

REVISITING BANGLADESHI NATIONHOOD: WALKING ALONG GLOBAL, GLOCAL AND LOCAL PATHWAY

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Introduction

A prominent Bangladeshi female artist of *Rabindrasangeet*¹ in a recent TV talk show asserted that women who cover their heads with *ghomta* (extension of the sari over the head) and *hijab* (a separate piece of cloth covering the head) are not ‘Bangalees’. According to her, a quintessential Bangalee woman should avoid both of these to assert her identity as a woman bearing Bangalee-ness. In no time, this remark sparked quite a controversy in print media and social networking sites where people questioned her ‘right’ to decide the nature of Bangalee identity in her own terms. Some drew her attention to the fact that the Bangladeshi urban society have comprised women with Western, traditional and religious dress-codes, and yet society has never felt any problem with its proliferation of Bangalee cultural identity. However, others highlighted that the singer metaphorically pointed out to the self-inflicted imposition of hardcore conservatism by the average Bangladeshi Muslim women in the name of obeying religion and thereby denying the secular fabric of the society.

This never-ending debate can be related to two apparently-minor-but-acutely-politicized incidents that may provide the conflicting character of the current Bangladeshi nationhood. Early-2013 witnessed the unprecedented Shahbag Movement² of the youths where one captivating slogan was regularly chanted

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1 Songs written and tuned by Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. Considered as classics, these songs are judged as prime components of Bangalee’s cultural heritage.

2 A mass movement initiated by some young online activists and bloggers in February 2013 protesting a verdict by the International War Crimes Tribunal against a fundamentalist war criminal Abdul Kader Molla, notorious as ‘Butcher Kader’, who was given life imprisonment despite his proven crimes of atrocities, rape and torture in 1971. The youths called on everyone via facebook and other social networking sites to join them in a sit-in rally at a central point in Dhaka known as Shahbag. Within 2 days, this rally turned into an unprecedented mass movement with tens and thousands of people from all walks of life joining and demanding death penalty of Kader Molla.

by the tens of thousands of people who gathered: '*Tumi ke, ami ke? Bangalee! Bangalee!*' (Who are you, who am I? Bangalee! Bangalee!). After some months, when Hefazot-e-Islam³ came up with their Dhaka-seize program on 6 April 2013 as a protest against the present government's alleged 'anti-Islamic and pro-atheist activities' and consequently demanding implementation of their 13-points,⁴ they chanted an alternative slogan '*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar! Tumi ke, ami ke? Musalman! Musalman!*' (Allah is great! Who are you, who am I? Musalman! Musalman!).⁵

These examples typify the dialectic character of Bangladeshi Muslims' nationhood ideology which, having its root in the pre-Pakistan era, has gradually engulfed the mass psyche over the years. The century-old confusion of 'Are we Bangalees or Muslims?' —travelling through the tunnel of 'Are we first of all Bangalees or first of all Muslims?' —has eventually taken shape in the perplexity of 'Can we be good Bangalees and good Muslims at the same time?'

Admittedly, identity is the most crucial feature for any country or nation where race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language etc. play their respective roles in determining nationhood. All or some of these factors usually combine together in establishing the nationhood of any group of people living together, although the role of race and ethnicity is not as primary as that of religion, language and culture. Precisely, these three latter factors are so interdependent that one must be supplemented by the other so that each of them can act as a potent factor to become a component unit in the process of forming nationhood.

However, with the advent of globalization, this identity issue has undergone a fair amount of chaotic reformation. Anthony Giddens pointed out how the present 'world of transformation' affects nearly everything what we do and concludes: 'For better or worse, we are being propelled into a global order that

3 An orthodox Islamic organization based at Hathajari Madrassa in Chittagong led by a 93 year old religious leader and head of the Qaomi Madrassah education system Allama Shafi. Literally, the name means 'Protectors of Islam'. This organization gained prominence due to their aggressive programs against the Shahbag Movement after several of its activists were believed to be an atheist in their faith who had written objectionable blogs about Islam's Prophet and his companions.

4 Hefazot-e-Islam came up with 13-Point demand that included imposing severe punishment on the atheists who wrote blasphemous blogs; stopping women from freely mixing with men and refrain from 'indecent and vulgar lifestyle'. Hefazot used these demands to mobilize students-teachers of the madrassas all over the country.

5 Source: *Daily Inqilab*, Dhaka, 7 April 2013.

no one fully understands but which is making its effects fall upon all of us.’⁶ Global orders, through the package of globalization, has imparted unavoidable influence on nationalism in diversified fronts. This has created a more interesting situation causing a constant struggle between global and local traditions—which has eventually given birth to this concept of ‘glocalization’.⁷ It implies the restoration of local socio-cultural flavor in global commodities, services, traditions etc. It is in this context that this paper attempts to examine the identity crisis of the people of Bangladesh with regard to these moot queries: how far has the overarching impact of globalization regarding both secularism and religiosity generated identity-struggle in Bangladeshi Muslim psyche and consequently, how far have secularism and Islamic fundamentalism reshaped themselves as glocal and local elements in Bangladeshi society. Thinking otherwise, the queries that may be raised: Is this entire gamut of confusion inseparably linked with post-globalization economic and political scenario? And more precisely, has the global upsurge of what we term as ‘political Islam’ (and consequently, Muslim fundamentalism) affected the mindset and local traditions of Bangladeshi society? More importantly, has the Bangladeshi society localized the radical Islam in its own terms which has been manipulating the identity crises of Bangladeshi Muslims? And, has secularism failed or compromised with this complex socio-psychological fabric in Bangladesh—demanding a glocalized version to become a stringent counterforce? This paper will therefore make an attempt to critically examine the status of nationhood in Bangladesh in terms of these queries.

Religion in nationalism: a historical overview

Discussions on nationhood, by and large, whirl round the discussion of nations. Nations are understood as real entities and communities, and hence their existence is taken for granted. The main dispute lies in how nations exist, and how they came to form nation-states. Let us have a brief overview of these issues.

Bengal has historically contained multiple ethnicities with religious and linguistic variations. And also, Bengal was always under the rule of foreign forces. The influx of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic saints, thinkers, rulers, along with their features, philosophies and customs—and consequently their

6 Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World*, Profile Books, London, 1999.

