Contesting Identities in Bangladesh:
A Study of Secular and Religious Frontiers

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Introduction

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was an epoch-making event within the post-colonial order of South Asia. Led by the middle classes, a bitter and bloody war of Liberation from Pakistan was fought, based on Bangladeshi peoples' aspirations for democracy, identity and for a more progressive society. Bangladesh's emergence as an independent secular state effectively shattered the 'two nation theory' that had formed the basis for the creation of Pakistan in 1947, and demonstrated that religion alone was not sufficient to forge a cohesive national identity. The new state of Bangladesh was the product of a 'Bengali nationalism' that arose to challenge West Pakistan's economic exploitation of its Eastern wing, its attempt to impose religious hegemony, and its repression of Bengali political voice.[1]

Yet this experiment with secularism was short-lived. After the 1975 assassination of Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the military rulers made political use of Islam in an attempt to create legitimacy and divert attention away from the country's increasingly pressing economic problems. But the political ideals of secular Bengali nationalism continued to find expression within the new political systems that emerged in Bangladesh. The ideals of the earlier Liberation struggle co-existed with these efforts to construct new identities around 'Bangladeshi nationalism' that had Islam at their core, with the result that the ruling political elites continue to contest both 'Bengali' and 'Bangladeshi' visions of nationalism. This working paper argues that identity formation in Bangladesh is neither instrumental nor primordial, but has instead drawn on a range of complex factors that include 'Bengali culture', 'religion' and 'socio-economic modes'. Through a survey of relevant literature and some recent fieldwork in Bangladesh, the paper hopes to illuminate the evolution of nationalism in Bangladesh and its array of potentially confusing identities.

Theoretical framework

Identity may be an essential component of a nation, but it remains an essentially contested concept within political theory. Language, religion, culture, shared history, ethnicity or citizenship has each been variously upheld to provide the foundation that gives rise to the feeling of nationhood (Sen, 2006). What constitutes the 'imagination' of a nation is therefore debatable. The problem may become even more acute when we consider the developing world with its heterogeneous populations. Anti-colonial nationalism provided only temporary coherence to identities in such countries, which soon faced multifarious problems of fragmentation in terms of ethnicity, religion and region (Huntington 1997). With the disappearance of the 'other', in the form of the colonial master, the veneer of unity holding disparate communities together as nations soon started giving way to more fragmentary tendencies. Nations were plunged into the vortex of military dictatorship, religious resurgence or ethnic backlash. The crisis of legitimacy which followed the erosion of the anti-colonial nationalistic hegemony was redressed by harping back to primordial religious or ethnic identities, or by resorting to military repression, or combinations of both.

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[1] Bangladesh's struggle for Liberation led to the country's foundation based on the four pillars of secularism, socialism, democracy and nationalism.

Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* considers the ways that ruling elites tend to construct the ethos and values of society to secure their vested socio-political interests, and he suggests that political civil society 'hegemonises' nationalistic values in support of ruling objectives (Gramsci 1971). Following from this argument, the Bangladeshi ruling elites have constructed both 'Bengali nationalist' and 'Bangladeshi nationalist' identities in support of both the right to self-determination and their own ruling objectives over the years, but with little reference at all to the subaltern class.

Within the short span of 25 years, Bangladesh had undergone two different national movements - the first taking place in 1947 which led to the creation of Pakistan, and the second in 1971 which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh and its secession from Pakistan. These two moments of violent rupture both impacted upon the fashioning of identities, but each in different ways. After 1947 there was the confusing situation of the old being dead, and the new not yet being born. During this interregnum, the national political space in East Bengal was occupied by various combinations of secularism, socialism, democracy and linguistic nationalism. Later, after 1971, came the military dictatorships and the rise of a more strident Islamic hegemony. During this period new heroes were made and old ones replaced, symbols and myths were created and then torn apart, and history was continually written and re-written in the search to imagine a nation in ways that overcame the underlying deep-rooted contradictions.[2]

Within such complex and changing circumstances, the study of nationalism and identities becomes particularly challenging. How can we now understand the range of identities with which Bangladesh heads towards the future? Are its secularist roots entirely dead, or does civil society have enough resilience to thwart potentially uncivil elements within what some observers have seen as an Islamic resurgence? This paper is an attempt to explore the trajectories of secularist and religious identities in Bangladesh. While the idea of secular Bengali nationalism was important in events leading up to the Liberation struggle of 1971, identities have since moved on. In particular, an erosion of secular trends began soon after the birth of Bangladesh, and subsequently both military and democratic regimes have attempted to reshape religious identities.

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[2] For example, politicians such as Maulana Akram Khan, Abul Qasim Fazlul Haq and Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy were each products of the old pre-Partition politics, and did not contribute to the struggle for Bangladesh. Even Maulana Bhashani's role was marginalized. Instead, it was the Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) who made the main contribution to fighting against the Pakistan army, and who successfully liberated the country. Sheikh Mujib Rahman emerged as the main political leader. The atrocities committed by the Pakistan army against civilians was a key mobilizing factor that led people to fight for freedom. 1971 became the starting point of the new country's history. But after Liberation, Mujib and his party became authoritarian. Soon the sacrifices and atrocities were forgotten, and people were denied participation within the new power structure. See Samaddar (2002) for an account of Bangladesh immediately after the War of Liberation, and the use of myth-making to strengthen some groups in power and exclude others. The author raises the question of how Bangladeshi nationalism should in fact be be defined. If language becomes the basis of nationhood, how should West Bengal, which is now a part of India, be treated? To escape from this paradox, some now deny the idea of 'Bengali nationalism' in favour of 'Bangladeshi nationalism'. This, according to Samaddar, has brought religion back as an element in the construction of national identity.

The following major issues each need to be considered: the history of the Islamisation of Bengal, essential to understand the roots of Islam in Bengal; the emergence of Bengali culture, most specifically the impact of language on crystallizing a distinct identity; the partition of 1905 and then subsequently in 1947 following the 'two nation theory'; the Language Movement in the erstwhile East Pakistan which challenged the political idea of Islam as a sufficient glue capable of uniting the two wings of Pakistan; and finally the War of Liberation in 1971 which resulted in the birth of Bangladesh and put forth the secularist resistance to discrimination under the garb of religious hegemony. The resurgence of Islam after the 9/11 attacks in the US, and the growth Middle East-funded Madrasa schools are also important factors. The outcome of the Ninth Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh in 2008 has once again revived the hopes for the creation of a secular nation state. All this of course also needs to be understood within the context of Bangladesh's fragile economy and continuing mass poverty.

Shaping primordial identities

In the pre-modern era, Bengal was populated predominantly by indigenous social groups, who worshipped their own cultural-religious deities. As M. H. Klaiman observed 'the descendants of non-Bengali tribals of a few centuries past now comprise the bulk of Bengali speakers'. In other words, the vast majority of the Bengali linguistic community today represents present or former inhabitants of the previously uncultivated and culturally unassimilated tracts of eastern Bengal (Klaiman 1990; Baxter 1997). These people depended on shifting cultivation systems, and were unaware of more advanced techniques of agriculture for their survival. In the early Vedic period, the arrival of Indo Aryans groups from the north-western parts of the Indian sub-continent began to influence these indigenous people economically and culturally, as they began settling mainly in the north western part of the deltaic land of Bengal (Thaper 1989). This brought strong social hierarchies to the north-western Bengal's indigenous people on the basis of Brahmanical socio-cultural beliefs. The Indo-Aryans also brought with them collections of Sanskrit literature, a new calendar and additional knowledge of agriculture, all of which influenced the socio-economic and cultural life of indigenous people in the delta (Bose and Jalal 2004). As Eaton (1993) explains:

'The literature produced towards the end of the migratory process reveals a hierarchically ordered society headed by a hereditary priesthood, the Brahmans, and sustained by an ideology of ritual purity and pollution that conferred a pure status on Indo-Aryans while stigmatizing non-Aryans as impure 'barbarians'.

