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RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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Questions

- 1. What evidence of harm to followers of Maijbhandari sect from others because of their religious faith?**
- 2. Is there any evidence that followers may be adversely treated in the Chittagong district?**

RESPONSE

- 1. What evidence of harm to followers of Maijbhandari sect from others because of their religious faith?**

Note: Maijbhandari is also spelt Maijbhandari or Maizbhandari. Various unfamiliar terms, from Bangladeshi Sufi Islam, are used in the sources in this response. The more common terms are *pir* (Sufi teacher-saint or holy man) and *mazar* (shrine, usually on the grave of a *pir*). For a description of common terms, see the section on [Islam in Bangladesh](#) in this response. See also Bertocci, P. 2006, 'A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari tariqa and its followers', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 1-28 – Attachment 1.

No reports of harm to followers of the Maijbhandari sect were found in a search of the available information. Very few sources were found which provide information of any detail on Maijbhandaris, although Manzurul Mannan states that the “movement promotes music based religious pluralism and has over 10 million active devotees and supporters across the world with estimated revenue of \$ 1.5 million”. Professor Carl W. Ernst, of the University of North Carolina, describes the sect as “the immensely popular Maijbhandari Sufi order in Bangladesh”. The only study found was conducted in 1999 (and before), by Professor Peter Bertocci. Bertocci does note that there is opposition between “Sufi-derived magico-mystical movements like the Maijbhandari” and “*shari’a*-focused Muslims” who see groups like the Maijbhandari as representing “a confrontation with Islamist versions of orthodoxy”. He also

notes that “there is some evidence that [the] globalisation of a *shari’a*-oriented Islam has begun to have an impact on the Maijbhandaris”; however, he gives no details on this or on the treatment of followers. Very few recent media articles or reports were found which mention the group. The most information found was on a particular member of the Maizbhandari family, Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari, who is also a politician. A 2006 article states that his “political ideology and philosophy is mainly based on mazar culture”. A number of 2005 articles report on Nazibul’s opposition to Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), and his accusations that they were involved in a series of bomb attacks on Sufi shrines (mazars). Nazibul quit the ruling BNP in protest and formed his own party, the Tariqat (or Tarikat) Federation. No information was found on him since the military takeover in January 2007. Many sources, including the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, note the increasing “Islamist radicalism and violence” occurring in Bangladesh. According to a 2007 article in the *Journal of South Asian Studies*, along with secular and religious minority targets, Sufi shrines have also been targeted, as “in orthodox interpretations [they] are seen as centres of idolatry and superstition – practices unacceptable to Islam”. There have been no reports of serial shrine bombings in Bangladesh since 2005 (‘Curriculum Vitae: Manzurul Mannan’ (undated), Independent University of Bangladesh website

http://www.iub.edu.bd/CV_SLAS/Manzurul%20Mannan.pdf – Accessed 15 August 2008 – Attachment 2; Ernst, C. (undated), ‘Sufism, Islam, and Globalization in the Contemporary World: Methodological Reflections on a Changing Field of Study’, in *Islamic Spirituality and the Contemporary World*, ed. Azizan Baharuddin (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, forthcoming). Found on University of North Carolina website <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/articles/global.doc> – Accessed 18 August 2008 – Attachment 30; Bertocci, P. 2006, ‘A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari tariqa and its followers’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 1-28 – Attachment 1; for articles on Nazibul Maizbhandari, see: ‘Maizbhandari manoeuvres with the new alliance’ 2006, *Probe News Magazine*, vol 5, issue 11, 8-14 September <http://www.probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=1625> – Accessed 11 August 2008 – Attachment 3, ‘Maizbhandari floats new political party’ 2005, *Daily Star*, 4 October <http://www.thedailystar.net/2005/10/04/d51004013523.htm> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 4; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2008, *USCIRF Annual Report for 2008 – Bangladesh*, 1 May – Attachment 5; Datta, S. 2007, ‘Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within’, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, April, p. 166 – Attachment 6).

This response provides [introductory information on Maijbhandari sect](#) and [information on Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari](#); brief information on [religious extremism](#) in Bangladesh and [attacks on Sufi shrines](#); background information on [Islam in Bangladesh](#) and some [further background information on Maijbhandaris](#).

Introductory information on Maijbhandari sect

The main study of the Maijbhandari found in the available information is based on “ethnographic inquiry” conducted in 1999. In this paper, published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in 2006, Professor Peter Bertocci provides information on the origins, history, ritual practices, beliefs, major figures and followers of the Maijbhandari *tariqa* (the Arabic word *tariqa* means “way”, “path” or “method”). Reading the entire article is recommended. The paper provides good background to this “Sufi movement”, which Professor Bertocci describes as “perhaps one of the most important spiritual groupings in today’s Bangladesh”. It should be noted, however, that the research is not recent, and includes no information on the general treatment of Maijbhandari followers, although Professor Bertocci does mention

that “one meets Maijbhandaris who are accomplished professionals and successful businessmen”. Nevertheless, Professor Bertocci notes in the introduction that “Bangladeshi Islam has of late displayed an authoritarian and militant face” (p. 2) and in his conclusion he notes that there is opposition between “Sufi-derived magico-mystical movements like the Maijbhandari” and “*shari’a*-focused Muslims” who see groups like the Maijbhandari as representing “a confrontation with Islamist versions of orthodoxy”. He also notes that “there is some evidence that [the] globalisation of a *shari’a*-oriented Islam has begun to have an impact on the Maijbhandaris”. The conclusion section is reproduced here in full:

