

The emergence of Muslim Background Believer communities in Bangladesh



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The emergence of groups in Bangladesh from a Muslim background (Muslim Background Believers – MBBs) who are *isayi*, followers of Jesus, and who remain outside the structures of the already existing Christian church might be thought to be one example of 'emerging church'. In the mission context this usually means not leaving existing church structures, but whether to bring believers into them in the first place. There are thousands of these believers, mostly gathering in small *jama'at* groups in homes, usually meeting on Fridays which is a holiday. Often several groups will be overseen by one, charismatic, leader, who may be part of – even pastor in – a denominational church or mission agency/network. There are occasional larger gatherings. Funding for these groups may come from abroad. Training networks are growing, again with outside help. The whole process is a focus of intense interest for missiologists. Some also claim that there are huge numbers of believers in Jesus *within* the mosques – the so-called 'insider movement'. This is doubtful. In one sense Muslims are believers in Jesus and are happy to say so, particularly if there is money involved! In practice most *isayi* tend to stop worshipping at the mosques, however, within six months as they come to a point where they can no longer pray the blessings on Muhammad, although they may well continue to attend the mosque for social purposes.

Why are these groups meeting in the way that they are instead of joining traditional churches (though, of course, some do)? There are three main reasons.

Survival

Zafar Ismail's research suggested that many Muslims who came to faith in Pakistan later 'fell away', not because they were disillusioned with Jesus, but because they could not survive outside of their community. This was not so much a problem of persecution as the need for social support. The movement in Bangladesh, described above, has enabled people to keep their basic community identity, although of course it then raises long-term issues to do with marriage etc. Some of the first generation of converts, for example, have married traditional Christian women, which makes the choice of identity for their children a challenge.

Of course, opposition is also less if people are seen to be keeping their culture. Staying within culture enables families and communities to maintain HONOUR – one of the most important aspects of Bangla (and many other) cultures. It is also significant that Christianity has often been equated with a *degenerate* culture!

Territory

In one area a group of *isayi* wanted to build a church. They bought land and prepared to build. There was opposition – threats and so on – from the local Muslim community, even though the government sent in folk to affirm that the believers were within their rights. They decided not to build because of the bad relationships that had been caused, and when they went back to worshipping in their homes, the trouble stopped – everyone was happy. In other words, territory mattered, even in a relatively tolerant setting. This is partly a question of honour. When the believers become visible, the honour of the community is at stake. But it is even more a question of territory. While the area is seen as Muslim, there is no problem. As

soon as there is a bid for 'Christian' territory, there is likely to be trouble. This extends even to the issue of burial rights.

Language

The single biggest issue appears to be language. Bengali, after all, is two languages.

The movement towards Christ can be linked not only to people retaining or adopting Islamic culture, but specifically and perhaps more importantly, with the use of Muslim Bengali. Bengali as a language has its roots in a Hindu society, and Hindus and traditional Christians use a vocabulary that largely comes from Sanskrit. In contrast, Muslims use perhaps 2,500 different words that come from an Arabic/Persian/Urdu source, including many ordinary words such as 'water', 'mother', 'father' as well as key religious words.

The first complete translation of the Bible into Muslim Bengali came at roughly the same time as the movement towards Christ among MBBs started to gather momentum. It was a problem for the traditional churches because of its use of Islamic vocabulary. In particular it used *Allah* rather than *Ishor* for 'God' and this was totally unacceptable, to the extent that MBBs could not take their Bibles into a traditional church.

The problem also goes the other way. The traditional Christian language implies Hinduism to many Muslims, and Hinduism implies polytheism. One MBB leader, when asked why he hesitated to use traditional Christian premises for a meeting, although he was quite happy to use the premises of a foreign Christian agency, immediately identified this as a problem. When he first came to Christ he witnessed to his family using traditional Christian terms and was thrown out because they thought that he had adopted a Hindu idea of god. In short, those using traditional Christian premises are associated in Muslim minds with Hindu practices. This then brings in other tensions because the debate between Muslims and Hindus is not only theological but has historical roots in the history of partition etc.

Some MBBs insist on the necessity to relate to the traditional churches, and even seek to join them. An example would be a woman with a 'traditional' mother and an MBB father, who is also married to an MBB. She attends a Presbyterian church, where they use the Hindu vocabulary, but at home they use Muslim vocabulary, and she has to talk to her son about both *Allah* and *Ishor*, *'Isa* and *Jesus*. The church does have a weekly prayer meeting that uses the Muslim vocabulary. One of her concerns is that the *jama'at* movement is going to produce its own denominations (It has happened: compare the SIM and SUM denominations in Nigeria.) but without the careful reflection and history that has gone into the traditional churches.

Other are working hard to shape the *isayi* movement as it gets established. This raises issues of training, theology, and worship as well as the relationship to the social and political context. All of these are complex issues which are in process of being tackled but will need yet more thought as time goes on.

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