Hegemony, Resistance, and Subaltern Silence

Lessons from Indigenous Performances of Bangladesh

Syed Jamil Ahmed

1. The māḍār pīr gāṅ performance space with the choral singers and musicians sitting in a circle at center. Ibrāhīm Sardār, behind the pole at right, performing as Māḍār Pīr; and Biṣṇupada Mohanta, standing center behind one of the musicians, as Jumal. Dighapatia, Natore, 25 December 1995. (Photo by Syed Jamil Ahmed)

Syed Jamil Ahmed is a director based in Bangladesh, and a Professor at the Department of Theatre and Music, University of Dhaka. He received two Fulbright fellowships (1990, 2005), has published essays in RIDE, ATJ, TDR, and NTQ, and has taught at Antioch College, USA (1990), King Alfred’s College, UK (2002), and San Francisco City College, USA (2005). Books published in English are Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre in Bangladesh (University Press Limited, 2000) and In Praise of Niranjan: Islam, Theatre, and Bangladesh (Pathak Samabesh, 2003).
In 1993, Islamic fundamentalists took to the streets of Bangladesh in massive and violent protests, demanding the death of the feminist writer Taslima Nasrin because of her highly critical views on outdated religious beliefs. She is still alive because she chose to live in exile—but Professor Hu-mayun Azad did not. A noted academic and novelist, Professor Azad was brutally stabbed by fundamentalists in Dhaka on 27 February 2004, and died mysteriously in Munich on 11 August 2004. These two incidents were not isolated acts of violence: Bangladesh has been besieged by a spate of bomb explosions since 1999.¹ And as is evidenced by the targets of this violence, religious intolerance has been directed not only toward Hindus and Christians but also toward non-orthodox Muslims. Recent police investigations reveal that the outlawed Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which maintains close links with al-Qaeda, launched many of these bomb attacks “as a part of a blueprint to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh” (The Daily Star 2005a:1). Another outlawed Islamist outfit, the Hurkatul Jihad, worked closely with JMB by providing ideological indoctrination and training (The Daily Star 2005b:1). Since 2000, Islamic fundamentalists have been urging the government to declare the Ahmadiyya community “non-Muslims” and followers of this branch of Islam have been the targets of violence and protest.² According to a report issued by the Amnesty International, “[the fundamentalists] are hoping to obtain mass support from poor and disenfranchised sections of society, [...] by appealing to their religious beliefs to gain support for an Islamic state” (2004).

As I write the introduction to this essay, I am forced to concede, bitterly enough, that religious extremism and intolerance are growing within Bangladesh. Simple bits and pieces of life that earlier seemed incongruous now make perfect sense. My friend, a noted mime in Bangladesh who is a Hindu by faith and migrated to Paris in the early 1980s, impatiently rejected one of my plays as “Islamic crap.” I had two students in the late ‘80s, a Christian and a Hindu, who never greeted me with a salam, the traditional Islamic salutation. Now, when I meet them, they do. When I greet an elderly Hindu person with a namaskaar (the traditional Hindu salutation), there is a moment of suspicious silence. I can almost read in their eyes memories of looting, arson, and rape—abuses meted out to Hindus in rural areas of southern Bangladesh after the 2001 general election (see Amnesty International 2001).

More than the violence, or even the coercion lurking behind the violence, it is the apparent absence of resistance that is utterly disturbing. It is as though the people of this country have been persuaded to accept the legitimacy of a narrowly interpreted “Islamic” way of life after they had rejected it in the War of Liberation in 1971. The acceptance is clearly visible, according to Saleem Samad, in:

the trend [of] pseudo-Islamic political culture introduced by all mainstream political parties. Some radical and left politicians shifted from their traditional progressive doctrine and turned champion of Islamic politics. In fact they understood that they were not heard while in progressive politics. The catch-phrase “Islamic nationalism” in politicking works like a miracle. (1998)

The unmistakably “Islamic” touch is widespread, imprinted so obviously that a foreign diplomat in Dhaka made the following observation: “In the 1960s and 1970s, it was the leftists who were seen

¹. Between March 1999 and October 2005, there were at least 487 major blasts. See South Asia Terrorism Portal (2005).
². The Ahmadiyya is a messianic movement founded in South Asia in 1899 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839–1908), ostensibly to revitalize Islam in the face of the British Raj, Protestant Christianity, and resurgent Hinduism. Ahmad claims to have received a divine revelation authorizing him to accept the allegiance of the faithful. He also declared himself to be the promised Messiah of Islam. The Ahmadiyya doctrine incorporates Indian, general Islamic, and Western elements. Orthodox Islam has never accepted Ghulam Ahmad’s visions, and Ahmadis in Pakistan have been declared apostate and non-Muslim by the government. Currently, there may be over 10 million followers of the faith (Columbia Encyclopedia 2003). Anti-Ahmadi groups in Bangladesh have bombed an Ahmadi mosque, which led to the death of eight people; killed an Ahmadi preacher; threatened to occupy Ahmadi mosques; burned Ahmadiyya publications; imposed “excommunication” and illegal house arrest on Ahmadi villagers; and brought out street processions against them (United Kingdom Home Office 2005; Amnesty International 2004).
as incorruptible purists. Today, the role model for many young men in rural areas is the dedicated Islamic cleric with his skull cap, flowing robes and beard” (Asia-Pacific Media Services Limited 2004). Friends from Pakistan, a country that average Bangladeshis believe to be more “Islamic” than their own, recently observed that one of the most distinguishing and prevalent characteristics of public life in Dhaka city is the sight of men wearing Islamic skull caps.

