



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Singing songs for a secular society? The elusive politics of cultural activism in contemporary Bangladesh

Mascha Schulz 

Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany

Email: mschulz@eth.mpg.de

(Received 26 April 2023; revised 24 April 2024; accepted 26 April 2024)

Abstract

In Bangladesh, many secularists pursue their political goals through cultural activism. While committed to achieving a secular, progressive, and non-communal society, they often refrain from explicitly articulating their politics due to the sensitivity of their goals. Instead, cultural performances allow them to instantiate and embody a secular ethos with transformative potential, expressed through distinct cultural genres that become recognized as secular aesthetics. While activists consider culture to be a morally superior and 'purer' way to promote their political aims than party politics, which they perceive as 'dirty' and corrupt, cultural traditions are hardly neutral ground from which to enact secular aspirations. This article explores the ethical struggles that emerge from this position to illuminate what it means to act politically while trying to avoid politics, and why people might choose comparatively elusive forms of political engagement despite their strong commitment to a cause. Attending to less tangible forms of politics encourages us to rethink the role of political messages and visibility in social movements by highlighting the significant role, as well as contradictory implications, of aesthetics, embodiment, and gestures in political action. Conversely, the elusive politics of cultural activism underlines the need to go beyond analysing national discourses to understand the contested nature of secularism in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Cultural activism; elusive politics; ethics; sound and affect; secularity

Introduction

HOEDERER: [...] How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! Alright, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

I've plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently? (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Dirty Hands*, 1948)

In summer 2017,¹ having spent most of the previous years engaged in activist street theatre performances aimed at promoting secularist politics, a theatre group in the Bangladeshi city of Sylhet began rehearsing 'rājñaitik hatyā'² (lit. 'political killing'), an adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mains Sales* (*Dirty Hands*) by the Indian theatre activist and politician Arpita Ghosh. The group's core members, Chanda, Ismail, and Rajosri,³ had chosen this drama about a political leader's assassination, written just after the Second World War, because they felt that it was relevant for contemporary Bangladesh and their own lives. The play explores the young communist Hugo's motivation for killing a leading politician, Hoederer, and the moral, political, and existential questions that surround the killing. The questions Sartre raises about whether it is ever possible to remain 'innocent' and cling to one's purity—or what kinds of compromises might be acceptable—strongly resonate with the ethical struggles faced by Bengali communists and cultural⁴ activists today.

Although Sartre's drama is ambiguous in its moral judgement of its characters, the members of the theatre group seemed to identify with the idealistic and tragically struggling Hugo rather than Hoederer, the pragmatic but effective politician. Reflecting the Bengali title, Oisharja Sharkar, a theatre group leader and director, discussed the play with me in terms of party politics, emphasizing how its themes are relevant in Bangladesh: the dilemma between choosing between one's ideals and pragmatism amid what he perceives as 'dirty' and corrupt politics, the factions within parties, questions about the legitimacy of political coalitions, and the complications of political dynamics because of personal aspirations. These issues were relevant not only for politicians, he said, but equally for cultural activists, even though these two fields seemed to function according to strikingly different moral standards. In politics, Oisharja said, compromise was unavoidable, as unfortunate and undesirable as that may be.⁵ By contrast, he insisted, cultural activists 'should not compromise'. Even though he engaged with Communist Party politics in order to advance a secular society,

¹This article is based on 15 months of ethnographic research on secularists in Sylhet undertaken between 2016 and 2019. While this article focuses on one specific theatre group, it was informed by interactions with a wider network of cultural activists and theatre groups that differed in their sociopolitical orientation but which all shared a commitment to the struggle for a more secular Bangladesh.

²Bengali terms in italics follow common transliteration rules modelled after Sanskrit and are thus not always congruent with pronunciation. For Islamic vocabulary (e.g. in Arabic) and names of persons, places, and movements, I use common spelling rather than a transliteration if it aids easy recognition. To distinguish Bengali from Arabic, the latter is not italicized.

³All interlocutors' names have been anonymized.

⁴The Bengali word for culture is *sanskṛti*, which semantically resembles the English term closely in that it can be used in the double sense of referring to either popular or high culture (such as literature, theatre, etc.) but also as an umbrella term to encompass a certain group's different habits, norms, ideas, traditions, and ways of doing. The English phrasing 'cultural activities' and 'cultural activist' were also used during otherwise Bengali conversations.

⁵This rather common perspective is also similar to the strong ambivalence towards politics and politicians that has been observed in rural West Bengal; see Aril Ruud, 'Talking dirty about politics: A view from a Bengali village', in *The everyday state and society in modern India*, (eds) C. J. Fuller and Veronique Bénéï (London: Hurst and Company, 2001), pp. 115–138.

Oisharja felt that the compromises required for party politics also often compromised the secular commitment of politicians, consequently limiting the scope for effective transformation of society. In his view, engaging with songs, theatre, and similar activities as a cultural activist was thus not only a 'purer' and highly ethical endeavour, whose high moral ground contrasts with the corrupting tendency of formal politics, but is also a more effective tool for bringing about social change. It allows 'the secularists' to unite, despite often-diverging understandings of what kind of secularity they are fighting for, accommodating positions that range from radical criticism of religion to an emphatic endorsement of the need to respect all religions. Given this contested nature, I approach secular and secularity here as emic terms subject to empirical investigation rather than as normative or analytical categories.⁶ The sensitivity that prevents more explicit forms of politics, however, also nurtures the imagination of elusive cultural politics as morally superior and pure; because secular ideals need to be compromised in many everyday interactions, cultural activists create and embrace a space in which secular sentiments are cultivated among the Bengali intellectualist middle class. Even though these politics may be elusive, the logic goes, at least they are not compromised.

Yet, these elusive means for pursuing politics are not a neutral ground; rather, the properties of Bengali cultural activism shape their politics. Despite their explicit distance from other, supposedly less dignified, forms of politics, particularly mainstream party politics, Islamic leaders often claim that Bengali cultural activists are anti-Islamic rather than merely secular, and that they are pawns in party political power struggles that ultimately serve the interest of the ruling, supposedly secular, Awami League. However, as I will show below, the fact that Bengali cultural genres relate differently to Islamic and Hindu traditions also leads to tensions among the cultural activists. My analysis of the elusive politics of cultural activism thus draws attention to the significant role, as well as contradictory implications, of aesthetics, embodiment, and gestures in political action. Furthermore, it underlines the need to go beyond analysing national discourses in order to understand the contested nature of secularism in Bangladesh.

Exploring such elusive politics, in which the very object of activism often remains indirectly articulated through aesthetic choices, offers novel perspectives on what constitutes activism and political action more generally. Thus, focusing empirically on the elusive struggle for secularism among Bengali cultural activists, this article seeks to make an intervention in debates on how to conceptualize political activism by highlighting the notion of 'elusive politics'.

While activism has often been understood as collective actions directed at bringing about social transformation, it has also often been described as a form of ethical

⁶The Bengali term for secularism is *dharmanirapekṣatā*, which is often translated as 'neutrality to (all) religion(s)' or 'religious neutrality'. It is thus often used as quasi synonymous to non-communalism rather than referring a degree of religiosity or the privatization of religion. Secular is here often used to oppose a certain form of religiosity (like fundamentalism or Wahabism), while embracing others (like Sufism). However, people also use the word secular ('*sekulār*') and *dharmanirapekṣa* frequently in ways that are highly congruent with the terms' use in casual English. For many cultural activists it also implied the possibility of not practising religion or being an atheist.

thriving and self-transformation.⁷ In her ethnography of lesbian and queer activism in New Delhi, Naisargi Dave defines activism as an *ethical practice* comprising three ‘affective exercises’, namely ‘problematizing established social norms, inventing alternatives to those norms, and creatively practicing these newly invented relational and critical possibilities’.⁸ While cultural activism through engagement with theatre and Bengali culture is certainly an ethical practice in Dave’s terms, it is very different to Dave’s queer movement in that its aims are rarely explicitly discussed. Envisioned alternatives are gestured to through aesthetic practices rather than debated explicitly. The result is a form of politics that seeks to bring about social transformation not by means of an explicitly articulated secularist message but, at least partially, via its media forms. Attending to how certain Bengali cultural traditions serve as a secular media that enable activists to embody a potentially transformative secularity, as well as to the ethical tensions inherent in these traditions, allows us to understand the possibilities and limits of a form of activism in which the very aims and envisioned alternatives remain elusive because their sensitivity and contentiousness make them unspeakable. Analysing such ‘elusive politics’ complicates our understanding of the significance of visibility, explicit messages, and intentionality in political actions and social activism by highlighting the role of embodiment, aesthetics, affect, and gestures.

