Defining the Frontiers of Identity:
Balancing Language and Religion in Bangladesh

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The question of identity is a social issue but behind its construction there are potent political forces at work. These forces seek to conceptualize and articulate socio-political grievances of a 'community' and convert these grievances into a political tool, which forms the basis of a separate nation state. Therefore, the issue of identity is the most volatile subject in multi-ethnic states. In a multicultural and plural state, the state-hegemonisation and definition of national identity inevitably creates fissiparous tendencies especially when the nature of the state often fails to take diversity into account.

In the context of the creation of Pakistan and given the history of partition, the state hegemony in crafting a 'nation' was an effort to translate the ideological inspiration behind the state formation. At the same time, the Hindu dominated Congress opposition created a sort of insecurity regarding the viability of the nation-state. Therefore, the state, in its over-zealous attempt to promote and protect an Islamic identity the basis on which the state was founded, played the role of an ultimate arbitrator of the identity question. The problem with such an overarching authority of the state that defined the existence of 'self' within the geographical parameter persisted in conceiving a political identity that defined the citizenship and gave him an identity and a sense of belongingness to the territory. In the process, the state advanced "Islam" as the core of the national identity. In this context, Urdu became the defining factor of being a 'Muslim' in the new state of Pakistan. Bengalis, the majority community of Pakistan, contested this identity of the state. The state addressed the issue but not before providing deep foundational inspiration to the future Bangladesh state.

The history of Bengal defines socio-cultural parameters and a unique notion of identity went through a socio-cultural evolution spanning centuries. The political construct of the Bengali Muslim identity is however not a very old phenomenon. When talking of Bangladesh and the construction of its national identity, one traverses a long period of history that constructed and politically consolidated this identity. The problem in studying the evolution of identity arises from its own political salience within the context of the debate on nation, nationality and national identity. In the case of Bangladesh, political awakening took a longer time to traverse the religious bonding that the state of Pakistan had crafted as the basis of its nationhood. Twenty-five years after the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religion, the political history of this region was reconstructed with a second partition on the basis of secular characteristics that formed the lynchpin in the formation of the Bangladesh state. The philosophy that drove the passion of the Bengalis was economic and political coupled with a strong secular identity, at the core of which lay the Bengali language. However, the post liberation political developments again brought the issue of religion to the centre stage. In this

context, there are certain issues this paper would deal with: First, does the state construction of an identity create a nation? This paper would briefly look into the history of the Bengali Muslims and their syncretic tradition. Then it would delve into how this socio-religious identity got converted into a political identity and the role played by the elite. The second part will deal with the formation of Pakistan, the failure of the Pakistan state and the birth of Bangladesh. Lastly it will analyze the contesting political identities of the secular versus the religious and the future of the Bangladesh state.

The Construction of 'Bengali Muslim' Identity

The construction of the Bengali Muslim identity went through the process of socio-political and cultural evolution. A variety of factors contributed to the shaping of this identity. By its very definition, the Bengali Muslim identity has both linguistic and socio-cultural connotations apart from religious overtones. In the evolution of this identity, one could discern a large influence of syncretism that evolved through religious intermingling, sharing of linguistic heritage and cultural commonality[1]. In this context the sense of self as it existed then was complementary rather than contradictory between the two communities. This syncretic tradition that was nurtured due to a supportive socio-lingual heritage is, to a large extent, a harbinger of the affinity between the two communities and has contributed to the growth of a secular ethos. Literature, songs and folklore developed their own syncretic traditions and the Bengali language overrode the broad religious divide.

Towards the early eighteenth century, however, the syncretic tradition started melting under the pressure of social realities and political compulsions. Cultural identities transformed into political ones and both the Hindu and Muslim communities competed with each other. This fact is discernable in the various writings of that period that reflected the differences between the two communities[2]. The literature of this period, barring a few, followed an action-reaction model. The reform movements in both Hinduism and Islam contributed to the consolidation of the two distinct identities based on religious values rather than on social ones[3]. The effort to push a separate sense of identity by orthodox mullahs who wanted to purify the Bengali Muslims and to make them see themselves as 'outsiders' or 'aliens' inevitably resulted in their social alienation from the Hindus (Ahmed 1988). The emphasis was to mould a communitarian definition based on religion. With these movements, the complementarities of the Bengali identity gave way to the political conceptualization of the Bengali Hindu and the Bengali Muslim identities. To quote Rafiuddin Ahmed, an analyst, who emphasizes the not very deep differences between the two communities:

> The course of development suggests particularly one significant conclusion – that the objective differences between the two communities at the mass level were by themselves not strong enough to induce mutual conflict. For although the doctrinal differences between the two religious system are wide and varied, historically these differences were not of such importance as to act an effective barrier dividing all Muslims from all Hindus. In fact, any unprejudicial

consideration of historical Islam in Bengal would suggest that basic doctrinal principles had very little to do with the political confrontation between Muslims and Hindus. It was only through skillful manipulation of certain religious symbols and constant ideological propaganda that the latent differences could be articulated and later used as a potent instrument in the conflict between the two groups (Ahmed 1998: 183).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Mullahs, in ignorance, fanaticism and naiveté, became a willing instrument in the hands of powerful interest groups who strived to bargain with the colonial rulers by projecting themselves as the leaders of their 'community.' To further their political interests, this identity formation was necessary. To quote an analyst, "the notion of an exclusive 'Muslim' identity gained ground and helped crystallize the boundaries of a self-conscious religious community, perhaps for the first time in their history" (Ahmed 2001: 18).

