



*Patronage and Salvation
in South Asian BMBs:
A socio-anthropological approach*

Abstract

In Bangladesh there are two deeply held perceptions which are strong influences within the stories of people. The first is that of seeing oneself linked with others in a living and dynamic way (a "collectivist" worldview), and the second sees the world as hierarchically organised, with particular roles for leaders in this hierarchy. These then form two vital parts of the dynamic of the patron-client relationship, which is a predominant element in relationships in South Asia. It's in this milieu that concepts of relating to prophets, reconciliation and salvation are worked out, both in the Islamic setting and in that of believers from a Muslim background.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ What follows is a reworking of my chapter in *Longing for Community*: Colin Chapman, "Patronage, Salvation, and Being Joined with Jesus: Socio-anthropological Insights from South Asia", in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?*, ed. David Greenlee (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013).

My Self Is Not An Individual

Those of us who are predominantly influenced by philosophical modernity (i.e. “Westerners”) are strongly individualistic. As well as being the core of much of our philosophy, Descartes’ maxim “I think, therefore I am,” also describes how central the individual is to a Western outlook. The individual is seen as the core building block in society. For example, psychology often focuses on self-actualization. Indeed, my English thesaurus lists over seventy-five phrases and words revolving round the word ‘self’ (e.g. self-made; self-assured etc.), and these are usually seen in a mainly positive light (e.g. it’s generally a good thing to be described as a self-made person). This centrality of the individual is indeed one of the markers of Western society.

This, however, is a far cry from how society, and components of community, are seen in South Asia. The identity of people here is much more bound up in being in group. “Who is your family? What social position do they hold? Are you older or younger?” are all key questions. Group belonging defines who you are and the group is seen as the core building block in society. Just as Jesus was defined by being from Nazareth (as is Saul of Tarsus), with all the connotations associated with that, so one’s place of origin is seen as part of identity. The two African sayings: “You are, therefore I am” and “We are, therefore I am”⁹⁹ accurately reflect the way communities are perceived in South Asia.

People in South Asia have an ontological sense of interconnectedness which affects how they think and interact, and this is embraced right at the level of being. To

⁹⁹ G. Mdimi Mhogolo, “A Vision of Full Humanity: An African Perspective,” *Transformation* 15, no. 1 (Jan 1998): 6-10.

truly know someone, you must know with whom they are linked. If I know your family are tradesmen, that you are the oldest son, and that you come from a village called Islampur, then I know a lot about who you are as a person. If you are the youngest daughter of a doctor from Dhaka, then I know what I need to know about you are as a person. Your setting is what defines you as a person.

This is not to say that people here see themselves set in a broad, universalistic connectedness. Their connectedness is usually curtailed to that of being in a small group of belonging, or limited set of groups that interlink. Those who are outside of those groups are then often viewed with negativity and suspicion.

Cross-cultural psychology usefully describes societies in terms of individualism and collectivism.¹⁰⁰ Collectivist outlooks tend to see the person as set in a group (e.g. family or religious identity) and that people find their core sense of identity in the group. Societies where collectivism is strong tend to look to external norms for regulating behaviour, with honour and shame being key factors in control of behaviour. Therefore, leaders are key centring people seen as exemplifying the group's ethos, leading to a marked personalisation of authority where power and authority are seen as embodied by a person rather than an impersonal code.

Hierarchy

Related to individualism and collectivism is the issue as to how vertical (hierarchical) or egalitarian (horizontal) a society tends to be. A vertical society expects a ranked order

¹⁰⁰ For a good introduction to these issues see Jerome H. Neyrey ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksons, 1991) (especially chapters two and three; 25-96), and for a fuller, more nuanced approach see Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism & Collectivism*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995) and the descriptions of horizontal and vertical collectivism.

of people with some at the top and others at the bottom, each with different levels of access to resources and power. This is seen as natural and often God-ordained, and to tamper with this is to go against the will of God. The now expunged verse from an old hymn says “The rich man in his castle; the poor man at his gate; God has made them high and lowly; he has ordered their estate,” sums how this setting is often seen as God ordained and not to be challenged.