The widespread veneration of *pirs* is one of several perpetually competing versions of Islamic belief and practice in Bangladesh. As noted at the outset of this essay, pirism appeals to a broad spectrum of people, including some among the otherwise minimally observant and many who are conventionally orthodox in their outward expression of faith. Pirism meets its greatest resistance, however, from those whose fervour is embodied in spiritualist revival movements, such as the *tablighi* (readily found in Bangladesh), and from others whose devotion to Islam demands political activism in seeking an Islamic state wherein strict adherence to the *shari’a* would be instituted as the legal order. It is from groups of the latter that Sufi-derived, magico-mystical movements like the Maijbhandari face the greatest challenge to their legitimacy, since for *shari’a*-focused Muslims they represent a confrontation with Islamist versions of orthodoxy. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the worship of saints has long been contested by the formally pious, from Abdul Wahhab in 18th-century Arabia to the revivalists in 19th-century East Bengal. These two streams of Islam appear to have remained in vigorous opposition everywhere in the Muslim world for quite some time. Thus, the Sufi stream in Bangladeshi culture that Maijbhandar exemplifies is a key source of institutional resistance to the militant thrust of literalist Islamism, and this may help to account for the lack of truly broad political appeal that Bangladeshi Islamists have had to date.

It remains to be seen whether this competition will continue as it has for so long. In her instructive discussions of *pir* veneration in Sylhet, Katy Gardner (1995: 228-68; 2001) argues that traditional allegiance to *pirs* as purveyors of miracles was being gradually undermined as the Sylheti migrant families she studied acquired both wealth and a more pietistic orientation to Islam from their sojourns abroad. Upon their return to Bangladesh, she asserts, they aimed to transform both the narratives of the great saints of the past and the conduct of their would-be emulators in the present to reflect and embody ritually conformist visions of what Islam should be.

There is some evidence that this globalisation of a *shari’a*-oriented Islam has begun to have an impact on the Maijbhandaris, even though they are primarily found in the nation’s south, a region not as yet well connected with the outside world. In contrast to the founder generation whose members never made the haj, key members of the present Maijbhandari leadership have gone on the pilgrimage and, one is told, other frequent visits to Mecca. It may not be surprising, therefore, that since the research for this paper was conducted, the elaborate shrine of Ahmad Ullah has been razed, and its replacement built to a design which depicts or somehow evokes the pages of the Qur’an (Manzurul Mannan, personal communication, 3 November 2003). This is in keeping with the view of the movement’s current leadership that the movement should be seen as compliant with *shari’a*. Thus, Gardner’s observations may well be right, and one wonders what this says about the future of Bangladeshi Islam’s ‘multivocality’ and whether, by reduction of the form and variation which gives the Maijbhandari *tariqa* so much of its intrinsic appeal, the movement itself will be diminished.

Yet one is loath to accept the inevitability of such an outcome. In all of its social, political and economic dimensions, the *pir-murid-mazar* complex lies at the heart of Bangladeshi culture, and movements of this sort provide genuine vehicles of spiritual expression for very many

people in Bangladesh. The Maijbhandari *tariqa* draws both leadership and subaltern participation from across the social spectrum, including the highly-educated men who direct its activities from their *manjil* headquarters in Maijbhandar, the businessmen and service professionals who organise local urban groups of devotees, and the ordinary farmers who people its widely-dispersed rural outposts. Bangladeshi elites and bewildered foreign visitors to the country are often tempted to dismiss the phenomenon of *pir* veneration as at best a spectacle of superstition on the part of the ignorant or at worst as a conspiracy to fleece the gullible on the part of charlatans posing as holy men. No doubt some self-styled *pirs* are ‘touts’ – to use a favourite Bangladeshi epithet – and many vulnerable souls may be taken in by their blandishments. But the charisma of genuine holy men, the aura of their shrines and the hope delivered by their teachings serve as lifelines for a host of ordinary people, just as the carnival element in musical, dance and oratorical performance that enlivens commemorative festivals like those I have described, and is the nightly fare of *mazars* everywhere, supplies diversion and entertainment for myriad folk whose daytimes are devoid of hope or pleasure. In the face of pressures to bow to the primacy of canon and the homogenisation of observance, the key to the self-preservation of Maijbhandari and other Sufi versions of Bangladeshi Islam may well lie in their power to entertain, to overwhelm and to inspire (Bertocci, P. 2006, ‘A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari tariqa and its followers’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 1-28 – Attachment 1).

Please note that, according to Bertocci, the Maijbhandari split into two strands, one of which is called “Ahmadiya”. As far as the information indicates, this is not a branch of the Ahmadiya sect of Islam, which is viewed by many mainstream Muslims as heretic (UK Home Office, Section 21.25). Section 21 of the UK Home Office country information report on Bangladesh provides information on Ahmadiyas (Bertocci, P. 2006, ‘A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari tariqa and its followers’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, p. 11 – Attachment 1; UK Home Office 2007, ‘Country of Origin Information Report: Bangladesh’, 31 August, pp. 94-98 – Attachment 7).

On 8 August 2008, an email was sent to Professor Bertocci at Oakland University to ask if he had updated information on the situation for Maijbhandaris in Bangladesh (RRT Research & Information 2008, Email to P. Bertocci: ‘Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal, Sydney, Australia’, 8 August – Attachment 8). No response has been received to date.

In his paper, Professor Bertocci acknowledges the assistance of Professor Manzurul Mannan of the Independent University of Bangladesh. Manzurul Mannan is also listed as a contact person on the archived Maizbhandari website. In his curriculum vitae, found in a search of the internet, he states that he “is working to transform the largest religiously plural, but secular Sufi movement of Bangladesh with over 10 million devotees into a modern organization in its struggle to cope with modernity and oppose the monolithic political Islam.” On 14 August 2008 an email was sent to Professor Mannan to ask if he had information on the current situation of the Maizbhandari organisation (‘Curriculum Vitae: Manzurul Mannan’ (undated), Independent University of Bangladesh website http://www.iub.edu.bd/CV_SLAS/Manzurul%20Mannan.pdf – Accessed 15 August 2008 – Attachment 2; RRT Research & Information 2008, Email to M. Mannan: ‘Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal, Sydney, Australia’, 14 August – Attachment 9).

Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari

A search for Maizbhandari/Maijbhandari mostly turned up articles reporting on Bangladeshi politician, Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari (with various spellings). A 2006 article states

that his “political ideology and philosophy is mainly based on mazar culture”. This article also states that he is a “member of the central advisory committee of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikya Parishad”. According to sources, Nazibul quit the BNP in September 2005, in protest over the party’s alliance with JI. He and others accused JI of instigating attacks on Sufi shrines (mazars). After leaving BNP, Nazibul formed a new party (“Tariqat” or “Tarikat” Federation) “comprising mainly spiritual leaders” (‘Maizbhandari manoeuvres with the new alliance’ 2006, *Probe News Magazine*, vol 5, issue 11, 8-14 September <http://www.probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=1625> – Accessed 11 August 2008 – Attachment 3; ‘Maizbhandari floats new political party’ 2005, *Daily Star*, 4 October <http://www.thedailystar.net/2005/10/04/d51004013523.htm> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 4).

Again, no further information on him was found in a search of the available information since the military takeover. The following selection of articles provide relevant information found pre-2007.

A 2006 article provides a profile of Nazibul, describing him as a member of “the famous Maizbhandari family” in Chittagong. The article states:

Syed Nazibul Bashir Bhandari was born to the famous Maizbhandari family in Chittagong on December 2, 1959. He is a graduate of Business Administration. He has been involved in social work. At present he is the President of the Dargah Mazar Federation and Bangladesh Waqf Estate Matwali Samity. He was also the President of Ahle Sunnat Jamaat Oikya Parishad. He was a member of the London-based World Religious Brotherhood and Spiritual Organization as well as a member of the central advisory committee of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikya Parishad.

In 1990 Bhandari got involved with the movement triggered by the passing of a Mazar Bill 1990 during Ershad regime. In 1991 he won the Chittagong-4 seat as an Awami League candidate. In 1995 he joined BNP and within a few months was made the central committee’s International Affairs Secretary. In 1996 he formed Jatiyatabadi Ulema Dal and became its President. In 2001 he contested in the election as a four-party candidate and lost. In 2005 Bhandari left BNP and in August of the same year he formed Bangladesh Tariqat Federation (‘Maizbhandari manoeuvres with the new alliance’ 2006, *Probe News Magazine*, vol 5, issue 11, 8-14 September <http://www.probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=1625> – Accessed 11 August 2008 – Attachment 3).

A July 2005 article reports on accusations against Jamaat-e-Islami, prior to Nazibul quitting the BNP:

Bangladesh Dargah Mazar Federation, an alliance of ‘Sunnis and followers of Tarikat’, yesterday called on the government to remove the Jamaat-e-Islami leaders from the cabinet.

It also demanded enactment of a law to punish those who show disrespect for Pirs and saints and to ensure the security of the mazars.

The alliance, in its first public gathering at the Engineers’ Institution auditorium, also vowed to form a political party and set up a private satellite channel to uphold the true teachings of Islam and mystic footsteps of the Pirs and saints.

Speaking at the gathering, the Federation leaders blamed the Jamaat, a member of the alliance government, and other organisations, who regard Moududi as their religious leader, for

spreading propaganda against Pirs and spiritual leaders, bombing the Islamic shrines and poisoning the creatures at Bayezid Bostami and Hazrat Shahjalal mazars.

Urging all devotees to turn the mazars into forts, Federation President Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari warned the government that they would paralyse the capital if Jamaat or their followers attack a single mazar in the country in future.

He also placed a six-point demand that includes exemplary punishment to US soldiers responsible for desecration of the Holy Quran, cancellation of Waqf Ordinance and establishment of an Islamic university.

Habibul Bashar Maizbhandari urged the Sunnis and followers of Tarikat to form a common platform and to unite against the Jamaat, terming it as the enemy of the state ('Remove Jamaat leaders from cabinet' 2005, *The Daily Star*, 7 July <http://www.thedailystar.net/2005/07/07/d50707060657.htm> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 10).

The Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) states: "BNP has been facing opposition for links with the Jihadis. On 26 September 2005, BNP's International Affairs Secretary Syed Najibul Bashar Maizbhandari resigned from the party, protesting the government's 'failure to act' against Jamaat-e-Islami" ('Election time in Bangladesh: Minorities face risks of more rights violations' 2006, Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), 1 November <http://www.achrweb.org/Review/2006/139-06.htm> – Accessed 2 November 2006 – Attachment 11).

The following October 2005 articles provide more detail.

4 October 2005, *New Age Newspaper*:

A dissident BNP [Bangladesh Nationalist Party] leader Najibul Bashar Maizbhandari who resigned from the party last week launched a new political party on Monday, 3 October.

Najibul announced himself as the chairman of his new party, Bangladesh Tariqat Federation, when he made the announcement of his new party at a press conference in the city [Dhaka].

Najibul, a former parliament member [MP] and the international affairs secretary of the BNP, resigned from the ruling party on 27 September accusing the Jamaat-i-Islami, an alliance partner of the government, of being linked to recent bombings at shrines in the country [Bangladesh].

He said his new party would follow the ideology of Bangladesh Dargah Mazar Federation (an association of shrines in Bangladesh) and the spirit of the war of liberation. He hinted that his party might form an alliance with "pro-liberation forces" that would not hurt the sentiment of the people who believe in shrines.

'We have no problem to make an alliance with the Awami League [AL] and even with the BNP if it keeps Jamaat out of the alliance,' he said.

'Jamaat is the main enemy of shrines, the country and Islam,' he said ('Bangladesh ex-ruling party member forms new Islamic party' 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, source: *New Age Newspaper*, 4 October – Attachment 12).

4 October 2005, *United News of Bangladesh*:

Zaker Party Chairman Peerjada Mostafa Ameer Faisal and Bangladesh Tarikat Federation Chairman Syed Nazibul Bashar **Maijbhandaree** Sunday vowed to 'root out' what they called the "pro-Wahibee and pro-Maududee Jamaat-e-Islami."

