

## **Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK: some observations on socio-cultural dynamics, religious trends and transnational politics**

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### **1. Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK**

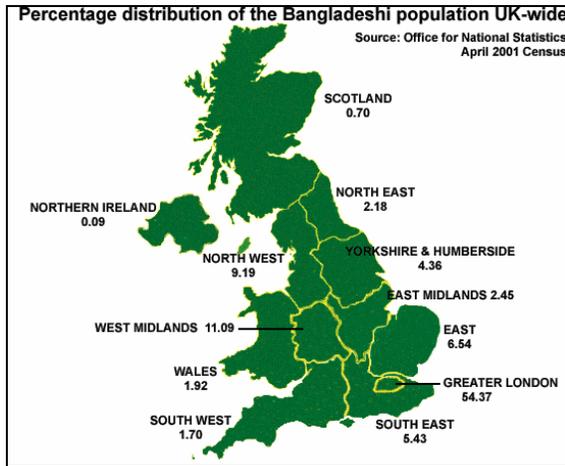
Bangladeshis in Britain are a largely young population, heavily concentrated in London's inner boroughs and experience a range of socio-economic problems. According to the most reliable national enumeration – the decennial Census – in 2001 283,063 Bangladeshis lived in the UK, i.e. 0.5% of the total population.

54% of the Bangladeshi population lived in the Greater London area and a high proportion of these London inhabitants were located within the inner boroughs. Indeed, the 'heartland' of the London Bangladeshi community is to be found in Tower Hamlets, which contained 65,553 Bangladeshi residents or 22.8% of the UK Bangladeshi population.

The third generation of Tower Hamlets' Bangladeshi population – those 'born and bred' in the area - constitutes approximately half of the community. Bangladeshis, both here and in other parts of Britain, experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment, overcrowding, and certain types of health problems.

Tower Hamlets can be seen as part of an inner ring of London boroughs running from Westminster, Islington and Camden round to Hackney, Newham and Southwark. In 2001 118,346 Bangladeshis - 41.8% of the British Bangladeshi population - lived in this inner London ring.

However, other concentrations should not be ignored. The largest Bangladeshi population outside London is located in Oldham – 9,817 in 2001 or 4.5% of the city's population, while 20,836 are scattered across Birmingham (2% of the city's population), 7,642 in Luton (4%) and 4,967 in Bradford (1%). It is a very English urban population - very few live in Scotland or Wales.



## 2. Diaspora and relationship to homeland

As many commentators on globalisation have noted, British Bangladeshis and other settlers from the South are linked to their countries of origin by telephone, mail, Internet, television and radio so that communication of news is rapid and sustained and results in ‘diasporic communities’ and a sense of belonging to multiple homes/nations.

‘Hyphenated identities’ such as British-Bangladeshi, British-Muslim, British-Asian, etc. have been coined to express these multiple, transnational and diasporic identities and ties.

In material terms these ties are supported by the sending of remittances back to relatives in ancestral villages across Bangladesh, especially the districts of Noakhali, Chittagong and Sylhet from which the vast majority of British Bangladeshis have migrated.

The financial relationship between Bangladeshis in Britain and their kin in Bangladesh is changing, however. In 1995 a report indicated that 20% of the Bangladeshi families in East London were sending money to Bangladesh, whereas during the 1960s and 1970s approximately 85% were remitting their savings (see Garbin, 2004:138). Today the proportion may be even lower than 20%. For a large number of families in Britain the cost of living, housing, or education for the children severely constrains any regular financial commitment towards Bangladesh. Moreover, the family reunion process has resulted in the social and economic reproduction of the household in Britain and conflicts (over land for example) can arise involving the mutual or reciprocal relationship between members of a joint household divided by migration. This, in turn, can reduce even more the level of investment in Sylhet.

The emergence of a second and a third generation of British Bangladeshis is another factor explaining the declining proportion of people’s income being invested in remittances. While many young British Bangladeshis still value Bangladesh as the ‘ancestral home’ where their cultural ‘roots’ are, it appears that very few of them are willing to invest, send money regularly, or stay for a long term.

