

The making of India’s Bengali Muslim problem



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

In conversation with Dr Navine Murshid, author of India’s Bengali Muslim Problem: The Marginalisation of Bengali Muslims in Neoliberal Times and Associate Professor of Political Science at Colgate University.

The Daily Star (TDS): How did you approach the research for your book, particularly in examining the historical relationship between India and Bangladesh through the lens of neoliberalism? Navine Murshid (NM): I wrote this book before the July uprising, so the issues I discuss are not new developments but part of a much longer process. The construction of the “Bangladeshi problem” — the portrayal of Bangladeshis as infiltrators or security threats — has existed in India for quite a while now. In moments of riots, ethnic conflicts in the Northeast, or broader political tensions, the “Bangladeshi” often emerges as an easy scapegoat: someone who can be vilified and criminalised without significant international repercussions or damage to bilateral relations with Bangladesh. I became particularly aware of this when I was in Assam during the 2012 violence in Kokrajhar. Every day, newspapers carried front-page reports about the “Bangladeshi threat”. Within a week, politicians and media analysts were already framing Bangladeshis as a grave national security issue. What struck me most was that people in Bangladesh were often unaware of how Bangladesh was being discussed in India. That realisation became one of



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the main inspirations behind my book. What surprised me was how natural and commonsensical this narrative had become. For example, in one case, a mugging escalated into a larger conflict, and almost immediately the claim emerged that the muggers were Bangladeshi, despite there being no arrests or clear evidence. Yet the certainty with which the accusation was made was striking. We continue to see similar patterns today: when a petty crime is committed by someone from a poor or working-class background, such as a construction worker or migrant labourer, they are quickly labelled “Bangladeshi”. Political actors then derive benefit from presenting such incidents as evidence of infiltration or security threats. So, this is not a new phenomenon at all; it is part of a long-standing political and social discourse that has reinforced social hierarchies based on class, ethnic identity, and country of origin. You see this in their school textbooks and curriculum narratives around 1971 as well. By claiming 1971 as their war, they take away agency from our Muktiyoddhas; in turn, the average Indian will tell you that they liberated Bangladesh for us. From this emerge the expectations — from politicians and lay people alike — of eternal and, more importantly, unconditional gratitude. This idea that there would be no Bangladesh without India produces

a relationship steeped in inequality, maintained through Bangladesh’s policy of “quiet diplomacy”. But there is a domestic angle here. If Bangladeshis actually believe that too, then it raises questions about Bangladeshi sovereignty. We have seen Jamaat-e-Islami politicians saying the same thing about India’s intervention in 1971, for example. By forcefully pretending that domestic and regional politics are separate, we have failed to notice that both Indian nationalists and the Jamaat here sing the same tune. TDS: What, in your view, explains this perception of Bangladesh? NM: There exists a hierarchy in the way they think about not only Bangladeshis but Bangladesh itself. On the one hand, at the state level, Bangladesh was projected as a friendly neighbour and strategic ally; on the other hand, Bangladeshis were vilified and portrayed as security threats. This contradiction raises an important question: how can these two narratives coexist? In exploring this issue, I realised that there is an ability to compartmentalise such narratives, and the target is not necessarily only Bangladeshi migrants. The same rhetoric can easily be directed towards Bengali Muslim populations within India who are legitimate Indian citizens yet are rendered indistinguishable from Bangladeshis in popular political discourse. As a result, Bengali Muslims and Bangladeshis become interchangeable categories, deployed as convenient scapegoats whenever necessary. The fact that many of these communities live in border districts such as Malda and Murshidabad — both Muslim-majority and border regions — further facilitates the manufacturing of the myth of “Bangladeshi infiltration”. In many ways, this has been an ongoing phenomenon, though it was not always recognised as such. Indian officials themselves have often framed it as an internal political matter tied to electoral calculations and vote-bank politics, and to some extent that interpretation is valid. These narratives shape how generations have come to understand Bangladesh and Bengali Muslims, reinforcing perceptions that Bengali Muslims are less deserving — a notion that finds acceptance in part because of their conflation with Bangladeshis. Quiet diplomacy on Bangladesh’s part has also meant accepting the scapegoating of Bengali Muslims in India as India’s internal problem, thereby helping to maintain such hierarchies through silence. However, these narratives inevitably carry consequences for bilateral relations at the popular level. They shape how Bangladeshis perceive India and deepen resentment towards the rhetoric emerging from Indian political discourse. While some may believe such narratives can remain confined within domestic politics, in an age of globalisation and instant communication, such containment is impossible. When Bangladeshis are described as “termites” or other similarly dehumanising terms, people in Bangladesh hear and internalise those statements as well. In that sense, the rise of anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh can also be understood as a response to these sustained narratives and representations. TDS: Given the long and contested history shared by India and Bangladesh, what makes this relationship different from India’s dealings with Pakistan or China? NM: There are two dimensions to