Clearly enough, Machiavelli’s Centaur has found pleasant hunting ground in Bangladesh, where the dominant classes have been attempting to achieve social and political control by means of the “dual perspective” of coercion and persuasion, of authority and hegemony (Gramsci 1971:170). Needless to say, in the global context of Osama bin Laden’s Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, questions related to hegemony and coercion assume immensely complex dimensions once “Islam” is added as a catalyst.

But does Machiavelli’s Centaur go unchallenged? How do the subaltern (subalterno: subordinate, dependent) classes “attempt [...] to influence the programs of [the dominant political] formations in order to press claims of their own” (Gramsci 1971:52)? Because Foucault’s convincing argument shows that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (1980:95) and because “resistance is an inevitable consequence of power” (Haber 1994:98), it may be argued that the Centaur will always face resistance from the subaltern classes. Indeed, as Rosalind O’Hanlon argues, “no hegemony can be so penetrative and pervasive as to eliminate all grounds of contestation or resistance” (2000:74) because “one of the invariant features of [subaltern politics is] a notion of resistance to elite dominance” (Guha 2000:4). However, is it true that subaltern resistance is always “an act, or a set of acts, that is designed to rid a people of its oppressors and [that] it so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous aesthetic principle” (Slemon 1995:107)? Or is it “grounded in the multiple and contradictory structures of ideological interpellation or subject formation—which would call down the notion that resistance can ever be ‘purely’ intended or ‘purely’ expressed in representational or communicative models” (108)? Or is it mostly grounded in a Freirean “culture of silence” (Freire 1993:14)?

These are not abstract intellectual questions for me. I am a male citizen of Bangladesh, a Muslim by birth, and a theatre practitioner by profession. In an era of globalization, where national identity may be quaint (to say the least), I still feel the most passionate urge to say that I am proud to have been born in this country and would choose it again if there is any possibility of the transmigration of my soul. I say this, having witnessed the most fascinating and poignant interplay of hegemony, resistance, and the culture of silence in the indigenous theatre of Bangladesh, where 88 percent of the population profess to be Muslims.

This context is important for me—rather, I want to see Bangladesh in this context, even if it is my own construction: in an overwhelmingly Muslim-dominated country, people feel passionately about 70-plus genres of indigenous theatre that still exist in the rural areas. The majority (nearly 30) of these genres are based on tales related to Brahminical deities, saints, and holy icons, such as Kṛṣṇa, Caitanya, Rāmacandra, Śiva, Kālī, and Manasa; over 20 are based on an Islamic worldview; and the rest offer secular entertainment (for details, see Ahmed 2000). Compared to demographic distribution, the worldview of the performances speak clearly enough—rather, they should speak clearly enough—of the worldview of the people.

Perhaps, when Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and George W. Bush are all dead, our children will have a new calendar that will divide the time continuum of human civilization into BS (Before September 11) and AS (After September 11). In the meanwhile, as we listen to the government of Bangladesh clamor to prove that Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim country, I may as well grapple with the issues of Islamic hegemony and subaltern resistance in terms of the indigenous theatre of Bangladesh. As a Muslim—even if only a nonpracticing one—I feel a responsibility to answer to myself when I confront pathologized representations of “minority”/marginalized identities. Accepting performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman 1959:15), and which “exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships” (Schechner 2002:24), I will attempt to show that performance is a site where hegemony and resistance produce the most complex manifestations of struggle.
Wāz Mahfil

Performance As Hegemony of the Dominant Classes

In one of my field trips to northern Bangladesh, I chanced upon a wāz mahfil—a gathering of lay devotees, often held in the evening (sometimes running through the entire night), where an Islamic scholar elucidates one or more religious issues deemed important. The scholar is usually seated on a raised platform at one end of a large open air space, canopied on top and lit with fluorescent tube lights. The scholar’s voice is crystal clear (clearer, in fact, than most of the performers in the mainstream urban theatre of Dhaka) and his vocal modulation is characterized by a chant-like pattern, which he adapts to fit any ordinary prose sentence. Alternating this near-chanting with ordinary prose, the scholar constantly encourages two-way communication by asking questions and seeking responses from the audience. Therefore, when led by a skillful speaker, a wāz mahfil may mesmerize the participants, arousing the deepest devotional fervor.

The wāz mahfil I chanced upon in December 2002 was addressed by parliament member Delwar Hossain Sayeedee of the Jama’at-i-Islami, an ultra-rightist political party that aims at establishing Islamic shari’ah in all aspects of life in Bangladesh, and which is a member of the four-party alliance that currently runs the country. This party leader is renowned for his clarity of argument and depth of knowledge in Islamic teachings. Hence, the spectators were moved to a degree of fervent Islamic zeal that even the zealous Christian George W. Bush might envy. Any “liberal intellectual” familiar with the sociopolitical situation in contemporary Bangladesh will unhesitatingly say that wāz mahfils are hotbeds of “Islamic fundamentalism” and that the scholars who address them are “half-educated, or Madrasha (Taliban Factory) educated maulana”3 (Mirza 2003). They may not be too far from the “truth,” but because “truth” has different meanings to different people, I need to specify what actually transpired at the particular wāz mahfil I attended.

