

Article

In Search of Sylhet—The Fultoli Tradition in Britain

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Abstract: This article presents a case study of the Fultoli tradition, an expression of Islam dominant amongst Bangladeshi migrants to the UK, but which in general terms has failed to communicate itself to British-born Muslims. It is also a denominational identity that has been overlooked in academic literature on British Muslims, and regularly mischaracterized. To correct this, the article presents an overview of Fultolir Sahib, the late founder of the tradition, and the theological distinctiveness of his teachings, before considering its movement to Britain. A varied methodological approach is adopted in order to explore the topic, combining a textual exploration of Fultoli sources with qualitative interviews with members of the Fultoli tradition, and also autoethnography drawing upon the authors' (who were both raised by Fultoli parents) experience of the tradition. The article argues that Fultolir Sahib's authority is constructed in an idiom that is inaccessible to British-born Muslims and that Fultoli institutions have failed to create leaders capable of preserving the tradition. It concludes that despite the diminishing numbers of Fultolis in Britain, it is still important for academics to recognize their unique role in the landscape of Muslim denominational diversity.

Keywords: Islam; Muslim; Bangladeshi; Britain; Fultoli; Fultolir Sahib; Sylhet; Shah Jalal

1. Introduction

In accounts of British Muslim denominational diversity, the Fultoli¹ tradition, emerging out of Sylhet in Bangladesh, is consistently overlooked. Despite being the expression of Islam practiced by almost all first-generation Bangladeshi migrants to Britain, it has rarely been given any attention or consideration in academic literature and, when it has been mentioned, it is often mischaracterized. The challenge of understanding the Fultoli tradition is exacerbated in that it faces near-extinction in Britain if its current trajectory continues. Despite being popular in Bangladesh, in Britain, there is a drastic generational drop-off in practicing the Fultoli tradition. The Fultoli tradition provides an important case study for British Muslim denominational diversity, and this article seeks to present a corrective to the under-representation of the Fultoli tradition in academic literature by presenting an empirical description of the theology of its founder (Fultolir Sahib²) and Fultoli institutions in Britain. In presenting this case study, the question of why the Fultoli tradition has failed to resonate with British-born Muslims is explored. The article argues throughout that Fultolir Sahib's authority is constructed in an idiom and language that is inaccessible to British Muslims. Furthermore, Fultoli

¹ There are a number of ways that this word can be spelt, including: Fultoli, Phultoli, Phultali, Foltali, Foltoli and Fultali. Whilst the latter is more correct as far as the standard Bengali spelling is concerned, the authors have decided to go with the spelling 'Fultoli' as this is how it is vocalised by nearly all Bangladeshis.

² In this article, the phrase 'Fultolir Sahib' (a possessive compound, meaning the Shaykh from the village of Fultoli), refers to the founder of the movement, whilst the term 'Fultoli' refers to the tradition, teaching, institutions and people associated with the movement.

institutions in Britain have fundamentally failed to create leaders capable of promoting and preserving the tradition, such that with the death of Fultolir Sahib, the movement has ceased to have growth or coherence in Britain. The article concludes with a plea to academics in British Muslim studies to more accurately recognize the specific religious history and identity of Bangladeshi Muslims and the Fultoli tradition.

2. The Absence and Mischaracterization of Fultolis in Academic Literature

Despite a burgeoning field of British Muslim studies and a growing list of popular books about Islam in Britain, there has been very little written about Bangladeshi Fultolis, a distinctive and sizeable though diminishing denomination within the British Muslim demographic. One of the few places in which Fultolis are given explicit mention is Ed Hussain's controversial book *The Islamist* (Hussain 2007), where he juxtaposes the 'kinder and gentler religion' (The Sunday Times 2007) of his parents against his foray into political Islam. His parents were followers of the Sufi Master Shaykh Abdul Latif Choudhury Fultoli (1913–2008), often called Fultolir Sahib, the founder and leader of the Fultoli tradition. In terms of academic research, the Bangladeshi-background scholar Sadek Hamid includes an entry on Fultolis by describing the devotionally orientated Bengali Muslims in the UK (Hamid 2016, p. 74) in his book *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism*. The Fultoli tradition is also mentioned in passing by Bulbul Siddiqi in his doctoral thesis on Tablighi Jama'at amongst Bangladeshis in the UK (Siddiqi 2018). Generally, however, when Bangladeshis are mentioned, for example, in overviews of Muslim history and settlement in Britain, their distinctive denominational identity is not included. This includes both academic works (Ansari 2004; Gilliat-Ray 2010) and journalistic ones (Bowen 2014). Even in studies that explicitly explore British Bangladeshi communities and their religious practice, such as that by Barton (1986), the Fultoli tradition is not mentioned—though the author's meeting with an 'undisputed pir' of the Naqshbandi school (Barton 1986, p. 44) in Sylhet may very well have been with Fultolir Sahib. Elsewhere, academics have mistakenly identified Fultolis as Barelwis (Garbin 2005; Brown and Talbot 2006, p. 129) or classified it as Barelwi-orientated (Eade and Garbin 2006, p. 189). The inaccuracy of the 'Barelwi' label is returned to throughout this article, and some reasons for the confusion are considered also.

Garbin however is accurate in his assessment that the Fultoli movement 'does not appeal to second and third generation British Bangladeshis' (Garbin 2005, p. 9), and, unlike other Islamic movements that have emerged in the UK, it has no appeal beyond its immediate ethnic group. This generational drop-off is no doubt part of the reason why Fultolis have not received much attention in academic literature as it is only accessible and observable as an element of the practice of first-generation Bangladeshi Muslims, who will rarely describe themselves as part of a Fultoli tradition. This generational drop-off will also be explored in subsequent sections.

After a consideration of methodology, the remainder of this paper will explore the denominational and theological distinctiveness of the Fultolis, considering their origins in Bangladesh and their activities in Britain. A key issue returned to is why academia has so consistently overlooked the Fultolis, both in Britain and other diaspora contexts, and, in a similar vein, explore why the Fultolis have failed to establish themselves successfully in Britain.

3. Methodology

A varied methodological approach has been adopted by the authors of this paper out of necessity. Both authors, British Bangladeshis, have been raised in the Fultoli tradition and met with Fultolir Sahib as young children. Their denominational identity however, like many other British Bangladeshis, did not remain fixed within this paradigm. Neither, in the course of their careers, has come across an extended consideration of the Fultoli tradition and movement, their teachings, beliefs, or activities. This is despite most Bangladeshi migrants to Britain having a link back to this tradition. The movement has produced very few written texts, in Bengali or English, or codified its distinctiveness in anyway. There is also, as will be explored, a failure to pass on the Fultoli tradition or identity intergenerationally.

