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Religion, Nationalism, and Political Evolution: A Historical Analysis of Identity and Security in Bangladesh

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Abstract: This study examines the contested evolution of nationalism and political identity in Bangladesh, focusing on the interplay of religion, politics, and security since 1971. The central issue revolves around tension between secular Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism, complicating efforts to establish a cohesive national identity. Employing a historical and conceptual analysis, this study traces these ideological shifts from their colonial-era roots to their contemporary manifestations. The findings reveal that while secular Bengali nationalism sought cultural unity through linguistic and historical heritage, Bangladeshi nationalism introduced inclusivity by integrating broader cultural and religious identities. The study concludes that these ideological contestations have profound implications for Bangladesh's political stability, societal cohesion, and national security.

Keywords: Bangladesh, nationalism, religion, politics, national identity, security

Introduction

Bangladesh's identity has been a subject of significant debate and transformation since its independence in 1971 (Uddin, 2006). Emerging from the socio-political upheavals of colonial rule, the partition of India, and its eventual separation from Pakistan, Bangladesh was founded on the ideals of secular Bengali nationalism. Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, this ideology sought to unite the nation through a shared linguistic and cultural heritage. However, political instability following Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975 marked a turning point, with competing nationalist ideologies reshaping the national discourse (Schendel, 2009).

Major-General Ziaur Rahman's introduction of Bangladeshi nationalism in 1977 offered a broader and more inclusive identity that integrated cultural and religious diversity (Jahan, 1980). This shift departed from the secular framework of Bengali nationalism, sparking debates that continue to shape Bangladesh's political and social landscape. These ideological contestations affect Bangladesh's political stability, societal cohesion, and broader discussions on managing diversity in postcolonial states.

This study builds on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) and Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism (Gellner, 2008) to explore the evolution of competing nationalist ideologies in Bangladesh. By examining the historical and political trajectories of secular Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism, the research undertaken seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature by analysing how these ideologies influence national identity and security. Guided by the question of how competing nationalist

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ideologies have influenced the construction of identity and security in Bangladesh since 1971, this study provides insights into the challenges of nation-building in a multireligious, multi-ethnic society. Situated within local and global contexts, the findings offer valuable lessons for other postcolonial nations grappling with similar identity-based conflicts.

Methodology

Employing a historical and conceptual analysis, this study examines the evolution of nationalism and identity in Bangladesh from 1971 to the present, focusing on the competing ideologies of secular Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism. The research draws on secondary sources, including historical documents, government records, political speeches, and academic literature, to analyse these frameworks' ideological foundations and societal impacts.

Grounded in Anderson's imagined communities, the study explores how cultural and linguistic symbols construct national identity (Anderson, 1991). At the same time, Gellner's theory of nationalism situates these identities within the context of modernity and political development (Gellner, 2008). Concepts from security studies, particularly the works of Barry Buzan (Buzan, 2007) and Michael Barnett (Barnett, 1999), further elucidate the influence of nationalist ideologies on societal cohesion and national stability. This integrated approach situates the analysis within Bangladesh's unique postcolonial trajectory, providing insights into the interplay of identity, nationalism, and security.

Literature Review

Different works of literature and narratives have made it challenging to identify the actual circumstances of relations between religious nationality, politics, and security in Bangladesh. The issue of nationality has been debated since Bangladesh gained independence. Khan (1985) stated that South Asia saw the rise of nation-states, which led to internal and regional conflicts. As a result, society became divided based on religion and regional nationality. Such conflict spread among Pakistani Muslims and Bengali Muslims, Islamists and secularists, Muslims and Hindus, and Bangladeshis and Indians. Hossain (2015) discussed the weaknesses of Bangladesh's national identity. Since the post-independence period, Bangladesh's political crisis and disunity have negatively affected the country's social pillars and national identity, leading to a national identity crisis. N. Absar (2014) produced a meaningful analysis of the historical trends of nationalism in Bangladesh and the conflict of secular Bengali nationalism with Islam and Muslim political and cultural dynamics in Bangladesh. Das et al. (2022) examined the evolution of Bangladesh's nationalism and identity, ranging from creole nationalism to Bangladeshi nationalism and national identity. Bangladeshi nationalism prioritises Islamic identity over their Bengali identity. Kabir (1987) identified the pattern of Bangladeshi nationalism, leading to a new religious-linguistic identity. The Pakistan movement influenced Bangladesh's nationalist development, transforming its identity, with religion and language becoming the primary focus for Bengali Muslims.

