POST-1971 NATIONALISM IN BANGLADESH: SEARCH FOR A NEW IDENTITY

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The kaleidoscopic history of Bangladesh over the past half of a century is an interesting and fascinating case of nationalist development. During this short span of time, the people of Bangladesh have undergone three distinct phases of nationalism reflecting remarkable identity change. With the adoption of the Lahore Resolution of 1940 calling for the formation of Muslim states in the north-western and north-eastern parts of India, the Muslims of Bengal were driven by the powerful forces of Muslim nationalism. All sections of Muslim population saw an immense opportunity for growth and prosperity in a Muslim homeland free from the exploitation of and competition with the far more economically and socially advanced Hindus. They appeared to be ardent Pakistani nationalists at least during and immediately after the Pakistan movement.

During this period, their nationalism was rooted in the religious community. This vigorous and intense religious nationalism started to show signs of increasing tenuousness in the 1950s as a consequence of the developments in the new nation of Pakistan. With the rise of Bengali nationalism, the salience of religion as the primary focus of identity and unifying factor started to decline. Religious identity was replaced by linguistic identity in the process of the march of new nationalism. Pakistani nationalism based on religious identity could not survive the ever-important questions of economic and political
deprivations. With independence in 1971, the people of Bangladesh have been going through a new phase of nationalist development. The post-independence era is characterized by a search for a new identity of Bangladesh. This paper seeks to understand and analyse the emerging trends in identity change and corresponding nationalism in post-1971 Bangladesh.

Theoretical Framework

Before we turn to a discussion of the post-independence trends, it is important to define nationalism. Although the literature on nationalism is vast, contemporary understanding of this phenomenon is far from complete. A recent critic has aptly described the existing literature as "the underdeveloped theory of nationalism." While noted authorities like Carlton Hayes, Hans Kohn, Louis Snyder offered a psychological definition that emphasizes the "state of mind" of the individual members of the political community and their "supreme loyalty" to the nation-state, Elie Kedourie, Anthony D. Smith, John Plamenatz, Eugene Kamenka and others, on the other hand, see nationalism as a form of ideology.

The present author is of the view that the above-mentioned two strands of thought on the definition and analysis are not totally incongruent; there are useful elements in both of them. Nationalism has a clearly perceptual, psychological basis; by the same token it is a movement which is often a product of a certain ideological current. In this way, we can combine these apparently two divergent approaches to the study of nationalism. For our purpose in this paper, nationalism is defined as a phenomenon whereby a political community shows consciousness that it has a right to form and maintain a state that warrants the allegiance and loyalty, both primary and terminal, of its members. It is important to note that the

2. For a catalogue of definitions of nationalism, see Boyd C. Shafer, Faces of Nationalism (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) Ch.—1
granting of primary and terminal loyalty by the members of the political community is the most vital requirement of this definition.

Historically, nationalism has been based on different predispositional factors, i.e., race, religion, language, culture, common historical experience etc. These predispositional factors have shaped and moulded the nature of nationalism, so we encounter different faces and manifestations of the same phenomenon called nationalism. Of these multiple identity bases of nationalism, one or a combination of factors usually supply the core nationalist identity. The core base of identity determines the nature of accompanying nationalism, while other factors are pushed to a subordinate position. Most often they complement the core identity and reinforce the appeal of nationalism. However, they can be in conflict with the core base of nationalism in some cases. The history of nationalism testifies that the core base of nationalist identity has remained the same over a long period for a political community. The case of Bangladesh demonstrates to our bewilderment that the salience of the predispositional bases of nationalism may change over time, so can the character of corresponding nationalism. It is exceedingly important to provide an explanation of the frequent shifts in the salience of the identity bases of nationalism, since it is key to the understanding of the present predicament of our political life.

Another important source of analytical confusion should be clarified here. Nationalism is often confused with patriotism, hence there exists a considerable disagreement about the date of appearance of nationalism on the world scene. Nationalism is regarded as a modern phenomenon by the present author. The French Revolution is considered to be the starting point of the nationalist era. Nationalism thus conceived is a manifestation of mass politics and mass awakening. Under the impact of nationalism, independence and dignity of the nation become the primary value of the large section of the population; while patriotism of the pre-nationalist era was limited to narrow section of the populace. Therefore, there is a significant
difference of political participation and awareness before and after the appearance of nationalism.