Many of the more eastern deltaic indigenous tribes of Bengal remained secluded from these influences. Eaton (1993) continues:

'The Indo-Aryan groups gradually settled the upper, the middle, and finally the lower Ganges region, retroactively justifying each movement by pushing further eastward the frontier separating themselves from tribes they ritually considered unclean. As this occurred, both Indo-Aryans and the indigenous communities with which they came in contact underwent considerable cultural change'.

Indo-Aryan socio-cultural influences remained mostly in the north-western part of the delta until the conquest of Mohammad Bakhtiyar in 1204 A.D. His invasion marked the onset of a new phase of identity formation in Bengal, in which people in the east of the delta gradually came under the influence of Islamic cultural values and mosque patronage. An economic dynamism followed from the transformation of the area as the *Indo-Aryans* introduced and instilled the technique of wet-rice farming and organized cultivation.[3]   Both *Brahmanical* socio-cultural influences and those of *Perso-Islamic* religious preachers under the mosque patronage helped bring forward the idea of organizing family and farming system. Therefore, the spread of Islamic religious-cultural expansion is also deeply enrooted with the spreading of the techniques of agriculture and wet rice production in pre-modern Bengal. Both Brahmins and Mullahs were instrumental in teaching new methods of agriculture linked with eastward expansion of these two distinct religious faiths, which loosely centred around 'Hindu culture' patronized within Brahmanical hierarchical social orders, and 'the Islamic culture' patronized by mosque or *Dargah*. Islamic culture was predominantly influenced by Sufism, which was linked with the process of de-forestation and agricultural expansion, had developed inclusive cultural values in Bengali society (Bose and Jalal 2004). Within this historical perspective we can see that the economic imperatives of survival played a central role in the formation of socio-cultural identities in pre-modern Bengal. Eaton (1993) also points out that

'only in Bengal a majority of the indigenous population have adopted the religion of the ruling class, 'Islam' in the garb of mosque patronages. The significant role was played by village mosques and shrines in the diffusion of Mughal authority and Islamic values in the region'.

However, the Mughal authorities did normally intervene directly in the religious affairs of any community, and recruited their officials from across all the different religious communities. For example, the Mughals protected the *Marwadi*[4] businessman community settling in Bengal, who provided the main source of military funds.

The evolution of a syncretic culture

The result was that culture and society in Bengal evolved with a set of syncretic values that emphasised religious inclusion. This was the result of a longstanding tolerance among the people of this deltaic region in relation to a wide range of influences that included Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sufism and Tantrik cultures, each of which had been accommodated within indigenous tribal cultures.[5] Within this syncretic Bengali society, one could still identify longstanding forms of worship from pre-modern Bengal. Brahmanical and Islamic identities seeped into the layers of society and created a distinct culture in Bengal such that there was a co-existence

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3 This has also given the idea of territoriality in early Bengal, along with the Indo-Aryan and Terko-Islamic cultural values.

4 A Hindu business community, originating from the Marwad region of present Rajasthan in India.

5 Discussion with Professor Imtiaz Ahmad, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

between old and new religious practices. This meeting of Islamic and indigenous cultures went on to create the world's second largest Muslim ethnic community.

The differentiation of identities within Bengali society is therefore a relatively modern concept. To the modern mind, religion appears as a fixed identity where there are specific and well-defined beliefs and practices. Islam has been so finely woven in the Bengali fabric that it is almost impossible to determine where one thread coming from local beliefs, and another from Islamic belief, begins and ends. This helped to create a unique Bengali Muslim identity different from other Islamic cultures, where Muslims and Hindus could venerate common deities and holy men (*Pirs*), and pay tributes to the same shrines (*Mazars*) (Anisuzzaman 2002). The ideas and practices of Yoga, Tantric and Natha cults all gained popularity across both these main religious communities. Some Muslims produced literature that drew on Vaishnava themes, and others recognized the Vedas as books sent by God, or claimed that Yoga was also taught by Prophet Muhammad (Anisuzzaman 2002).

Moreover, the frontier people of the eastern delta did not seem to have viewed Islam as an alien or closed system, to be accepted or rejected as a whole. Religions were far from being the 'culture-boxes' with well-defined boundaries that they seem to be today. A static understanding of religion cannot therefore be applied to the pre-modern Bengal frontier, which was a fluid context in which Islamic and other beliefs seeped into a set of local cosmologies that were themselves dynamic. During the Islamisation process in Bengal, this 'seepage' occurred over such a long period of time that one can at no point identify a specific moment of 'conversion', or any single moment when people saw themselves as making a dramatic break with past beliefs (Eaton 1993). A gradual process of identification with an indigenous higher god slowly displaced the indigenous cosmology and the monotheistic ideal of Islam gradually became the norm.

Islam in Bengal absorbed local culture and became profoundly identified with Bengal's long-term processes of agrarian expansion. During its formative years, the cultivating classes did not seem to have regarded Islam as 'foreign' - even though some Muslim and Hindu literati and foreign observers did occasionally take such a view (Pattnaik 2005). As late as the early twentieth century, Muslim cultivators retained indigenous names like Chand, Pal, and Dutt. In the context of pre-modern Bengal, then, it would seem inappropriate to speak of the 'conversion' of 'Hindus' to Islam. What one finds, rather, is an expanding agrarian civilization, whose cultural counterpart was the growth of the cult of Allah. In 1908, the *Gazetteer of Khulna District* noted that the Muslim masses 'are descendents of semi-Hinduized aborigines, principally Chandals and Pods' who 'do not, however, know or admit that they are the descendants of converts to Islam; according to them they are the tillers of the soul' (Eaton 1993). In the evolution of this identity, there was a strong element of syncretism arising from religious intermingling, sharing of linguistic heritage and cultural commonalities.[6]

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[6] For example: Ray Mangala, written in 1686, praises both Dakshin Ray and Muslim pioneer Badi Ghazi Khan. The literatures that are prominent were Ananta Badu Chandidas's Srikrisna Kirtana, Ramayan by Kritivasa and Srikrisna Vijaya by Maladhara Vasu. The Pachali poems on local Gods and Goddess appeared towards the end of the fifteenth century which drew from the cultural climate and physical geography of Bengal (for details, see Tarafdar 1965). Nabi Vamsi by Sultan Saiyid depicted Krishna as one of the prophets (for details, see Bhattacharya 1999). Nur Tattwa is another literature that talked of the

Islamic and non-Islamic frontiers

The Perso-Islamic politico-cultural expansion in the region formed two social classes within the Muslims of Bengal, the 'Ashraf' and the 'Atraf'.[7] The Ashraf were viewed as the ruling class of Muslim society characterized by Perso-Arabic cultural values. The Atrafs were considered to be lower professional Muslim classes, who had originated from indigenous people mostly from the south eastern parts of Bengal. Ashrafs did not tend to share this view (Anisuzzaman 2002). The rural masses saw themselves as good Muslims because they cultivated the soil, while the Ashraf as non-cultivators disdained the plough. Members of the Ashraf class typically viewed their ancestors as people who had come to Indian sub-continent to administer a vast empire, and not to join indigenous peasant fellow cultivators. Herein lay the basis of a social cleavage between rural Muslims and non-cultivating Ashraf that had further widened in the context of the political and religious movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Eaton 1993).

