tion for villagers when the nearest court was in Barisal. He pursued an interest in allopathic treatment, encouraging locals to understand the properties of plants and cultivate those with health benefits. Even today at the madrassa complex the tea served is sourced from *joshanda*, the mehendi plant, which is thought to be healthy.

He founded numerous educational institutions and was instrumental in introducing technical education alongside religious instruction at madrassas. After all, practical skills could only enhance religious knowledge in providing the student with a better opportunity to engage with society on its own terms. He also believed in the rights of women to be educated, and the Nesarabadi complex includes a women's madrassa.



PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

Madrassa students outside the Nesarabadi Islamic Complex in Jhalakathi.

"We Muslims have forgotten that serving fellow humans is one of the cardinal principles of our religion," Quaid Sahed Hujur is reported to have said, "In order to become true Muslims we must serve humanity."

Believing it to be Islam's work, Quaid Saheb Hujur organised an anti-corruption committee and participated in many anti-corruption processions over the years. According to his son, he was once detained for his efforts. At a rally he had called out dishonest officials by name, which had forced them through shame to return ill-gotten sums.

A great admirer of Rabindranath Tagore and a reader of Swami Vivekananda, Quaid Saheb Hujur was not averse to visiting Hindu religious ceremonies. After all, how could one hope to be of assistance to broader humanity if one does not engage with it? It is documented that he once went to listen to *kirtan* chanting in the *bhakti* tradition, performed by a group of *kirtankars*. After that experience Quaid Saheb Hujur said, "All religions say the same things."

Visiting a kirtan was not a challenge to his Islamic faith but rather an expression of it.

During the 1971 Liberation War it is recorded that some Hindus approached Quaid Saheb Hujur seeking to convert to Islam. Their decision was driven by fear, thinking they might be saved from the Pakistani Army. He discouraged them, saying, "The Pakistani Army is killing Muslims as well. Life and death are in God's hands." For Quaid Saheb Hujur, conversion motivated by fear was not a proper endeavour.

He believed that for the betterment of Bangladesh good people of all religions should stand united against dictatorship and corruption, and rise above religious difference for peace and unity. That is the legacy he left for Jhalakathi.

Unsurprisingly for a saint, there are miracles ascribed to his life, which are naturally difficult to verify. Similarly it reads as somewhat out of character that he took a stand against atheists – though it might do to remember that until the most recent years the term was not politicized in Bangladesh in the way it is today, and to him, it might've been more of a synonym for immorality and lack of principle.

In any case, one does not need to be a Muslim or agree with all aspects of his beliefs to find within his teachings compassion and understanding. The Islam that Quaid Saheb Hujur taught is a faith of the 'middle path' with no place for either slackness or extremism.

In Jhalakathi, the legacy of Quaid Saheb Hujur continues to be both significant and significantly positive. While a society is made of people, ideas create the flavour. And leadership matters.

Asked what his father would have done if he had lived to see these troubling recent days of Hindu homes being burnt and temples desecrated in several other districts of the country, his son says, "He would have gone to those districts straight away and tried to convince the Muslim communities that it is wrong. Islam does not believe in destruction but in good behaviour and harmony."

For Shonkor Chandra it might be even simpler. He knows the value of combination. He knows that anyone favouring communalism could never enjoy the diversity of chotpoti. They'd be left, perhaps, to chew on onions. And he could certainly contemplate such things of an afternoon by the roadside, before the customers arrive, in a peaceful district like Jhalakathi, in a society that's not lacking in space.

** information sourced from interview and various Nesarabadi Islamic Complex publications.*