7 This term was first coined by Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Anchor Books, New York, 2000.

amalgamation with local and grass roots traditions, values and ideologies—has always played pivotal roles in shaping and reshaping the civilization of this area. So, despite the reality that people were not allied by any shared linguistic, religious or political system, religion has contributed to the concept of social collectivity—etymologically meaning to strive and move forward in a united manner. This union meant the alliance of caste, classes and trans-regional groups. So, during the pre-colonial period in Bengal, religion actually referred to righteous lifestyle, positive codes of conduct and sets of duties to communities and nation. Religion thus meant connectivity between soul with God as well as man with man, and as such provided moral and social bondages. Religion was not just a misty consciousness. Trajectories of religious-political thoughts and actions emanated from religiosity. This religiosity was both sacred and secular in form, opening up space to include groups within and beyond Bengal. This non-sectarian patriotic religiosity was different from religious extremism. Religion was used in politics for harmonious social order that didn't evoke politicized inculcation of religious and cultural norms.

However, the penetration of colonialism demolished this particular socio-religious fabric in Bengal. The spiritual and moral values underlying in the Bangalee ideas of nationhood and political freedom was vastly different from the European definitions. The British colonizers carried automated globalization machinery with them; this globalization would not match with its present operational structure for obvious reasons, but the underlying ethos and fabric cannot be differentiated much. The British arrived in the sub-continent as business people, started marketing and selling products and eventually inflicted colonization as masters. This is what globalization of today, transformed into glocalization, meticulously does. Let us see how the British imperialists put their globalization approach as a counterpart of the harmonious social order of this region.

Globalization has taught us that when people go to the market, they do not remain human beings; metaphorically they get transformed into consumers and salespersons, commodities and service items. In this sense, consumerism turns people into isolated identities, instead of unifying them.⁸ This concept is evident in the nationhood framework as well. Bengal was once directly a colony, and after two successive independence in 1947 and 1971 (from Bangladesh

8 Serajul Islam Chowdhury, *Bichchinnatar Satya-Mithya* (Truth and Lies of Separation), Anyaprokash, Dhaka, 2006.

perspective), it has gone under imperialism. And this is the point where globalization allows 'localism' to gain footing. Bruno Latour shows how different cultural traditions are invented within the state, how religious affiliations in diversified forms arise and work, and consequently become even more entrenched than before. 'It is as if the metaphor of "roots" had been turned upside down: the more "uprooted" by the forces of modernization, the farther down identities are attaching themselves.'⁹ Hence the word glocal appears as a successful terminology which signifies that labels can no longer be safely positioned along the former scale, stretching from the most local to the most universal. Instead of subtracting one another, conflicting identities keep being added. And yet they remain in conflict and thus have to be sorted out, since no one can belong to all of them at once. Currently in Bangladesh, the existence and co-existence of Gono Jagoron Moncho¹⁰ and Hefazot-e-Islam, vis-à-vis the ongoing political platforms, can be related to this fact. Anyway, the British were the first force to activate and encourage conflicting identities, particularly in Bengal, that paved the way for unsolvable problems for the inhabitants of this region.

Partition of Bengal and the division of the minds

It is almost trite to mention that separate nationhood—grown out of 'Two-nation Theory'—was the basis for the division of this sub-continent into two separate states. Religion was the guiding factor for such nationhood. A closer look at the history of Pakistan Movement reveals that Bangalees were also largely influenced by this factor, ironically by a person no less than Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was known as an un-religious secularist in his lifestyle and ideology.

If one goes back to the Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905, one would find the massive upsurge of anti-imperialist movement in Bengal against this partition. Irrespective of class, religion and occupation, Bangalees were united for stopping this imperial design. An air of nationalistic awakening swept all over Bengal upon which Curzon had sarcastically commented that Bangalees started thinking themselves as a nation; it should be an emergency duty of the

9 Bruno Latour, *On the Difficulty of Being Glocal*. Art-e-fact (http://artefact.mi2.hr/_a04/lang_en/theory_latour_en.htm), 27 May 2013.

10 Refers to the dais set in the center of Shahbag on which leaders and activists of Shahbag Movement would stand and deliver speeches. *Gono* mean 'mass', *jagoron* means 'rise' and *moncho* means 'stage'. This name later became synonymous with the movement itself.

British bureaucracy to thwart this attempt of Bangalees' nationhood.¹¹ In 1911, the British government was compelled to halt this partition which apparently may mean the victory of a unified Bangalee nationhood but in a deeper thought, flaunted division between Hindus and Muslims. Serajul Islam Chowdhur, a noted Bengali writer and critic, rightly asserted that this very attempt of preventing Bengal's partition actually destroyed the possibility of forming a nation and consequently, implanted the seed of division among them. So, despite the prevention of partition in 1911, the Bangalees actually got themselves divided into Hindus and Muslims—in a crude form.¹² This division accelerated in future with the cunning support of the British. The British went on to encouraging the creation of Muslim League in 1906 by some prominent members of the Muslim community; they also patronized further division by accepting the Muslim demand of separate electorate. Then came communal riots much to the pleasure of the colonizers. Historian Amalesh Tripathy cited a comment from records of top level bureaucracy that, 'Hindus and Mussalmans hate each other so much that they have not much time to hate us.'¹³ Therefore, religious sentiment overshadowed the linguistic impact on nationhood. However, middle class Hindus and Muslims judged their respective demand for freedom in terms of their self interests where both wanted their socio-economic development. Thus, Pakistan was created and the subsequent events led to the creation of Bangladesh, proving that the creation of Pakistan on the basis of Muslim nationhood was not an enduring proposition.

Such sentiment based on religion cannot, and thus did not, last long. The economic disparity between the two wings of Pakistan resulted in the development of Bangalee nationalism which proved that religion as a bond of unity failed to serve its purposes. The language movement launched to establish Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan marked the original basis of Bangalee nationalism. The attempt by the West Pakistani authorities to impose Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan was deemed by the Bangalees not only as an intrusion into their cultural life but also a far-reaching conspiracy of prolonged socio-economic colonization. The creation of Bangladesh on the basis of Bangalee nationalism proves that, although religion can work as a bond

11 Serajul Islam Chowdhury, *Bichchinnatar Satya-Mithya*, (Truth and Lies of Separation), Dhaka: Anyaprokash, 2006.

12 Serajul Islam Chowdhury, *Bichchinnatar Satya-Mithya*.

13 Mentioned in Serajul Islam Chowdhury, *Bichchinnatar Satya-Mithya*.

of unity, the impact of language on culture and national identity formation is profound.

