



Role of identity in Bangladesh nation-building

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Abstract

The article "Role of Identity in Bangladesh Nation-Building" examines how identity has played a crucial role in shaping the nation-building process in Bangladesh. The article highlights that the Bengali identity, which had been suppressed during East Pakistan, was reclaimed and celebrated as the foundation of the country's national identity after the 1971 War of Independence. The Bengali language, culture and history were recognised as the core elements of the country's identity. Additionally, the Muslim identity played an important role in shaping the country's national identity. Bangladesh is an overwhelmingly Muslim country, and Islam has been an integral part of the country's culture and society.

Furthermore, the article examines the country's challenges in the nation-building process, particularly the rise of extremism and the emergence of extremist groups and political parties. The government has had to take measures to counter these threats while also ensuring that the rights and interests of all groups within the country are protected.

Additionally, the article also examines the period of General Zia's rule and how it challenged the earlier concept of secularism and emphasised the central role of Islam in nationalist ideologies. It also highlights how the government's idea of secularism and the understanding of the national identity in terms of the Bengali linguistic identity have been experiencing challenges from terrorism, extremism and communalism. In the 2000s, there have been severe conflicts over defining the national identity of Bangladesh. While Awami League, headed by Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hassina identifies Bangladesh to be primarily a secular state with the Bengali language as its prime identity, on the other hand, extreme forces like that of BNP have been in favour of defining the national identity more in terms of Islamic religious forces. The article concludes that the role of identity in nation-building is a critical aspect of any country's development, and this is particularly true for Bangladesh.

Keywords: nation-building, Role of Identity, culture and society

Introduction

Bangladesh fought two independence wars at different points in history to get independence. The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was a watershed moment in the postcolonial order of South Asia. The middle class of Bangladesh led the liberation movement against Pakistan to seek democracy, identity and a progressive society. Identity plays a vital role in constructing a nation, particularly in Bangladesh. The country's identity is shaped by a unique blend of culture, and historical and geographical influences, which has helped form a distinct national identity. Bangladesh's identity is deeply rooted in the Bengali language, the shared history of the 1971 War of Independence, and the country's commitment to secularism and democracy. Additionally, the recognition and celebration of the diverse ethnic and religious identities within the country also contribute to the formation of a solid and inclusive national identity. This paper aims to understand these processes of identity shifts in the country since the country was experiencing colonial rule and was part of mainland India in light of Bangladesh as a nation-state. First, we need to understand the idea of the contemporary nation-state and the role of identity in Bangladesh's liberation war to the present day.

Defining the nation-state

A nation-state is a sovereign political entity defined by a distinct territory, a government, and a population that shares a common culture, language, and history. The concept of the nation-state has evolved, with various theories attempting to define and explain its formation and development.

One theory, known as the "modernist" approach, argues that the nation-state is a product of the modernisation process that occurred in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. This theory posits that the nation-state was formed due to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, which led to a centralised state and a homogeneous national culture. This approach emphasises the role of economic and political factors in forming the nation-state.

Another theory, known as the "primordial" approach, argues that the nation-state is rooted in deep cultural and historical ties that predate the modern era. According to this theory, the nation-state is a product of a shared ethnicity, language, and religion that has developed over time rather than artificially created by political or economic forces.

A third approach, the "constructivist" process, suggests that the nation-state is a social construct shaped by economic, political, and cultural factors. According to this theory, the nation-state is not a natural or inevitable outcome but rather the result of a complex negotiation and compromise between different social groups.

Regardless of the approach used to define a nation-state, it is clear that the concept is complex and multifaceted. A nation-state is not just a political entity but also a cultural and social one. It is defined by a shared identity, a sense of belonging among its citizens, and the institutions and systems that govern their lives. The nation-state is also a product of its historical and political context, shaped by the interactions and relationships between different social groups and the forces of globalisation and international relations.

One of the critical challenges facing nation-states today is the growing diversity of their populations. With increasing migration and the rise of multicultural societies, the concept of the nation-state is being tested and re-evaluated. Some argue that the nation-state must adapt and evolve to accommodate this diversity. In contrast, others say it must maintain its traditional boundaries and values to preserve its integrity.

Another significant challenge for nation-states is the world's increasing interconnectedness through globalisation, which has led to the erosion of national sovereignty and the emergence of transnational challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and economic instability. Nation-states must navigate these complex and rapidly changing global dynamics to maintain their independence and security while cooperating with other nations to address shared challenges. The nation-state is a complex and multifaceted concept shaped by various economic, political, and cultural factors. It is defined by a shared identity, a sense of belonging among its citizens, and the institutions and systems that govern their lives. The nation-state is shaped by its historical and political context and by the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing global environment. Today's nation-states face many challenges, such as increasing diversity and interconnectedness, but they also have the chance to create a more inclusive and sustainable future for their citizens.

