

Our quest for national identity

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MID April, 1971. A lanky young boy sneaked out of his family home in old Dhaka into the hitherto unknown world of warfare. A mate in the vicinity did the same. The political mood was already charged since Bangabandhu's inspiring call of March 7, but the horrors of March 25 turned our world upside down. The despair, however, quickly turned to resolve with the thrilling call of resistance. Not much persuasion was needed. The intent to resist the Pakistani brutes, the pull of adventure, and the scope to escape parental control blended with the adrenal call of the wild. But the two friends could little imagine they were on a life altering journey. Youth's passion works in so many mysterious ways.

Half a century later, when I, one of the boys, now an elderly citizen, retrace that fateful plunge—the myriad recollections wrapped in blood, tears, toil, joy, grief, valour, folly, and fear rush down memory lane—it is difficult to set them apart. They sometimes make me wonder, were the sacrifices worth it? While instinct responds in the affirmative, reason gets a bit fuzzy. Wading in the five decades of turmoil, violence, uncertainty, achievements, and failures, it's time to inquire what our goals were and how far we could attain them. Seeking equality, human dignity and social justice is enshrined in the constitution, but these political goals do not explain the philosophical foundations of creating a state. Did we have any? Fifty years is not a very long time in a nation's history, but enough to make an evaluation for charting our future course. This train of thought leads me to taking a cursory look into our nationality, the *Raison d'être* for waging our Liberation War.

Pakistan deprived us both politically and economically, but what angered us most was it wanted to erase our ethnic Bengal identity, which forms the basis of a nation. A nation may have other elements in its body politic but without shared ethnicity, it's incomplete. As family is the basic unit of society, ethnicity is the first unit of nationality. A nation can be artificially imagined like many postcolonial ones, but an ethnic people/society is an organic growth and can't be imagined, bestowed or imposed. It may have other traits but racial similarity, shared geography, dialect, and sociocultural behaviour make them distinct. With these basic features, an ethnic people at some point in their evolution may grow into a nation. With the twists and turns of history, it may also grow into a political nation if its cultural and political aspirations match with material abilities. But this process may not inevitably lead to statehood; that depends on a host of conditions. In view of this general theory, how did the Bengalis evolve into a nation?

Various ethnic peoples evolved across the world at different times in history. They would have had little

impact without power. Power is derived from multiple sources, like material wealth or wisdom/knowledge. On the positive side, it empowers a people, lifts aspirations, refines culture, and gives a sense of unity and purpose. Several ethnic nations, including Bengal, evolved in different parts of the subcontinent over the past thousand years. It also became part of a few millennia old centre-region conflict. For resisting the centre's imperial reach, the regions developed their own ethno-regional, racial and cultural patterns. In Tagore's view, "nation" carries three different meanings. First, it means *jati*—a caste or subcaste in Hinduism, both in professional and social categories. Second, *jati* also means race or sub-races like the Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Assamese, Punjabi, Rajput and so on. These *jatis* evolved as a result of a mixture of races from outside India and local Austric and Negroid people over a long period of time, and by late middle-ages they evolved as clearly visible ethnic nations.

Third, *jati* also means nation. An ethnic nation can grow into a political nation, like several in Europe. Bengal experienced such a transformation from the mid 19th century. Of course, this didn't happen suddenly. From the early middle-ages, the assertive Pathan Sultans of Bengal had advanced the Bangla language to counter the influence of imperial Delhi. The second influence was the birth of syncretism, a blend of the Sufi, Vaishnava and Buddhist spiritual traditions. Third, the Hindu and Muslim large landlords had joined hands, however briefly, against the Mughal invasion, like their counterparts in the Deccan, Maharashtra and Punjab. It was primarily to save their estates, but it also sowed ethnic unity. All these contributed to the growth of an ethnic nation, but it was the colonial assault and tyranny that finally created the fertile ground for Bengal to awaken and assert itself. In the meantime, a new generation of educated middle class emerged, unwilling to remain adjunct to the colonial masters. The Bengal renaissance was their collective expression to rediscover themselves.

It was led by a new professional class, the *Babus* who emerged with a bag full of conflicts. They, however, succeeded in igniting the imagination of the growing middle classes. Yes, it had a communal tilt, and remained confined to the Kolkata based Hindu upper castes/class, but was nevertheless instrumental in stirring a national consciousness, however flawed. In fact, this is also true about the famous European renaissance—before it influenced the rest of Europe, it was confined to a few rich families in northern Italy. A series of brilliant minds from the mid 19th to mid 20th century made immense contributions to Bengali culture, knowledge, and sociopolitical fields. As a result, Bengal asserted its political claim via the anti Bengal partition movement in the early 20th century. Although similar ethno-regional/nationalist trends were visible among

the Tamils, Marathas, Punjabis and few others, it is in Bengal that it became irreversible.

