The religious consciousness of the muslim minority in the muslim majority country: the case of Haidar Baba followers of Bangladesh

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Abstract: The research assesses religious consciousness as an explicit rhetoric of lived experiences of a group of minority Muslims living in the Muslim majority country, Bangladesh. It is a qualitative endeavor that reports and interprets the religious consciousness of the followers of late Zulfigar Haider Shah, aka “Haidar Baba”. The research argues that the religion of a particular minority group, when socially constructed, founded on the beliefs and ideas that are socially significant for the group members. Second, the resemblances of the lives of the key figures of the world religions signify the ontological foundation of the beliefs of the minority. Third, the mystic experiences by the followers are pivotal because it leads them to a realm of symbolic meaning by obscuring their harsh mundane lives. Finally, the epistemological framework of the beliefs is centered on believing the omnipotent presence after demise, finding a deep sense of peace around the shrine, and regarding the late saint as an intercede on behalf to be acceptable to God. Since the most prolific research communities of the developed countries often get less scope...
to examine the modes and mechanisms of the traditional reproduction of beliefs of the Muslim minorities, studying the followers of Haidar baba would be a reference to how the religious consciousness of the minority flourishes and survives.

Subjects: Islam; Qualitative Methods; Religion & Sociology

Keywords: Lived Islam; muslim minority; shrine veneration; ethnography; Bangladesh

1. Background

On 2 April 2014, the residents and the pedestrians of Mohammadpur’s Tajmahal Road witnessed a severe traffic gridlock. Mohammadpur is one of the busiest areas of one of the most densely populated city of the world. But population is not its most pronounced feature. Mohammadpur has Saath Gambuj Mosque (Seven Domed Mosque) built in 1680 AD, a gigantic madrasa (Muslim educational institutions) complex called Jamea Rahmania Arabia, Mausoleum of Bibi, a Shia Mosque, and the Geneva Camp—a colony of the stranded Pakistanis migrated during the India–Pakistan partition of 1947. Geneva Camp is the home of the trapped Bihari Shi'a Muslims who have no genuine hope of repatriation in Pakistan (Rahaman et al., 2020). The Shia’s often consider themselves as the victims of discrimination and the Sunni’s frequently denounce Shia as heretics; sometimes, that dispute intensified (Syed, 2016). Though sectarian conflicts among the Muslims in Bangladesh are not that pronounced, apparently, religion is, and more pronounced in the residence of Mohammadpur. For this residential cum commercial zone, where a variety of political or civil processions are often carried out, traffic congestion is not unusual.

The reason for 2 April 2014 traffic congestion was nothing but unusual; there were back-to-back clashes between a bunch of Madrasa students and the followers of Julfikar Ali, aka “Haidar Baba”. Late Julfikar Ali, in his ragged clothes, just began to walk one day with the reason nobody knows (bdnews24.com, 2014a). Soon he gathered significant followers who promoted him as their saint and become a source of enormous curiosity for the city dwellers. After his death on 13 March 2014, his tomb has become a center for the pilgrims. Most of his followers are the dwellers at the Geneva Camp (Sarkar, 2014). When his devotees were arranging a function near his grave, a football got inside and agitated them. Incidentally, the students of a local madrasa were playing with that ball. The devotees rebuked, the madrasa authorities protested; the clash erupted. Hundreds involved in the confrontation with sharp weapons and sticks and at least 50 severely injured; some five to seven people got a minor injury. The dispute continued till the local police got involved, fired blank shots and charged batons to disband the agitated commuters. The police deployed additional forces to avert further clash. Some pragmatists may consider it as the dysfunction of religion, and some others may see it as the consequence of the deviation from the true Islamic path.

Perhaps, this is how certain communities manifest their religious consciousness. About the event, the deputy commissioner of police of that zone said, “As this was a religious issue, we have to handle this situation with extra caution” (Sarkar, 2014). It is not unusual that religious issues always need to be handled with extra caution. While Muslims living in Urban areas like Mohammadpur reside in a clearly defined urban areas, they constitute a heterogeneous group that lacks the sense of belonging to the larger Muslim community of Bangladesh (Zaman, 1998). Though the people are overwhelmingly Muslim, religion and society in Bangladesh are intricately intertwined. With religious issues becoming increasingly important to politics, social development, and the state’s expanding role as a religious arbiter in recent decades, this complexity has multiplied many-fold (Riaz, 2020). As in any community, religion has left its influence not only by formal institutions but also through unofficial social customs (Uabra, 1992). There are people in every society who do not keep pace with the rest of the nation, whether it be in terms of religious or political progress; they adhere to the old ways, practices, and ideas that their ancestors held to be essential to their survival (Gomme, 2016). While some argue that Bangladesh is a country plagued by religious tensions of the highest kind (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020) and that a high level of communal intolerance as well as considerable evidence of sectarian intolerance is found (Fair & Patel, 2020),
not much is known about the modes and mechanisms of the traditional reproduction of beliefs of the Muslims with unorthodox perspectives.

The current study is a qualitative investigation into the religious beliefs and practices of followers of Haidar baba, with the goal of reporting and interpreting their religious consciousness by focusing on the meaning and importance of tangible things relating to Haidar baba. Religious consciousness is a state of mind in which one is aware of one's place in relation to God and the Holy others; it is an awareness of one's most fundamental self, and people who have this sense of unconditional tolerance and respect can only be described as having this sense of being blessed (Otto & Harvey, 2018). When a particular minority group's religion is socially constructed, the research hypothesized that the religious consciousness of that group is established on beliefs and ideas that are socially meaningful to its members. Second, the similarities between the lives of the world's major religious luminaries testify to the ontological underpinning of the minority's views; the spiritual experiences of the adherents are crucial because it obscures the harsh reality of their daily life. Finally, the epistemological framework of the beliefs is built on believing in the omniscient presence beyond death, experiencing a deep sense of serenity in the vicinity of the shrine, and seeing the late saint as an intercessor on one's behalf in order to be acceptable to God.