Dilemma of Identity in Sovereign Bangladesh

The rise of Bengali nationalism manifested the reversal of the earlier trend of strong identification with religion that led them to embrace the Islamic community of a thousand miles away as a part of the same Muslim nation. During this period of the rise of Bengali nationalism, the linguistic (ethnic) aspect of identity became predominant pushing religion to a subordinate position in the identity compound. The Bengali Muslims in their struggle against the Pakistani central ruling elite used and manipulated the symbol of their language and culture to unify the ethnic Bengali community of Bangladesh. In the context of Pakistan, the definition and boundaries of Bengali nationalism were vaguely spelled out. In that particular context, there was no real urgency or need to define the limits of Bengali nationalism. The term 'Bengalis' was used to mean exclusively the East Bengalis.

But when Bangladesh came into existence as an independent political entity and the struggle with the central ruling elite of Pakistan was removed from the scene, the Bengalis were confronted with the difficult task of taking a harder look at the roots of their nationalism and defining it. In the changed context, it was not easy to solve the dilemmas of definition, because the symbols and slogans used during the Pakistan period were those of Bengali linguistic (ethnic) identity. If linguistic identity were to be the most important or determining factor of Bengali nationalism, the thorny question that remains to be resolved is the point of difference with the ethnic Bengalis of the Indian state of West Bengal who are predominantly Hindus. This dilemma led to a search for a new identity in post-1971 Bangladesh.

Twin Heritage of Bangladesh

After the successful war of liberation, the militant Bengali nationalists under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib came to power in
Bangladesh. The whole nation was united behind Sheikh Mujib who became the symbol of Bengali nationalism. The charisma and personal appeal of the leader reached such a point that observers even wondered if Sheikh Mujib surpassed Gandhi in terms of mass appeal and hypnotic hold on the people. The new leadership of Bangladesh was entrusted with the stupendous task of rebuilding the nation out of the war-torn economy with the help of a nearly collapsed administrative apparatus. One of the urgent tasks was to define what Bengali nationalism exactly meant and to set the limits of its boundaries.

Defining Bengali nationalism was not an easy task, because of the duality in the heritage of the Bengali Muslims. The search for an identity has been a long, strenuous, yet unresolved process for them. One part of their identity emphasizes their significant and inalienable religious heritage. Islamic values are important in their profession and practice. It is a wellknown fact that the Bengali Muslims looked westward toward the Muslim Middle-east in search of the roots of their identity, even at points denied their motherland. Although the forces of circumstances have compelled them to look inward, the extraterritorial and universal appeal of the Muslim qawom (nation) is a powerful element in their belief system. The brief experiment of less than a quarter century of Pakistan was the manifestation of this conscious option of the Bengali Muslims to prize their religious identity.

Concomitant of the religious identity of the Bengali Muslims is their linguistic, ethnic, and cultural heritage which is equally important and prized. Starting from the second decade of the present century with the spread of education and rise of middle class from among the rural Muslims, the Bengali Muslims have demonstrated a deep emotional attachment to their motherland, and its language and culture. Over the years, this attachment

grew stronger, although this aspect of their identity was oversha-
dowed during the Pakistan movement which was primarily motiva-
ted by utilitarian considerations. But the years of Pakistan witne-
ssed revolts of the Bengalis whenever there were encroachments
against their deeply-held Bengali linguistic and cultural heritage.
Again, utilitarian motives were at the core of their rejection of
the earlier religious nationalism. Religion lost its appeal among
the attentive Bengali public as a symbol of Islamic unity and a
source of anti-Hindu inspiration which was crucial in the rise of
religious nationalism.\(^4\)

The emergence of Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh mani-
ifested extreme volatility in the shift of the salience of the different
aspects of their identity. Now that the competition with the Hindus
is no longer in existence and the economic exploitation and poli-
tical deprivation by the Pakistani ruling authorities are gone,
the Bengalis are not left with any extraneous enemy to point
at and to emphasize one aspect of their identity as a unifying
factor. By their 'second' independence in 1971, the Bengalis have
tried twice with two strong bases of their identity compound in an
attempt to nation-formation in less than half a century. What it
amounts to is that the Bengali Muslims have two faces of their
identity orientation, one is religious, the other linguistic.\(^5\)
The emergence of Bangladesh with strong emphasis on linguistic identity
and culture does not nullify the fact that the Bengali Muslims are
Muslims and would continue to be so. Thus, the Bengalis have two
sources of inspiration, two strands of rich heritage. These two
currents of Bengali identity have often been viewed as contradictory,

4. For an insightful analysis of the two aspects of the Bengali identity, see
Abidullah Ghazi, "Muslim Bengal: A Crisis of Identity" in Barbara
Thomas and Spencer Lavan, eds., West Bengal and Bangladesh (East
5. For an analysis of this point, see T. N. Madan, "Two Faces of Bengali
Ethnicity: Muslim Bengali or Bengali Muslim," The Developing Economies,
Vol. 10 (1), March 1972, pp. 74-85.
irreconcilable, and even mutually exclusive with the rise of one form of nationalism or the other.