The existing literature on Bangladeshi national identity is limited, highlighting the need for further investigation. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive understanding of identity and nationalism in Bangladesh, thereby guiding policies and activities that promote societal unity and resilience.

The Formation of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a riverine country that is part of the largest delta in the world. It is located on the Bay of Bengal and in the lowest flow of the Ganges-Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers (Guhathakurta & Van Schendel, 2013). The area of Bangladesh is 147,570 square kilometres, and the total land length is 2400 square kilometres. India borders 92% of Bangladesh's western side, and Myanmar borders 8% of its eastern side. The coastal boundary of the Bay of Bengal in the south of the country is 483 kilometres (Kabir et al., 2018).

The rivers have had a tremendous impact on the formation of the land structure of the region and the people's livelihood and culture. As such, Bangladesh's people, rivers, and history have been tied in the same thread for thousands of years. However, it is precisely unknown when human settlement began in Bangladesh. Based on early records, Greek historians of Alexander's contemporaries mentioned a wealthy kingdom on the banks of the Ganges river called "Gangaridai." In the first century A.D., the Greek geographer Ptolemy described that the Gangaridai people lived in the Ganges estuary (Rashid, 2019). The exclusive clothes made here were exported globally, and the Ganges became an international river port during that time. In ancient times, Bengal was a distinct part of Bangladesh, and historians concur that Greek scholars used "Gangaridai" to describe the Bengal delta's Dravidians. The Dravidians arrived in the Indian subcontinent via Baluchistan from the Tigris and Euphrates riverbanks in West Asia about 5,000 years ago. They started living in the coastal areas and banks of India's largest rivers (Avari, 2007,). Moreover, the Dravidians set up permanent settlements on the Ganges riverbanks, where they built the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan civilisations in this region (Pruthi, 2004).

In 1750 BC, the Aryans of the Kyrgyz region began migrating to the Sindhu and Punjab areas via Iran. The formidable Aryan nomads attacked the ancient tribal Dravidians and destroyed Mohenjo-Daro, Harappan, and Chanhudaro (Avari, 2007). They killed and imprisoned many locals, occupied Dravidian states, and established several independent Aryan states from Punjab to Benares in India. Although the Aryans were mighty in northern India, the conflict between them and the Dravidians of Bengal lasted for an extended period.

Over time, Bengal witnessed the migration of many ethnic groups and also experienced radical changes in its religious and sociocultural systems. From the Vedic rule of the Kushan, Persian, Mauryan, Gupta, Pala, and Sen empires to the Muslim empire and European colonial period, Bengal endured constant struggle and destruction-construction periods (Siddiq & Habib, 2017). However, during its 550 years of rule, the Muslims established a new civilisation in the region (A. A. Khan, 2011). Bengal epitomised religious coexistence and a prosperous region, and became an attractive place for traders and tourists from all over the world. In the 14th century, the Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta visited Bengal, commenting on its abundance (Khondker, 2022). Another Dutch merchant, Van Lindolan, nicknamed Bengal as "the granary of the East" in the 16th century (Sengupta, 2008, p. 2). During the reign of the Pala and Sen kings, Bengal was known as Banga, and it spread only partly to the east and south. Among the Muslim Sultans of Bengal, Sultan Shams al-Dīn Ilyas Shah made an invaluable contribution to the development of Bengal—he somewhat extended the Bengal boundaries, which he named as Shahi Bangla (Lewis, 2011).