Putting these two sets of concepts together we find societies tending to vertical individualism, vertical collectivism, horizontal individualism, or horizontal collectivism.¹⁰¹ South Asian countries have a strong tendency to vertical collectivism. In cultures that are predominantly vertical collectivist, the concept of connection is definitely not egalitarian and society here is unquestioningly hierarchical. The title of Dumont's book, *Homo Hierarchicus*¹⁰² is both alliterative and deeply descriptive of societies in South Asia which are profoundly affected by views on status, honour and prestige, all bound up in a highly developed sense of hierarchy in an interlinking and collectivist society.

Taking cues from others, how people value and rank each other (honour or shame) therefore becomes a matter of extreme importance. Honour is the warp and woof of life in this setting, such that Abecassis describes how even in poverty stricken areas “the most important social goal after survival [is] the maintenance or improvement of status.”¹⁰³ Indeed, honour and shame seem to be the two most

¹⁰¹ Triandis, *Individualism & Collectivism* is a good introduction to this.

¹⁰² Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and its Implications*, revised English edition. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980)

¹⁰³ David Abecassis, *Identity, Islam and Human Development in Rural Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press, 1990), 38.

important dynamics in most decision making processes. It's important to note that many different factors go into honour ranking. The eldest brother has a special role in the family, and girls are often worth a lot less than boys. Years of experience, age and date of qualification are important in a working environment, with these things being more highly considered than a person's skills and ability. Wearing burqa is a symbol of status as only the richer classes can afford to sequester their women, and it also denotes purity and piety, both important value markers. All these markers are used in assessing relative status and position as people meet and relate to each other.

Leadership: Hierarchy And Linkage

The two themes within vertical collectivism (i.e. hierarchy and interpersonal linkage) find a focus in leadership. My leader is seen as someone representing me and someone with whom I am linked. His victory is my joy (and yes, leadership is usually male). His shame is my shame. Furthermore, in return, my behaviour reflects on him personally. If I fall, I bring shame on the group and on my leader, and in matters of purity and pollution women have specific responsibility to preserve and protect the groups honour. The proverb that "women wear shame like jewellery" highlights the importance of this responsibility.

It is hard to over-stress the importance of the role of a leader here and the sense of connectedness with him. He is the focus of many hopes, ambitions, and dreams of advancement. He gives me identity, for I am his person. To be linked with the right leader is to find a path to provision and benefits, which are often rare commodities in South Asia. A good leader will help provide loans, resources, and good political connections. A follower invests an enormous amount into the person that they follow, and loyalty to superiors is seen as a key value in this society. Loyalty is the

expression of my connectedness, and the word for ‘obey’ in the language here is actually the word ‘to honour.’

Patronage

The patron-client relationship is the dominant form of relationship in South Asia. Patronage, and the patron-client model, is a description developed by outsiders¹⁰⁴ trying to understand the dynamic, and it’s usually set in a political or economic framework. It therefore needs careful application in a different setting, but it is a model that can be helpful. The crux of the patron-client model is that of a hierarchical and personal bond between the patron and the client, rooted in an unequal distribution of resources and which facilitates an exchange of differing kinds of resources. The patron offers access to scarce resources (e.g. goods, protection, influence, employment, fertility, spiritual experience) that may be economic, political, or spiritual. Ideally the patron is supposed to act as a father-figure acting with favouritism, faithfulness, and loyalty, kindly providing for clients that which they don’t have access to. The client on the other hand, offers thanks and honour to the patron, avoiding situations that may dishonour him, working to increase his reputation, providing service when requested (rent-a-crowd, labour etc.), acting with loyalty and faithfulness. The word ‘gratitude’ sums up the ideal client response.

¹⁰⁴ S.N. Eisenstadt and Louis Roniger, “Patron-Client Relationships as a Model of Structuring Social Exchange” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 no 1 (1980): 42-47.
This is one of the touchstone papers on patronage.

The Broker

In South Asia there are multiple extended networks, and so there is a role for an additional middle-man, a broker, who uses his or her relationship with the patron and with the client to facilitate their relationship. Ideally the broker is related to the patron and mediates the exchange between client and broker. A person can simultaneously be a patron to a client, a broker between other clients and a more powerful patron, and a client to a patron. This position is one where the broker continually works on networking and bolstering the relationships needed in order to be trusted by all concerned. This person has a large of networks and a phone full of contacts. One friend, the nephew of a politician, didn't have a job but made his way through life brokering connections and deals.