Elusive politics: Culture as activism

In Bangladesh, secularism has long been a prominent and highly contested theme. Upon gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971, the new state defined itself as ‘secular’ in its constitution—a direct contrast to Pakistan, which emphasized Islam as a source of national identity. However, the socially and politically contested nature of this constitutional principle soon became visible and manifested itself in constitutional amendments that, in 1979 and 2011 respectively, first removed and then reintroduced secularism as a principle.⁹

In recent history, the social tensions around secularism and atheism have resurged as an intense polarization due to the emergence of the Gonojagoron Moncho Movement (lit. Platform for People’s Awakening). When students, bloggers, cultural activists, and so-called leftist actors took to the streets in February 2013 to demand capital punishment for the 1971 war criminals in the then-ongoing war crimes tribunal, supporters of the movement widely celebrated it as an important step towards a secular society. Conversely, opponents argued that the tribunal was motivated by party political manoeuvring and denounced the activists as atheists. In reaction to the Gonojagoron Moncho Movement, the Hafazat-e-Islam, a madrasa-based pressure

⁷Naisargi Dave, ‘Activism as ethical practice: Queer politics in contemporary India’, *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 3–20; Arne Harms ‘Beyond dystopia: Regenerative cultures and ethics among European climate activists’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 124, no. 3, 2022, pp. 515–524; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety. The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁸Dave, ‘Activism as ethical practice’, pp. 5–6.

⁹Jahid Hossain Bhuiyan, ‘Secularism in the constitution of Bangladesh’, *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2017, pp. 204–227; Tazeen Murshid, ‘State, nation, identity: The quest for legitimacy in Bangladesh’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1997, pp. 1–34; Sufia Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, ethnicity, and language in an Islamic nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

group, mobilized in unprecedented numbers and scope, demanding capital punishment for the ‘atheist bloggers’ and stricter blasphemy laws. The politicization was entangled with party politics and also created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. According to Bert Suykens and Aynul Islam’s study, at least 3,870 violent party-political incidents were recorded in that year, with documented lethal consequences for at least 765 people with more than 30,000 injured.¹⁰ The Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami was consequently banned from elections and became increasingly suppressed. The supposedly secular Awami League managed to entrench itself in power through increasingly autocratic rule. However, bloggers and activists became very cautious about voicing criticism of Islam or religion, not only because of the killings of so-called ‘atheist bloggers’ by Islamist extremists following the polarization (2013–2016) but also because they feared political repression and social condemnation. At a more general level, people have become much more hesitant to speak up and openly express controversial opinions because of increasingly repressive policies of the governments such as the Digital Security Act.¹¹ Indeed, some of the cultural activists had been active bloggers during the Gonojagoron Moncho Movement but have become more reluctant to publish their writing in recent years. Thus, despite Bangladesh’s rich history of oppositional writing and debate, many intellectuals, including secularists, have become more cautious and indirect, thus making a very explicit struggle for a secular Bangladesh more difficult.

While secularism still remains an ideology of positive identification, the political climate following the sociopolitical polarizations in 2013 makes it a highly sensitive issue as people seek to avoid the risks that come with being perceived as atheists and religion sceptics. Secularism has also been strongly associated with Bangladesh’s factionalist and highly confrontational party-political system. While the currently ruling Awami League presents itself as secular, it is cautious not to be labelled atheist, which has a strong association with amorality, out of fear that it would lose voter support. Thus, many secular politicians are eager to display their ostensible piety and sympathies for religion. Consequently, the party and the centre-left coalition continue to be considered secular and liberal despite common complaints about policy decisions or political statements that contradict secular values and pander to Islamic leaders.¹²

Because they view politics as corrupt, violent, self-serving, and ‘dirty’, committed Bangladeshi secularists tend to be disillusioned, doubting that they can achieve significant progress towards a secular society through formal politics. Throughout the time I spent with secularists in the city of Sylhet, I repeatedly encountered the view that theatre and other forms of Bengali culture offered a higher moral ground for transforming society amid widespread disappointment with politics and existing

¹⁰Bert Suykens and Aynul Islam, *The distribution of political violence in Bangladesh: 2002–2013* (Ghent: Conflict Research Group, 2015).

¹¹Mark Lacy and Nayanika Mookherjee, “Firing cannons to kill mosquitoes”: Controlling virtual “streets” and the “image of the state” in Bangladesh”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2020, pp. 280–305.

¹²See also Mascha Schulz, “That was a good move”—some remarks on the (ir)relevance of “narratives of secularism” in everyday politics in Bangladesh”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2020, pp. 236–258.

social conventions. While some activists remain involved in political parties (Oisharja Sharkar is a member of the Communist Party), most feel that cultural activities represent a better method of achieving secularist aims and transforming society. Oisharja Sharkar, like many of my secularist interlocutors, demarcates his cultural activism not only from party politics but also from merely being an 'artist' or 'just singing songs', activities that he argues are motivated not by 'ethics' but by a desire for fame. In contrast, he emphasizes that activists are ready to stand up for their ideals and engage with social problems.

However, while such an ethical project of transforming society through theatre and other cultural activities is at the core of cultural activists' self-definition, *the precise nature* of this ethical-political project remains elusive, as this statement by Oisharja makes clear:

Although it is ... a cultural group, among its workers and members ... there is a political philosophy, change, equal society, and such things are part of their thinking. If this is in one's thinking, a song does not remain a song only, but there is much more to it. Cultural activities don't mean just singing songs ... Take, for instance, if one of our *sculptures* is removed, I have to protest it. **This** is what culture is. A sculpture is removed by designating it as an idol ... But we won't remain silent. But we will sing [to protest], we are musical artists. [...] This is what culture is, indeed. That ... where we are, there will be no disadvantages ... this is culture. [...] This is what you see at our programmes. At Pohela Boishakh [Bengali New Year]. At various times ... our Nazrul [Nazrul Islam], Rabindranath [Rabindranath Tagore] ... we study their affairs ... consciously ... we practise this.

Despite his claim that they 'won't remain silent', Oisharja's description of culture as a sociopolitical project is surprisingly vague. Although alluding to secularism, he is silent about the kind of politics they are struggling to achieve. Instead, he illustrates their ethical striving and commitment with reference to established Bengali cultural tropes: Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, sculptures, and the Bengali New Year. As is often the case, the wider meanings of these persons and symbols remain unarticulated, seemingly self-evident. Yet, for Oisharja Sharkar and other cultural activists, they index an ideology in which secularism, Bengality, and a commitment to equality or universalist humanism are central. Arguably, they are some of the most prominent signifiers of what one might call the cultivated style¹³ of a Bengali secularist. The theatre activists with whom I interacted typically foregrounded these specific cultural tropes. Rather than 'only' performing on theatre stages, they often engaged with various forms of 'Bengali' music and dance and also organized music performances and cultural days such as Bengali New Year or Mother Language Day, Ekushe. They seek to cultivate songs and music genres that played a significant role in Bengal in mobilizing various non-communal and secular movements, such as those that fought against the partition of Bengal in 1905, or for the Language Movement in the early 1950s, or that

¹³James Ferguson, *Expectations of modernity. Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

were active during the Independence Movement.¹⁴ Consequently, cultural activism in Bangladesh, and Bengal more widely,¹⁵ remains strongly connected with progressive social activism, secularism, and even religion-scepticism, though activists only rarely explicitly articulate such a stance. Such indexing of secularity through a wide range of cultural tropes does not account for the differences of these signifiers, for instance between Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam,¹⁶ and their complex histories. Thus, there is great scope to interpret and inhabit secularity in multiple ways.