The speaker was deliberating on fatwā—an issue which has been attracting tremendous excitement since the famous High Court judgment of 1 January 2001, declaring “any fatwā including the instant one are all unauthorized and illegal” (Supreme Court of Bangladesh 2001a:7).4 Our speaker, too, was much enthused, alternating passion with reason. His line of argument was clear enough. He began by asking, “What is a fatwā?”5 A very good question, I thought. The spectators remained silent, feeling hesitant, perhaps, that their answer may be no match for the erudition of the great scholar. After a brief pause, he proceeded to answer his own question with an air of finality: “A mandate,” he said once in a lower pitch. Then he burst forth with full gusto: “A fatwā is Allah’s mandate. It is Allah’s decree to do something or forbidding them from doing something else. Allah has said—” (and here he recited in the most melodious voice a passage from the Qur’ān, which, another Islamic scholar later told me, was from “Surah Baqara,” verse 173). Immediately after the recitation, he translated the verse into Bengali for the majority of spectators, myself included, who were ignorant of the language of the Holy Scripture. Here is the translation in English:

He hath only forbidden you
Dead meat, and blood,
And the flesh of swine [...]. (The Qur’ān, II.173; Ali 1983:67)

Having given the translation, the scholar looked around triumphantly and boomed in a sonorous and most knowledgeable voice: “And therefore we do not take pork. Do we take pork?”

3. “Maulana” is an Arabic term, literally meaning “our lord,” but in this context it denotes a “master.” It is a title of respect, technically reserved for Muslim scholars.

4. The High Court bench issuing the judgment also recommended that the “giving a fatwā by unauthorised person or persons must be made punishable offence by the Parliament immediately, even if it is not executed” (Supreme Court of Bangladesh 2001a:7). Subsequently, Mufti Mohammad Tayeeb and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad challenged the verdict at the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, and hence the High Court judgment was stayed on 13 November 2001 (Supreme Court of Bangladesh 2001b).

5. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, were translated by the author from Delwar Hossain Sayeedee’s wāz mahfil in December 2002.
This time the crowd was sure of the answer: “No!” they roared back. Pleased at the response, the speaker charged again, “And why not?” The spectators loved this. Like students who knew the answer sought by the teacher, they cried, “Because we are Muslims!” Having scored his point, the wise speaker spoke calmly—but firmly:

We do not take pork because we are Muslims. And we are Muslims because we follow Allah’s mandate. To be a Muslim implies that we have to accept fatwā because it is Allah’s command. But they do not want us to remain Muslims. They want us to be Hindus.

By now he was getting all worked up, pouring all his energy into his words:

But we must never forget that our primary identity is that we are Muslims. Then we are Bangladeshis. But we are not Bengalis. Hindus of West Bengal also speak the Bengali language. A Bengali may be a Hindu. But we are not Hindus. And so we are not Bengalis but Bangladeshis. But above all that, we are Muslims.

At this point he picked up the characteristic wāz chant-like cadence:

O you Muslims, do not be deceived by the infidels for they are out to destroy your identity. The whole world including the Zionist forces are out to destroy you because they know that you stand on pillars of faith. We must resist them in the name of Allah […].

The speaker at the above wāz was a wily performer. To keep the record straight—and to avoid being accused of lying—he did mention, albeit in a lower voice, that fatwā is a mandate. Then he drummed up the crowd’s frenzy with the point that it was Allah’s command. What he should have said, but did not, is that fatwā is the opinion of Islamic scholars (mufti), who can be both males and females, “on a point of law, the term ‘law’ applying, in Islam, to all civil or religious matters” (Tyan 1983:866). The necessity for fatwā arose when Islam, by the middle of the 8th century, had already crossed Sindh (in South Asia) to the east, Armenia to the north, and Spain to the west. These newly
conquered cultures and peoples brought with them new problems. Fatwās, as opinions of competent persons, were intended to harmonize and integrate the laws and customs of the conquered with the precepts of Islam. However,

with the introduction of codes and their provisions borrowed from European systems in almost all branches of law, the profession [of the mufti] has fallen in disuse; even in those matters which, like personal status and wakfs, are still generally governed by the principles of Islamic law, the practice of fatwās seems to be becoming obsolete. (Tyan 1983:866)

Nevertheless, as the above cited Islamic scholar clearly demonstrated, fatwās are not obsolete in Bangladesh. At the same time it must be conceded that this leader has a genuine ground for concern. If fatwās are declared illegal, many Islamic practices sanctified by tradition will be nullified. And hence, Islamic political parties, representing a section of the ruling classes, use wāz mahfil for hegemonic social control over the subaltern classes, “persuading them to accept the norms and values of [their] own prevailing worldview” (Ransome 1992:135).

What these political parties are attempting to enforce is a grotesque practice based on a patriarchal interpretation of Islam. It is reported that in 1993 alone, about 6,000 women who were victims of fatwā and saliṣ (arbitration) committed suicide in Bangladesh (Pereira 2000:659). The following case is but one of them:

A fatwa was issued against Rażia Begum for having an adulterous relationship with her husband—she claimed they had merely separated and were living together again, while clerics claimed the two had divorced. After the fatwa of fifty-one lashes in public was carried out, she killed herself. (Pereira 2000:659–60)

The speaker at the wāz mahfil I attended never mentioned Rażia Begum. Although he urged his Muslim brothers (I did not notice any women at the performance) not to be deceived by the infidels—i.e., the whole world including the Zionist forces—he was content to name only the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal. However, the khatīb of the Baitul Muqarrām National Mosque, Maulānā Obāidul Haq, was bolder. In the main Eid al-Fitr prayer of the country held on 17 December 2001—which was attended by the President of the Republic A.Q.M. Badruddoza Chowdhury, the Speaker of Parliament Jamiruddin Sircar, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Mahmudul Amin Choudhury—the khatīb identified the United States as a terrorist state for having attacked Afghanistan and prayed for the destruction of the U.S. In his khutbah he declared that if 1.5 billion Muslims of the world spit on George W. Bush, he and the U.S. would be washed away (Prothom Alo 2001).

