

How did the independence war of 1971 affect the identity of those in Bangladesh

As M. Anisuzzaman writes, “Bangladesh is a deeply fragmented nation” (Anisuzzaman 2000, 52) divided along religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic lines. The 1971 Bangladesh war of independence was one of many cataclysmic events triggered by such identity-related politics. This paper will aim to demonstrate that the independence war of 1971 deepened these identity divisions by aiming to form one cohesive national identity in what is a culturally pluralistic society. The nationalist discourse surrounding the identity of Bangladesh has focused most significantly upon the “importance of Bengali and Islamic identities in the colonial and post-colonial constructions of Bangladesh.” (Zeitlyn 2014, 3) In this essay, I aim to investigate how this focus upon Bengali / Bangladeshi identities in nationalist discourse has deepened and unified identities within the society of Bangladesh. In order to demonstrate this, I will first investigate why there has tended to be a focus upon ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ identities within Nationalist discourse. Then I will consider the effects this has had upon these two identities. Finally, I will consider the effects of this dogmatic binary upon the neglected communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh.

Firstly, The terms “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi” differ significantly based upon their origin, however, both dominate the Nationalist discourse of Bangladesh. According to Benedict Anderson, Nations are “Imagined Communities” constructed based upon “common factors of identity such as ethnicity, language, religion.” (Hussain 2013) The construction of “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi” identities undeniably were essential to the formation of the Nation of Bangladesh. The history of Bangladeshi nationalism finds its root in an “abiding sense of belongingness to the Islamic faith.” (M. H. Khan 2006, 335) Undoubtedly, the emphasis of religion as a common factor of identity was constructed under the military rule of Ziaur Rahman in order to distance Bangladesh from the culture of “the Bangalis of India.” (M. H. Khan 2006, 331) On the other hand, Bengali patriotism found its root in “ethno-linguistic” (M. H. Khan 2006, 327) and “ethno-cultural” (M. H. Khan 2006, 327) commonalities between the population of what was East Pakistan.

Scholars have named Bengali nationalism as “an organic inevitability because of the difference in ethnicity, language and culture of Pakistan.” (Khan 2014, 3) Indeed, the use of religion by West

Pakistan as a tool to suppress the language, tradition, culture and economy of East Pakistan eventually culminated in the independence war of 1971. (Khan 2014, 7) Thus, nationalist discourse has naturally been dominated by Bengali narratives. Willem van Schendel has, however, highlighted that “unequal power relations” (Van Schendel 2001, 111) in academia has “allowed Bengalis to dominate discussions completely and to ignore, marginalize, distort and silence other voices systematically.” (Van Schendel 2001, 113) Hence, Bengali Nationalist narratives have tended to focus most significantly upon the idea of Bengali identity, ignoring the existence of others.

However, despite this, it is evident that Bangladeshi narratives have too played a dominant role within Nationalist discourse. This is due to the fact that the elite classes of Bangladesh are made up of both Bengali’s and Bangladeshis who since the war of independence have intermittently taken leadership of the nation. This draws us to the reason in which the Bangladeshi identity has been central to Nationalist discourse. According to Dr Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, Bangladeshi identity was in fact constructed by the elite in order to “secure their own vested socio-political interests.” (Bhardwaj 2011, 4) This supports the arguments of Brass who states that elites select aspects of a groups culture for use “as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups.” (Brass 1979, 41) The same argument can to be applied to the idea of ‘Bengali’ Nationalism. This has been evident in the party politics of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL) who compose the two largest political parties in Bangladesh. Both the BNP and AL “campaign, mobilize, win support and elections” (Khan 2014, 2) on the basis of ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ identities. The AL and BNP have both followed in the legacies of their founding fathers who had too played on particular elements of the culture of Bangladesh in order to achieve their political end goals. For example, Whilst Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the AL had proposed a Bengali identity by drawing on ethno-linguistic and secularist sentiments to achieve an independent Bangladesh. Ziaur Rahman propelled the notion of a Bangladeshi identity rooted in Islamic dispositions to 1) separate the nation from the Culture of West Bengal, (Begum 2016, 9) and 2) to legitimize his new regime. In addition to this, Van Schendel has acknowledged that there have been movements whereby counter-elites have too utilized ‘old symbols’ (Van Schendel 2001, 109) for their own goals.

For example, language day has been used in order to discredit the “authoritarianism, military rule and narrow party politics” (Van Schendel 2001, 109) which have come to be associated with Bangladesh. This shows that from the era of the independence war up until today, Bengali and Bangladeshi identities have been utilized in nationalist discourse as a tool to serve a clear political purpose.