This was announced at pre-Iftar meeting between them at Zaker Party's Banani office.

During the meeting Zaker Party chairman also announced countrywide demonstration from October 16 to 19.

Peerjada and **Maijbhandaree**, who recently quit BNP in protest against Jamaat's presence in the government, had also close-door meeting, a press release of the Zaker Party said.

Speaking at the meeting, Peerjada Faisal said terrorism of extreme fundamentalist in nature had emerged and that the "militant Jamaat created a suffocating situation" through serial bomb blasts across the country.

"Either Jamaat or we will live here in this country," the Zaker Party chief said, adding "we will not allow Wahibees and Maududees in this country. We will win, Inshallah" ('Maijbhandaree meets Zaker Party chief Peerjada Faisal' 2005, *United News of Bangladesh*, 8 October – Attachment 13).

Religious extremism

Information indicates that Islamic fundamentalism and associated violence has been rising in Bangladesh. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) placed Bangladesh on its "Watch List" in 2005. In its 2008 Annual Report, USCIRF states that the placement was "due to a number of concerns, some of which have increased in severity in the past year", including a number of concerns over Islamist radicalism and violence (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2008, *USCIRF Annual Report for 2008 – Bangladesh*, 1 May – Attachment 5).

The UK Home Office country information report includes a section on religious freedom. This quotes the 2006 US Department of State report on religious freedom:

"Since the 2001 elections, attacks on religious minorities have led to the routine posting of law enforcement personnel during major religious festivals and events, since festivals tend to attract large congregations that make easy and more attractive targets. Reported incidents included killings, rape, torture, attacks on places of worship, destruction of homes, forced evictions, and desecration of items of worship. These claims continued during the period covered by this report...however, many such reports could not be verified independently, and **there were incidents of members of the Muslim community attacking each other on holidays as well, due to a perception that some events were un-Islamic.** The Government sometimes failed to investigate the crimes and prosecute the perpetrators, who were often local gang leaders ... There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report. However, the banned extremist group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) attacked a variety of government and civil society targets...on the grounds they supported secular governance [or promoted 'un-Islamic' practices]" [2c] (**section II**) [researcher emphasis added] (UK Home Office 2007, 'Country of Origin Information Report: Bangladesh', 31 August, Section 21.07 – Attachment 7).

The UK Home Office report also quotes a 2003 *Guardian* article which states:

...Bangladesh, which is 85 per cent Muslim but has a long tradition of tolerance to religious minorities, is, say local organisations, being pushed towards fundamentalism by the Jamaat-e-

Islami, which is growing rapidly in rural areas with the deepest poverty and runs two key ministries.” [55a]

“‘This is like a silent revolution. We are returning to the dark ages’, a leading lawyer said, asking not to be named ... ‘I think the backdrop is being created for the introduction of strict sharia laws. You see extremist rightwing fundamentalists infiltrating every professional area, in the appointment of the judiciary, the law, medicine and in education. They are capturing key positions in government, the universities and institutions’.” [55a]

“Thousands of Bangladeshis are thought to have crossed the border to India in the past two years. It is impossible to verify numbers because New Delhi will not release records, but Dhaka’s statistics show the Muslim majority increasing dramatically and the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other minorities declining.” [55a]

“Leading Islamic scholars are appalled by the repression and the rise of fundamentalism. ‘What we are seeing is the Talibanisation of Bangladesh,’ Maolama Abdul Awal, former director of the Bangladesh Islamic Foundation, said. ‘If we allow them to continue ... [minorities] will be eliminated. Bangladesh will become a fascist country’.” [55a] (UK Home Office 2007, ‘Country of Origin Information Report: Bangladesh’, 31 August, Section 21.05 – Attachment 7).

Research Response BGD33461 is recommended for recent sources on religious extremism in Bangladesh. This research response, dated 30 June 2008, provides detailed information on the current situation of religious minorities in Bangladesh (Question 1); background on attacks on religious minorities, current situation of BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Islamist groups (Question 2); general information on the availability of state protection for religious minorities in Bangladesh (Question 3); information on attacks on a minority community (Hindu) in the Chittagong District (Question 4) (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response BGD33461*, 30 June – Attachment 14).

Research Response BGD32159, dated 27 August 2007, provides information on the influence of Islamic parties on the caretaker government in Bangladesh (Question 2); an overview of the state of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh and the reaction, if any, of the caretaker government (Question 3); an assessment of the situation of religious minorities, focusing particularly on Christians (Question 4) (RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response BGD32159*, 27 August – Attachment 15).

Attacks on Sufi shrines

While most reports on the growth of Islamic extremism focus on the impact on religious minorities, sources report that violence has also been directed towards Sufi-oriented beliefs and practices. An April 2007 article in the *Journal of South Asian Studies* by Sreeradha Datta lists a number of attacks between 1999 and 2005. The primary targets, according to Datta, are people with a “secular worldview and lifestyle”, places “perceived as non-Islamic” (such as movie halls), and “the offices of political parties that have been critical of rising extremist tendencies”. Datta further states: “Secondarily attacks were directed against Ahmadiyya places of worship which, for the fundamentalists, are not proper mosques and hence not sacrosanct or inviolable; and against **Sufi shrines which in orthodox interpretations are seen as centres of idolatry and superstition—practices unacceptable to Islam**” [researcher emphasis added] (Datta, S. 2007, ‘Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within’, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, April, p. 166 – Attachment 6).