Our zealous speaker at the wāz mahfil was not as bold as the khatīb. However, when he referred to the “whole world including the Zionist forces,” the indication was clear enough. At this level, he clearly saw the Muslims as the subalterns (if one interprets the subalterns literally as “of inferior ranks” [Hawthorn 2000:345])—the oppressed, the victims of U.S. imperialism. Thus, the wāz mahfil became a site with shifting ground, at times offering ideological resistance against U.S. imperialism and at other times exerting hegemonic social control over the subaltern classes. It is in this shifting nature of wāz mahfil as a performance—this very fluidity and indeterminacy of its function—that the image of the Machiavellian Centaur dissolves. What emerges is an ambivalent performance disrupting the either/or logic of binary oppositions. This does not mean that wāz mahfil ceases to be hegemonic entirely. What it means, though, is that it is not only hegemonic but also an act of

6. A wakf is a religious endowment in Islam, usually devoting a building or plot of land for religious purposes.
7. Khatīb is a person who delivers the khutba (sermon) and leads the prayers on Friday and during the Eid prayer.
8. Eid al-Fitr (Feast of Fast-Breaking) is a three-day Muslim religious festival that follows Ramadan, the month of fasting. The celebration begins when the new moon of Shawwal (the 10th month in the Islamic lunar calendar) is seen.
9. Khutba is an Arabic term that refers to the Islamic sermon delivered after or before prayer.
resistance—that is, of course, if you are prepared to accept that in his own way, bin Laden was (and perhaps, or hopefully, still is) engaged in resistance.

Mádār Pírér Gaṅ

Subaltern Resistance and Anachronistic Fossils

Does the attempted hegemonic social control over the subaltern classes go unchallenged? Can the subaltern classes speak through performances and attempt resistance to the dominant ideology? To examine such possibilities, I must take you to a distant village in northern Bangladesh.

It was a chilly winter night. I was sitting with a few hundred people in a playground, at the center of which stood a pavilion. In case such an image of a pavilion conjures Orientalist fantasies, I must immediately add that it was nothing more than a 12-foot-square area of earth, raised about 9 inches; at its four corners, bamboo poles supported a flat shade of date-palm leaves on top. Two gas lamps burned at two bamboo posts diagonally across from one another. Illuminated thus, a group of eight male performers were presenting mádār pírér gān, a genre of indigenous performance. The choral singers-cum-musicians (pāil) were sitting in a tight circle at the center, singing the refrain of a song. Around them the lead narrator (gaṅ) and two female impersonators (chukri) were dancing in what appeared to be an unending whirling motion. The lead narrator was wearing a white dhoti, an álpi (a loose-fitting ankle-length gown) that was white on top but frilled and red in color on the lower part, as well as a red tāj (headdress). He was carrying an āśā (a short metallic staff with an insignia, signifying supernatural power). The female impersonators were in cotton saris with frilled headdresses falling down their backs. Along with the few hundred villagers, I was watching the performance in rapt silence.

Mádār pírér gān is a narrative performance commemorating the miraculous deeds of one of the most popular Sufi saints of South Asia: Syed Bāddūddīn Qutubul Mádār, popularly known as Sāh Mádār or Mádār Pīr. (A pīr is a spiritual director or guide among Muslim mystics from the Sufi branch of Islam.) In isolated rural pockets of greater Rajshahi and in Dhaka, Mádār Pīr is venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike as the guardian of fire or the protector against cholera. His followers branch of Islam.) In isolated rural pockets of greater Rajshahi and in Dhaka, Ma¯d a¯r  P ı¯r is venerated

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The performers of mádār pírér gān may be Hindus or Muslims, but all are firm believers in the Sufi doctrine and accept Mádār as their pīr. Ibrahim Sārdār, the lead narrator of a troupe of mádār

10. The term caliph is derived from the Arabic term Khālfah (“successor”), which denotes the ruler of the Muslim community. After the Prophet died in 632, Abū Bakr succeeded to his political and administrative functions as khālfah rasīl Allāh (the “successor of the Messenger of God”). ‘Umar Ibn Al-kha‘bāb, ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan, and ‘Ali Ibn Abī Tālib served as the second, third, and fourth caliphs (i.e., the civil and religious heads of the Muslim state), respectively. Abū Bakr and his three immediate successors are also known as the “perfect” or “rightly guided” caliphs (al-khulafa’r-rāšídiun).

Imām (Arabic, “leader” or “exemplar”), in everyday usage among the Muslims, is the person who leads prayer services. In Shi ‘i Islam, the term is applied to the political and religious leader who is a descendent of ‘Aℓi and Fāṭemā (the son-in-law and daughter of the Prophet Muhammad). For the adherents of this sect, ‘Aℓi was the first imām.
pirer gân from Banshbhag village in Natore district, is a farmer and a fisherman by profession, and a Muslim by faith; his chief associate, Bishnupada Mohanta, is a blacksmith by profession, and a Vaishnavite Hindu by faith. Landless or marginal farmers, small-scale traders, and rural artisans who may be Hindus or Muslims usually sponsor the performance as a promised offering when they are delivered from calamities (often cholera), or when the childless finally bear children. The spectators belong to the same professions and are adherents of the same faiths as the sponsors. You will certainly not find either a Brahmin priest or an imam, definitely not those scholars who perform wâz mahfils, in a performance of mädâr pîrer gân.