The origin of the Bengali Muslims became relevant in the contested identity that competed with the homogenizing efforts of the Congress that argued that India is one nation. This is to attract British indulgence to resolve both the self-rule and nationality issues. While the Muslims insisted on their Arab, Afghan and central Asian lineages to forcefully argue that they constitute a separate nation, the Hindus emphasized the fundamental unity of the Indian people.[4] With the British arbitrating the political fortune of both communities, the hitherto syncretic socio-cultural tradition was pushed into the background.

The sense of nation with a political flavor in fact germinated when the first census took place in Bengal in 1881. For the first time, it was reflected that the Muslims were the majority. The British regime and the concept of 'self rule' gave a new political meaning to 'numbers'. However, compared to their Hindu compatriots, they were economically and educationally backward. Although their stake in the political system was very high, this prevented them from competing for any political position. The Bengali Muslims therefore turned to western education to qualify for various government jobs that will elevate their socio-economic status. They increasingly participated in political activities and organized themselves in order to work out this numerical majority in their favor. This was done to protect their genuine interests which they perceived would be undermined in a united India. As discussed earlier, though the Bengali Muslim identity had been socially formed, it had not envisioned itself politically within a territorial confine. The division of Bengal in 1905 gave territoriality to the Bengali Muslims' sense of identity. One can argue that the Bengali Muslims were provincialists rather than nationalists or separatists[5] in their approach to the partition, and subsequent political developments reflected such an orientation.

The heightened sentiments, competition and perceived deprivation coupled with the lack of economic privilege gave rise to the perception that the Muslims were being exploited by the Hindus in the Muslim minority provinces and Bengal. This sense of deprivation was further translated into political capital and its politicization heightened the tension between the two communities. These sentiments were factored into an

inevitable fear of a political system dominated by the Hindu majority. Though the Muslims were in the majority in Bengal, they were a minority in united India. The choice was between the partition of India and a united India. Between these two, coupled with the unwillingness of the Bengali Hindus to form a united Bengal, the Bengali Muslims were left with the only option which is to unite themselves as a Muslim 'nation.' Though the feeling of a separate Bengali identity was present during the 1947 partition, efforts were made to cement the linguistic and religious identities. The *Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Samaj* and later Muslim Sahitya Samaj played an important role in this. Later, another significant organization, the East Pakistan Renaissance Society, that came into being in the forties and which was a cultural front of the Pakistan movement, applied separatist measures to consolidate the Muslim identity[6]. The feeling was more in conformity with a monolithic Islamic brotherhood which was conceptualized and projected as a 'nation' in the Lahore resolution of 1940. The partition and formation of a Muslim nation was a transformation from empire to nation for the sub-continent Muslims given the context of long years of Muslim rule in India.

The Lahore resolution, moved by A.K.Fazlul Haq, one of the pioneers of the Bengal peasant movement, was regarded as a tool to the ultimate attainment of self-sufficiency of the Bengali Muslims. To accomplish the goal of an independent Muslim state, the All India Muslim League (AIML) leadership carefully mobilized the Bengali Muslim leaders. After a year of moving the Lahore resolution, Haq resigned from the AIML and consolidated his Krisak Praja Parishad. In fact, he formed the government in Bengal with the support of the Congress. After the Congress withdrew its support, the Muslim League extended its support to cultivate this rural based political party in order to further its agenda of a separate nation. Though Jinnah had the support of the Calcutta-based Urdu speaking Muslim leaders like Nazimuddin, Isphani and Suhrawardy, he needed to make inroads into the rural areas to strengthen and build a unified movement.

The euphoria over the partition and creation of a state for the Muslims was short lived for the East Pakistanis. The political mobilization based on religion was built on the assumption that there could be no justice for the Muslims in a Hindu majority state. But at the same time, a religion-based nationalism was not accepted fully. The dilemma of nation and nationhood was reflected in the last minute efforts to form a united Bengal[7]. Such a state would have assured the Bengali Muslims greater political power in a state where they constitute a majority. The Congress that had earlier opposed the partition of Bengal in 1905 supported the division of Bengal in 1947, exactly on the ground on which it had opposed it earlier[8]. This opposition to a united Bengal along with the 1905 division has profound impact in the mind of the Bengali Muslims to date, that the Hindus have acted against the Bengali Muslims' interests. In fact, such a narrative is cited in favor of a Bangladeshi nationalism as a justification for a separate Bengali Muslim identity with a religious component.