Identities in Bangladesh

The People's Republic of Bangladesh, the third-largest country in South Asia, is known for its rich ethnic and cultural diversity. The geographic region that makes up Bangladesh has been known by different names throughout history, including Bengal, East Bengal, East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, reflecting the evolution of its identity and recognition. Bangladesh's national identity has been shaped by the country's history of struggle and liberation. The two wars of liberation fought by the Bangladeshi people against different powers have been instrumental in constructing and protecting their national identity. After gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh established a parliamentary constitution and democracy in the newly formed nation. However, the concept of national identity has been a constant source of debate within the country. Islam and Bengali linguistic and cultural identities have been the two most dominant and competing identities in Bangladesh, which have led to bloodshed and violence. The process of nation-building in Bangladesh is deeply influenced by the ongoing identity conflict, which has deep historical roots.

Identity plays a central role in the society and culture of Bangladesh. The country is home to a diverse population that is composed of various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, each of which has its own unique identity. These identities are shaped by the country's complex history, geography, and political context, and they play an essential role in shaping the national identity of Bangladesh.

One of the most significant identities in Bangladesh is the Bengali identity. Most of the population speaks Bengali, the country's official language. Bengali culture and literature have a rich tradition that dates back centuries and continues to shape the country's identity today. The Bengali identity is also closely tied to the 1971 War of Independence, which led to the formation of the independent nation-state of

Bangladesh. This shared history has played a crucial role in shaping the national identity of Bangladesh and continues to be a source of pride for many Bangladeshis.

Another significant identity in Bangladesh is the Muslim identity. Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, and Islam plays a vital role in shaping the country's culture and society. The government has a long history of Islamic tradition and culture and is home to many important historical and religious sites for the Muslim community. However, there is also a significant Hindu minority in the country, which also shapes the country's identity. The government is also home to other religious minorities, such as Christians and Buddhists, who contribute to the diversity of the country's identity.

Ethnic identities also play a significant role in shaping the identity of Bangladesh. The country is home to many ethnic groups with distinct cultures, languages, and customs. The largest ethnic group is Bengali, followed by Chakma, Garo, and Santal. Recognising and celebrating these ethnic identities is vital for maintaining a cohesive national identity and promoting social harmony.

Language is also an essential aspect of identity in Bangladesh. Most of the population speaks Bengali, the country's official language. However, there are also many other languages spoken in the country, including English, Hindi, and various tribal languages, which are recognised by the government and are taught in schools.

The country's political context also shapes identity in Bangladesh. The government has a long history of political turmoil and is currently a democratic republic with regular elections and a multi-party system. The country's commitment to secularism and democracy is essential to its national identity.

Despite the diversity of identities in Bangladesh, the country has generally been prosperous in fostering a sense of national unity and cohesion. However, there have been challenges in creating a cohesive national identity, mainly due to ongoing struggles with poverty, political divisions, and ethnic and religious tensions. The country has also been affected by global issues such as immigration, economic inequality, and religious extremism.

Identities in Bangladesh are diverse and multifaceted. The Bengali, Muslim, ethnic and linguistic identities are the most significant ones, but many other identities shape the country's culture and society. These identities are shaped by the country's complex history, geography, and political context and play an essential role in shaping the national identity of Bangladesh. While the government has generally been successful in fostering a sense of national unity and cohesion, there have been challenges in creating a cohesive national identity due to ongoing struggles with poverty, political divisions, and ethnic and religious tensions.

The British rule

A complex interplay of cultural, historical, and political factors shaped the identities of the people of Bangladesh during British rule. The British East India Company began to establish control over the region in the late 18th century. By the mid-19th century, the British Raj controlled most of the Indian subcontinent, including present-day Bangladesh. Under British rule, the people of Bangladesh were subjected to various forms of political and economic exploitation, which profoundly impacted the formation of their identities.

One of the most significant identities in Bangladesh during British rule was the Bengali identity. Bengali culture and literature have a rich tradition that dates back centuries and was essential to the people's identity during the British government. However, British colonial policies sought to suppress and marginalise the Bengali language and culture. The British promoted the use of English and discouraged Bengali in education and government. This led to the erosion of the Bengali identity and a sense of cultural alienation among the people of Bangladesh.

Another significant identity in Bangladesh during British rule was the Muslim identity. Islam is the dominant religion in the region and plays an essential role in shaping people's culture and society. Although the region has a history of solid interdependence and co-existence, conflicts and divisions based on religious and ethnic identities have also been present. The colonial government's systematic discriminatory policies significantly created and perpetuated divisions between the Hindu and Muslim communities. This resulted in a heightened awareness of religious identities among the people of Bengal, ultimately leading to the partition of Bengal into West Bengal, which is currently a state in India, and East Bengal, which is present-day Bangladesh. Culturally, the West and East Bengal people shared the same Bengali culture and language, making them similar. The main difference between the two regions was their religious identity.

