

# **The Shifting from Bengali Nationalism to Bangladeshi Nationalism- A Political Analysis**

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## **Introduction**

According to Partha Chatterjee (1991), this sense of nationalism, community and belonging is an imaginary creation. It is actually created by the elites to unite the common people with an intention to use them for the growth of capitalist society. On the contrary, the Marxists critics explain nationalism as an ideology that occurred from the conflict of classes (Brown, 1998). They agreed that nationalism basically emerged with a view to construct a class-less society. Yet, my paper is intended to analyze the formation of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism and their shifting with the swap of political regimes in Bangladesh. Initially, it will be qualitative research. However, the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism is a politically constructed concept which was formulated after 1975 by former president Ziaur Rahman with a view to separate the Bangladeshi people from the West Bengal People and establish a separate identity for them. But my argument is emphasizing religious identity instead of cultural identity of Bangladeshi citizens before formulating the new nationalism concept. Also, through the establishment of Bangladeshi nationalism in this territory, he aims to gain political popularity among people and make his regime longer.

## **Literature Review**

Basically, the concept of nation state became popular after the second- world-war when people started to realize that there is no divine power within kinship and church authority. Therefore, the image of the nation is remade as the community of social justice (Brown, 1998). Nationalism as a discourse that does not have particular definition and theories. However, Benedict Anderson (1983) defines a nation as an imagined political community which is inherently limited and sovereign. After the era of kinship and religious authority, people started to look for a new identity, which was the time the concepts of democracy, nation, nationalism and democratic government became popular.

Meanwhile, Ernest Gellner (1983) makes a critical point by claiming that nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness rather it invents nations 'where they do not exist'. Now, if we consider Bangladesh's liberation war history, the idea of Bengali nationalism or Bangladeshi nationalism emerged prior to the birth of Bangladesh. We have also seen at the beginning of the 1952 language movement, a map was used to drawn in the middle of the flag because during that time, there was no particular border or territorial identity for Bangladesh. But the people were fighting for an undisputed land identity within limited border. So, with an intention to inform others about the existence of Bangladesh territory, the map was drawn in the middle of the flag. The nationalists believe that once a group has defined itself as a nation, they have a 'natural right' to create a territory urgently to live and govern in. But there was no state named Bangladesh existed, so the ideology of Bengali nationalism was applied to unite the people. This ideology derives from the language and cultural identity which gives them a sense of unique and unified existence during the liberation war in 1971. Also, this Bengali nationalist identity helped to separate the Bengali people from the Urdu speaking West Pakistani people.

Again, Gellner (1983) views politics and nationalism as a unified unit. But in the same year, Anderson (1983) argued that Nation, nationality, nationalism all have proved notoriously difficult to define. His claim also supports Hugh Seton-Watson idea as he proclaims that no 'scientific definition' of the nation can be drawn; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists. Suddenly, with no exact definition, the ideology of nationalism, nation and nationality became popular because it has given a new sense of identity for people. Though if we see deeply, our sense of identity is arbitrary. For instance, before 1947 Pak-India partition, we were known as Indian. Then after the partition we became (East) Pakistanis. Finally, after the victory in the 1971 liberation war, we are recognized as Bangladeshi people. Although, this national identity is also uncertain because if more divisions occurred or with the major shifting of political regime, this identity can be possibly changed or reformed.

Historically, the first division for Bangladesh occurred in 1905 based on two nation theory when the rulers decided that there will be two separate nations Pakistan and Hindustan. Mohammad Ali Jinnah proposed this idea which was dismissed in 1909. Again, in 1947, after the British left Indian sub- continent,

two separate nations emerged named Pakistan and India, created based on their religious identity. During the time of partition, many people were forced to leave their country and moved to the new state because of their religion. Besides, many people were forced to change their religion ex. 'Ranamama' from Urvashi Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence*, who accepted Islam to live in Pakistan (pp.17). Also, during our liberation war, many Hindu families left the country and moved to India only to save their lives because the Pakistani military often attacked only the Hindu community with an objective to make East Pakistan a state of Muslims.

According to Eric Hobsbawm (1990), the idea of nationalism is a myth. Since there is no proper definition of this term, political parties have the chance to change and reform this concept following their will. Also, oftentimes religion plays a significant role in defining nationalism. Therefore, the West Pakistan rulers took this opportunity to create Pakistan as a Muslim state after the 1947 partition. They decided that Pakistan would be a Muslim country containing a Pakistani nationalist perspective which believes that its one and only state language should be Urdu. It is true that the elites and political parties of a democratic state frequently reconstruct the nationalist ideology for their own benefit. For example, there was no state religion philosophy at the beginning of the constitution in 1972. Later, Islam was announced as the state religion of Bangladesh to satisfy the majority of Muslims by former president Ershad in 1985. On the contrary inclusion Bangladeshi nationalism in the constitution to provide a unique and separate identity for the people living in this territory. This is one of the ways religion and political power together construct the new nationalism concept in the post 1975 era.