From the very beginning, the Bengali Muslims were conscious of their separate identity. The reason why they joined the state of Pakistan was to attain economic salvation which was a dominant concern of the predominant peasant class. Numerically they were in the majority therefore they were not apprehensive of capturing political

power in a democratic set up at the provincial level in a united India. Nor did they fear Hindu domination in politics, unlike the pre-partition Urdu speaking Muslim leadership. Yet they voted overwhelmingly for Pakistan for political power and economic well being[9].

The state of Pakistan was well envisioned territorially, but the structure of the state and its ideology remained vaguely defined in the pre-partition era. Interestingly, 1947 underlined the success of the elite in defining a political identity based on religion that ultimately led to the formation of the state. However, the failure of that identity to sustain the nation was entrenched in the structure of the state. The future course of identity politics was clear when the Awami League (AL) dropped the term Muslim from the party nomenclature, the Awami Muslim League.

The Pakistan State and the Bengali 'Nation': the Failure of a Relationship

The graduation of the 'Muslim community' of Bengal to a 'nation', as has been mentioned earlier, went through a socio-political metamorphosis as a concept. The formation of Pakistan as a nation state was portrayed as a monolithic foundation based on Islam where the political elite urged their religious compatriots to rise above the narrow provincialism[10]. The state founded on religious nationalism, at the same time, tried to define citizenry in terms of Islam. It was presumed that the religious identity would supercede other primordial identities that would be able to hold together the disparate nation. However, a state can always ideally motivate and mobilize the people based on a primordial identity. But to transform it into a political reality and sustain it through the onslaught of sub-national identities, it needs an egalitarian approach to both political aspirations and economic grievances of the various ethno-linguistic groups.

Both political autonomy and economic self-sufficiency remained unattainable goals after the creation of Pakistan. Although the creation of Pakistan addressed the fear of Hindu domination in East Bengal however it did not assuage the Bengali Muslims' aspirations for an equal society. The state of Pakistan introduced various measures to consolidate its hold over the Bengali Muslims. Two important factors contributed to the marginalization of the East Pakistanis and the weakening of the Pakistan state: politics and the language/cultural issues.

To deal with the majority issue and the inherent political implications that it might have posed, the West Pakistan political elite introduced a 'one unit' formula. This formula provided parity between East Pakistan which has the majority of the population and its Western counterpart. The political and economic balance however heavily favored Pakistan.[11] The 1954 political controversy which resulted in the sacking of the elected government in East Pakistan laid the foundation of a process that culminated in the creation of Bangladesh. The political events that unfolded in the succeeding years and the economic disparity, as mentioned earlier, thus deepened the antipathy. The Bengali nation and territorial homeland which now exist and provide a driving force to convert

this antipathy into a movement, and this in turn was powered by three factors: economic well being, national security and political autonomy.[12]

The state of Pakistan offered the Bengalis nothing more than nationalism based on religion, but the Bengalis were given latent indication that their culture and language do not comply with their religious belief. The predicament surfaced when the state decided to make Urdu, a language spoken by a minority migrant community belonging to the part that forms India, as the national language. The West Pakistan political elite coaxed the Bengalis to be 'Muslim' with those cultural diacritics, that they perceived, were in conformity with the religion. For example, the Bengalis were clearly opposed to the Islamic nomenclature of Pakistan, a separate electorate and Urdu as the national language[13]. As it was perceived then, all these three issues were the pillars of the Muslim nationhood. Though eventually Bengali became one of the national languages and a joint electorate system was introduced, the problem that eventually had a bearing on the conception of a Bengali nation was the effort of the Pakistani state to *persianise* and *urduiase* the Bengali language (Morshed: 82). The Central Advisory Committee for Education in East Pakistan recommended Arabic script for Bengali.[14] The government also established adult education centres and allocated substantial funds to impart education in the Bengali language but through Arabic script.[15] The Islamic cultural conferences held in Dhaka in 1952 and 1956 and the East Pakistan literary conference held in Chittagong in 1958 repeatedly exhorted that it was the duty of writers in East Pakistan to adhere to Islamic culture and principles, emphasize the Muslim tradition, strengthen the ideology of Pakistan, and always be on guard against and frustrate the designs of those who aim to unite the two Bengals (Anisuzzaman 1995: 22). This clearly underlined the insecurity of the Urdu speaking elite and acknowledgement of the fact that language has the strength to surpass the religious barrier. The commitment of the Bengalis to the Pakistan nation was always a matter of doubt to the West Pakistanis. Therefore simultaneously effort was made to encourage Bengali Muslim writers to write in *Chalit bhasa*[16] as an effort to get rid of the influence of sanskritised words in Bengali literature. By April 1951, the government had spent around Rs 60,000 on adult education centres to examine whether literacy could be achieved quickly with the introduction of the Arabic script (Murshid 1996: 313).