On June 23, 1757, the Muslim rule in Bengal ended with the fall of Nawab Mirza Muḥammad Sirāj al-Dawlah, and the British East India Company began colonising the Indian subcontinent. The British ruled the region, including Bengal, for almost 200 years, during which they applied the "divide and rule policy." As a result, Bengal radically changed its own Muslim culture, and Hindu-Muslim relations deteriorated drastically through the rise of extremist nationalism (Tharoor, 2016). Even though Bengal was a prosperous region, it became a poverty-stricken area. In 1905, the British divided Bengal into two separate provinces called

West Bengal and East Bengal, or "Bangabhanga." However, in 1911, the British government reunited the two Bengal provinces due to the violent movements of Hindu fundamentalism (Chatterji, 2002). Towards the end of the British rule in 1947, the Muslim and Hindu communities had spread extreme violence against each other, which prompted the British to form two separate states: one for the Muslims and the other for Hindus. Associated with West Pakistan despite its long geographical distance, East Bengal became East Pakistan due to its Muslim-majority population. Eventually, Bangladesh was created from East Pakistan following a nine-month freedom struggle in collaboration with the Indian Army (Sisson & Rose, 1990).

An Overview of Bengali Nationalism

Nationalism connotes a "uniform" that unites people under one roof. A nation can introduce itself as independent and distinct globally by holding this "uniform." Nationalism strongly identifies a political entity as a group of people defined in national terms, such as a nation (Smith, 2010). Bengali nationalism is the political manifestation of the ethno-national consciousness of Bengalis residing in Bengal's ethno-linguistic regions. Specifically, it refers to the unified identity of the human community living in Bangladesh and West Bengal of India, as well as people living in Tripura, Assam, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands who also speak Bengali (Van Schendel, 2023). The first Bengali nationalism movement arose in 1905 and revolved around issues related to the partition of Bengal.

After the end of the Muslim rule in this region, especially after the Battle of Palashi (or Battle of Plassey), the Muslim population became increasingly impoverished and insignificant due to the conspiratorial activities of the British East India Company. On the eve of the establishment of the British Raj in the second half of the 18th century, misery was inflicted upon the Muslim population when the ordinary middle class and the British administration brought about a series of administrative, economic, cultural, and political changes that unfairly gave rise to a new Hindu landowning class and professional aristocracy. The British administration's introduction of new laws and accompanying unbridled competition and corruption built up enormous wealth for the Hindu professionals (babu and gentry classes), while the Zamindar-Mahajan classes made Bengali Muslims and peasant-weavers even more impoverished and destitute.

In 1793, Lord Cornwallis introduced land revenue or taxation legislation in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, which he called the Permanent Settlement (Bhardwaj, 2011). As a result of the law's introduction, the Zamindars became the absolute owners of landed property in the colonial state. Apart from being proprietors of land, they acquired Zamindari taxes at a fixed rate in perpetuity. Although there were few Muslim Zamindars, the majority were Hindus. Most Muslim Zamindars were unable to collect high revenue at the end of the year. The rural peasants and landowners were also unable to pay more rent or revenue at the end of the year, so they were forced to pay by taking loans from the Zamindars at high interest rates. As a result, Muslim Zamindars lost their Zamindari status after the specified date of expiration according to the sunset law, while a new unitary Hindu Zamindari class emerged.

At the same time, the peasants were unable to recover their total debts, which took into account the exorbitant profit and principal. Consequently, the Zamindars took possession of all their property and, together with usury moneylenders, crippled the Muslims and rural peasants. This led to heightened anger and discontent within the peasant societies, and a series of peasant revolts took place in the 19th century (Rajat & Ray, 1975).