On the contrary, Swarupa Gupta (2007) argues that the idea of nationhood emerged from the sense of collectivity and also influenced by past ideas like samaj, jati and desh. But I argue, the imagined identity of nationhood was developed to minimize the categories like race, ethnicity, caste, religion, language and more and bring the people under one roof. It is important to remember that a Muslim influenced ideology often predominates in our state. After the Awami League was left out by the military government in 1975, their secular and social policies were legally replaced by religious and capitalist views. Besides, language unity of Bangladeshis is frequently overlapped by the religious identity. As a result, the Muslims were getting more priority in both social and political discourses compared to others. However, Michael

Hechter (2000) argues that ‘ethnic solidarity’ will be seen in people belonging to ‘inferior culture and economy’. During the Pakistani regime, the Bengali people were considered as inferior and were highly dominated as well as discriminated in economy, politics and cultural discourses. Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury (2009) states that 3 billion dollars received from the United States as foreign aid, was spent in the development of western wing of Pakistan only. But East Pakistan did not receive any single penny from the aid. Swarupa Gupta (2007) also claims that after being colonized by British and then Pakistani rulers, the Bengalis fell into solidarity and ‘a sense of self-consciousness and alienation’ developed among people. Now, they started to believe that they can run over their own nation state. Therefore, they demanded for a free state with freedom of speech and after a bloody liberation war, we got our own nation. After creating the new state, the political conflict over national identity began within a few years. Unfortunately, the overlapping and problem with national identity still exists in our country after 53 years of independence because of political instability.

It basically started when Mr. Ziaur Rahman came to power, “he consolidated the growing religious sentiments to secure and expand his support base” (Chowdhury, 2009). He introduced the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism in order to project the distinctiveness of Bangladeshis to the globe. Conversely, the original Constitution of Bangladesh was secular in content. But, after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in 1975, Secularism was strategically removed from the Constitution in 1977 by the Fifth amendment. Moreover, Islam was declared as the state religion in 1988 by Hossain Muhammad Ershad. His government also decided to follow in the footsteps of former President Ziaur Rahman. The late Bangladeshi scholar Muhammad Ghulam Kabir (2016) argued he ‘successfully changed the image of Bangladesh from a liberal Muslim country to an Islamic country’. He strategically pushes the secular identity of the nation towards Islamic views by including ‘Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim’ at the beginning of the constitution to convince the Muslims. On the contrary, Kabir (2016) points out that secularism is a hazy and misunderstood concept in Bangladesh. The Bengali term for it is *dharma mirapekshata*, or ‘religious neutrality is often misunderstood with the concept of atheism or *dhormohinota*.’ Thus, Lintner (1992) argues the word secularism has a different semantic meaning in Bangladesh than the meaning in the West. I added, this misconception of

meaning between secularism and atheism is politically constructed. As the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, states - “Secularism does not mean the absence of religion. Hindus will observe their religion; Muslims will observe their own; Christians and Buddhists will observe their religions. No one will be allowed to interfere in other’s religions” (Islam, 2016). He also discouraged the political use of religion in this territory because Bangladesh has already suffered a lot because of unethical use of religion by the British and Pakistani rulers. Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq (2016) remarks, the abuse of religion in politics is the fundamental reason that causes conflict between religion and politics in Bangladesh. But the people are stuck between Muslim nationalistic Bangladeshi identity and the more secular, religiously and culturally pluralist Bengali identity (Islam, 2016).

However, it is commonly believed that there should be an identity beyond race, religion, gender, creed, ethnicity, caste and color which will unite people together. Therefore, the concept of nationalism and national community emerged to unite people for political, historical and social reasons (Khan, 2013). The Republic of Bangladesh has also seen two models of nationalism: i.e. Bengali nationalism, introduced during the liberation war and Bangladeshi nationalism, was introduced by the 1975 military government. Mohsin (2018) argues that in both instances, the minority people have been ‘marginalized and alienated’. I added, the overlapping two nationalist identities produce sick political competition between parties. No matter what logic they provide, practically both doctrines are populist in nature because they believe in excluding people (like minorities, ethnic groups) from the mainstream society.

Yet in our context, the debate between Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism is still going on. I argue, the Bangladeshi version of nationalism creates a rift in the community to build up a homogenous state based on geographical borders. That is the power of politics that can unite or divide a nation subjected to simple ideologies like nationalism, language, culture, race, color and many more. For example, Bengali nationalism helps to unify people for the freedom of Bangladesh. Lintner (1992) argues that the ideology of Bengali nationalism introduced by Awami League, was based on the language movement not religious identity. On the contrary, Bangladeshi nationalism is highly exclusionary that is created to outmatch the already established Bengali nationalism ideology.

