl-e-Hadith Factions and Their Ideologies

There are two mainstream organizations of Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh: Jamiyat Ahl-e-Hadith, Bangladesh (JAH), headed by Dr. Bari's son, Dr. Ershadul Bari, an academician; and Ahl-e-Hadith Tabligh-e-Islam (AHTI), headed by Maulana Shafiqul Islam, a traditional Islamic scholar. Both are non-political, organizationally weak, with a relatively small formal membership base. Ideologically, they are closely linked to the Jamaat Ghuraba-e-Ahl-e-Hadith, based in Karachi, Pakistan, which believes that the present political system, although un-Islamic in its nature, should be quietly tolerated until majority of Muslims in society adopt the correct 'aqida (belief), i.e. the Ahl-e-Hadith doctrine, and then the Islamic state will automatically follow. While the JAH believes that it is possible – in fact, desirable – to strive for an Islamic change through democratic elections, the AHTI remains indifferent to political process and pursues its Islamic goals through peaceful persuasion.

The JMB and JMJB position, on the other hand, regards the present democratic system of government in Bangladesh – and, for that matter, in all Muslims countries, except Saudi Arabia – as *batil* (false, un-Islamic) and believe that it is the duty of every Muslim to make an effort to bring about a “true Islamic System,” even through violence, if peaceful

Ahl-e-Hadith Factions in Bangladesh



Ahl-e-Hadith Factions in BD (Cont.)

	(1) <u>JAH</u>	(2) <u>AHTI</u>	(3) <u>AHAB</u>	(4) <u>JMB</u>	(5) <u>JMJB</u>
Political Ideology	Non-Political, Accepts Democratic Polity	Non-Political, Accepts Democracy with Islamic Flavor	Rejects Democracy, Khilafa by Peaceful Means	Democracy is Satanic, Islamic Rule via Armed Struggle	Shariah Rule thru Violent Overthrow of Present System
Organizational Activities	Weak Organization, Branches in 16 Districts	Weak Organization, Few Branches in North Districts	Well Organized in 41 Districts, Women/Youth/Children Wings	Underground Organization of Trained Militants	Organized Underground Cells of Armed Militants
Foreign Links	None	None	Runs AH Madrassas & NGOs for Social Services	Train Militants, Aug. 05 Blasts in 63 Districts, Killing Judges	Train Militants to Assassinate Leftists/Outlaws / 'Anti-Islamists'
Foreign Links	None	None	Scholarships & Funds from SA (Hermain), Kuwait (Al Ahya), Pak, Ind.	Suspected to have Unspecified 'Foreign' Links	No Direct Links, May have 'Indirect' Links thru JMB

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means are not available. They consider it a Jihad to overthrow a government that is not based on Shariah. Both the JMB and the JMJB leaders seem to have been influenced immensely by the experience of the Afghan Jihad, both through direct participation, and through its legends. Their model of an Islamic government is that of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan with its literal interpretation, and strict enforcement, of the Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic teachings, and the Shariah rules. Another model that inspired them was that of Saudi Arabia where the Salafi-Wahhabi ulama exercised near monopoly of power over the religious/Shariah matters. Beyond their great fascination for the Taliban rule, and the Saudi example, both Abdur Rahman of JMB and Bangla Bhai of JMJB had no clear vision or a detailed blueprint of an Islamic government. Their half-baked ideas on Islamic revolution are contained in a few pamphlets – some of them are not more than four pages long – that were being clandestinely circulated in mosques around the country during 2004-2005. One pamphlet attributed to Sheikh Abdur Rahman is titled Inqilab, which talks vaguely about how his movement will be able to force the authorities to introduce Islamic laws by harassing and terrorizing them.

Dr. Asadullah Ghalib's position is somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. He rejects the modern democratic system as un-Islamic because "it is based on the idea of popular sovereignty and majority opinion, which may go in the direction of anti-Islamic measures if people so desire." According to Ghalib, there is nothing wrong with elections if both the voters and the candidates for public offices are practicing Muslims

and fulfill the condition of public trust as prescribed by Islam. But if democracy means following the desires of people who have no Islamic knowledge or Islamic commitment, then they are more likely to vote for candidates “who would support casinos, alcoholic drinks, bars, free mixing of sexes, prostitution, usury, etc. In other words, all these vices can be legalized if you can get 51% of votes in the parliament. It is this risk in democracy that we Muslims cannot take” (Interview with Dr. Ghalib, op.cit.).