this issue: one internal and the other external. One emerges from relations between the two states, while the other is rooted within society itself. What makes the relationship between India and Bangladesh particularly complex is their shared history. At one point, they were part of the same political entity, so the distinction between what is “internal” and what is “external” is often blurred. The nature of anti-Bangladeshi sentiment also varies across regions. Compared to China or Pakistan, Bangladesh is seen as a more manageable “security threat”. China and Pakistan are viewed as actual military challenges, where the outcome of a conflict is uncertain. Bangladesh, however, is perceived differently: a threat can be constructed politically and still remain controllable. This allows political actors to mobilise unity through anti-Bangladeshi rhetoric while avoiding the risks associated with larger geopolitical rivals. At the same time, officials themselves often acknowledge the importance of maintaining Bangladesh as an ally. In my research, I tried to understand how these narratives operate differently in places such as West Bengal and Assam, especially through labour practices and their effects on social hierarchies. In West Bengal, I found that the labour market is highly segregated along ethnic and religious lines. Bengali Muslims are largely confined to low-wage occupations such as guards or peons, while higher-level positions remain dominated by others. One important factor here is caste. Bengali Muslims are often viewed through the lens of caste prejudice, particularly through the perception that many were historically lower-caste converts to Islam escaping caste oppression. The same disdain directed towards Dalits is, in many ways, projected onto Bengali Muslims. This helps explain why Bengali Muslims are frequently labelled as “Bangladeshis” or “infiltrators” — not merely as an act of religious bigotry, but also as a way of symbolically excluding them from belonging within society itself. The situation in Assam has a different historical trajectory. During the colonial period, Bengali Hindus were often brought in as administrators and managers, while Bengali Muslims were recruited as plantation labourers. These colonial labour arrangements created enduring social divisions. From the Assamese perspective, Bengalis came to be associated with extractive practices in much the same way as the British colonisers themselves. Over time, Bengalis — whether Indian or Bangladeshi — were increasingly blamed for economic hardships, unemployment, and competition over resources. In the neoliberal period, as Assam has

continued to face uneven development and economic difficulties, anti-Bangladeshi sentiment has become closely tied to economic anxieties. Bengalis, particularly Bengali Muslims, are often portrayed as responsible for broader structural crises, regardless of their actual citizenship or social position. TDS: How has neoliberalism shaped social hierarchies, language politics, and patterns of exclusion in regions such as Assam and West Bengal? NM: What changes with neoliberalism is the emergence of uneven development — islands of significant growth alongside regions that experience what I describe as “neoliberal neglect”. In Assam, many areas fall into this category of neglect, creating fertile ground for frustration, insecurity, and various forms of social discontent. In West Bengal, however, the impact of neoliberalism takes a somewhat different form. Rather than simply producing uneven development, it also reinforces and solidifies existing social hierarchies. Under neoliberal globalisation, certain languages become associated with productivity, modernity, and global aspiration. English, for example, gains prestige because it projects an image of cosmopolitanism and global power. Hindi, too, rises in importance because of globalisation and because of Bollywood’s role in Indian soft power. As a result, linguistic hierarchies become sharper. Within this hierarchy, Bangla occupies a relatively marginal position. Bengali Muslims in West Bengal, who are largely poor and rural, are often excluded from these privileged linguistic spaces because they are less likely to speak English or Hindi fluently. In this sense, neoliberalism does not erase older inequalities; rather, it strengthens them by aligning local social hierarchies with broader global hierarchies of language, class, and cultural capital. TDS: How has neoliberalism shaped migration, labour, and social hierarchies in India and Bangladesh, and what differences do you see in the way the two countries have experienced these transformations? NM: I have coined the term “differential neoliberalism” to capture the different pace and forms of neoliberal policy adoption in India and Bangladesh. The idea is to understand how populations develop different “neoliberal sensibilities” — that is, how they perceive, internalise, and respond to neoliberal ideology. This includes attitudes towards policies such as privatisation, deregulation, market liberalisation, and fiscal austerity. In my argument, Bangladesh can be seen as an early site of neoliberal experimentation, even before the structural adjustment programmes associated with the IMF and World Bank, or later development frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals. Emerging from the 1971 war and facing the famine of 1974, Bangladesh became a space where development-oriented governance and NGO-led interventions expanded rapidly. This is also the period when neoliberal ideas were being tested in parts of the West — in New York, for example. Drawing on this history — and on thinkers such as David Harvey, Naomi Klein, Arundhati Roy, Anu Muhammad, and Lamia Karim — I suggest that Bangladesh developed an early “prehistory” of neoliberalism. A dense NGO landscape emerged, often split between rights-based organisations and development-oriented, policy-driven NGOs, with the latter becoming more dominant over time. Over time, neoliberalism became embedded within Bangladeshi nationalism itself. Two features are especially important here: first, the normalisation of labour migration — a kind of “wanderlust” where working abroad (in India, the Middle East, or elsewhere) is seen as ordinary rather than deviant; and second, a strong sense of self-reliance, where the state is not expected to provide fully for healthcare, education, or employment. In contrast, India experienced a