Since the Bengali Muslims were at least two generations behind the Hindus in acquiring modern education, it was only from the 1920s that the renaissance dawned upon them. Of course, earlier, a number of notable literary figures had pioneered this awakening, but it was from this period that a sizeable and certainly secular Muslim intelligentsia grew in society. Several literary circles led by Nazrul and other creative individuals made key contributions in discovering their Bengali heritage. As they were skeptical of orthodox Islamic views, they connected with the rich attributes of the Bengal renaissance, free of communal tilts. It was a quest for the educated Bengali Muslims to graduate from an ethnic to a political nation. Of course, it still had to wait.



The Mongol Shobhajatra at Pohela Boishakh has now become an integral part of celebrating our Bengali culture.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA

The nascent Bengali nation—the fruit of the renaissance—got divided in the communally frenzied days of pre-Partition India. The Hindus in the west yielded to the imagined Indian nation, which in fact was a multinational state, while the Muslims in the east submitted to another imagined nation of Pakistan, fearing the tyranny of the Hindu loan sharks/landlords. While the west stayed put within the Indian state, East Bengal, having made common cause with its co-religionists, soon reclaimed its ethnic identity. Facing economic, racial and cultural bias from the Pakistani rulers, the Bengalis demonstrated passion for their language, which slowly grew into a national movement and culminated in the creation of Bangladesh; a sovereign nation state. Bengalis rose to the occasion and took a quantum leap to be free from the shackles of medieval moorings. For the first time in the subcontinent, out of several similar ethno-regional nations, Bengalis, like the English, French or the Chinese, organically transformed into a political nation over centuries and created a state. Of course, this does not preclude other

minor nationalities sharing the same geography.

Liberation was a great feat! But having created a state, we got busy in the ensuing decades, tearing ourselves apart trying to decide whether we are Muslims or Bengalis. Why this confusion? Are they mutually exclusive? Not at all, if their roles are clearly defined. Eons ago, faith was the primary identity of all humans. State and religion was inseparable. Consequently, over a long period both got corrupt, though at different stages of different faiths. In the modern age, state and religion was parted with clearly defined roles. State would take care of temporal affairs of society based on human reason, while religion will deal in the spiritual domain. As for Bangladesh, after Liberation, we found ourselves surrounded by India; we needed friends beyond. As a Muslim majority state,

dropping "Muslim" from its name in a meeting held in 1955 created a secular awareness. Slowly, the cultural front took the lead, growing in leaps and bounds and culminating in the Six Point Movement. The combined impact of these interventions galvanised the Bengali nation into action.

It's this growing secular Bengali national identity the Pakistanis hated most and deprived us for on all fronts. They expected Bengalness to be subservient to the imagined nation of Islam embodied in the state of Pakistan. And that is why the Liberation War became a necessity for creating our own state. But if in free Bangladesh, we seek to reestablish the Bengali Muslim nation as state policy, the very philosophical basis for the war falls apart and creates ground for unwittingly relapsing into the two nation theory.

Although the secular state policy has been restored recently, the state religion is still there. Now we are both a secular and a religious state. How can we resolve this paradox? The usual reason is that 90 percent of the country are Muslims. Perhaps it also reflects the wider Islamic world's still somewhat ambiguous position between the modern nation state and the mirage of Islamic Umma. This line of reasoning forgets Europe is also 90 percent Christian, but that doesn't stop it from separating religion from state. The very rise of modernity was to avoid religious control in state affairs, which paved the way out of the middle ages. The result of dragging religion back into state affairs in modern times has not been positive anywhere.

In 1953, after a bloody clash between two groups of Islamic clerics in Lahore, two high court judges were entrusted with judicial inquiry. After lengthy investigation and cross examination of diverse clerics and multiple other relevant people over a year, Justices Munir and Kayani, wrote a long report with recommendations on separating religion from the state. However, ever since, all the successive Pakistani governments ignored it. As a result, innumerable radical Islamic groups, state sponsored or private, have grown to hold the state hostage. Afghanistan is another sorry example. Now, India is on an irreversible course of becoming a Hindu state by tossing its secular credentials to the gutters. It is not yet legally binding, but the ramifications are already grotesquely visible. All religious minorities are virtually at the mercy of Hindu supremacists.

Separating religion from state is not faithlessness. Islam is in our DNA. It has an important role to play in our personal, family and social lives, but not in state affairs. If it does attain such a role, the above mentioned fates will be inescapable—a brief attempt in that line, in the form of curbing women's rights, was made in the recent past. State religion is not consistent with our secular credentials.