But Ghalib is not in favor of violent overthrow of the present system, nor does he advocate subversion of the system through clandestine tactics. According to a booklet he wrote in Bangla two years ago (*Equamat-e-Din: Poth O Poddoti*, Rajshahi: Hadith Foundation, 2004), *d’awa* (call, preaching) and educational efforts by an organized movement – such as his own, AHAB – will eventually lead to the transforming of society on Islamic principles and an Islamic society will then culminate in the establishment of an Islamic state based on the model of the Prophetic state in Medina and the early, rightly-guided caliphate. In this publication, Dr. Ghalib rejects violence as a means of Islamic change and argues for a peaceful, “educational jihad” to transform the society and to impress upon the rulers to attend to their Islamic duties. The best form of government, according to Ghalib, is Caliphate. Once a caliph has been “selected” by the Majlis-e-Shura (consultative body) of pious Muslims, his obedience will be obligatory on all Muslims as long as he rules according to Shariah and dispenses justice to all citizens. Ghalib was not explicit on whether people should continue to participate in the democratic system in the “interim period,” i.e., until the present society is fully transformed into a truly Islamic society: “We don’t prevent people from participating in the [democratic] process but, at the same time, we tell them not to expect anything Islamic out of it” (Interview with Dr. Ghalib, op. cit.).

Even though there is no direct evidence linking Dr. Ghalib with violence – even fifteen months after his arrest the government prosecutors have not presented any evidence against Ghalib for his involvement in violent activities – or indicating that he instructed his followers to conduct terrorist operations, there are, nevertheless, reports that he often talked about *qitaal* (killing) and jihad in his speeches (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, op. cit.). His supporters insist, however, that Ghalib’s reference to Jihad did not mean “armed struggle;” it was meant as a moral exhortation to strive for Islamic causes (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, Acting President of AHAB, op. cit.). Even those who strongly differ with him on doctrinal issues and do not approve of his flamboyant religious posture and sectarian activism insist that, despite his rhetoric and inflammatory talk, he is not the violent type (Interviews with Shah Abdul Halim, Ashraf Hussain, Abdul Shaheed Nasim, op. cit., See also, interview with Maulana Muhiuddin Khan, Senior Vice-President of Islami Oikya Jote – a Deobandi religio-political party -- and Editor of the monthly magazine *Medina*, Dhaka, who is otherwise no friend of Dr. Ghalib, “Dr. Ghalib is an academic; he can’t be involved in militancy,” *Weekly Probe*, Dhaka, December 16-22, 2005, p. 14).

Some writers have argued that the Ahl-e-Hadith doctrine of strict adherence to Shariah based on a literal understanding of the Hadith literature, as well as the history of a strong sectarian orientation of the Ahl-e-Hadith, lead them to both religious intolerance and political radicalism. Both Khalid Ahmad (“Islamic Extremis in Pakistan” *South Asian Journal*, No. 2, Oct. – Dec. 2003) and Yogindar Sikand (“The Spectre of Sectarianism: Analyzing the Ahl-e-Hadith,” *Qulandar*, Banglore, India, April 2004) contend that there is an inherent link between the Ahl-e-Hadith’s religious doctrines on the one hand, and religious intolerance and radicalism, on the other. It is true that the puritanical and reformist zeal that the movement has inherited from the ideas of Imam Ibn Tamiyya and Ibn Abdul Wahhab, as well as from the writings of early Ahl-e-Hadith polemicists of Muslim India, often leads to its followers to a highly exaggerated sense of self-righteousness, and to a disdainful attitude toward the followers of other sects, especially toward the Shias and the Brelvis, but mostly these exclusivist orientations have remained confined to religious polemics. In Muslim South Asia, as we have seen, Ahl-e-Hadith have a history of both activism and quietism. Some specific circumstantial contingents may have given rise to the militant groups among the Ahl-e-Hadith (Lashkar –e-Taiba in Pakistan and the JMB and the JMJB in Bangladesh) in recent years but the fact remains that an overwhelming majority of the movement’s followers are peaceful and entertain no sympathy for the militants among them.