This presents a uniquely challenging topic of study. The authors have thus drawn on a combination of methods. This includes both textual and audio-visual sources. Existing works in academic literature have been consulted, along with hagiographic material posted online, and various sermons delivered by Fultolir Sahib uploaded onto YouTube by his followers. This has been combined with qualitative research undertaken in the last two years. One dimension of this has been surveying and documenting Fultoli institutions in the UK based on research of British mosques one of the authors is currently undertaking. It also includes three unstructured interviews with Bangladeshi Muslims about their knowledge of Fultolir Sahib. The individuals were selected for their specific insight or engagement with an aspect of the Fultoli tradition the authors desired clarification on. It includes a first-generation migrant who organized tours by Fultolir Sahib of mosques in Britain in the nineties and noughties, an older second-generation Muslim who attended several talks by Fultolir Sahib, and a former chairman of a Fultoli mosque. The ‘flat’ organizational structure of the movement in Britain means other than the late Fultolir Sahib and a small number of key Bangladesh-based leaders, there are no ‘key informants’.

The above was guided by and supplemented with an autoethnographic approach influenced by Carolyn Ellis, who describes autoethnography as a qualitative approach intended to ‘connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political’ (Ellis 2003, p. xix). In practical terms, it involved the authors sharing their knowledge and experiences of the Fultoli tradition with each other and seeking to triangulate it with other empirical sources in order to present a sound understanding of the Fultoli tradition sociologically and theologically.

4. The Founder: Fultolir Sahib

Shaykh Abdul Latif Choudhury Fultoli, also known as ‘Fultolir Sahib’, ‘Sahib-e-Qiblah’, or ‘Shamsul Ulama’, was a Bangladeshi Sufi shaykh and *pir* hailing from the north east region of Bangladesh known as Sylhet. He was born in 1913, in the Bengal region of British India, and died in 2008. Information about the life of Abdul Latif Choudhury is hard to establish. Most details come from short hagiographic excerpts written in Bengali and sometimes in English by his followers. The other details are oral accounts, accessible through the first generation of British Bangladeshis, who themselves usually heard the stories from other devotees and followers of the *pir*. This ambiguity, however, in which the precise details of his life are not known, is likely partly intentional, and helps maintain an important aura of mysticism and mystery necessary for a *pir*. Through collected reports and biographies, it is clear that Fultolir Sahib is positioned carefully as an inheritor of the heritage of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim India, and the Sylheti region itself. The way in which biographic accounts of Fultolir Sahib achieved this will be presented next.

To comprehend the Fultoli tradition requires understanding the person of Fultolir Sahib. His message, activity, and call are, in the context of Bangladesh, as significant as *who* he is. The messenger and the message are intertwined amongst Fultolis. This can be seen in four areas: Fultolir Sahib and the origins of Islam in the Bengal, Fultolir Sahib and Islam in wider (Mughal) India, Fultolir Sahib’s prophetic mandate to teach, and, finally, Fultolir Sahib’s spiritual (Sufi) lineage. All four combine to provide Fultolir Sahib with a pre-eminent religious authority amongst Bangladeshi Muslims.

The story of Islam reaching Sylhet is enshrined in an oral tradition that figures remarkably consistently in the paideia of Bangladeshi Muslims. The narrative runs roughly as follows. In the fourteenth century of the Christian era, a Muslim family in the Sylheti region, alone and unsupported, faced persecution from their Hindu neighbors and a local ruler. The father of the family, Burhan ad-Din, on the birth of his son, secretly sacrifices a cow in gratefulness to God. A crow steals a morsel of flesh and drops it in the vicinity of a Brahmin family, or in some accounts, into the court of the Hindu ruler himself, Raja Gaur Govinda—who seeks out the source of the slaughtered cow and then punishes Burhan ad-Din for desecrating Hindu sensibilities by killing his son. Distraught, Burhan ad-Din beseeches help from other Muslims, unsuccessfully, until his pleas reach the legendary Shah Jalal Makhdum Mujarrad (d. 1346 CE), and his 313 disciples. Shah Jalal avenges Burhan ad-Din by conquering Raja Gaur Govinda’s palace (through a series of miracles) and then decides to settle in

Sylhet and, with his disciples, teaches Islam to the locals. The story is included in Barton's study of Bradford Bengali Muslims (Barton 1986), as well as in Metcalf's anthology on Islam in South Asia (Metcalf 2009). It is an important part of the self-conceptualization of Sylheti Muslims. Shah Jalal's intimate link to Sylhet and the region can be observed in the eponymous naming practices prominent in the region. The area of Shah Poran is named after one of Shah Jalal's nephews and disciples who was supposedly banished to the outskirts of Sylhet after consuming one of Shah Jalal's prized pigeons. Another Meccan disciple of Shah Jalal by the name of Khawaja Shah Kamal Qahafan settled on the banks of the Ratna river. This area became known as Shaharpara (lit: Shah by the banks of the river). This eponymic practice, as we shall see, continues with Fultoli Muslims today and the naming of mosques in Britain.

The historicity of the account, when stripped of the miraculous feats included in hagiographies, is largely attestable. Shah Jalal does indeed seem to have been a real figure, as was the toppling of Raja Gaur Govinda (see Metcalf 2009, pp. 138–43). The famous Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta (d. 1377) includes a notice of meeting Shah Jalal in Sylhet in his travelogue *al-Rihla* (Eaton 1996, 2010).

The role played by Shah Jalal in Sylhet's collective memory is perhaps comparable to the patron saints of Christian countries, or the 'founding-father' in nationalistic myth. Consequently, the reader should appreciate the significance of Fultolir Sahib tracing his lineage back to a disciple and close friend of Shah Jalal, Shah Kamal (Allamah Fultali Sahib Qiblah 2010). This blood-relation with the disciple of Shah Jalal immediately confers upon Fultolir Sahib a sense of inherited piety and places him in the founding narrative of Sylhet and the surrounding region.

The biographic accounts of Fultolir Sahib also often mention that he is a descendant of Shah Alaa Bakhsh who—according to the biographers—was active in Ahmad Sirhindi's (d. 1625) reformist movement ('Family Background' Nadwi 2009). The latter, Sirhindi, was widely celebrated in scholarly circles for resisting and contesting the Mughal Emperor Abu al-Fath Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Akbar (d. 1605)'s heterodox notions of Islam. Whether or not Shah Alaa Bakhsh was involved in Sirhindi's reforms is not clear, but it appears the biographers of Fultolir Sahib are more concerned with anchoring him as a descendant of the religious struggles at the heart of Islamic India and the Mughal empire.