As detailed previously, media articles in 2005 reported Najirul Maizbhandari and others accusing JI of responsibility in a series of attacks on mazars, and the BNP of complicity through its alliance with JI. There are a number of sources who have also recently alleged that there is government complicity behind the growth in Bangladeshi militant religious groups. A March 2008 article by exiled Bangladeshi journalist, Tasneem Khalil, alleges that there is “sponsorship and patronage of Jihadist outfits by the DGFI [Directorate General of Forces Intelligence] and the National Security Intelligence agency”. Both Khalil and ICG state that the DGFI is “the driving force” behind the military rule (Khalil, T. 2008, ‘Surviving torture in Bangladesh’, *International Herald Tribune*, 2 March <http://www.ihf.com/bin/printfriendly.php?id=10615296> – Accessed 13 August 2008 – Attachment 16; International Crisis Group 2008, ‘Restoring Democracy in Bangladesh’, International Crisis Group website, 28 April, p. 16 http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_asia/151_restoring_democracy_in_bangladesh.pdf – Accessed 25 June 2008 – Attachment 17).

According to a May 2008 *BBC* article, a Bangladesh terrorist outfit is suspected of being behind a number of bombings of religious and other sites in India, including the October 2007 bombing of Sufi shrine in Ajmer (Bhaumik, S. 2008, ‘Who is behind the India bombings?’, *BBC News*, 14 May http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7401573.stm – Accessed 14 August 2008 – Attachment 18).

An October 2007 article in *The Hindu* describes the Ajmer bombings as part of “the war of Islamist neoconservatives against the syncretic traditions and beliefs that characterise popular Islam in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh”. Praveen Swami states:

Thursday’s bombing of the saint’s shrine at Ajmer – the third in a series of attacks on Muslim religious institutions after the 2006 bombing of a Sufi shrine in Malegaon and this summer’s strike at the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad – have been characterised as attempts to provoke a pan-India communal war. But the bombings also reflect another less-understood project: the war of Islamist neoconservatives against the syncretic traditions and beliefs that characterise popular Islam in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti is, almost without dispute, the most venerated Sufi saint of South Asia. Born in 1141 C.E., Chishti is believed to have studied at the great seminaries of Samarkand and Bukhara before travelling to India. Ajmer emerged as an important centre of pilgrimage during the sixteenth century, after Emperor Akbar undertook a pilgrimage on foot to the saint’s grave.

Chishti’s order laid stress on seven principles, notably the renunciation of material goods, financial reliance on farming or alms, independence from economic patronage from the established political order, the sharing of wealth, and respect for religious differences.

Chishti’s doctrine on the “highest form of worship” led to the saint often being described as the Garib Nawaz, or emperor of the poor. Several of the most famous Sufi shrines in South Asia – notably that of Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar at Pakpattan in Pakistan, and that of Nizamuddin Awliya in New Delhi – were born of Chisti’s teachings.

Over the centuries, they have come to command a massive multi-faith following, attracting Muslims, Hindus and Christians alike. For that precise reason, they have long been under attack from religious neoconservatives.

Islamist critics of Sufism have made no secret of their loathing for shrines like that at Ajmer, which they claim propagate the heresy of ‘shirk’ – an Arabic term commonly translated to mean polytheism, but which is also used to refer to the veneration of saints and even atheism.

South Asian terror groups associated with recent attacks on Muslim shrines — notably the Lashkar-e-Taiba — draw theological inspiration from the Salafi sect, a neoconservative tradition also sometimes referred to as Wahabbism. Salafi theologians are intensely hostile to Sufi orders like that founded by Chishti, characterising them as apostasy.

In *The General Precepts of the Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamaah*, a pamphlet which propounds the Salafi doctrine, theologian Shaykh Naasir al’Aql, sharply criticises religious practices “where the dead are taken as intermediaries between a person and Allah, supplicating them and seeking the fulfilment of one’s needs through them, seeking their assistance and other similar acts.”

Al’Aql, whose work is often drawn on by Lashkar ideologues, argues that “every avenue that leads to shirk in the worship of Allah, or innovations in religion – it is obligatory to forbid it.” Another pamphlet available on the website of the Lashkar’s parent organisation, the Pakistan-based Jamaat-ud-Dawa, rails against shrines, demanding that “Muslim leaders combat and uproot this phenomenon.” Just how this is to be done, the Jamaat-ud-Dawa does not say – but Lashkar cadre have left little to the imagination.

Terror groups in Jammu and Kashmir have frequently targeted regional religious institutions that draw on the same syncretic traditions as that at Ajmer. In June, 2005, for example, the Lashkar-e-Taiba was held responsible for the attempted assassination of north Kashmir mystic Ahad B’ab Sopore. Eyewitnesses said the assassination attempt, in which one person was killed and nine were injured, was carried out by Qayoom Nassar, a well-known Sopore-based Lashkar operative.

Lashkar cadre are also thought to be responsible for a May 2005 arson attack that led to the destruction of the 14th century shrine of the saint Zainuddin Wali at Ashmuqam in south Kashmir. Ashmuqam was earlier subjected to several grenade attacks, leading to disruption of festive days there for several years. A month later, Lashkar operative Bilal Magray was arrested on charges of having thrown a hand grenade at a Sufi congregation in Bijbehara, injuring 15 people. Dozens of similar attacks have taken place over the years. (Swami, P. 2007, ‘The war against popular Islam’, *The Hindu*, 12 October <http://www.hindu.com/2007/10/12/stories/2007101261651600.htm> – Accessed 13 August 2008 – Attachment 19).

Other background information

Islam in Bangladesh

The US Library of Congress country study on Bangladesh (1988) provides background information on the influence of Sufism on Bengali culture, as well as an explanation of various aspects of Bengali Sufi traditions. The relevant passages are reproduced at length below:

The wholesale conversion to Islam of the population of what was to become Bangladesh began in the thirteenth century and continued for hundreds of years...Conversion was generally collective rather than individual, although individual Hindus who became outcasts or who were ostracized for any reason often became Muslims. Islamic egalitarianism, especially the ideals of equality, brotherhood, and social justice, attracted numerous Buddhists and lower caste Hindus. Muslim missionaries and mystics, some of whom were subsequently regarded as saints (usually known as *pirs* in Bangladesh) and who wandered about in villages and towns, were responsible for many conversions.

