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# Encountering the real and the imagined The nation and the citizen

AMENA MOHSIN

As I remain glued, like many of us, to the news of the Rohingyas fleeing to Bangladesh for survival, my mind goes back to my days in the camps of Pakistan, where I had spent three years of my life along with my family, and many of the Bengali army personnel and their families. These were the Bengali military personnel who, in 1971, after the

liberation of Bangladesh, had opted to come back to Bangladesh, a land which was, and is, their own. The fenced life in the camp was both “real” and “imagined”.

It was real because the constant surveillance of the Pakistani soldiers along the fenced wire—which had electricity passing through it round the clock lest any of the interns or prisoners flee—reminded the interns of the presence of the state and its power to kill or keep one fenced; the intern was the “other”, not a citizen of that state. But within the fenced

community, there was also life. We listened to Bangladesh Betar most intently. My very first emotional encounter with my Bangladesh, a land I had created in my imagination within those fences, was through patriotic Bangla songs as they flowed through the programmes of Bangladesh Betar. We celebrated Nazrul and Rabindra *jayanti* with songs and dramas. It was our encounter with the state of Pakistan where we sang Bangla songs and performed dramas despite their guns and barbed wire. It was also the building of a realm where we survived through our dreams and imaginations of returning to our land one day. It was indeed a land of freedom for

exposed the hegemony and limits of nation and nationalism. He protested the imposition of Bengali nationalism and Bengali citizenship upon the entire population of Bangladesh through its first constitution in 1972. Larma made it explicit that he was a Chakma, not a Bengali, so his nationality could not be Bengali, but indeed he was a Bangladeshi citizen.

The shift later into Bangladeshi nationalism, with its incorporation of religion as its tool, did not reflect the dream of the minority communities either. With Bangladeshi nationalism, the state took a turn towards majoritarian religion, i.e. Islam; in Bengali nationalism, the majoritarian



There are cycles of "otherness" and "exclusions" in the basic premises of state formation.

me. I wonder if a Rohingya teenager imagines a land for herself or himself, a land of freedom, with no soldiers marking her or him the “other”.

The ideas of nation and citizenship thus got engraved in my mind through those days in the camp. Very early I, along with my generation, saw the “power” of the state, the “power” and “privileges” of citizenship, and also, to some extent, the plight of statelessness through refugeehood or being imprisoned in camps. The power that is embedded in these categories, I would suggest, we need to encounter as humans, not as nations or citizens. In independent Bangladesh, it was Manabendra Narayan Larma, the sole representative from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the national parliament, who

Bengali culture was embedded. These state-sponsored models of nationalism created cultural, linguistic, ethnic and then religious minorities. One needs serious pondering here. Within these frames, where and how do the non-Bengalis and non-Muslims locate themselves as part of the nation and citizenry?

The question of women also looms large within these discourses and frames. Women are considered to be the emblem of cultural and biological continuity and authenticity of a nation. The “purity” of the nation is important for nation and state construction, which, in most post-colonial states, have become interchangeable. It is no surprise, then, that rape has been and continues to be used as a strategy during war-