Transforming self and society through Bengali cultural activism

While my interlocutors shared a commitment to humanism or secularism in the sense of equal treatment of all religious communities (non-communalism), the significance and meanings they attributed to secularism differed considerably. They avoided explicit discussions of religion and atheism, or limited their conversations to those whose views were already known and deemed acceptable. Instead, they often talked to me about their experiences of personal transformation in which their engagement in cultural activism was an inherently transformative ethical activity. I often heard the view that theatre and musical performances and concomitant activities, such as eating together, the intermingling of Muslims and Hindus, and the messages transmitted through various dramas or song texts, helped to cultivate secular sentiments among the members. Beyond this, however, it seems that certain cultural media forms are themselves considered to be inherently transformative and as having an inherently progressive and secular essence. Similarly, although *some* (street) theatre plays and songs explicitly address such themes as fundamentalism, non-communalism, or superstition, many cultural performances do not. Nevertheless, these cultural forms are *generally*, and as such considered to be, a form of secularist activism.

Shujon Anindyo, a journalist who was born into a Muslim family but now identifies as an atheist, told me how his convictions changed through his engagement with certain songs with which he came in contact through cultural activism:

When we [cultural activists] sat together, gossiping or practising with one another, listening to Lalon songs (*lālangīti*), that's how the change started.

¹⁴See also James Bradbury and Mascha Schulz, 'Performing the secular: Street theatre and songs as "secular media" in Bangladesh and West Bengal', in *Global sceptical publics: From nonreligious print media to 'digital atheism'*, (eds) Jacob Copeman and Mascha Schulz (London: UCL Press, 2022), pp. 71–96.

¹⁵James Bradbury, 'Hinduism and the left: Searching for the secular in post-communist Kolkata', PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2019.

¹⁶While secularist cultural activists celebrate the national poet as an example for secularity and non-communalism, others have attempted to appropriate Nazrul Islam as a Muslim Bengali poet; see Sajal Nag, 'Two nations and a dead body: Mortuarial rites and post-colonial modes of nation-making in South Asia', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 50, 2006, pp. 5183–5190. Such an indexing of secularity through certain people or cultural tropes like Bengali New Year is paralleled by the strong, constantly reiterated, but elusively vague association between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Independence War, and secularism among Awami League supporters. For similar dynamics interpreted through the lens of moral idealism in southern India, see Stefan Binder, 'The "ideal" atheist. Nonreligion and moral exemplarism', *Religion and Society*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2023, pp. 154–167.

Lalon's song can influence you a lot. Many thoughts will be triggered in your mind by listening to his songs. If I didn't come to this cultural world, then I would be a theist and no thoughts would have come to my mind.

This statement about the transformative power of the famous Baul Fakir Lalon Shah's music was not unusual. Thus, Shujon did not consider a particular secularist message or any specific interaction as being central to his becoming an atheist and committed secularist activist. Rather, as in many other narratives of personal transformation towards a (more) secular self, he highlighted his exposure to a certain cultural form, namely the genre of Lalon songs. Yet, while Shujon believed Lalon songs and Baul music were key triggers of his personal change, he emphasized that such change does not happen automatically. Rather, it requires active cultivation in the form of intellectual engagement (e.g. through intellectual conversations or engagement with books and other writing), continuous practice, and a general willingness to question and actively expose oneself to such cultural activities.

Although Shujon Anindyo described himself as a cultural activist, his ethical striving for the secular resembled more forms of (non)religious conversion and other projects of self-cultivation than what is typically thought of as activism, namely vigorous campaigning and claims-making designed to bring about social change. In fact, despite the cultural activists' aim to bring their cultural activism to the 'mass people' through street theatre and music events, many of their more radical performances are staged for like-minded, culturally oriented middle-class audiences.¹⁷ The stories of self-transformation and engagement with Bengali culture as a turning point in one's life have similarities with the narratives of 'breaking with a past' that Birgit Meyer described in the context of religious conversion.¹⁸ For Meyer, 'breaking with the past' should not be understood literally because the past becomes a 'negative identity, one from which one wished to escape'.¹⁹ In this way, Ghanaian converts to Christianity are able to define themselves as 'modern' and 'progressive' in contradistinction to 'backward' African culture. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the meaning of what cultural activism is emerges as much from contradistinction to a person's past as from visions for the national or societal future. Becoming a cultural activist is certainly not a literal conversion, not least because many activists view their activities as compatible with their religiosity or their identity as a Muslim or Hindu. But the self-transformation experienced by cultural activists is similar to Christian conversions in that it constitutes 'a process of becoming' and is 'always an incomplete project',²⁰ that 'involve[s] the crossing of conceptual, social and/or religious boundaries'.²¹

¹⁷See also Bradbury and Schulz, 'Performing the secular'.

¹⁸Birgit Meyer, "'Make a complete break with the past". Memory and post-colonial modernity in Ghanaian pentecostalist discourse', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1998, pp. 316–349.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 293.

²⁰Matthew Engelke, 'Discontinuity and the discourse of conversion', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 34, no. 1–2, 2004, p. 104.

²¹Mathijs Pelkmans, 'Introduction: Post-Soviet space and the unexpected turns of religious life', in *Conversion after socialism. Disruptions, modernisms and technologies of faith in the former Soviet Union*, (ed.) Mathijs Pelkmans (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 12.

Narratives of becoming a cultural activist also highlight some of the tensions of the implicit and elusive association between ‘secularism’ and what interlocutors conceptualize as ‘Bengali culture’. In Bangladesh, progressiveness is not associated with modernity but rather with performative arts that are thought of as traditionally Bengali. These include not only theatre but also Baul music, *rabīndrasaṅgīt* (songs in the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore), *bratacārī nr̥tya* (Bratchari dance), *gaṇasaṅgīt* (lit. ‘folksongs’, songs associated with left-wing and social activism), and *jāgaraṇer gān* (‘awakening songs’). These specific genres, rather than, for instance, Bengali rock music or Islamic song forms (e.g. *gajal*, *mur̥sidī gān*, *kāōyāli*), are associated with a sense of being progressive and a secular Bengali cultural identity (or ‘Bengaliness’). Thus, instead of seeking to break with ‘traditional culture’, notions of progressive political transformation are inherently linked with embracing tradition in the form of Bengaliness, cultivated through particular stylistic practices, with the goal of building a national future by reviving a(n imagined) non-communal past. This orientation is visible in the theatre group’s constitution:

We believe that for the success of our campaign in enlightening people against the darkness, a revival of [a] new cultural front with the aim of founding a socialist society²² is required. We firmly believe that the basic and foremost responsibility of Artist[s] and Art is to continually guide the society towards [a] progressive direction and engage themselves for the total wellbeing of the society. [...] Folklore, in any society, is the foundation of cultural growth and renaissance.

Cultural activism and certain Bengali performative art forms have a transformative potential for the secularist activists, who thus cultivate them in order to bring about change for both society and the self. The understanding of certain cultural forms and aesthetics as having the power to foster secular sentiments was often taken for granted among the theatre activists. Notably, these secular sentiments are rather different to Hirschkind’s understanding of the secular as ‘a unique configuration of the human sensorium’.²³ While Hirschkind argues, building on the work of Asad and Connolly, that secular practices are defined by their relationality to religion and *not* to an identity, the cultivation of secular sentiments among cultural activists is not necessarily opposed to religion. Instead, it is strongly related to cultivating a secular Bengali identity. Yet, such politics that centre on the cultivation of certain aesthetic genres leaves secularity and progressiveness only elusively defined. As we see in the next section, this results often in controversies about what counts as (secular) culture and what a commitment to the secular and progressiveness should imply.

²²While this cultural organization was linked to socialist politics and a Marxist ideology, this is not the case for most other cultural organizations in Sylhet, although they are associated with leftish politics in a broad sense. Interestingly, economic inequality and class politics were not very prominent topics of conversation among the cultural activists even though a commitment to equality was. Explicit alignment with communism or socialism was mostly limited to people who were also active in communist political parties. For a discussion on the relationship between cultural activism and communist party politics in Bengal, see Bradbury and Schulz, ‘Performing the secular’.

²³Charles Hirschkind, ‘Is there a secular body?’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2011, p. 645.

Elusive politics, elusive secularity

Explicit, open, and upfront discussions about secularism and (non)religion beyond generalized condemnations of fundamentalism and communalism are surprisingly absent from a milieu that is so closely associated with secularity and which opponents denigrate as atheist. Going through my fieldnotes and recorded interviews, I was struck by how the association between Bengali culture and secularity among both cultural activists as well as the urban educated population more generally was both constant but elusive. However, this did not mean that tensions and controversies were absent. Take, for example, a conflict that occurred about three weeks after rehearsals began for the *Dirty Hands* adaptation, *rājnaitik hatyā*.