Most Muslims in Bangladesh are Sunnis, but there is a small Shia community. Most of those who are Shia reside in urban areas. Although these Shias are few in number, Shia observance commemorating the martyrdom of Ali's sons, Hasan and Husayn, is widely observed by the nation's Sunnis.

The tradition of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism appeared very early in Islam and became essentially a popular movement emphasizing love of God rather than fear of God. Sufism stresses a direct, unstructured, personal devotion to God in place of the ritualistic, outward observance of the faith. An important belief in the Sufi tradition is that the average believer may use spiritual guides in his pursuit of the truth. These guides--friends of God or saints--are commonly called fakirs or *pirs*. In Bangladesh the term *pir* is more commonly used and combines the meanings of teacher and saint. In Islam there has been a perennial tension between the ulama--Muslim scholars--and the Sufis; each group advocates its method as the preferred path to salvation. There also have been periodic efforts to reconcile the two approaches. Throughout the centuries many gifted scholars and numerous poets have been inspired by Sufi ideas even though they were not actually adherents.

Sufi masters were the single most important factor in South Asian conversions to Islam, particularly in what is now Bangladesh. Most Bangladeshi Muslims are influenced to some degree by Sufism, although this influence often involves only occasional consultation or celebration rather than formal affiliation. Both fakirs and *pirs* are familiar figures on the village scene, and in some areas the shrines of saints almost outnumber the mosques. In some regions the terms fakir and *pir* are used interchangeably, but in general the former connotes an itinerant holy man and the latter an established *murshid*, a holy man who has achieved a higher spiritual level than a fakir and who has a larger following.

Ever since Sufism became a popular movement, pious men of outstanding personality reputed to have gifts of miraculous powers have found disciples (*murids*) flocking to them. The disciple can be a kind of lay associate earning his living in secular occupations, consulting the *pir* or *murshid* at times, participating in religious ceremonies, and making contributions to the support of the *murshid*. In addition, he may be initiated into a brotherhood that pledges its devotion to the *murshid*, lives in close association with him, and engages in pious exercises intended to bring about mystical enlightenment.

The Qadiri, Naqshbandi, and Chishti orders were among the most widespread Sufi orders in Bangladesh in the late 1980s. The beliefs and practices of the first two are quite close to those of orthodox Islam; the third, founded in Ajmer, India, is peculiar to the subcontinent and has a number of unorthodox practices, such as the use of music in its liturgy. Its ranks have included many musicians and poets.

Pirs do not attain their office through consensus and do not normally function as community representatives. The villager may expect a *pir* to advise him and offer inspiration but would not expect him to lead communal prayers or deliver the weekly sermon at the local mosque. Some *pirs*, however, are known to have taken an active interest in politics either by running for public office or by supporting other candidates. For example, Pir Hafizi Huzur ran as a candidate for president in the 1986 election. The *pirs* of Atroshi and Sarsina apparently also exerted some political influence. Their visitors have included presidents and cabinet ministers.

Although a formal organization of ordained priests has no basis in Islam, a variety of functionaries perform many of the duties conventionally associated with a clergy and serve, in effect, as priests. One group, known collectively as the ulama, has traditionally provided the orthodox leadership of the community. The ulama unofficially interpret and administer religious law. Their authority rests on their knowledge of sharia, the corpus of Islamic jurisprudence that grew up in the centuries following the Prophet's death.

The members of the ulama include *maulvis*, imams...and mullahs. The first two titles are accorded to those who have received special training in Islamic theology and law. A *maulvi* has pursued higher studies in a *madrasa*, a school of religious education attached to a mosque...Additional study on the graduate level leads to the title *maulana*.

Villagers call on the mullah for prayers, advice on points of religious practice, and performance of marriage and funeral ceremonies. More often they come to him for a variety of services far from the purview of orthodox Islam. The mullah may be a source for amulets, talismans, and charms for the remedying of everything from snakebite to sexual impotence. These objects are also purported to provide protection from evil spirits and bring good fortune. Many villagers have implicit faith in such cures for disease and appear to benefit from them. Some mullahs derive a significant portion of their income from sales of such items.

In Bangladesh, where a modified Anglo-Indian civil and criminal legal system operates, there are no official sharia courts...Most Muslim marriages, however, are presided over by the *qazi*, a traditional Muslim judge whose advice is also sought on matters of personal law, such as inheritance, divorce, and the administration of religious endowments (*waqfs*).

In the late 1980s, the ulama of Bangladesh still perceived their function as that of teaching and preserving the Islamic way of life in the face of outside challenges, especially from modern sociopolitical ideas based on Christianity or communism. Any effort at modernization was perceived as a threat to core religious values and institutions; therefore, the ulama as a class was opposed to any compromise in matters of sharia. Many members of the ulama favored the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in Bangladesh and were deeply involved in political activism through several political parties. Most members of the ulama were also engaged in carrying on the *tabligh* (preaching movement), an effort that focuses on the true sociopolitical ideals of Islam and unequivocally discards all un-Islamic accretions. *Tabligh* attracted many college and university graduates, who found the movement emotionally fulfilling and a practical way to deal with Bangladesh's endemic sociopolitical malaise.

A number of Islamic practices are particular to South Asia, and several of them have been subject to reforms over the years. For example, the anniversary of the death of a *pir* is observed annually. Popular belief holds that this anniversary is an especially propitious time for seeking the intercession of the *pir*. Large numbers of the faithful attend anniversary ceremonies, which are festive occasions enjoyed by the followers of the *pir* as well as orthodox Muslims. The ceremonies are quite similar in form and content to many Hindu festivals. Several nineteenth- and twentieth-century fundamentalist reform movements, aimed at ridding Islam of all extraneous encroachments, railed against these and similar practices. Nevertheless, the practice of *pir* worship continued unabated in the 1980s.