By examining the religious experiences of the Haidar baba followers, the study offers a distinctive understanding about the religious lives of the Muslim minority living in Muslim majority country. The study echoes lived religion approach that theorizes religion in modernity by focusing on how it is practiced (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020). It is useful to differentiate the personal experience of religious people from the prescribed religion of beliefs and practices that are institutionally established (Hall, 2020). This way of looking at religion is important for sociological analysis since it offers a subjectively grounded conception of religious experience and expression (McGuire, 2008). The nature of official religion (that is, the religion based on the scripture and its interpretations) and how various religious organizations promote religion are integral to the overall picture. Conversely, the lived religion framework allows one to understand contemporary religious practices by reflecting on the religious experiences of the people; the nuances, obvious inconsistencies, heterogeneity, and untidiness of the variety of religious activities that people find relevant are the primary focus (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020).

2. Conceptualizing religious consciousness

Religious consciousness is a dialectical synthesis between the subjective perception of the conventionally coded contexts and real social experiences; this is the dialectic whereby the saint’s very personhood is appropriated by signifying him as a mystical symbol of savior (P Berger, 1969). Muslims' religious consciousness often inhabits in contemplative rather than rational comprehension (Hamdan, 2010). With contemplative awareness, the adherents calibrate their view of God and themselves in accordance with reality, and the fundamental tenants of their religion becomes secondary (Labrie, 2006). Hence, religion is not merely a set of beliefs, but a state of consciousness and experiences in which one possesses an awareness of God or other holy beings (Stone, 1978). It is not only a feeling or opinion but encompasses a powerful sentiment that made the utterly rational people behave irrationally (Hamilton, 2002). The sectarian conflict among the Muslims, whether minor or major, is about how the ontological foundation and epistemological framework of their beliefs constructed the differences; “because people can believe they are very different when they are not” (Joseph, 2008, p. 553).

Each society renders its cultural framework for daily life where religious expression is constructed and religious behavior is manifested (Anjum, 2007). Daily life is loaded with repetitive routines, such as ways to work, to walk and to sit, speak and act, to express emotions, and so on that are usually intended to be functional ends; however, for many people, everyday life is unquestionably affected by embodied practices, whereby the sacred is made vividly real to the external world (RR Williams, 2010). The person can experience the reality of his or her religious world instead of simply thinking or believing in it. To make religious realms true and present to the
senses, religious consciousness is essential, even though they are occasionally detached from the world of daily life (Orsi, 2010). While religious consciousness takes form in the representations embedded in the perception of the adherents (Marx & Engels, 1967), differentiation occurs through ordinary life through socialization, family systems, and a variety of other social structures in both systematic and sporadic means (Joseph, 2008). Religion is explicitly related to the exercise of specific group interests (Marx & Engels, 1970), and religious life is rooted in the functional constitution of everyday life, part and parcel of the mechanism or the “ideological apparatus” by which external sociocultural forms construct the beliefs (Althusser, 1971).

Religion-as-lived is founded more on religious consciousness than religious ideas, and as a result, it often lacks objectivity (McGuire, 2016). Nonetheless, religious practices require a practical coherence to be effective in the daily life the adherents who can somewhat achieve some of their desired ends, such as cure, improving one’s relationship with another person, or harvesting sufficient food. This realistic coherence explains the very common religion’s fundamental logic, which might otherwise seem irrational and superstitious (McGuire, 2016). Even though logical coherence is crucial to the intellectual mind, only a small and unrepresentative proportion of ordinary individuals seek to achieve a tight consistency among their wide-ranging views, opinions, experiences, values, practices, and behavior. In the same vein, the apparent discrepancies between religious ways of thinking and rational ways of thinking are mainly concerned with intellectuals, and not much of concerned for the believers (McGuire, 2008).

Therefore, religious consciousness can be analyzed both in terms of the driving powers of its socially constructed origins and the transformative potential of its collective practitioners (Ammerman, 2014). A proper conception of religious consciousness as collective enterprise includes both of the contexts where the pragmatic integration of beliefs becomes an important issue for modern social study (Ammerman, 2014).

3. Methods

3.1. Study design
The present research is a qualitative endeavor that reports and interprets the religious consciousness of the followers of Haidar baba. Like the social constructionists, the study emphasizes on how their social experiences construct the meaning and importance of tangible materials related to Haidar baba. To address the ontological foundation of the religious beliefs related to Haidar baba, the study considered the secondary sources. Information collected by the ethnographic fieldwork was used to interpret the epistemological framework of the followers. The study analyzes (1) the reports published in the daily newspapers, magazines, websites; (2) the narratives of the pedestrian who has the first-hand experience of witnessing Haidar baba; (3) the words the Haidar baba followers used to describe their social experiences at his shrine; (4) the acts they do, and the manner they follow while interacting with one another at the memorial. Overall, it is an ethnographic research that aims to portray a version of Islam as socially constructed. Though the ethnographic method is not heavily used in sociological analysis, its usage in history of sociological research is eminent; the Chicago school studied “deviant subcultures” in urban America in the 1930s. To some extent, and in a limited sense, studying Haidar Baba and his pilgrims can be treated as a studying deviant subculture.