Performances of mädâr pîrer gân are based on oral narratives, composed partly in lyrical, rhymed, metrical verse and partly in prose dialogue and narration. There are 12 episodes in the repertory of Ibrâhîm Sardâr. However, the most interesting is the “Bibhîsa Pâl,” in which Azrâil, the angel of death, flies away with the soul of an innocent child who was the victim of cholera. Mâdâr Pîr intercepts Azrâil, protests against the youngster’s death, and holds back the soul from the angel. Allah learns of the matter and throws Mâdâr Pîr into hell. As the mortal Pîr pitilessly roasts in the fires of hell, Fâtemâ, the Prophet’s daughter and Mâdâr Pîr’s foster mother, comes to know of the crisis. Immediately she rushes to Moses and asks him to plead with Allah on Mâdâr’s behalf. When Moses fails, Fâtemâ herself goes to Allah, but Allah is still unwilling to forgive her rebellious foster son. When Fâtemâ has no alternative, she reminds Allah of how the universe was created.

FĂTEMA: There was not the world, nor any shape. There were neither relations nor any attachments. Like the darkness cast by a lamp extinguished, Such was all—all in all. In the darkness, amidst the haze, was formlessness, What floated upon the foams of the formlessness? ALLAH: An egg floated. FĂTEMA: You will explain to me the beginning and the end of the egg. ALLAH: I will not speak [on that] O Mother Barkat.
FATEMA: Allah was the yolk, the Prophet was the white of the egg. 
Like a swan, I incubated the egg, I, Mother Barkat, 
I incubated the egg with my wings spread open, 
There was neither food nor sleep, nothing to depend on save the Kâlemâ. 
Thus passed 170 thousand years, 
Then a sound reverberated inside the egg, 
And the egg was broken in two. 
With one part was the earth created 
With the other, the sky. [...]11

As the primordial Mother—the mother of the Creator—she demands that her request be granted. Allah has no option but to accept her petition but on the condition that Madâr must beg forgiveness from him. Madâr does, but he also manages to get Allah to promise that Bibhişana, the cause of cholera, will not visit villages where his followers reside.

An interesting feature of madder pîrer gân is that Mâdâr Pir is always shown to be accompanied by his “double,” his closest disciple, Jumal. The pair of Mâdâr-Jumal represents two poles of human existence: the sublime and the profane, the wise and the fool, the rational and the irrational, the serious and the comic. Jumal often has the spectators rolling in laughter, undermining the seriousness and the “holiness” of Mâdâr. He goads Mâdâr into performing miracles for the people, sets him against authority, and even quarrels with him on behalf of what he believes to be right. Jumal’s sense of “rightness” favors the plight of the subaltern; in effect, he is the subaltern’s voice. Whenever conflict develops between Mâdâr and Jumal, it is often resolved with Jumal as the victor.

In many ways, madder pîrer gân is an act of resistance on behalf of the subaltern classes. This is not only reflected in the composition of the spectators and performers, but also in the performance’s

11. From the oral narrative “Bibhişana Palâ” performed by Ibrahîm Sardâr and translated by the author.
approach to Islam. By challenging and defying Allah, Mādar challenges the foundational belief system of Islamic scholars, which is promoted in the wāz mahfils. Instead of the persuasive techniques used to convince the subaltern classes to conform to the ways of the dominant classes, in mādar pīrer gañ one sees the subaltern classes making the dominant worldview conform to their own perspective. This is clearly seen in the manner that Mādar protests the death of an innocent child. In a bold attempt to subvert Allah’s eternal authority, the performance shows Him to be a “creation” of Fātēmā (a benign maternal figure sympathetic to popular interest).

Another distinguishing feature of mādar pīrer gañ is the syncretism it projects in the worldview of the performance. Sukumar Sen has rightly pointed that the worldview propounded in mādar pīrer gañ is a fusion of Sufism and the yogic practice of the Nātha cult (1400 [Bengali calendar]:147). In mādar pīrer gañ performances, the origin of life is explained in the legend of the egg, which is also recounted in Nātha performances. Syncretism is thus deeply embedded in the belief system of the performers. Ibrāhim Sardār believes that there is no difference between the Prophet and Kṛṣṇa, and Fātēmā and Sītā. Syncretism is also reflected in the costume of the lead narrator. After the performance, when I asked Ibrāhim Sardār why the gañ wears a dhoti, typically a Hindu garment, he said, “The gañ wears the dress of Mādar Pīr. Mādar Pīr is half Muslim and half Hindu. So he wears a dhoti.” Hence, the very act of performing, sponsoring, and witnessing mādar pīrer gañ is an act of resistance to the ideological stance taken up by the Islamic scholars at wāz mahfils. In this re-

12. An esoteric religious movement that originated in eastern India with Bengal as its center, the Nātha cult has a history of well over a thousand years; at the height of its popularity, it had a large following all over India. The cult is so called because those adept in its practice bear the title of “Nātha” (literally, “Master” or “Lord”). According to one view, the term denotes a “timeless religion which is the cause of stability of the whole universe” (Mandal 1356 [Bengali calendar]:xxvi). In modern times, it has been reduced to marginal status and has been assimilated into Sāivism.
spect, it fulfills Gramsci’s insistence on the need “to diffuse [...] alternative ‘common sense’ as part of the battle for ‘hegemony’” (Miliband 1977:48). However, the very same performance also acts as a hegemonic tool for the dominant classes.