Apart from this degradation of the linguistic heritage, the cultural celebrations were also looked down upon with disdain by those who considered them as influences of the Hindu culture. Rabindra sangeet which is considered as an eternal source of inspiration to many Bengalis in East Pakistan was banned and efforts were made to Islamize cultural symbols. However, state efforts had limited effects due to the protest of the Bengali elite. Most of them perceived this not only as a cultural onslaught on their heritage but an effort to marginalize the Bengalis in the new state[17]. The language movement has got its own heroes in the form of language martyrs who were killed on 21st February 1951 by the Pakistan Army while demanding the recognition of Bengali as one of the national languages. The Bengali nation was already born on this day nearly four and a half years after the birth of the state of Pakistan. It was just waiting for the political impetus that will eventually turn the nation into a nation-state. Like any nation state, having its own myth, history and culture with which the passage of time germinates and

consolidates itself as an idea, the Bengali nation also went through political conception, evolution and culminated as a separate nation state.[18]

To protect what the state perceived as its inherent ideological foundation, it played up the "fear of India threat, communist incursions and Hindu phobia" (Murshid 1996: 285) thereby trying to consolidate an Islamic identity that necessarily impinged upon the secular demands of the East Pakistanis. The genuine demands were included under the rubric of state security and were given a separatist and conspiratorial color by the state, a state that did not represent the majority and was a political construction to serve the insecurities of the Urdu speaking elites initially and later the Punjabis. The most crucial issue that was considered as the departure point for the Bengalis was the 1970 election where the Awami League, an East Pakistan based political party, secured a majority. However, transfer of power did not take place owing to the extreme reluctance of the West Pakistan military and the bureaucratic and political elite to hand over power to the Bengalis. The 25th March 1971 crackdown to protect the Pakistani state from disintegration ultimately led to its unraveling.

Reassertion of Bengali Identity: the Creation of Bangladesh

The creation of Bangladesh questioned the rationale of a nation formation on the basis of religious identity. The formation of a nation-state, its historical and cultural heritage constitute inspiring factors in national identity construction. The national identity formation – a Bengali identity – which is linguistic, laid the political foundation of the nation-state. What inspired the masses was not only the issue of economic exploitation and political marginalization but the slogan that 'we are Bengalis.' This battle cry delineated a clear line between the perpetrators of the crime and its victim, and was pitted between 'us' vs 'them.' The liberation war, its foundational inspirations, the context of Bengali aspirations, made the state incorporate secularism as one of its state principles. The constitution of Bangladesh in this context defined nationalism as: "The unity and solidarity of the Bengalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengalee nationalism".

It is important to mention here that secularism as a foundational principle was incorporated, keeping in mind how the Pakistan state exploited the Bengali Muslims, citing the 'one religion-one nation' concept. Article 12 elaborated on how the state would realize secularism.[19] Another important article that was a prerequisite for the functioning of secularism was article 38 that banned "any communal or other association or union which in the name of or on the basis of any religion has for its object, or pursues, a political purpose."

The term secularism got politicized due to various circumstantial compulsions. Foreign policy postures of the new state, due to the domestic political dynamics, unnecessarily dragged external countries to the domain of ideological rivalries between various groups in the Bangladesh state.[20] Mujib detractors used this as a political tool to

discredit him and portray his regime as a 'client' of India. And the adoption of secularism was considered as a compromise in spite of the fact that it was a reaction to a religion based state. Even today this is propagated politically and it is believed socially. The reference that was pertinent and served the political purpose then was the 1947 partition which is still relevant in Bangladesh's national identity construction. Even immediately after the liberation when the sentiments were against the political use of religion, Mujib himself tried to defend the inclusion of secularism. To quote him, "Secularism does not mean absence of religion. You are a Mussalman, you perform your religious rites. There is no irreligiousness on the soil of Bangladesh but there is secularism. This sentence has a meaning and that meaning is that none would be allowed to exploit the people in the name of religion, or create such fascist organizations as the Al-Badr, razakars etc. No communal politics will be allowed in the country" (Mujib 1972: 16-17). Secularism had another component to its content i.e. linguistic nationalism which discarded a religious identity as the basis of nationalism. Even though Mujib established a secular state, he could not separate religion from the state. His brand of secularism was termed as a 'multi-theocracy' by a scholar (Maniruzzaman 1983: 187), where the state, instead of being neutral, strived to show that it believed in all religions. This did not prevent his detractors from criticizing him. He increasingly used religious greetings in order to establish his Islamic credentials to assure his followers and at the same time send a message to his detractors. He established the Islamic foundation to deal with the apprehensions created by his critics.

Thus a question that crosses one's mind is whether Bangladesh was socially or politically prepared for the inclusion of secularism in 1971. One can forcefully argue that the incorporation of secularism politicized religion in Bangladesh where the definition of secularism was not very clear to the masses, thereby subjecting them to various propaganda regarding its application and meaning. The secular identity was propagated as synonymous with being non-religious which is repugnant to the Muslim majority[21]. It also denied any primacy to Islam. This was narrowly interpreted that the Muslims will be equal to the other minor religious communities rather than having any preponderant position in terms of their standing in the new state. The old fear of exploitation by the Hindus resurfaced in the carefully crafted notion of cultural distinctiveness between the two parts of Bengal. The growth of anti-Indianism provided a fertile ground for religious nationalism (Umar 1975). The Muslims of Bengal had fought for a Muslim East Pakistan and not a secular state, and this was the dominant sentiment among them. And this sentiment was molded by the rightist elements. It is important to mention here that there was no popular movement against secularism. Its incorporation had the liberation war as its background. In fact, even after Mujib's assassination, his successor Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmed did not make any attempt to remove secularism from the constitution.