Support Base of the Radical Ahl-e-Hadith Factions

It appears that none of the JMB and JMJB leaders and activists has a clear vision for the future of Islam in Bangladesh, nor any specific, well-thought-out plan of action to bring it about. The followers and foot soldiers of the two radical organizations also lack any ideological unity -- except the fact that most of them are doctrinally linked to the Ahl-e-Hadith school – and seem to have come together only during certain armed operations planned by their leaders. In many cases, as has been reported in the Bangladeshi press and verified by local law enforcement officials, those involved in smuggling of weapons and explosives, communicating messages from one area to another, and undertaking minor operations intended to unnerve the authorities, are not even JMB/JMJB regular activists; rather, they are mostly semi-educated, unemployed young men of no known Islamic tendencies or affiliations who are willing to take up such temporary assignments in exchange for a few hundred or a few thousand takas. According to the Joint Intelligence Task Force for interrogating Abdur Rahman and other the JMB activists arrested in March 2006, in several cities the August 17, 2005 bomb blasts were carried out by some rickshaw pullers who were paid Tk 300 to Tk 500 (about \$ 5 to \$ 8) , but they had no idea of what the Jamaatul Mujahidin was (*New Age*, Dhaka, 20 March 2006).

However, those who constitute the hardcore activists of the JMB/JMJB are carefully recruited, indoctrinated, and trained in clandestine operations. Although the initial recruitment of manpower came from among the several hundred veterans of the Afghan

Jihad spread over most of the northern districts and Sylhet, the bulk of volunteers/activists who joined these two organizations since 2002-2003 came from the Ahl-e-Hadith background and, especially, from the graduates of Ahl-e-Hadith affiliated 'Alia madrassas. Very few JMB/JMJB activists have come from the mainstream Ahl-e-Hadith Quomi madrassas, if at all. Most of the activists were recruited in neighborhood mosques after congregational prayers where initial contacts were made and, subsequently, relationships were consolidated by the local leaders/commanders of the JMB/JMJB. Another ready source for JMB manpower was the Jubo Sangha, the Ahl-e-Hadith Youth Movement, established by Dr. Ghalib as a part of his efforts to mobilize the Ahl-e-Hadith youth for religio-political activism. Abdur Rahman was able to lure many of the Jubo Sangha members to his activist and militant agenda by convincing them that "the Islamic revolution is just around the corner if only they are ready to act" (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, op. cit.).

In some cases, activists of the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Chhatra Shibbir (ICS), who did not approve of the Jamaat-e-Islami's participation in the democratic political process and its decision to join the BNP Alliance government in 2001, also found JMB/JMJB a place cut out for the realization of their radical ideas and approach to Islamic change. Thus, JMB chief Abdur Rahman's brother Aatur Rahman alias Sunny, the Chief of the Armed Wing of the JMB, was an active member of the ICS in Jamalpur. Several other activists in the JMB have also been identified as having past links with the ICS in Rajshahi, Jamalpur, Chittagong and Sylhet. The ICS leadership, especially since the country-wide bombing of August 2005, has denounced terrorism and has disassociated itself from what it describes as "some renegade and disgruntled ICS elements" who had long been formally expelled from the organization for "indiscipline" (Interview with Shamsheer Munir, President of the Dhaka University ICS, Dhaka, 7 January, 2006).

Interviews with the government officials, Ahl-e-Hadith leaders, and the journalists who have reported on the activities of the militants indicate that the main support base of the JMB is concentrated in Rajshahi and Khulna regions. The areas from where Abdur Rahman was able to recruit most of his followers include Satkhira, Khulna, Rajshahi, Comilla, Kushtia, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Ghazipur, Chittagong, Chapainawabganj, Jamalpur, Jaipurhat, Jhenaidah, Thakargaon, Dinajpur, Naogaon, Natore, Narsingdi, Nilphamari, Pabna, Bogra, Bagerhat, Mymensingh, Jessore, Lalmonirhat and Sirajganj. (It is important to note that almost all of these cities have a high concentration of Ahl-e-Hadith population). In an interview with the *Daily Star* in May 2005, Abdur Rahman boasted of having trained up to 10,000 full time activists across the country (as quoted in *Daily Star*, Dhaka, 2 March, 2006) – a figure that is vigorously contested by most observers, including the Bangladesh intelligence officials.