The “spontaneous philosophy” contained in “popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which is collectively bundled together under the name of ‘folklore’” (Gramsci 1971:323), is permeated by “common sense,” defined as “the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world” (Hoare and Smith in Gramsci 1971:322). It is this “common sense” that màdàr piràr gà́n preaches by promoting unquestioning devotion to Màdàr Pir. Syncretism seen in màdàr piràr gà́n is a “benevolent” or “generous” gesture, a persuasive device or hegemonic tool, which was used by Màdàr Pir in the 14th century (when the Muslims were the ruling class in Bengal) to proselytize the non-Muslim native population and bring them into the fold of Islam.

As Gramsci pertinently asks, “How is it possible to consider the present, and quite specific present, with a mode of thought elaborated in the past which is often remote and superceded?” If “[o]ne’s conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and ‘original’ in their immediate relevance” (1971:324), màdàr piràr gà́n may function as an act of resistance against the ideological stance taken up by Islamic scholars at wáz mahfils, but it is also an anachronistic fossil when it comes to dealing with cholera because it promises to protect the people if they have blind faith in Màdàr Pir. By thus promoting an “uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world,” màdàr piràr gà́n functions as a tool for the dominant classes. This is further evident now that the act of resistance is on the verge of being entirely silenced because the Bibhîşâna Pâl referred to above is no longer performed by Ibrâhim Sârdâr. He says his preceptor forbade him.

These contradictory characteristics of màdàr piràr gà́n issuing out of what Stephen Slemon identifies as “multiple and contradictory structures of ideological interpellation” (1995:108), fracture the performance as indeterminate. It is an anachronistic fossil assisting the dominant classes and is at the same time an act of resistance against domination.

Jấrî Gấn

Performance As a Metaphor of Dialogue

Resistance against dominant Islamic ideology can also be seen in the contentious type of performances in which two groups of performers debate issues of contemporary relevance. For example, jấrî gấn of southwestern Bangladesh often features debates on numerous issues of popular interest, including: (1) the Shấriat (religious law) and the Mấrjấf (the mystic way); (2) Hinduism and Islam; (3) Adam and Satan. In a performance I saw in October 1995 at Kaliganj in Satkhira district, two lead-narrators (bayátîs) and their troupes engaged in a heated debate between Hinduism and Islam that began early in the evening and ended inconclusively well after sunrise. The lead narrators were Muslims. One of them was a woman named Rubînâ Pârvîn and the other, a man named Kấsem Bayấtî. All the questions and replies were, as is customary in many forms of contestual performances, in accordance with the scriptures, i.e., the Qur’àn, the Hadîth, Sufi mystic texts, their interpretations, and various Hindu scriptures.

The performance of jấrî gấn at Kaliganj was held at the weekly marketplace. I bought a ticket (this was a ticketed show organized by the marketplace committee) and entered to find a makeshift auditorium, created with corrugated iron sheets on all four sides and an awning on top. At the center of the performance space was a 2.5-foot-high elevated platform, about 12 foot square. Poles at each corner supported another awning on top. Most of the space on three sides was covered with hay for the “ordinary” spectators to sit on. For more privileged ones such as me, collapsible chairs were placed in rows on one side. A ramp descended from the center of one of the sides and led through a passage to the greenroom, a small enclosure, some 15 feet by 5 feet, at one end of the space. Electric lamps were suspended from the corner posts of the platform to light the performance area. The whole auditorium was well-lit with fluorescent tubes.
The performance began with Rubinā Pārvin appearing on the stage with her *dohārs* (choral singers and musicians). She was carrying a handkerchief and wearing a colorful *sālwar* and *kāmiz* and ankle bells. Her *dohārs* were all males, wearing *pānjaži* with pajama pants, or *lungi*. They sat on the platform, on the two opposite sides that lay perpendicular to the ramp side: the percussionists on one side and the wind instrumentalists on the other. Rubinā Pārvin’s opponent, Kasım Bayātī, was sitting with his troupe at the end of the auditorium near the greenroom door. Rubinā Pārvin began with a *bandānā*, a song offering salutations to Allah, the Prophet, ‘Ali, Goddess Saraswati, Fātimā, all the 330 million Hindu deities, and her preceptor. Her *bandānā* was followed by another *bandānā* sung only by the *dohārs*. Both the *bandānās* were sung with choral accompaniment.

When it was over, Rubinā Pārvin occupied center stage and asked the spectators what should be the topic of the evening’s debate. The majority of the spectators called out in favor of a debate on Hinduism and Islam. She agreed and proceeded to render a narrative based on an episode of the Karbala legend, composed in rhymed metrical verse. The narratives rendered in jārī ġān, she told me later, are always based on the life and deeds of the Prophet, ‘Ali, and his immediate descendants. In her performance, Rubinā Pārvin alternately sang and recited parts of the narrative, punctuating these with explanatory comments in improvised prose. The *dohārs* provided choral and musical accompaniment to all lyrical passages, while the drummer accompanied the recited sections.

At one point, Rubinā Pārvin suspended the narrative and opened the debate by declaring that she would play the role of a Hindu, and argue that Hinduism is superior to Islam. Then she posed a few questions to her opponent. This was done in rhymed metrical verse created extempore, followed by explanations in prose so that all the spectators could grasp her argument. Her questions may be summarized thus: *Tell me, O you Muslim, was A’dām (Adam) ever circumcised? Was he a Hindu or a Muslim? By what sign can you claim that Hāwā Bībī (Eve) was a Muslim? If a male Muslim dies, you Muslims say the ja’anjāja (funeral prayer) for him. The same happens if a Muslim woman dies. A child is also alive in the mother’s womb before its birth. But if it is born dead, will you say the same ja’najāja for it?*

After presenting her questions, Rubinā Pārvin sat down at one side, giving the floor over to the *dohārs*, who rendered a song on mysticism that was accompanied by a folk dance. During the rendition of the song, Rubinā Pārvin played the harmonium while the *dohārs* danced, some of them playing their instruments as well. At the end of the song, Rubinā Pārvin and her troupe left the performance space for the greenroom.