When analysing the emphasis placed upon the Bengali / Bangladeshi binary since the war of independence, it is evident that the dogmatic dichotomy has played a central role in deepening divisions between groups who identify as the secular ‘Bengali’ and the Islamic ‘Bangladeshi.’

This has occurred through the party politics of the AL and the BNP who have been complicit in manipulating “ethno-symbolic cursors such as language and religion” (Khan 2014, 3) to remain in, or to attain the seat of power. For example, in 2008 the Awami league promised a ban of religion and communalism in politics if they were to be elected. On the other hand, the BNP played on Islamic sentiments by stating it would “enact a ‘blasphemy law’ to prevent antireligious statements and criticism of religion in books, newspapers and electronic media.” (Bhardwaj 2011, 22)

Such assertions support the claims of Brass as both the AL and BNP do indeed “select aspects of” the constructed Bengali and Bangladeshi identity in order “compete” with each other. (Brass 1979, 41)

Fahmida Zaman states that through these actions, such groups are “not only creating a common cognitive framework against each other, but also defining the enemy.” (Zaman 2017)

The effect of this has been detrimental to the once syncretic society of Bangladesh and has aggravated divisions constructed over 40 years ago by the early leaders of the Nation.

The tensions between the Bangladeshi identifying Hefajat-e-Islam and the Bengali identifying Shahbag movement best epitomize the nature of these divided identities today. For example, the 13-point charter of demands of the Hefajat-e-Islam reflect the growing Islamist sentiments in Bangladesh despite it being declared as a secular state. This can be seen in the calls for a “ban on mixing of men and women in public” (Mustafa 2013) and “enactment of an anti-blasphemy law with provision for the death penalty.” (Mustafa 2013)

On the other hand, the Shahbag movement continuously reaffirms the sentiments of the Bengali identifying population. For example, Asif Mohiuddin writes, “The innate Bengali value set and moral stance suppressed by a myriad of territorial and colonial propaganda [...] has been put back in lime-light once again through this movement.” (Mohiuddin 2013) From this, it is evident that the ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ identities propagated by the AL and BNP have divided the Nation “into two radical and binary camps.” (Zaman 2017)

In addition to deepening divisions between the ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ identifying population. The focus upon the dogmatic dichotomy has also led to the erasure of other identities who inhabit Bangladesh. Whilst Bangladesh has indeed been named one of the world’s most “uniquely homogeneous states.” (Chowdhury 2015, 41) Cultural pluralists challenge this idea, asserting that Bangladesh encompasses a culturally pluralistic society which includes “at least” 45 groups who identify as non-Bengali. (Chowdhury 2015, 41) Furthermore, such scholars assert that the state has tactically repressed minority groups since the war of independence in order to maintain this image of homogeneity. Pluralists have thus concluded that the Bengali / Bangladeshi binary has been emphasised by the state in order to appear as a culturally homogenous state. Despite this, the tactical repression of minority groups is clearly documented and has followed the precedence of the suppression of the inhabitants of the CHT by the architect of Bangladesh, Mujibur Rahman. According to Amena Mohsin, in a post-independence Bangladesh, Rahman “rejected the demands” of the people of the CHT for regional autonomy whilst remaining within Bangladesh. (International 2013, 15) Instead, article 9 of the Bangladesh constitution emphasised: “a distinctive Bengali identity, language and culture” (International 2013) thus ignoring the status of other ethnic groups in Bangladesh. Mohsin draws further attention to the fact that Rahman encouraged the hill people “to adopt the new, nationalist Bengali identity” and backed this “with a threat to effectively marginalize Pahari by sending Bengalis into the region.” (International 2013) Similarly, In 1975 Rahman “addressed the tribals” of the Chittagong Hill Tracts “as brethren and told them to become Bengalis, to forget the colonial past and join the mainstream of Bengali culture.” (Van Schendel 2001, 114) These two assertions embody the active denial of agency by the elite to fulfil clear assimilationist

desires. From this, it is evident that the independence war has had violent effects on the identity of non-Bengali and Bangladesh identifying communities, specifically for those who inhabit the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Historically, the eleven non-Bengali groups who reside in the CHT are divided ethno-linguistically, culturally and along religious lines as much so as East Pakistanis were from that of West Pakistan. Furthermore, the geographically isolated region of the CHT, “topographically contrasts with the rest of the plain land of Bangladesh.” (Chowdhury 2015, 2) Thus, those who populate the Chittagong Hill Tracts are divided by both natural and psychological borders from the Bengali and Bangladeshi identifying society of Bangladesh. However, despite these clear frontiers, the assimilationist strategies of the state since the war of independence has marginalized and alienated these communities by actively neglecting their agency and removing them from centres of power. One effect of this as suggested by Adnan has been the crystallisation of a “collective Jumma identity” (Chowdhury 2015, 4) between the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Lushai, Pankho, Bawm, Mro, Khyang, Khumi and Cha. Such phenomena can be explained by desires to create a sense of distance “from the Bengali assimilationist project.” (Chowdhury 2015, 4)