The fact that majority of the JMB/JMJB activists are from the northern districts of Bangladesh and that these districts have a large concentration of a minority sect – Ahl-e-Hadith – that may have been made to realize its relative deprivation in political power compared to other religious political groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami and the

Deobandi-oriented Islami Oyoko Jote, should also be seen along with another important fact: the northern districts have been the hardest hit areas as a result of the drying up of the Great Padma River in the wake of the construction of India's Farraka Barrage. Agriculture and fisheries have suffered enormously in these areas for at least last two decades because of the severe shortage of water coming downstream from India. More and more agricultural land is becoming waste land every year resulting in unproductive agriculture, unemployment, and increasing poverty. It should not be surprising, therefore, that a sense of religio-political alienation, sectarian particularism, and doctrinal righteousness combined with declining economic fortunes seem to have contributed to the vulnerability of many young, unemployed, poor Ahl-e-Hadith men to the radical religious rhetoric and options offered by the organizations such as JMB and JMJB.

The most important thing to note about the JMB and the JMJB, however, is not their power but the lack thereof, despite their ability to stage a spectacular scene of terrorist violence in August 2005. Not only that these organizations lack any social embeddedness in the larger Bangladeshi society, but they have also been roundly condemned by an overwhelming majority of the ulama and religious political groups. The mainstream Ahl-e-Hadith organizations, and even the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan of Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, have disassociated themselves from the terrorist violence perpetrated by the JMB and the JMJB. Hundreds of prominent ulama of Bangladesh of all schools of thought signed a fatwa condemning the August 2005 bombing and killing of judicial officials as "un-Islamic" and "deserving of the severest punishment" (Interview with Maulana Mukhlesurrahman). Most observers of Bangladesh politics agree that religiously-inspired violence as witnessed in the past couple of years may continue in some small measure as an irritant and a nuisance for the authorities, but it is doomed to extinction in a socio-political environment as inhospitable as that of Bangladesh. As Talukdar Maniruzzaman, arguably the most prominent political scientist of Bangladesh and an acute observer of his country's development, noted: "A fish, in order to survive, needs ocean, or at least a pond. The JMB fish has no water to swim ... no popular support. They have made a few splashes and that's it; they will have no impact on Bangladesh society" (Interview with Talukdar Maniruzzaman, Professor of Political Science, Dhaka University, Dhaka, 31 December 2005).

Ahl-e-Hadith Madrassas

Akhbar-e-Ahl-e-Hadith reports the existence of several dozen prominent Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Muslim Bengal in the 1920s, most of them in Calcutta and Northern Bengal. (No. 43, V. 16, 26 September 1919). The most prominent Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in North Bengal was run by Maulana Muhammad Bashiruddin Bengali in Dinajpur that was established sometime in the 1910s and produced a steady supply of prayer imams and khatibs for Ahl-e-Hadith mosques in North Bengal. However, Maulana Naushehravi lists only nine Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in East Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947 (Naushehravi, op.cit., pp. 158-62). But it is possible that his list included only those madrassas that were directly under the management of the Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith, East Pakistan and did not include the madrassas established by the Ahl-e-Hadith 'ulama in

their individual capacity. A report prepared by the Jamaat-e-Islami, East Pakistan in 1960 for the then Governor and Martial Law Administrator of East Pakistan, Lt. General Azam Khan, mentions more than fifty Ahl-e-Hadith Quomi and 'Alia madrassas, mostly in North Bengal ("A Proposal to Establish an Islamic University," Typed Ms., Jamaat-e-Islami, East Pakistan, 1960). Nevertheless, the number of Ahl-e-Hadith affiliated madrassas in East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, remained miniscule compared with both the Deoband-affiliated madrassas in the Quomi sector and the Brelvi-affiliated madrassas (known in Bangladesh today as "Hanafi" madrassas) in the 'Alia sector.

It is only in the early 1980s that we witness a considerable increase in the number of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Bangladesh. Several factors seemed to have contributed to the sudden upsurge in the number of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in the 1980s and in subsequent years. First, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the consequent sense of urgency on the part of the Saudis to "protect" the Sunni orthodoxy in South Asian Islam from the Shia religio-political influence of Imam Khomeini led to a generous outpouring of funds to their doctrinal counterparts – the Ahl-e-Hadith – in Bangladesh (as well as in Pakistan and India).