Another account central to Fultolir Sahib's institutional activity and often included in biographies shared about Fultolir Sahib relate to a dream in which he was commended by the Prophet Muhammad. The following story is narrated by Fultolir Sahib's son Najmuddin Choudhury Fultoli (Shafe Ahmed 2019) and has been transcribed and translated into English by the authors of this article. However similar versions of the story have been shared on various biographies online (Hazrat Allama Fultali Saheb Qiblah 2013) and in interviews with Fultoli followers in Britain. The story begins that while Fultolir Sahib was teaching at Badarpur Senior Madrasah one day, he was visited by Shaykh Abd al-Nur Gharkafni, a well-known and celebrated *pir* from that part of the country. Najmuddin Choudhury Fultoli quotes his father Fultolir Sahib as follows:

I was teaching Tirmidhi Sharif in class one day when Maulana Abd al-Nur Sahib came to visit me. I assumed he came to observe me teaching my students. After class he approached me and said, 'I have come to you regarding an important request.' I replied, 'What is your request?' He said, 'teach me how to recite the Qur'an (*qirat*) once a week.' I was very busy with teaching hadith and *tafsir*, as this requires advanced preparation, so I gave him my apologies and refused. He went away and came back the following day. After I finished teaching, he came to me and said, 'I have come back again for the same request.' I, again, told him of my difficulties, but he replied, 'This is not my request, but from someone far greater.' I replied, 'Did my teacher Maulana Badarpuri Sahib send you?' He replied, 'No, someone far greater than him.' I said, 'tell me who it is.' He replied, 'I saw the Prophet in my dream, I requested that I wish to hear him recite the Holy Qur'an. The Prophet recited the Qur'an in the most beautiful manner. I asked, 'O Messenger of God. I wish to recite as you did.' The Prophet pointed towards a man on his right. When I looked at this man, I saw that it was none other than you sat beside the Prophet.' After hearing this I stood up in utmost

respect and informed him that I would teach one hour per week, God willing. He asked, 'Where will you teach us?' I told him, 'at the shrine of Shaykh Adam Khaki.' We agreed that we would meet every Thursday at midday. The shrine was one mile away, so Maulana Abd al-Nur Sahib brought me a horse to ride there. The word spread that I would be teaching *qirat* and when I went there, I found that 250 ulema and imams had come to learn. The lesson extended all the way to Isha prayer.'

This story is heavy with meaning. Nile Green observes that such visions and dreams often formed an 'essential element in the rhetoric of sainthood,' and include a component of inter-denominational competition between *pirs* (Green 2003, p. 210). While pious lineages are important, the dream is an indicator of divine approval and *baraka* (see Cormack 2013 for an edited collection that explores the concept of *baraka* in a variety of settings) present in an individual. Not only does the dream narrative serve the function of elevating Fultolir Sahib's teaching of the Quran by receiving Prophetic approval, it also serves to allow lay Muslims an opportunity to access the same Prophetic approval by seeking Fultolir Sahib as their teacher.

In Sufi circles, the core component of an individual's qualification as a *pir* is his *silsila* (Bearman et al. 2012). Fultolir Sahib's *silsila* or spiritual lineage was likewise important in the construction of his authority, tracing its way to Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (d. 1873) (Kazir Bazar 2014). It is also here that the common misconception of Fultolis as similar to Barelwis can be understood in context. Jaunpuri was the spiritual disciple of the scholar, Sayyid Ahmed Barelwi (d. 1831—not to be confused with Ahmed Reza Khan Barelwi (d. 1921), although it is likely some have) and a disciple of the equally conservative scholar Shah Muhammad Ismail (d. 1831). Jaunpuri was sent by Sayyid Ahmad to reform Islam in the Bengal region from what were considered heretical cultural accretions and Hindu syncretism by Sayyid Ahmad (Metcalf 1982, p. 70; Nadwi 2009, p. 37). Jaunpuri's activism led him to be known as *Fatih Bangal* or the Conqueror of Bengal (Hanif 2000, p. 189). This part of Fultolir Sahib's biography is pertinent as while his biological lineage reaches back to the origins of Islam in the Bengal region, his spiritual lineage has him connected to modern Islamic revival in Bengal.

Fultolir Sahib's *silsila* also highlights why it is incorrect to label the Fultoli movement as Barelwi-influenced (David 2005) or Barelwi-oriented (Eade and Garbin 2006). The aforementioned Shah Muhammad Ismail, both a disciple of Sayyid Ahmad and a teacher of Jaunpuri (Nadwi 2009, p. 20), was the subject of sustained criticism from Ahmed Reza Khan, the founder of the Barelwi movement. Ahmed Reza Khan laboriously lists seventy reasons as to why Muhammad Ismail had committed heresy based on the latter's work *Taqwiyat al-Iman* (though Ahmed Reza Khan hesitates from issuing a final declaration of *kufir*) (Sanyal 2005, p. 107). In short, while there are apparent similarities between Fultolis and Barelwis, they are no more significant than the apparent similarities between Deobandis and Barelwis (after all, both groups are South Asian Sunni Hanafis who consider themselves Sufis). Rather, Jaunpuri and Muhammad Ismail represented a scholarly tradition, separate and distinct from Muhammad Qasim Nantauvi (d. 1880, the founder of the Deobandi movement) and Ahmed Reza Khan (d. 1921). Fultoli Islam is the contemporary manifestation of that tradition. The link shared between Fultolis, Barelwis, and Deobandis is that they emerged out of the vibrant and highly charged religious public sphere of India under the Raj, in which calls for religious reforms had both urgency and political relevance.

It may be that the similar names of Sayyid Ahmed Barelwi and Ahmed Reza Khan Barelwi is what led to academics conflating Fultolis and Barelwis. Such confusion occurs between Deobandis and Barelwis too, with the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* listing Sayyid Ahmed Reza Khan Barelwi as the founder of the Deobandi movement (Esposito 2004)—despite tracing the lineage correctly in another section (Moosa 2004). As of yet, no academic literature has correctly traced the lineage and history of the Fultoli tradition, or the salience of the divisions amongst Muslims from Bangladesh. This article hopes to begin a process of correction in the representation of Fultolis in literature.

This section has listed four key ways in which the person of Fultolir Sahib is charged with religious authority, namely: His link to Shah Jalal and the origins of Islam in Bangladesh, as a continuation of the tradition of Islam in Mughal India, his Prophetic mandate, and his spiritual lineage.

5. Fultolir Sahib's Institutions and Scholarship

Fultolir Sahib is best-known for founding the Darul Qirat Majidia Fultali Trust Madrasah in Bangladesh, which educated the public in Islamic studies, specializing in the recitation and memorization of the Quran. When it was launched in 1950, it began as a month-long program that ran during the month of Ramadan to teach the correct pronunciation of the Qur'an, and then developed into a fully-fledged seminary (Darul Qirat Majidia Fultali Trust 2019). The success of the seminary in Bangladesh led to the model being adopted in Britain, including the flagship Fultoli institution of Darul Hadis Latifah in London.