The Sufi Saint As Patron

The *pir-murid*¹⁰⁵ relationship of Sufism is a prime example of patronage and Abecassis describes the *pir's* role as that of being an "Arch Patron."¹⁰⁶ The *pir* is a leader of a Sufi order or *tariqa* and is followed with extraordinary loyalty and devotion. We are used to Catholic orders such as the Franciscans (following the rule of St Francis and a hierarchy of leadership) and the Jesuits (following the rule of St Ignatius), and Sufi orders are similar (e.g. *Chistiya*, *Naqsbandhiya*, *Muhammadiya*). In Bangladesh about five to ten percent of people are active disciples in one of the different Sufi orders, but

¹⁰⁵ A *pir* is a Sufi leader and the *murid* is the disciple.

¹⁰⁶ Abecassis, *Identity*, 29.

over half of people would go to a Sufi event or practise each year. Sufism is very influential and widely accepted.

Sufism follows the mystical way of drawing close to, and experiencing, the divine. A Sufi *tariqa* has usually been set up by a founding saint, and then his mantle is passed to a new *pir* down through the generations. The *pir* acts as a guide along the way of mysticism and experience, but also, in many ways, embodies the way the centre of devotion. The *pir* fulfils the dual role of broker-patron, whereby he has direct access to resources that only a limited few can access and is brokering those on behalf of the more distant and unapproachable patron (Allah), or series of patrons (e.g. previous *pirs* to Muhammad through to Allah) to his followers. The links between my *pir* and previous *pirs* of the *tariqa* are seen as living and embedded in relationship with Muhammad and in his relationship with Allah.

The relationship with your *pir* is known to be of key importance and therefore not entered in to lightly. “You need to choose your *pir* carefully, because once you follow him you will be so in love with him that you will be blind to any faults that may be there. So make sure you chose a good one right from the start.” This advice was given to me by a friend who was part of a Sufi *tariqa* and shows the depth of devotion and engagement he has with his *pir*. For him, his *pir* is without fault and worthy of deep devotion, convinced that there is no flaw nor weakness in him.

The *pir*, with his faultlessness and holiness, facilitates two main resources. The first are the blessings (*barakha*), protection and provision of Allah and second is the path to relationship with Allah. The blessings and provision of Allah include things like health, children, wealth and flourishing, exam success, good luck, employment, and victory over adversaries. A relational experience with Allah is more about direct spiritual experience and being connected with Allah, lost in his love. Here the aim is to

experience the spiritual and be in union with the divine. The notion of *fana* (obliteration or dissolving into) aims at having the connection become so deep and so overwhelming that one's very self is lost in the greatness of the other. So like salt is dissolved in water, or wood is consumed in a fire, so I am lost and subsumed into the greatness of the other. This is intimately linked to the person of the *pir*, with focus and devotion on him leading to *fana-fi-pir* (loss of self in the *pir*) which is the first stage to *fana-fi-Allah* (loss of self in Allah). The path to union with the divine is through union with my *pir*.

The *pir-murid* bond is therefore an intensely personal one with faith, loyalty and obedience being major factors. The *murid* (disciple) is intricately linked to their *pir* and focused on them in a relationship where faith is a major constituent. I am faithful to my *pir* and trust that they will faithfully care for me and guide me. I aim to focus on my *pir* so that I become like them and reflect their character to their glory. In practise it is a relationship revolving around reciprocity within a vast inequality in honour and closeness to Allah. Herein the *pir* dispenses access to scarce resources and the *murid* can only respond with gratitude and due honour and service to the *pir*. The very essence of this relationship is patronage distilled and purified in form.

So, What Is Salvation In This Setting?

A conversation with a Muslim friend sharpened the meaning of salvation for me in relation to these worldview themes. I asked him for his views of salvation. This is his reply in full.

"Ah, well you see, there's what we're taught and what we know."

Somewhat bemused I asked, "And these are different?" "Oh yes" he said.

"Let me explain."