Historically, the Bengali language is considered a dominant source of strength of Bangladesh's nationalism (Iftekharuzzaman and Rahman 1986). Therefore in a linguistically defined predominantly Muslim country, it was just a matter of time before the religious sentiments are used for political expediency especially when the governments were military.[22] With the change of political equation with India, it was portrayed as a major challenge to the regime. A societal insecurity regarding religion was

carefully crafted, pursued and also exploited. An atmosphere was created to revive the religious identity of the Bangladeshis given the new political dynamics. Under the prevailing circumstances, the Indian state embodied the old evil exploitative Hindus. To sum up the sentiment, those forces opposed to Mujib believed, for a variety of reasons, that Bangladesh after gaining independence from Pakistan which treated it as a colony, is again moving in a similar pattern of client-patron relationship with India. Therefore, the need for the preservation of their Muslim identity resurfaced with the old equations being resuscitated. Therefore, there was a need, to quote Rupert Emerson (1960) in this context, for the nation "to takeover the state as the political instrument through which it can protect and assert itself"(96). It is important to mention here that the politics of aid and recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign country by Saudi Arabia added its own dynamic. Saudi Arabia's recognition was in fact a great moral boost to Bangladesh with a dominant Muslim population.[23] It acted as a reestablishment of faith on the Bengali Muslims which was symbolically defining. Therefore the constitution was amended by Gen. Zia-ur-Rahman and article 25 (2) was incorporated that gave primacy to relations with Muslim countries.

The incorporation of "Bismillaur Rehmanur Rahim" as a result of the amendment[24] added by the military regime did impinge on the societal relationship between the two communities, but in the political sphere where its reverberation was felt predominantly, it had long term politico-social implications. To accommodate the religious denomination in the constitution, various articles of the 1972 constitution were subsequently deleted.[25] With the legitimacy of the religious parties a new phase of identity politics emerged. Zia's regime did away with any semblance of secularism and the AL was marginalized and now just a mute spectator. Moreover, the AL had not got over the shock of the elimination of its front ranking leaders. Gen Zia civilianized his rule with the help of rightist elements and some of them were even drawn from the Awami league. The foundation of a majoritarian state that was laid down during Mujib's period took its charted course.[26]

To take the process forward, General Ershad declared Islam as the state religion.[27] Article 2A reads: "Islam is the state religion. All other religions can be practiced freely in peace and harmony."[28] The state increasingly relied on religion in the formation of identity and political discourse. The minorities, both religious and ethnic, increasingly felt that they are at the mercy of the majoritarian state in regard to their rights. With the intrusion of religion into politics, Islam became a part of the societal discourse. The state that had agitated against the use of religion and had fought for a composite culture got sucked into the debate on religion vs secularism and the controversies over what constitutes the fundamentals of Bangladesh nationhood.

The state though has not taken any steps to introduce measures like the Sharia which will make it a real Islamic state, the reverberations of such an intrusion is strongly felt in the social life. The symbolic nature of Bangladesh as a state with Islam as state religion is likely to change with the rise of religious parties (Jamaat Islami, Election Manifesto). Once religion has intruded, the contour and extent of the political use of religion will depend on factors, both external and internal, that will determine the time

frame of Islamisation. Internally it would depend on the government's capability to fight growing extremism, reestablishing the faith of minorities on the state and providing political space for dissent. At the same time, the initiative of civil society groups to persuade the government to establish an egalitarian society would contribute extensively to containing internally the political use of religion. However certain measures taken by the present government headed by the BNP, does not give much assurance about the future state of affairs.[29]

The elite articulation of Bangladesh being a 'moderate Muslim country' is ambiguous both in its meaning and implications. The problem in such a conception is who would define what constitutes 'moderate.' The function of the judiciary does not also inspire confidence among the secularists and the minorities. Islam as the state religion inherently gives primacy to the Muslims. This creates a kind of superior attitude and empowers even a common man psychologically against the members of other communities (Goswami and Nasreen 2003). It officially makes the state belong to one particular community. The problem with this kind of political construction of a national identity in an ideologically driven society is that it creates divisions among the polity. This torments and taunts the people who are on the other side of this ideological divide and often places them as outsiders. The polarized Bangladesh politics reflects these issues broadly.

