

Majoritarian Nationalist Discourse and Cultural Heterogeneity in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh unlike India and Pakistan is perceived to be a largely homogeneous country as the statistics fortifies that about 98 per cent people speak Bengali, the state language and about 90 percent are Muslims. As a consequence, more than 45 ethnic minorities constitute less than two per cent of the total population. Notwithstanding the projection of one nation, one language and one religion, in reality Bangladesh manifests interesting mosaic of diversity within this apparently homogeneous land. Bangladesh is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious plural society which embellishes different cultural shades among people across this nation.

1. Debates on Bengali Nationalism vs. Ethnic Minorities

The ideology of Bengali nationalism as envisaged by the ruling party was to marginalize the non-Bengali minorities in general and tribal nationalities in particular. The debate in the constituent assembly on October 25 and October 31, 1972, especially the reaction of the member of the ruling party, were indicative of this attitude. On October 25 while discussing Article 14 of the Constitution, the question of ethnic minorities came to the fore. The Article 14 provided that one of the fundamental responsibilities of the state would free the working population-peasants and labourers and the "backward sections" of the population from all kinds of exploitations. The article did not specify these 'sections'. Manabendra Narayan Larma, an independent member from the Chittagong Hill Tract moved an amendment to the above article proposing the inclusion of lawful and special rights of the minorities and backward classes. Larma also proposed declaring autonomous status for tribal regions of the CHD. His proposal was portrait as a challenge to Bengali nationalism, *raison de'tre* of the new nation.

The notion of homogeneity is manifested in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Article 9 maintains that "the unity and solidarity of Bangalee nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be this basis of Bangalee nationalism" (Article 9, *Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972*). The Bangladesh Constitution of 1972 emphasized on the non-communal, secular ethnic linguistic identity of the nation calling the citizen 'Bengalis' (Anisuzzaman 2000). The Bengali identity overlooked more than forty-five ethnic minorities, representing less than two percent of total population, and destroyed cultural heterogeneity of Bangladesh. Subsequent attempts to construct a unique ethnic linguistic or religious identity of Bangladesh have tended to ignore multiple identities around issues of language, ethnicity and religion and alienated the non-Bangali population, especially the indigenous population. The pre-1975 Bengalee and post-1975 Bangladeshi *bhadrasantan* (i.e., the dominant social forces) alienated the non-Bengali population especially the hill peoples of Bangladesh (Ahmed 1994: 130). In this context Ali Riaz (2016: 207) aptly remarks "A majoritarian

Bengali nationalist discourse by definition marginalizes the identity of other ethnic groups (such as Chakma, Marma, Hajong, Garo),f it creates a national identity which has built an exclusionary characteristic contributing to schism within the society".

2. Complex Status of Minorities

Mohsin (1997) argued that the assertion that "the people of Bangladesh shall be known as Banglees as a nation, ensured Bengali domination once all political and cultural life within the state as well imposition of single nationality over all citizens of Bangladesh" (Mohsin 1997). Social structure of Bangladesh exhibits the complex status of minorities. In Bangladesh since independence in 1971 the ethnic minorities have been struggling for the recognition of their identity by the state. Ethnic minorities can be categorized into two groups, plain land ethnic minorities and those residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) regarded as Hilly land ethnic minorities. State policy reveals a distinct discrepancy between indigenous leaders and Bangladesh government in the context of the issue of identity. When Manabendra Narayan Larma, a leader from the CHT resisted the imposition of hegemonic Bangali identity, the new state behaved like the old Pakistani state, trying to suppress the Chakma's quest for identity and autonomy (Schendel 2000). Mujibur Rahman who fought for the emancipation of Bangalis against Punjabi domination, seemed to disregard the lesion of Pakistani state, failed to recognize the legitimate demand from the CHT people and told them to forget their ethnic identity for Bengali (Ahmed 1994: 134). In response to Mujib's stands the Parbatya Chhottogram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) was established in 1972 with the objective of ensuring the recognition of ethnic minority identity as well as protection of their rights. An armed wing of the PCJSS was also formed, it was known as *Shanti Bahini* (peace force).

3. Chakmas' Quest for Identity and Autonomy

Chakmas have been waging a violent insurgency in the quest for autonomy and regional "Jumma nation" identity for the last thirty years (Kabir 1998: 11, Choudhury 2001: 83). Another issue of CHT is Bengaliness and land accusation.

Narzul Islam depicted the Bengalization as an induced factor because by this integration process more tribal people lost their cultivated land.

The replacement of the Bengali nationalism with Bangladeshi nationalism, under General Zia regime does not resolve the problem, for the concept Bangladesh still remain inextricably limited to the idea of Bengali hegemony over the non-Bengali Hill people of CHT. Under the military regime of Ziaur Rahman, the democratic struggle “between the indigenous people and the government got converted into a low-intensity armed conflict... Zia regime initiated the two pronged strategies to address the CHT problems including the resettlement programme as well as extensive military deployment” (Chakma and Maitrot 2016: 10). In this context Chakma notes that, “Bengali settlement not only altered the demographic of the CHT, it also expedited process of ethnic cleansing” (Chakma 2010: 110). Some scholars like Adnan (2004) have linked the settlement (alienation from common and private land) with poverty.