The Ashrafs historically have also controlled and warned the ruling class of Muslims to deal with infidels and keep them away from key ruling responsibilities. This brought occasional tensions between the Turkish religious leaders and the Hindus in Bengal. By the end of the fourteenth century, the Sufis and the Firdausis ordered that the rulers should not reduce participation from Hindus and retain the Islamic character. Maulana Muzzafar Shams, a Sufi of the Firdausi order, wrote to Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah stating:

'The vanquished unbelievers with heads hanging down exercise their power and authority to administer the lands which belong to them. But they have also been appointed (executive) officers over the Muslims in the lands of Islam, and they impose their orders on them. Such things should not happen'.[8]

Another example of such tensions the rise of powerful nobles such as the Raja Ganesh dynasty. Raja Ganesh hailed from the ruling families of the former Pala and Sena rulers and had a great influence due to his ownership of vast and rich deltaic lands. Raja Ganesh became very powerful, but there is still no absolute agreement amongst historians as to whether Raja Ganesh actually usurped the throne or not. Raja Ganesh did not tamper with the basic ideals of the administration and polity which was then over two centuries old. In order to reduce tensions between Turks and Bengalis he arranged for his son to convert to Islam, becoming known as Sultan Jalal al-Din Muhammad, and later ruling as a Muslim king (Eaton 1993). While there was a divide between Islamic and non-Islamic groups at the upper level among the ruling classes, the masses were left relatively free to practice their religious beliefs, even during the Mughal period. Unlike any other Muslim society, even today in Bangladesh, irrespective of their religion, women wear the *Bindi* red spot normally associated with Hindu traditions. In reality, Bengal evolved characteristics that were

syncretic tradition of Bengal. Apart from this common literature, both Hindus and Muslims also revered goddesses such as Bon Bibi and Sitala (also see Pattnaik 2005).

7 The small but influential class of mainly urban Muslims who perpetuated the Mughals' ruling-class mentality, cultivated Urdu and Persian, and typically claimed ancestral origins from the west of the delta (for details, see Jahan 2002).

8 Muzzafar Shams Balkhi, Maktubat-I Muzaffar Shams Balkhi (Persian MS., Acc. No.1859, Khuda Baksh Oriental Public Library, Patna), Letter 163, p. 509. See also Askari (1956).

different both from other parts of northern India and unlike the Middle East from where the rulers hailed. At the same time, processes of Hindu-Muslim differentiation at the upper levels were pursued by the British colonial rulers from the nineteenth century under their policy of 'divide and rule'.

The colonial period: the growth of Islamic consciousness

The reformist movements in both Hinduism and Islam contributed to a consolidation of the distinct religious identities of the two communities. The Hindus in upper India started the Shudhi and Sangathan movements and the Muslims started Tabligh, Tanzeems, Firduasi and Sufis mostly in the Indian sub-continent. In Bengal, the Wahabi, Farzai and Tarika-e-Mohammad movements such as those represented by Titu Mir and Haji Shariatullah helped to give a distinct identity to Bengali Muslims. These were conservative schools of thought that stressed 'purist Islam' and urged the Muslims to give up Sufi practices (Ahmed 1998). At the same time, reform movements in Hindu society also created divergence. The idea of Islam and non-Islam as closed systems with definite boundaries is itself largely a product of these nineteenth and twentieth century reform movements. For most rural Bengalis during the pre-modern period, the line that separated 'non-Islam' from 'Islam' appeared to have been quite porous and shifting. Popular literature dating from the seventeenth century, such as the Mymensingh ballads, was popular amongst both communities who remained remarkably open to accepting any sort of religious ideas around agency, human or superhuman, that might assist them in coping with life's everyday problems (Eaton 1993). Yet in the background, the influences of British policy, and of religious movements, began to create and reinforce ideas of difference between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal.

Shaping socio-economic frontiers

Tensions around land ownership within the Bengali Hindu community helped feed processes of differentiation. In the north-western parts of Bengal, a predominantly Hindu class of *Zamindar* landlords existed along with a business class and an educated-middle class. In the south-eastern deltaic region of Bengal, on the other side, was the majority of Muslim settlers who remained mainly poor peasant tenants, or artisans working as tailors, dyers, masons, furniture makers, silkworm rearers, weavers and sailors and were considered lower class.

The British colonial policies played further upon these differences. The East India Company control of Bengal began with the defeat of a Muslim ruler Nawab Sirajudola in the battle of Pilasi in 1757. At first, the British took over revenue administration in 1765 and the Hindu trading class developed a friendly relationship with the company's officials (Chandra 2009). The wealth they had accumulated was reinvested in the land as *Zamindars*. The urban population was also primarily drawn from the professional and trading classes, consisting of high caste Hindus such as Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas. Later, the British turned to this class to try to create a reformist landlord class of 'gentlemen farmers' and create the foundation of an incipient civil society. The Muslims, with exceptions, occupied the lower rungs of society, and engaged themselves in agriculture and cognate pursuits. The communal

division of labour also reinforced the different socio-economic identities between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal.

At the same time, the British introduced a hierarchical education system aimed at creating a group of lower echelon of civilian bureaucrats who could manage the colonial state's revenues. This further entrenched unequal conditions and opportunities, which led to the exclusion of Bengali Muslims from access to this western education.[9] The relationship between the Muslim peasants and the Hindu *Zamindars* was to deteriorate further with the introduction of the 1793 Permanent Settlement, which created a new kind of land tenure system. This provided for a peasant to be a tenant on the land that he cultivated without ownership rights such that he could easily be evicted. An absence of strong laws made it convenient for the *Zamindars* to exploit tenants in order to maximize revenues (Day 1874; Eaton 1993, p.261-2). At the same time, *Zamindars* made every possible effort to exclude peasant from gaining access to western education. This occurred even at the primary school level until 1939, when a Muslim provincial government enacted free primary school education for the rural masses in Bengal.[10]

Just after a hundred years of rule, the British were forced to rethink their British India policy after the revolt of 1857, led mostly by the Hindu princely states. The British had realized that the Muslims, whom they had earlier defeated in 1757, were now no longer a threat. In a new twist to the colonial 'divide and rule policy',[11] they began more explicitly playing both sides off against each other. British officials and scholars such as William W. Hunter (1872) began to rethink their position in relation to the Muslims of the state. The introduction of cash crops such as jute, cotton, and tobacco was strengthening the position of the peasants and the British saw the potential of this up and coming Muslim cultivator class of *Jotedars* (rich farmers) in their new strategy. A new land law enacted in 1859 ensured the ownership of land for those cultivators who had held the land for twelve consecutive years, and forbade rent hike and unlawful evictions. These new laws created tension and unrest and increased awareness amongst the *Jotedars* about their control and authority over the land. After more attempted rent hikes, an uprising took place in 1873.[12]

By now, *Jotedars* had been placed on a more equal footing with the *Zamindars*. The British policy initiatives and new land ownership laws had been critical in helping them realise their potential as a political force. A more self-assertive *Jotedars* class began to attempt to free themselves from dependency on the *Zamindars*. For the *Jotedar*, then, political society had become a precondition for the protection of land ownership (Macpherson 1962). Implicitly they challenged their status as subjects and demanded the freedom of property and individual rights in accordance with the possessive quality of the bourgeoisie law of ownership. It was also similarly clear to the *Jotedars* that without western education and the precise

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9 English Education Act of 1935, Government of India, 1872. See Chandra (2009).

10 Two Years of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal, Being a Report of the Work Done by the Government of Bengal from 1st of April 1939 to 31st March 1940, Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1939, p.xii.