The creation of Bangladesh on the basis of Bengali nationalism was characterized by changes in their socio-economic and cultural activities, affecting their day-to-day life. It is necessary to make reconciliation between the religious and cultural values of the masses before resolving the question of 'identity'. Such reconciliation depends on to what extent culture is likely to be influenced by religion, language, customs, usages and traditions. It is a misconception that language and other associated factors, which are considered an integral part of our culture, should be the sole basis for its development. The role of religion towards such development is equally important as we have seen in the pre-colonial Bengal society. We will see below that this was not adequately considered by the politicians and intellectuals of sovereign Bangladesh right after independence in 1971.

Bangladesh consists of 68 thousand villages inhabited mostly by semi-literate and illiterate people who constitute about 70 per cent of the total population. Religious sentiments, not radical fundamentalism, are strong among these masses. The urban literate population, broadly divided into traditional and westernized elites, does not possess the same religious views. Despite the fact that the traditional elites are trying to adjust themselves to the new challenges of science and technology, they have strong views on religion. The ultra-modern westernized groups on the other hand have adapted themselves to the newly acquired values, regardless of its adverse effect on religion. Such changes affecting the socio-cultural lives of the people of Bangladesh could not make much impact on the traditional elites and have been altogether rejected by the rural masses.

Several ultra-modern elite groups, who used to maintain pro-power stance during the Pakistan regime but drastically reaped the benefits of creation of Bangladesh, have innovated some new cultural practices to serve their own interests.¹⁴ The adoption of such practices by the well-to-do may be considered as a symbolic gesture of their class structure. The practice of such customs and rituals has no religious or cultural significance. Majority of the people of Bangladesh have been treating such values as alien.

14 Ahmed Sofa, *Nirbachito Rajnoitik Probandho*, (Selected Political Essays). Khan Brothers & Company, Dhaka, 2011.

The traditional elite groups possess effective power and influence, which they can use to mould public opinion. It is true that their views on religion are not as progressive as the westernized elite, but at the same time they would not be happy to see the revival of any extreme ideologies pertaining to Muslim nationhood. This group would, at best, be part of the ‘political Islam’ doctrine for their self interests—though that is harmful enough to create intellectual and cultural havoc (discussed later).

The dichotomy of *Khoda Hafez* and *Allah Hafez*

This is probably the most crucially interesting issue that will give a clear indication of how a very usual practice of religiosity has undergone politicization and subsequently engulfed the Bangladeshi Muslim psyche—eventually creating a demarcation line between ‘being secular’ and ‘being religious’.

Like Muslims of different parts of Indian sub-continent, Bangladeshi Muslims in general used to utter *Khoda Hafez* in order to bid farewell or good-bye to fellow Muslims. The nuance of this term became so normally widespread that even the non-Muslims used it frequently. However, suddenly during the ‘90s, *Allah Hafez* replaced it in the government-run TV and radio broadcast—resulting its gradual spread among the educated masses. Even the signboards on the roads, particularly at the boundaries of local administrative districts, switched to *Allah Hafez* to wish good-bye to exiting passengers. The massive wave of *Allah Hafez* has swept *Khoda Hafez* not merely off roadside signs and hoardings but from its niches of every description. So much so has been the shift that a *Khoda Hafez* from one to some colleague or friend is normally returned with a defiant *Allah Hafez*. The moot query is, why was this change?

The general perception is, saying *Khoda Hafez* is a sin, as God Almighty has only one name to address, i.e. Allah. One can hardly fight this perception by highlighting the basic fact that our Supreme Creator looks at the genuineness of our intentions, not our utterance. And according to Islamic theology, it is entirely permissible to call the Supreme Being by any of His names (‘Allah’, ‘Rahman’, ‘Khoda’ or any of His 99 given names) so long as it is profane and it is beautiful. Now coming to the word *Khoda*, it has been strongly intertwined with Bangalee Muslim culture for centuries. In terms of its usage in everyday life, it is at least as common as ‘Allah’. The folklore of Bengal is strewn with

it.¹⁵ One finds numerous invocations of *Khoda* in the poems and lyrical literature of this region. Many Islamic songs composed by Kazi Nazrul Islam¹⁶ invoke *Khoda*; some of his songs contain both *Khoda* and *Allah*. All these are parts of Bangalee's cultural heritage. It may be also appropriate to recall how prominent place the word *Khoda* occupies in Persia, the land of its origin. From *Diwan*, composed by Persian mystic poet and scholar Mulla Nurud-Din Jami, a line goes as such: 'O Jami, the road of guidance to *Khoda* is naught but love.'¹⁷ It need to be mentioned that Jami was an orthodox Muslim and hardly endorsed the pre-Islamic Persian culture. Yet that did not prevent him from using *Khoda* in his writings. Similarly, one finds this line from legendary mystic philosopher Jalaluddin Rumi: 'That *Khoda* who on Creation's Primal Day/ The first foundation of thy soul did lay...'

Therefore, *Khoda* is never profane as it never belittles the Supreme Being. And as per Islamic scholars, *Khoda* is unambiguously a beautiful name of the Creator. In this regard, let us also analyze the ungrammatical nature of *Allah Hafez*. The two-word *Khoda Hafez* is an idiomatic Persian phrase. It may have the Arabic rooted word *Hafiz* meaning 'safekeeping' in it, but it is what linguists call a Perso-Arabic word, or a Persianized Arabic word. The inherent grammatical structure of the phrase is Persian. So simply replacing *Khoda* with *Allah* does not make sense in the language of any man's natural speech. Therefore uttering *Allah Hafez* to an Arab from Middle East while bidding farewell will draw nothing but a blank look; it is completely incomprehensible to Arabic speakers who usually bid goodbye by saying *Ma'ssalameh*.¹⁸

So why was this forcible switch to *Allah Hafez* all on a sudden? The propagators of *Allah Hafez* are probably aggrieved by the fact that *Khoda* is a Persian word, not Arabic. A noted Pakistani academic Dr. Kalim Irfani confirmed that it was invented by the General Zia-ul-Huq's crusade of Islamization of Pakistan in the mid 1970's.¹⁹ Since the post-1975 era of military

15 Mahmudur Rahman, *Khoda Hafez vs. Allah Hafez and Other Critical Essays*, University Publishers Limited, Dhaka, 2007.

16 Bengal's most prominent revolutionary poet, lyricist and music composer in British India—famous for his compositions on Hindu-Muslim unity. He was awarded the status of National Poet of Bangladesh after independence in 1971.