One afternoon, I met eight members of the theatre group after their daily session for tea at a small stall close to their rehearsal room. A heated debate soon ensued among the members. It became so tense and emotional that I could hardly understand what was going on. People were talking over the top of each other, some shouting, others quieter but equally emotional. Finally, Oisharja Sharker intervened: 'The issue can't be resolved today! We will discuss it another time.'

At the centre of the debate was Aishi, a Hindu woman in her early twenties and a talented singer. She was a long-standing member of a musical section of the same umbrella organization of which the theatre group was a part, but had joined the latter only recently after marrying Rajosri Karmakar, a prominent theatre activist. Now Aishi was trembling and in tears, but she firmly declared that she would not discuss this issue any more and that others would have to accept her decision. 'Otherwise, I won't attend the rehearsals any more.' This ended the conversation. We silently drained our cups and went our separate ways.

I left with Ismail and Chanda, two young but extremely active group members born into Muslim families. We squeezed onto a rickshaw, and they started to discuss the argument. At the most recent rehearsal, someone had suggested that Aisha should remove her *śākhā palā*, the red and white bangles worn by married Bengali Hindu women. Aishi strongly disagreed, especially as she had only recently married; even a temporary removal might be inauspicious. Others argued that it made little sense for her to join the group if she was unwilling to let go of her visible signs of Hindu womanhood—the *śākhā palā* and the *siṁdur*, the red powder line typically worn by married women along the parting of their hair—not even for a theatre performance.²⁴ The ensuing debate went well beyond Aishi's specific role to encompass the broad question of what it means to be a (secular) cultural activist.

Not surprisingly, Ismail and Chanda had strong opinions about this. Their commitment to cultural activism meant committing to secularism, non-communalism, and the promotion of the spirit of Bangladesh's Independence War. Theatre was not about being an artist, they emphasized, not just a matter of artistic and aesthetic quality;

²⁴It is no coincidence that the conflict evolved around visible signs of womanhood. *Jāti* (i.e. Muslim and Hindu) belonging tends to be more visible for women than for men because the application of certain markers is much more strongly expected and enforced by relatives. Men thus find it easier to cultivate a 'secular' style. See Stefan Binder, *Total atheism: Secular activism and the politics of difference in South Asia* (London: Berghahn, 2020). On women as 'boundary markers', see Santi Rozario, *Purity and communal boundaries. Women and social change in a Bangladeshi village* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

it was about the transformation of both society and self. For them, Aishi's refusal to remove the *śākhā palā* indicated her 'backwardness' and the persistence of her superstitious beliefs. They were outraged that, even in their apparently progressive group, some people were so '*dharmāndha*' (religiously fanatical, bigoted). Ismail's outrage derived from the wider implications he saw in this conflict: 'How can we work for a secular society when we have such kind of narrow-minded persons in our own group?'

Chanda and Ismail were emotionally invested in matters of religion and secularism, and tense interactions around these issues emerged frequently in informal interactions at rehearsals, after theatre shows, and in casual conversations. Other theatre members often viewed cultural activists' opposition to the use of religious symbols as being too radical, impassioned, and unable to accommodate the diversity of stances among the cultural activists. Nevertheless, such controversies were premised on an underlying consensus that engaging in culture and theatre was inherently progressive, secular, and potentially transformative of both self and society.

In Bangladesh, culture is not only associated with engagement with politics and intellectual debate, as is the case elsewhere in South Asia,²⁵ but certain forms of Bengali culture are considered inherently secular. Yet, while people like Ismail and Chanda understood a commitment to secularism also as a conscious departure from religious and communal symbols, others, such as Aishi, embraced religion while holding onto a commitment to secularism in the sense of the equal treatment of all groups. Arguably, the frequent tensions regarding religious practices and symbols among theatre activists were a result of the ill-defined relationship between certain cultural activities and secularism. Consequently, while the theatre group's members were all striving towards an imagined secular society, they had different understandings of what this entailed.

Baul songs: An aesthetics of 'the secular'

Why does Bengali culture in particular allow activists to express their secular aspirations, and how does this shape the possibilities, limits, and affective potentials of their political struggle? To answer this question, we first need to challenge popular and academic accounts that 'equate the secular with its normative accounts of disembodied reason'²⁶ and instead engage with recent anthropological literature, building on developments in religious studies,²⁷ that highlight the embodied, material, and aesthetic

²⁵See Rustom Bharucha, 'The shifting sites of secularism: Cultural politics and activism in India today', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1998, pp. 167–180; Bradbury, 'Hinduism and the left'; Hans-Martin Kunz, *Schaubühnen Der Öffentlichkeit: Das Jatra-Wandertheater in Westbengalen (Indien)* (Heidelberg: Draupadi, 2014); Laetitia Zecchini, 'Hurt and censorship in India today. On communities of sentiments, competing vulnerabilities and cultural wars', in *Emotions, mobilisations and South Asian politics*, (eds) Amélie Blom and Stéphanie Lama-Rewal (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 243–263.

²⁶Stefan Binder, 'Aesthetics of the secular', in *The Bloomsbury handbook of the cultural and cognitive aesthetics of religion*, (eds) Anne Koch and Katharina Wilkens (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 264.

²⁷For example, Matthew Engelke, 'Material religion', in *The Cambridge companion to religious studies*, (ed.) Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 209–229; Charles Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds), *Religion, media, and the public sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

dimensions of secularity.²⁸ Thus, while the activities in which cultural activists express their secular ambitions—plays, musical performances, speeches, protests, and aesthetic preferences—could be analysed in light of existing discourses and debates on secularism and religion, they cannot be reduced to them. Like the cassette sermons described by Charles Hirschkind, such activities ‘create the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political lifeworld with its specific patterns of behaviour, sensibility, and practical reasoning’.²⁹ Beyond this, certain performative art genres are perceived to be *inherently* secular, possessing an innate potential for transforming the self and society. One such genre was Baul songs, a case that illustrates how and why certain Bengali traditions have become associated with secularism but also why this association nevertheless remains both elusive and contested.

People in Sylhet frequently urged me to study Bauls to grasp their philosophy (*ādarśa*) and understand ‘what Bengali secularism is about’. Theatre activists consider Bauls to be the embodiment of secularity even though the academic literature portrays them as a ‘religious sect of mystical minstrels’³⁰ and ‘wandering mendicants and singers’,³¹ whose practices, rituals, and cosmological ideas are influenced by tantrism, Vaishnavism, and Sufism.³² But even though they are considered religious, Bauls are widely seen in Bangladesh as ‘nonconformist, antisectarian, and highly anticlerical’,³³ committed to equality and universal humanism, and willing to cross-communal boundaries between Hindus and Muslims.³⁴ During interviews or conversations, my interlocutors would often state that the Bauls promoted humanism and strove to overcome divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Many cultural activists quoted Baul sayings or song lyrics to express their secular world view. Take, for example, the following song lyrics by the Sylheti Baul, Shah Abdul Karim (1916–2009):

āge ki sundar din kṛāitām
 āmrā āge ki sundar din kṛāitām
 grāmer naojōyān hindu musulmān
 miliyā bāul gān ār murśidi gāitām
 Hindu bārite yātrā gān haitam

What a beautiful time [we] used to have,
 what a beautiful time we used to have,
 the village youth, Hindus and Muslims,
 together we used to sing Baul songs and *murśidi*.
 when jatra songs were sung in a Hindu house,

²⁸For example, Binder, *Total atheism*; Jacob Copeman and Mascha Schulz, ‘Introduction: Nonreligion, atheism and sceptical publicity’, in *Global sceptical publics*, (eds) Copeman and Schulz, pp. 1–36; Reza Gholami, *Secularism and identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian diaspora* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015).

²⁹Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape*, p. 8.

³⁰Lisa Knight, ‘Bāuls in conversation: Cultivating oppositional ideology’, *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2010, p. 76.

³¹Leonard Lewisohn, ‘Rabindranath Tagore’s syncretistic philosophy and the Persian Sufi tradition’, *International Journal of Persian Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, p. 13

³²See Rahul Peter Das, ‘Problematic aspects of the sexual rituals of the Bauls of Bengal’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 112, no. 3, 1992, pp. 388–432; Rahul Peter Das, ‘New publications on Bengali syncretistic religions’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 114, no. 2, 1994, pp. 249–253.