Nonorthodox interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices pervaded popular religion in Bangladesh in the 1980s. Hindu influences can be seen in the practice of illuminating the house for the celebration of Shabi Barat (Festival of the Bestowal of Fate), a custom derived from the Hindu practices at Diwali (Festival of Lights). Rituals to exorcise evil spirits (*jinni*) from possessed persons also incorporated Hindu influence. Often, villagers would fail to distinguish between Hindu and Muslim shrines. For example, shrines called *satyapir*, which dot rural Bangladesh, are devoted to a Hindu-Muslim synthesis known as Olabibi, the deity for the cure of cholera. This synthesis is an intriguing superimposition of the Hindu concept of divine consort on the stern monotheistic perception of Allah (US Library of Congress 1988, 'Religion' in *Country Studies – Bangladesh*, September <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 20).

Further background information on Majbhandaris

Professor Bertocci also authored the section on Bangladesh in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of*

the Modern Islamic World. This 1995 article includes a brief description of Maijbhandari. Here he states that it is part of the Qadiriya Sufi order, while in his later work (2006) he states that it is an “indigenous Sufi-inspired movement” (p. 8), reflecting “a melding of several of the Sufi orders that have been historically prominent in India – notably the Qadiriya and Chistiya Orders – in order to create a new, distinctly Bengali *tariqa* which would mesh well with indigenous Bengali traditions” (p. 14) (Bertocci, P. 1995, ‘Bangladesh’ in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. J. Esposito, Oxford University Press, vol.1, pp. 187-191 – Attachment 21; Bertocci, P. 2006, ‘A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari tariqa and its followers’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 1-28 – Attachment 1).

In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Bertocci notes that Islam in Bangladesh is a mixture not only of Sufism and syncretism but also of orthodox fundamentalism. He states:

...[I]n its Islamic dimension, by 1947 the maturing national identity of East Bengal not only retained remnants of Sufism and syncretism but also contained elements of orthodox fundamentalism and modernism.

From a large survey she has recently conducted of Bangladeshi Muslims claiming an active faith, Razia Akter Banu (1992) has identified three basic tendencies in present-day Bangladeshi Islam. ...Nearly half of her rural and a quarter of her urban respondents evinced the syncretism of folk belief and practice described above. Followers of popular forms of Islam most often represent lower levels of income, education, and occupation.

Attribution of supernatural powers to pirs [or “saints”] is an especially salient feature of popular Bangladeshi Islam. Commemorative gatherings (*‘urs*) at the ubiquitous tombs (*mazār*) of the pirs occur year-round, and major shrines are located throughout the country. At least one major Sūfī order (*tarīqah*), the Qādirīyah, has a large following, with a national center in the Chittagong district village of Maijbhandar. These Maijbhandari, as they are called, meet in weekly gatherings (*mahfil*) where religious folk music forms the centerpiece of devotional worship, and they have an annual conclave at their national center. The nature and extent of Sūfī activity in Bangladesh needs much further study, but it is widespread and attracts persons of all social, educational, and occupational backgrounds.

Another 50 percent of Banu’s rural sample, and more than 60 percent of her urban respondents, claimed adherence to orthodox forms of Islam: literality in acceptance of Qur’ān and *hadīth*, strictness in observing obligatory duties, and total obedience to the Hanafī school of law. Both urban and rural people of moderate educational background register among the ranks of the orthodox; in the rural areas orthodoxy is associated with relatively higher levels of land ownership, in contrast to its correspondence with middle levels of income in the cities (Bertocci, P. 1995, ‘Bangladesh’ in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. J. Esposito, Oxford University Press, vol.1, pp. 187-191 – Attachment 21).

Information, including an email contact address, and photos of Maijbhandari tombs, can be found at <http://www.sufimaizbhandar.org/index.htm>

This website appears to have much less information recently than it did previously. Previous versions of the website can be found on the Internet Archive:

http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.sufimaizbhandar.org. Background on the sect from the archived website is included in this response as Attachment 22 (‘Maizbhandar Sharif’ (undated), Maizbhandar Sharif Sufism website, accessed from the Internet Archive

<http://web.archive.org/web/20021217143638/www.maizbhandar.org/MaizbhandarSharif.PDF>
– Accessed 18 August 2008 – Attachment 22).

See also Manzurul Mannan's description of the Maizbhandari movement, included in his curriculum vitae ('Curriculum Vitae: Manzurul Mannan' (undated), Independent University of Bangladesh website http://www.iub.edu.bd/CV_SLAS/Manzurul%20Mannan.pdf – Accessed 15 August 2008 – Attachment 2).

Recent mentions

As mentioned above there were few recent sources found which mention Maizbhandari (or alternate spellings).

One article dated 23 March 2008 describes the religious observation of Eid-e-Miladunnabi (the birth and death of the Prophet Muhammad), including a Maizbhandari procession in Dhaka:

Eid-e-Miladunnabi was observed throughout the country with reverence and religious fervor.

Different religious, socio-political and cultural organizations chalked out programmes in the capital and elsewhere in the country.

In one of the day's major programmes, several thousand people joined the **Maizbhandaria's** colourful Miladunnabi procession in the city carrying colourful banners and green flags and singing hymns in praise of Allah and Prophet Muhammad (SM).

Leading spiritual personality and chief patron of World Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat Alhaj Syed Moinuddin Ahmed Al Hasani Maizbhandari led the march following a grand milad mahfil and mass prayer at Maizbhandar Manjil at Mirpur seeking eternal blessings for people in distress in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world ('Miladunnabi observed' 2008, *The New Nation*, 23 March <http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2008/03/23/news0825.htm> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 23).