The Sheikh Mujib Era

The Bengali nationalists who assumed power in independent Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib were confronted with the task of giving Bangladesh a new and positive identity. It is important to note how this new leadership tried to redefine the identity of Bangladesh. Their own leadership position owed a great deal to the appeal of linguistic nationalism and a corresponding erosion of religion as a nationalist symbol. The question of reunification of West and East Bengal on the basis of linguistic unity could have posed a serious problem to the new leaders. Although, the Bangladesh movement was enthusiastically supported by the people of West Bengal, the question of reunification was carefully avoided by the important elements of both societies even at the height of Bengali nationalism in 1971.

This conscious rejection of the concept of united Bengal is an indication of the subjective decision of the Bengalis that Bangladesh is a nation by itself. Although a large part of its identity has shared traits with West Bengal, it is a different Bengali nation. And it is a predominantly Muslim nation, yet their Muslim identity does not outstrip the cultural and linguistic heritage to go for Pan-Islamism. In cases of other divided peoples, a strong urge for reunification is the general tendency. The cases of Vietnam, Korea or Germany are examples of such trend. In case of Bangladesh, the absence of any such trend even during the years of Pakistani rule is indicative of the separateness of the Bengalis.

6. The term 'Bengali' is used in this paper to denote the people of Bangladesh.
7. During the rise of militant Bengali nationalism, the Bengali political leaders consciously avoided any such connotation of their movement. The only friendly overture was made in the sphere of foreign policy preferences. The Bengalis espoused a policy of positive friendly relations with India. See, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh: My Bangladesh (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972).
In another way, the Bengali nationalists set the limits of their nationalism by making frequent reference to the “75 million” Bengalis in their speeches and statements. By declaring 75 million people constituting the Bangladesh nation, they excluded the possibility of any confusion about reunification. The term “75 million Bengalis” was repeatedly used during the war of liberation and after the emergence of Bangladesh. Another significant attempt to demonstrate the distinction was the inclusion of the map of Bangladesh in the national flag during the war of liberation. This flag with the map set the territorial limits of Bangladesh. But to set the geographical boundary was perhaps not the only reason to include the map. The map of Bangladesh also served as a symbol of the Bangladesh nationalist cause. Subsequently, however, the map was dropped from the national flag ostensibly not to set the geographical boundaries permanently.

The salience of religious identity reached such a low ebb at the time of emergence of Bangladesh that the official radio and television stations dropped the formal Muslim greetings at the beginning and end of their programmes. This was perhaps a reflection of the accumulated anti-communal sentiments due to the use of religion by the perpetrators of genocide. Moreover, the political process of Bangladesh witnessed a growing secularization during the rise of Bengali nationalism. Perhaps, some zealous supporters

8. Ibid. The population of Bangladesh was estimated to be 75 million people in early 1970s.
9. The Bangladesh flag was first hoisted by the student front of the Awami League in early March 1971 in Dhaka when the military ruler of Pakistan postponed the scheduled National Assembly meeting. Ittefaq, Dhaka, March 3, 1971. This postponement sparked a spontaneous movement which ultimately led to the emergence of Bangladesh.
10. The present flag without the map was perhaps first designed by leftists. The leftist students of Rajshahi University and Rajshahi Medical College hoisted this flag in the early days of March 1971. Azad, March 7, 1971.
11. Secularism is a hazy and often misunderstood concept in Bangladesh. In its ordinary use, secularism means religious tolerance in matters of public affairs. The Bengali term for secularism is “dharma nirapekshata” which literally translates “religious neutrality”. In that, secularism has a different connotation from its use in the West.
of "secularism" instituted these policies in order to show religious tolerance. However, when Sheikh Mujib came back to Bangladesh after his release from prison in Pakistan, he reintroduced the use of Islamic symbols in government-owned broadcasting network.12 Not only that, he boastfully declared that he was a Muslim and Bangladesh was the second biggest Muslim nation in the world in a mammoth public reception on his return to Bangladesh.13 Sheikh Mujib made this emphatic declaration about the religious component of Bengali identity in order to dispel the fear of the common Bengali Muslims that the survival of their religion was at stake due to the predominance of the secularists. After a few months of independence, Sheikh Mujib started to use religious symbols and expressions in his speeches which were remarkably absent from his earlier speeches.14 He also assured the Bengali Muslims many a time that his secularism did not aim at the obliteration of religion from the life of the people. He emphasized the nature of religious tolerance as a state policy and not to use religion as a political weapon.15