³³Lewisohn, ‘Rabindranath Tagore’s syncretistic philosophy and the Persian Sufi tradition’, p. 14.

³⁴See also Knight, ‘Bāuls in conversation’; Lewisohn, ‘Rabindranath Tagore’s syncretistic philosophy and the Persian Sufi tradition’; Jeanne Openshaw, ‘Inner self, outer individual: A Bengali “Bāul” perspective’, *South Asia Research*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 183–200.

nimantraṅ dita āmrā yāitām.	We were invited and used to go.
Jāri gān, bāul gān	jāri song, Baul song,
ānander tuphān	a storm of joy,
gāiyā sārī gān naukā dauṛāitām.	We used to row the boat, singing songs.
(Abdul Shah Karim ³⁵)	

The text nostalgically celebrates the allegedly bright past of inter-religious harmony in Bengal. Muslims and Hindus not only sang together, they sang Baul *jātrā* (associated with Hindus) and Bengali devotional songs associated with Islam, namely *murśidī* and *jāri gān*. This ‘communal harmony’ is not contrasted with religiosity, although the lyrics promote the ideal of crossing community boundaries and a certain *mode* of religiosity, one in which singing songs is considered not only acceptable but even desirable.

Certain Bauls, my interlocutors said, refused to identify as Hindu or Muslim (even if born into one of these groups), thus demonstrating a commitment to universal (or unitarian) humanism. Rather than belonging to one religious group (*dharma*), they would declare that they belonged to the Baul *dharma* or that they were simply ‘human beings’. My interlocutors would frequently recite the following famous lines to illustrate this point:

ei sab niye dbandba kena	Why all these fights?
Keu Hindu keu Musalmān	Some are Hindus, some are Muslims
tumi mānuṣ, ami mānuṣ	You are a human, I am a human
āmrā sab ek māyēr santān.	We are all the children of one mother.
(Shah Abdul Karim)	

This theme of a united and single humankind that transcends and rejects all communal divisions illustrates a commitment to ‘human-ism’ that many of my interlocutors argued was essential for understanding ‘Bengali secularism’. It also influenced and became popular through Rabindranath Tagore’s writings, most explicitly in *The Religion of Man*.³⁶ Yet, this ‘universal Man’ is not necessarily godless or anti-theistic; rather, such a commitment to humankind and human experience is associated with the search for the divine *within* humans, the human experience, and the body.³⁷ Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of Baul conceptions of the divine,³⁸ my interlocutors emphasized that this God is not partisan or, to use a phrase that appears in Tagore’s book, not a ‘tribal God, the God of a chosen people’.³⁹

³⁵All translations are mine.

³⁶Rabindranath Tagore, *The religion of man* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1931).

³⁷This is taken up in *The religion of man*. Tagore writes: ‘The humanity of God is apprehended, man realizes his divine self in his religion, his God is no longer an outsider to be propitiated for a special concession. The consciousness of God transcends the limitations of race and gathers together all human beings within one spiritual circle of union’: Tagore, *The religion of man*, pp. 79–80. Many cultural activists share similar perspectives, though my interlocutors do not necessarily emphasize this in the way Tagore did. See also Michael Collins, *Empire, nationalism and the postcolonial world. Rabindranath Tagore’s writings on history, politics and society* (London: Routledge, 2012); Openshaw, ‘Inner self, outer individual’; Hugh Urban, ‘The politics of madness. The construction and manipulation of the “Baul” image in modern Bengal’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999, pp. 13–46.

³⁸See Das, ‘Problematic aspects of the sexual rituals of the Bauls of Bengal’.

³⁹Tagore, *The religion of man*, p. 80.

Furthermore, Bauls are closely associated with Bengaliness. For many cultural activists, they thus represent a specifically Bengali secularism. Like the organized atheists in South Asia who, according to Binder, engaged in ‘re-interpreting, and thus re-appropriating certain parts of Indian cultural history—like folklore, art forms, moral principles, or philosophical insights—as purloined achievements of original Atheism’,⁴⁰ Bangladeshi cultural activists, through their nostalgia for Bauls, arguably performed a similar reappropriation. In this case, though, they were striving towards the ideal of an original Bengali *secularism* rather than atheism per se. Binder pertinently suggests that the focus on such revived traditions and their concomitant ‘aesthetics can offer a way forward beyond normative accounts and European conceptual history’ of secularity.⁴¹ Beyond this, however, the reappropriation of the Baul figure indicates a different mode of secularist activism to those that come typically into view and are associated with ‘conceptual history’, namely a form in which secularity is gestured to through certain aesthetic forms. At the same time, that a ‘religious’ group came to be seen as the embodiment of secularity is related to complex and contested histories of revival movements, both nationalist and religious, during the colonial period.

While the term ‘Baul’ was first used in the fourteenth century to ‘refer to the divine “madness”’,⁴² it was only in the nineteenth century that it came to refer to a distinct group with a coherent tradition. Yet, Bauls have been tremendously hard to define because they reject hierarchical structures and central authorities, draw on diverse traditions, situationally vary the meaning of ‘Baul’, and sometimes even outright reject the term as a self-descriptor.⁴³ Hugh Urban argues that ‘Baul’ does not describe ‘any particular religious community, but rather an imaginary construction, employed by various social and political factions—scholars, reformers, missionaries, nationalists—for a wide range of different historical interests’.⁴⁴ Urban shows that Bauls were—like other ‘heterodox’ groups such as fakirs, dervish, or kartabhaja—subject to criticism by Hindu and Muslim reformers. During British colonialism, these critiques emerged in conversation with Orientalizing discourses⁴⁵ through which Bauls were associated with backwardness and allegedly ‘immoral’ habits such as drinking, improper intermixing, or ritual practices involving sexual intercourse and the consumption of various bodily fluids.⁴⁶

While radical reformist and Muslim fundamentalist movements, such as the Faraizi movement, viewed Baul traditions ‘as a dangerous perversion of traditional religious

⁴⁰Binder, ‘Aesthetics of the secular’, p. 268.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 264.

⁴²Urban, ‘The politics of madness’, p. 26.

⁴³Knight, ‘Bāuls in conversation’; Openshaw, ‘Inner self, outer individual’. Significantly, Lalon Sah (or Lalon Fakir) (1774–1890), who is considered to be one of, if not the, most famous Baul in contemporary Bangladesh, never used the term as a self-description; see Urban, ‘The politics of madness’.

⁴⁴Urban ‘The politics of madness’, p. 15.

⁴⁵For a discussion of moral discourses and transformed meaning of begging and religious venerators, especially fakirs, at the nexus between British colonial criticism and Muslim and Hindu reformism, see Nile Green, ‘Breaking the begging bowl: Morals, drugs, and madness in the fate of the Muslim faqīr’, *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 226–245.

⁴⁶For details, see Das, ‘Problematic aspects of the sexual rituals of the Bauls of Bengal’; Urban ‘The politics of madness’.

belief and a profound threat to the proper order of society',⁴⁷ a positive image of Bauls as an icon of 'folk culture' emerged due to Rabindranath Tagore's influence. Combining the Brahmo movement's reformist efforts with an idealistic imagination of the Bengali rural past, Tagore popularized the 'Bauls' as an embodiment of universalism and humanism. Through such refashioning, the figure of the Baul became popular among the educated, urban middle class. Some scholars have criticized such reappropriations and reinterpretations of Baul practices as a 'grave distortion'⁴⁸ by an 'educated class' seemingly detached from such a tradition,⁴⁹ which thereby reduces the rich tradition to certain aspects while remaining silent on issues such as sexual and esoteric rituals,⁵⁰ and concerns about 'fake Bauls' through commercialization.⁵¹ However, one should not ignore how such refashioning has conversely influenced Baul practices and lyrics. Crucial to the revival of Bengali culture and language within Bengali and Indian nationalism and anti-colonial resistance, Bauls became a 'quintessential image' of Bengali popular culture, unity, and national identity.⁵²

For my interlocutors, it is the aesthetics of the Baul as a figure and music genre that makes Baulism inherently secular, not a specific philosophy. Such reappropriation of Baulness is not a superficial engagement or simple use of an icon but an affective, albeit situated and selective, engagement with Baul traditions—traditions that my interlocutors view as possessing transformative potential, a secular practice in itself. During my fieldwork, various theatre groups performed Baul songs at their events, and such performances were occasionally accompanied by brief speeches that highlighted the significance of these songs for the project of building a secular, non-communal, and progressive society. Some group members were Baul musicians, and other artists had added 'Baul' to their name, although they performed a wide range of music genres. Posters of Abdul Karim, Lalon Shah, and Rabindranath Tagore often decorated the cultural activists' rehearsal and private spaces.