The partition of Bengal in 1905 is a crucial chapter in Bangladesh's history of nationhood and religion. Murshid Quli Khan was appointed as the Dewan of Bengal during the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1700. Although Dhaka was the capital of Bengal, in 1704, Murshid Quli Khan moved the capital to Murshidabad in West Bengal (Richards, 1981). During British rule, Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Assam, and several other regions were formed as the Bengal Presidency, and the capital moved again from Murshidabad to Calcutta or Kolkata. Calcutta became the capital of the British administration in the province of Bengal and the whole of India. Business and industrial sectors, public and legal administration, and educational institutions were concentrated in Calcutta. Most of the people in East Bengal were Muslims, but they were less privileged than the Hindus. As a result, the Muslims of East Bengal were left behind in all aspects of life. In 1835, the Persian language was replaced by English as the official language of the British Government of India (Ahmed, 2019). Persian was the official language of the Mughal administration. Since educational institutions were centred in Calcutta and English became the lingua franca, the Muslims of East Bengal lagged behind in English education. Consequently, the Hindus became the most privileged locals and secured government jobs.

Industrial factories were built in Calcutta using raw materials from East Bengal. Even though jute production was mainly in East Bengal, there were no jute mills. Most of the jute mills were built on the banks of the Hooghly River in West Bengal. Although Chittagong has had a seaport since ancient times, no work was done to develop it during the British colonial period. Instead, the government and the business class completely neglected the Chittagong port, assuming that the profit of the capital's port, Calcutta, would decrease (Qasmi, 2023).

The Bengal Presidency consisted of Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Assam, and other regions. According to the first census of India held in 1872, the population of the Bengal Presidency was "six crores seventy lakhs," or 67 million (Mannan, 2006, p. 221). The British could not smoothly rule the entire Bengal Presidency with this vast population. On October 16, 1905, the new East Bengal and Assam Province were formed with 15 districts of Assam and East Bengal by the British Viceroy Lord Curzon in India, and Dhaka was made the capital of the new province (Cronin, 1977). The newly formed area had a population of about 31 million, most of whom were Muslims. However, the British government's development was still centred on India's capital, Calcutta.

Therefore, the people of East Bengal were neglected and deliberately left out of mainstream developments. Since most people in this region were Muslims, they received fewer privileges than the Hindus. Therefore, the move to separate Bengal was advocated so that the people of East Bengal, especially the Muslims, would get the needed facilities. The disenfranchised majority Muslims in East Bengal saw the partition movement of Bengal as the first dawn of their destiny. On the contrary, the Calcutta-based caste-centric Hindu landlords, businesspeople, politicians, intellectuals, and journalists who supported the auxiliary power of the British gauged this movement as a severe blow to their sociopolitical foundations built over 150 years (Mannan, 2006).

The main driving force behind the anti-partition movement was the revival of Hinduism and Bengali nationalism. The Hindus dubbed the partition of Bengal as "Loss of limb of Bengali mother" (*Bongo matar onggo sed*), and their Hindu leaders, such as Surendranath Banerjee, Bipin Chandrapal, Arvind Ghosh, and Ashwini Kumar Dutt, launched a counter militant protest movement. Within a brief period, the momentum of this movement increased and Bengali nationalism, known as the Swadeshi movement, arose forcefully (Sarkar et al., 1973). The struggle against the partition of Bengal turned violent at one point when the Hindu extremists appeared. Two armed Hindu organisations were formed called Yugantar in Calcutta and Anushilan in Dhaka. They started using bombs as weapons in the armed movement against the partition of Bengal in India. The Maharashtra leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Cow Protection movement (Goraksha Andolan) listed the Shivaji-initiated Ganapati festival in their programme and adopted the anti-Muslim anthem "Vande Mataram" as the national anthem of the campaign (Bharati, 2019). Many nationalist writings were published during this period, and in 1906, Rabindranath Tagore wrote a poignant song titled "Amar Sonar Bangla" for the abolitionists, which became the national anthem of Bangladesh in 1972 (Capwell, 2017). On December 12, 1911, Emperor of India George V announced the partition of Bengal revoked at the Delhi Durbar due to strong Hindutva protests (Wynbrandt, 2009). Nevertheless, after the partition of Bengal in 1911, religious nationalist sentiments arose among the Hindu and Muslim communities. A spirit of Muslim nationalism appeared in place of the Bengali nationalist spirit among the Muslims of East Bengal.