The only other mentions of Maizbhandari in 2008 were announcements found in the Chittagong based *Daily People's View*. A June 2008 piece announces a "get together function" to celebrate 27 years of the "publication of the 'Jiban Bati' Paper concerning life and philosophy of Maizbhandari. The chief guest of honour was Professor Jamal Nazrul Islam, an "internationally-reputed scientist" (see profile from Islamic World Academy of Sciences website, Attachment). Other "noted educationists, journalists, researchers, writers and intellectuals of the county" were also reportedly attending as guests of honour. No further information on the paper was found. No further information after the function was found ('Jiban Bati get together June 29' 2008, *Daily People's View*, 21 June http://www.peoples-view.org/day_by_day/2008/06/21/City_Watch.php – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 24; 'Profile: Prof. Jamal Nazrul-Islam' (undated), Islamic World Academy of Sciences website <http://www.ias-worldwide.org/profiles/prof48.htm> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 25). *The Daily People's View* also has a March 2008 announcement in relation to Eid-e-Miladunnabi, at the same time as an event commemorating Ziaul Hoque Maizbhandari ('Milad Mahfil on Ziaul Hoque Maizbhandari (KA) today' 2008, *Daily People's View*, 17 March http://www.peoples-view.org/day_by_day/2008/03/17/City_Watch.php#link10 – Accessed 15 August 2008 – Attachment 26).

Syed Moinuddin Ahmed Maizbhandari

The current leader of the Maizbhandari appears to be Syed Mainuddin Ahmed Maizbhandari (with various spellings). The Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities website includes information on him as one of the speakers at a 2006 Sufi symposium held in Edinburgh. This describes him as the “direct descendent of prophet Muhammad (S.M.); elected president of the Coordination Body of Sunni Leaders in 1988, director of Maizbhandar Dharbar Sharif Islamic complex, orphanage, madrasa and free clinic at Chittagong” (‘International Sufism Symposium’ 2006, Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities website <http://www.eicws.org/content/view/11/> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 27).

He is mentioned in the March 2008 article quoted above, where he is described as a “leading spiritual personality” (‘Miladunnabi observed’ 2008, *The New Nation*, 23 March <http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2008/03/23/news0825.htm> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 23).

A 2005 article reports on Maizbhandari receiving an international peace award:

Leading religious personality Syed Moinuddin Ahmed **Maizbhandari** today received an international award for his outstanding contribution as a “worthy grand ambassador for Islam and peace” in the capital of Ghana. Vice-president of Ghana Alhaj Ali Mohammed handed over the award presented jointly by Ghana National Council for Islamic Celebration and the US-based Universal Islamic Centre. The citation of the award highly praised Syed Moinuddin Ahmed for his extraordinary contribution for “establishment of peace, reconciliation, spiritual uplift and development of humanity” as a religious leader of Bangladesh. The ceremony of giving the “international award of the decade for the years 2005” followed a three-day conference joined by professional and civil society leaders, imams, spiritual personalities from across the globe (‘Bangladesh’s spiritual personality receives international peace award’ 2005, Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies, 29 August – Attachment 28).

2. Is there any evidence that followers may be adversely treated in the Chittagong district?

No information was found on whether followers may be adversely treated in the Chittagong district. According to Bertocci, the Maizbhandari spiritual centre “is located in the Chittagong District village of Maizbhandar”. Bertocci describes a “large-scale event” at the Maizbhandar centre which he attended in 1999. Information on the archived website states that Maizbhandar is “a place of pilgrimage for...millions of people, irrespective of their religion, race, cast and status” (Bertocci, P. 2006, ‘A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The Maizbhandari tariqa and its followers’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 1-28 – Attachment 1; ‘Maizbhandar Sharif’ (undated), Maizbhandar Sharif Sufism website, accessed from the Internet Archive <http://web.archive.org/web/20021217143638/www.maizbhandar.org/MaizbhandarSharif.PDF> – Accessed 18 August 2008 – Attachment 22). As detailed in the previous question, little recent information was found on the organisation. A June 2008 article in the Chittagong based *Daily People’s View* announces a Maizbhandari function to which a number of notables were invited as guests. A March 2008 article also announces a Maizbhandari function in Chittagong (‘Jiban Bati get together June 29’ 2008, *Daily People’s View*, 21 June http://www.peoples-view.org/day_by_day/2008/06/21/City_Watch.php – Accessed 12

August 2008 – Attachment 24; ‘Milad Mahfil on Ziaul Hoque Maizbhandari (KA) today’ 2008, *Daily People’s View*, 17 March http://www.peoples-view.org/day_by_day/2008/03/17/City_Watch.php#link10 – Accessed 15 August 2008 – Attachment 26).

Professor Carl Ernst states that the order “has had a major effect particularly on local government in relation to its seat in Chittagong, as well as influencing the national government”. While he cites Bertocci as an informational source for this statement, there is no further detail on how the Maizbhandari order influences local or national politics (Ernst, C. (undated), ‘Sufism, Islam, and Globalization in the Contemporary World: Methodological Reflections on a Changing Field of Study’, in *Islamic Spirituality and the Contemporary World*, ed. Azizan Baharuddin (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, forthcoming). Found on University of North Carolina website <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/articles/global.doc> – Accessed 18 August 2008 – Attachment 30).

A 2006 article reports that an AL-led national general strike was not being enforced in the area at the request of the “Maizbhandar Urs committee” so as to allow a Maizbhandari devotional event to take place. The article states:

The Chittagong chapter of the Awami League-led opposition alliance, announced to keep the city free from its nationwide general strike today following an urs at the Maizbhandar Sharif, said sources in the alliance.

President of AL Chittagong unit, MA Mannan told New Age that the decision not to enforce the general strike in Chittagong was taken in line with a request from the Maizbhandar Urs committee to facilitate holding its programmes as well as arrival of devotees.

The urs is being organised to mark the death centenary of Gausul Azam Maizbhandari, he said (‘No hartal in Chittagong’ 2006, *New Age*, 22 January

<http://www.newagebd.com/2006/jan/22/front.html> – Accessed 12 August 2008 – Attachment 29).

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BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

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RRT Library Catalogue

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