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Dissertation Proposal

Project Title: *Piety in Practice: Seeking out Religious Authority in Rural Bangladesh*

Abstract

In their every day lives, Bangladeshi Muslims encounter several legal systems, including the state-sanctioned civil and criminal law courts, the Family Courts, and the informal, community-sanctioned *panchayat* and *salish* courts. But other legal authorities may be called upon to adjudicate cases or to provide advice, even if they do not hold authority through the Bangladeshi state. These legal authorities include *kazis* (who *do* hold the position of marriage and divorce registrar), *muftis*, *huzurs* (religious teachers), *mullahs* (religious leaders), and prominent community leaders, as well as *pirs* and Sufis who manage and work in *mazars* (*dargahs* or shrines). Such authorities may give advice related to a number of religious topics, including marriage and divorce issues; I am particularly interested in dower (*mahr*) and dowry and *hilla* marriage. I will be using ethnographic and textually-based methods to understand how Bangladeshi Muslims, and women in particular, navigate the multiple legal options and officials in order to resolve disputes. Through interviews and participant observation, I will note how and when legal topics are discussed in daily life. In doing so, I hope to better understand the motivations and strategies, religious and otherwise, that encourage women and their families to make particular legal decisions.