Furthermore, Khan (2013) in his paper ‘The Rift within an Imagined Community: Understanding Nationalism(S) in Bangladesh’ argues that, “Bengali nationalism is a natural manifestation while Bangladeshi nationalism is an imposed one”. But my research opposes this claim and states that there is no natural token of nationalism. Both Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism are constructed concepts. Moreover, the idea to Bangladeshi nationalism influence the people of Bangladesh to come into a consensus that they are Bangladeshis and they have their separate identity along with their own nation. He wants the people to take part in building their own nation. Franda (1981) in her article ‘Ziaur Rahman and Bangladeshi Nationalism’ claims that introducing the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism but it is not perfectly defined yet. For his decision, the idea of Bengali nationalism immediately shifted to Bangladeshi nationalism and added to the constitution through the 5th amendment. People also liked the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism because it seems this ideology is giving them a more individual and unique identity and promoting Bangladeshi nationalism which was based on territorial attachment of Bangladeshis. Moreover, the ideology of Bangladeshi nationalism seems more appropriate at that time because it suits the Bangladeshis most and distinguishes them from the west- Bengal people of India.

We find the collision between Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism still exists in our state. As we see, when Awami League holds the power, they talk about Bengali nationalism. But when BNP (Bangladesh National Party) came into rule, they eventually shifted the ideology into Bangladeshi nationalism. Now, the fundamental question is, who are the victims of this conflict? The mass people are the victims of this discord. They do not get any economic, social or political benefit from the two nationalism identities. But taking it as a survival strategy, the Bangladeshi people actually learn to go with the flow.

On the contrary, the concept of digital nationalism added a new dimension to the nationalism discussion. The rapid growth of digital media and social platforms create an influential unreal world where online spaces allow people who identify with the same national identity to connect, exchange information, participate in discussions and celebrate shared values and cultural traits. While print media once served as the primary medium for shaping national consciousness among mass. However, today’s social media platforms fulfill a similar role by cultivating a sense of shared national dialogue. These digital

interactions amplify national sentiment by circulating shared stories, common ideals, and coordinated digital movements. For instance, in our 2024 student movement, Facebook and other social platforms played a huge role to unify students and common people and finally they succeeded brought down the 15 years regime of the former government.

No matter whether it is Bengali nationalism or Bangladeshi nationalism, but nationalist critic Eric Hobsbawm (1992) claims that the whole idea of nationalism is very complex and has no clear definition. Then George Orwell raises this question: which discourse is appropriate for nationalism? Whether history, political science, ethnography, geography or as an individual discourse. Like cultural studies, it is very difficult to establish nationalism as a separate discourse because it has no separate theory or clear definition to discuss. Now, one of the basic conditions of establishing a discourse is, it should have definition and certain theories to discuss. Yet, we read nationalism by keeping it under other discourses' lenses; ex. history, globalization, politics, economy and others. Yet the strength of national identity derived from the belief that state elites would be the agents of equitable development. Brown (1998) claims that psychological needs of individuals in search of an imagined kinship community are able to replicate the security of the family. The idea of nationalism is very much relevant to create an imagined connection among unknown people. Because we are living in the same country, means we all are Bangladeshis. No matter what the political parties say, whether it is Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism, but we all are parts of the same nation. Still, the instrumentalization of religion and political parties are highly responsible for the unnecessary dispute of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism in our country.

**Research Questions:**

1. To what extent political parties are responsible for the emergence of Bangladeshi nationalism in our context?
2. How is religion politically instrumentalized to replace the concept of Bengali Nationalism from the Bangladesh territory and why?

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the theoretical framework of this study, I am applying religious nationalism, secular nationalism, Gellner's theory of nationalism and nationalism and populism theory to analyze the implementation of Bangladeshi nationalism in our context. Basically, the theory of religious nationalism refers to the interdependence of nationalism to a dominated religious belief, dogma or affiliation and religion can be implemented in politics in two ways; 1. politicization of religion and 2. the influence of religion on politics. The ideology of religious nationalism can also be used against the idea of secular nationalism. On the other hand, secularism is a political ideology intended to erase the influence of religion from public and social life. Predominantly, a secular nation is a state that does not have any official religion and treat all its citizens equally. At the beginning, Bangladesh was proceeding to become a secular nation and stressing to language and cultural identity of people. Therefore, the first president of independent Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman decided to go with the concept of Bengali nationalism. But later on, this concept of secularism is misinterpreted with atheism and Bangladesh is gradually shifted to a Muslim- dominated country.

Nevertheless, Gellner (1983) defines nationalism as primarily a political principle which views politics and a nation as corresponding and analogous unit. He believes that nationalism strives for one culture or ethnicity under one roof or state. While establishing his ideology, he criticized a number of pre-established theories like naturalism theory which considers nationalism as a natural, neutral, self- evident and self- governing ideology. Also, he criticized Elie Kedourie's idealist argument that state nationalism is not related to industrialization.