The new leadership of Bangladesh attempted to define Bengali nationalism at the time of constitution-making. It was imperative

14. During the height of Bengali nationalist upsurge, Sheikh Mujib would usually end his public speech by saying "Joi Bangla" (Hail Bengal). Since late 1972, he started adding formal Bengali Muslim farewell greeting, *Khuda Hafez* along with *Joi Bangla* to close his speeches. For a collection of some of his important speeches after the emergence of Bangladesh, see Khondoker Mohammad Elias, ed., *Bangladesher Samaj Biploba Bangabandhu Darshan (Philosophy of Bangabandhu in the Social Revolution of Bangladesh)* (Dhaka: Bangabandhu Parishad, 1979).
15. See, for example, his policy statement in the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh on November 4, 1972 as reported in *Ittefaq*, November 5, 1972. Religion was an important part of Sheikh Mujib's value system and this was evident in his private and public life. See, Abul Fazal, *Sheikh Mujib: Tanke Jemon Dekhechhi* (Sheikh Mujib: As I Saw Him) (Dhaka: Nazimuddin Ahmad, 1978).
because nationalism was declared one of the four state principles, the others being democracy, socialism, and secularism. In the assembly there was not much debate, because all but one member were from the ruling Awami League (AL), so it was essentially a one-party show. The definition of Bengali nationalism provided in the Constitution did not help much in its clarification. Article 9 of the Bangladesh Constitution says, “The unity and solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained so sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bangalee nationalism”. This definition emphasizes the linguistic and cultural roots of Bengali nationalism. The only way it claims the uniqueness of Bangladesh and hence distinguishes from West Bengal is the war of independence.

Neither Sheikh Mujib nor other important leaders of his party clearly spelled out their views on Bengali nationalism. True, linguistic identity and Bengali culture became most significant during the rise of Bengali nationalism, but in the context of an independent Bangladesh this was not enough. Sheikh Mujib in his demagogic style attempted to give simple, often naive, explanations. In one important speech, he said, “my civilization of Bengal, and my Bengali nation—these constitute Bengali nationalism”. However, in his speech to the Constituent Assembly, he was a step ahead of the usual vagueness and emphasized the importance of feelings in the nation-formation of Bangladesh. He maintained, “I just want to say that we, the people of Bangladesh are a nation...language, education, civilization and culture whatever you say, there is an additional factor, that is feelings...Nationalism thrives on feelings. Today the Bengali nation achieved its independence through a bloody struggle. This struggle was based on feeling that made us Bengalis, that provided the basis of Bengali

17. Ittefaq, June 8, 1972. Sheikh Mujib used to use possessive ‘my’ to refer to anything in Bangladesh in his speeches.
In another speech, Sheikh Mujib held "...I am a Bengali, Bengali is my language. The culture, civilization, history, soil, sky and weather of Bangladesh—all these constitute Bangladesh nationalism." It is evident from the above quotations that the religious differences between the two Bengals or the Muslim predominance in Bangladesh was not openly admitted as a component of Bengali nationalism. This denial of religion as a source of nationalist inspiration was a manifestation of the rejection of communal politics that abetted the perpetration of Pakistani rule in Bangladesh. Increasing secularization of the political process was accompanied by the rise of Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan. This is what explains the official deemphasis on religion after 1971. Moreover, the competition with advanced minority community was no longer in existence due to the migration and gradual decline of the Hindu community over the years. The Bengali Muslims were now ready to embrace the minorities as a part of the same Bengal nation. Thus, the use of religious symbols in the explication of Bengali nationalism was carefully avoided in an attempt not to alienate the minority community.