Future of Identity Politics

Language versus religion dominates the ideological domain of Bangladesh politics. The domestic politics is completely divided on these counts. The context of ideological rivalry and the question of national identity often constitute the core of this debate. What is debatable is whether religion that was the basis of the 1947 nationalism, or language that was the basis of the 1971 nationalism, constitutes the relevant basis of state formation. Though the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religion has a different connotation for the Bengali Muslims, this identity still defines the sentiment of a section of the population in the Bangladesh period. The Islamic parties and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are vying for this definition of national identity. Though BNP is conscious of the cultural moorings of the liberation movement, its emphasis has been on the religious identity in addition to the linguistic identity. Though BNP's founder Gen Zia-ur-Rehman declared independence,[30] the political circumstances made the BNP articulate rightist ideology for its political survival. Constitutional changes brought about by this party in 1977 had its political compulsions and ideological constraints given the politics of the time. But it still adheres to a conception of a state with visible religious diacritics. Competing for the political space with the BNP are religious right-wing parties like the Jamaat Islami, IOJ and the Jatiyo party (Ershad) that are willing to go beyond the constitutional provision of Islam as the State religion. All these parties have a rather patronizing attitude towards citizens who do not belong to their definition of the nation state. Due to this, the cultural symbols have already come under attack.[31]

The Awami League on the other hand has projected itself in the line of a secular ideology with language as an important pillar of its ideological mooring. However, given the constraint in pursuing secularism in Bangladesh politics, the AL has diluted its position by using religion in a subtle manner. The problem is that in a Muslim majority state the AL can hardly keep religious symbolism out of its political articulation. At the same time, it does not want to display overt religious symbols to assuage both the minorities as well as secular intellectuals who also played an important role during the liberation and constitutes an important segment of its vote bank. AL's insistent and dominant articulation has been to project itself as a party that played the lead role in the liberation of the country on the basis of secularism. It does not want to concede the glory of the liberation struggle to other parties, some of whose members are also freedom fighters. AL has adopted a method of political cornering that includes branding members of other political parties as collaborators of the Pakistan regime. This has resulted in other parties reacting to AL's ideological challenge. To quote an analyst: "contentious politics is reflected and reinforced in cultural and intellectual activities. …the clash of heroes and doctrines reverberate through the entire polity"(Aminul Islam 2002: 68).

The left parties are committed to secularism but they do not have the electoral arithmetic to favour them. To all these parties, except for the religious parties, 1971 is the reference point for Bangladesh's national identity construction whether it is only as a 'Bengali nation' or being a 'Bangladeshi nation.'

The social space for the linguistic nationalists who believe in secularism is getting smaller in the growing ideological rivalry as all the parties compete with each other to use religion as a tool of legitimacy and political discourse. Both the AL and BNP have made this as a ground of their rivalry. Inevitably, this brings forth the underlying motivation of the state formation. The 1947 formation of the Pakistan state had a clear basis and that was religion. The contour of the state and the formation of the nation became problematic later. In the present context of Bangladesh, both 1947 and 1971 remain relevant depending on which side of the ideological divide one locates oneself.

These debates on secularism vs religion continue to rage. The creation of a tolerant democratic environment can ensure a healthy debate which will give space to the liberals and seculars to ventilate their ideas, to the minorities to live without fear and recognize diversity. If not secularism, a liberal environment will ensure free participation and security to its citizens. To achieve this, civil society, political actors and the state need to work in tandem. A sense of hope amidst despair seems to characterize the attitude of the elite in Bangladesh. Though they seem complacent at the moment, the 21st February celebration and the 1971 liberation war reminds them that they can still change the situation. Tariq Ali,[32] speaking on the occasion of the first screening of *Muktir gaan*, said, "… I marvel at the spirit we were able to infuse. I feel proud finally. And to you I wish to say do not lose heart at the rise of anti-71 forces eating away at the roots of our secular-democratic dream of golden Bengal. We have won that war. We shall win this one" (Zaman 1999: 423).

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[1] For example: *Ray Mangala*, written in 1686 praises both Dakshin Ray and a 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 Goddesses appeared towards the end of the 15th century which drew from the cultural climate and physical geography of Bengal. For details see M.R Tarafdar, "Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494-1538 AD: A Socio-Political Study" (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965), pp.11-12. *Nabi Vamsi* by Sultan Saiyid depicted Krishna as one of the prophets. For details see France Bhattacharya, "Hari the Prophet-An Islamic View of a Hindu God in Saiyid Sultan's Nabi Vamsa", in Perween Hasan and Mufakharul Islam, "Essays in Memory of Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar" (Dhaka: Centre for Advanced Research in the Humanities, 1999), pp.192-208. Other writers were Shaikh Faidullah, Daulat Qadi and Alaul whose writings were based on various common traditions and practices of both communities flourished in the 16th and 17th century. *Nur Tattwa* is another literature that talked of the syncretic tradition of Bengal. Apart from the literature both the Hindus and Muslims revered goddesses Bon bibi, Sitala etc. For elaboration of the syncretic tradition see Richard Eaton, pp.268-303

[2] 17th century poems like the *Nasiyat Nama* of Shaikh Paran, Kifayit-ul-Musalin of Shaiakh Muttalib and Shariat Nama of Nasrullah Khan which aimed at Islamisation. (as cited in Enamul Haq, "Muslim Vangala Sahitya, pp.164-66 and 177-78) As contrasted with the Muslim poems of 15th and 16th centuries which are replete with Yogic-Tantric themes and ideas, these works have Islamic content. Both the main text and footnote is quoted from M.R Tarafdar.