However, the populism theory is different. This theory prioritizes the division between the common people and the elites and is fundamentally exclusionary. Henceforth, critics view populist discourse on a vertical and nationalist discourse on a horizontal axis.

### **Data Collection**

For this paper, I have selected three primary texts ex. 'Nations and Nationalism' by Eric Hobsbawm, 'Imagined Communities' by Benedict Anderson, *The Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia, *The Emergence of*

*Nationalism in Bangladesh* by Nehal Karim and other secondary resources, journals and articles to strength my claim. Basically, the intention of my research is to show how the nationalist identity of Bangladeshi citizens has been transformed by the parties to sustain their political power.

### **Rationale of the paper**

This paper is intended to show the shifting of Bengali nationalism into Bangladeshi nationalism in Bangladesh through a political lens. It will also analyze how Bangladeshi political leaders overlap the idea of a secular nation with atheism for political benefits and prioritizes religious identity instead of cultural and language identity to create a clear distinction with the Indian West Bengal People. Moreover, along with the historical reasons, it will also analyze if the mass people is really benefited because of this shifting of national identity.

### **Critical Analysis**

Hossain & Khan (2006) argues that the analysis of nationalism in Bangladesh enforces the idea that nationalism or national consciousness are politically determined concepts. Obviously, the conflict between Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism proves that the political groups used to define nationalism from their own point of view. Ultimately, the mass people become the victims of this dispute. They often fall in identity crisis in spite of living in a sovereign country. On the contrary, nationalist theorists argue that a nation is the only rightful source of political power, although they ignore the consequences of misusing political power by the parties within a nation. Nehal Karim (1992) in his book argues that Bangladesh is struggling in political context to construct a definite nationalist identity for people because of boundless interruption of religion and inter-party philosophical conflict.

Meanwhile, Benedict Anderson (1983) viewed the nation as an imagined political community. He depicts a nation as a socially constructed community. But Partha Chatterjee (1994) opposes his idea by saying Anderson's idea is influenced by European concepts of nationalism. But India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are divided based on religion, language and culture diversity. Though he recently argued that the European convention of nationalism assists to shape the sub- continent Indian cultural discourse; Yet Ghosh (2015) recognized a gap between theory and practice of cultural nationalism in India.

She insisted with an example, becoming a Bhadrolok/ gentleman (wearing suit, tie, pant) is a European ideology imposed on Indian culture. It was introduced as a formal and necessary attitude in India. But the Indian people are originally psychic in nature. Therefore, a crisis occurs between the inner selves and outer selves among the sub- continent people to maintain a formal and spiritual life at the same time. In my point of view, they adjust to capitalist ideology and become materialistic with time. Thus, the conflict between inner and outer selves become blurred.

Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the 'imagined community' also suggested that digital platforms and social media offer new opportunities for shaping and reinforcing national identity. This is called digital nationalism as an evaluated concept because digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and others help craft and spread national narratives, symbols, and shared experiences and develop sense of national belonging. The netizens can give their opinions, provide digital voting and take part in nation development and constructive decision making. Historically, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the fusion of capitalism and print media brought a kind of nationalism that unified people across different social classes and encouraged them to work together and even make personal sacrifices for a common reason. According to Anderson's argument, in today's digital age, the government can use social media to control the dissemination of information, push forward specific national narratives, and rally support. At the same time, ordinary users can use these platforms to show national pride, participate in nation-building activities, or challenge an official decision. For example, through social media majority of Indians and their celebrities are showing support to 'Operation Sindoor' mission directed in Pakistan by Indian army. Though human activists, peace institutions and critics are criticizing the mission saying it will destroy the political peace in South Asia and it will also cause destruction of national identity of border people. The Bangladeshi citizens are also showing concern about their nation security. That is how digital media is impacting national decisions and giving people opportunities to speak up and put their opinions.

Florian Schneider (2021) theory of 'networked nationalism' explores how online interactions and the circulation of digital narratives shape national identities. It states that social media, search engines, and online forums work as tools for spreading nationalist ideologies, which is often done in behalf of

government and political party. Social networking also helps uniting people under a national agenda. Through participation in nationalist virtual communities, sharing posts, images, storytelling, and digital activism, individuals help to strengthen national consciousness online. Schneider also explains that digital platforms also play a key role in influencing and controlling national sentiment. For instance, our former government stayed in power for 15 years where social media plays a crucial role in spreading positive political news, big project announcement, development news to influence the users and gaining support for their political party