A range of other organizations in Bangladesh are attributed to Fultolir Sahib (British Fultoli organizations will be looked at in the next section), such as *Anjumane Madaris e Arabiya* (the Association of Arabic Schools), which sought to both preserve the standards of madrasa education while also fighting for employment rights of teachers employed in the madrasa system, and *Anjumane Talamije Islamia*, an Islamic Students network. The success and activities of these organizations in Bangladesh is hard to establish, with disparate news stories, social media posts, and an unreliable online presence. Without further fieldwork in Bangladesh itself, this paper is unable to answer this question.

Fultolir Sahib was anything but a prolific writer, his primary scholarly output was as a teacher and preacher, delivering lectures and classes. The short list of books he did publish were written in a variety of languages. These include *Al-Qawlus Sadeed fil Qirat wat-Tajweed* ('True and Accurate Speech in Recitation and Pronunciation'), a short and popular book available in Urdu, Bengali, and English used to teach the correct recitation of the Quran. *Anwarus Salikeen* is an Urdu language book detailing the Sufi path, and *Nek Amal* is a short Bengali language book aimed at a popular audience illustrating various actions rewarded and praised in the Islamic tradition. *Al-Khutbat al-Yaqubiyah* is one of Fultolir Sahib's most popular publications, it is a collection of short Arabic Friday sermons with Bengali translations, rich and replete with Quranic references and hadith. The book is named after Fultolir Sahib's teacher and father-in-law Shaykh Hatim Ali Yaqub Badarpuri (d. 1958 CE). In the South Asian Hanafi tradition, the Friday sermon is read in Arabic, and as such, pre-written Arabic sermons of this nature are popular, especially in Britain, where it allows non-specialists to lead the Friday prayer.

However, the core of Fultolir Sahib's influence remained within the paradigm of the traditions of the tariqa in which he was a *pir*. Through personal relationships and sermons, he and his key followers, such as Maulana Nizam Uddin Biskhuti Sahib (d. 2009 CE), would maintain and spread his influence within Britain.

6. The Theology of Fultoli Tradition

Fultoli beliefs, theology, and practices are rooted in a Hanafi Sunni expression of Sufism common in the Indian subcontinent. The initial similarity with other expressions of Islam is probably why, hitherto, researchers have confused them with Barelwis, or otherwise overlooked their distinctiveness, especially as both Barelwis and Fultolis place an emphasis on what Gellner calls 'low Islam', the Islam of rural populations with a focus on rituals and concretization of abstract doctrines in the form of Sufi veneration (Gellner 1992). Sufism has been the de facto Islam in the Indian sub-continent even amongst the early Ahle Hadith movement (Metcalf 1982, p. 57).

In accordance with the religious tradition in the Bengal region, Fultolir Sahib was a Sunni, Hanafi, Sufi Muslim. Many of his lectures and works are a defense of his beliefs, or articulation of the practicalities of the Naqshbandi tariqa. As an orator, Fultolir Sahib's sermons are sporadic and unstructured. He often gets side-tracked by tangents, frequently leaving a point unfinished before starting a new one, a story within a story like Cervantes in Don Quixote or the author of the Arabian

Nights. His sermons are however rarely aimed at providing a coherent or comprehensive lesson. Unlike the university lecture, Fultolir Sahib's aim is to provide a wide array of moral exhortations and wisdom traditions. However, a single theme consistently is returned to within his sermons—that of respecting and recognizing the 'true' status of the Prophet Muhammad.

For Fultolir Sahib, a person cannot be a true believer unless they recognize the status afforded to the Prophet Muhammad by God. Unlike other denominations who frame the discussion of orthodoxy and heterodoxy by using Arabic terms like *sunna* (prophetic practice) and *bid'ah* (heresy), Fultolir Sahib takes an approach rooted in Qur'anic rhetoric. He labels an orthodox Muslim as one who is simultaneously a *Mu'min* and a Muslim, whilst the heretic is only a Muslim (Allama Fultoli Saheb Qiblah 2017). Drawing on a variety of Qur'anic verses, Fultolir Sahib argues that even the Prophet was wooed by the apparent piety of some of the 'hypocrites'; however, God warns him that while they may be Muslims (those who practice Islam), they are not *Mu'mins* (those who fully believe in Islam) (Allama Fultoli Saheb Qiblah 2017). Moving on from this premise, Fultolir Sahib argues that salvation can only be attained when outer submission (Islam) is aligned with inner conviction (*iman*). In contrast with the Deobandis and Barelwis, in Fultolir Sahib's view even the Ahmadis are Muslims. Importantly, however, they are not *Mu'mins*. For Fultolir Sahib, a person's inner conviction will never align with its external manifestation if one's beliefs about the Prophet are incorrect. Thus, believing the Prophet to be just another human is an error, he is a perfected human and thereby something unique and transformative to the rest of creation. Fultolir Sahib's soteriology based on his prophetology has led him to rebuke, refute and mock those who disagree with him, and the Jamaat-e-Islami are selected for particular scorn.

The intercession of the Prophet is an integral part of Fultolir Sahib's prophetology. According to Fultolir Sahib, one can be a Muslim without praying, however, not holding the Prophet in correct reverence will be the cause of being deprived of the Prophet's intercession (Saheb Qiblah Fultoli (Muhammad Abdul Latif Chowdhury)—Waz II (2014)). Fultolir Sahib roots this strongly within a sober doctrine of the Prophet's mortality, describing any claims of divinity to be 'extending one's feet in front of the Prophet', a Bengali expression meaning to go beyond what someone has instructed (Allama Saheb Qibla Fultoli, Moulovi Bazar 2004 2016). Thus, in contrast to Barelwi teachings, the Prophet is not 'Knower of the Unseen' (*alim al-ghayb*), nor does he attend the *mawlid* gatherings (*hazir o nazir*) and to place a chair in anticipation of the Prophet's appearance is to deviate from his *sunna*. The recitation of *salam ala al-Nabi* (salutation on the Prophet), also known as *mawlid*, *mawlid sharif*, or *qiyam*, is an integral part of Fultolir Sahib's teaching. Anyone who denies the *mawlid* is a 'Wahabi' according to him. However, for Fultolir Sahib, unlike the Barelwis, standing up in the *mawlid* is in remembrance of the Prophet being born into the world and not in anticipation of his appearance at the event (Allama Fultoli Saheb Qiblah 2017). The debate around the personhood of the Prophet, his nature, the extent of his knowledge and presence in the world, are fault lines of identity between Deobandis, Barelwis, and other groups (such as the Jamaat-e-Islami) in contemporary South Asia. Fultolir Sahib navigates these debates, putting forward a unique position on each that aligns with neither the Deobandis, Barelwis, or Islamists such as the Jamaat-e-Islami. Mehmood Naqshbandi, who manages a national database of British mosques (Muslims in Britain 2019) admitted to also finding it difficult to recognize their unique practices, stating that he initially considered Fultoli mosques as potentially 'a typical low-key Deobandi masjid, particularly of the more tassawwuf-inclined variety' until learning about the Fultoli tradition (Naqshbandi, 2017, personal communication, 4th August).