3.2. Study setting
Haidar baba is engraved at a corner of a graveyard where there is a limited option to develop a full-fledged shrine. At the north-east corner of the local cemetery of Mohammadpur, a tiny teen-shaded shrine complex is built; it is a simple pilgrim center where devotees venerate the tomb. Adjacent to the tomb, some spaces left to pray the regular Şalât. In front of that tiny complex, some open spaces reserved for the devotees to meditate, venerate, and rest. At the time of Urs (the death anniversary), the pilgrims gather and enjoy live devotional songs arranged by the shrine committee. Close to the graveyard, there is a tiny room of a four-storied building where Haider baba used to live; the room emerged as a memorial.
Image 1. The teen-shaded shrine of Haidar Baba at the north-east corner of the local cemetery of Mohammadpur
Photo Credit: Surveyor.

Image 2. Devotees seated inside the small shrine complex
Photo Credit: Surveyor.
The memorial premise is a small room, where hardly 50 persons can sit together. There are some chairs and a few other regularly used things partitioned by glass. Among the regular things, there are some of his old clothes, a couple of prayer mats, few teacups, a couple of watches, flowers made by plastics, and a picture of Haidar Baba. All these things are under lock and key, protected as something valuable. But the prime focus of that premise is the chair covered by a red cloth and placed at the center. Some garlands made of plastic are on the chair to signify the glory of it.

3.3. Data collection
The study examines the praxis, experience, and expression of everyday religion by the followers of Haidar baba. The study gathered data from the people who venerate the shrine, and from the people who spend a significant amount of their times at the memorial. Like the most ethnographic research, the present study made a considerable use of participant observations but as a pure observer not directly taking part in action at the memorial. To reduce biases, the employed ethnographer did not intrude in the research context and used only unobtrusive measures where no formal measurement instrument was introduced to collect the data. Since studies as such often lack the reliability, the study triangulated the findings with (1) semi-structured interviews at the shrine, (2) ordinary informal conversations at the memorial, and (3) the available relevant reports from the secondary sources such as newspapers, the bloggers, and webpages.

The semi-structured interview schedule sought a general profile of the pilgrims; (1) who venerates the shrine, (2) how they know about it, (3) with who they usually visit, (4) how often they visit, (5) how much time they spend, (6) whether they contribute any money, and (7) any other things as such. It included some structured questions like the degree of influence of their religion in their everyday lives, such as on (1) decision making, (2) Apparel, (3) Food, (4) Beverage, (5) social associations. Some questions were formulated by reviewing the previous studies on the pilgrims in the shrine (cf. Abbas et al., 2020; Pinto, 1989; Rasmussen, 2011; Rehman, 2012; Samuel & Rozario, 2012; Umashankar, 2015) to understand the structure of the beliefs on Haidar baba.
shrine. That includes whether (1) the deceased Haidar baba can hear their wish, (2) had a good relationship with the prophet of Islam, (3) can solve anyone’s problem, (4) can save in afterlife (salvation). About the shrine, it was asked that whether they consider (1) devotees should wash exactly as they wash for prayer, before entering the shrine, (2) the angels are moving around this shrine, (3) Allah likes this shrine, and (4) this shrine can be part of Allah’s heaven. In addition, how often they (1) pray, (3) read holy scripts, and (4) listen to religious discussions were also been recorded. The structured questions of the interview schedule used mostly 6-point Likert scale format, where the elicited responses were self-reporting but asked and recorded by the interviewers.

The contents reported by the secondary sources were analyzed and interpreted to construct the life and demise of Haidar baba. The tale of Haidar baba signifies ontological foundations by which particular form of dominance is inscribed in conceptions of the dignity and competitiveness of him among his followers. The discussions at the memorial were recorded using a digital audio recorder,
and later transcribed and translated from Bangla to English. These discussions were interpreted as the dialectic synthesis between the subjective perception and objective reality to unveil the religious consciousness inhabited among the devotees. In addition, the frequencies of the responses collected by the semi-structured interviews at the shrine were analyzed to report the epistemology of their beliefs and practices.

3.4. Participants & ethical consideration
The study recorded the narrations of the chief patron of the Haidar baba memorial, a devotee who spent a significant amount of her time with Haidar baba until his demise, and the chief caretaker of the memorial. In addition, about 31 pilgrims, 20 males and eleven females, were interviewed with the semi-structured questionnaire at the shrine. The age of pilgrims ranges from 18 years to 74 years; one-fourth of them have no formal education, and another one-fourth of them only have completed their primary education. About 8 of the 31 pilgrims never went to any formal educational institutions, and 4 of the 31 pilgrims have completed their master's degree. Most of the pilgrims live in the adjacent areas of the shrine; half of the interviewed participants were married, some 2 were widowed. Five out of eleven females are homemakers, and most male pilgrims are not employed in any respectable occupation. The ethnographer and interviewers explained the purpose of the research before collecting data, took proper consent before recording their narrations and debriefed of what they have recorded.