Bangladeshi Nationalism

Bangladeshi nationalism is a political philosophy that glorifies and promotes Bangladeshi citizens as a distinct cultural and political country. It is based on the spiritual bonds of Bangladeshis living within the borders of Bangladesh. After the defeat of its ruler, Nawab Sirāj al-Dawlah, by British conspiracy in 1757, Bengal lost its independence, and Dhaka lost its glory. Nevertheless, on October 16, 1905, Dhaka regained its glory by being East Bengal and Assam province's capital through partitioning the Bengal Presidency. Still, the Hindus formed a widespread protest movement against the partition of Bengal. Their campaign resulted in a Muslim nationalist spirit emerging among the Muslims of Bengal. The All-India Muslim League was formed in Dhaka in December 1906 (Malik, 2012). In the 1930s, the poet-philosopher and modern Islamic scholar Allama Muhammad Iqbal proposed the idea of a separate, independent Muslim state in the Indian subcontinent, an idea that soon became popular among Indian and Muslim League leadership (Şahbaz, 2020).

In contrast to Bengali nationalism, 89% of the population of East Bengal were Bengali Muslims who participated in the establishment of Pakistan. Consequently, in 1947, India and Pakistan were formed as two separate countries based on religious nationality. British Viceroy, Lord Charles Hardinge, was forced to abolish the partition of Bengal in 1911 due to Hindu solid agitation. The abolition of the Bengal partition created a religious nationalistic spirit among both the Hindu and Muslim communities, leading to the creation of India and Pakistan at midnight on August 15, 1947. This ended British rule and incorporated the Muslim-majority East Bengal into Pakistan and the Hindu-majority West Bengal into India (Hasan, 2017).

However, the geographical distance, cultural contrast, and disparity between the rulers of East and West Pakistan led to the emergence of geographical nationalism, which combined Muslim nationalism and Bengali nationalism among the people of East Pakistan. Eventually, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was broken in 1971, and a new state called Bangladesh was founded based on geographical nationality (Zaheer, 1994). The same year, the newly independent Bangladesh introduced secular Bengali nationalism, to replace the majority Muslim population's Islamic nationalism, which was entirely against the ethnic and Islamic consciousness of the people of Bangladesh. The constitution collectively enshrined nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism as the governance principles (Hasan, 2017). Awami League added secularism to the constitution and banned all forms of Islamic politics in independent Bangladesh. In the name of Bengali nationalism, the Awami League government tried to erase symbols of Muslim history in the culture and politics of Bangladesh (Uddin & Nesa, 2020).

Ziaur Rahman became the President of Bangladesh on April 21, 1977. He introduced "Bangladeshi nationalism" to maintain Bangladesh's uniqueness. He amended the constitution to replace the principle of secularism with "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" (Wohab, 2021, p. 21). The ideology of Bangladeshi nationalism also made a clear distinction between the similar linguistic people in the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh (Shehabuddin, 2016).

Crisis of National Identity Issues in Bangladesh

Since the liberation war, Bangladesh has become an independent sovereign country with its language and unique cultural heritage (Ahmed, 2004). After 50 years of independence, despite having all the features of a single nationalism, the entire nation is still "divided" on nationality and the debate of Bengali nationalism versus Bangladeshi nationalism. Unfortunately, the current political divide over the question of national identity has profoundly undermined the beliefs, culture, and communal harmony of the Muslim and Hindu communities that have developed over centuries (Hossain, 2015). India and Pakistan were founded in 1947 based on Hindu-Muslim religious nationalism. Subsequently, the nationality of people of all races, tribes, and languages in India was endorsed as Indian. Likewise, in Pakistan, the national identity of people of all religions, languages, and castes and tribes was sanctioned as Pakistani.