It should be noted that transnational ties link British Bangladeshis to other Bangladeshi communities in North America, the Middle East and elsewhere. This could be observed in a variety of domains:

- religious rituals (*Eid, Kathm il Koran*)
- circulation of goods and gifts in the transnational space
- communication (phone, e-mail, internet discussion sites)
- matrimonial links (choice of partners from Britain or America instead of recruiting them from Bangladesh)
- entrepreneurship (for instance, Bangladeshi migrants/individuals from the USA, UK or the Middle East investing in a business partnership in Sylhet or elsewhere)

### 3. Islamists versus secularists and community politics

The intimate relationship between politics and religion has led to intense rivalry between secular and Islamist activists, who have taken a keen interest in the ways in which religious issues have entered the political arena in Bangladesh. This tension related to the 1971 Liberation War has been projected in British soil and re-interpreted through the struggle for community space and community ‘representation’.

For instance, in Tower Hamlets, Bengali secular community leaders refer to a set of values (‘secularism, nationalism, socialism and democracy’) linked to the 1971 Liberation War (*Muktojudho*) against Pakistan in order to define a cultural/political project in Britain. A wide range of initiatives reflecting their commitment to transmit a secular Bengali heritage is regularly undertaken - organisations of festivals (such as the Bengali New Year) youth cultural awareness programmes, celebrations of independence movements, etc. (see Eade and Garbin 2002).

In Tower Hamlets, as well as Oldham, these leaders are also keen to shape the local urban community space through symbols of Bengali nationalism. One of these symbolic markers is the *Shaheed Minar*, a monument which commemorates the martyrs (*shaheed*) of the Language Movement in 1952. In Tower Hamlets, the *Shaheed Minar* was erected in Altam Ali Park, Whitechapel, after funds were collected among a large number of secular Bangladeshi community groups. In Oldham, it was built in the Bangladeshi area of Westwood and funded through a local council regeneration scheme.

Islamist activists, in Tower Hamlets and Oldham, stressed their moral commitment to an ‘authentic’ religious identity and opposed the nationalist initiatives of the secular leaders. In both places these critiques are legitimised by the increasing role they tend to play in the local arena and, above all, by their claim to represent the local ‘Muslim community’. In Oldham, for instance, Islamist activists described the *Shaheed Minar* as a ‘waste of money’ and an encouragement to ‘stop the youth to think Islamically’. In Tower Hamlets, they described the Bengali New Year as a syncretic (*shirk*) event, which was influenced by Hindu traditions and promoted unrespectable behaviour and practices.

In Tower Hamlets and Oldham, this tension between secularists and Islamists has been particularly prominent recently due the visits of Maulana Delwar Hussain Saydee, a (non-Sylheti) *Jamaat i Islami* MP in Bangladesh, who travels regularly to the Bangladeshi enclaves in Britain and elsewhere in the Bangladeshi diaspora. A member of Awami League in Oldham (also a journalist for the newspaper *Surma* and local correspondent for Bangla TV) was attacked in 2001 following an article he wrote about Saydee’s controversial speech in Oldham. In Tower

Hamlets, violence also erupted around the East London Mosque where Saydee was delivering a speech in 2001.

These incidents illustrate the competition for social and political control between Islamists and secularists in the community context. This competition revolves around the mobilisation of two different 'imagined communities' situated beyond the local ethnic enclaves - on the one hand, a Bengali cultural/nationalist diasporic space and on the other hand, a global religious space, the *umma*, the global community of Muslim believers (Eade 1997, Garbin 2001). Perhaps more importantly we can talk here of the constitution of a 'diasporic public sphere'. This sphere is highly dependent on collective memory and historical reinterpretations of the 1971 Liberation War and is shaped by the links between some British Bangladeshi groups and the *Jamaat i Islami* and by the participation of some Bangladeshi leaders within the Awami League and groups like the Nirmul Committee<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4. Islamist politics among Bangladeshis in the UK

The expansion of settlers from Muslim-majority countries has been accompanied by the growth of Islamist organisations. There are several types of organisations. Some are already established in Muslim-majority countries and extend their activities to Britain. Others are set up in this country to provide a Muslim voice at local and national level – for example, the long-established Council of Mosques, UK and Eire and the Union of Muslim Organisations, as well as the younger but higher profile Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The MCB is probably the most successful lobby at the national level given the encouragement it has received from the government after the demise of the much more radical Muslim Parliament.