Earlier, I cited the case of Shujon Anindyo, who told me that Baul songs—specifically those of Lalon Shah—had transformed his understanding of self and society, and had prompted him to embark on the journey to becoming an atheist and non-believer. This was not just a cognitive process; Shujon and many other cultural activists also attributed much significance to the transformative and affective power of *listening* to Baul songs and related music genres (such as songs by Rabindranath Tagore or Kazi Nazrul). Indeed, many traced their engagement with theatre to an initial exposure to such songs. As Hirschkind states, 'the contribution of this aural media [...] lies not simply in its capacity to disseminate ideas or instil religious ideologies but in its effect on the human sensorium, on the affects, sensibilities, and perceptual habits of its vast audience'.⁵³ Yet, Shujon did not oppose the affective to the cognitive or intellectual.

⁴⁷Urban 'The politics of madness', p. 27.

⁴⁸Das, 'New publications on Bengali syncretistic religions', p. 249.

⁴⁹Openshaw, 'Inner self, outer individual', p. 185.

⁵⁰Das, 'Problematic aspects of the sexual rituals of the Bauls of Bengal'; Das, 'New publications on Bengali syncretistic religions'.

⁵¹See Das, 'Problematic aspects of the sexual rituals of the Bauls of Bengal', p. 422.

⁵²Urban 'The politics of madness', pp. 38–39.

⁵³Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape*, p. 2; see also Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

While listening to this music was seen to initiate a personal transformation through slow-moving change, it was also a person's active cultivation of these genres, their openness to debate, and ethical striving that made it a desirable secular activity and delimited it from consuming mere art. For Shujon, Lalon songs were the initiator of a change that happened in his life and a process through which he came to renounce his belief in God—notwithstanding the fact that the lyrics are full of devotional and religious vocabulary. Listening to Lalon songs was not about becoming a Baul or adhering to a set of ideological principles, but about cultivating a sense of striving and a disposition that consequently transformed his own convictions and perspectives.

It was not only the music but also the lifestyle and practices of Bauls—imagined as lonely wanderers, equipped with only simple clothing and an *ektārā* (a one-stringed music instrument) and committed to the promotion of fundamental equality, renouncers free of social responsibilities and status considerations—that strongly resonated with the cultural activists' ideal of a 'pure' commitment to secularism. That other social groups, especially pious reform-oriented Muslims, saw the Bauls' many boundary-crossing practices as highly problematic, only served to reinforce the image that the idealistic Bauls possess an uncompromising commitment to their own convictions. However, activists were often ruefully aware of the disparity between their own lives and such ideals. For most of my interlocutors, such idealistic practices and lifestyles were unattainable, as they had to act appropriately as a wife, a father, a student, an employee, etc. Nevertheless, engaging with Bauls and their music allowed them to cultivate the ideals that they considered the tradition to embody.

Because it was rarely clearly defined who a Baul was and what a Baul stood for, unless one was not directly questioned by an anthropologist, the positionality of cultural activists towards different religious traditions or symbols was highly heterogeneous and contested. Actively engaging with and embracing the idea of the Baul figure and Baul songs were seen as a means to contribute to the cultivation of secularism in itself but, once again, the nature of this secularity remained elusive.

The communal logic of non-communalism

Despite its association with folk culture and the Bengali village, Baul music also has broad appeal in contemporary Bangladesh. The Bengal Cultural Festival 2017 in Sylhet, which targets a wider middle-class audience, staged performances of globally renowned Bauls, such as Parvathy Baul or Baul Shafi Mandal. At this festival, Ismail criticized one of the Baul performances for its overt use of Islamic vocabulary. He was particularly upset about the prominent use of the word 'Allah' in the text, arguing that this was against the very idea of Baul philosophy. In his view, Bauls should use a neutral word for the divine, such as '*īsbār*' or '*khadā*', rather than a partisan word like 'Allah', which appeared to refer exclusively to the god of Muslims. Few cultural activists, however, agreed with him. Instead, they thought he was overreacting, taking himself too seriously, and accused him of being anti-religious, arguing that devotional songs had always been a Baul song genre and the word 'Allah', if used by a Baul, does not need to be read in a communal sense. The tensions that emerged at the festival are not just about different tastes in Baul performances but reflect divergent understandings of how Bauls relate to secularity, or rather to what kind of secularity they symbolize. Such controversies emerged regularly as a result of the elusive politics that



Figure 1. A self-designed wallpaper that decorates the room of atheist and cultural activist Shishir Baul in Sylhet and summarizes his secularist stance through the slogan 'I am not against religion—Religion is anti-me'. *Source:* The author.

allow for a diversity of imaginations of the adequate role of religion and specific religious traditions in the envisioned secular society. Beyond this, the incident illustrates that Bengali culture is not a neutral ground upon which the fight for the secular takes place; rather, its properties and material histories shape the possibilities and dynamics of secularist politics.

Like his comment on the Baul performance, Ismail's open criticism was often challenged as being anti-religious. Many people, even secularists, disapprove of open criticism of religion, which they see as indicating a lack of respect for other people's religious sensibilities. This is why Ismail was widely considered to hold views that were too 'radical', to 'speak too much', and to be immaturely transgressive in his outspokenness. Ismail's comments were not always welcomed, at times not even by outspoken secularists. Although some activists agreed with his points, they often were uneasy with his open anti-religiosity.

One of the most avowed atheists among my interlocutors, Shishir Baul, had even enshrined that motto as a slogan in his self-designed wallpaper (see [Figure 1](#)). He explained that although he was an atheist, it was important to him to respect religion and religiosity. This was not just lip-service. Indeed, many who self-identified as atheists or as non-practising, including Shishir Baul or Shujon Anindya, invited me to join them at religious festivals such as *urs* (death anniversaries of Sufi saints), Hindu or Buddhist events, and Muslim iftar parties. Enthusiastically attending such events enacted secularism as non-communalism, with emphatic respect for religious pluralism and trans-communal conviviality. At the same time, Shishir's wallpaper

counters common accusations that cultural activism is anti-religious and against Islam. The second part of the statement—‘Religion is anti-me’—indicates some of the complications that structure positioning towards secularism and religion. Although ‘religion’ is repeated in the slogan, it is used in two different senses: the first usage refers to religion as an abstraction, the second to specific religious traditions, namely those that are (seen as) contrary to cultural activism, communism, atheism, and other parts of his lifestyle. Thus, while many atheists emphasize their strong commitment to a secularism that is respectful of ‘religion’ *as such*, they also critically engage with specific religious traditions, especially reformist Sunni Islam. This tension, however, also complicates cultural activists’ non-communal and ethical striving and efforts to keep their hands clean. Ironically, many of the cultural genres that are seen as promoting non-communalism do not relate to Islamic and Hindu traditions in the same way, making them vulnerable to accusations of being anti-Islamic rather than secular. To explore this further, let us return to Ismail, looking at his reflections on his criticism of religion and the usage of religious signifiers among cultural activists.

In the beginning, Ismail explained to me, he felt that writing about other people’s religions was wrong, and that is why he originally limited his criticism to Islam. Yet, he gradually became convinced that religion itself was problematic. Furthermore, he emphasized that it was important to address the biases of cultural activists. He made his point by discussing the case of a well-known *ganasaṅgīt* (leftish activist songs) singer in Sylhet. ‘He says that he is not believing but suddenly he wears a *tāgā* [a coloured wrist band worn by Hindus] ... I think it is quite frightening to see this ... suppose if I went to the auditorium wearing a *ṭupi* [prayer cap],⁵⁴ then everyone will look at me strangely. They will ask, what is happening? [...] Even I am involved in the conflict between Muslims and Hindus.’