11 Appeasing one community against other, as Hindus were made to stand against Muslims before 1857, and viewing this new perception of threat, Muslims were set against the Hindus in post-1857 policies.

12 William W. Hunter (1872) argued that the Hindus in every branch of government had the upper hand over Muslims (Hunter, 1872, p.171–2).

knowledge of the law of property, they would not be able to challenge the all-powerful *Zamindar* class, as Rahim pointed (1992, p.316):

'For the *Jotedars*, then, education was not a means to earn a living, but was rather a means for self-assertion' against the feudal economic system'.

Census reports after 1872 began to classify tenure holders (such as *Jotedars* and *Talukdars*) into occupational categories of cultivators. Thus it is not possible or correct to compute from these records the proportions of *Jotedars* as Hindus or Muslims. However, the census reports indicate that there certainly was a majority of Muslims who dominated the agricultural sector in East Bengal, and that most of the rich farmers were also Muslims (Rahim 2007). With the foundation of the peasant economy, an incipient Muslim middle class therefore emerged under the tutelage of the colonial state, which had formerly patronized the Hindu middle classes during the early nineteenth century. To encourage the Muslims to participate fully in the affairs of the State, the school curriculum was considerably revamped.[13] Persian and Arabic languages were introduced at the secondary level. In addition, Farsi was included along with other subjects, such as Sanskrit, in the post-secondary examinations (Mahmood 1985). Social insecurity created by colonial underdevelopment also reinforced political competition between Hindus and the Muslims as they struggled to control limited resources. Not only did politics reinforce religious identity, but religion was also to later shape the evolution of nation-state ideology. Fears of Hindu domination created the conditions for building communal Islamic organizations that could help to unify Bengali Muslims.

From this point onwards, religious identity became a central aspect of political mobilization in colonial India. Religious identity formations were inextricably connected to the dynamics of the land ownership. As we have seen, the Hindu political class was mostly constituted by the Zamindars and an educated middle class, whereas the Muslims were farmers and a newly-emerged class of *Jotedars*. These identity constructions were later to be crucial for the creation of Bangladesh. Bengali Muslims from the *Jotedar* class consolidated themselves as a political force during the first quarter of the twentieth century, as English education became a passport to upward mobility. They emerged as a vocal political force for social and economic reforms in Muslim Bengal, which were opposed by many Hindus and by some of small Muslim feudal class (Rahim 2007). In the first half of the twentieth century, a vernacular elite emerged from these Muslim cultivators that produced leaders such as A. Q. Fazlul Haque, Abul Hashim, H. S. Suhrawardy and M.H. Bhashani who became the political voices of the lower economic class of the Muslims in Bengal. These new political elites saw no contradiction in being Bengali and Muslim, and this meant that a distinction became clearer between the Urdu language speaking up-country Muslims, and these Muslims who were loyal to the Bengali language and a distinctive Bengali cultural heritage. In the later years, these Bengali speaking Muslim Leaders were behind the evolution of an ethno-cultural nationalism (Sen 2002). By contrast, it was Urdu speaking East Bengali Muslim leaders such as Kwaza Nazimuddin and M.A. Ispahani who were among the most prominent supporters of the idea of Pakistan. Indian Muslim nationalism, then, was not homogenous - rather, it reflected a

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13 Bengal, Calcutta University Commission, 1917–19, Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing (1919, p. 229).

set of regional and linguistic tendencies. Beneath the coating of the Islamic brotherhood, argued the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia, there lay a profound cultural and linguistic distinction between a Bengali Muslim and a Muslim from upper India (Sen 1976).

Shaping political and religious frontiers

The Partition of Bengal in 1905, and the formation of the Indian Muslim League in 1906 were the two most significant events of a period that could be considered the key moment of increased politico-religious consciousness among Bengali Muslims in British India. As a large and potentially troublesome territory, Bengal province had attracted the attention of the British government during the later half of the nineteenth century. Early in 1903 Sir Andrew Fraser, governor of Bengal, propounded a scheme in which the idea for the partition of Bengal began tot take shape. The main argument was that the territories lying in the eastern section of the province were poorly administered and needed more attention from government. *Amrit Bazar Patrika* wrote on December 14, 1903 that the government wished to weaken the Bengali nation by placing it under two administrations, and '*The Bengali'* newspaper described it as a manifestation of the policy of 'divide and rule'.[14] It was at this stage that Muslim politics in Bengal took a new turn. Nawab Salimullah emerged as a leader of the Muslim community, especially of East Bengal. He supported the Partition scheme (1905) and organized a movement in its favour. On the other side, Lord Curzon himself toured East Bengal in February 1904 and addressed public meetings at Chittagong, Dhaka and Mymensingh. Speaking at Dhaka on February 18, 1904, he declared:

'Partition would make Dhaka the centre and possibly the capital of a new self sufficing administration which must give to the people of these districts by reason of their numerical strength and their superior culture the preponderating voice in the province so created, which would invest the Mohammedans in eastern Bengal with a unity which they have since the days of the old Musalmaan Vice-Roy and kings'.[15]

From this it was clear that the British were going to show special favours to the Muslims of East Bengal by creating a new Muslim majority province.

Later, while many Muslims of Bengal supported the Pakistan cause, there was apprehension. A.K. Fazlul Haq called for more than one state for the Muslims of India, thereby securing Bengali Muslims rights and interests in Bengal (Ayoob, 1975, p.2-3). It was the 'two-nation theory', which Fazlul Haque was made to present and was known as the Lahore Resolution of 1940 of All India Muslim League. The Lahore Resolution gave the Bangladesh people a concrete framework or a base in which they developed the idea for a separate Muslim state for East Bengalis. However, his 'two nations' were based on the Pakistan proposal, which had originally been plural in nature - and hence the term 'states' has been used rather than 'state'. Later, this idea was not pursued strongly and by 1946, it was accepted as a mere grammatical error. In fact, this resolution was moved as a tool to attain the dream of

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14 The Bengali, 15th January, 1904.

15 Curzon's Speeches, Volume 3, pp. 303-4.

an independent Muslim state by the All-India Muslim League (AIML) leadership in 1940. They had carefully mobilized the Bengali Muslim leaders for the self-reliance of the Bengali Muslims, and extended their political support to the Fazlul Haque government to cultivate their rural mass base. When the Indian National Congress (INC) withdrew their support, the Muslim League extended legislative support to the most popular leader of rural Bengal, Fazlul Haque to make a uniform Muslim movement for one state. In fact, Jinnah had little support from rural Bengali Muslims, except from a few Calcutta-based Urdu-speaking Muslim leaders such as Nazimuddin and Ispahani (Sen, 1976, p.32-33). Later, H. S. Suhrawardy was to also play a critical role in the Direct Action Day for Pakistan. After riots took place in Noakhali and Calcutta, differences between Hindus and Muslims widened. As a result, the Bengali Hindu community began to strongly oppose the idea of a united Bengal that had been raised at the last minute of Partition of India by some leaders.[16] Congress supported the division of Bengal in 1947, exactly on the grounds on which it had opposed its division earlier.[17]

Politically, the idea of United Bengal was an appealing one to some Muslim leaders, but the attainment of economic progress was a dominant concern of the Muslim peasant class of Bengal. One can argue that besides their economic status, the Muslims of Bengal were essentially provincialists, rather than nationalists or separatists.[18] The Bengali Muslims were neither apprehensive of capturing political power in a democratic set up at the provincial level (being 55 per cent), nor did they fear Hindu domination in politics as did the pre-partition Urdu-speaking Muslim leadership. Finally, they enthusiastically supported the Two Nation Theory (TNT) based on Muslim nationalism in 1947. Hence, in the partition of Bengal, economic factors were the main drivers in the political and religious mobilization of the Muslims.