At the same time, digital platforms give individuals and communities space to question dominant narratives and promote alternative ideas of national identity. Through this, now internet users can speak for minority rights, question's national identity and its relevance, talks about rights of citizens, easy access to information and raise voice for proper help system and cyber security. Beside this, social media algorithms also contribute by creating echo chambers—digital environments that primarily expose users to views they already agree with. This can intensify nationalist sentiments and give rise to online communities centered on national pride (Sunstein, 2009). As a result, digital storytelling now becomes essential to building national narratives. Thus, governments and institutions utilize digital platforms to craft and disseminate stories about the nation's history, culture, and achievements. Through official websites and crafted contents, states try to shape citizens' perceptions and reinforce collective identity (Heang, 2024). For instance, our older government use official government websites, verified pages for their political campaigns and they highly use the concept of nation development and advancement as their political party's constructive achievement and exaggerating the information that their party leader and members are working hard for the benefit of people and development of nation infrastructure. Dhaka Metro Rail, Padma bridge, Dhaka Elevated Expressway were major projects of their advertisement. But they ignore the fact that most of the heavy projects are constructed in the capital city. The other divisions may have some development projects but districts, unions, villages are still left behind in construction, education, transportation and communication. So, according to governance and development perspective, their idea of development was not inclusive.

More broadly, national identity serves deeply personal and social functions for individuals within a community. National identity also provides individuals and social classes with a sense of belonging. This shared identity offers a powerful way for people to define themselves and understand their place in society through a collective narrative of ‘who we are’ (Anderson, 1983). Through shared values, symbols, and traditions—such as flags, currency, anthems, uniforms, monuments, and ceremonies; sense of collective identity and emotional connection. Have been injected in people’s minds.

On the contrary, Anderson’s interpretation reinforces the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ where individuals view their community as separate from others (Anderson, 1983). Ethnicity and nationality are political constructions that support the idea of imagined communities. Even when people never meet, they share a mental image of belonging to the same nation. In digital spaces, where physical borders do not exist, this ‘we’ versus ‘them’ binary must be reinforced through language and interaction (Smith, 2020). As people increasingly identify as part of a national collective, the internet’s structure—such as domain name systems, algorithmic biases, and national digital ecosystems—helps maintain and normalize these forms of nationalism.

However, nationalist policies can have serious consequences for minority groups, often leading to exclusion, discrimination, or even violence. Minority groups may face systematic exclusion in areas such as employment, housing, and education. In extreme cases, their fundamental freedoms like speech, religion, and cultural practice can be severely curtailed by nationalist governments that favor the interests of the majority. Nationalist ideologies tend to prioritize a dominant cultural identity, which can result in policies that marginalize those seen as outsiders. Research shows how such ideologies influence areas like citizenship law, language use, cultural expression, and minority rights.

Over the past several years, the growing influence of Islamism in Bangladesh has sporadically drawn attention from both regional and international analysts. The nationwide bomb attacks on 17 August 2005, when more than 450 bombs were detonated in under an hour by two banned Islamist militant groups. It was terrifying and also demonstrated the organizational strength and operational capability of these groups. In the following months, the country also witnessed four suicide bombings carried out by Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB

– the Assembly of Holy Warriors) and the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB – the Awakened Muslim Masses of Bangladesh), resulted at least 30 dead and injured over 150 others. The victims of those attacks included members of the judiciary, law enforcement, and the press. After these violent events, the government is forced to formally recognize the presence of a domestic militant network and initiate a crackdown on these groups. By March 2006, security forces had arrested seven top leaders and hundreds of members associated with these militant outfits. The judicial process moved quickly, and by August 2006, a number of trials had concluded with convictions. In several cases, local courts sentenced 28 leaders to death, and by September 2006, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentences of seven of them. The executions of six militant leaders were carried out on 29 March 2007. So far, the Bangladeshi government has banned four of these organizations: Sahadat-i-Al-Hiqma (banned in February 2003), JMB and JMJB (banned in February 2005), and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam Bangladesh (HuJiB, banned in October 2005) (Riaz, 2010). Despite the confusion Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism identity, this concept of Islamism enforces religious identity over language, culture and nation. The growth of Islamism concept not only connected to attacks or violence but it enforces Islamic laws to establish while set aside the secular views of nationalism. Truly, religion Islam talks and works for peace, but the misinterpretation of Islamic views causes violence and conflict among people and groups.

Nevertheless, several incidents have raised concerns about the diminishing secular character of the Bangladeshi state. In 2017, changes to school textbooks that removed secular content and the removal of a sculpture from the Supreme Court premises sparked debates among secular advocates. Critics questioned whether Bangladesh was evolving into a theological state, similar to Pakistan, or increasingly identifying as an Islamic country. These fears were amplified by a 2014 statement from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina indicating that Bangladesh's administration could be guided by the Medina Charter—an Islamic constitution aiming to establish peace and unity under Quranic and Sunnah principles. The study by Abdul Wohab (2021) argues that religion and secularism have coexisted in Bangladesh in a unique syncretic tradition. Religion has long been embedded in the country's culture, compelling political parties to incorporate religious symbols into their platforms. Wohab commends that Bangladesh practices a form of secularism distinct from

Western models, allowing public religious expression while maintaining a degree of state-religion separation.