Notwithstanding the above, the Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment was passed by the Parliament on 30 June, 2011, maintains that “the state shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities” (Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution). In this context a peace accord was signed with the *Shanti Bahini* in 1997, by Sheikh Hasina government, to resolve the protracted conflict between the Bangladeshi government and the indigenous people. However, there have been continuing reports of human right violation in CHT. More than two decades have passed since the signing of the CHT accord, yet most of its provision are only partially implemented, particularly the key issues.

4. Linguistic Diversity

Bangladesh is often projected as monolingual country. However, this hegemonic misconception begins to break down if one considers the diversity of actual speech form that varies significantly across social classes, and geographic region. There are also various ethnic minorities that have distinct languages. There are many different regional varieties – or so-called dialects– of Bangla.

The constitution of Bangladesh does not acknowledge in any way the linguistic diversity that exists within the country. While it refers to Bangla as the ‘state language’, it makes no mention of whether there are other languages in Bangladesh, except that it gives de facto recognition of the use of English for administrative purposes. Article 23A of the constitution which was visited in 2011 in response to the demand of ethnic communities that they should be recognized as “indigenous peoples”, has nothing on language or recognize linguistic diversity found in the indigenous people (among them).

In keeping with the widespread non-recognition of linguistic diversity, the extent of diglossia (the use of two languages or language varieties by the same person or community) and multilingualism in Bangladesh is rarely acknowledged or appreciated. But in reality, a large population of Bangladeshis routinely use different languages or language varieties, and are used to different degree and types of multilingualism, the degree and extent of which may vary according to factors such as class, region, religious affiliation, gender and ethnicity (Tripura 2018).

Notwithstanding the lack of constitutional recognition of non-Bangla native languages of Bangladeshis, the National Cultural Policy of 2006, does talk about supporting tribal languages, albeit in a limited way, and it also provides for promotion and research of different dialects’ and languages such as – Arabic, Sanskrit, Farsi and Pali. On the whole, there is more prominence given to the Bengali language and culture as constituting the mainstream and there is also explicit reference to indigenous and to the need to make the ethnic minorities more familiar with and ‘immersed’ in the mainstream.

The National Educational Policy 2010 talks about promotion and development of the languages and culture of indigenous and small ethnic groups. However, while acknowledging the importance of the mother tongue of indigenous children in their education, the same policy speaks about helping her children “learn their mother tongue” on opposed to helping them “learning in their mother tongue”. In such a situation the dominant language engulfs the minority languages. Several indigenous groups living in Bangladesh are gradually losing their cultural inheritance and language losses consequence. Sujana Chakma contents, “Chakma languages going to language shift to Bangla and it is gradually moving towards language loss. Chakma people are becoming more and more exposed to Bengali people and language” (Chakma 2004: 10).

5. Narrative of Marginalization

The status of ethnic minorities’ manifests marginalization in terms of land disposition, land related violence, lesser livelihood options and limited access to social services. In Bangladesh ethnic minorities became poor over the years and stay poor. The status of ethnic minorities both the CHT and plain lands manifest experiences of poverty. In the context of land the Bangladesh governments budget allocation of BDT 160 million for the estimated 2 million indigenous people of the plains are criticized and labeled as, “mockery towards the indigenous people of the state” (Chakma and Maitrot 2016, 1). Many scholars like Chakma and Maitrot (2016), Barkat *et. al.* (2009) and Adnan (2004) find that low opportunities, specific geographic locations, education, deprivation, and disposition of land are the main factors of poverty among the ethnic minorities of Bangladesh. The non-income poverty is also widespread in CHT particularly reflected in education and health indicators, due to geographic conditions.

In 1988 Bangladesh witnessed the re-emergence of Islamic identity with the declaration of Islam as a state religion in the constitution by General Ershad. JP introduced the Islamic identity, BNP maintained it and AL reinstated it through Fifteenth Amendment The re-emergence of Islamic identity has torn the social cohesion and intensified the communal divide in Bangladesh. If the Bengali’s cultural identity excluded the non-Bengali, Chakmas, as well as Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and Ahmadias. Since its early days, Bangladesh has followed a policy detrimental to the minorities, most visible in the case of the Chakmas.

Predominance of the Islamic identity and the corresponding dilution of tolerance in Bengali cultural identity have worked against the tradition of religious tolerance and accommodation. In this context a Bangladeshi scholar aptly remarks:

“Although technically speaking, there is nothing to prevent minorities to participate in mainstream politics in Bangladesh and hence being in their own kinship structures into play, the fore-grounding of a majoritarianism inscribing Bengali as a state language and Islam as a state religion automatically marginalizes religious and ethnic minorities from attaining a central role in determining class hegemony” (Guhathakurta 2002).

6. Conclusion

The political landscape underscores the plight of the minorities. Rise of Islamic extremism led to increase in incidents of discrimination and violent attacks on Hindu,

Christian and Buddhist minorities and vanishing Hindu, minority. Harassment of Ahamadis also occurred. Islamic Fundamentalists have put the civil society under siege and successfully ruined “Barsha Baran”, the Bengali New Year’s Day deliberation for last many years. They have forced an Islamic “dress code” on women and Urdu and Arabic phrases are being increasingly introduced in common parlance. In sum, Bangladeshi state since its emergence “pursued a majoritarian model of state-building which alienated the indigenous population. The arguments for an Islamic identity, in equal measure, created an exclusionary environment as it rejects the non-Muslim identity and makes them subservient to the majority” (Riaz 2016: 207).

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