17 Edward G. Browne, *A literary History of Persia*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976.

18 From a personal interview with Farida Majid on 19 April 2006.

19 Farida Majid.

regimes in Bangladesh were deliberately prone to Pakistani ideals in the name of imparting Islamization on the society, *Khoda Hafez* consequentially became a secular utterance that needed to be replaced by *Allah Hafez* with which both the orthodox Islamists and the political Islamists have found a common bondage.

**Folk lyrical tradition of Muslim Bengal:
Glocalization of Arab Muslim heroes**

Another very interesting area to dwell upon this issue of the Bangalee Muslim's mindset is the traditional rural lyrical poetry known as *Pünthi*. Presently defunct, *pünthi* was one of the most popular folk literary items where the *pünthi*-reader used to recite the verses with musical vocal intonations in a dramatic manner for the masses to enjoy. The subject matters of the *pünthis* were usually based on mythological or historic characters and narrations of their activities; the inherent theme was of course to highlight the essence of religion.

Sofa vividly described how the Bangalee Muslim *pünthi* writers imposed unbelievably reckless heroism on the characters taken from Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources for countering the local Hindu heroes in the Hindu mythological texts. And in order to do that, they unhesitatingly transformed those Arabic-Persian characters like, Hazrat Ali, Imam Hasan, Imam Hussain, Abu Hanifa, Ameer Hamza, Hatem Tai, Rustam, Sohrab et al into local Bangalee heroes who represented the Muslim glory. Interestingly, all these Muslim heroes resembled the Hindu mythological figures like Ramchandra, Laxman, Arjun, Hanuman, Vishma, Radhika, Draupadi et al in characteristics and activities.²⁰

Sofa mentioned a famous *pünthi* named 'Janganama' where Ameer Hamza, known as the 'Mahaveer Hamza', is a super powerful, invincible hero who keeps travelling across continents and defeating the *kafir* (anti-truth) and *be-deen* (anti-religious) kings and warriors—eventually marrying the beautiful women of those lands one after another. By dint of his herculean power, Ameer Hamza effortlessly kills all the devil giants by going to their kingdom *Kokaaf* far above the sky. Similarly, *pünthis* named 'Shonabhan' and 'Jaigun Bibi' reveal the superhuman valor of Muhammad Hanifa, the imaginary son of Hazrat Ali, who has a super-horse called *Duldul* upon which he rides and conquers

20 Ahmed Sofa, *Bangalee Musolmaner Mon*, (The Mind of Bangalee Muslims). Khan Brothers & Company, Dhaka. 2013.

every land that comes on his way. Interestingly, all these lands are ruled by unmarried Brahmin ladies who are stunningly gorgeous and excessively brave. All these women had earlier declared that they would marry only that man who could defeat them in sword-fight. Since obviously Muhammad Hanifa is that 'man', these women warriors get defeated by him to become his wives one after another by accepting Islam.

Sofa came up with some crucial analyses regarding the reasons for such narratives in the *pūnthi*. Firstly, the primary intention of the writers was to highlight the graciousness of Islam through mother tongue Bangla which they tried to portray by imposing all sorts of incredibly gallant activities on the Muslim heroes; they thought that this would appeal the rural masses more. Secondly, the period²¹ when these *pūnthi* were written was a period of Bangalee Muslims' psycho-social conflicts; it was also the time when Muslims were experiencing conflicts of values and attitudes between its emerging and downtrodden classes. As a result of all these, the underprivileged Muslim class tried to find a kind of psychological comfort by materializing their aspirations through the fantasy of these *pūnthi* heroes. Thirdly, the ignorance of *pūnthi* writers about the origin of Islamic civilization and Arabic-Persian languages, and the subsequent spiritual and socio-cultural developments across historical and geographical boundaries, made them create such reckless hybrid narratives in *pūnthi*. And finally, most of the writers who were converted Muslims from backward Hindu castes and hence once subjugated by upper caste Hindus later took a sort of psychological revenge on the Brahmins by displaying their defeats at the hands of Muslim heroes.

These *pūnthi*-issues prove how Muslim mass psyche at that time has gradually infected a section of educated Bangalee Muslims over the years to maintain their fundamentalist, not radical, mindset.

Global fundamentalism turned glocal

Bangladesh, despite its remarkable socio-economic developments over the years, has been traumatized by precarious political turmoil resulting frequent non-functioning of its political system and lack of basic tenets of social security. Citizens of such states are more vulnerable to the propaganda and radical agenda of global terrorist agencies. Thus, extremists have the chance to gain popular support for the use of political violence during any tenuous

21 Between 19th and early 20th centuries.

period.²² Consequently, the ordinary citizen can be persuaded to support political violence and engage in such an act as a way of attaining tangible economic and political goods that the state can no longer provide.²³

This particular situation has been evident in Bangladesh since 2001 with the rapid growth of militant groups out of which Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh or JMB earned considerably shocking prominence. Operated by two Afghanistan-trained militant leaders Shayekh Abdur Rahman and ‘Bangla bhai’, this group infused brutally innovative terror all over the country by killing political opponents from secular parties. Despite the fact that JMB hardly enjoyed any mass support and was soon banned after the hanging of their two cult-leaders, global fundamentalism found its motivational infiltration in the mass psyche in a soft-core format. In a much refined, intellectual appearance, Hizbut Tahrir Bangladesh²⁴ started to gain momentum targeting the educated people, particularly teachers and students of public and private universities—as well as professionals like doctors, lawyers, engineers and very importantly, ICT experts. It propagated the ideas of value education, enlightened thinking, obedience to religious ethics, moral codes of conduct and so on which drew substantial dedicated followers. Gradually, the radical agendas of this forum became obvious and people became aware of its undercover acts.