4. Results

4.1. The religious significance of the tale of Haidar Baba- the ontological foundation
When a group’s religious beliefs become part of its cultural heritage, they take on a distinct identity by establishing a set of firmly established narratives (Magnani & Bertolotti, 2011). Adherents feel compelled, whether consciously or unconsciously, to replicate their own worldview in order to correct what they perceive as a subjectivist bias in current views on social actions; hence, any contradictions leave no mark on their religious consciousness (Griffin, 2018). Legend has it that the forefather of Zulfigar Haider Shah was the merchants came from Iran and settled in Chittagong. Grandfather Ramzan Ahmed settled in Dhaka, and father Manjurul Hossain was the permanent settler of the old town. Zulfigar Haider Shah was born on 25 December 1923 at Jahuritola in Nawabpur, Dhaka (Meraj, 2020). His father died before he was born and lost his mother at four. Orphan Haider baba was raised by his grandfather. He completed his higher secondary education in Dhaka and admitted to Aligarh University in India for higher studies. He completed his Master’s in English and Arabic Literature, and came back to Dhaka in 1956. He got married to Farida Banu in 1957; he was the father of three sons and a daughter. His regular residence was in Mirpur. He had always been a voracious reader, preferably the religious texts. His occupational history started as an administrative officer in the famous Adamji Jute Mill and later worked for a range of famous local factories. Around 1970s, his mind began to change; he could barely concentrate on the earthy activities. He devoted most of his times at religious activities. After his wife's demise in 1974, his asceticism became apparent. He started walking. Sometimes, he walked all day and night without a proper destination. Around 1980s, his presence on the road got people’s attention. Many used to laugh and make fun; he seldom replied; he walked and walked. Gradually, people began to perceive that spirituality had emerged within him. People started crowding around, and he became “Haider Baba” from Haider Shah. Mostly, he meditated and was busy in prayers. People noticed that he could guess the problems that the surrounding people brought to him. He often asked them to pray Şalāt (regular structured prayers performed by Muslims facing at the direction of the Kaaba), and people believed that obeying his command solve their problems. Soon, he emerged as a charismatic figure. A recent report is published more about the life of Haidar Baba (cf., Meraj, 2020).

Around the early 1980's, he stopped talking and stopped eating any heavy food. His apparel remained unchanged day after day and found to have no interest in anything. It seems like his only job was to walk, and nothing but walk—walk in Dhaka city, and outside. Around nineties, he
was seen to roam around the Taj Mahal Road in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area. Noticing this, the locals made a place, much like a small room in front of the local Eidgah Mosque; the place became his most temporal address. The pilgrims gathered early to walk with him; they often bought a range of foods that Haidar baba hardly eats. The poor and disadvantaged were not the only pilgrims; there were the rich and the affluent—some with strong political power. When he walked, devotees followed. Some devotees took the responsibilities to clear the path for baba and some were busy to make a safe passage for those who wanted to walk with him. Haidar Baba had been walking in the heart of this city for over 30 years until the end of his life.

The mystic experiences of the followers around the saviors are pivotal because it leads them to a realm of symbolic meaning by obscuring the conscious presence of reality (Elias, 2000). From an empirical point of view, Haidar baba was an elderly person who was distracted from the normal flow of life for some unknown reason and immersed himself in the habit of walking all around all day long. He was “seemingly very clad old man with a bushy beard and mustache was lying on the ground leaning against the wall; much of his body-parts were exposed, and the thick layer of dirt on his body that turned black apparently manifested that he had not been cleaning himself for a long time” (Basu, 2010). His followers, the people of distinct classes and professions, left their normal flow of life and wondered around Haidar Baba. Several men and women surrounded him with a variety of food. Some were very busy of waving with any means they could have to create a modest current of air that could give some comfort to Haidar Baba. His followers were extreme devotees, always respectful, always cautious of not disrespecting him of any sort. The road was the most authentic address of Haidar Baba, and there was no pause in his aimless walking—on and off—some interval. Behind him, there was always a caravan of pilgrims—some joined, some departed, but there were always some who walked with him (Basu, 2010). Walking with him was the religion-in-action by which the people construct their religious world. Religion, in this vein, is “not about practice rather than ideas, but about ideas, gestures, imaginings, all as media of
engagement with the world” (Orsi, 2003; xxii). If we consider the ordinary tale of Haidar baba, we will notice how he is symbolized with divinity.

There are some remarkable features in the tale of Haidar baba. First, his ancestors were from Iran, considered being the common birth places of the South Asian Sufis. Second, he was born on the day Jesus (in Islam Prophet Isä ibn Maryam) was born. Third, like the prophet Muhammad (SM)—the founder of Islam, Haidar baba was born in a Merchant family, lost his father before his birth, lost his mother before reaching five, raised by his grandfather and got married around age 25. Fourth, like Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, he found no interest in the earthy matters and chose the life of an ascetic by walking aimlessly.

The episode of the demise of Haidar Baba shows that religious consciousness is not merely a subjective manifestation. It is more of a lived experience than a cognitive experience, because individuals collectively construct their religious environments by frequently exchanging vivid memories of the intersubjective reality (Orsi, 2003). Religious belief is not just an activity in the mind of a person, and it needs concrete social support as “plausibility structures” to preserve the subjective reality (PL Berger, 1967). This is how religion ceases being a regular life phenomenon and unfolds into a disputed social phenomenon. Haidar Baba died on 13 March 2014, at 94. When the news of his death spread, thousands of devotees rushed to the Eidgah next to Taj Mahal Road to be part of Salāt al-Janāzah. Eidgah is the usual open-air enclosed ground reserved for Salāt al-Eid, the special prayers as part of celebrating the two biggest Islamic festivals. It is not unusual that Salāt al-Janāzah, the prayer as part of the Islamic funeral rituals, performed in the congregation to seek pardon for the deceased and all dead Muslims, is arranged in an Eidgah, but what was unusual that a large segment of the gathered devotees began demanding to bury him in the middle of Eidgah. Some others wished to engrave him at the Taj Mahal Road cemetery next to the ground, while quite a few among his relatives were interested to engrave him at Mirpur Buddijibi Koborsthcan, the largest and most-known cemetery under Dhaka City Corporation. Before his deceased body reached the ground, a clash broke out among the devotees on the decision of where to bury him. The conflict intensified when a group of very enthusiastic devotees started digging graves in the middle of the ground (bdnews24.com, 2014b). A group of agitated locals joined the conflict to protest the engraving of him at the center of Eidgah. Eventually, the police came to take control of the situation. In the presence of numerous law-enforcing agents, Ghusi al-Mayyah (a simple ritual involving bathing and shrouding the body of the deceased before the Salāt al-Janāzah) took place.

