Preface

In the dark days of the liberation war in 1971 when I was sentenced to fourteen years' rigorous imprisonment by the occupation forces for my participation in the struggle, I used to dream of writing some day a history of the Bangladesh revolution. In the wake of the lovely dawn of freedom, I found the task exceedingly daunting. Like the studies on the French Revolution in the nineteenth century, the history of Bangladesh revolution degenerated into squabbles of contemporary politics. I started having second thoughts about the competence of participants like me in making an objective assessment of the liberation war. I thought that it might be easier to search for the historical roots of this new nation. I presumed that the remoteness of historical events might give me an opportunity to delineate a conceptual framework for Bangladesh Revolution. I found this task also equally frustrating. Methodologically, as Alfred Cobban rightly pointed out, "historians and sociologists are natural enemies". However, the blending of history and sociology was inescapable to explain the historical roots of Bangladesh. Despite the express disdain of the historians for theories, traditional historical methods seem to generate more heat than light. As an economist, I tend to agree with Alfred Marshall that "the most reckless and dangerous theorist is the man who claims to let the facts speak for themselves." I, therefore, prefer explicit theorizing of social scientists to implicit theories of historians. I am fully aware of the fact that such an approach is likely to earn for me more enemies than friends among the historians. Hopefully, explicit theories would clarify the issues in the debate and would be helpful in hammering out the mainstream interpretation even if many of the hypotheses of this study are not accepted.

Though I had been honing the points of departure of this study for last twenty five years, the completion of this book would not have been possible without active encouragement and assistance of Dr. Kamal Siddiqui. He helped me in collecting a lot of research materials for this book. Words are inadequate to express my debt to

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My wife Hamim had supported me in innumerable ways during last 23 years. I hope that she will have the satisfaction that her sacrifices were not altogether in vain.

Dhaka, November 1996   Akbar Ali Khan

Preface to the revised edition

A postscript has been added to this revised edition. The postscript reviews some of the technical issues which were not elaborated in the original text. However, the original text remains unchanged except for a few editorial changes.

I am deeply grateful to Asiatic Society of Bangladesh for awarding the "Justice Mohammad Ibrahim Gold Medal" for this monograph which was adjudged as the most outstanding work in arts and humanities in Bangladesh in the biennial 1996-98.

Dhaka, 1st February 2001   Akbar Ali Khan

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a latecomer into the world of nation-states. She ranks 133rd among 185 members of the United Nations (as of 1995) in order of the date of admission. The overwhelming majority of states which succeeded Bangladesh are mini-states who have until recently inhabited the by-ways of history. Of the 52 states which were admitted to the UN since her entry, 25 contain less than a million people each; another 17, less than ten million. The combined population of 48 such states is less than that of Bangladesh (about 120 million in 1995). At the time of her birth in 1971, Bangladesh had the eighth largest population in the world. One out of every forty six persons in the world today is a Bangladeshi. Obviously, Bangladesh is the last major nation-state to proclaim its identity.

Bangladesh's birth was not only late but also sudden. She is neither a distinct geographical entity nor a well-defined historical unit. Her political boundaries were demarcated in 1947 by a British arbitrator who was selected primarily because of his ignorance about South Asia (Collins and Lapierre 1975, p. 217). This division was so abrupt that it resulted in what the Bengali poet Annada Shankar Roy ruefully described as "an orgy of division and destruction" (1954, p. 148). The traumatic partition of 1947 did not, however, resolve the dilemma of her nationhood. Bangladesh is the product of double secessions. Here is a nation that changed its statehood twice in less than a quarter of a century. The dramatic emergence of Bangladesh runs counter to conventional tenets of nationalism in South Asia. She does not fit in the stereotype of either territorial nationalism as espoused by the "one-nation theory" nor does she conform to religious nationalism as enunciated in the "two-nation theory" in South Asia. She is not merely what Seton Watson describes as a "new nation" in contradistinction to what is called a "continuous old nation" (1977, p. 6). She is a volatile nation whose roots baffle the historians. Bangladesh, rightly observed an American political scientist, "is a country challenged by contradictions" (Ziring, 1992, p. 1).