As East Pakistan

In 1947, Pakistan was established based on the two-nation theory, which posited that Hindus and Muslims were separate nations. However, soon after its creation, the validity of this theory was called into question as the country was composed of diverse linguistic and ethnic groups. The Muslims in East Pakistan had distinct cultures and languages from those in West Pakistan. This was further exacerbated by the imposition of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan, which led to the rise of Bengali nationalism among the people of East Pakistan. It should be noted that the imposition of Urdu as the official language was not the only factor that contributed to the rise of separate nationalism in East Pakistan. The economic exploitation of East Pakistan's resources, such as fisheries and jute for trading purposes, and the lack of investment in the region, further contributed to a sense of alienation among the people in East Pakistan.

Additionally, the feeling of being politically unheard, as demonstrated by the leader of the Awami League winning democratic elections but being denied the ability to form the government in Pakistan and the lack of representation in political and bureaucratic positions, further contributed to the feeling of alienation among the people from the two regions. East Pakistan's physical proximity to the Indian mainland and the dominance of political power in West Pakistan, controlled by Punjabi people, added to the feeling of disconnection among East Pakistanis. The West Pakistani leadership prioritised their religious identity over other identities, which Bengali-speaking Muslims did not accept in East Pakistan. The West Pakistani government's authoritarian tactics and promotion of Arabic and Persian forms of Islam, vastly different from the Sufi practices in East Pakistan, further deepened the divide between the two regions. This approach disregarded the unique identity of East Pakistan and forced the population to relinquish their

own identity. During East Pakistan, the country's identity was deeply rooted in the Bengali language, culture and history. However, the country faced constant discrimination and marginalisation from the West Pakistan-dominated government, which led to a sense of alienation and marginalisation among the Bengali population. This discrimination was evident in education, employment and political representation, where the Bengali population was underrepresented and disadvantaged.

The 1971 War of Independence, which led to the formation of the independent nation-state of Bangladesh, was a defining moment in the country's history. The war was a culmination of years of political and economic exploitation, cultural suppression, and the West Pakistan-dominated government's marginalisation of the Bengali population. The war also brought to the forefront the issue of national identity, with the Bengali population fighting for the recognition of their distinct culture, language and history.

The formation of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state marked the beginning of nation-building. The new government had to navigate the challenges of building a cohesive national identity to unite the country's diverse population. The recognition and celebration of the various ethnic and religious identities within the country were essential steps towards the formation of a solid and inclusive national identity.

As Bangladesh

Like many other countries, Bangladesh faced challenges in nation-building, including the emergence of extremist groups and political parties. After the liberation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan in 1971, the question of the state religion arose in 1972, when secularism was established as one of the four pillars or guiding principles of Bangladesh as a nation-state, alongside democracy, socialism, and Bengali nationalism. The first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Mujibur Rahman, believed that secularism would provide the country with a solid democratic foundation while fostering a national identity that superseded primordial identities. This national identity played an important role in shaping political decisions and economic opportunities. The aftermath of the formation of Bangladesh was marked by widespread dissatisfaction and discontent among the population, mainly due to the new government's failure to address the issues of economic opportunity and food shortages. This led to the assassination of Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the rise of a military dictatorship led by General Zia-Ur-Rahman and Jammāt-e-Islām. This regime challenged the earlier concept of secularism and emphasised the central role of Islam in nationalist ideologies. During General Zia's rule, several vital amendments were made to the national constitution, such as replacing "secularism" with "to place full faith in Almighty Allah," adding "Bismillahiar Rahamur Rahim," and substituting "struggle for national liberation" with "war of national independence." These changes reflected a shift in the government's understanding of secularism and how they perceived Bangladeshi identity. Article 25(2) was also amended to emphasise "Islamic solidarity," highlighting the distinctiveness of Bangladeshi Bengalis from Indian Bengalis and prioritising territorial Islamic nationalism over linguistic nationalism. As early as 1978, the politicisation of Islam emerged in Bangladesh with the formation of the Bangladeshi National Party (BNP). Under the military

regime led by Ershad, Islam was declared the state religion. The secular ideals and understanding of national identity as primarily Bengali linguistic identity championed by Mujibur Rahman faced challenges from terrorism, extremism, and communalism. In the 2000s, there were intense debates over defining the national identity of Bangladesh. While the Awami League, led by Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina, advocated for a primarily secular state with the Bengali language as the primary identity, extreme forces like the BNP favoured defining national identity more in terms of Islamic religious forces. Minority groups also rejected this Islamicization of the country within Bangladesh, such as Buddhists and Hindus. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the recent 15th amendment has marked a return to secularism in the Bangladeshi Constitution.

Conclusion

The creation of a nation-state is a nation-building process derived from a sense of nationalism and shaped by national identity. The sense of nationality among the people of Bangladesh has undergone a process of evolution, construction, and reconstruction over time. This process has faced challenges and criticism from various forces, impacting the country's economic, social and political aspects. Bangladesh's Bengali linguistic and national identity has been particularly challenged by extremist forces, both within and outside the country. The period of military rule questioned the idea of secularism, as propagated by Mujibur Rahman, and sought to establish a Bangladeshi identity based on religious lines. Additionally, there has been a rise in right-wing political forces within Bangladesh, primarily defined as pro-Pakistan forces operating within the country.

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