Youth groups are also active among Bangladeshi communities, such as the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), which is affiliated to the Islamic Forum Europe (IFE) - an organisation based in Tower Hamlets with several branches across Britain, including Oldham and Birmingham.

These Islamist groups can be distinguished from Islamic organisations. Islamist groups may be involved in politics – locally, nationally and transnationally – whereas Islamic groups following *Tabligh Jamaat*, *Deobandi* and *Barelvi* ideologies seek to avoid politics and focus on religious activities, such as propagating (*dawah*) their own particular understanding of correct Islamic practice.

They can also be distinguished from the expanding number of Muslim professional groups, which seek to represent Muslims in white-collar professions (medicine, law, engineering etc).

These national lobbying groups often have little contact with local Muslim activists. In areas with high levels of Muslim settlement, such as Bradford, Oldham, Birmingham and London, representation has been led by activists associated with particular mosques such as Tower Hamlets' East London Mosque or a group attempting to coordinate action between mosques such as the Bradford Council of Mosques. They may link up with local councillors or MPs, who try to appeal to voters on issues which concern them as Muslims, such as the provision of *halal* food in schools, correct dress, conflict in the Middle East, Iraq, Chechnya and Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> National Coordinating Committee for the Realisation of Bangladesh War Ideals and Trials of Bangladesh War Criminals of 1971 (also known as *Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Jatya Samanay Shomiti*). It was created in Bangladesh in 1992 by Jahanara Imam, the mother of a 'freedom fighter'.

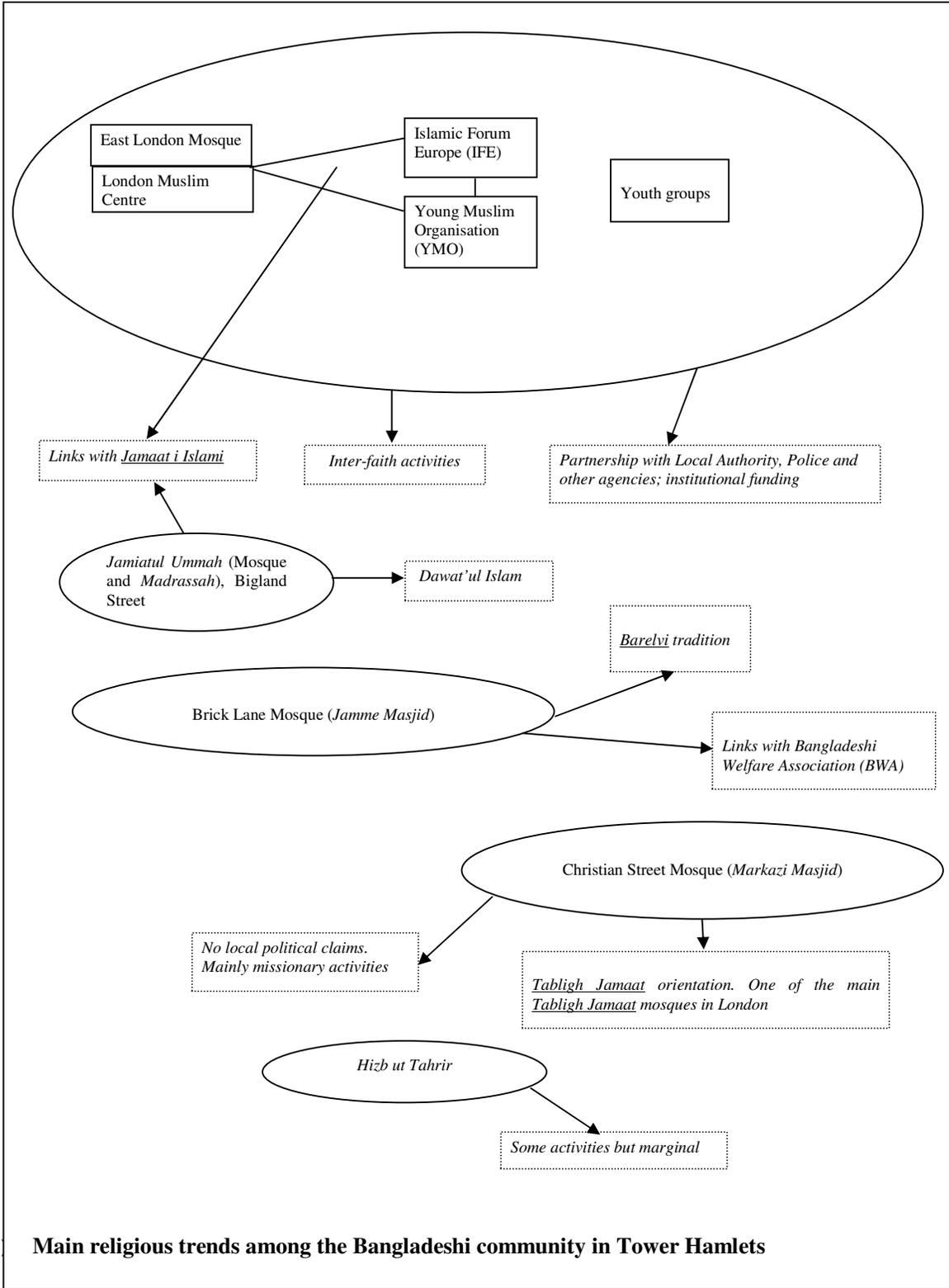
## ***Case studies: Tower Hamlets, Birmingham and Oldham***