“You see they teach us that on the last day we all stand on the field of judgment before Allah. Then we are each judged with our good deeds on one side of the scales and our bad deeds on the other. If the good deeds outweigh the bad, then we’re allowed into heaven. If our bad deeds outweigh the good, then we go to hell. Maybe for just a while, but most people will stay there. That’s what we’re taught. But no one believes that.” [He paused for effect, which was real for he was throwing out all that I thought was standard Islamic theology. Somewhat non-plussed I asked, “What do they believe then?”]

“Well, you see, it’s like this. On the last day we all stand on the field of judgment before Allah. Allah speaks and says ‘But before we begin. Muhammad. Come. Come here. This isn’t for you. Come stand beside me.’ So Muhammad goes and stands beside Allah. When he gets there, he turns and says ‘That’s my brother. Come brother. That’s my cousin, come! He’s mine, she’s mine and he’s mine.’ Muhammad calls out all those that are his. They then enter into heaven, and after that judgment for the rest starts.”

My friend belongs to a Sufi *tariqa*,⁴ follows a *pir* and has a fairly broad theology which he elaborated on.

“Not only will Muhammad be called out, but all the holy men of history will be called out and they will then call to themselves all their people. My pir will be called too, and because I am in him¹⁰⁷ I will be saved.”

I sat there for a while, stunned at his turn of phrase, and then said. “You know, I believe almost exactly the same thing.” Now it was his turn to be somewhat surprised. I continued “but there is only one person that any of the holy books or scriptures call holy. Only one.” Slowly, almost painfully, he agreed “Yes. That’s the question really, isn’t it?”

This story of salvation through Muhammad via connection with a *pir* is, I believe, a defining story in understanding dynamics here. I asked my contacts if they had heard it. Almost all say “Yes” and most cheerfully admit to believing it. Most of my friends who are now followers of Jesus say that they used to believe this. “How else could we be saved? We’re certainly not good enough ourselves” is a common response. Most people here view, either tacitly or explicitly, their connectedness with Muhammad’s group through relationship with his leaders as the means to salvation.

There are *hadith* that are commonly told (e.g. Al Bukhari 60.15)¹⁰⁸ teaching how on the last day people will approach other prophets to ask for their intercession, but no prophet will be willing or able to do so. However, when Muhammad is asked to help, he will prostrate himself before Allah, who then will declare that He will give him what

¹⁰⁷ Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸ <https://habibur.com/hadith/bukhari/60/>

he asks for. Naturally, it's assumed that Muhammad will ask for the salvation of all his followers.

I was struck that my friend used the phrase "in him." I have not heard anyone else use the phrase "in him;" indeed, some people vigorously reject the baldness of this phrase, but many will unreservedly alter it to "I will be saved through him [Muhammad]" or "via him" or something similar. Those that focus on their *pir* use similar wording. Many of these alternative words have significant overtones of being joined to him.

How Is This Salvation Accomplished?

This view of salvation acknowledges the connectedness that we have with others. This linkage is held at an ontological level, at the level of being. I am joined with others in my group. I am joined to my leader and my prophet. Thus, people can talk about being saved through Muhammad. Allah accepts Muhammad and then all those linked with him are also included.

This sense of connectedness to a saviour then becomes central in understanding how people here are now coming to faith in *Isa al Masih*. In this hierarchical society where the status of the person you follow and to whom you give allegiance is very important, the position of *Isa* becomes the focus of reconsideration. As we now turn to the shared journey of those that have come to faith in *Isa al Masih* the point I wish to highlight is the rank that *Isa* comes to occupy.

The Station Of Jesus: Who do you say that I am?

When I ask my contacts who now follow Jesus about their journey of faith most will talk of a time when they were Muslim, seeing the Prophet Muhammad as most prestigious. They acknowledged *Isa al Masih* as a prophet among many others, but

usually with no special place; not often thought about, if at all. However, all informants then relate some experience that drew their attention to the person of *Isa al Masih*. Usually that was a piece of literature, someone talking to them about him, or a dream. This event then led them to investigate who *Isa al Masih* is.