[3] The Wahabi, Farzai and Tarika-e-Mohammad movements gave a distinct identity to the Bengal Muslims. These conservative schools of thought stressed 'purist Islam' and urged the Muslims to give up Sufi practices. At the same time reform movements in the Hindu society also created divergence.

[4] According to Richard Eaton, though it is difficult to ascribe the bulk of the Muslim population of East Bengal to immigration there were many factors that contributed to the presence of majority Muslims in this region. According to him mutual accommodation of two theories of immigration and the egalitarian nature of Islam bridged the gap between the Ashrafs and the locals that stressed the unity of all the Muslims residing within their borders. See Richard Eaton, "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760", (Delhi: Oxford university Press, 1997), pp.127-28. For various theories of Islamisation see pp113-134

[5] 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 reference underwent political transformation under various circumstances and compulsions.

[6] Anisuzzaman, commenting on a paper presented by Ghulam Murshid, "Oscillating Muslim identity: Cases of Abdul Mansur Ahmed and Abdul Haq" in Rafiuddin Ahmed ed. "Islam in Bangladesh: Society, Culture and Politics", (Dhaka: Bangladesh Itihas Samity, 1983), p.149-150

[7] In the press conference held on 27 April 1947, Suhrawardy in collaboration with Abul Hashim, a socialist General Secretary of BPML announced that he will work for a sovereign united Bengal. For details see Harun-or-Rashid, "Inside Bengal Politics, 1936-47: Unpublished Correspondence of Partition Leaders", (Dhaka: UPL, 2003), pp.28-29. Abul Hashim and Sarat Chandra Bose had talked of a 50-50 percent sharing of power by the Hindus. Hashim blames it on the haste of the British who did not give the Bengalis much time to negotiate. See Abul Hashim, "In Retrospect" (Dhaka: Cooperative Book store, 1974), pp.152-64. He felt that the Lahore resolution provided independence of Bengal and therefore he supported it and he did not believe in the two nation theory. See Hashim pp.35-36

[8] For details of politics involving this division see Harun-or-Rashid, pp.257-328

[9] The state of Pakistan meant differently to the Muslims of different geographical regions. To the Muslims who were in a minority in a Hindu majority province it was political and economic emancipation from a Hindu dominated rule, For the Bengalis it meant freedom from the clutches of the Hindu Zamindars. To Punjabis, Sindhis and Pathans it was perpetuation of their hold on land and state power against a possible encroachment from the Hindu Business class staying in this area.

[10] Jinnah's statement in Dhaka in which he considered the demand for Bengali as one of the national language is enemy initiated, and the Bengalis who were making such a demand were referred to as fifth columnists. See "National Consolidation" delivered on March 21and "Farewell Message to East Pakistan" of 28th March 1948 in Quaid-i-Azam Mahomed Ali Jinnah Speeches as Governor General 1947-48" (Karachi: Pakistan Publication, nd) and Liaquat Ali Khan's statement on the issue in which he said it is the Urdu speaking Muslims who created Pakistan therefore Urdu will be the national language underlines the point of monolithic state.

[11] Disparities were noticed in GDP growth rate, investment, industrialization and also standard of living. For data see Rehman Sobhan, "Bangladesh: The Problem of Governance" (Dhaka: UPL, 1993), pp82-108

[12] It was clear that the economic disparity was appalling. The disparity was reflected in transport and communication, the urban areas and the living standard of the two wings. The 1965 war with India exposed the vulnerability of the Eastern wing. The rationality of defence spending was obvious to the Bengalis from the beginning. The logic that was propagated by the West Pakistan elite--that the defence of East Pakistan lies in West Pakistan--was debunked. The Bengalis realized that West Pakistan is being protected at the cost of their economic development. Even after the Awami League, an East Pakistan based political party, won the power in the election conducted by the military regime, power was not handed over to them. All these factors drove the point that East Pakistan has virtually become the colony of West Pakistan.

[13] For the opposition to the Islamic nomenclature see the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debates, vol.1, no.51, January 28, 1956, p.2201. Prominent among the Muslim members who opposed this are H.S.Suhrawardy and Mujib-ur Rehman. On separate electorate issue see Pakistan, Constituent Assembly Debates, February 1, 1956, pp.2268-69

[14] Defending this recommendation, the Education Minister replied in the floor of the CAP, "The board is of the opinion that in the interest of national unity and solidarity and the rapid advancement of general education in Pakistan, it is necessary to have all the regional languages of Pakistan written in the same script; the Arabic script was most useful for this purpose…" This statement was given in reply to a question posed by Abul Basher Mahmud Hossain who asked the question on behalf of Shahadul Haq as cited in Rangalal Sen, "Political Elites in Bangladesh" (Dhaka, UPL, 1986), p.105.

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

[16] *Chalit bhasa* was more of a local language spoken in the Muslim dominated East Bengal. In contrast, *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*.

[17] Though the language issue was broadly seen as an attack on the East Pakistan linguistic identity and cultural heritage, the middle class perceived it in economic terms. They felt that the introduction of Urdu as a national language would cripple their economic aspiration in terms of getting jobs in Pakistan.