Islamic nationalists forces were always present to some extent in Bengal. This fact could be analysed from the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the partition of India in 1947.[19] A section of Bengali Muslims regarded the annulment of Partition in 1911 as a victory of Hindu dominance over Bengali Muslims.[20] The same section of East Bengal was later to support the idea of Pakistan. In fact, the emergence of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971 was the culmination of Bengali nationalist struggle, launched in early twentieth century, to establish a separate identity. This was an identity not only distinct from the Hindu majority of the province, but also distinct from their co-

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16 It should be noted that Suhrawarthy's love for 'United Bengal' was a direct outcome of his having been passed over for the leadership of the East Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Party, even though he had been Prime Minister of undivided Bengal until Partition. The Leader of the EBML Parliamentary Party ipso facto become the Chief Minister of the Pakistan province of East Bengal.

17 For the details of politics involving this division, see Harun ur Rashid (2003, pp. 257-329). Abul Hashim and Sarat Chandra Bose had talked of a 50-50 sharing of power by the Hindus.

18 These terms have contextual relevance. 'Provincialist' is used in terms of a Bengali identity, 'nationalist' is used to refer to Islam as an identity and separatist is used to denote their ambitions in terms of political future. However all these references underwent various political transformations.

19 In 1905, the British divided Bengal in two parts. West Bengal was the Hindu majority province, and East Bengal had a Muslim majority.

20 The creation of IML was moreover was a result of the partition of Bengal, where a section of Bengali Muslims felt humiliated by the opposition of division of Bengal by Indian National Congress.

religionists in other regions of India (Haston 1994). Some scholars argue that this Bengali Muslim consciousness has roots as far back as the thirteenth century, with the conquest of Mohammad Bakthiyar (Osmany 1992). Many scholars believe that there were always fundamental cultural, religious dissimilarities between the two civilizations of India, Hindu and Muslim, even in Bengal (Sayed 1960). Nevertheless, it is clear from the study of Bengal that economic factors had conditioned a far more differentiated set of secular, cultural-linguistic, and religious identities among East Bengalis than was found in other parts of the Subcontinent.

Contesting identities in the united Pakistan

The separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 was not merely a case of geographical secession. It fundamentally challenged the very concept of two nations on which Pakistan was created, i.e. the idea that Hindu and Muslims of undivided India formed two distinct nations. A logical corollary of this theory was that the Muslim majority areas of the sub-continent should be constituted as a single nation, and it was on this basis that the monolithic state structure of Pakistan was established in 1947. Yet the new state embodied a set of internal cultural, linguistic and, above all, politico-economic contradictions that ultimately culminated in East Bengal's struggle for separation.

Many analysts viewed the emergence of an independent state of Bangladesh in 1971 as merely the implementation of the original 1940 Lahore Resolution, suggesting that this proved that poet philosopher Mohammed Iqbal's concept of Pakistan was more sound than politician Mohammed Ali Jinnah's view of the Muslim homeland (Ayoob 1973). This assessment was based on the evidence that in his famous Presidential address at the Muslim League Session of 1930, Iqbal had declared:

'I would like to see the Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated in to a single state. Self-government within British empire or without the British empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim States appears to me to be the finally destiny of Muslim at least of the north-west India'.[21]

Originally, Bengal had had little or no place in Iqbal's scheme of things. It was only later on in his correspondence with Jinnah, dated June 21, 1937, that the poet-philosopher seems to have become interested in the Indian Muslim Community (Ahmed 1970). The key visionary of the idea of Pakistan, Chaudhary Rahmat Ali, had also not considered Bengal as a part of Pakistan, referring to Bengal as Bang-e-Islam, and a Muslim majority state separate from his Pakistan. Ali's view of Pakistan was essentially the same as that in Iqbal's 1930 address, but with the single addition of Kashmir (Hussain 2000).

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21 Indian Annual Register (Calcutta), July-December 1930, pp. 337-38.

Two nation theory and Bengali Muslim identities

The Lahore Resolution of 1940 seemed to find a *modus vivendi* between the ideas expressed by Iqbal, and those expressed by Jinnah and other leaders of Muslim minority provinces, particularly U.P. While the Resolution talked in terms of 'Muslim India' as if it could be considered a single whole, Sayeed (1969, p.106) writes that the operative part of the resolution declared that

'The areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority, as in the north-western and eastern zone of India, should be grouped to be constitute 'independent states' in which the continent units shall be autonomous and sovereign'.

It was not until 1946, when the Muslim League Legislatures Convention was held in Delhi, that the League officially endorsed the concept of single state of Pakistan comprising both the north-western and eastern Muslim majority zones. Even at that time, there were voices of dissent raised, principally by Abul Hashim, the then Secretary of the Bengal branch of the Muslim League (Ayoob 1973). But these voices, though prophetic, were at that time merely cries in the wilderness, since the emotional commitment to Pakistan that had been created by Jinnah and the Muslim League was now too strong to resist.

Differences of opinion over the two nation theory can also be traced back to two separate strands of Islamic thinking which took shape in the nineteenth century: one based around Aligarh, and another Deoband (Episoto 1986). The Aligarhist strand was revisionist and liberal, committed to the reworking of the ideas of Islam so as to be relevant both to the socio-economic and political imperatives of pluralistic societies containing differing ethnic and cultural minorities, and to the economic and technological demands of an emerging modern world. In terms of the Aligarhist spirit, Islam did not stand in contradiction to the organisational principles of the nation-state or of parliamentary democracy, despite the frequency of such a claim by some *mullahs* and other religious clergy (Piscatori 1986). M. A. Jinnah drew inspiration from Islam from this particular tradition.[22]

The tradition that was associated with the seminary at Deoband was concerned with an essentially medieval, hierarchical view of Islam, based upon the powers of the clergy. It saw the Muslim community as a distinct whole, immune from other divisions and competing loyalties and from the artificial identities and symbols of the nation-state. Initially, many Deobandian scholars rejected the calls for a Pakistani state on the grounds that the ideas of national exclusiveness stood in contradiction to a pan-Islamic identity. Maulana Azad, a liberal Muslim who remained within the INC and served in the government of independent India, noted in his biography that 'it is one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, linguistically and culturally different' (Gandhi 1987). Having reluctantly accepted Partition, the Deobandian tradition came to dominate the Islamic political parties in the form of Jamaat-i-Islami and Jamait-ul-Ulema-i-Islam.[23]

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22 Just before his death, Jinnah had outlined his vision of the future Pakistan based upon a parliamentary system of government, in which 'Hindu, Muslim and Christians could become good citizens of Pakistan'. With such little explicit reference to Islam within the 1956 Constitution, cynical eyebrows were raised both in New Delhi, and within Pakistan itself.

23 It was later to oppose the creation of Bangladesh as an independent state.

These organizations, with differing emphases and slightly differing policies, took up the task of creating a real 'Islamic society' based upon the codification of the Shari'at. They favoured the sanctioning of religious authority through the teachings and tenants of Sunni orthodoxy with regards to language (the use of Urdu), strict punishment for adultery and theft, and held with Islamic ideals of interest, taxes and economic development (Hewitt 1992).

The East Bengal middle class soon realized that one could not live by religion alone. They faced both economic exploitation and lack of political voice within the new country. Pakistan's power structure was heavily loaded in favour of West Pakistan, and particularly its Punjab and Mohajirs elites, such that any politically conscious Bengali felt an acute degree of political exclusion. Combined with the geographical distance between the two wings of Pakistan, and the linguistic differences, demand grew for a degree of autonomous existence for East Pakistan's people, demands that were not acceptable to the central government.