Although Bangladesh was born with diminishing salience of religion, during the 44-month rule of the Awami League religion gradually resurfaced as a salient aspect in the identity of Bangladesh. The Islamic sentiment started to grow from fear of Indian domination and because of the failure of the AL-government to improve the economy. Although enthusiastic friendly attitude developed toward India during the guerrilla war, the euphoria of Indo-Bangladesh friendship started to get tainted in the post-liberation period. The presence of the Indian army in Bangladesh was increasingly seen with suspicion and important political leaders like Maulana Bhashani demanded immediate withdrawal of the Indian forces. At the face of growing popular opposition, Sheikh Mujib asked India to withdraw its forces and they were withdrawn in early March 1972.

The fear of Indian domination in the public mind was further rooted when India and Bangladesh concluded a 25-Year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace in the fashion of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship in March 1972. The terms of the treaty were, however, of general nature and contained nothing that can be termed as a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of Bangladesh. But it was rumoured that the exiled Bangladesh Government concluded several secret agreements with India which were thought to be against the permanent interests of Bangladesh. The 25-Year Treaty was perceived as the formalization of the grip of India over Bangladesh. After the conclusion of the treaty, it was even questioned in the press “Are We Really Sovereign?”

But the more concrete source of growing anti-Indian feeling was the volume of smuggling of foodgrains, jute, and other goods to India and the troubled trade agreement between the two countries. The opposition forces and newspapers loudly protested against the Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement, especially the provision for border trade. The Bangladesh government was of the opinion that Indo-Bangladesh economic relations were of complementary nature and increased volume of trade was in the interest of both the countries. But some of the leading economists challenged this view of unreserved economic ties with India. In a series of articles, one economist showed the pitfalls of the prevailing Indo-Bangladesh trade patterns and concluded that “at the present stage of our development, the economies of Bangladesh and India are highly competitive”. Jute was the main export item and life blood of Bangladesh economy. India was widely accused of destroying the Bangladesh jute industry and export through its export policy and smuggling.

22. Holiday, April 21, 1974. The first three parts of the article by Akhlaqur Rahman was published on March 17, 24, and 31.
23. Numerous editorial page articles were published in the leading newspapers of Bangladesh on the issue of jute trade. See, for example, Ittefaq, February 16, June 6, August 24, 29, September 3, November 16, and 23, 1973.
Smuggling was perhaps the most discussed issue in Bangladesh during the first few years of its independent existence and ultimately contributed to the fall of the AL. The exact volume of smuggling is not known, but it was seen as a grave threat to the Bangladesh economy. One opposition leader sarcastically commented that "there is every likelihood of entire Bangladesh being smuggled out".

Besides the economic relations, there were other areas of tension between the two countries. Even the friendly inauguration of Indo-Bangladesh relations after 1972 could not help much to resolve some outstanding issues. Most important of them is the problem of sharing the Ganges waters, an international river that flows in both countries. India diverted much of its flow by constructing the Farakka Barrage. The diversion of the Ganges waters threatens to ruin much of Bangladesh's agricultural economy. The other important areas of disagreements are maritime boundary and other related border problems.

In addition to these, the visible presence of Indian diplomats and bureaucrats in the Bangladesh government circles, who reportedly tried to maintain an air of superiority and authority, reminiscent of the Pakistani bureaucrats, was bitterly criticized by the Bengali Muslim middle class.

All these external constraints coupled with the inability and ineffectiveness of the ruling AL to improve the economic conditions led to a slow resurgence of Islamic sentiments. People were gradually pointing at India disdainfully for all their miseries. Although Sheikh Mujib enjoyed public confidence and won a massive victory in the

first elections in 1973, his regime, his party, and even his immediate family were accused of widespread corruption and highhandedness. Some leaders of the AL were also accused of involvement in smuggling operations with India. As a result, 23 members of the Constituent Assembly were expelled from the AL party as early as June 1972. The economic miseries of Bangladesh was compounded by the worldwide inflation and price hike in the early 1970s. To add to the growing problems of the government, a devastating famine swept Bangladesh in 1974. The official death toll is 27,500, while the unofficial estimates are much higher than that. The government was also facing mounting challenge from the left not content with just independence, who wanted to bring about a social revolution. At the face of faltering economy, mounting opposition, and growing anti-Indian sentiment, Sheikh Mujib started using Islamic symbols to halt his diminishing popularity and bring Arab petrodollars for economic development. As he was losing popular grounds, he turned increasingly authoritarian and launched a so-called “second revolution” in early 1975. The “second revolution” was a constitutional coup in which he introduced a single-party system and all the facades of democracy were obliterated. This in turn, triggered an army coup by some disgruntled young Majors in August 1975. Sheikh Mujib along with other members of his family were brutally killed. With this ended a phase of nationalism in which the Bengalis tried to come to terms with their two strands of identity.