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WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

'Mental health for all' during the Covid-19 pandemic

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THIS year, we celebrate World Mental Health Day during a challenging time, when the need for improved mental health and psychosocial support is higher than ever. The pandemic has brought many challenges to people's lives, including their exposure to Covid-19, lockdowns, self-isolation or quarantine, suspension of educational activities, job losses and so on. The theme for this year's celebration is "Mental Health for All: Greater Investment—Greater Access", which appropriately focuses on the necessity for increased investment in mental health programmes, nationally and internationally, in order to optimise people's mental health and their access to mental health services. Although mental health is a precondition for individuals' physical health and should be a top priority during this pandemic, it is under-funded globally.

According to the World Economic Forum report 2018, globally, one in four people was affected by mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, and mental disorders) at some point in their lives and approximately 450 million individuals suffered from these illnesses due to inequalities in educational attainment, income, accommodation, social support services, violence, human-made tragedies and natural disasters, including floods, cyclones and storms. The advent of coronavirus has deteriorated individuals' mental health, and the number of people with mental illnesses is rapidly growing. For example, in the US, before the outbreak of coronavirus, one in five adults lived with mental health conditions (approximately 47 million in 2017). The pandemic has only added to this existing mental health situation. According to a Kaiser

Family Foundation poll, approximately half of Americans reported that the Covid-19 pandemic is harming their mental health. This suggests that they now require mental health services more than before. However, the psychological health services in the country remain underfunded, unprepared and fragmented, according to a report in *The Washington Post*.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

While similar situations prevail in other high-income countries, the state of the low and middle-income countries (LMIC) is far worse. According to the National Mental Health Survey in Bangladesh from 2018-19, around 17 percent of Bangladeshi adults are undergoing mental health problems like depression, anxiety, stress and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Of them, over 92 percent did not seek mental health services due to stigma, negative perceptions, inadequate knowledge

of available mental health services, misconceptions about treatment and treatment cost. Although there is limited population-based data on what percentage of Bangladeshi people are suffering from mental health problems due to the Covid-19 crisis, a review of extant studies of Covid-19 has found high rates of psychological distress among Bangladeshi individuals, ranging

from 58 percent to 86 percent. This indicates that the pandemic has taken a serious toll on existing mental health problems in Bangladeshi individuals. Nevertheless, the available data on healthcare budget shows that less than 0.5 percent of the total health budget is usually allocated for mental health programmes, which has created a gap in the response to mental health problems. Mental health is oft ignored and massively underfunded in most countries of the world. According to the

World Health Organization (WHO), over 66 percent of countries spend only one percent or less of their health budgets on mental health. Notably, there is no mental health policy in over 40 percent of countries, and more than 30 percent of countries do not have any programmes for the mental health of their citizens. This little emphasis on mental health is reflected in the provision of inadequate healthcare services for people with mental health problems. More than 50 percent of countries have only one psychiatrist per 100,000 individuals. At the primary health care level of around 25 percent of countries, there is an absence of the most frequently prescribed drugs applied to treat mental disorders, including schizophrenia, depression and epilepsy. Limited resources and their inequitable distribution, city-based services, stigma, and discrimination restrict people's access to mental health services.

Because of the challenges mentioned above and limited or no mental health policies, programmes and financial investment during this unprecedented pandemic, globally, people from all walks of life are currently experiencing the mental health fallout of Covid-19. Specifically, some groups of people—like women, children, older people, healthcare workers, individuals with compromised immune systems, and those who have pre-existing medical and substance use problems—have become more vulnerable than others to the psychosocial effects of Covid-19, which includes suicidal behaviour. This may act as a barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 3 of reducing by one-third the premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promoting mental health and well-

being.

What all these suggest is that mental health has been underfunded and sidelined from development indicators across the world, thus creating a huge challenge to ensuring "Mental Health for All". Therefore, it is vital to undertake global actions. First, all governments should recognise the importance of mental health as an essential part of health, and financial investments should be prioritised in the national budgets and development assistance, and implemented correctly. Even just USD two per capita investment in mental health can spread mental healthcare among approximately half of the individuals living with mental health problems in LMIC. Second, it is vital to incorporate mental health into primary healthcare services for enhancing universal health coverage so that people, including the disadvantaged individuals and those with mental illnesses, can afford mental health services. Third, to facilitate the provision of mental health services and address barriers to accessing those services, all countries should have evidence-based guidelines and policies where the expert opinions of psychologists and social scientists should be integrated.

Finally, the harmful impacts of Covid-19 on individuals' mental health may get worse in the coming days, specifically when we are being threatened by a second wave. The longer the disease stays, the less likely people are to deal with and recover from mental illnesses. Therefore, governments and development partners must ensure that mental health is prioritised during this time, and psychosocial support and mental health interventions are provided to all individuals, everywhere.

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