Socio-cultural differences and economic disparities

In the united Pakistan, the state began introducing measures that would consolidate its hold over Bengali Muslims. Initially, the attempt had been made to define Pakistani citizens' identity in terms of religion. It was presumed that a religious identity would supersede other primordial identities and hold the disparate nation together. In theory, a state can mobilise people based on a single identity. But to make this into a political reality, and to sustain it beyond sub-national identities would have required a more egalitarian approach that was on offer, one that would be able to address the political aspirations and economic grievances that arise among different ethno-linguistic groups.[24] Instead, in 1948, Jinnah declared Urdu to be state language, ignoring the fact the Bengalis were a distinct group of Muslims whose political and social aspirations required proper recognition within the new state of Pakistan. Instead of building a bridge to work with Bengali Muslim political elites on the difficult cultural and economic issues that were becoming apparent, the West Pakistan-dominated Muslim League leaders began redefining Pakistan's political culture through an authoritarian approach and an emphasis on Persianized and Arabized religion and culture (deVotta 2001). The League leadership was in favour of making Urdu[25] the sole national language for all of Pakistan, despite the fact that Urdu was a minority language spoken by a tiny fraction of the ruling elites, who had migrated from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and settled in Karachi. In a self-assigned civilizing mission, Urdu was to be the medium of instruction at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education and the Bengali script was to be replaced by the Arabic script.[26] This would have serious implications for educated Bengalis who had to compete for government jobs with their counterparts from West Pakistan, who would now have to learn two languages: English and Urdu, in addition to Bengali.

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24 In discussion with Athar Hussain, Director, Asia Research Centre, LSE, London, UK.

25 The raison d'être for making Urdu the sole national language was, however, a deeply embedded feeling rooted in Indian Islam. Urdu had developed under the patronage of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire (1192–1800 AD). It was part of the Arabic, Persian and Turkish heritages, and seen as representing Islam par excellence. See Smith (1946, p.97).

26 The Dawn, 19th February, 1949; 21st March, 1951 (cited in Rahim, 1986: 380–3).

At the same time, the prospect of getting better jobs and a better future remained a distant hope, due to the siphoning off of economic resources from East to West Pakistan (Nations 1971). The government established an Adult Education Centre and allocated substantial funds to impart education in Bengali language through Arabic script.[27] Simultaneously, efforts were made to encourage Bengali Muslim writers to write in *Chalit Bhasa*[28] as an attempt to get rid of the influence of 'sanskritised' words in Bengali literature. By April 1951, the government had spent around Rs60,000 on efforts to examine whether literacy could be achieved quickly with the introduction of an Arabic script (Murshid 1996).

On 21st February 1952, the government's violent repression of the Language Movement revived Bengali cultural nationalistic feelings. From the mid-1950s onwards, secular and democratic forces gained expression of their dissatisfaction with the status quo under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.[29] Pakistan's minority communities, which made up 10 per cent of the total population, had also become a powerful critical force, since they also wanted to play a role in national politics.[30] The Awami League (AL), which by that time was gaining popularity, picked this issue up alongside the principle of language. In 1955, secular forces within the AL revoked an earlier decision of the party so that it was now opened to all citizens of Pakistan irrespective of their creed, caste and religion. The name of the party was then changed from Awami Muslim League to the National Awami League. With grassroots support from both the main communities, the AL emerged as a mass political party. It was to become the first political party to make a major breakthrough in the communal politics of the State.

The most prominent issue for the people of East Pakistan was economic deprivation, exacerbated by government discrimination in resource allocations between West and Eastern wings. West Pakistan's policies had brought about disparities in the economies between the two wings of Pakistan, and between 1949-50 and 1969-70 the economy of West Pakistan grew at a faster rate than that of East Pakistan. East Pakistan contributed heavily to foreign exchange earnings through the export of its raw jute and jute goods, which constituted over 90 per cent of the total export earnings of Pakistan. Yet West Pakistan was accounting for the bulk of the foreign exchange used for investment and industrialization. The famous Six Point

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27 A sixteen member committee was formed on 9th March 1949 under the chairmanship of Maulana Akram Khan. This committee submitted its report on 7th December 1950, and rejected the introduction of Arabic script in Bengali.

28 Chalit Bhasa was more of a local language spoken in the Muslim dominated East Bengal. Contrary to this Sadhu Bhasa was more of a 'sanskritised' language that is used by the Bengali Hindus. This debate was more relevant with regard to the quality of language in which prose was composed. In this context the perceived dichotomy between the two communities witnessed the flourishing of punthi literature as a challenge to Sadhu Bhasa.

29 Alam (1991) analyses the role played by the 1952 Language Movement (bhasha andolan) in East Bengal in the development of a Bengali nationalist discourse. The Language Movement forged a conscious link between various subaltern social groups, enabling them to transcend existing barriers and transform them into formidable political actors. Using the Gramscian concept of counter-hegemonic striving, this paper argues that the language movement was a definitive outcome of years of counter hegemonic activities of the Bengali subalterns. This process of counter hegemony was especially evident in the peasant insurgency in rural areas, and in the building of an alternative political organization. The articulation of political power through these two processes stands in sharp contrast to the efforts of the Muslim League, both ideologically and politically.

30 The question of a joint electorate was not a contested issue in the 1954 provincial election and no reference was made to it in the famous 21 Point Programme.

Programme had argued for the removal of this economic disparity between the two wings.

Bengali commitment to Pakistan had been predicated on the assumption that they would exercise autonomy at the regional level and share power at the federal level, but they found themselves betrayed almost from the start of the new Pakistan. In a heavily centralized system, power was concentrated among the West Pakistan-based elite. This elite used its power to plunder resources from East Bengal, monopolized external aid, and channelled state resources to West Pakistan, ostensibly in a programme to build social equality. But this programme demanded the suppression of democracy and the denial of autonomy to the provinces, and East Pakistan in particular. An emphasis on religious identity was used as a façade to conceal the Punjab-centric identity of the new Pakistani state. The struggles for democracy, regional autonomy, social justice, secularism and nationalism therefore coalesced within the broader struggle for self-rule for East Pakistan.[31] The creation of Bangladesh's national identity must therefore be viewed within the historical context that led to creation of an independent state.

Contesting identities in the new state of Bangladesh

The policies and programmes of Fazlul Haq within undivided India, and later those of H.S. Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhashani, Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman, each played a decisive role in the evolution of Bengali Muslim politics. The origins of the idea of Bangladesh lay in successive identity-related conflicts. The first of these conflicts, associated with religious identities, first led to East Bengal's separation from the body politic of India and from West Bengal within Pakistan. The second conflict, associated with East Pakistan's political, linguistic and cultural identity, culminated in the subsequent division of Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh. In the first decades of independence, further differences of perception and ideology among Bangladeshi leaders went on to shape these identities further during the 1980s and 1990s.

The disappearance of the 'second colonial rulers', that had attempted to weld the disparate communities of Pakistan into a nation, showed the importance of primordial cultural-linguistic identities. Mujib went on to shape the new nation on the basis of his 'four pillars' - democracy, socialism, secularism and Bengali nationalism - the basic principles of the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. By contrast, the narrower policy perspectives of the anti-Mujib leaders such as Maulana Bhasani and General Ziaur Rahman (who seized power in a coup in 1975) emphasized a different kind of nationalism that had Islam its core.[32] Bhasani's policies were based on ideas of 'Islamic socialism', and in one of his meetings he declared that he would 'trample the Constitution underfoot, if it is not based on the Quran and the practices of the Prophet' (Chakravarty 1995). Contrary to Mujib's policies of secularism, he advocated a narrower form of communalism, based on an anti-Hindu ethos that was closer to that found in the idea of Pakistan. He criticized Mujib for making Bangladesh into a satellite of Hindu India, attempting to forge a united front between

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31 Discussion with Rehman Sobhan, Dhaka; also see Sobhan (2006).