Though as a political entity Bangladesh is novel, the term
Bangladesh is not in the least new. Tirumulai inscription of Rajendra
Cola which was recorded in 1025 *A.D.* describes "Vangladesa" as a
land "where rain water never stopped" (Chowdhury 1967, pp. 83-84).
The cognate of Bangladesh is "Vanga" which could be traced to
Hindu scripture *Aitareya Aranyaka* (composed between 500 B.C.
and 500 *A.D.).* Legend has it that Prince Vanga who first colonized
Bengal was born out of the union of King Bali's wife Sudeshna with
the accursed saint Dirgatama (Sarkar 1392 B.S., p. 222). According
to the linguists, the etymological roots of the word *Vanga* may be
traced to languages in neighbouring regions. One school of linguists
maintains that the word *Vanga* is derived from the Tibetan word
"*Bans*" which connotes "wet" and "moist" (Das, 1969, p. 1). Accord-
ing to this interpretation, Bangladesh literally refers to a wetland.
Another school is of the opinion that the term "*Bangala*" is derived
from *Bodo* (aborigines of Assam) words "*Bang*" and "*la*" which
signify "wide plains" (Nath, 1948, p. 17). Yet another explanation
came from the sixteenth century Mughal historian Abul Fadl. He
wrote: "The original name of Bengal was *Bang*. Its former rulers
raised mounds measuring ten yards in height and twenty in breadth
throughout the province which was called *al*. From this suffix, the
name of Bengal took its rise and currency"(Quoted in Majumder
1943, vol. 1, p. 19). Of the theories advanced so far, the hypothesis of
Tibetan origin seems most plausible in view of the fact that the Bengal
delta constitutes one of the largest wetlands in the world.

Geographically, Bengal is a distinct unit. As Nihar Ranjan Roy
points out, "On the one side very high mountains; on two other
sides hard hills and on another side the vast Sea, in the middle the
evenness of the plains—this is the geographical destiny of the
Bengalees"(1400 BS, p. 71). Curiously, in the ancient and medieval
times, the geographical unity of the "Great Bengal" was perceived
more clearly by the outsiders than the Bengalees themselves who
were mostly scattered in "little Bengals". Ancient inscriptions of the
region attest to the existence of a congeries of principalities. There
are frequent references to "twelve Bengals" in the medieval
Dharmamangala literature in Bengal (Sen 1993, vol. 1, p. 12). On
the contrary, Gwalior Inscription of the Pratihara King Bhoja I
(9th century) alludes to the "Great Bengal" (*Brihada Vangan*)" (Sen
1993, Vol. 1, p. VIII). The Mughal rulers were clearly aware of the
vastness of the geographical Bengal. "Bangalah", writes the Mughal

court historian Abul Fadl, "is situated in the second clime (Iqlim) and is four hundred kos in length from Chittagong to Garhi (Teliagarh). It is bounded on the east and north by the mountains, on the south by the Sea, and on the west by the Subah of Bihar. Bordering on the country are Kamrup and Assam" (Quoted in Rahim 1963, vol. 1, p.7). Mughal emperor Jahangir in his autobiography also mentioned that total area of Bengal was extensive. He reported that the length of Bengal was 450 kos and breadth 220 kos which indicated that total area of Bengal was around 400,000 square miles—much larger than the combined areas of Bengal Presidency (84,092 square miles) and Bihar and Orissa (111824 square miles). While Jahangir obviously overestimated the area of Bengal, he was, however, right about the vastness of Bengal as a geographical unit.

The "Great Bengal" which was a political reality during the Muslim rule (1201-1757 *A.D.*) was unknown in the ancient times. The political landscape of the zone prior to the Muslim rule was dotted with a multitude of small states. Epigraphic evidence reveals the existence of a mosaic of principalities. The nucleus of many small states might have been provided by the tribes which originally inhabited the region. Roy is of the opinion that Vangah, Radhah, Gaudah and Pundrah are the names of the ancient tribes of Bengal (1400 B.S., p.108). The precise boundaries of the territorial units mentioned in the inscriptions are unknown. Furthermore, these boundaries were not fixed and they varied with political fortunes of these kingdoms. Historical sources refer to three distinct kingdoms which were known as *Vanga, Vangala* and *Vangladesha.* These kingdoms were located in south and east Bengal. Apart from these kingdoms, the eastern region also witnessed the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Harikela (probably in Sylhet), Samatata (Comilla area), Pattikera (Comilla area), and Chandradwipa (Barisal area). The western region of Bengal was the home of the kingdoms of Kajangal (south west Bengal), Tamralipti (Medinipur), Suhmabhumi (parts of Burdwan, Hugli and Howrah) and Radha (West Bengal) which was sometimes fragmented into Uttara Radha (north west Bengal) and Dakshin Radha (south west Bengal). The central Bengal was the political arena of the kingdoms of Pundravardhana (Bogra, Dinajpur and Rajshahi areas), Varendra (Rajshahi area), Gauda (Murshidabad, Birbhum, Maldah and Burdwan) and Karna Subarna (Murshidabad area).

