

PERSPECTIVE

SUFFERING FROM AN IDENTITY CRISIS?

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It is the first day of the Bengali New Year and our national identity seems to be in a state of predicament.

On one hand, Islamist groups have been campaigning hard to stop celebrations, claiming them to be “anti-Muslim”. These groups not only include Hefazat-e-Islam but also Islami Oikyo Jote, Islami Andolon Bangladesh and Awami Olama League. On the other hand the government has made it mandatory for all educational institutions to bring out Mongol Shobhajatra processions – which include non-Bengali schools as well.

As the pendulum swings between religious subjugation and ethnic Bengali hegemony, this Pahela Baishakh, we are definitely debating the boundaries of Muslim, Bengali and Bangladeshi.

With different interest groups and state apparatuses refusing to accommodate inclusive grey areas, one question becomes imperative—are we failing to define the nation? In other words, are we suffering from an identity crisis?

In comprehending these questions, one must reflect on Bangladesh's political history. Even though secularism, socialism, democracy and nationalism were included as the state principles in the country's first constitution in 1972, the role of religion became palpable in politics. Islamist political parties emerged as kingmakers after the restoration of democracy in 1990s. While the Islamisation of politics was underway, the 'pro-secular' Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and the centre-right Bangladesh National Party (BNP) were engaged in political squabbles.

The acrimonious relationship between these two parties had left the political and ideological spectrum vacant and provided Islamist groups with significant opportunity to mobilise and influence. The political use of Islam led to the constructions of two identities: the 'Bengali' and the 'Bangladeshi.'

The 'Bengali' identity highlights the secularist traditions that were an integral part of the early history of Bengal as well as the Language Movement that arose in the early 1950s which eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh. On the other hand, 'Bangladeshi' emphasises Islam as the core element of its identity and territorial nationalism, as an effort to differentiate the Bengalis of Bangladesh and Bengalis of West Bengal of India.

The two distinct identities, the 'Bengali' and the 'Bangladeshi', have indicated a failure to resolve historical and political anxieties. Both the 'Bengali' and 'Bangladeshi' nationalism adhere to selective histories that serve each political party's unique version of the 1971 and subsequent history. They create linear meta-narratives of the religious and cultural history of the region to serve their political interests. The identity struggle turned from a political issue to a social crisis in 2013 when the Shahbagh movement and Hefazat shed light on the unresolved and politicised issue of national identity. Since then, the perceived mutual exclusivity of people's religious and cultural identities has reinforced political and social polarisation fuelled by the two main political parties.



PHOTOS: STAR FILE



The Shahbagh movement and Hefazat-e-Islam adopted a binary and continuously redefined frame, in which these two camps construct their different national identities based on their perceived loyalty to “liberation war” or “Islam.” However, one must note that, Hefazat-e-Islam has served as the mouthpiece of Islamist politics energised by the BAL and BNP. They only capitalised on the political division created by the ruling elites.

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The Shahbagh movement and Hefazat-e-Islam shaped grand narratives in 2013 and claimed to “save” what they believe should be the basis of Bangladesh's collective identity. These narratives resulted in an “us” vs. “them” account of the past and the present.

As these groups were recounting their narratives, they were not only creating a common cognitive framework against each other but also defining “the enemy.” Both movements' actors and participants framed their versions of the history based on the ideology and identity they adhered to. Hence, each group of participant shared socio-political understanding that was different from the other's. In doing so, they not only intensified political divisions but also highlighted an economic dissection in the country.

For example, the Shahbagh movement was supported by mostly middle class urban youth with access to mainstream Bengali and English medium education, which provides better access to social, political, and economic resources. Participants and supporters have regular access to the Internet, which played a major role in bringing about the movement. Followers of the Shahbagh movement also included members of the civil society, Bangladeshis living and studying in Western countries as well as the political elites.

On the other hand, Hefazat-e-Islam was represented by the youth who were predominantly from rural areas where madrassas are the alternative education system for people who cannot afford mainstream education. This education largely results in social, political, and economic exclusion from the mainstream society. It is safe to say that unlike the participants of the Shahbagh movement, supporters of this movement did not have access to the Internet.

However, like the Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism, the meta-narratives created by both movements were exclusionary in nature. The Shahbagh movement portrayed itself as the “soul” of the nation. This portrayal was exclusive in the sense that it implies a singular soul of the nation, or a singular narrative of history, and a singular imagination of the nation. For example, Asif Mohiuddin, in a blog post titled “Shahbagh movement – Rebuilding Bengali Identity” writes, “The innate ‘Bengali’ value set and moral stance, suppressed by myriad of territorial and colonial propaganda, made obsolete by cultural and economic aggression, has been put back in lime-light once again through this movement. We are rediscovering the part of our lost selves, our conscious in Shahbagh.”

This narrative of the Shahbagh movement excludes non-Bengalis such as the Chakma and other tribal peoples found in the Hill Tracts and elsewhere, and non-Bengali 'Biharis' left over from Pakistan. On the other hand, in Hefazat-e-Islam's imagination of the nation, there was no place for a non-Muslim community in Bangladesh. It lacks historical perspective or context in the sense that it ignores the thousand years of shared history and cultures.

But what is most unfortunate regarding these narratives and the identity crisis is the perceived mutual exclusivity of the “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi” identity. The assumption that the region's cultural and religious identities are at war with each is outrageous and ahistorical. Bangladesh went through three partitions encompassing a struggle of various factors including religious, social, and economic.



PHOTOS: STAR FILE



The Shahbagh and Hefazat-e-Islam protests have largely divided the nation into two radical and binary camps. Unfortunately, media outlets have played a role in strengthening the division by favouring one over the other.

These conflicting binary groups legitimised intolerance and created a greater division in the already polarised society and fragile democracy. Contemporary Bangladesh has seen the rise of two violent and binary camps, neither of which, as Saimum Parvez, a former professor of North South University pointed out in a 2015 study, “represents the syncretic and tolerant nature” of the region's history. They highlighted the continuous struggle between “Bangladeshi” and “Bengali” identities, which has escalated into an identity crisis. They only legitimised undemocratic practices by the ruling party as well as amplified extremism and intolerance towards different opinions

and ideas.

But what is most unfortunate regarding these narratives and the identity crisis is the perceived mutual exclusivity of the “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi” identity. The assumption that the region's cultural and religious identities are at war with each is outrageous and ahistorical. Bangladesh went through three partitions encompassing a struggle of various factors including religious, social, and economic.

Each of our partitions has been different from the other, resulting in a sense of historical disorientation. The complex memories of our partitions have constructed the collective identity in Bangladesh through creation, disintegration and recreation.

The non-existent discourse of previous partitions in Bangladesh and the selective history of the official narrative of Bangladesh's history

indicate the complex ways the partitions still loom over the society. This impact is evident in Bangladesh's lingering identity crisis. History shows that for the region currently known as Bangladesh, the question of identity is not either or. Rather, the complex history of the territory contextualises a fusion of cultural and religious identities that are multi-dimensional and inclusive in nature.

In a globalised world, most societies are vulnerable to religious and nationalist extremism. In Bangladesh, one must understand and advocate for a multiplicity of identities to combat such global threats. After 46 years of independence, it is time for a political and social recognition that being a Bengali and a Muslim in Bangladesh is not mutually exclusive. Neither are they requirements to be a Bangladeshi.

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