27. The AL again won nearly all the seats of Parliament with a 73-17 per cent popular vote. Talukdar Maniruzzaman, Bangladesh Revolution, op cit., p. 159.
31. Rounaq Jahan, “Bangabandhu and After,” The Round Table, January 1976, p. 83. He joined the Islamic Conference in early 1974 as a symbolic gesture to improve relations with Arab countries, and to project an Islamic image at home, much to the annoyance of India.
After the overthrow of Sheikh Mujib, Khondoker Mushtaq Ahmed, a senior member of the AL known for his Islamic and pro-western leanings, became the new president. In order to gain mass support, his new regime made a number of symbolic gestures that were aimed at attracting the Islamic elements. The Bengali slogan of “Joi Bangla” was replaced by more Islamic “Bangladesh Zindadad” in government announcements and radio broadcasts. The 26th day of the month of Ramadan was selected to announce the future political framework. More people were allowed to perform pilgrimage in Mecca. Shift in foreign policy was also underway. A policy of distance was pursued toward India, while friendship with Pakistan, China, and Saudi Arabia was inaugurated.

However, this government was overthrown in another coup within three months and after a series of coups, General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) came to power in November 1975. Zia ruled Bangladesh for nearly six years until his assassination in an abortive coup in May 1981. Although he came to power in an army coup, he took swift steps for civilianization of his rule. By the middle of 1978, he was elected president of the country with strong popular support. Unlike many other military dictators, he was increasingly relying on popular support than to depend on the army for the continuation of his rule. He launched a political party of his own to mobilize mass support. His party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is a centrist party, which attracted a variety of political elements ranging from rightist Islamic forces to some leftist groups. The point of commonality of this conglomeration in the BNP is the sharp anti-Indian feeling

32. *ibid.*, p. 81.
shared by all these elements. The BNP won handsomely in 1979 parliamentary elections. 34

Zia and his party in an attempt to project the distinctiveness of Bangladesh nationalism came out with the concept of "Bangladeshi" nationalism. Neither Zia nor his party men ever clearly defined what they exactly meant by Bangladeshi nationalism. What emerges from the frequent reference to Bangladeshi nationalism by Zia and his party men was that they wanted to make a clear distinction between the two Bengals in terms of their cultural and religious differences. In an attempt to make this distinction even more pronounced, they started to call the people of Bangladesh as Bangladeshi instead of Bengali. They thought the use of the term 'Bengali' had the scope of confusion to include the Bengalis of both East and West Bengal, the new term 'Bangladeshi' would put an end to that ambiguity.

Earlier Zia amended two of the four guiding principles of the constitution through a presidential proclamation in early 1977. The principle of secularism was dropped altogether, and it was substituted by "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" in an attempt to project a more pro-Islamic image of his regime. Secondly, the principle of socialism was modified by adding the qualifier of socialism "meaning economic and social justice". 35

Zia's propagation of Bangladeshi nationalism has been seen by observers as a scheme "to simultaneously consolidate feelings of nationhood, provide a series of symbols for unifying the country, contribute to the enthusiasm with which nation-building activities are pursued, and, ultimately, maintain the identity and integrity of

Bangladesh as a nation-state independent of India.”

But he was no less ambiguous than his predecessor when he told his audience: “We are all Bangladeshi! This is our soil! This is our water! This is our air! These are our plants! We will take soil and this air, and we will make our plants grow faster and better! We will improve the soil and we will dig canals for the water. We will grow more rice and wheat! We must! We are all Bangladeshis now!”

In a posthumously published article of Zia, seven factors are claimed to be the basis of Bangladeshi nationalism. These are: territory, people irrespective of religion; Bengali language; culture; economic life; religion and the legacy of the 1971 liberation war. The thrust of the arguments of this article and other pronouncements of Zia is the difference between East and West Bengal. Although Islam was not openly declared to be the state religion, in private discussions the supporters of Bangladeshi nationalism emphasize the role of Islam. They argue that the concept of Bengali nationalism is more ‘comprehensive’ in that it incorporates other important elements of ‘national glory’. Zia was successful in securing the support of some religious and right wing parties when he started propagating Bangladeshi nationalism, organized religious forces like the Jamaat-i-Islami, Muslim League and Islamic Democratic Party promptly extended their support to Zia’s formulation as they thought it was an expression of Muslim nationalism. These elements made constant demands.