The "little Bengals" of the ancient times were welded into a "Great Bengal" by the Muslim rulers. Even before the Muslims

invaded Bengal, there had been abortive attempts by king Sasanka (7th century) and the Pala rulers (750-1162 A.D.) to unite Bengal. Political unity in Bengal, however, could not be sustained before the establishment of the Muslim rule. Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (1342-1357 *A.D.*) not only united different areas of Bengal but also christened the united kingdom as "Bangala". He himself assumed the title *Shah-i-Banglah* (King of Bangalah). Despite occasional spurts of centrifugal forces, political unity of Bengal largely survived since the fourteenth century. It was further strengthened by the Mughal rulers who incorporated the province of Bengal into the Delhi-based empire. Political unity forged by the Muslim rulers also promoted linguistic homogeneity. Unlike their Hindu and Buddhist predecessors, the Muslim rulers in Bengal were ardent patrons of Bengali language and literature. Prior to Muslim rule, the Bengali vernacular was despised for its impurities and vulgarities by Hindu elites who proscribed the teaching of the Sanskrit to the lower castes. The spread of Islam challenged the spiritual leadership of upper caste Hindus. The intense competition between Islam and resurgent Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism for capturing the imagination of unlettered masses resulted in an outpouring of their stirring messages in the vernacular.

The British inherited a politically united and culturally homogeneous Bengal. The centralized *Pax Britannica* in South Asia not only consolidated the nascent unity of Bengal but also placed her in the hub of the political and cultural life of the subcontinent. As Chaudhuri rightly points out: "The Bengalis themselves were not important in political, military or economical life, and at their most ambitious they sought minor posts and functions in the Muslim administration. But all this changed suddenly and drastically with the establishment of British rule. Bengal became the political centre of India, and due to the introduction of education through English, the cultural centre as well. For the first time in the historic existence of the Bengali people, that is to say, of a people who could be distinguished clearly from the rest of the Hindus in India as a human group with an identity of its own, there came to them the opportunity to play a major role in the history of their country and also to obtain highest worldly positions open to Indians" (1987, p.663). In the nineteenth century, the Bengali elite used to boast: "What Bengal thinks today, the rest of India will think tomorrow". The Bengali historians claimed that the ancient Bengalis were the architects of

civilization not only in Bengal but also in the Ceylon, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and other parts of India (Sen, 1993; Das 1984). In this political and cultural environment, the political elite in Bengal was enthralled by what Chaudhuri described as "megalomania" (Chaudhuri: 1402 B.S.).

Throughout history, the Bengal zone had known either one Great Bengal or many little Bengals. But the partition of Bengal into two political entities in 1947 was a sudden twist in her history. The broad division of Bengal into the East and West is not altogether unknown in historical sources. Vatsayana, the author of *Kama Sutra* (circa 3rd/4th century *A.D.*), refers to Gauda and Vanga as two separate entities. Ibn Batutah who travelled to Bengal in the fourteenth century, refers to kingdoms of Lakhnawti and Bangalah which roughly correspond to West and East Bengal (Rahim, 1963). The Mughal court historian Abul Fadl mentions mutually exclusive "Bhati" (low country) and "Bangla" regions which approximate respectively to Bangladesh and West Bengal (Eaton 1994, pp. 145-146.). These divisions were not, however, precursors of the partition of Bengal in 1947. These political entities were short-lived and did not leave behind any common memory of achievements and sacrifice. For example, Morrison suggests that Bengal in the pre-Muslim period was divided into four virtually independent political divisions (1969). The partition of Bengal in 1947 was not the culmination of any inevitable, historical process. Bangladesh did not, therefore, evolve as what Hans Kohn described as "a great corporate personality of history" (Kohn 1945, p. 329).

Broadly speaking, there are two competing theories on the origins of nationalism: (i) primordial, and (ii) instrumental. While the primordialists believe that nations are born, the instrumentalists maintain that nations are made. According to primordial view, the essence of a nation is psychological. This essence is a "psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way"(Connor 1978, p. 379). Primordial attachment is defined as "one that stems from the givens or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed givens—of social existence, immediate contiguity and kin-connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices". These attachments

constitute the givens of human conditions and are "rooted in non-rational foundations of personality"(Geertz 1963, p. 147). Primordial attachments are not however always real; sometimes they are perceived. The perception of primordial attachment is very often based on what Breuilly described as "uniqueness historicism" which postulates that uniqueness of each nation is vindicated by history. Nationalist historicism is not actual history, it is an appeal to history to justify that the nation is defined by the past. As Breuilly explains: "History is not evidence on which theories could be tested or a charter drawn up from which to justify present decisions. It is not a constraint on the present or a rich profusion of the various forms human nature has assumed. Rather it is the only way to apprehend the spirit of a community, it is the principal way of learning the language of a particular society" (Breuilly 1981, p. 334).