Due to the successive secular government’s crackdown on Hizbut Tahrir’s masterminds and activists, this group eventually undertook a low profile but they kept operating in diversified fronts in different names—keeping active collaboration with pro-Islam political parties. In the backdrop of such gradually increasing, incessant activities of these groups, the most interesting phase has ultimately taken place, i.e. the global radical Islam has undergone glocalization process in Bangladesh through the emergence of Hefazot-e-Islam. Instead of following the footsteps of other radical Islamist groups, Hefazot leaders since their inception undertook a carefully planned strategy of highlighting ordinary religiosity as their motto, i.e. they have branded themselves as non-political, peaceful mouthpiece of Islam-loving common folks. And more interestingly,

22 Tiffany Howard, “Moving beyond Radical Islam, Modernization, and Authoritarian Rule as the Root Causes of Terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa.” *ASPJ-Africa and Francophonie*. Vol. 4 (April-June), 2013, pp. 25-62.

23 Tiffany Howard, “*Moving beyond Radical Islam*”.

24 A sister concern of the international pan-Islamic political organization *Hizb at-Tahrir* or ‘Party of Liberation’.

this is a prime reason why Hefazot single-handedly enjoys sympathetic support among the grass-root Muslims who are otherwise hesitant to cope with the ‘political Islam’ of radical parties. However, outwardly they could not or did not maintain this image due to twofold reasons: firstly, many of their frontline leaders are actually former members of other radical political Islamist parties and therefore, secondly, their urge to activate themselves in politics—rather than religiosity—eventually became strong.

By selecting particular strands from religion, religious extremists in Bangladesh—in line with their global counterparts—have craft and empowered discourse on nationalism. Their very attempt of bringing the masses to the political stage shows how they have tried to mobilize the power of the people. The triadic notion of combination of faith, patriotism and politics has ultimately created contradictions in the ideology of Bangladeshi nationhood.

Dilemma of secular forces: wedged between global and local formats

Ideologically, the secular forces in Bangladeshi politics—be it individuals or groups or parties—have always been pro-liberation (in popular words, *pro-muktijuddho*). The 1971 was predominantly fought under the fabric of Bangalee nationalism which was secular in nature. This secularism evolved from the collective secular mindset that resulted from the Language Movement in 1952. In fact, the pre- and the post-1952 psyche of Bangalee Muslims displayed a remarkable contrast—the former being ‘Muslim identity’-oriented and the latter being ‘Bangalee identity’-oriented. West Pakistan’s cultural aggression manifested through their aggression against Bangla was the most blatant indication of their imperialism that was to gradually follow in the political, economic and cultural areas of East Pakistan. The bloody events of 21 February 1952 revived Bangalee cultural hegemonistic feeling—which for the first time united East Pakistani Bangalees under a secular umbrella. According to Shamsul Alam, the 1952 Language Movement in East Pakistan played the major role in developing a Bangalee nationalist discourse.²⁵ Thus the Language Movement forged a conscious link between various subaltern social groups enabling them to transcend existing barriers and transform them into formidable political actors. From the mid-1950s the dissatisfied and deprived masses found their greatest platform in Awami League under the sole leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In 1955, the renaming of Awami Muslim League to Awami

25 S. M. Shamsul Alam, ‘Language as Political Articulation: East Bengal in 1952’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1991.

League allowed it to appear as a secular party—open to all citizens regardless of cast, creed and religion. With grass roots support from both Muslims and Hindus, Awami League emerged as a mass political party—thus becoming the first political party in Pakistan to make a major breakthrough in regard to non-communal politics in the country.

Needless to say, the series of events in East Pakistan that followed were all indicators of suppression of Bangalees' all sorts of rights resulting massive disparity between Pakistan's two wings. What was more important, a devious imposition of Muslim identity on East Pakistani people was attempted by West Pakistani government as a pretense to conceal the Punjab-centric identity of the Pakistani state.²⁶ And consequently, the 'struggles for democracy, regional autonomy, social justice, secularism and nationalism therefore coalesced within the broader struggle for self-rule for East Pakistan.'²⁷

It is in this backdrop that we need to judge how secularism started functioning in Bangladesh and eventually underwent a lack of balance between global format and localized format. Secularism, defined in plain terms, implies the reduction of the influence of primeval factors like religion, ethnicity, caste etc. within national identity construction—focusing on economic opportunities and freedom of rights of all citizens. As Maniruzzaman described, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wanted to implement his own distinctive definition of secularism where he meant neither the absence of religion nor the denial of Islamic practices. He viewed this strategy as a protective measure against Islamic extremism. His aim was to build a society based on national and public welfare that would negate communalism as a political force. He also firmly believed that the religious ideology of Islam could be retained within the spirit of secularism. In order to publicize this, he re-instated the old practice of daily recitals from holy books of different religions on national radio and television. The idea was that Mujib's rule would be based on 'multitheocracy.'²⁸

However, misinterpretation of this particular secular approach by both the secularists and the pro-Islamic forces soon created mayhem in the identity-

26 Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, *Contesting Identities in Bangladesh: A Study of Secular and Religious Frontiers*, Asia Research Centre, London, 2010.

27 Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, *Contesting Identities in Bangladesh: A Study of Secular and Religious Frontiers*.

28 Talukder Maniruzzaman, 'Bangladesh Politics: Secular and Islamic Trends', in R. Ahmed (eds.) *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*. South Asian Publishers, New Delhi.

debate. Secular politician and intellectuals, by and large, deemed the harmony between religiosity and secularism as an appeasement of Islamist forces. And consequently, they started promoting and practicing religion-free attitudes and atheistic views. As this created an unnecessarily wrong picture among the religious mass about secularism as a whole, the various religious ‘stakeholders’ instigated this sentiment to gain political mileage. They could successfully implant this theory in public psyche that secularism implies an anti-religion system which promotes atheism, and its eventual goal is to demolish Islam from Bangladeshi soil.