37. Quoted in *ibid*.


39. Personal interview of the author with Shah Azizur Rahman, Prime minister during Zia’s rule, on August 1, 1983; Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury, Secretary General of the BNP, on August 21, 1993; Kazi Golam Mahbub, senior Vice President of the BNP, on November 21, 1982; and Muhammadullah, a former President of Bangladesh who later joined hands with Zia on August 28, 1983.

to declare Bangladesh to be an Islamic republic. Although Zia was ready to emphasize and glorify Islam, he was not a fundamentalist. More importantly, any such declarations, he knew, would be readily rejected by the influential sections of society like the intelligentsia and students.

Zia made a number of symbolic gestures to feed the religious sentiments of the overwhelming Muslim community. Dropping of secularism has already been mentioned. Recitation of the verses from the holy Quran was a regular phenomenon of the BNP meetings, the propaganda machine of the party often referred to the Islamic teachings and tenets. Madrasahs were given increased amount of government aid, and it was also decided to establish an "Islamic University" with the help of the Arab countries. Shift in foreign policy toward the Middle-east was clearly discerned, while a policy of distance was pursued toward India. Zia took increasing interest in the Organization of the Islamic Conference and toward the end of his rule, he gained a respectable diplomatic position in the Islamic World. His pursuit of a pro-Islamic foreign policy was motivated by the twin desire of serving Islamic sentiments at home and of securing the much needed foreign aid for the economic development of the country.

Post-Zia Developments

The present military rulers continue to follow the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism enunciated by Zia and emphasize the Islamic values. General Ershad told his audience that we are Bangladeshis "having separate and distinct entity, identity, religion, culture, history, heritage and common hopes and aspirations. These ingredients constitute our Bangladeshi nationalism which is to be consolidated by reflecting Islamic values at all walks of our state and social life."41

The military rulers in an attempt to seek legitimacy and popular support, played with the Islamic sentiments. The new education policy of the military government made Arabic one of the compulsory subjects in primary education curriculum. The announcement of this education policy was greeted by student demonstrations. In mid-February 1983, four students were killed when police fired on a massive student rally protesting against it. It sparked an anti-education policy movement which gained significant receptivity among the urban population. This rejection of the imposition of Arabic first by the students and intelligentsia then by the masses, demonstrates the strength of the other side of the identity complex i.e., the deep and enduring attachment to the Bengali language and culture.

The Intelligentsia and Emerging Trends

The intelligentsia in Bangladesh is generally secular and shows deep attachment to the language and culture of the land. The intellectual leadership of Bangladesh movement was provided by the militant intellectuals who resisted being cowed down by the Pakistani ruling elite. There are broadly two currents of thought among the intelligentsia. One represented by Abul Mansur Ahmad believes that the 'two-nation' theory contains the real basis of Bangladesh and the emergence of Bangladesh is the restoration of the demand of the historic Lahore Resolution.\(^42\) In other words, the present frontiers of Bangladesh with Muslim predominance are the delimiters of Bangladesh nationalism.\(^43\)

However, Ahmad does not like to be called anything but Bengali. He argues that since Bangladesh inherited the major portion of the


\(^{43}\) Ahmad, *End of a Betrayal*, p. 641. The point of religious differences has also been emphasized by Abne Gholam Samad, *Bangladesh, Manush O Oitiya* (Bangladesh: People and Tradition) (Rajshahi: Samad, 1978).
Bengal territory and the West Bengalis, in their free choice, opted for partition and to remain in India, the people of Bangladesh are true inheritors of Bengali language and culture. Thus, the people of Bangladesh are true Bengalis while those in the Indian state of West Bengal are Indians. This is the point of unity between himself and other group that is pronouncedly more secular and rejects religion as an ingredient of the Bangladesh nationalism. This group also forcefully asserts that the people of Bangladesh are Bengalis, while Indian Bengalis are Indians. They hold that the coinage of the term "Bangladeshi" stems from a "lack of self-confidence, uncertainty in matters relating sovereignty, and ambiguity about identity". The advocates of this group see their Bengali identity from a positive viewpoint, not shaped by the fear of possible Indian domination. They take immense pride in the Bengali language and culture. The secularism of this group has been accused of being pro-Hindu in content and has been subjected to criticism for downplaying the Islamic values and symbols. While this group of the intelligentsia is generally believed to be pro-Indian in foreign policy preference, the former is more cautious, even at times anti-Indian. Despite