### **➤ Tower Hamlets**

In Tower Hamlets, religious practice initially centred around small prayer rooms in council flats or private premises. During the 1980s a number of larger facilities became available in areas where Bangladeshis were heavily concentrated. The East London Mosque (ELM) moved into purpose-built site close to the Brick Lane Mosque, which occupied a former synagogue. Synagogues and community halls were also turned into mosques, while existing mosques sought to alter their sites in order to accommodate larger congregations (see Eade 1997). This process has continued down to the present day with the East London Mosque recently expanding into a large former car park where the London Muslim Centre is now used for prayers, recreational facilities and housing.

To give some sense of what is a diverse and changing situation, we will focus on four mosques in particular – the East London, Brick Lane, Bigland Street and Christian Street mosques – and the organisations associated with them.

- The East London Mosque – this claims to be the oldest mosque in London going back to the early 1940s. It has maintained close links with the *Jamaat i Islami*, largely through the Islamic Forum Europe and the Young Muslim Organisation, whose offices are located nearby. The ELM's leaders and other local activists have been highly successful at building alliances with local government officials through campaigns against drug abuse, family breakdown, anti-social behaviour, school truancy, etc.
- The *Jamiatul Ummah* (Mosque and *Madrassah*), Bigland Street - where the organisation *Dawat'ul Islam* is based. *Dawat'ul Islam* was created during the 1970s in Tower Hamlets by Bangladeshi members of the UK Islamic Mission, who were also involved in the *Jamaat i Islami* in Bangladesh before coming to Britain.
- The London *Jamme Masjid* (Great Mosque), Brick Lane – based in a former Huguenot chapel, which was built during the 1740s and later used by Methodists and then by the East European Jewish settlers as a synagogue and theological centre. In terms of beliefs and practices it is influenced – like most British Bangladeshi and Pakistani mosques - by the syncretic *Barelvi* tradition. It has close links with the Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA) - a long-established organisation dominated by Bangladeshi businessmen and elites, whose offices lie next door. Some secular nationalists have described it as the 'Bangladeshi community mosque'.
- The *Markazi Masjid*, Christian Street – one of the main *Tabligh Jamaat* mosques in London. It concentrates on missionary activities within Muslim communities and tries to avoid being drawn into local politics. It seems to attract young Bangladeshis through its *dawah* work.
- We should also note the presence of the group *Hizb ut Tahrir*. Its activists have tried to influence local religious and political institutions but with little apparent success.