Session two began as Kasım Bayātī (along with his troupe) occupied the performance space. He was wearing a white pānjaži, and a pair of white pajamas. He began his performance with a

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13. *Kāmiz* is a loose-fitting long shirt worn by women with *sālwar*, a pair of loose-fitting pants. A *pānjaži* is kind of loose full-sleeved shirt worn by men. A *lungi* is a loincloth worn by men, the upper end of which is knotted at the waist; the lower end hangs near the ankles like a skirt.

14. ‘Alī’s reign as the fourth caliph (656–661 c.e.) ended after he was struck with a poisoned sword while praying in a mosque. Mu’āwiya, then governor of Syria, succeeded him and established himself as the first Umayyad caliph. His succession marks the intensification of a schism in the Muslim community because ‘Alī’s son Hasan claimed the caliphate. Eventually he abdicated in favor of Mu’āwiya but reserved the right to succession (after Mu’āwiya’s death) for himself. However, Hasan was poisoned through Mu’āwiya’s son Yazīd’s conspiracy in 669 c.e. On Mu’āwiya’s death, Yazīd succeeded him as Umayyad caliph and Hussein avoided giving allegiance to him. Soon, he received letters from many inhabitants of Kuňafah (now in Iraq) who offered him their support against Yazīd. After confirming their support, Hussein set off through the desert for Kuňafah with a small party of men, women, and children, hoping to fight Yazīd with the assistance of the Kuňafis. However, Hussein never completed the journey. Yazīd earned the rebellious attitude in Kuňafah and sent the governor of Basa to restore order. He had Hussein intercepted by his army at Karbalá (north of Kuňafah and west of the Euphrates). Vastly outnumbered, Hussein and his men lay in a state of siege on the plains of Karbalá, cut off from any source of water for 10 days. A battle was fought on the 10th of Muharram (10 October 680 c.e.), in which Hussein lost all his men. He was decapitated and his body was buried on the spot.
bandanā offering salutations to the four directions, in addition to those saluted by Rubinā Pārvin. Then came the bandanā of his doharās, after which he began a different narrative in rhymed metrical verse (which was also based on the Karbala legend), in the same way as Rubinā Pārvin. Suspending his narrative at a suitable point, Kāsem Bayāti prefaced his argument by declaring that he had entered into the contest in the role of a Muslim, and sought blessings from the spectators so that he may convert a staunch Hindu like Rubinā Pārvin into the true faith:

However, my job will be easy because she does not know that she and all the Hindus like her are already half-Muslims. If you ask me how, then I will tell you. A clear sign to show that you are a Muslim, in this country at least, is that one eats beef and also drinks cow’s milk. But the Hindus do not take beef, they only drink the milk. They believe that 330 million gods reside in a cow. I eat its flesh and hence I eat all those deities. Therefore, I must be a greater god. It is Rubinā’s duty to worship me and not to pick a silly quarrel, the outcome of which is a foregone conclusion!

Kāsem Bayāti then began to answer Rubinā Pārvin’s questions in rhymed metrical verse created extempore, followed by explanations in prose. His answers in summary: (1) The custom of circumcision began from the time of Prophet Ibrāhim (Abraham); hence it is a stupid question to ask if Adam was circumcised. But, as it is stated in the Holy Qur’ān, Allah sends each human being on the earth as a Muslim. When he or she grows up, an individual may lose his/her way and cease to be a Muslim. (2) For a stillborn child, one does not say the jānājā. This is because Allah has said that an individual is held accountable for virtuous deeds and sins after age six. For a stillborn child, Allah has not made mandatory anything on earth and hence the child will automatically go to heaven.

Kāsem Bayāti then posed counter questions for Rubinā Pārvin: “How can Draupadi be a satī (chaste) woman with five husbands? Why does Kṛṣṇa steal the clothes of 1,600 gopinis?” Kāsem Bayāti’s session ended with another song on mysticism, accompanied by dance, rendered by the doharās.
There followed three more sessions given by each of the bāyātis, the duration of each session varying from one hour to one and a half hours. In each of these: (1) The suspended narrative was taken up again (after a brief recapitulation of the previous events) and was suspended again at a suitable point. The rendition of the narrative was completed in the final session; (2) The questions and answers provided by each of the bāyātis gradually extended to cover wide-ranging aspects of Hinduism and Islam, the point of reference of which was always the scriptures. Often, the bāyātis made personal attacks on each other in verse (created extemporaneously) and in the vernacular idiom. The range of these attacks varied from subtle wit and humor to gross vulgarity.

The performance finally ended inconclusively after six in the morning. By that time, both Rubīnā Pārvin and Kāsem Bāyātī had created intense excitement among the spectators, who enjoyed the sharp arguments of each, and murmured their disapproval when either speaker failed—and this is important—regardless of the onlooker’s own personal faith or religious adherence.