Many devotees were seen collecting the water used for Ghusi al-Mayyah from the field and applying it to their heads, considering it holy water (bdnews24.com, 2014b). Thousands of people participated in his Šalāt al-Janāzah in the presence of a large number of police, and with the presence of a range of law enforcing agencies, he was entombed in the north-east corner of the local cemetery of Mohammadpur. Devotees continue to gather on every Thursday, and on the day of his demise to commemorate his death anniversary. The death anniversary of a Sufi saint, known as Urs—an Arabic word literal means wedding), is celebrated with enthusiasm by the devotees. Devotees are in a festive mood, they sing, they dance, because they believe that Haidar Baba as lover of God were finally meeting each other. It is not usual that festivity is taking place next to a graveyard. A daily newspaper published the detail of his demise (bdnews24.com, 2014b).

4.2. The structure of beliefs of Haidar baba followers—the epistemological framework
The epistemological framework of religious beliefs determines the objective structures of social relations that assume the cultural form of commonality and point of departure (Hill et al., 2000). It is the followers’ semantic and syntactic values and the significance that they gain in their social sense by their positioning in relation to Haidar Baba Shrine. At the memorial, the pilgrims often sit in front of the chair, do not talk, few often close eyes to mediate, and leave the place. Occasionally, some devotees donate some money in the donation box placed outside the glass-partition. Hardly anyone brings any flowers, or none have seen anyone becoming very emotional or crying while
they were in the room. The pilgrims do not talk loud; neither have they bowed in front of the chair. Some showed respect to the chair in such a way that they were seeing Haidar baba sitting on it.

“I saw him walking in many places around the world; I saw him when I was in Saudi Arabia, when I was in Darjeeling, and when I was in Australia. I am talking about his omnipresence when he was alive. One day, when I was in Darjeeling, and going to a place by bus, I saw him walking. I know it was not possible because he was possibly staying in Bangladesh. It was pouring, but I know what I saw. My wife was just beside me, but she could not see him. I realize, not everyone can see, only the lucky devotees!” the retired engineer and the owner of the four-storied building where the memorial is located, was sharing his experience with Haidar baba. He is the usual chief patron of the Urs. He continued, “Many devotees saw him when they were at the Dhaka international airport to leave the country to search a better life in the west. The devotees feel he is there to bid farewell. Now, I often see him in my dreams!”

A caretaker of the government school in Mohammadpur was the most frequent visitor of the memorial. After her regular work at the school, she spends much of her time at the memorial by sitting just beside the empty chair where Haidar Baba used to sit. She was poor, and she had a strong desire that her daughter could finish at least the primary level of education. “One-day Baba told me not to worry, because my daughter will finish not only the primary education but will have a master’s degree. And you know what, my daughter, indeed, completed master’s level education. This is all because of Baba!” She felt Haidar baba’s presence in every aspect of her life, even after his demise. He saved her on countless occasions. “Many of us have not always seen Baba praying his five times a day, but whenever the Adhan (the Islamic call to prayer) is there, he insisted us to pray!” she continued, “Baba is not an ordinary person; he is special. And when he was not in a good mood, he talked in colloquial speech where some words are less formal. But he is no ordinary person, and it was completely okay with us.” She continued, “One day, a woman came to Baba crying; her son was in critical condition because of the dengue fever. Baba gave her son some water, and it was not surprising that the son began to recover henceforth”.

A 55-year-old fellow is the chief caretaker of the memorial. He hardly leaves the premise and rarely goes to mosque even for his usual prayer. He feels good to pray in the room. He feels that his life is usually problem-free because of his devotion to Haidar baba. He said, “I was always around him when he was alive! Though he is not alive now, but I felt his presence! He is always protecting many. There are many enemies out there who want to vandalize the place and destroy all the things here. Many times, others want to rob the key of this room. But I was, as always, protected, and nothing could harm me.”

Shrines are places where the interplay between the subjective perception and objective reality experienced by the devotees constructs themselves as religious beings (Fazalbhoy, 2005). “Shrines are significant because they are a kind of inversion or negation of the society that surrounds them” (Samuel & Rozario, 2012, p. 290). Haidar baba shrine veneration is a collective activity by the pilgrims, mostly visiting the shrines with their family members, but sometimes they visit alone. Most of interviewed pilgrims visit once or twice a week and spend less than an hour in every visit. Only a few contribute some money for the benefit of the shrine. About half of the interviewed pilgrims seek mental peace, and one-fourth of them venerate the shrine to resolve family-related issues. Not that they found their wishes have been materialized very often. However, most of them firmly believed that the deceased Haidar baba can hear their wishes. Most of the pilgrims believe to some degree that the deceased baba can work as a conduit to fulfill anyone’s dream. Some 7 of 31 interviewed strongly believed that Allah likes the shrine, but hardly anyone recites holy Quran in the shrine of Haidar Baba. They are not that committed to the regular five-time prayers. About half of the pilgrims perceive that their religious beliefs extremely influence their decision making, some eight of them do not consider that their beliefs have anything to do with what they wear, and some one-third of them feel that their religious beliefs have an extreme influence on their food preferences. One-third of the pilgrims have no firm
conviction about the role religion plays in their social contacts. Please consider Appendix for the detail questions and the responses.