**A view of Al-Markaz-ul-Islami Madrassa of Dr. Ghalib in Rajshahi
(photo taken by the author, June 2000)**

Second, the pro-Islamic policies of both General Ziaur Rahman's and General H.M. Ershad's governments from the mid-1970s to the 1980s created a conducive political environment that facilitated the growth of Islamic activities and institutions, including the opening of new madrassas. Today, According to Dr. Muslehuddin, the Acting Amir of AHAB, there are close to 2,000 Ahl-e-Hadith Quomi and 'Alia madrassas of various sizes in Bangladesh. (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, op. cit.). About two hundred of them were established with direct assistance from the Saudi and Kuwaiti Islamic charities. Major Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas include: Al-Jamia al_Ahmadiya Salafiya, Satkhira; Al-Markazul Islami, Rajshahi and Bogra; Madrassa Muhammadiya Arabiya, Jatrabari, Dhaka; Madrassatal Hadith, Nazirabazar, Dhaka; Aramnagar 'Alia Madrassa, Jamalpur; Muhammadiya 'Alia Madrassa, Sirajganj; Dhamrai 'Alia Madrassa, Dhaka; Rasulpur 'Alia Madrassa, Narianganj; Korpai 'Alia Madrassa, Comilla; and Jagatpur 'Alia Madrassa, Comilla. It is important to note that 80% of the operating expenses of the 'Alia madrassas are paid by the government treasury.

One of the largest Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Bangladesh is al-Markazul-Islami al-Salafi in Rajshahi, located on the Airport Road in Nowadpara, a suburb of Rajshahi. The madrassa was established in 1981 and moved in a new, huge complex of buildings, funded entirely by the Kuwait-based NGO, Al Jamiyat al Ahya-al-Sunnah (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society), with which Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, the founder of the madrassa, had established contacts during his trips to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Author's interview with Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, 22 June, 2000). The madrassa today has more than eighty rooms of classrooms and faculty and administrative offices, and a hostel for students with 28 large rooms. The madrassa that started with less than a hundred students in 1981 today has more than 2,000 students with about 400 resident students. The rest of them are from nearby towns and villages and from Rajshahi city, many of them provided with school transport. Tuition is free but resident students pay TK 400 (about \$5.50) per month for board and lodging. In 2000, there were 160 students, mostly orphans, who were on full scholarship, paid from the funds received from "foreign donors" (interview with Dr. Ghalib, op. cit.). In January 2006, the number of orphan and poor resident students was 400 for which the same "foreign donors" were reportedly paying TK 1,000 (about \$16) per student per month (Interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, op. cit.).

The total annual budget which in 2000 was TK 2.5 million (about \$35,715) was more than TK 3.5 million in 2004 (\$45,915). There are 25 permanent teachers, a few of them sponsored and paid by Al-Harmain Islamic Foundation of Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Saudi Government, and Al Jamiyat al Ahya-al-Sunnah, Kuwait, which also has an office in Dhaka (Interview with Dr. Ghalib, op. cit.), It was not clear whether these foreign funds have continued after the arrest of Dr. Ghalib in January 2005, but Al-Harmain Islamic Foundation was banned from operating in Bangladesh in 2004 after it was declared a terrorist organization by the US Department of State.

While As-Saura gave cash money for salaries and other expenses, Al-Harmain and al Ahya-al-Sunnah also provided funding for the construction of new buildings "for orphans" (interview with Dr. Ghalib, op. cit.). According to Dr. Ghalib and his successor, Dr. Muslehuddin, all the recurring expenses of the madrassa – about TK 3.5 million – are

borne by donations, zakat and sadaqah by the local Ahl-e-Hadith community and “some Islamic NGOs” (interview with Dr. Ghalib, June 22, 2000; and interview with Dr. Muslehuddin, January 9, 2006).

Five teachers who receive their salaries from Saudi Arabia are all graduates of Medina University where they studied on Saudi Government scholarships. Seven of the madrassa teachers received their higher Islamic education in Jamia Salafiyya in Karachi, a well-known Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas of Pakistan. The rest of them are either graduates of other Bangladeshi Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas or are alumni of al-Markazul-Islami.

Al-Markaz is the “central madrassa of Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh,” which also controls six other satellite madrassas including the five large ones in Satkhira, Bogra, Joipurhat and Gaibandha, and Rajshahi city. The number of students in these satellite madrassas was more than 3,000 in 2000. Most of the expenses of these madrassas are borne by the local communities but “some financial aid is also provided by some foreign Islamic NGOs” (interview with Maulana Saeedur Rahman, Vice-Principal, al-Markaz al-Islami, June 22, 2000, Rajshahi). Al-Markazul Islami maintains close contacts with other Ahl-e-Hadith religious and educational establishments in West Bengal, India and Pakistan, as well as with the prominent Saudi Wahhabi ulama. This madrassa has served as an important source of manpower for Dr. Ghalib’s large network of religious and social welfare organizations and has afforded him a considerable influence within the Ahl-e-Hadith circles.