The debate between the two performers continued over five consecutive evenings. In the early morning hours of the fifth debate, after the final session of both performers, they occupied the performance space together for a scene of reunion known as gos̄tha milan. This began with Rubīnā Pārvin, along with the dohārs of both the troupes, occupying the performance space. The dohārs sat in a semicircle with their backs to the greenroom. Thereupon, Rubīnā Pārvin assumed the role of Balaī and sang a song addressing her opponent as Kānāi, inviting him onstage.15 After repeated invitations, Kāsem Bāyātī entered, singing another song addressed to Rubīnā Pārvin as Balaī. After another round of debate in their respective roles as Balaī and Kanai, they reconciled their differences amicably. Kāsem Bāyātī offered sweets to Rubīnā Pārvin as the spectators began to leave, arguing among themselves as to who was the better performer of the two, and whose arguments were more acceptable and convincing. Neither performer was officially declared the winner of the contest.

Not denying the fact that jārī gān accepts the validity of a particular religious system of belief (i.e., Islam), and hence facilitates the hegemony of the dominant religious classes, it can, nevertheless, be seen as a dialogic “encounter between men [humans], mediated by the world in order to name the world” (Freire 1996:69). “Dialogue,” in this case, is both a “symbolic face-to-face oral or gestural communication” and “any kind of reciprocal interaction between ourselves and the world” involving “a mutual interplay between the participants, as opposed to a one-way imposition of one upon the other” (Falzon 1998:7). As Christopher Falzon argues, “[d]omination is the radical negation of dialogue”; and “[s]tates of domination are at best temporary blockages to the movement of dialogue. […] It is at those points where otherness is entirely overcome, where dialogue is entirely arrested, that states of domination emerge” (7). In this respect, jārī gān is an act of resistance that attempts to overcome the dynamics of domination. This is made possible by the organizers (whose subaltern status may be questionable) who arrange for the performance (albeit for financial gain); by the subaltern classes who buy tickets to these performances; and by the performers themselves, who raise sensitive issues relating to the two systems of belief. Whereas wāz mahfil seeks to overcome otherness and suppress dialogue, thereby reinforcing domination, jārī gān invites “mutual interplay between participants,” thereby inviting dialogue.

Thus I could end, had not Rubīnā Pārvin confided in me that the contest in most of jārī gān performances is fixed. The performers make a show of battling their lives out, while in actuality, they even help each other by passing slips of paper where answers to their questions are scribbled down. But then, as Richard Schechner (1985) would argue, all behavior, including everyday real-life behavior, is “twice-behaved,” isn’t it?

15. This is a performance convention in jārī gān. As recounted in popular versions of Hindu mythology, the two brothers Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma sometimes engaged in bitter quarrel; but then they would settle their differences and become the best of friends. Similarly, the opponents in jārī gān end their heated debate amicably by singing to each other as Kānāi (a popular form of Kṛṣṇa’s name) and Balaī (a popular form of Balarāma’s name).
Hegemony, Resistance, and Silences:
Inverted and Multiplied

However hard one theorizes resistance, the notion resists neat formulations. George W. Bush made his existentialist choice in a meaningless and absurd world: to “defend” humanity and “resist” the terrorism of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. In his hiding, bin Laden must have already nursed his battle wounds, and may now be cooking up another Twin-Tower plot to resist U.S. imperialism, while the incarcerated Saddam must be gloating at the success of his guerrillas. In this tiny corner of earth called Bangladesh, the ruling classes were at wit’s end trying to resist the U.S. decision to include this country on the terror-risk list. Our Islamic scholars at wāz mahfils can only dare to resist Indian Hindus and are wisely silent on George W. Bush.

While the world is in turmoil now over whether or not to resist George W. Bush, Rubina Pärvin has given up her battle. She does not perform anymore. In her early years, Rubina was a member of a circus troupe. There she met and married Seher Ali, gave up the circus, and helped Ali sell medicine by singing songs at street-corner gatherings. Later she rejoined the circus, then switched to performing jātra, and finally jāri gān. Today, she is silent. I met her five years ago, at her house in Islampur village, near Satkhira. When I arrived, she was not at home. I was going back, disappointed, when I saw her fishing on the bank of a nearby stream. It was an uncommon sight. A 40-year-old woman does not fish—she is “supposed to” attend to her household. When I accompanied her back to her house, I understood why. Her husband, Seher Ali, who plays the harmonium in Rubina Pärvin’s troupe (and I suspect, runs the troupe) sells medicine as a kaviraj on his days off. He was away. A younger woman sat with a child at the other end of the verandah of Rubina Pärvin’s house. At one point, she introduced me to her as her sister. It took me a while to understand that the young woman was Seher Ali’s second wife. Rubina and her husband had not been able to conceive.

Recently, I was told that Rubina Pärvin is in India. That is good news if I can persuade myself to believe that she is still performing there. However, given the fact that a few thousand women are trafficked from Bangladesh each year—to end up in brothels in India, Pakistan, or farther still in the Middle East—it is more possible that Rubina Pärvin has been “silenced” for good.

I would like to believe with Eric Hobsbawm that “[t]o be subaltern is not to be powerless” and that “passivity” is a common and successful form of subaltern resistance (1973:13). I could also assure Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that the subaltern classes do speak (2001:2205–08). Not as Bhubaneswari Bhaduri in Spivak’s essay, who had to wait for her menstruation to end before she could hang herself, but as Rubina Pärvin, who could challenge a male in a debate over Hinduism and Islam. But who will speak for Rubina Pärvin’s silent acceptance of her husband’s second marriage? Who will speak for Râzâ Begum, who committed suicide after being flogged for having an “adulterous” relationship with her own husband? Can I speak—now that George W. Bush is no longer a “Machiavelli’s Centaur—half-animal and half-human,” but a completely coercive animal who does not need to persuade me any longer?

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Tyan, E.

United Kingdom Home Office