The instrumental theory of nationalism challenges the view that nations are inscribed into the nature of things, and nation-states are the manifest ultimate destiny of ethnic or cultural groups. There are several approaches to instrumental interpretation of nationalism (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994). While recognizing the importance of culture in nationalist movements, Gellner argues that cultural identity does not create nationalism; on the contrary, it is the need of modern societies for cultural homogeneity that creates nationalism. In his words, "it is nationalism which engenders nations and not the other way round." The urge for nationalism arises from the transition of agro-literate society which is based on folk culture to industrial society dominated by high culture. The efficient functioning of an industrial society is contingent on the easy mobility of a homogeneous labour force with similar education, training and outlook (high culture). Nationalism in his view, is "essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority and, in some cases, the totality of the population"(Gellner 1993).

Tom Nairn (1977) suggests that nationalism originates in threatened and underdeveloped societies where the intelligentsias mobilize the masses around its development goals. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsawm (1983) maintains that even in Europe, the nation was invented by political elites in order to legitimize their power. Paul R. Brass (1979) concluded that despite the constraints of pre-existing cultures or religious practices of ethnic groups, particular elite groups manipulate cultural symbols to create political

identities. Anderson (1992) also regards the nation-state as an artifact, "an imagined political community".

Both "primordialist" and "instrumentalist" positions seem to be extreme; the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. However, an analysis of the historiography of Bangladesh indicates a predilection of much of the studies towards instrumental interpretation. There are four major instrumental schools on the origins of Bangladesh. According to one school, the emergence of Bangladesh is viewed as the culmination of divide and rule policy of the British *Raj* (Addy and Azad, 1975). Another school maintains that the evolution of Bangladesh was the reaction against the economic deprivation (Sobhan 1992). In a similar vein, Mallick and Husain concluded: the identity assertion of Bangladesh was essentially "a reaction of a marginalized community in quest of its due share in economic and political milieu" (1992, p. 550). A third school portrays the emergence of Bangladesh as the outcome of elite conflicts (Broomfield 1992). Finally, the emergence of Bangladesh is very often viewed as the result of Pakistan's failure in national integration rather than the culmination of a long drawn historical process (Jahan 1994; Maniruzzaman 1980).

The primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh was mainly articulated in the speeches of the nationalist leaders. It has not been as yet fully developed into a coherent theory. Nevertheless, primordial basis of nationhood in Bangladesh is assumed to be a reality. For example, Ziring writes: "The Bengalis of East Pakistan has declared and demonstrated their intention to form a nation based upon their peculiar cultural and historical heritage. Nationhood gave societal expression to what had always been a distinct consciousness. There was no need, as in so many other twentieth century countries, to integrate a disparate people. Cultural fusion had already succeeded. The Bengalis were a community prior to their demand for self-determination" (Ziring 1992, p. 2). Another historian maintains that "the history of Bangladesh nationalism begins where all histories begin, i.e. in the midst of prehistory" (Osmany 1992, p. 1.)

There are two factors which impeded full-scale development of a primordial interpretation of nationalism in Bangladesh. Such an interpretation presupposes an unalterable base of nationhood. In case of Bangladesh the base of nationhood suddenly shifted from religious nationalism to linguistic nationalism.

The shift in the base of nationalism generated the current contro-versy over Bengali versus Bangladeshi nationalism. The proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism underline the Islamic identity of the Bengalis in Bangladesh vis-a-vis in the neighbouring state of West Bengal (Osmany 1992, p. 145). The Bengali nationalism on the other hand glorifies the secular and linguistic heritage of Bengal (Ahmed, 1994). However, no theory has been advanced as yet to reconcile the contradictory strands of nationhood in Bangladesh.