With this example, Ismail points to the issue that, although there is not much difference in terms of his and the folk singer’s non-religious convictions, their affiliation by birth nevertheless differentiates them today. The bodily markers of such affiliation have different degrees of affinity and (in)commensurability with cultural activities and aesthetics. Namely, Muslim markers are less suitable for cultural activists’ attire than Hindu ones. Indeed, even cultural genres and aesthetics are not neutral with regard to different religious traditions. Most prominently, using musical instruments to accompany songs has a different relationship in Hindu traditions and Sufism than some other Islamic traditions. Thus, while Hindu children are encouraged to engage in ‘cultural’ activities, such as taking classes in classical music and the harmonium, Muslims risk criticism and questions regarding their religious commitment if they do so. Consequently, some Muslims do not pursue cultural activities or hide them from their parents. Sadat Hossain’s experience is a striking example. He became involved in theatre as a youth while still attending an Alia madrasa and living with his landowning extended Muslim family in rural Sri Mongol. Expecting that his parents would not allow him to engage in ‘such activities’, he kept them secret from both his family and other madrasa students. On rehearsal days he pretended to go to bed early, only to slip out through his window, cycle the long route to the city, and return secretly late

⁵⁴Arabic: *ṭāqīyah*. It is widely assumed for Muslims that wearing this hat is *mustahabb* (recommended). In Bangladesh, a *ṭupi* is often worn by elderly people, the pious, after the death of a close relative, and during prayers.

at night. Even now, roughly 15 years later, having attained his master's degree at one of Sylhet's private universities and become a businessman, he still hides his theatre activities from his parents.

Even if their immediate family is sympathetic, people perceived to be Muslim are nevertheless subjected to other people's criticism and comments. For example, one theatre activist was unable to extend his lease on two different flats: the owners deemed him an inappropriate tenant because he was a Muslim who also engaged in *gān-bājnā* (lit. song and instrumental music).

Due to these configurations, people born into Muslim and Hindu families have diverging experiences of becoming involved in theatre and understandings of what cultural activism and 'breaking with the past' entail. Communal belonging is highly significant in South Asia, and it has been argued that this is the case because Muslims and Hindus are conceptualized as being 'essentially different'.⁵⁵ Yet, even those who are committed to non-communalism—who reject such essential difference—cannot escape the effects of their communal belonging. The manner in which activists engage in secular struggle have different relationships to religious dogmas, aesthetic practices, or rituals that have become hegemonic in their respective communal groups. Practising cultural genres associated with cultural activism was arguably a more radical, transgressive, and secular act for those who have to constantly defend themselves against criticisms that their activities are immoral and against Islam. The practice of non-communalism thus followed a communalized logic.

Obviously, and as various interlocutors told me, there is no incompatibility between Islam and cultural activities as such. Rather, this relationship is, as it is elsewhere,⁵⁶ complicated, contested, and continuously renegotiated. Certain Islamic melodic genres, such as *nāt* (na'at; praise of the Prophet) and *hāmd* (praise of Allah), are integral to pious and ritual practices widely practised in Bangladesh and among the Bengali diaspora, especially during the South Asian sermon congregations *milād māhfils*.⁵⁷ Furthermore, some Bengali genres such as *jāri gān*⁵⁸ or *murśidī gān*⁵⁹ focus explicitly on Islamic themes. Moreover, devotional practices related to shrines and Sufism

⁵⁵Fernande Pool, 'The ethical life of Muslims in secular India: Islamic reformism in West Bengal', PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016.

⁵⁶See Patrick Eisenlohr, 'As Makkah is sweet and beloved, so is Medina: Islam, devotional genres, and electronic mediation in Mauritius', *American Ethnologists*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2006, pp. 230–245; Pierre Hecker, *Turkish metal: Music, meaning, and morality in a Muslim society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Dominik Müller, 'Islamic politics and popular culture in Malaysia: Negotiating normative change between shariah law and electric guitars', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 43, no. 127, 2015, pp. 318–344.

⁵⁷See Samia Huq, 'Women's religious discussion circles in urban Bangladesh: Enacting, negotiating and contesting piety', PhD thesis, Brandeis University, 2011; José Mapril, 'A Shahid Minar in Lisbon: Long distance nationalism, politics of memory and community among Luso-Bangladeshis', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 9, 2014.

⁵⁸*Jāri* derives from the Persian word 'zari' and means lamentation. *Jāri gān* are performed especially on the occasion of Muharram. The song dramatically and rhythmically retells various stories relating to the history of Islam and the tragic story of Karbala. They also sometimes take on a dialogical form and focus on contentious issues around Islam. The songs are mostly accompanied by instruments such as the *ektara*, *harmonium*, *dotara*, or *sarinda*. See Syed Jamil Ahmed, *In praise of Niraijan: Islam, theatre and Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Pathak Shamabesh, 2001).

⁵⁹A devotional song genre associated with Sufism, often praising the *murśidī* or *pīr* or speaking about divine love.

are commonly associated with practices such as *zīkr* (commemoration of God), *sāmā* (Sufi auditions), *qawwali* (Bg.: *kāōyāli*, Islamic Sufi devotional music), *ghazal* (Bg.: *gajal*, devotional and love songs) as well as with Baul or other kinds of songs (*gān*).⁶⁰ More reformist (Salafist, Wahhabi) Islamic traditions often contest such Sufi practices, especially their use of music,⁶¹ as well as Baul traditions. However, despite such rhetorical contrasting, these traditions should not be too hastily opposed. Max Stille has shown that the Islamic sermon congregation *waz' mahfil*, specifically their patterns of melodic narration and musical-affective mobilization, share many similarities with Bengali and South Asian forms of storytelling.⁶² Accordingly, *waz' mahfils*, including those of 'conservative' groups such as the Hefazat-e-Islam, might even draw on the melodies of 'secular music' such as a *jāgaraṇer gān* ('awakening song' standing in a politically left tradition) and utilize their affective potential.⁶³

Moreover, in Bangladesh it is not unusual for middle-class Sunni Muslim families to enrol their children in extra-curricular classes on both the Quran, in a *maktab* (Islamic school) or with a private tutor, and on Bengali traditional music such as *rabīndrasaṅgīt* (the songs of Rabindranath Tagore), in an art school, or with a private tutor. Indeed, Samia Huq describes how women in the Dhaka-based Quran reading groups struggled in their pious pursuit to 'unlearn' the songs (*gān, saṅgīt*) they had learnt as children because they considered this to be a 'requisite to becoming a good Muslim'.⁶⁴ They 'conceptualize music as an unnecessary evil due to its ability to arouse sexual, romantic emotions,⁶⁵ which is seen to contradict their aim to cultivate 'an Islamic disposition'.⁶⁶ Notably, Huq highlights that her pious interlocutors actively disengaged from specific song genres, namely those of Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam, precisely because they were considered progressive and secular. Similarly, Islamist leaders and groups such as the Islami Shashontantra Andolon (Islamic Constitutional Movement) condemn cultural activism not only as *dharmahīn* (religionless, blasphemous) but also, ironically, as responsible for Hinduizing society.

Ismail complained vocally about the relative marginalization of Islamic symbols in contrast to Hindu signifiers among the cultural activists. For instance, cultural activists commonly use elements associated with Hindu ritual practices, such as *ālpanā* (floor paintings) or *maṅgal pradīp* (lamps), at their events because they consider them to be part of Bengali culture. By contrast, Sunni Islamic symbols are rare. Here, the term 'non-Islamious' is useful for understanding why staunch non-communalists have such differentiated reactions towards religious signifiers. Reza Gholami defines non-Islamiosity as a *mode of the secular* that directs 'its eradictive impetus (its secular

⁶⁰See Ahmed, *In praise of Nirañjan*; Hans Harder, *Sufism and saint veneration in contemporary Bangladesh. The Majibhandaris of Chittagong* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁶¹See Harder, *Sufism*, pp. 179–183; Max Stille, *Islamic sermons and public piety in Bangladesh: The poetics of popular preaching* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020).

⁶²Stille, *Islamic sermons*; Max Stille, 'Conceptualizing compassion in communication for communication. Emotional experience in Islamic sermons (Bengali wa 'z mahfils)', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, pp. 81–106.

⁶³Stille, 'Conceptualizing compassion', p. 299.