Given Fultolir Sahib's role in establishing schools of *qirat* and *tajweed*, it should not come as a surprise that the correct pronunciation of the Quran has become a focal point for Fultolis. In particular, the correct articulation of the letter *dād* (ض) has become an idiosyncratic fault-line for Fultoli identity, especially during recitation of the opening chapter of the Quran, the *fatihah* (which is repeated in every formal daily prayer). So adamant was Fultolir Sahib, and subsequently his followers, on the correct articulation of *dād* that Fultolis became known amongst Bangladeshis as '*duallin fornay wala*', or 'the people who read *duallin*' (referring to the final verse of the *fatihah*) as opposed to '*zuallin fornay wala*' or

‘the people who recite *zuallin*. Subsequently, the epithet ‘*duallin*’ (which ironically means ‘those who have gone astray’) has become a marker for true Islamic identity and the title ‘*zuallin*’ was reserved for movements and denominations of Islam considered ‘deviant’.

Understanding the roots of this debate, which has manifested in conflicts within Fultoli mosques in Bangladesh and Britain, is challenging. The letter *ḍād* is the most difficult letter to pronounce in Arabic, and it has long been considered unique to the Arabic language itself, leading to Arabic being referred to as ‘the language of *ḍād*’ (Versteegh 2001, p. 89). Other than native Arabs of a particular dialect, not many people can successfully pronounce it (Brown 2007). The sound for *ḍād* is made when air is forced through the left side of the tongue as it touches the left top and bottom molars. Any minimal gap between the side of the tongue and the molars will result in a sound which is similar to a *zā* sound. Scholars experienced in the recitation of the Qur’an recognized the difficulty of this letter and understood the theological problems that can arise because of a change of meaning caused by substituting one letter for another. Thus, they wrote many works elaborating Islamic guidance on this issue (Shafi 1932).

It is not clear why Fultolir Sahib became exclusively animated over the articulation of *ḍād*. One brief account from Fultolir Sahib in 2004 recounts that he was forced to flee to Pakistan due to rioting that took place in the 1950s. While in Pakistan he was told that the mark of a true scholar is to believe that the Prophet Muhammad was subject to human frailties and weaknesses, and to recite the letter *ḍād* as *zā* (Allama Fultoli Saheb Qiblah 2017). Fultolir Sahib explains he took it upon himself to refute these beliefs. Beyond this short narration, the authors have been unable to trace why the *ḍād* has emerged as such an important denominational issue for the Fultolis. Nonetheless, the consequence of this is that the average Fultoli Muslim is acoustically trained to perceive whether the imam leading the prayer is reciting *duallin* or *zuallin* (even if this Muslim is otherwise amateur in Quranic recitation). For the imam of a Fultoli-aligned mosque, it is a daily job interview, and any minute slip of the tongue (literally) whilst reciting the final verse of the *fatihah* will lead to censure and rebuke from congregants. This has resulted in a heightened awareness by Bangladeshi imams, Fultoli or otherwise, regarding the correct pronunciation of the letter *ḍād* in the *fatihah* (even though there may be lapses in the correct pronunciation of other parts of the Qur’an).

In terms of practice, Fultolir Sahib outlined a simple series of instructions for followers (those who took *bay’a* from him, or the pledge of allegiance Sufi Muslims offer *pirs*). It included an exhortation to be ‘of assistance to others’, to delight in other’s successes and not be pleased in other’s failures, to diligently observe the five daily prayers, to recite the *shahada* (Islamic declaration of faith) silently with every breath, and to recite *salawat* upon the Prophet at least 200 times before sleeping, as well as to seek forgiveness from God at least 100 times in a day. These instructions were delivered to all followers who took *bay’a* from him, such that other than being recorded in numerous places online (Fultali 2017; Al-Nasiha Al-Latifiyyah 2013), the advice was also recounted by British Bangladeshi Fultolis interviewed as part of the research for this article.

Fultoli theology then is largely synonymous with other Sunni, Hanafi, Sufi Muslim groups. Its idiosyncratic features, an emphasis on correct prophetology and on the pronunciation of *ḍād*, are debates that while relevant in Bangladesh, have largely been confined to Bangladeshi Fultolis in Britain.

7. From Sylhet to Britain

Having outlined the person of Fultolir Sahib and the theological distinctiveness embedded within the Fultoli tradition, the following section will consider more closely their establishment in Britain.

The Bangladeshi migrants who settled in Britain are part of a wider migration from Commonwealth countries to the United Kingdom following the Second World War. As such, many of the accounts of Bangladeshi migration to the UK are part of wider histories of Muslim settlement, such as Ansari’s ‘Infidel Within’ (2004). A small number of researchers have paid particular attention to Bangladeshis and their history of settlement in Britain (Eade 1990; Eade and Peach 1996; Khanum 2001; Eade and

Garbin 2006; Peach 2006; Kibria 2008; Lie 2010). In general, Bangladeshis followed the pattern of wider post-war migration—young men seized on opportunities for employment following the Second World War and the British Nationality Act 1948 (which conferred upon them British citizenship as former subjects of the British Empire). Their employment was usually in labor-heavy roles (factories, on ships, and later, the service industry).

Not long after moving to Britain, the single men brought wives and families from Bangladesh and began a period of chain migration. Today, Bangladeshis—like many of their Windrush generation counterparts—have a first-generation community long-settled in Britain, and an adult second-generation population increasingly with families of their own. In some places, this has moved into third, fourth, and sometimes even fifth generations. Kibria identifies two phases of Bangladeshi migration to Britain, the first of Bengali single men travelling for work, and the second of chain migration and reunification of families (Kibria 2008, pp. 247–48). This broad picture however can conceal several unique facets of the British Bangladeshi population.