The problem was further complicated by the gradual dysfunction of democratic and economic systems, uncontrolled corruption and cronyism under the Mujib government which led to widespread disillusionment among people. Thus, the seeds of pro-Muslim mindset were replanted in that regime.²⁹ Huntington rightly described how anti-colonial nationalism provides only temporary coherence to identities in once-colonized countries which soon face multifarious problems of fragmentation in terms of ethnicity, religion and region. And with the disappearance of the colonial master, the thin covering of unity holding disparate communities together as nation soon starts giving way to more fragmentary tendencies.³⁰ Serajul Islam Chowdhury therefore justifiably remarked that after 1971, Bangladeshis had suffered from a collective complacency—forgetting the fact that social orders need to be changed and the fight for those changes is a never-ending one; cessation in this struggle results reintroduction of the old system.³¹

The secular forces could hardly come up with any effective grass roots activities to counter this planned propaganda except showering theoretical discourse in intellectual forums and media. The reasons are manifold.

First, the left secular parties were engaged in ideological battles much before 1971 in two broad lines—pro-Moscow and pro-Peking. And within these individual categories, there were numerous divisions along hardcore to softcore lines. Some of them compromised with General Ayub Khan and later

29 Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, *Contesting Identities in Bangladesh: A Study of Secular and Religious Frontiers*.

30 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, London, 1997.

31 Serajul Islam Chowdhury, “Moulbad Theke Poritrane Upaye” (Ways to Get Relieved from Fundamentalism). *Amader Shomoy* (<http://www.amadershomoybd.com/content/2013/09/11/middle0611.htm>), 11 September 2013.

collaborated with communal forces while others got involved into bloody internal fighting. However, due to Sheikh Mujib's sole charisma as the *de facto* leader in political struggles, the left secular forces, brushing aside their ideological differences, were compelled to unite under him and participate in *Muktijuddho*. After independence, those forces naturally did not find Awami League as their ally and subsequently, they started their politics of blame-game (that included tagging others as 'Indian agents', 'Chinese agents', 'American agents' etc.), kidnapping, killing, frequently compromising with Awami League for political gain and so on. Amid this turmoil of cluelessness, the communal parties started gaining strength in an organized manner.

Second, the rapid expansion of Qaomi Madrassas (which has never been under governmental control) along with stringent religiosity that they propagate gradually engulfed the grass roots sectors. Due to their apparently non-functional socio-political infrastructure and subsequently their blind adherence to bourgeois political forces—mainly Awami League, secularists lost credibility among the mass.

Third, the failure of the secularist forces had also lot to do with the inherent limitations of secularism itself. In 19th century, when rationalism became a dogma, the rationalists and secularists almost began to worship 'reason' and dismissed religion with contempt. In fact the rationalists have been as contemptuous of religion as the believers have been of secularism. Like the religious fundamentalists, rational or secular fundamentalists developed little respect for believers whom they considered nothing less than 'superstitious'. This attitude came under challenge in post-modernism where religious pluralism rather than rejection of religion is accepted. Post-modernism recognizes the limitations of reason and accepts validity of religious ethos. That the progressive secular forces in Bangladesh got themselves trapped in the dilemma between postmodern secularism and religious pluralism evident from their failure to adjust with the ordinary religiosity of Bangladeshi Muslim mass. And consequently, their ideological battle for national improvement suffered a setback.

The regimes of forced 'Pakistanization' leading to Islamization

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's regime was quickly followed by the regimes under Khondoker Moshtaque Ahmed and General Ziaur Rahman respectively where the ruling elites consolidated state power by harping back to the issues of religion.

Immediately after the brutal assassination of Sheikh Mujib on 15 August 1975, his once-upon-a-time close associate Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed took control of the country as President backed by the rebel Majors of Bangladesh Army. Constitutionally, he could not be given the role as a President because neither he was the Vice President nor he was the Speaker of the Parliament. It was an arbitrary but deliberate choice by the army officials. Moshtaque quickly formed his cabinet that comprised, ironically, ministers from Sheikh Mujib's cabinet as well as people who used to be close with Sheikh Mujib.

Moshtaque ruled Bangladesh for only 82 days. But this was the period that witnessed the re-establishment of pro-Pakistan administrative and political setup. Famed British journalist Antony Mascarenhas in his *Bangladesh: A legacy of blood* vividly narrated how Moshtaque—with direct assistance of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—took massive attempts to make Bangladesh once again a part of Pakistan.³² Some sensational instances of civil and military administrative reforms can be cited here in brief.³³

During 1971, the Chief Secretary of East Pakistan was Shafiul Azam who fled to Pakistan when Bangladesh was independent. Bringing him back from Pakistan, Moshtaque appointed him Cabinet Secretary. Similarly, Salahuddin, who was the Home Secretary in 1971, was brought back and awarded the same post. Former high official of Pakistan's detective unit Safdar was made chief of National Security Intelligence. Former official of Pakistan's Foreign Office Tabarak Hossain was appointed Foreign Secretary. And a prominent pro-Pakistani politician Pir Mohsin Ali Dudu Mia was sent to Pakistan as a special envoy of Moshtaque government with a proposal of 'creating a confederation between Bangladesh and Pakistan'. Bhutto on the other hand sent Mahmud Ali, who was a secular politician in the '50s, to discuss and negotiate matters with Moshtaque government. Meanwhile, Moshtaque appointed Ziaur Rahman as the army chief of staff under the direct influence of the rebel Majors but at the same time appointed Khalilur Rahman, a Pakistan-returned army officer, as Chief of Defense Staff (a post that was suddenly created). Ziaur Rahman appointed Huseyn Muhammad Ershad (later became President) as his Deputy who was at that time a Brigadier and was in New Delhi for training. Usually no army

32 Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*. Arnold Overseas, London, 1986.

33 Golam Murshid, *Muktijuddha O Tarpur*, (War of Independence and Thereafter). Prothoma Publications, Dhaka, 2010.

officer receives promotion during training, but interestingly, Ershad was given double promotion and made Major General bypassing his senior officers in order to appoint him as the Deputy Chief of Army. Another former Pakistani Air Force officer Towab, who was an executive in a business organization in West Germany, was brought back and appointed as the Chief of Air Force. All such incidents clearly indicate how the post-Mujib regime spared no time to re-establish the pro-Pakistan spirit preceding 1971. The eventual goal was to impose Islamization and for that the next government under Ziaur Rahman played a vital role.