44. Ahmad, She Baonga, pp. 20-22,
46. Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, former editor of the popular Bengali daily, Sangbad and himself a leading secular intellectual, labelled this criticism against the prevailing trend of secularism among the "progressive" intelligentsia. Sangbad, Special Supplement on the 25th year of publication, May 1977, p. 113. For the viewpoint of the dominant group of secularists, see Ali Anowar, ed. Dharmatrapeksaha (Secularism) (Dhaka ; Bangla Academy, 1973.)
47. See, for example, Abul Mansur Ahmad, Beshi Damey Kena Kom Damey Becha : Amader Swadhinata (Our Freedom: Purchased at High Price and Sold Cheap) (Dacca: Ahmed Publishing House, 1982) for the viewpoint of this group.
these differences, both groups agree that over the years, the Bengalis of Bangladesh have evolved as a nation that is different from West Bengal. They both hold that the scope of Bangladesh nationalism stops at the present borders of Bangladesh and the Lahore Resolution is accepted as the milestone in the road toward Bengali nationalism. There is a growing trend among the Bengali intellectuals to project the historic differences between East and West Bengal.48

Both the political leaders and intelligentsia in Bangladesh firmly believe that their nation is a viable state despite all the economic difficulties it faced ever since its emergence as an independent nation. They stress that the fertile land, enormous human resources, natural gas, jute and other resources are enough to sustain a viable economy for Bangladesh. They argue that it is not lack of resources, rather lack of efficient management and absence of representative government in the country that explain the present predicament. They point at the homogeneous population, linguistic and religious homogeneity as assets for Bangladesh which are lacking in most of the Third World nations.49

Most importantly, the war of liberation in 1971 is seen as the most powerful source of separate identity for Bangladesh.50 As one of the leading Bengali academicians puts it: “The great sacrifices made in the revolutionary war in 1971 have not gone in vain. The revolution created a nation of gallant men who wrested independence from

48. For example, M. Anisuzzaman, “Bangladesh Nationalism” in Bangladesh Public Administration and Society (Dhaka : Bangladesh Books International, 1970), pp. 16.36,
50. All the political leaders and intellectuals interviewed by the author invariably pointed at this source of distinct identity base of Bangladesh.
the most brutal perpetrators of genocide. This traumatic birth of
the nation is possibly the greatest force ensuring its continuity. The
revolution has created heroes, myths, and vision of Sonar Bangla
(Golden Bengal). Bangladeshi “generations yet unborn” will con-
tinue to be proud of the nation born of a heroic revolution and this
will sustain them in their attempt to complete the unfinished task of
realising a Golden Bangladesh.”

Conclusion

To sum up, the people of Bangladesh have been striving to find
a positive identity for their new nation in post-1971 period. The
previous exclusive emphasis on linguistic identity seems to be
inadequate in the context of independent Bangladesh. In order to
differentiate from West Bengal, the Bengalis of Bangladesh are
inescapably looking toward their religious heritage. Although Sheikh
Mujib did not officially or publicly incorporate Islamic elements as
components of nationalist ideology, the essence of his “Bengali”
nationalism is not significantly different from that of Zia’s “Bangla-
deshi” nationalism. The difference is of degree and the line of
political ideology associated with them. Zia forcefully and officially
recognized Islam as an important basis of nationalism in Bangladesh.
The present era is characterized by a search for a new identity where
both religious and linguistic values are to be accommodated. The
search for an identity sets a new trend in the identity pattern of the
people of Bangladesh. Now both religion and language seem to be
equally salient in their identity complex and a new religio-linguistic
identity is on its way to emerge. This shift in salience has been
shaped by the fear of Indian hegemony and performance failure of
the regime that assumed power after the emergence of Bangladesh.
However, the gradual reappearance of religion as an important identity
focus does not mean that the strong attachment to language and
culture has suffered a significant loss of appeal. It appears that both

religion and language are the two powerful elements in the identity foci of the Bengali Muslims. Both of them are intensely held by the overwhelming majority Muslims of Bangladesh. The manipulability of symbols by the elite is clearly witnessed. However, the scope of manipulation of symbols by the elite seems to be rather limited. Although community identity does not appear to be as rigid and permanent as the primordialist school of historians would like to think, yet the competing elites have to select and manipulate symbols of nationalism within the two broad foci of identity complex—religion and language.