The first is the singular geographic origin of the migrants. In 1948, many of the migrants we now identify as Bangladeshi would have been from “East Pakistan”, formed following the partition of India and the end of the British Raj. The region of East Pakistan is culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and to a certain extent, religiously, distinct from “West Pakistan” (what is now simply Pakistan). East Pakistan became Bangladesh following an armed struggle for independence in 1971. However, Bangladesh itself is diverse, and Sylhet is in many ways an exception to the rest of contemporary Bangladesh. “Historically, Sylhet was in Assam, not Bengal” writes Samuel, and the Sylheti dialect spoken by its inhabitants “is not immediately intelligible to speakers of standard Bangla” (Samuel 2012, p. 142). This distinctiveness of the region is significant when considering the character and profile of Bangladeshi migrants to the UK as it is estimated that between 80% (Peach 2006, p. 136) and 95% (Lie 2010, p. 1428) hailed from Sylhet. The Bangladeshi population of Britain is overwhelmingly a Sylheti population. They are bound by their unique dialect of Bengali and their largely rural backgrounds, as well as the religious history of Shah Jalal outlined prior.

The second unique facet of Bangladeshi settlement in the UK is the pattern and timescales of migration. While young men from Sylhet were offered the opportunity to work in Britain like others under the former Raj, Peach considers this migration to be lagging “10 years behind” (2006, p. 137) their Pakistani counterparts. Thus, he argues that while Pakistanis migrated to Britain from the 1950s onwards, Bangladeshi migration only began in earnest in the 1960s. Likewise, Pakistanis began settling with families in the 1970s, whereas Bangladeshis only began this process in the 1980s. In the 1991 census, Bangladeshis were the youngest population amongst Muslim migrants (Eade and Peach 1996). Ansari observes that Bangladeshi migration to Britain increased in the 1970s and 1980s while it was declining from other South Asian countries (2004, p. 155). While it is no longer the case that Bangladeshis are the youngest Muslim migrants in Britain, it is likely that their institutional development is correspondingly also ten years or so behind their Pakistani and Indian counterparts.

Finally, demographically and economically, there are distinctions too. There are fewer Bangladeshis in England and Wales than Pakistanis or Indians. The 2011 census records 447,201 Bangladeshis (compared to 1,124,511 Pakistanis and 1,412,958 Indians), making them a minority within the wider South Asian population (Population of England and Wales—Ethnicity 2019). The Bangladeshi population is less financially well-off than other South Asian counterparts also, with lower levels of home ownership, employment, and educational attainment (Salway 2008; Dale and Ahmed 2011). They are clustered in London, particularly Tower Hamlets, leading Garbin to write the British Bangladeshi population “is a very English urban population—very few live in Scotland or Wales” (2005, p. 1). Those Bangladeshis who are in Wales and Scotland are often individuals who first settled in England, and then moved to find new opportunities in the tertiary industry, establishing restaurants and takeaways in rural towns or working in the taxi service.

Relevant to the discussion of Fultoli denominational identity, there are very few ways in which to ascertain numerical data about the tradition. While it is most common amongst first-generation

Bangladeshis, it is not the denomination followed by all Bangladeshi migrants. The 2011 census recorded that 51.9% of the Bangladeshi population in the UK is British-born ([People Born Outside the UK 2018](#)), however details for where the remaining 48.1% were born is not available (and it is not uncommon for Bangladeshis to migrate to Britain from other European countries). As such, it is not possible to ascertain a reliable estimate of the number of Fultolis in Britain (usually first-generation migrants from Bangladesh), and, likewise, without further research it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the numbers involved in the generational drop-off discussed prior. A breakdown of Fultoli institutions in Britain in the next section provides some indication of their influence and significance within the wider British Muslim denominational landscape, but without further qualitative and quantitative research, conclusive numbers are currently impossible to ascertain.

In summary then, there are several salient facets of the British Bangladeshi population worth noting. They are generally more recent migrants than other Commonwealth migrants. They are usually more socio-economically deprived than other Muslim migrants. They are numerically significant in Britain as a contingent of the Muslim population (likely hovering around the figure of half a million) but much smaller in number than Pakistani or Indian counterparts (though the Bangladeshi Muslims are more numerous than Indian Muslims in the UK). They are clustered in England, especially in London, particularly in Tower Hamlets. The Bangladeshi migrants are also overwhelmingly from Sylhet, which is a unique part of Bangladesh, distinctive in language and history. These are the migrants then who brought the Fultoli tradition to Britain.

8. Fultoli Mosques in the UK

These first generation of migrants from Sylhet brought with them their national-cum-religious history of Shah Jalal, the mystic itinerant warrior-saint who is credited with bringing Islam to the region. The Fultoli tradition, as identified, traces its origin back to one of Shah Jalal's 313 companions (Shah Kamal). One way in which this identity has been recreated is through the establishment of mosques. Like other Muslim migrants in diaspora, the establishment of the mosque became a priority as soon as single Muslim men began marrying and starting families ([Ahmed 2019](#)).

Fultoli mosques are often keen to include "Shah Jalal" in the title of the mosque. There are 34 "Shah Jalal" mosques in the United Kingdom, with the majority in England but with 2 in Wales and 1 in Scotland. Alternative names include "Jalalia" (meaning 'of Jalal'), of which there are 5 (all England bar 1 in Wales) or Jalalabad (meaning 'the place of Jalal'), there are 7 such mosques all in England. There are also the similarly named Shah Poran mosques (a disciple of Shah Jalal), with 1 in Wales and 4 in England. This naming convention means that Shah Jalal is the Muslim figure with the most mosques named after him (46 in total, and a further 5 named after his disciple of Shah Poran). No other figure comes close, including the Prophet Muhammad or famous companions (Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, Ali, or Bilal).

This eponymic naming convention is telling about meaning-making by Fultoli Muslims. To make sense of the naming strategy requires one to be familiar with a particular context. Here, it may be better to speak of 'con-text' than context, drawing on Shahab Ahmed's discursive conceptualization of how Muslims make meaning ([Ahmed 2015](#)). 'Con-text' is the historical, literary, cultural, artistic, and scholarly resources Muslims draw upon to make meaning. Some of these resources may be universal to Muslims, such as the story of the Prophet Muhammad's biography (thus the prominence of mosques named "Madinah"), but others are tied intimately to a locality or ethnicity, such as in the case of Shah Jalal. The challenge, which relates to the generational drop-off amongst Fultoli Muslims, is that British-born Bangladeshis as well as non-Bangladeshi Muslims will find it difficult to access the meanings and significance of such naming conventions.

Naqshbandi identifies 32 mosques belonging to the Fultoli tradition in his database ([Muslims in Britain 2019](#)), only some of which overlap with the eponymic naming convention discussed above. Likewise, [Garbin \(2005\)](#) identifies a handful of mosques in Birmingham with Fultoli-links (such as the Jalalabad Sunni Jame Masjid and Islamic Centre or the Muslim Association of Salisbury).