In 1971, East Pakistan became the state of Bangladesh, and Bengali nationalism entered a new trend of secular Bengali nationalism. In fact, all the pre-independence movements had revolved around Bengali nationalism. While there was no element of secular nationalism in any movement, the independence movement was conducted in alignment with the long-standing Bengali tradition of the region. Under the patronage of the Shah-i-Bangla Sultanate of Bengal, the emergence of Bengali identity as a nation based on Hindu-Muslim partnership and cooperation in the region and the development of the Bengali language ran parallel. In continuation, Bengali culture was perfected in the Mughal Empire, and the rule of the Nawabs of Bengal in the 18th century was a notable example of Hindu-Muslim unity.

The current national identity narrative in Bangladesh highlights the secularist tradition of "Bengali identity," whereas "Bangladeshi" emphasises Islam as the core element of identity. It must be noted that Bengali nationalism has no conflict with Islamic ideology (Islam & Islam, 2020). The expression of Bengali nationalism in Pakistan was first reflected in the manifesto of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League in 1949. This declaration and the subsequent 42-point manifesto of the East Pakistan Awami League and the 21-point manifesto of the United Front elections of 1954, both drafted by Abul Mansur Ahmad, did not reflect any conflict between Islamic ideology and Bengali identity (Islam & Islam, 2020).

In 1947, the Muslim majority of East Bengal joined Pakistan based on religious unity. However, in the language movement in 1952 and the independence movement in 1971, local nationalism prevailed over religious majoritarianism (Oldenburg, 1985). United by linguistic nationalism and regional nationalism, all the Hindus and Muslims of East Pakistan participated in the movement. Through the Armed Liberation War of 1971 against Pakistan, an entirely new nation and new state of Bangladesh was formed.

National identity cannot be developed based on language alone. Nationality comprises various elements, including religion, linguistic structure, caste and tribe, culture, history of independence, tradition, and geographical boundaries. In contrast, even though Arabic-speaking people occupying areas from the Arabian Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, and from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, are united by the Arabic language, each Arab country has a separate national identity (Suleiman, 2019). However, the chances for an absolute and complete national identity of the people of Bangladesh through Bengali nationalism is improbable. Apart from the Bengali population, there are 45 tribes and ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh (Guhathakurta, 2022). If the nationality of Bangladesh is Bengali, then the tribal citizens will be left out of the Bangladeshi identity. Outside of Bangladesh, many Bengalis live in various states of India, including West Bengal. The Bengalis of West Bengal are of Indian nationality, though they share many similarities in language and manners with the Bangladeshi people.

In addition, Bengali, Chakma, Garo-Marma, Khasia, and other ethnic groups are known for their ethnic identity within Bangladesh. Nevertheless, as a nation-state, all the citizens of Bangladesh will be identified as Bangladeshi. This characteristic will mark the clear difference between the people of Bangladesh and other ethnic groups worldwide. Hence, the ongoing debate regarding the national identity of Bangladesh highlights the nation's complexities and challenges in forging a collective identity that accommodates its rich diversity and historical context.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution of nationalism and national identity in Bangladesh, focusing on the ideological contestations between secular Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism. These competing frameworks have shaped the nation's political stability, societal cohesion, and ongoing identity crisis. The dual nationalisms underscore the challenges of unifying a multi-heritage, multireligious society within a cohesive national framework.

Bangladeshi nationalism presents a viable pathway to addressing these divisions by offering a distinct national identity that integrates Bangladesh's diverse heritage, encompassing language, culture, religion, and history. Reconciliation of these competing ideologies is critical to fostering long-term unity and stability. This requires a balanced political vision that respects secular principles while acknowledging the country's Islamic heritage. Inclusive national policies that embrace the population's diversity can further reinforce Bangladesh's identity and distinctiveness on the global stage.

Bangladesh's experience provides valuable lessons for other postcolonial nations navigating the complexities of identity and nationalism. By adopting a model of nationalism that reflects historical legacies, cultural diversity, and political aspirations, nations can strengthen social cohesion and ensure stability. The ongoing contestation over national identity in Bangladesh highlights the importance of inclusive and adaptive nationalism in addressing the challenges of multi-ethnic, multireligious nation-building.

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