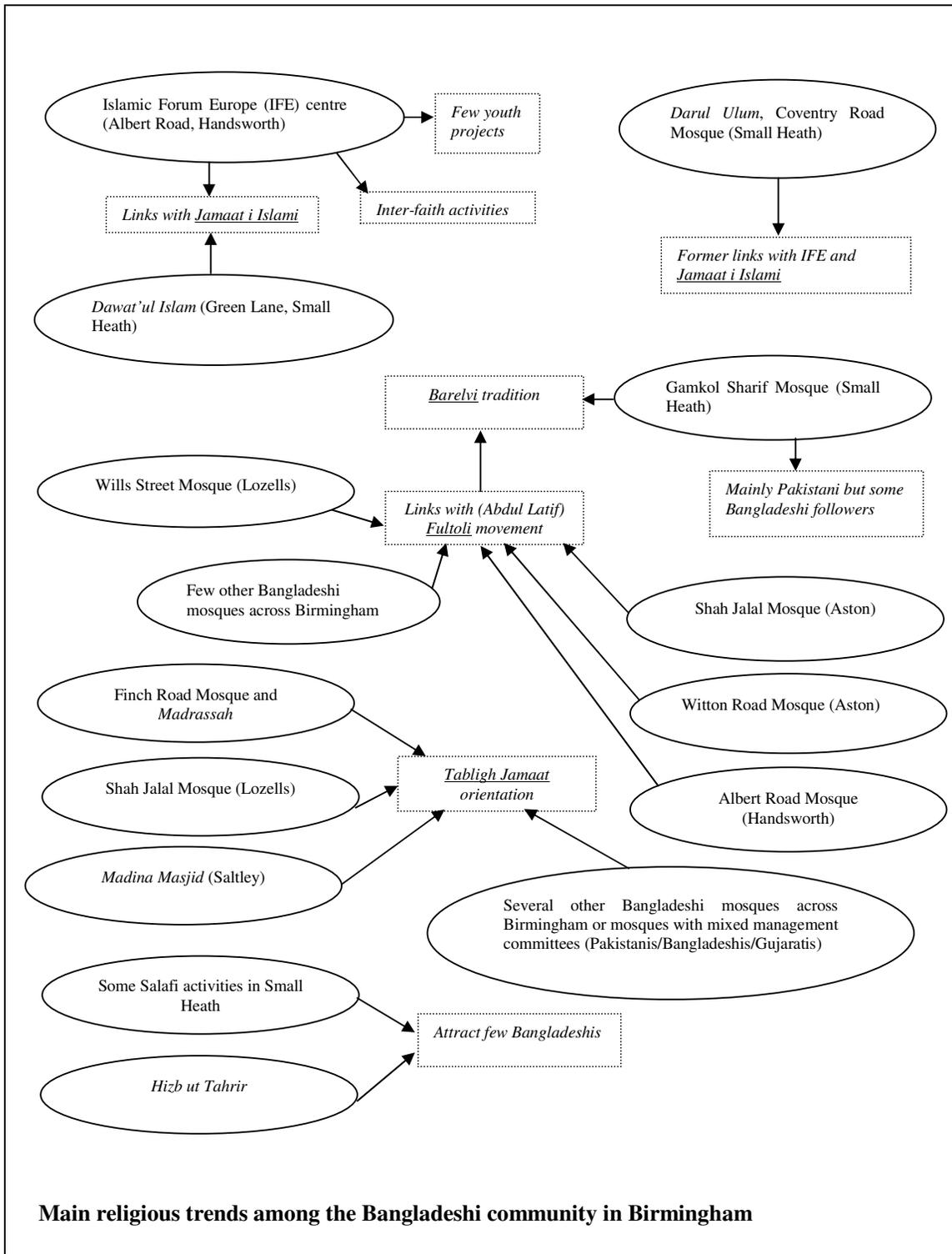


In Birmingham, as opposed to Tower Hamlets, the influence of the Islamic Forum Europe (IFE) and Young Muslim Organisation (YMO) is rather limited. The IFE has around 80 members (male and female combined) while the YMO has no more than 30. Based in the Handsworth area, the Birmingham branch of the Islamic Forum Europe was created at the end of the 1980s. It has recently started some inter-faith initiatives and some educational and drug awareness projects among young British Bangladeshis. As in Tower Hamlets, this organisation has links with *Jamaat i Islami* and some of its members were active in the youth/student branch of *Jamaat i Islami* back in Bangladesh, before they migrated to Britain during the 1980s and 1990s.