A comprehensive list of Fultoli mosques is however difficult to compile, not least because the generational drop-off discussed prior means that mosques can change ownership and identity. An example is the Jamia Al-Jalalia, a madrassa and mosque based in Oldham opened in the early noughties, though only officially incorporated as a trust in 2008. The Bangladeshi Fultolis found themselves unable to maintain the running of the madrassa, both financially and following a series of controversies involving trustees. In 2011, the trustees eventually handed over control to Jamia al-Karam, the flagship madrassa for the Barelwis in Britain, to continue running Jamia Al-Jalalia, which was eventually re-opened in 2012 as Oldham Islamic College. This story of a Fultoli institution changing denominational identity is not uncommon, and if the generational drop-off of adherence to the Fultoli tradition continues, it will become increasingly challenging for Fultolis to maintain the identity of mosques, madrassas, and charities.

One of the best-known mosques with a Fultoli heritage is the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid. The establishment of the mosque was ostensibly a reaction to the more reformist tendencies of the East London Mosque nearby, leading to congregants purchasing the building, originally a chapel and subsequently a synagogue, and converting it to a mosque (Saleem 2018, p. 71). Indeed, Eade and Garbin observed how the commitment to Fultoli Islam amongst the mosque congregation was a stumbling block for the recruitment and growth of reformist movements amongst Bangladeshis in East London (Eade and Garbin 2006, p. 189). It remains staunchly Fultoli, and annually hosts an *urs* on the anniversary of Fultolir Sahib's death.

What is notable about the establishment of Fultoli mosques is that despite the striking uniformity on naming conventions, they are individual, independent, and emerge out of local groups. There is no evidence of any hierarchy or formal relationship between Fultoli mosques in their establishment. Fultolir Sahib did not command his followers to establish mosques in Britain. Nor did the followers of Fultolir Sahib look to him for authority to establish a mosque. Rather they built mosques and recreated the only expression of Islam they knew and were familiar with—a Sunni Islam, of the Hanafi *madhab*, of the Naqshbandi tariqa, of the Fultoli tradition. Once established, they did become part of a network of Fultoli institutions, hosting Fultolir Sahib, his sons, or other highly regarded preachers and *pirs* within the Fultoli tradition (such as Maulana Nizam Uddin Choudhury Bishkuti Sahib). Such visits would see the guest delivering a *w'az* (an Islamic sermon, the word is Bengali though has made its way to the language from Arabic via Persian) followed by fundraising, usually to support Fultoli institutions in Bangladesh (such as orphanages, madrassas, or other charitable development projects). Garbin describes these visits as "*w'az mahfil*" and taking place in the Fultoli-linked mosques in Birmingham (Garbin 2005, p. 8). The guest would then be hosted in a local Bangladeshi family's home for the night, something both practical but also highly sought after by the family for the *baraka* of hosting a pious figure. This informal practice bound together the various Fultoli institutions, creating an informal network and also raising important funds for the activities of Fultolir Sahib in Bangladesh. However, it has largely declined following the passing of Fultolir Sahib and Biskhuti Sahib, though still maintained to a lesser degree by his sons.

There are also those institutions established directly as a result of the activism of Fultolir Sahib. One of the most prominent organizations is the Darul Hadis Latifiah Secondary School, College and Title Madrasah. It began as a complimentary educational school for Muslim children, established in 1978 directly by Fultolir Sahib, out of concern for young Bangladeshi children in Bethnal Green (a district within Tower Hamlets in East London), teaching the children a basic Islamic studies syllabus. It has since become a full-time secondary faith school. A similar institution, the Latifiah Fultali Complex was established under Fultolir Sahib's guidance in West Bromwich, a town a short distance from Birmingham in England. The Latifiah Fultali Complex hosts a secondary school, the British Muslim School, as one of its projects. Both of these institutions are modelled after the previously mentioned Darul Qirat Majidia Fultali Trust Madrasah in Bangladesh. Darul Hadis Latifiah is also a base for other organizations founded by Fultolir Sahib, such as the Al-Islah Youth Forum or Anjumane al-Islah. The former is a youth organization, focusing on short Islamic courses and daytrips. The latter, Anjumane

al-Islah, is modelled on a similar organization founded by Fultolir Sahib in Bangladesh. The website describes it as a 'non-political charity' (About Us 2019) though Garbin describes it as the 'political wing' of Fultolir Sahib's activities, though 'not very influential either in Britain or in Bangladesh' (Garbin 2005, p. 7). Its work in Britain has historically focused on fundraising and attempting to build networks and local chapters of activists. The association is currently largely inactive, especially as similar work is being done by the Fultali Foundation, a registered fundraising charity in Britain.

9. The British Decline of Fultolis

The story presented so far of the Fultoli tradition is one of significant growth and activity in Bangladesh. By combining his authority as a descendant of Shah Jalal, a scholar in the tradition of scholars of Mughal India, and hagiographic accounts of Prophetic approval, with a simple message, Fultolir Sahib was successful in reaching many Sylheti Muslims. As these Muslims migrated to Britain, they brought with them their identification and reverence for Fultolir Sahib. The Fultoli institutional landscape of Britain is loose, however. Unlike Deobandi establishments, where authority, tradition, and hierarchy are more clearly defined, Fultoli institutions are more independent and only bound by networks of association and familiarity. Prior to Abdul Latif Chowdhury Fultoli's death, these were sustained through his itinerant preaching and fundraising. However since his passing, and that of Biskhuti Sahib, there are few individuals left to continue this legacy (only Fultolir Sahib's sons have the spiritual capital to do so). There is now very little then to bind together Fultoli institutions, or to continue their association with each other, other than a shared religious identity.

This is not the only challenge however faced by Fultolis in Britain. The tradition is deeply tied to Bengali soil. Returning to a key question in this article, the general failure of Fultoli Islam to successfully propagate itself within Britain, it is possible to identify how the biographical features that make Fultolir Sahib preeminent amongst Bangladeshis fail to resonate with British-born Bangladeshis or to non-Bangladeshis. This effectively turns the Fultoli tradition into an insular one, inaccessible except to insiders. Fultolir Sahib's religious authority and appeal is tightly bound to the geographic and religious space of Bangladesh itself. How relevant is being a descendant of Shah Jalal to a British Muslim? It could be argued that the Prophetic mandate has a potentially wider appeal, however the specific medium in which it is expressed, that of a dream, is a Sufi paradigm that would be rejected by strict textualists (such as Salafis) and viewed with skepticism by conservative Sufis (such as Deobandis). Much of the message, practices, and meaning-making of the Fultoli tradition simply fail to work in a British context. An example of such a practice is the *bay'a* that would take place at the end of lectures by Fultolir Sahib. The Bangladeshi Sylheti Muslims would queue in front of Fultolir Sahib and commit to following his teachings and preaching. The *bay'a* is a familiar Sufi practice, and so not unusual. What is unusual is that the *bay'a* would be offered and received in Urdu—the national language of Pakistan—by Bangladeshis with only limited capability to speak and understand Urdu. It would be an easy mistake to read contemporary national implications into this, but it is more accurate to understand the use of Urdu in the subcontinent as a sacred language of Muslim scholarship, agency, and ambition (Hakala 2016). This resonance of Urdu however is less intelligible in a British context, and while it is easily changed, like much of the Fultoli tradition, its followers have sought to recreate it in Britain with as much fidelity as possible.