5. Discussion
The matter of faith is the “Conscious imagination”, which mediates all social activities and manifests itself through the pragmatic concern and social awareness of adherents (R Williams, 1977). But how this conscious imaginations and individual religious expressions are shaped (the ontological foundation) by their social experience? How do the shared meaning, learned practices, and borrowed imageries (epistemological framework) construct religious consciousness? To address the questions, the present research focuses on the pragmatic and semantic aspects of the religious experiences of Haidar Baba followers. First, by analyzing the secondary sources available related to Haidar Baba, the research addresses the ontological foundation of their beliefs. Second, the research studies the social environment of the Haidar baba dargah (Persian word, meaning shrine), his memorial, the narratives centered on him, and the religious consciousness of his followers to make sense of the epistemological significance of their religious actions. The research assessed the religious consciousness as an explicit rhetoric of lived experiences of a group of Muslims by interpreting the role of the holy man and his sacred space where his adherents experience their religious endeavor.

The research narrates a recent form of lived religion by studying the case of Zulfigar Haider Shah, aka “Hata Baba”, and argues that religion of the people, when socially constructed, founded on the beliefs and ideas that are socially significant. First, the life of Haidar baba, from the narrators’ point, is signified by the resemblances of the key figures in world religion. It is irrelevant, whether the information is real or untrue, because “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). The perception of a situation prompts the person to act; though this is not an objective interpretation, but hardly any objective interpretation required by the believers to believe on something. Behavior is influenced by how people perceive a situation; albeit whether there is an objectively correct interpretation is not of immediate concern, the intent is to aid individuals’ behavior. It hardly matters how the pragmatic others are remarking them or their saint, it only matters how they are interpreting the significance of their beliefs. Second, the devotees collecting the water used for Ghwash al-Mayyah of Haidar Baba signifies the beliefs on the sacramental use of water, known to be Aab-i Shifaa, literally, the water that heals. Traditionally, the shia’s dissolve the dust of Karbala in water and drink by considering it the healing water (Aab-i Shifaa) that can cure illness, both spiritual and physical (Virani, 2007). In most religious traditions, water is sanctified by various distinctive rituals, and elevated as sacred that purifies body and mind. Third, since the late 1980s, scholarly works on the shrines proliferated, and on most occasions, the beliefs of the devotees are similar. For instance, pilgrims believe that although he is no longer alive, but he is “most certainly present” everywhere (Pinto, 1989); they seek blessings by getting physical proximity to the tomb (Rasmussen, 2011) and “finding deep sense of peace” (Rehman, 2012); the deceased Sufi can “resolve the problem of everyday life” (Abbas et al., 2020) because he is the “intercede on behalf to be acceptable to God” (Umashankar, 2015).

Fourth, the memorial of Haidar baba resemblances somewhat “wayside shrine” where some chairs and few other regularly used things partitioned by glass; those things are venerated by the pilgrims, as it represents the embodiment of an abstract or intangible power, regardless of its inherent simplicity. The memorial requires no rigid structure of rituals, and pilgrims venerate these objects rather informally (Stauth & Schielke, 2008). Transforming the memorial into a sacred site, however, is strongly tied to the question of how sacredness in various Muslim contexts is constructed (Stauth & Schielke, 2008). Sacredness is connected to the collective tradition of giving the physical form a special significance (Lagdaf, 2020). Specific practices of sanctifying a place are intensified to maneuver through the social complexities; this process is driven both by religious references and by the social actors’ context-related daily life with their particular economic, cultural, and social dimensions (Desplat, 2012). Fifth, the chair covered by the red cloth and placed at the center of the
memorial is significant; metaphorically, a chair is a throne—a seat of power, and the seat of the soul, thereby, a part of introspective judgment. The chair is a symbol of the owners’ religious and spiritual attitudes. The chair transmits a sense of serenity to the social space through its religious connection; it is a visible embodiment of self-actualization (Koltun-Fromm, 2010).

The findings lead to one critical question; How to deal with the “reality” of the experiences of followers of Haidar Baba that run counter the orthodox understandings of the essential traits of Muslims? This challenges the social scientists and forces them “to rethink fundamental conceptualizations of what we study and how we study it” (McGuire 2008, 12). One way to interpret the religion is to go beyond of “religion-as-prescribed” and emphasize how religion is socially constructed, which calls for an exploration of the historical origins of their beliefs (McGuire, 2008). After all, “the religious person is the one acting on his or her world in the inherited, improvised, found, constructed idioms of his or her religious culture” (Orsi, 2003, p. 173). “Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs and morals. It is a tradition” (Asad, 1986, p. 14). Islam in south Asian countries seems to have been essentially a holy man Islam (Trimingham, 1998). Islam of the marginalized class was historically centered on venerating the shrines and following the Sufis who are not the Gnostics but the miracle workers, who, by the divine bliss, can solve their problems (Elias, 2000). For their closeness to the masses, their voluntary poverty and their ascetic mode of life, the Sufis often received greater respect than an official expert on Islam, and thereby the authorities or the affluent tried to get their assistance to their functional end as well (Suvorova, 2005).

The epistemological framework of the followers of any religion is not totally conscious, but not always unconscious; it includes the reciprocity of the adherent’s subjective interpretation of the objective context to consolidate the existing social structure and provide a basis of contestation or change (Alston, 2014). The followers continuously try to restore the coherence of their lived world in the face of people’s increasing disillusionment of venerating the shrines in modernity. This is driven by complex contradictions inherent in the specific historical constituents imposed on them. To reconcile with the social conditions, regular shrine veneration becomes more than regular repetition. The epistemology of the religious beliefs and practices, whether of simple or more complex structures, exhibits both reaffirmation and agitation, to replicate their religiosity (Yandell, 1994). Shrines are the places where the simultaneous replication and transformation of historical structures is especially pronounced (Elias, 2000). Apparently, in such circumstances, transition and opposition become the reality formed among bearers of distinct cultural types (Elias, 2000).