There is also a *Dawat'ul Islam* presence in Birmingham (Small Heath) but its influence is weak compared with Tower Hamlets, where the headquarters of this organisation are located.

The two dominant religious trends among Bangladeshis in Birmingham are:

- The *Barelvi*-oriented movement known as 'Fultoli' – led by Abdul Latif Chowdhury (born in the village of Fultoli, Sylhet). This spiritual leader, based in Bangladesh, is said to be a descendant of Shah Kamal, one of the disciples of Shah Jalal who spread Islam across Sylhet during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The *Fultoli* movement has many followers in the Birmingham Bangladeshi community, mainly among the older generation. Some mosques in Aston, Lozells and Handsworth follow the *Fultoli* movement in terms of religious practices and beliefs (there is a great emphasis on the *Sunna* – 'the way of the Prophet'). Abdul Latif Chowdhury travels regularly to Britain to preach at *wa'z mahfil* (religious conference) but his political wing, *Anjumane Al-Islah*, is not very influential either in Britain or in Bangladesh.
- The *Tabligh Jamaat* – controls a large number of mosques in the Muslim areas of Birmingham, among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Gujarati communities. As in Tower Hamlets, this movement seems to have been successful at attracting second and third generation Bangladeshis, mainly thanks to its long established local network of mosques and *madrassahs* and through its *dawah* (propagation) activities. As mentioned earlier, the *Tabligh Jamaat* is essentially a missionary movement. Following *Deobandi* precepts and opposed to the more syncretic *Barelvi* tradition (of the *Fultoli* movement, for instance), it tries to avoid being drawn into local or national politics.
- There are also some *Salafi* activities in Small Heath/Handsworth, which attract a small number of young British Asians.
- As in Tower Hamlets, *Hizb ut Tahrir* is active but very marginal among Bangladeshi youth.



**Main religious trends among the Bangladeshi community in Birmingham**

➤ **Oldham**

- The offices of the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO) and Islamic Forum Europe (IFE) are located in the Westwood/Cold Hurst area. Both groups were set up in Oldham during the end of the 1990s. As in Birmingham, the YMO and IFE lack resources to carry out a wide range of activities. The YMO has around 20 to 30 core members and the IFE around 100 (men and women combined). However, through their religious and recreational activities (IFE discussion circles, YMO sport tournaments and summer camps) they have managed to attract a growing number of young people recently. As a result they purchased a piece of land in the Westwood area where they are planning to build a new centre (Oldham Muslim Centre) with religious and recreational facilities. The YMO also works in partnership with other agencies, such as Sure Start, the Oldham Youth Services or the police (drug patrols). They also participate in an inter-faith forum.

As in Tower Hamlets and Birmingham, many members of the IFE support *Jamaat i Islami* political ideology, especially those who came to Britain during the 1980s and 1990s. They remain opposed to the more secular stance of the Awami League or the syncretic practices and beliefs of *Barelvi* movements such as *Fultoli*.

- This *Barelvi*-oriented *Fultoli* movement is well established among the Bangladeshi community in Oldham. Its main followers are first generation migrants. As mentioned earlier, it does not appeal to second and third generation British Bangladeshis.
- The *Tabligh Jamaat* is also well established in Birmingham, especially among the Pakistani community. Among Bangladeshis, it is also influential, primarily in the Westwood/Cold Hurst area (*Al-Khazra Markazi* Mosque). Yet the *dawah* strategy of Bangladeshi *Tablighis* seems to be less effective among young people compared with the *dawah* strategy of the Pakistani *Tablighis*.

It should be noted here that members of the IFE and YMO are now trying to create links with Pakistani and Bangladeshi *Tablighis*, but the difference between them, in terms of methodology, strategies and aims, seems to remain significant.

- The group *Hizb ut Tahrir* appears to have no significant presence there. There are, however, some *Hizb ut Tahrir* circles in Manchester.