[18] The Bangladesh political leaders and the leaders who played important roles during the 1947 partition suggested that 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh was an implementation of the Lahore resolution that talked of 'independent states'. At the same time it is interesting to note that in the ML legislators Conference held in Delhi on 9th April, 1946 Suhrawardy, on Jinnah's insistence, moved a resolution for making "a sovereign independent state of Pakistan instead of a more than a Muslim majority independent states." MAH Ispahani, "Qauid-e-Azam Jinnah as I know him" 1966, pp.156-160. Also see Abul Mansoor Ahmed, "Bangladesher Culture", (Dhaka: Ahmed Publishing House, 2004)

[19] The approach as laid down in the constitution was that the state would strive by eliminating communalism in all its form, not granting political status in favour of any religion, eliminating abuse of religion for political purposes, removing any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.

[20] The contest was between religious nationalism and secularism. In this rivalry, India's role in the liberation war and its close ties with Awami League made some of Mujib's detractors spread the rumour that this policy was dictated by India. The anti-liberation forces were active and to them division of Pakistan, an Islamic state and Bangladesh's emergence as a secular country was a political anathema. Apart from this, Saudi Arabia's delayed recognition made the matter worse. However it is important to mention here that even with the violent end of Muib, his detractor and successor Khodokar Mushtaq Ahmed did not

delete this provision from the constitution. According to Dr Kamal Hossain, who was one of the major architects of the Bangladesh 1972 constitution, there was no outside pressure on the inclusion of secularism. The Constituent Assembly deliberated on this issue and there was a consensus on the inclusion of secularism given the context of state formation. Moreover, after the adoption of the constitution, the AL went for election in 1973 and won it with a landslide victory.

[21] In the context of close relations with the Indo-Soviet bloc, it got a different meaning, something akin to a communist society and considered as a conspiracy.

[22] For detail analyses of various factors that contributed to Bangladeshi nationalism see T. Maniruzzaman, "Group Interests and Political Changes: Studies of Pakistan and Bangladesh", (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1982), pp.13-17.

[23] Pakistan had always treated Bengali Muslims as an inferior race and not 'true Muslims.' It also considered Bengali as an unIslamic language.

[24] This was incorporated through an ordinance (proclamation order no. 1) when Zia came to power and later was made part of the constitution through the 5th amendment. The passage of these ordinances in the *Jatiyo Sangsad* (National Assembly) in the form of the 5th amendment was preconditioned on the lifting of martial law. As a result the AL members staged a walk out from the parliament.

[25] Article12 and Article 38 dealing with secularism and religion politics respectably were deleted. The words 'historic struggle for national liberation' was substituted with 'war of independence.'

[26] Towards the end of his regime Mujib used more Islamic symbolism in his speeches and public pronouncements. He established the Islamic foundation, strengthened the Madrassa system of education and increased funding to these madrassas.

[27] According to Gen. Ershad, he was under compelling circumstances to declare Islam as state religion. From among various factors he cited the Pakistani propaganda which had greater influence among the Muslim countries was that Bangladeshis are not real Muslims and it is the pressure from the OIC countries that forced him to take this decision. Apart from this he wanted to make the distinction between *Epar Bangla Opar Bangla* (This side Bengal and that side Bengal). The Bengali Hindu dominated state of West Bengal is a major source of cultural insecurity for Bangladesh which is reflected on the issue of national identity. In an interview with Gen Ershad, former President of Bangladesh, on 28th December 2004, Dhaka.

[28] See Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh", (Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh, 2000), p.2.

[29] The frequent attack on Ahmediyas is a case in point. In some instances the police remained mute spectators. Parties like Awami League who talk of secularism have not issued any statement condemning these attacks. The BNP and the alliance government banned the literature of Ahmediyas. The Islamic parties or their front organisations want them to be declared as non Muslims. The left parties are the only ones who have taken a firm stand on the issue. Other than they, the civil society has strongly condemned the attack. In fact activists of the Ghattak Dalal Nirmul Committee (Committee to abolish Murderer and their Agents) have marched to the Ahmediya mosques on Fridays to prevent attacks. Even the Hindus have been attacked in certain cases but most of these are related to the vested property Act.

[30] This issue is a controversial subject. The AL insists that before Gen Zia's declaration, there was a declaration of independence which only few people heard since the radio station did not have a larger coverage area. Gen Zia only declared independence after AL party workers had done it. Since this issue is highly contested, the information that sounds credible is that Gen Zia declared independence in the name of Mujib. However BNP's stand is that the General declared independence on his own.

[31] For example, there was a bomb blast on the occasion of Pohela Boisakh, a cultural festival welcoming spring in Dhaka in 2003. This year for the first time the Quran was recited in Shaheed Minar on the occasion of observance of language martyrs day. This recital had a symbolic value. Though the voices of secularism are extremely strong and organized in Dhaka, they do not have much presence in the countryside.

[32] A freedom fighter who by singing songs had tried to arouse patriotic feeling in the refugee and the Mukti Bahini camps