6. Conclusion
There is a transcendental reality in every religious consciousness that cannot be understood solely by focusing on orthodox beliefs and practices, because Islam and Muslims are not synonymous, and they are far from static and mutually exclusive entities. Because of the democratic transitions of the last few decades, proliferation of state-supported religious ideology and the secularization of Bangladesh’s educational institutions, those who adhere to dominant religious ideologies frequently disregard and demean the religiosity of minority sects such as the followers of Haidar Baba. While most of time, this denigration is difficult to comprehend from outside, sometimes it manifests itself violently in the socio-political arena. Commonly, in its everyday occurrence, it is despoiled by the educated Muslims, theologians or otherwise, who regard it as evidence of epiphenomenon, often invariably and effortlessly suppressed by the Muslim majority. Nonetheless, venerating the saints such as Haidar Baba is still extensively and devoutly observed by a group of Muslims. Many factors contribute to the continued veneration of saints, but one of the most important is that their assigned attributes do not draw on Islamic theology but refer to culturally particular earthly and metaphysical requirements, many of which are agrarian in origin.

People’s cultural and spiritual identities are formed in part through their participation in religious endeavor, and studying the religious consciousness of the Muslim minority of Bangladesh is a way of promoting a more critical understanding of modern religiosity. Comprehensive understanding of
lived religion’s fundamental logic requires an informed empathy and empathetic understanding of an active and broad synergy between tradition and religion. There are several ways in which they might change, fuse and reinforce each other, and also break apart. Understanding Sufi veneration helps us understand how cultures and religions interact, as well as the historical factors that have shaped our religious institutions today. The sociological study of religion in the contemporary world has much to gain by studying Sufi veneration, a developing area with much to offer in terms of empirical inquiry and theoretical development. An important outcome of the present research is an in-depth understanding of how social context influences and shapes religious consciousness, particularly those who belong to a minority sect.

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### Appendix

| Table A1. Demographic profile of the respondents |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Factor** | **Category** | **Frequency** | **Percent** |
| Gender     | Male         | 20            | 64.5        |
|            | Female       | 11            | 35.5        |
|            | Total        | 31            | 100.0       |
| Age group  | 18 to 29     | 12            | 38.7        |
|            | 30 to 39     | 13            | 41.9        |
|            | 40 to 49     | 1             | 3.2         |
|            | 50 to 59     | 3             | 9.7         |
|            | 60 and Above | 2             | 6.5         |
|            | Total        | 31            | 100.0       |
| Level of Education | No Formal Education | 8 | 25.8 |
|            | Primary Education | 7 | 22.6 |
|            | Secondary Education | 2 | 6.5 |
|            | Higher Secondary | 3 | 9.7 |
|            | Graduation    | 7             | 22.6        |
|            | Post-Graduation | 4 | 12.9 |
|            | Total         | 31            | 100.0       |
| Material Status | Single | 10 | 32.3 |
|            | Married       | 16            | 51.6        |
|            | Widowed       | 2             | 6.5         |
|            | Others        | 3             | 9.7         |
|            | Total         | 31            | 100.0       |
| Employment | Business      | 1             | 3.2         |
|            | Day labour    | 1             | 3.2         |
|            | Retired Engineer | 1 | 3.2 |
|            | Private Services | 7 | 22.6 |
|            | Housewife     | 5             | 16.1        |
|            | Sales Person  | 1             | 3.2         |
|            | Self-employed | 1             | 3.2         |
|            | Shop-keeper   | 1             | 3.2         |
|            | Student       | 4             | 12.9        |
|            | Unemployed    | 7             | 22.6        |
|            | Rickshaw puller | 2 | 6.5 |
|            | Total         | 31            | 100.0       |
Table A2. General pattern of visitation

| Factor                        | Responses     | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------|
| Source of information         |               |           |         |
| Family                        | 16            | 51.6      |         |
| Friends                       | 3             | 9.7       |         |
| Relatives                     | 3             | 9.7       |         |
| Neighbors                     | 4             | 12.9      |         |
| Non-specific                  | 5             | 16.1      |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |
| Associated Pilgrims           |               |           |         |
| Family                        | 11            | 35.5      |         |
| Friends                       | 7             | 22.6      |         |
| Relatives                     | 1             | 3.2       |         |
| Colleagues                    | 1             | 3.2       |         |
| Neighbors                     | 3             | 9.7       |         |
| Alone                         | 8             | 25.8      |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |
| Frequency to visit            |               |           |         |
| Once or twice a week          | 12            | 38.7      |         |
| Once or twice a month         | 10            | 32.3      |         |
| At least once in Three months | 2             | 6.5       |         |
| At least once in every Six months | 1     | 3.2       |         |
| At least once a year          | 4             | 12.9      |         |
| Not remember when last visit  | 2             | 6.5       |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |
| Time Spend                    |               |           |         |
| Less than an hour             | 10            | 32.3      |         |
| More than an hour but less than two hours | 9 | 29.0 |         |
| 2 to 3 hours                  | 7             | 22.6      |         |
| More than 5 hours             | 5             | 16.1      |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |
| Reason of Visitation          |               |           |         |
| To get mental peace           | 16            | 51.6      |         |
| To solve Family disputes      | 7             | 22.6      |         |
| For good health of Family     | 4             | 12.9      |         |
| For forgiveness of Sin        | 4             | 12.9      |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |
| Wish Fulfilled                |               |           |         |
| Never                         | 2             | 6.5       |         |
| Sometimes                     | 11            | 35.5      |         |
| Usually                       | 6             | 19.4      |         |
| Often                         | 6             | 19.4      |         |
| Very often                    | 6             | 19.4      |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |
| Economically Contributed      |               |           |         |
| Never                         | 3             | 9.7       |         |
| Sometimes                     | 10            | 32.3      |         |
| Usually                       | 10            | 32.3      |         |
| Often                         | 4             | 12.9      |         |
| Very often                    | 4             | 12.9      |         |
| Total                         | 31            | 100.0     |         |