more rapid neoliberal transformation in the 1990s. While there were earlier developmental tendencies, large-scale liberalisation came later and was more concentrated on privatisation and foreign investment. Migration did not become central to its neoliberal imagination in the same way. As a result, Bangladeshi migrant mobility is often normalised in Bangladesh but criminalised or securitised in parts of India. This also produces different labour regimes. In Bangladesh, industrialisation from the 1970s and 1980s involved a transition from agrarian labour to factory-based employment, with relatively less worker militancy. In India, by contrast, pre-existing industrial structures were reorganised through neoliberal reforms, leading to greater displacement and more visible labour militancy. These differences shape how workers in both contexts understand rights, mobility, and legitimacy. They also feed into broader social perceptions, including the criminalisation of Bangladeshi identity in India, which I interpret as part of this broader logic of “differential neoliberalism” — where migration, labour, and belonging are experienced and judged through distinct historical trajectories of neoliberal transformation. TDS: Despite the tensions and challenges you have outlined, where do you see opportunities for a more constructive Bangladesh-India relationship in the years ahead? NM: There are different levels at which this issue can be understood. At the state or diplomatic level, the situation may appear complicated, but it is not. Bangladeshi diplomats need to be able to speak openly and confidently, advancing their own interests. They need to grow a backbone. A servile attitude does not serve anyone. Indian diplomats I have spoken to, for example, have noted their frustration when communicating with their Bangladeshi counterparts, primarily because the latter never say what they want to say. If we look at people-to-people exchanges, again, there is a lack of communication. Assamese students I have spoken to have told me, for example, that for all the talk of Bangladeshis in Assam, they have never actually met anyone from Bangladesh. This has to change. It is much easier to despise an imaginary Bangladeshi than a real one, and conversely, much easier to despise an imaginary Indian than a real one. We have seen that when people do come together from both sides, it is usually not driven by hatred. Rather, they realise that political actors have used religion and national identity to mobilise and polarise the masses. Greater communication between ordinary people is therefore essential so that they can see through this kind of politicisation and recognise that the interests of ordinary working-class people on both sides are actually quite similar, even though they often become the subjects of political rhetoric. Take the example of the undocumented Bangladeshi in India. The fact that they are there and are able to work speaks to a certain kind of coexistence at a practical level. They are clearly accepted there in some capacity. There is some hope in that! But the fact that many avoid taking their families with them because of fears of communal tensions shows us the limits of this kind of hope. The pattern of Bangladeshi migration there is revealing too. My research suggests that most of these migrant workers travel for work and then return home. This also shows the limits of what is deemed acceptable — reminiscent of Vijay Prashad’s oft-quoted line in The Karma of Brown Folk: “They want our labour, not our lives.” Multiculturalism is never easy. India itself demonstrates that a shared national identity is not enough to maintain social harmony — there are many ways in which “difference” is politicised and utilised. Decades of politicking have led to different communities being portrayed as enemies, infiltrators, or threats, depending on political need. It is important to recognise the constructed nature of such threats and to be able to place humanity and human dignity above man-made social differences. In a world where enemy-making is so politically productive, rebuilding trust and achieving reconciliation take time. Still, I want to believe that our shared humanity will eventually allow us to see that unity in diversity is not merely a nationalist rhetoric. The interview was taken by Priyam Paul.



Cover of *India's Bangladesh Problem: The Marginalisation of Bengali Muslims in Neoliberal Times* by Navine Murshid (Cambridge University Press, 2023).