Concluding Observations

1 Ahl-e-Hadith, with its theocratic particularism and a highly exaggerated notion of its own role as a puritanical, religious reform movement, will continue to remain an important part of the religious landscape of Bangladesh. However, a section of the Ahl-e-Hadith’s stint in politics, and especially radical politics and militancy, has turned out to be both short-lived and disastrous for the rank and file of the community. The mainstream Ahl-e-Hadith community and leadership has now awakened to the need for wresting the leadership of the movement from the radicals and refocus their activities on their traditional religious concerns.

2. The transformation of the Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh from political quietism to political activism to militancy, that is, from Dr. Abdul Bari to Dr. Asadullah Ghalib to Sheikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqul Islam, was caused by multiplicity of factors: 1) Internal dynamics within the Ahl-e-Hadith movement in Bangladesh that first factionalized the movement and then led to the radicalization of the splinter groups; 2) the gradual weakening of hold over the movement by the old guard; 3) the political environment of Bangladesh during Ziaur Rahman’s and Ershad’s periods that encouraged Islamic political activities to counter the influence of secularly-oriented Awami League; 4) the rise of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Deobandi-oriented religio-political parties in the 1980 that showed a way to the politically ambitious elements within the Ahl-e-Hadith movement that they, too, could become a political force to be

reckoned with; 5) the international environment created by the Islamic revolution in Iran that prompted the Saudis to counter the Iranian influence in Muslim South Asia, and elsewhere, by mobilizing and patronizing their natural, doctrinal allies, the Ahl-e-Hadith, through generous funds, both from official and semi-official sources; 6) the culture of political violence in Bangladesh that seems to have encompassed all political spectrums – from religious to nationalist to secular; 7) the internecine conflict between the two main political parties, the Awami League and the BNP – that seems to have paralyzed the administrative structures, thus creating a fertile ground for militants; 8) the almost total ideological disorientation, and lack of social embeddedness and a well-defined class base of the Bangladeshi state also creates a space for militant ideological and political alternatives; and 9) finally, the existence of a large number of unemployed young men, mostly madrasa graduates from poor families, who have no prospects for any productive employment but are, at the same time, witness to highly ostentatious display of wealth and prosperity by corrupt officials, unscrupulous politicians, and *nouveau riche* businessmen. It is this large army of the poor, unemployed young men, many of them religiously-motivated as well, that were most vulnerable to the radical ideas of the JMB and JMJB that promised them quick solution to their existential problems, and justice in a cruel world.

3. Dr. Asadulla Ghalib, an ambitious “religious entrepreneur” and a “personal empire builder,” was planning eventually to launch his own Islamic political party using his extensive base of Ahl-e-Hadith affiliated networks. He believed that a solid Ahl-e-Hadith constituency in the northern districts of Bangladesh would place him at a relatively advantageous position vis a vis other Islamic and secular parties. Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan was thus a stepping stone for his larger political goal of creating a powerful bloc that could possibly play a critical role in the usually fractured politics of Bangladesh. Given these political ambitions, it is unlikely that Dr. Ghalib could have risked his political ambitions by involving himself with violence, or associating with those of the Ahl-e-Hadith school – Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai – who had clearly opted for violent ways. In fact, according to one report, it was Dr. Ghalib who persuaded Abdul Ghani, the President of the Jamiyat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith of Jamalpur, to expel Abdur Rahman from the organization on account of his radical views and militant inclinations (Interview with Ashraf Hussain, Editor, *Nautan Safar*, op. cit.).

4. As pointed out earlier, the Islamic militancy, as it manifested itself in the country-wide terrorist activities and the target assassinations of judicial officials, has been widely condemned by all sections of society, including all the prominent ulama of all schools of thought and the religious political parties. Not a single voice was raised in support of the leaders of the JMB and JMJB, not even from the Ahl-e-Hadith circles. In the absence of any social base of support even for their ideas, not to talk of their actions, these organizations, as Talukdar Maniruzzaman put it, remain “fish without a pond.”

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