A student studying at Master's level in a madrassa talks of picking up a piece of paper off the road which said "Jesus, the light of the world." He describes how that phrase "bit" him. It "bit into" him and he could not put it down, so he decided to investigate who *Isa* was. He naturally turned to the *Qur'an* as he understood Arabic (which is not common here), and saw things he had never noticed before.

The first step is an event that attracts their attention to *Isa al Masih* and the second step is to investigate who he is, usually looking to the *Qur'an*. There they find he is:

Kalimatullah, "Word of God."¹⁰⁹

Ruhullah, "Spirit of God."¹¹⁰

Performer of miracles.

Born of a virgin. (This is incredibly important as this makes Isa one of only two people not conceived by the immensely polluting activity of sexual union. The other one was, of course, Adam, who was disobedient.)

¹⁰⁹ Sura iv (al-Nisaa):169; Sura iii (al-Imran):40.

¹¹⁰ Sura iv (al-Nisaa):169

Holy and most pure.¹¹¹ (Other than Jesus, the Qur'an describes no-one as "most pure.")

God raised Jesus to himself.¹¹²

As they go on to other sources e.g. the *Injil* (New Testament), they see he is creator, light, powerful etc. Their search in the *Injil* vitally deepens their understanding. They find the position of *Isa* is higher in the hierarchy than they had originally thought. With each discovery they re-evaluate his position and power. Indeed, the very real question they begin to ask is that of his relative status with respect to the prophet Muhammad. In this finely tuned hierarchy, two leaders is one too many. There cannot be equals at the top level and so the question arises as to who is more important.

Almost all my informants faced this question, sometimes resolving it at time of crisis. One chap was caught in a dangerous situation and thought he was going to die. He had both the *Qur'an* and the *Injil* with him. Thinking he was about to die, he realized he faced a choice: who was the one powerful to save? He thought about it, then expecting to die, took the *Injil* and held it against his chest and prayed, "*Isa al Masih*, I know you are the Lord. I commit myself to you." Indeed, he was saved. Those who place their loyalty and faith in *Isa* are those who resolve this crisis by deciding he is the one of most honour. This premier position then means they then give allegiance to him and are joined with him, as leader and patron.

¹¹¹ Sura xix (Maryam):19-22.

¹¹² Sura iii (al-Imran):40; Sura iv (al-Nisaa):169

Death and Resurrection

A following question I asked my contacts was “*Isa al Masih* died and rose again, and is now with Allah, and we are saved. How does his death and resurrection lead to our being saved?” Before we look at their answer first let us explore the question. This question came to be shaped as it was because in most of my interviews people here rarely talk about Christ’s death in isolation. Most of my informants’ discussions concerning Christ’s death also include his resurrection, and commonly his ascension. For them, Jesus’ death is not a stand-alone event; rather it is part of a tightly knit package. It is his death, resurrection and ascension that are brought to the foreground as a unity, rather than highlighting his death as bringing about salvation.

Thus, the question was phrased “*Isa* died and rose again, and is now with Allah, and we are saved. How does his death and resurrection lead to our being saved?” In reply, there is an answer that many of my informants give in part or in whole. I have found this answer to be profound in its understanding and its simplicity. A colleague of mine put it most eloquently with an accompanying descriptive gesture.

It’s like this. I’m joined with Jesus. [Here he interlaced the fingers of both hands, both palms facing downwards. As he continued talking, he made a sweeping wave gesture with his interlinked hands, sweeping down and back up]. Jesus died and rose again. Since I’m joined with him, I am therefore dying with him and have been raised with him.

How he has used his verb tenses is also insightful. As well as talking about being linked with Jesus he described how he *was* dying, and yet *had been* raised to new life.