Nationalist ideologies have historically fueled violence and conflict, often targeting minority communities. Bangladesh has repeatedly drawn international criticism for its treatment of minority groups. A notable example occurred in October 2021 during Durga Puja, when at least 801 of the 32,000 makeshift temples were attacked (Al Jazeera, 2021). Between 2013 and 2021, Bangladesh witnessed over 3,600 attacks on religious minorities (bdnews24.com, 2021). On October 23, 2021, Bangladeshi female activists protested in Dhaka against a wave of violence targeting the Hindu community, including assaults on temples, shops, and homes (Sony Ramany/NurPhoto via Reuters). These attacks involved the arson and vandalism of 559 houses and at least 1,678 temples, idols, and places of worship. The violence was reportedly triggered by the placement of the Quran on the knee of a Hindu deity, Hanuman (bdnews24.com, 2021). Investigations suggest that these attacks were not religiously motivated, but driven by political and economic forces. Some allege that anti-government groups orchestrated the violence to destabilize the ruling administration (Panday, 2021). Conversely, others argue that the government has exploited such unrest to suppress opposition voices.

Additionally, in the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in 2011, the government officially labeled indigenous communities as ‘tribes’ ‘minor races’ and ‘ethnic sects and communities’ (Dhamai, 2014). The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010 refers to indigenous peoples in Bangladesh using the term ‘khudro nrigoshthhi’ (small ethnic groups). Historically, Bangladesh’s national identity was ‘Bangali’ but in 1977, under military rule, this was amended to ‘Bangladeshi.’ Later, the Supreme Court declared that while citizens would be identified as ‘Bangladeshis’ the people as a nation would be considered ‘Bangalee’ a classification formalized in Article 6.2 of the Fifteenth Amendment (2011). This classification effectively allows the state to impose a Bengali identity on ethnic minorities, overriding their distinct cultural and ethnic identities. In response to international attention on indigenous issues, including several UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) reports in 2011, the Bangladesh government rejected the term ‘indigenous’ asserting that no such people exist in the country (The Daily Star, 2011). Despite global recognition, the government continues to avoid acknowledging

indigenous status and instead uses reductive and outdated terms (Dhamai, 2014).

Once Bangladesh was a part of the same undivided India and then a subordinate state of Pakistan. Later, it became an independent and sovereign state in 1971 through a decisive battle of 9 months. Then the people of Bangladesh got a separate territory with an individual national identity. But I found, religion has a large influence while demonstrating this identity. Previously, it was decided Bangladesh would be a socialist- democratic country where the majority of people would be known as Bengali Muslims. But the fourth amendment of the constitution has changed the pre- decided structure and Bangladesh became a capitalist country with one party government system and it eventually dropped the idea of parliamentary democracy (Akbar, 2007). As a result, the nationality and national identity of the Bangladeshi people is also changed and they are recognized as Bangladeshi Muslims.

Basically, the first partition of the Indian subcontinent occurred based on the two-nation theory (which claimed that Hindus and Muslims were two different nations based on religion) in 1905. Though the decision was dismissed in 1909. On the one hand, this partition proposal of former Pakistani Governor General Mohammad Ali Jinnah increased animosity between two states' people and on the other hand, it affected the security of the minorities within the states (Mohsin, 2015). Moreover, it developed a religious conflict between two states' people and they started to believe themselves higher than the other religious group. From this point, the concept of religious nationalism grabs an important place in the Indian sub- continent. Religious nationalism is a theory where the concept of nationalism and national identity will be highly influenced by a particular religion and community. In Bangladesh, Islam takes this place and influences the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism instead of Bengali nationalism. In Bangladeshi nationalism, religious and territorial identity gets more priority than cultural identity (Khan 316). Now, the majority of people will be known as Bangladeshi Muslims instead of Bengali Muslim. Although when Awami League got the power in 2009, they brought back the concepts of secularism and Bengali nationalism in the constitution. They tried to prioritize cultural identity instead of religious recognition in defining nationalism. Yet, a secular nation with less or no political influence of religion can't be created.