⁶⁴Samia Huq, 'Piety, music and gender transformation: Reconfiguring women as culture bearing markers of modernity and nationalism in Bangladesh', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2011, p. 225.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 235.

power) not at “religion” but at “Islam”—and Islam alone.⁶⁷ However, cultural activists in Sylhet repeatedly emphasize that they are not against Islam per se but only *certain* forms and interpretations of Islam. Thus, although they emphasize that they are not anti-religious, their aesthetic practices treat certain forms of religiosity, namely Baul and shrine-based Sufi practices as well as ‘moderate’ Hinduism, as compatible with secularism, thereby creating Sunni Islam as a significant Other. Thus, although my interlocutors are not anti-Islamic in their rhetoric, their secular activism has an implicit non-Islamic aesthetic that makes them vulnerable to accusations of being anti-Islamic or even of promoting Hinduism and to conflicts among themselves about the appropriate role of religious signifiers.

Discussing *Dirty Hands* (not) at home

A few days after the conflict around the *śākhā*, I visited Rajosri and Aisha Karmakar at their home. Rajosri is known for his strong commitment to secularism and has long been active in protests and on social media on these issues. During the contentious period after 2013, he went into extended periods of hiding to avoid being attacked by Islamists. He has become more careful about what he posts and writes but sent me several pages of his so far un-posted texts and poems, believing that ‘society is not yet ready for them’. Here is one:

dharma bokār kāche satya	Religion is true for the fools,
ñānīr kāche mithya	false for the wise,
ār śāskera kāche upakāri astra.	and a useful weapon for the ruler.

His texts explicitly communicate his stance as a non-practising sceptic, his rejection of superstitious beliefs, and opposition to the political misuse of religion. Many are radical, even aggressive, in tone. During the conflict after the rehearsal, however, he took a moderate position. While he seemed to partially agree with Ismail and Chanda, he also tried to protect his wife, Aishi.

During my visit, Aishi told me about her preparations for the Hindu ritual, Teej. When I expressed my interest in this ritual, she vividly explained how it was intended to ensure the husband’s well-being and happiness in their conjugal life. Listening to his wife’s enthusiastic explanations, however, Rajosri seemed uneasy. Later, when he walked me to the CNG (vehicle) I was taking home, he emphasized that he had a different perspective on such rituals than his wife. He said that he did not subscribe to any of the ‘superstitious beliefs’ surrounding the ritual, but that he nevertheless understands its significance for Aishi, especially given her status as a new bride. Similarly, when I asked him about the incident with the bangles, he told me that he agreed with Ismail and Chanda in principle but thought that they were using the wrong strategy. In his view, the incident was an issue of age and gender. Aishi had just started with theatre, he said, seemingly in defence of his wife’s ‘backward’ perspective. ‘She is still young. With time, she will learn and understand things. This needs time.’ He further explained that being from a musical family and thus talented in singing, she had learnt to be an artist (*silpi*) but had never seriously engaged in cultural activism. Thus, she still lacked the adequate mindset.

⁶⁷Gholami, *Secularism and identity*, p. 6.

One of the most common complaints I heard from cultural activists concerned the ‘hypocrisy’ of those theatre group members who fight for secular principles but ‘are not secular themselves’. This critique reflects the view that the cultural domain and theatre are purer and more idealistic, and are thus distinctive endeavours in a society compromised by pragmatic and often selfish considerations. Such complaints thus feed into contested moral discourses about how one should position oneself, and how this position affects the possibilities for changing society. The strong commitment to the ideals of innocence embodied in Sartre’s protagonist Hugo was thereby accompanied by widespread disillusionment about the impossibility of realizing them. Even activists who were wholeheartedly committed to cultural activism could face criticism for not being able to live up to their own standards in other realms, especially at home.

Rajosri’s actions revealed crucial aspects of the structures that shape such ambiguities and partial positionings towards secularism and religion. First, conceptualizing secularism and non-religiosity as progressive allowed Rajosri to reconcile his strong commitment to critiquing religion and pursuing his secular project with engaging in religious rituals with his wife, whose lack of an ‘adequate mindset’ he sees as temporary. Second, he rationalized that participating in religious rituals avoided hurting his wife’s religious sensibilities. This was a common strategy among my secular interlocutors, allowing them to avoid conflicts with close relatives while also remaining consistent with their secular or atheist conviction not to disrespect the religious practices of others, at least those who are not fanatical or ultra-conservative. Third, the way that Rajosri talked about his wife, and also his mother, revealed that commitment to secularism and atheism in Bangladesh is strongly entangled with gendered regimes that, as elsewhere,⁶⁸ ‘distribute the burden of embodying the ex-centricity of secular difference unequally between men and women’.⁶⁹ Most significantly for this discussion, Rajosri, despite his strong commitment to secularism and critical engagement with religion, felt that an overtly confrontational stance was not conducive to bringing about societal change.

The committed ethical self and tiptoeing around secularism

HOEDERER: Nonsense! You wanted to prove that you were capable of acting and you chose the hard way, as if you wanted to gather up credit in heaven; that’s youth. You didn’t succeed. Well, what of that? There’s nothing to prove, you know, and the revolution’s not a question of virtue but of effectiveness. There is no heaven. There’s work to be done, that’s all. And you must do what you’re cut out for; all the better if it comes easy to you. The best work is not the work that takes the most sacrifices. It’s the work in which you can best succeed. (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Dirty Hands*, 1948)

In his ethnography of the atheist movement in South India, Stefan Binder argues that his interlocutors’ understandings of atheism as a mental revolution are based on a

⁶⁸In many atheist and humanist groups, the majority of members are male. See, for example, Susanne Kind, ‘Contested humanist identities in Sweden’, in *The diversity of nonreligion. Normativities and contested relations*, (eds) Johannes Quack, Cora Schuh and Susanne Kind (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 41. For an instructive discussion of the gendered dynamics of atheism, see Binder, *Total atheism*.

⁶⁹Binder, *Total atheism*, p. 34.

moral ideal and conceptual grammar of ‘practical sincerity’.⁷⁰ He calls this form of activism ‘total atheism’ because it can be characterized by a ‘moral ideal of matching words with deeds, of putting ideological commitments into practice by totalizing them’,⁷¹ an ethical project which is doomed to failure but is nevertheless continuously reconstructed. Similarly, my interlocutors subject their ethical struggles to a ‘continuous hermeneutics of insincerity’.⁷² They consider ‘cultural activism’ to be an ethical endeavour that they contrast with dirtier or more corrupting fields such as (party) politics, economics, religion, or the search for personal gain. However, in contrast to Binder’s interlocutors, mine define their activism and ethical striving at least partially through its media and aesthetic forms, not through explicit sociopolitical aims or a coherent ideology. While this is partially the result of the sensitivity surrounding secularism in Bangladesh, this kind of elusive politics produces its own tensions. The ‘culture’ of cultural activism is simultaneously a leisure activity and aesthetic preference for some, and a political tool used to fight for a more secular society for others. Moreover, this culture does not provide a neutral or detached stance for secular engagement because the specific aesthetic forms and cultural genres are themselves part of the wider social contestations around the secular in Bangladesh. Due to the aesthetic practices in which they engage, cultural activists are accused of being anti-religious and anti-Islam.

Thus, despite their passionate, idealistic commitment to striving for the secular with ‘pure hands’ and ‘practical sincerity’, activists like Ismail, Chanda, Rajosri, or Shujon often feel unable to openly state the object of their struggle. Instead, they index secularism indirectly through allusion to and engagement with certain aesthetic forms that allow for a wide range of interpretations, affects, and imaginations. Due to such a ‘tiptoeing’ around secularism, the goal of struggle remains elusive, leading not only to intense controversies about what cultural activism means, how it should be enacted, and what its relation to non-religion or atheism should be, but also constant ethical tensions among cultural activists themselves. Nevertheless, cultural activism and its aesthetics provide the possibilities for a highly affective engagement in the project of social change, a constant striving for the secular, and a strong sense of shared sociality resulting in a continued association of the secular and Bengali culture.

Acknowledgements. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 817959). I would like to thank Jovan Maud for his thorough editing of this article as well as Jason Cons, Ursula Rao, the participants of the South Asia Workshop at the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology in Halle, and the two anonymous reviewers of *Modern Asian Studies* for their helpful comments.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 231.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 232.

⁷²Ibid.

Cite this article: Schulz, Mascha. 2024. ‘Singing songs for a secular society? The elusive politics of cultural activism in contemporary Bangladesh’. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X24000210>