General Ziaur Rahman, in the process of strengthening his political powerbase, took various steps that methodically transformed Bangalee cultural and political mindset along further communal lines through Constitutional amendment. The word ‘secularism’ was replaced by a new provision ‘to place full Faith in Almighty Allah’ by amending article 8(1) of the Constitution. It also introduced the words ‘Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem’ at the top of the preamble of the Constitution. The ‘Struggle for National Liberation’ was replaced by ‘War for National Independence’. Socialism was redesigned to conform to the Islamic idea of social justice. A new clause was added to Article 25(2) relating to ‘Islamic solidarity’, which allowed the cultivation of fraternal relations among Muslim countries. These changes were aimed at downplaying the role of secular struggles of Independence. ‘The military regime therefore rejected linguistic nationalism in favor of a territorial Islamic nationalism’ as Bhardwaj (2010) puts it. This attempted to forge a new national identity for the people of Bangladesh by making a clearer distinction between the Bengalis of West Bengal, and those in Bangladesh. From this point, the citizens of Bangladesh were described as ‘Bangladeshis’ (Article 6). According to Bhardwaj, “This brand of Bangladeshi nationalism was also constructed by the regime primarily to divert attention from the government’s failure to deliver meaningful change. The process of Islamization served the purpose of trying to avert a legitimacy crisis in the face of a weakening economy and persistence of mass poverty. This eventually opened the floodgates for other leaders, such as General H. M. Ershad during the 1980s, to continue using religion as a tool for political purposes.”³⁴ General Ershad went a step ahead to declare Islam as the ‘state religion’—interestingly which was vehemently criticized by Bangladesh

34 Golam Murshid, *Muktijuddha O Tarpot*.

Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jama'ate Islami, the parties that follow soft and hard Muslim-Bangladesh stance respectively.

Using Islam politically by these governments paved the way to a rebirth of 'political Islam' in Bangladesh, which we will see later. However, one of the direct impacts of politicizing Islam in Bangladesh was the resurrection of collaborators³⁵ of Pakistani army who were accused of war crimes in 1971. Several of them were directly involved in the killing of intellectuals and other civilians. And a majority of these *razakars* came from the religious political parties. So what happened was, under the silent patronization from the military governments, these forces began 'using every religious occasion to chastise Bangladesh's liberals and secularists for abandoning Islam and the Prophet and accepting Hindu Bangalee Rabindranath Tagore as a cultural figurehead. By invoking these slogans, the right-wing establishment succeeded in transferring its communalism into the Bangladeshi brand of nationalism. On the basis of an anti-Mujib ideology, BNP was founded in 1978.'³⁶

The picture, in a nutshell, is quite lucid. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the defeated religious forces started to bounce back from oblivion where they found both President Ziaur Rahman and President Huseyn Muhammad Ershad as their greatest allies. Both these presidents, whose 'admiration' for Islam appears to be questionable, successfully followed the Machiavellian doctrine of using religion as a municipal tool rather than a moral one, i.e. as a controlling entity which a clever ruler would manipulate to his advantage. Machiavelli, who viewed faith as a device to exploit and control the masses, propounded why rulers need not be religious, but need to wear the gown of religion.³⁷

Thus, in a relentlessly systematic order, the radical forces—regardless of their internal divisions out of vested interests—established themselves in Bangladeshi socio-political arena with solid political support from the governments. And with the financial aid from the global forces, they kept

35 Notoriously known as 'razakars' since 1972. The name was derived from the 'Razakar force', i.e. volunteer force created by Pakistani army that used to recruit young people who would fight for the integration of Pakistan and thus help Pakistani army to locate the freedom fighters whom they termed 'Indian agents'.

36 Golam Murshid, *Muktijuddha O Tarpox*.

37 Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, (Trans. by W.K. Marriott), The Pennsylvania State University, 2001.

inventing newer strategies to overturn the psycho-cultural fabric of the country. Social Science text books in schools were re-written with distorted, fabricated and half-truth-half-lies histories which kept shaping the minds of the generations to come. Their imposition of the discourses in favor of Muslim identity over the natural Bangalee identity gathered so much momentum that ordinary Muslim mindset was permanently caught into an identity-trap from which it could never recuperate.

Impact of right-wing global politics: Political Islam's rebirth

We need to keep in mind of the global political scenario during that period—with USA and its allies spearheading propaganda war against the Soviet Union instigating religious sentiments particularly in Muslim countries. The categorical approach was plain and simple: They are communists who believe in dialectic materialism, hold negative views about religion and hence, atheists.

This is a very crucial 'ideology' if we judge the difference of reactions of Muslim masses in case of Soviet-Afghan war and America-Iraq war. Generically in both cases, both religious and secular Muslims of Bangladeshi saw it as colonizers' aggression against the weaker nations who refused to abide by colonizers' designs. Therefore, the overwhelming sympathy was directed toward the Afghans and the Iraqis who symbolically epitomized the We-ness against the Other-ness. However, the Muslim minds were raged against the Soviets because they judged it as an 'aggression of anti-religious atheist forces' against the peace-loving Afghan Muslims and Islam. So, tens of thousands of radical Muslims deemed it as their sacred duty to participate in the Afghan Jihad against the 'atheist devils'. But in the Gulf war, the aggressive Americans were primarily seen as 'Zionist-Christian conspirators' against Islam; since they were not 'atheist-communists' and since they also enjoyed Saudi Arabian support, the Jihadist rage was absent.

The impact of the Afghan war gave birth to political Islam in Bangladesh—reshaping a new kind of fundamentalist discourse. Slogans like '*Amra shobai Taleban/ Bangla hobe Afghan!*' (We are all Talibans/ Bangladesh will soon become Afghanistan) used to be heard in the processions of several fundamentalist parties. It is in this very line of ideology that the blast of 500 bombs throughout the country at a time in August 2005 occurred as a clear message by the radicals that they had come to dominate the socio-cultural frame of Bangladesh. It is also under the same philosophy that the Burmese Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar had been trained to become armed who later played at the hands of political Islamists.