Nevertheless, we can't deny the influence of religion during the 1947 Pakistan-India partition. Urvashi Butalia brings the subjective experiences of 1947 partition in her book *The Other Side of Silence* after she realized that the partition was something more than a political division (6). I found, she introduces a new way to look at the already existed history and know the unknown. After the announcement of partition in 1947, many people were forced to leave their nation and shifted to a new state crossing the border. 'Ranamama' was such a victim of partition who later accepted Islam to live in Pakistan with her wife and daughters (pp. 30). Yet he belonged to a Hindu family first, but after her siblings left for India, he was left alone with his mother to take care of his grandfather's property. Like 'Ranamama', lots of people decided to change their religion as a part of survival strategy. Butalia (2014) argues that the mainstream history of partition is highly political. Her success is, she brings real-life subjective experiences of people who saw the partition which was literally ignored by the mainstream history. Because of the partition, the need for a new national identity has emerged. That time, we were part of Pakistan and were known as Bengali people who are fond of eating fish and rice whereas the Pakistani people prefers roti in their dinner. Yet after the independence of 1971, the new conflict over nationalism; whether it should be Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism occurred in our context. During the post 1975 era, we are recognized as Bangladeshi Muslim instead of Bengali Muslim.

However, history can be a way to view nationalism from a different point of view. Swarupa Gupta (2006) argues that history can be a site for rethinking about 'jati' and brings that collective sense of people into light. We are known as Bengali Muslims community observing the political history of Awami League. Meanwhile, BNP defined our collective identity as Bangladeshi Muslims. Thus, the definition of 'jati' and collective identity has changed with time. Our identity has been transformed as Bangladeshi people from the Bengali community. The Awami League wants us to be recognized from our cultural perspective but the BNP tries to identify us based on our religion and territorial distinctiveness. Therefore, with the collective identity, the nationalism concept has also been shifted.

Meanwhile, the Rohingya crisis is deeply intertwined with nationalist sentiments particularly in Myanmar and within the Rakhine region. Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country whereas the opposite is seen in

Myanmar. Buddhist nationalism fueled by a long-standing animosity toward the Muslim minority in Myanmar. This animosity is also exacerbated by the Myanmar government's denial of Rohingya citizenship and the framing of them as illegal immigrants. Bangladesh has also played a prominent role in addressing the humanitarian fallout from the Rohingya crisis, which stems from systematic persecution in Myanmar. The Muslim Rohingyas become a huge burden for Bangladesh to bear. Solutions to this displacement crisis include diplomatic pressure on Myanmar to halt human rights abuses and efforts to ensure safe repatriation of refugees. However, these must be accompanied by psychological and social support for both the Rohingya and host communities in Bangladesh, who have borne the brunt of the refugee influx. According to Md. Ashraful Islam (2024), addressing the crisis requires a multi-dimensional, sustained, and collaborative global response. Also, legal, humanitarian, and diplomatic strategies must converge to ensure the well-being and protection of the displaced population. Continued international cooperation is essential to achieve durable solutions and improve the future of affected communities (Islam, 2024).

### **The Role of Religion Islam in the Construction of National Identity in Bangladesh**

Keeping aside the cultural identity, religion Islam is widely used in Bangladeshi political discourse to control people by the political parties. But with an intention to create a secular nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman banned the activities of Religious parties (ie. Jamaat -e- Islami, Nizam-e- Islami) in 1972. Moreover, many other leaders agreed for separating religion and politics to build up a secular nation where every citizen (from different religious background) will get the equal rights (Maniruzzaman, 2015). Secularism theory supports the idea of nation with no state religion where every citizen will get the equal opportunity and right to live. No religious community will get extra priority in social, political, cultural and individual discourse. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman clearly stated that secularism does not mean the absence of religion rather all segments of people should be able to perform their religion without any interference (Islam, 2018). The objective of this ideology is, nobody will attack others for their religious beliefs or trying to his or her views or them. Another concern was, nobody should get the chance to use religion as a political weapon. (Islam, 2018). But later on, the concept of secularism is misinterpreted with atheism. Beside this, the Bengali

cultural identity is overlapped by the Bangladeshi national identity. As a result, people become more convinced with the Bangladeshi nationalism ideology instead of the already established Bengali nationalism concept.

Fundamentally, the ideology of Bengali nationalism emerged because of colonial attitude of Pakistan towards Bengali people after the 1947 partition. This concept was mainly influenced by language and cultural unity. It is interesting to note that it was during this period that various political slogans expressing Bengali nationalist sentiments became extremely popular. For example, slogans like Joy Bangla (Victory to Bangla), Amar desh, tomar desh/Bangladesh Bangladesh (Your home and mine is Bangladesh), Ekti Bangalir Jibon (every single letter of the Bangla alphabet epitomizes the life of a Bengali), Jago Jago Bangalee Jago (Wake up, Bengalis), "Bir Bangalee Astro Dhoro Bangladesh Swadhin Koro (Take up arms, heroic Bangalis/bring independence to Bangladesh) and more (Anisuzman, 2016). Plus, the growth of national consciousness among the Bengali Muslims helps them to get a separate identity and a sovereign nation. Chowdhury (2009) agrees that their past experience plays an important role in shaping the pattern of external behavior even in contemporary times. For example, Bangladeshi people learned to respect their language as well as their country. Moreover, a sense of self- dignity and self- right turn up in them.