(Continued)
| Factor                     | Responses | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Amount Contributed         | Less than 50 | 8         | 25.8    |
|                            | 50 to 100    | 7         | 22.6    |
|                            | 100 to 500   | 5         | 16.1    |
|                            | 500 to 1000  | 8         | 25.8    |
|                            | Above 100    | 3         | 9.7     |
|                            | Total        | 31        | 100.0   |
| Request to visit others    | Never        | 2         | 6.5     |
|                            | Sometimes    | 17        | 54.8    |
|                            | Usually      | 8         | 25.8    |
|                            | Often        | 2         | 6.5     |
|                            | Very often   | 2         | 6.5     |
|                            | Total        | 31        | 100.0   |
Table A3. Degree of the influence of islam in everyday life (self-reported)

| Factor          | Count | Not Influential at all | Not that Influential | Somewhat Influential | Hardly Influential | Extremely Influential | Total |
|-----------------|-------|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Decision Making |       |                        |                      |                      |                    |                       |       |
| Frequency       | 2     | 0                      | 10                   | 4                    | 15                 | 31                    |       |
| Percent         | 6.5   | 0.0                    | 32.3                 | 12.9                 | 48.4               | 100.0                 |       |
| Apparel         |       |                        |                      |                      |                    |                       |       |
| Frequency       | 8     | 1                      | 13                   | 9                    | 0                  | 31                    | 100.0 |
| Percent         | 25.8  | 3.2                    | 41.9                 | 29.0                 | 0.0                | 100.0                 |       |
| Food            |       |                        |                      |                      |                    |                       |       |
| Frequency       | 5     | 0                      | 10                   | 6                    | 10                 | 31                    | 100.0 |
| Percent         | 16.1  | 0.0                    | 32.3                 | 19.4                 | 32.3               | 100.0                 |       |
| Beverage        |       |                        |                      |                      |                    |                       |       |
| Frequency       | 4     | 1                      | 8                    | 6                    | 12                 | 31                    | 100.0 |
| Percent         | 12.9  | 3.2                    | 25.8                 | 19.4                 | 38.7               | 100.0                 |       |
| Social Association |     |                        |                      |                      |                    |                       |       |
| Frequency       | 10    | 0                      | 13                   | 3                    | 5                  | 31                    | 100.0 |
| Percent         | 32.3  | 0.0                    | 41.9                 | 9.7                  | 16.1               | 100.0                 |       |
### Table A4. General religious commitment (self-reported)

| Factors                     | Count | More than once a day | Once a day | More than once a week | Once a week | More than once a month | Less than once a month | Total |
|-----------------------------|-------|----------------------|------------|------------------------|-------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Salat Frequency             | 31    | 12                   | 5          | 6                      | 6           | 2                      | 0                      |       |
| Percent                     | 100.0 | 38.7                 | 16.1       | 19.4                   | 19.4        | 6.5                    | 0.0                    |       |
| Reading Holy Scripts Frequency | 31    | 2                    | 4          | 6                      | 3           | 7                      | 9                      |       |
| Percent                     | 100.0 | 6.5                  | 12.9       | 19.4                   | 9.7         | 22.6                   | 29.0                   |       |
| Listening Religious Discussions Frequency | 31    | 3                    | 4          | 2                      | 0           | 10                     | 12                     |       |
| Percent                     | 100.0 | 9.7                  | 12.9       | 6.5                    | 0.0         | 32.3                   | 38.7                   |       |
| Items                                                                 | Count | Strongly Disbelieve | Disbelieve | Somewhat Disbelieve | Somewhat Believe | Believe | Strongly Believe | Total |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------|------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-------|
| The deceased Haidar baba can hear the wish                          |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 0     | 1                   | 1          | 8                   | 9               | 12      | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 0.0   | 3.2                 | 3.2        | 25.8                | 29.0            | 38.7    | 100.0           |       |
| Haidar baba had good relation with the prophet of Islam             |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 0     | 2                   | 6          | 7                   | 6               | 10      | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 0.0   | 6.5                 | 19.4       | 22.6                | 19.4            | 32.3    | 100.0           |       |
| Deceased Haidar Baba can solve anyone’s problem                     |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 1     | 2                   | 2          | 8                   | 12              | 6       | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 3.2   | 6.5                 | 6.5        | 25.8                | 38.7            | 19.4    | 100.0           |       |
| Deceased Haidar Baba can save in after-life                         |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 2     | 1                   | 4          | 11                  | 9               | 4       | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 6.5   | 3.2                 | 12.9       | 35.5                | 29.0            | 12.9    | 100.0           |       |
| Before entering the shrine devotees should wash themselves exactly like they wash for prayer, | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency                                                           | 0     | 0                   | 1          | 8                   | 17              | 5       | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 0.0   | 0.0                 | 3.2        | 25.8                | 54.8            | 16.1    | 100.0           |       |
| The angels are moving around this shrine                             |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 1     | 0                   | 1          | 10                  | 13              | 6       | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 3.2   | 0.0                 | 3.2        | 32.3                | 41.9            | 19.4    | 100.0           |       |
| Allah likes this shrine                                             |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 0     | 0                   | 0          | 14                  | 10              | 7       | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 0.0   | 0.0                 | 0.0        | 45.2                | 32.3            | 22.6    | 100.0           |       |
| This shrine can be part of Allah’s heaven                            |       |                     |            |                     |                 |         |                 |       |
| Frequency                                                           | 3     | 1                   | 6          | 1                   | 12              | 8       | 31              |       |
| Percent                                                             | 9.7   | 3.2                 | 19.4       | 3.2                 | 38.7            | 25.8    | 100.0           |       |