This political Islam witnesses an unprecedented amalgamation of right-left-moderate intelligentsia, more precisely, pro-Saudi, pro-Pakistani, pro-Iranian, pro-Chinese and anti-Indian political and intellectual stalwarts. Let us have a brief appraisal of the entire scenario.

The role of Madrassa education needs to be highlighted as the core proliferating force in this spectrum of political Islam's rise in Bangladesh. Let us mention this surprising reality that the number of Madrassa in Bangladesh in the first 25 years after independence was 2/3 times greater than the number during the 25 years of Pakistani rule.³⁸ At present, there is hardly any village where at least one Madrassa does not exist. And over the years, Madrassas have become a crucial element in the rural social structure—so much so that their support becomes essential for candidates who aspire to win in the Union *Parishad* elections. Two different types of occurrences have led to this position.

Firstly, the activities of the pro-Pakistani war criminals after 1971. Most of them who fled to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia or other Middle East countries, utilized the post-1971 period (till 1975) for manipulating the Middle East governments and influential agencies in favor of their evil motives. Till then, the Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia, did not recognize Bangladesh. However, these Middle East-based collaborators could successfully convince those governmental agencies that 'Islam had been under attack from India and pro-Indian secularists' and the only way to save Islam in Bangladesh was to establish more Madrassas which would nourish the fundamental tenets of Islam. The result was obvious. Unlimited flow of petro-dollars entered through their channels for establishing mosques, Madrassas and Islamic NGOs. Interestingly, the Middle East money had been used for establishing hospitals, clinics, banks, coaching centers, insurance companies, media etc. which in turn became massive fund-generating bodies for propagating 'political Islam'. This is a major reason why the radical Islamists have never had any problem of money for securing their vested interests, as well as maintaining their propaganda machines among the poor rural masses through Madrassas. And very justifiably, Hefazot-e-Islam's strongholds are the uncountable Qaomi Madrassas all over the country. Since the post-1990 governments (i.e. after the fall of the autocratic regime of President Ershad through a mass movement in December 1990) did not want to lose this opportunity of using Madrassas for their unique political mileage, no wonder these Madrassas received immeasurable amount of

38 Ahmed Sofa, *Nirbachito Rajnoitik Probandho*.

government donation in the name of educational development from all successive governments. The supposed-to-be-secular regimes under Awami League government in 1996-2001 and 2009-till now have been no exception. That the Madrassas have unambiguously established themselves as the breeding grounds of political Islam is evident from a simple fact: barring a few exceptions, none of the children of the frontline Islamist leaders and Madrassa-based politicians have studied in the Madrassas; most of them have undergone either the mainstream education system or the English medium system.³⁹

Due to this reality, the psycho-social fabric of Bangladesh has gradually undergone various categorical changes over the last 25-30 years. First, blatant anti-Indian politics has become a tool of maneuvering the mass psyche for some reasons or others and winning the elections; second, the abuse of public sentiment through anti-Indian politics has veered to anti-minority attitude where every word and action of the minority communities (basically Hindus) are subject to doubt and negatively assessed; third, anti-Indian feeling and anti-Hindu feeling have become synonymous under which Hindus are generically deemed as 'Indian agents'; and last, Hindus in particular have been suffering from political demoralization since long due to which they also are engulfed by fundamentalist and communal attitudes.⁴⁰

These issues have collectively transformed into a prime national mindset of the Muslim masses called 'Muslim identity' in the disguise of Bangladeshi-ness. Apart from the radical Islamists, all other sets of political ideologies (blind followers of different global powers) have come under this identity-frame. This frame has allowed a pro-Chinese or a pro-British intellectual adhere to political Islam just like his pro-Saudi or pro-Iranian counterpart.

Conclusion

A crucial observation hereby needs to be pondered. While East Pakistan was on the process of liberating herself from the clutch of Pakistani colonization, the politicians, intellectuals and middle-class masses had been proactive with some fundamental ideals and realizations pertaining to the 'life' after independence.

39 This information has been published in different Bangladeshi newspapers several times over the years. However, an authentic account is also available in *Son's & Daughters of Bangladeshi Political Leaders* published on <http://www.parisvisionnews.com/articles/5732-sons-a-daughters-of-bangladeshi-political-leaders.html>, updated on 19 January 2013.

40 Ahmed Sofa, *Nirbachito Rajnoitik Probandho*.

But right after the independence, everyone found it extremely hard to implement those ideals and their realizations within the cultural framework of the sovereign country. The cultural frame that evolved from linguistic unity spearheaded the emergence of Bangladesh; when the challenge came in front to give a political shape to this cultural frame, the real crisis began. As mentioned in the beginning, the pre-colonial secular religiosity in Bengal comprised people from all categories; religion was used in politics for harmonious social order. But the sovereign Bangladesh failed to recapture and reorder that spirit. This is where colonialism, aided by globalization's socio-economic paradigms, affected the values of identity.

Political thinkers maintained that such a crisis would not have emerged if the 1971 war of Bangladesh were a long-drawn mass war instead of a 9-month war. In such case, people from all walks of ideologies had to compulsorily get involved in it and consequently, shrugging of their individual political attitudes they could have collectively transformed themselves into liberal, open-minded patriots. But since that kind of war did not take place, the quest for national identity became faulty and clueless, and the reordering of Bangladeshi nationhood remained an everlasting conflict of interests.⁴¹

In the words of Serajul Islam Chowdhury, 'We will be definitely depressed and sorry not because fundamentalism is progressing, but because alternative politics is unmoving.'⁴² This immobility of alternative politics is anathema to the prevention of the robust globalization that has already taken shape through political, religious and cultural glocalizations. It is high time that an attempt is made to make a synthesis between the fundamental beliefs and cultural values of the Bangladeshi masses. Such compromise, if made, will ensure that people will retain their cultural identity as Bangalee and geographical identity as Bangladeshi—without being detrimental to each other. The inter-mixture of religiosity and culture will help to create an environment conducive to the creation of a multi-religious society where all can feel secure to live as loyal citizens of the state and enjoy their rights and liberties.

41 Ahmed Sofa, *Nirbachito Rajnoitik Probandho*.

42 Serajul Islam Chowdhury, *Moulobad theke poretraner upaye*.