However, the introduction of Bangladeshi nationalism to separate the Bangladeshis from the West Bengal people. Mahmud Hasan Khan (2013) argues that Bengali nationalism was a natural concept whereas Bangladeshi nationalism was imposed. But I argue that both the nationalism concepts are politically constructed. Because both political groups have separate objectives behind introducing these ideologies. They both are populist in nature because the both abstractions ignore the minority of people living in the territory. Absar (2014) proclaimed that Bangladeshi nationalism derived from its predominant Muslim heritage and tradition the former president used religion Islam as an excuse to promote the Bangladesh nationalist ideology. However, the inclusion of 'Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim' in the beginning of the constitution and the announcement of Islam as state religion of Bangladesh made the grounds for a new nationalist identity. As people started to believe that Bangladesh is a Muslim country and they need a different identity as citizens of Bangladesh so that people won't confuse them with the West Bengal people. Also, if they are identified as Bangladeshi Muslims, their religious identity will

also be recognized around the world. Although this kind of thinking is indirectly implemented by the ruling party in the heads with an objective to maximize the mass support for the legal shifting of nationalism ideology. Because if they had decided it within the parliament only, the opposition party and the people might blame them as autocratic rulers. However, Bangladesh is known as a democratic country by birth. Also, autocracy is constitutionally banned and the government must be democratic. Therefore, the ruling party used media, religion Islam and the clever inducement of a distinct identity from the Indian community as great weapons to manipulate the mass in behalf of Bangladesh nationalism.

Still, the false dichotomy between Bengali and Bangladeshi constructed by the ruling elites exists in the current Bangladesh. Bengali language and culture are integral parts of independent Bangladesh. This study argues that neither people nor the state become benefited because of two different nationalism concepts rather it only creates confusion. How? We are constitutionally known as Bengali people but in our legal documents i.e. passport, birth certificate, we are recognized as Bangladeshi people. Ironically, this confusion does not bring any good result, economic development or effective consequences for us. To my understanding, the Bangladeshi nationalism concept has been brought for political competition and the sake of a lengthy regime. In a democratic framework, if the people are satisfied with the decisions of the government, the regime will definitely sustain and people always ask for something new from the politicians. If we democratically choose a party, what they will get us? The introduction of a new nationalism concept has been proved an effective decision by the Zia government to convince the masses.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This paper found that Bangladeshis are moderate Muslims and the replacing of Bengali nationalism with Bangladeshi nationalism is a political construction to convince the common people because the military government tried so hard to sustain their regime longer. They even do not hesitate to abuse the religion for the sake of their regime. Their goal was to introduce something new to the people so that they became satisfied with the ruling party and not to dare to question their legitimacy. However, the concept of Bengali nationalism is connected with culture and the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism is enforcing the territorial identity. Although the political parties didn't hesitate to use

national identity and its confusion for their benefit. But they do not bother about the benefit of people. Like nationalism, nation, national identity is also a constructed ideology. If there is no nationalism, still we are Bangladeshi citizens. Therefore, nationalism is not the fundamental concept but the false dichotomy created with Bangladeshi and Bengali nationalism to confuse the mass. To forsake from the conflict of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism, Awami League had an opportunity to remove 'Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim' from the constitution to make it secular and a constitution for all believers. But the government decided to stick with it.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, my paper agrees that using religion and religious beliefs to manipulate common people is not acceptable at all. The forceful sifting of Bengali nationalism to Bangladeshi nationalism as an ideology and legalizing it with no time, can also be questioned. From a democratic- secular nation, Bangladesh is consciously transformed into a Bengali- Muslim country within a few years of independence because of active religious policies of the political groups in power. Political parties and their internal conflicts are highly responsible for this shifting of nationalist ideology. Not only that, religion is used as an instrument to influence the masses to accept the new ideology and recognize themselves as Bangladeshi Muslim community and district themselves from the Indian Bengali Hindu community. But West- Bengal and Bangladesh people speak in Bengali but the influential logic behind this shifting is- Bangladeshi people will be recognized for their state. After the territorial identity overlapping, the fundamental principle of Bengali nationalism in the constitution and the Bangladeshi national identity become two separate concepts. Previously, Bengali nationalism and national identity were the same. There was a match between the constitutional principle and practical identity. Although the new nationalism concept prioritizes land identity instead of language recognition. When the 1952 language movement occurred, it was for Bengali nationalism and identity but the former military government announced that since the ethnic minority people live in this land but their mother tongue is different, so the national identity should be considered Bangladeshi, not Bengali. In this way, those indigenous and ethnic people can also be incorporated. But the reality haunts, because the Bangladeshi nationalism identity still can't ensure equal rights for those ethnic- minority people. They are bearing the Bangladeshi national identity

but are often discriminated against in diverse situations and having rights. Thus, the shifting of Bengali nationalism to Bangladeshi nationalism is merely a political construction, bringing no major changes to our nation.

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