The second impediment to a primordial interpretation of national-ism in Bangladesh is the widespread belief that both politically and culturally Bangladesh is an integral part of greater South Asian civi-lization. As Chatterjee points out, during last hundred years, there has been a 'tidal wave of historical memory about *Arya-Hindu Bharatavarsa'* that asserts the singularity as well as classical origins of the history of India (Chatterjee 1993, p. 115). The political history of Bangladesh is viewed as inextricably intertwined with the north-India based empires. Starting with the mighty *Gangaridai* empire in the latter half of the fourth century B.C. which reportedly scared away Alexander, the Great from India, Bangladesh region, according to this interpretation, had been successively ruled by the Maurya empire (4th to 2nd century B.C.), the Gupta Empire (4th-5th century A.D.), the empire of Sasanka (7th century *A.D.*), the Pala empire (8th to 12th century A.D.), the Sena Kingdom (12th and 13th century), Delhi Sultanate (13th to 15th century), Mughal empire (16th to 18th century) and the *Pax Britannica*. Specially the Pala empire which lasted for more than four hundred years and reached its zenith in eighth and ninth centuries under the leadership of Dharmapala and Devapala is cited as an example of Bengal's political genius in empire-building.

From the cultural point of view, Bengal is often viewed as an in-separable part of the Great Indian Tradition. It is postulated that consciousness of a common culture in South Asia "provides the source for the communication between Little and Great cultural traditions and for the formation of a world view, value system, and personality type characteristic of a civilization as a whole in spite of the many internal differences and changes" (Singer 1972, p. 7). From both political and cultural points of view, Bangladesh is not, there-fore, classified as a distinct historical unit.

Both these premises are, however, wrong. The unitary-imperial interpretation of history of Bangladesh is not corroborated by

historical evidence. The canonical interpretation overstates the role of all-India empires in the political life of Bangladesh region. Epigraphic evidence suggests that only some of the areas which now constitute Bangladesh were occasionally incorporated in the larger empires of South Asia (see Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison of unitary-imperial and fragmentary - local interpretation of Bangladesh history

Period	Unitary-imperial interpretation	Fragmentary-local interpretation
Latter half of 4th century BC	the emergence of mighty *Gaugaridai*-empire.	The precise boundary of *Ganguridai* is unknown. It is usually presumed to be located to the east of the Ganges and the Bhagirathi. It is unlikely to be a very large empire.
321-185 BC	The Maurya empire. There is direct evidence of Maurya occupation of north Bengal and indirect evidence of Maurya influence in other areas.	The Maurya political suzerainty was confined to north Bengal only.
1st and 2nd Century *A.D.*	The Kushana coins have been discovered. This region might have been occupied by the Kushans.	There is no direct evidence to prove that Bengal was a part of the Kushana empire.
331-650 A.D.	Bengal formed a part of the Gupta Empire	There is evidence of direct Gupta suzerainty in north Bengal. But East Bengal occasionally paid tribute. Nevertheless, there is evidence of independent kingdom in West Bengal (Pushakara) and independent kingdom in Faridpur as mentioned in Kotalipara inscription (circa 500-600 *A.D.*)
600-650 *A.D.*	The Gauda Empire of Sasanka	East Bengal was not a part of the Gauda empire as evidenced by the existence of Bhadra dynasty.
650-750 *A.D.*	The Period of anarchy	Independent Khadaga dynasty ruled East Bengal during 650-700 *A.D.*

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Period	Unitary-imperial interpretation	Fragmentary-local interpretation
750-1162 A.D.	The Pala empire which lasted for about four hundred years was a large north Indian empire.	The Pala empire was primarily confined to Bihar and certain areas of north Bengal. Except a short interregumun (1043-1075 A.D.) in the eleventh century, much of Bangladesh region remained outside the orbit of the Pala empire. All the inscriptions of early Pala rulers were issued from Bihar and lands granted by them were located in Bihar or parts of northern Bengal. The last Pala king ruled in Bihar and not in Bengal. These clearly suggest that the base of Pala empire lay in Bihar. Furthermore, epigraphic evidence on the following sovereign kingdoms attest to political independence of Bangladesh region:
		1. Khadaga dynasty, 650-700 A.D.
		2. Nath and Rata dynasty, 700-750 A.D.
		3. Deva dynasty, 750-800 A.D.
		4. Harikela dynasty, 800-900 A. D.
		5. Chandra dynasty, 900-1040 A.D.
		6. The Varmans, 1080-1150 A.D.
		7. Pattikera dynasty, 1000-1100 A.D.
1160-1206 A.D.	The Senas established an empire on the whole of Bengal.	The Sena kingdom was based in Bengal and was not a north-India based empire.
1204-1757 A.D.	Delhi based Muslim empires under various dynasties extended their sway to Bengal.	Out of about 550 years of Muslim rule, Bengal was effectively ruled for 200 years by Delhi-based all-India empires. For about 350 years, Bengal remained effectively independent.