32 This was to become known as 'Bangladeshi nationalism'.

extremists of right and left against the forces of secularism. The debate on state and religion became an issue when the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh stated that secularism was the fourth pillar of state policy. The idea of making secularism[33] part of state policy followed logically from the freedom struggle in which Bengalis sought to establish a democratic country based on secular values.

The essential strength of a secular society is that it reduces the significance of primordial factors such as religion, ethnicity, and caste within national identity construction, influencing political choice and delineating economic opportunities.[34] Elevation of any such primordial factor to a significance that constrains opportunities or incites violence is inimical to the construction of a secular society. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman defined secularism in a distinctive way. For him secularism neither implied the absence of religion, nor any repudiation of Islam. He argued that it was a way to protect people against the influence of Islamic extremists. In Pakistan, religion had been used as a tool to establish and sustain dictatorship for more than a decade, and this was very well understood by the AL leadership. The repudiation of secularism by the Pakistani state inspired a culture of exclusion that eroded democratic values and arguably culminated in the genocide of 1971.

Under Bangladesh's Constitution, Article 38 prohibited politics based on religion. Under this provision, religious parties such as Jamaat-e-Islam were banned. The aim was to build a society based on national and public welfare that would negate communalism as a political force. Mujib believed that the religious ideology of Islam could be retained within a spirit of secularism. In order to publicise this, he re-instated the old practice of daily recitals from holy books of different religions on national radio and television. The idea was that Mujib's rule would be based on 'multi-theocracy' (Maniruzzaman 1990).

All this created an era of religious and cultural disagreement amongst different religious 'stakeholders'. The idea of setting up a new cooperative farming system upset rich rural cultivators, and the creation of the *Rakhi Bahini*, a paramilitary force between the government and army, displeased the Armed Forces. Mujib's authoritarianism during the later years of his rule, such as the abolition of civil liberties and the introduction of a new one-party system, also undermined liberal democrats in the country. In addition to each of the above, the comprehensive failure of the government deliver economic progress, the controlled hoarding of food, corruption and cronyism, led to widespread disillusionment and resulted in Mujib's assassination in 1975. The new nation then became plunged into a period of multiple coups that were to lead on to a decade and a half of military dictatorship. The anti-colonial nationalistic hegemony faded, and General Zia's military regime began to consolidate state power by harping back to issues of religion.

General Ziaur Rahman, in the process of consolidating his political power base, took the steps that began to transform Bengali culture and polity along more

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33 The Constitution does not precisely conceptualize the idea of secularism but suggests it may be realised through the elimination of: (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting of official status to any religion; (c) the prohibition of the use of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.

34 These could be essential features for an individual's identity but not for a secular state (personal communication with Rehman Sobhan, Dhaka).

communal lines. Religious politics took shape in Bangladesh, with the amendment of Article 38 of the Constitution. The word 'secularism' was deleted, and a new provision incorporated 'to place full Faith in Almighty Allah', by amending article 8 (1) of the Constitution. It had also introduced the words 'Bismillahir Rahamnur Rahim' at the top of the preamble. The 'struggle for national Liberation' was replaced by the 'war for national Independence'. Socialism was redesigned to conform to the Islamic idea of social justice. A new clause was added to Article 25(2) relating to 'Islamic solidarity', which allowed the cultivation of fraternal relations among Muslim countries.[35] These changes were aimed at downplaying the role of Mujib and the Awami League in securing Independence. The military regime therefore rejected linguistic nationalism in favour of a territorial Islamic nationalism. This attempted to forge a new national identity for the people of Bangladesh by making a clearer distinction between the Bengalis of India's West Bengal, and those in Bangladesh. From this point, the citizens of Bangladesh were described as 'Bangladeshis' (Article 6). This brand of Bangladeshi nationalism was also constructed by the regime primarily to divert attention from the government's failure to deliver meaningful change. The process of Islamisation served the purpose of trying to avert a legitimacy crisis in the face of a weakening economy and persistence of mass poverty.[36] This eventually opened the floodgates for other leaders, such as General H.M. Ershad during the 1980s, to continue using religion as a tool for political purposes.

While there is no doubt that Islam was used politically by these leaders, the critical issue is to understand how deeply this 'Islamisation' process has in fact gone. One of its effects was the attempt to rehabilitate a number of prominent 'collaborators' accused in 1971 of involvement in the killing of intellectuals and other civilians. Indeed, a majority of these collaborators had come from the religious political parties. They began using every religious occasion to chastise Bangladesh's liberals and secularists for abandoning Islam and the Prophet and accepting Hindu Bengali Rabindronath Tagore as a cultural figurehead. By invoking these slogans, the right-wing establishment succeeded in transferring its communalism into the Bangladeshi brand of nationalism. On the basis of an anti-Mujib ideology, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was founded in 1978. Similarly, the second military regime, General H M. Ershad continued his predecessor's policy with enthusiasm. Indeed, he went one step further by declaring 'Islam as state religion' of Bangladesh.[37] The Bangladesh masses had struggled against an Islamic brand of nationalism in 1971 to secure a Bengali cultural-linguistic identity, but the subsequent military regimes gradually helped bring an Islamic identity into Bangladeshi politics.

The growth of an Islamic politics

The onset of democracy during the 1990s did not alter the trends set in place by the military regimes significantly, and there was an increased incidence of terrorist

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35 The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Law, The Government of the Republic of Bangladesh, 1979.

36 Hashmi (2003) argues that the successors of Mujib adopted Islam after the failure of both the welfare state and the promised socialist utopia.

37 Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, The Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Law, Government of the Republic of Bangladesh.

activities, extremism and communalism in Bangladesh grew during the 2000s. A key change was that in the BNP government of 2001-6, fundamentalist forces had increasingly begun to occupy legitimate political space as the ideals of the Liberation movement faded.

The BNP has always been associated with an ideology of 'Bangladeshi nationalism' in contrast to the 'Bengali Nationalism' traditionally associated with the AL. After the 2001 elections, there was a tremendous rise in the attacks on minorities, moderate Muslims and liberal democratic forces including opposition politicians. The BNP-led governing coalition included Islamist parties, most notably the Jamaat-i-Islami. Islamic groups such as the Islamic Chattra Shibir and HUJI-B gained legitimacy within the political landscape of Bangladesh. This was a very significant change as forces that had once been shunned as collaborators had now managed to occupy mainstream political space. The same period was also witnessed a rise in terrorist training camps. The existence of Islamist militant groups such as Jamat-ul-Mujahideen-Bangladesh (with a close link to Afghan Jihadis) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (linked to Al-Qaeda) in Bangladesh have consolidated and expanded their institutional trans-border networks. In certain quarters scholars began wondering if 'Talibanization' of Bangladesh was underway (e.g. Karlekar 2006). In fact, the characteristics of this change was perceived that the ethos and the ideology of the movement for autonomy and the Liberation struggle were no longer relevant in Bangladeshi politics, and the re-emergence of Islam as a factor considered necessary to consolidate political power in Bangladesh. The marginalization and disappearance of the left of centre and leftist parties from Bangladesh's political scene were a setback to the moderate forces in the country (Dixit 2001). It is interesting that after 2006 this has become less prevalent, and that accounts of Bangladesh's 'talibanization' now seem somewhat alarmist.