Another effect is that with little to no influence within the central government, understandings of ‘Jumma’ identity have been discursively constructed by the Bengali and Bangladeshi state elite. (Chowdhury 2015, 42) This has had significant repercussions for how ‘Jummas’ are viewed by outsiders. For example, Karim states that the “regime” of Bangladesh has framed Chakmas as “terrorist, separatist and insurgent.” (Karim 1998, 304) In addition, Chakmas have been referred to as “upajatee” (Chowdhury 2015, 44) with a literal translation of sub-nation denoting that the community is viewed as primitive by the majority of the population. Such terms have been epistemologically violent and have been used to justify ethnic and genocides of the ‘Jumma’ people.

The final effect of the independence war upon the people of the CHT has been the cementation of a ‘Jumma’ Nationalist ideology under the leadership of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti.

Founded in 1972 by Manabendra Narayan Larma, the political party operates within the CHT in order to represent its eleven inhabiting communities. Like that of the leadership of the AL and BNP, the PCJSS “began espousing Jumma identity immediately after Bangladesh independence.” (K. Chowdhury 2008, 67) The PCJSS has continued to do so for the past four decades by emphasizing the “common economic, social and political similarity and continuity”(K. Chowdhury 2008, 68) of Jummas as well as naming Jummas “one nation.” (K. Chowdhury 2008) Such statements reflect the notions presented by Dr Sanjay K. Bhardwaj of elites mobilizing “ethno-symbolic cursors” (Bhardwaj 2011, 4) to secure “their own vested socio-political interests.” (Bhardwaj 2011, 4)

In the case of the PCJSS, mobilizing one homogenous Jumma identity has been essential to fighting for autonomy as the hill people form only a minority in Bangladesh. The nationalist sentiments of the PCJSS mirror much of that of Bengali Nationalism. Indeed, both share the principles of Nationalism, democracy and secularism. In addition, both Jumma identity and Bengali identity were borne from resistance to the imposing force of the state. For Bengalis, it was the oppression of West Pakistan. For ‘Jummas’ it has been the suppression of the state of Bangladesh. The aim of the PCJSS to form one cohesive ‘Jumma’ identity also mimics the way in which the Awami league aimed to form a singular Bengali National identity. However, the CHT (and Bangladesh more widely) undeniably inhabit a culturally pluralistic population and the aim to form a singular ‘Jumma’ identity may come to be problematic. For example, Whilst ethno-linguistic and secular sentiments of a singular ‘Bengali’ identity was enough to galvanize the independence war, a schism was quick to occur once this was achieved. Similarly, whilst the hill people of the CHT have adhered to a ‘Jumma’ identity in the present to distance itself from “Bengali assimilationist project” (R. Chowdhury 2015, 38) this may not be enough to hold the community together in the future. This shows once again that the aims of elites since the war of independence play a significant role in affecting the identities of Bangladesh.

In conclusion, the independence war of 1971 has in some ways divided as well as united the population of Bangladesh. The emphasis of Bengali and Bangladeshi national identity within nationalist discourse has been central to these divisions and unifications. This essay has argued that the construction of ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ identity by the elite has had three implications.

The first is that it has served the socio-political desires of the elite to remain in power and to appear as a culturally homogenous state. Secondly, and more importantly, Bengali and Bangladeshi identities have been dichotomized by the leadership of Bangladesh since the war of independence which has undeniably deepened secular and religious divisions within the population. The final implication has been the effect on groups who identify as neither Bengali, nor Bangladeshi. On the one hand, the rigid categories have marginalized, dehumanized and ignored the agency of groups such as those who inhabit the Chittagong Hill Tracts. On the other hand, repression by the state elite has led to the formulation of a cohesive 'Jumma' identity between the people of the CHT. Whether Jumma nationalist movements will be enough to keep the people of the CHT united requires more research, however, it is undeniable that its origins lay in the independence war of 1971. Thus, it is clear that the independence war of 1971 has affected identities in Bangladesh by both dividing and unifying its population through the construction of 'Bengali' and 'Bangladeshi' identity.

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