Other challenges relate specifically to leadership of Fultoli institutions, most notably, the mosque. With no full-time madrassas producing Fultoli ulema in Britain, there is a dearth of English-speaking Fultoli imams. Fultoli mosques are faced with a number of bounded choices. One option is to hire an imam from Bangladesh, which perpetuates the challenges of connecting with a British-born Muslim congregation (Bangladeshi or otherwise). The alternative is to hire a qualified British-born English-speaking imam but who has graduated from a British institution belonging to another denomination, usually Deobandi, which means to lose their denominational distinctiveness. A third option, often resorted to out of desperation and necessity rather than preference, is to have the religious

functions of the imam undertaken by Islamically semi-literate and pious laymen rather than trained ulema. All three can be observed in Fultoli (or, sometimes, former Fultoli) mosques.

The future of the Bangladeshi Fultoli tradition in Britain remains uncertain. Its presence is marked by absences. While the Deobandi movement has invested in madrassas and the production of religious professionals (King 1997; Birt 2005; Gilliat-Ray 2006, 2007, 2018; Geaves 2012; Ingram 2018), there is no such activity for the Fultolis. The Tablighi Jama'at have organized activists on the ground recruiting new members and socializing them into the ideals and principles of the movement (see primarily Timol 2017 but also Metcalf 1993; Sikand 1998; Ali 2003); there is no comparable recruitment or activism however amongst the Fultolis. The Salafis have an international network, maintaining transnational links through the internet, television channels, and visiting scholars (Hamid 2016; Inge 2017). The Fultolis have few of these, and while there are Bengali language channels in Britain (such as 'Channel S') which host Fultoli ulema, they remain preachers in the Bengali language and so appeal only to insiders. These factors all contribute towards the generational drop-off amongst Fultolis, with young British-born Bangladeshis often seeking religious fulfilment elsewhere. Sometimes this is by adopting a completely different denominational identity: Salafism, the Deobandis, and various Islamist movements have all become vehicles of religious self-expression for young British Bangladeshi Muslims. For those who seek to maintain some continuity with their parents' overtly Sufi Fultoli Islam, Sufi shaykhs from abroad provide a more attractive and accessible source of guidance than Fultoli *pirs* from Bangladesh, such as Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, and Shaykh Muhammad Yacoubi. Hamid describes this new international Sufism as the "traditional Islam movement" (Hamid 2016). The rate of generational drop-off is hard to quantify, and even qualitatively, the nature of the drop-off is difficult to identify. In some cases, younger British Muslim Bangladeshis may outright reject their parents' Islam as heretical, lacking intellectual rigor, or village superstition (all three descriptions have been encountered by the authors). In other cases, they may respect but struggle to access Fultoli Islam. Others still also disengage from a religious identity altogether. Further research on Fultolis in Britain is needed to explore the numbers and nature of intergenerational transmission more closely.

If the Fultoli tradition is to remain a part of the British Muslim landscape, then it will need to reorient itself to be meaningful to younger British-born Muslims. This in no way means abandoning all that makes the Fultoli tradition distinctive, or its relationship to Bengali soil, but it does require ensuring that its meaning-making is intelligible to Muslims outside of Bangladesh, that it can address the theological issues of debate in the Western world (rather than the Indian subcontinent), and that it produces leaders and imams capable of serving and running Fultoli institutions in the United Kingdom. That said, it would be premature to consider the Fultoli movement as irrelevant. Its impact in Britain, through the establishment of mosques, will still shape future developments amongst British Muslims (even if those mosques do not remain Fultoli in denominational identity). It is also worth reflecting on Sikand's predictions that the Tablighi Jama'at will fail to engage or capture the attention of British-born Muslims (Sikand 1998, p. 187). He cites the Tablighi Jama'at's adherence to Gujarati cultural traditions, aversion to 'Western' dress and education, and a general failure to prioritize intergenerational transmission, as reasons for its demise in the United Kingdom. These predictions have largely failed to bear fruit (Timol 2017), with the Tablighi Jama'at not only appealing to British-born Muslims of a Gujarati Deobandi background, but becoming a movement attractive even to Salafis and ethnically diverse British Muslims. Likewise, while the current period is one of decline in Britain for Fultolis, the coming years may see a reversal.

10. Conclusions

A key objective of this article has been to correct the representation of Bangladeshis in the literature on British Muslims. Since Geaves' seminal work on sectarian influences within Islam in Britain (Geaves 1996), the study of denominational diversity amongst Muslims in the UK has been a growing field of interest, leading to not only overviews and surveys, such as Hamid's *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists* (Hamid 2016), but more focused studies of British Muslim denominations themselves. The latter

include studies of Salafis (Inge 2017), Sufis (Geaves 2000), Deobandis (Birt 2005; Gilliat-Ray 2006), the 'Jamaat-e-Islami' (Geaves 1995), the Tablighi Jama'at (Timol 2017), or the Muslim Brotherhood (Bowen 2013). Fultolis, however, have remained largely absent in this growing picture, and so it is intended that this article contributes towards a more accurate and nuanced picture of British Muslim denominational diversity. It is also the wish of the authors that future scholarship on British Bangladeshis at least recognizes the unique denominational identity of the migrants, and perhaps even studies it further, contributing to our understanding of Fultoli activism in the United Kingdom.

Finally, this article presents a case study of a denomination failing, in general terms, to adapt and grow in Britain. If one looks at the Tablighi Jama'at, who have successfully transplanted their movement from its South Asian origins to multiple new contexts, with appeal not only to the British-born Deobandi diaspora but also (to a more limited degree) intra-religious converts from other ethnicities and denominations (as found by Timol 2015, 2017), the failure of the Fultoli tradition becomes even more pronounced. While this article has highlighted the mechanisms through which Fultoli Sahib attained the religious authority to establish a distinct denominational identity in Bangladesh, it has also argued that the Fultoli tradition has not engaged in the activities that have made co-religionists successful in Britain, through the establishment of networked institutions and production of new leaders. To fully understand the denominational diversity of British Muslims, and the operation of authority within them, it is necessary to account for the less successful groups like the Fultolis, alongside other larger and growing movements within British Islam.

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