Source: 1. For unitary-imperial interpretation, Majumder (1943)
2. For local-fragmentary interpretation, Chowdhury (1967)

According to the revisionist interpretation of Bangladesh history, political fragmentation and not empire was the historical destiny of Bangladesh region in ancient and medieval times. Inscriptions indicate the existence of a succession of independent kingdoms in southern and eastern Bengal. These local kingdoms included the realms of Vainyagupta (6th century), the Faridpur kings (6th century), the Bhadra dynasty (600-650 *A.D.*), Khadaga dynasty (650-700 *A.D.*),

Natha and Rata dynasties (750-800 *A.D.*), the rulers of Harikela (800-900 *A.D.*), Chandra dynasty (900-1045 *A.D.*), Varman dynasty (1080-1150 *A.D.*) and Pattikera dynasty (1000-1150 A.D.). Effective political unity was first imposed on Bengal by the Muslim rulers. Nevertheless, Bengal was practically independent for about 350 out of 550 years of Muslim rule.

Culturally, the Great Tradition of Indian civilization extended to Bengal. Redfield and Singer pointed out: "Embodied in sacred books or 'classics', sanctified by a cult, expressed in monuments, sculpture, painting and architecture, served by the arts and sciences, the Great Tradition becomes the core culture of an indigenous civilization and a source, consciously examined, for defining its moral, legal, aesthetic and other cultural norms. A Great Tradition describes a way of life and as such is a vehicle and standard for those who share it to identify with one another as members of a common civilization" (Quoted in Singer, 1972, p. 7). However, the hold of the Great Tradition had been significantly weaker in Bengal region than in other areas of South Asia. Historically, the region had been a nursery of heresies, heterodoxies and esoterism. Nevertheless, these cults were reconciled as little culture within the paradigm of Great Tradition. The pre-ponderance of Muslim population in Bengal further eroded the Great Tradition which usually neutralized alien or folk culture either through "Sanskritization" (a process which brings groups outside Hinduism in its fold and non-Hindu groups are Hinduized by becoming castes and the status of the lower castes is raised up) or compartmentalization (a process that incorporates new groups and clans into the civilization as sub-castes with their distinctive ways of life and thought). Despite syncretization of Islam with little culture at the grass-roots level, the Muslims of Bengal remained totally outside the orbit of the Great Tradition of India; they could neither be "sanskritized" nor "compartmentalized". On the contrary, the Islamic revivalist movements drew the Muslims of Bengal into the Great Islamic Tradition which not only resisted "Indianization" of Islam but also promoted the purge of folk elements from Islam in Bengal(Roy, 1983). The Islamic revivalist movements provided the bedrock of religious nationalism that surfaced in the 1940s.

While theology inspired religious nationalism, historicism permeated territorial nationalism in Bangladesh. Historicism is not based on what actually happened in the past, it is based on doctrines and ideas which are presumed to be supported by history. Three strands of

historicism animated territorial nationalism in Bangladesh. These are the pride in the "indomitable Bengal", the memory of the affluence of the "Golden Bengal" and doting adulation for the "sweetest" mother tongue.

One of the received doctrines in the canonical interpretation of history of Bengal is that this country had always been a land of re- bels which had defied the dominance of successive north-India em- pires. It is postulated that this fierce spirit of independence in this region was nurtured by geographical isolation and distinctiveness. Separated by mountains, hills and forests, Bengal was a world unto herself. Her geographical isolation was further reinforced by innu- merable rivers which criss-crossed the deltaic areas. Bengal thus provided a safe haven to political rebels who time and again revolted against the alien rulers. This image of the indomitable Bengal was invoked to whip up hatred against foreign rule. The notion of in- domitable Bengal is, however, exaggerated. First, revolt against the centre is not in the least unique to Bengal. It had always been rife in all regions of South Asia. Secondly, this interpretation assumes that Bengal had always been a monolithic political entity. Historical evi- dence indicates that Bengal was always politically fragmented. Bengal not only revolted against Delhi, she was a house divided against herself. The most striking fact in the political history of this region is not frequent revolts against the central rule in the north but the absence of central authority in Bengal itself.

The resurrection of the "Golden age" is one of the fondest dreams of the nationalists throughout the developing countries. Apalled by the disparities between the standard of living in developing and industrial countries, the nationalist leaders in the less developed societies evoked the image of a golden age in their history which is usually not in the disagreeable recent past, but in a more remote past, and is defined and corroborated by historicism. The dream of the restoration of a "Golden age" is the defence mechanism for safeguarding the self-esteem of nations blighted by stark deprivation. There are two underlying assumptions in the "Golden Bengal" hypothesis which inspired the nationalists in Bangladesh. First, it is postulated that Bengal enjoyed uninterrupted economic prosperity before the establishment of the British rule in India. This implies that Bengal was free from famines, poverty and the sufferings inflicted by economic cycles. Secondly, Bengal in the pre-British era was more prosperous than other adjoining contemporary societies.