This is very Pauline language but very few of my colleagues have ever read Romans. Most are still reading the Gospels and have not moved on to the epistles. Yet

many talk in this manner, speaking of being linked with *Isa al Masih*. They often accompany this explanation with a hand motion (e.g. hooking their two index fingers together or holding their hands together in various ways). It is this linkage that holds them to him is his death and resurrection. *Isa* is now their patron, the one they give allegiance to and are joined with, and a faithful and loyal to. *Isa* is the top of the hierarchy, and is a true and faithful patron. They therefore see themselves in sharing in his death, new life and salvation.¹¹³

The status of *Isa* is a continual journey. My friends walk is that of a Christology from below. The way they see *Isa* often starts as viewing as a man and a prophet, but his status then grows to be healer, provider, Messiah, King and Saviour. He is the crucified and risen one and is now in heaven with Allah. And therein lies a question: is he seen as God himself, as part of the Trinity? This is certainly the trajectory of my friends' walk of faith, but it's often not the at the point when they change allegiance. I know people who have been believers for several years, following him in loyalty and facing persecution, for whom it was a slow dawning that *Isa's* high position was because he is God. This isn't obscure Trinitarian musing, but joyous understanding of the fullness of the incarnation, that he is Emmanuel (God with us), and of relationship with God Himself. Jesus is the broker-patron because his is the patron, Son of God in very being. This is a continuous learning process for us all, but especially for those whose walk is a Christology from below. This is one topic that interaction with people from other Christian traditions can help foster and grow. Jesus is Lord!

¹¹³ Cf Rom 6.3-4, 8-12.

Concluding Thoughts

The paradigm here is of a growing realization of the status of Jesus. Something attracts people's attention to Jesus, this leads them to investigate who he is, and as his status rises in their estimation so his potential as a leader is highlighted. The assumption is then that if he is of the highest honour and position then he is powerful to save. It's also assumed that in giving allegiance to him then there is a joining with him. We are linked to others but this union with the ultimate leader is a deeper thing. Thus, in being linked with him, his salvation becomes the believer's as well.

Out of this paradigm there are a couple of points I would like to draw attention to. Firstly, whilst it is true and right that theologically the point of comparison is between Jesus the living revealed Word and the *Qur'an* as the written revealed word, and this has been focused upon in missiological writing,¹¹⁴ the above paradigm highlights the need to remember the comparison between the lead prophets of honour: Who has the highest honour, Jesus or Muhammad? For, despite orthodox Muslim theology, the essence of salvation is tied up with that question for many Muslims. Missiology needs to allow for this conversation of honour in its dealings with Islam, and it is a dialogue that needs to occur at both the individual level and at community level. The missionary cannot force this as it would come across in a very confrontational way, but nor can the missionary deny this process, and often we are blind to it. Anyone

¹¹⁴ For example, Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Leicester, UK: Inter Varsity Press, 1995), 76: "It is essential for Christians to realise that the Qur'an is to Muslims what Jesus is to Christians. It is a mistake to make a direct comparison between the role of Jesus in Christianity and the role of Muhammad in Islam."

bringing the message must allow space for this comparison to occur without invoking a confrontation between 'us' and 'them.'

This view of salvation is a biblical and important one. It reflects a lot of Pauline language and highlights our need for relationship with Christ, remaining *in Christ*. However, this is not how most Westerners naturally talk about salvation. Westerners tend to use concepts of moral guilt, judgment, punishment and price paid. Penal substitution is a core element to a lot of evangelical atonement thinking, but in comparison the sense of debt and price paid, or guilt and expiation, is almost completely lacking from how my informants here express their thoughts on salvation. This is perceived as a serious flaw by many Western missionaries. Indeed, it is significant. However, I have no desire to undermine the strength of the theological position that *is* being expressed here. I have been profoundly touched with the depth of understanding of union with Christ, participation in his death and resurrection, and joy in new life that my brothers have shared with me. I have personally learned an enormous amount as I have shared in this walk with my brothers and sisters.

My hope is that people holding either viewpoint realize that we have a lot to learn from each other. We must start by recognizing the strength of the viewpoint different from ours. Cross-cultural workers can build on those strengths and move people towards a deeper walk with God. Both viewpoints also need to humbly acknowledge their blind spots (e.g. Western evangelical atonement theory can be weak in the area of stressing relationship in Christ and in the unified body of Christ; the atonement theory being expressed in South Asia can be weak on seeing moral guilt and its effects). The other dialogue partner needs to be gentle, understanding and non-judgmental.

My own walk in Christ has been deepened immensely by having my brothers and sisters share their journey with me. The believers in South Asia have valid and important things to share with the greater body of Christ. My prayer is that I have been able to speak on their behalf and that readers can share in their insights.

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