The rise of Islamic extremism was fuelled by continuing economic underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment. Bangladesh remains predominantly an agriculture-based society, with more than forty per cent population is still bellow poverty line. Unemployed immigrants such as Rohigiyya refugees were systematically targeted and taken advantage of by religious fundamentalist forces. These domestic factors, and the influence of international Islamic actors, both provided a rationale for exploiting illiterate and unemployed youth to promote Islamic extremism, including within an expanding Madrasa sector.

The factors beyond Islamic revivalism and intolerance in Bangladesh lie mainly within macro, meso and micro layers of within Bangladesh society and polity. At the macro level, the socio-political elites of the society have used Islamism for political purposes to hold state power and divert from problems of mass poverty and unemployment. In this process, external actors, using petro-dollars from Middle East countries, have imposed their version of Islamism through the work of charities to strengthen a Madrasa culture and patronise mosques. The dominance of Middle Eastern Islam (*Hanabli*) has contributed ideas of intolerance among the Muslims of Bangladesh (*Hanafi*). At the meso (intermediate) level, a decline of scholarship in the Islamic academic sector and inability of mainstream religious civil society, particularly mosque-based educated mullahs, to reveal the true version of Islam to the society, has led to confusion among some Muslims. At the micro level, increased migration of unskilled and semi-skilled workers to the Middle East has favoured

efforts to impose an 'authentic' Middle Eastern version of Islam over *Hanafi* society, as migrants return home to predominantly poor and illiterate communities in Bangladesh.

Islamic politics versus secularism

Secular forms of politics remain inculcated within the thought processes of mainstream political parties in Bangladesh, reflected in their slogans and manifestos. During the ninth parliamentary elections in 2008, the Awami League promised that the use of religion and communalism in politics would be banned if elected, with courtesy and tolerance restored to the political culture of the country.[38] By contrast, the BNP's alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islam, the proponent of a stronger Islamic identity, stated that if elected it would enact a 'blasphemy law' to prevent anti-religious statements and criticism of religion in books, newspapers and electronic media (Kumar 2009). Most importantly, the Jamaat emphasized giving military training to citizens aged between 20 and 30 gradually under the supervision of the defence forces.[39] Jamaat did not clarify the intention behind such training, but it made many people worried since Islamist organizations have generally given this kind of training to promote militancy. The BNP-led political alliance had been largely responsible for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and it had neglected to combat Islamic extremism in the last decade.

When the AL won the election with a landslide, the results seemed to indicate a rejection of the Jamaat-e-Islami brand of Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh. The Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina promised to the people of Bangladesh to bring about change, and the younger generation had been a key factor in the left leaning secularist's alliance election victory. Hasina used the language a change from darkness to light, from the shrouds of graft and corruption, violence and militancy to the light of a modern, secular and democratic country. She particularly emphasised the idea re-instating 'the spirit of 1971'. The AL won 262 seats out of 300 parliamentary seats, and these new MPs are entrusted with the onus of opening a new era in the history of Bangladesh. The mandate clearly shows that people of Bangladesh voted for a party, that won the country's independence from Pakistan in the spirit of secularism. In the elections, the 'forces of 1947' were badly defeated by the believers of moderate democratic and secular principles.[40]

Historically, Bengali culture as we have seen, is mainly inclusive, tolerant and syncretic in nature. Time and again, these socio-cultural values have come under attack and suffered. People have struggled to maintain these basic values, from fighting the war against Pakistan in 1971, to more recently voting to power a secular alliance against the forces of intolerance in the 2008 Parliamentary Elections. A recent verdict in the Bangladesh High Court has directed the government to re-instate the original 1972 Constitution. The dangers of extremism have at least for now been

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38 Election Manifesto of Bangladesh, Awami League, Ninth Parliamentary Elections 2008, at http://www.albd.org/autoalbd/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=367&Itemid=1.

39 'Polls Manifesto: Jamaat pledge blasphemy law', The Daily Star, February 4th, 2008, http://www.thedailtstar.net/pf story. php?nid=667829.

40 The 'forces of 1947' represent the 'idea of Pakistan', based on the principle of 'Islamic nationalism'.

sidestepped by the people of Bangladesh in this election. With an absolute majority in the parliament, the government has now changed the Islamic symbolism and re-instated 'Secularism' (fifteenth amendment) within the constitution of Bangladesh. The consolidation of democracy, and the maintenance of a vibrant civil society, remains the best antidote for secular identity within Bangladeshi society. At the same time, while the tensions around identity remain as a fault line that runs through Bangladesh politics, other factors are also at play. For example, as Mushtaq Khan (2000) has shown, there is now a deep-rooted system of political patronage and alliance-building that allows each party to gain power and resources in rotation through electoral politics. In this model, he argues that religious and secular identities do not run very deep, and are just convenient political tools. The fact that the AL and the BNP have successfully alternated in government each election since 1991 suggests that this system is a resilient one.

Conclusion

The main argument of this working paper has centred on the idea that Bangladesh rests on a set of primordial socio-cultural, linguistic and religious identities that have been distinctively shaped by the history of the Bengal delta. The socio-economic system around which modern civilization has grown up in Bengal is derived from a distinctive cultural-religious ideology. As a result, relatively flexible religious ideologies were mobilized around the mode of production and economic life of the people. Subsequent attempts to construct a unique linguistic or religious identity within Bangladesh have tended to ignore the multiple identities around issues of language, class and profession, and this has occasionally served to provoke confrontation and violence.

The nationalist project has revolved around a recurring tension between two distinct 'constructs': the 'Bengali' and the 'Bangladeshi' identities. The 'Bengali' identity evolved largely due to two factors: first, on account of the syncretic secularist traditions that were present in the early history of Bengal; and second, from the Language Movement that arose in the early 1950s within East Pakistan. On the other hand, the 'Bangladeshi' identity was forged by taking recourse to Islamic loyalties that were initially crystallized during the movement for Pakistan, and then later by the process of Islamisation set in motion by the military regime of General Zia and later continued by General Ershad. Yet both two identities had exclusionary elements – the first towards non-Bengalis such as the Chakma and other tribal peoples found in the Hill Tracts and elsewhere, and non-Bengali 'Biharis' left over from Pakistan; and the second towards non-Muslims, who had long considered themselves to be Bengalis. A recognition of plural identities is needed to maintain a society which includes a mosaic of people of different creeds, communities, and political persuasions and enable them to live in harmony and tolerance. After the reintroduction of electoral democracy in 1991, more space opened up for political mobilization along religious lines, with the use of Islam by political parties such as the BNP and Jamaat-i-Islami to gain electoral benefits. The result was a state-sponsored Islamisation that has been deployed primarily to divert attention from the states failure to deliver solid benefits to its people. The outcome of the 9th Parliamentary Election has revived hopes that there are still strong sections of moderate Bengali secularist forces within civil society that both promote inclusive cultural values and resist a resurgence of Islamic

extremism. The majority of Bangladesh's people and its civil society (including the majority of religious leaders) still hold strong secular and inclusive cultural values. Finally, the paper has also argued that there is a correlation between an economically weaker Bangladesh and the resurgence of Islamism, and between greater prosperity and a reduction of Islamism. The international community should therefore continue to endeavour to help the country with its development. A secularist-linguistic-civic-Bengali-nationalism is perfectly possible within the framework of Islam in Bangladesh if this long tradition of tolerance is re-imagined within the nationalistic hegemony.

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