An analysis of the historical sources does not support the hypothesis that Bengal in the pre-British era was a Shangrila (Khan, 1992). It was a typical pre-industrial society with a fragile economic base which was highly vulnerable to the whims of nature. The natural presumption is that transitory distresses occurred periodically; famine was not, therefore, altogether unknown to the so-called Golden Bengal. Furthermore, there were deep pockets of chronic poverty across the country. The existence of slavery clearly indicates that destitution was wide-spread. The purchasing power of the people in the region was limited. Available evidence on the price of slaves in Bengal suggests that wage in the pre-British Bengal was likely to be low. This hypothesis is supported by qualitative and quantitative evidence on poverty of the weavers. In the so-called Golden Bengal, gold or silver coins were not the usual medium of exchange in day to day transactions. The common people used to earn, buy and sell in *cowries.* Gold and silver coins were used mainly for payment of revenue. The legendary cheapness of prices in Bengal resulted not from the oversupply of goods and services, but from the lack of purchasing power. Viewed in this perspective, cheap prices in the pre-British Bengal reflect the misery and not prosperity of common people. The Golden Bengal was not, therefore, *golden* in the absolute sense. Available evidence does not, however, altogether reject the hypothesis that despite limitations, the pre-British Bengal was better-off compared to many contemporary pre-industrial societies. *A priori,* there are reasons to presume that Bengal was relatively more prosperous than many other areas of Asia. Because of abundance of water, droughts in Bengal were less devastating than in other parts of Asia. Despite the overwhelming evidence against its absolute version which presents pre-British Bengal as a land of cheapness and plenty, the historicism of "Golden Bengal" is deeply rooted in the Bangladeshi psyche.

According to romantic nationalists, language mirrors the national soul. Each language is, therefore, viewed as the manifestation of its unique values and ideas. Language is, therefore considered as one of the basic ingredients of nationhood. It is not, therefore, surprising that nationalism in Bangladesh was nurtured by an emotional attachment to language. Ziring (1992) maintains that "Bengali love affair with their language involves a passionate ritual that produces emotional experiences seldom found in other parts of the world". He suggests two reasons for the uniqueness of attachment of the

Bengalis to their own language. First a poor nation is likely to hold tenaciously to cultural heritage as the mooring of its national identity. Cultural hauteur is the counterpoise to material inferiority. Secondly, in Ziring's view, geography and climate also shaped the emotional attachment to language in Bangladesh. He argues that the annual monsoon which inundates vast areas of the country each year brings life to a standstill. In this environment, "Bengalis pass the rainy season huddled together in small groups, riding out the torrential downpour in virtual isolation sustained only by recitations and songs that fill the time, waiting for rains to subside and waters to recede". Obviously, Ziring's hypothesis seems to be oversimplified. Love of the Bengali language is not confined either to the poor or to the rural areas which are inundated by the monsoon. Emotional attachment to language is much more pronounced in the urban areas where the effects of the monsoon are limited.

There are three major limitations of the theory that interprets nationalism in Bangladesh purely on linguistic basis. First, during the Pakistan movement, the majority of Bangladeshis opted for an union with their coreligionists who spoke in a different tongue. There is obviously a dichotomy between language and religion in this region. Secondly, Bengali language is not unique to Bangladesh. It is shared with West Bengal and other areas in eastern India. In fact, Calcutta in West Bengal was the seat of Bengali culture during last two hundred years. As Novak argues: "Though it is anathema to say so in today's Bangladesh, the truth is that the high literary tradition of Bangla was carefully developed in the late nineteenth century mostly by Hindus, who used Bangla to help impart to their province the sense of identity of a modern state in the European style"(Novak 1993, p. 143). Finally, the overwhelming majority of the population in Bangladesh are unlettered. They are unlikely to be emotionally obsessed with language. Linguistic narcissism is confined mainly to the urban elites.

The foregoing analysis indicates that the primordial interpretation of territorial nationalism in Bangladesh is based on half-truths and myths. The birth of Bangladesh reaffirmed the partition of a distinct geographical unit and division of a homogeneous ethno-linguistic community. Neither part of the divided Bengal has exclusive claim over Bengal's rich cultural heritage.

Religious nationalism based on two-nation theory unleashed the historical forces which led to partition of Bengal. The swing of public opinion towards religious nationalism was, however, short-lived.

"The existence of a nation", rightly observed Renan, "is an everyday plebiscite, it is like the very existence of an individual, a perpetual affirmation of life" (1994, p. 17). By this criterion, religious nationalism has already been repudiated by the people of Bangladesh through the process of a sanguinary liberation war in 1971. From the theological point of view also, Islamic nationalism is a contradiction in terms. Islam believes in universal brotherhood of all Muslims and not in the division of the *Ummah* in different nationalities.

The most difficult challenge before the historians of Bangladesh is to reconcile the contradictions arising from the shifting bases of nationhood. Explanations on the dramatic about-face in the tortuous search for Bangladesh's identity differ. The easiest explanation is that Bangladesh nationalism is *sui-generis* (unique of its kind). As Kabir argues, "The quick series of shift in the prominence of religion and language in Bangladesh is bewildering. Perhaps Bangladesh is a unique case of such shifting patterns of communal identity" (1994, p.213). The advantage of this hypothesis is that it does not require any proof; the burden of proof lies on those who want to disprove it.

According to a second school of historians, religious and territorial nationalisms are two stages in the evolution of nationhood in Bangladesh. "Whereas the pre-1947 nationalism was cloaked under the religious and/or communal surplice, the post-1947 nationalism was entirely secular" (Mallick and Husain 1992, p. 551). This theory oversimplifies the dichotomy between religious and territorial loyalties in Bangladesh. Territorial and religious loyalties existed side by side in the minds of the people of Bangladesh. Secular territorial nationalism did not succeed or replace religious nationalism, they vied with each other for winning the hearts of the people.

Ahmed maintains that "there are certain particular traits in the way of life and culture of the Bengali people which have marked them out as a distinct nation" (1994, p. 13). These traits are identified as emotionalism, primacy of the spirit of religion over outward external rituals and the deviation from traditional Hinduism since ancient times. This theory does not, however, explain how these traits developed. Nationalism is everywhere a powerful emotional force. Nationalism in Bangladesh cannot, therefore, be explained in terms of emotionalism alone. The roots of emotionalism have to be explained.

A summary of the existing literature indicates that no satisfactory explanation for primordial nationalism in Bangladesh has been

expounded as yet. It may be hypothesised that nationalism in Bangladesh is not at all deeply rooted in history. The search for primordial origin of nationhood in Bangladesh, may, therefore, be futile. Marc Bloch rightly warned about the dangers of "idol of origins": "The explanation of the very recent in terms of the remote past, naturally attractive to men who have made of this past, their chief subject of research, has dominated our studies to the point of a hypnosis. In its most characteristic aspect, the idol of historian may be called the obsession with origins" (1953, p. 29). Furthermore, it is not always correct to presume that the gestation of nationalism is always too long. Max Weber (1948) maintained that nationalism in the oriental countries may surface within a short space of time.

The hypothesis of the recentness of nationalism in Bangladesh is not consistent with historical facts. The nationhood in Bangladesh may be new. The dichotomy of territorial and extra-territorial loyalties which caused the flip-flops in Bangladesh's search for identity is, not, however at all new. The split personality of Bengal Muslims could be traced as early as the fourteenth century. The spread of Islam in Bengal region generated an identity crisis. The Muslims believe that every letter of the Holy Quran was directly dictated by God. No authorised translation of the Holy Quran is permissible. It was, therefore, essential for those who accepted the Quran as the word of God to understand its language. In reality, however, the overwhelming majority of people in far-flung areas like Bangladesh did not at all know Arabic. On the contrary, the translation of Islamic teachings in the vernacular of Bengal region was not considered desirable because the Bengali language was born and nurtured in the cultural environment of Hinduism. It is not, therefore, surprising that in the early Bengali literature composed by the Muslim writers, the words "Hindu" and "Hinduism" were used interchangeably with Bengali language (Shahidullah 1967, p. 246). Despite the limitations of Bengali language, the rendering of Islamic teachings into vernacular was inescapable to disseminate the message of Islam among the unlettered masses.

This conflict between the faith and the habitat can be traced to Shah Muhammad Saghir, the earliest Muslim writer in Bengali language. Saghir was a contemporary of Sultan Ghiasuddin Azam Shah whose reign lasted from 1389 to 1416 A.D. In his epic on the Muslim legend of "Yusuf Jolekha", he mentions that the writers are afraid to translate the message of Holy scriptures into Bengali. He, however,

maintained that this fear is unfounded. "In my view", said Saghir, "it is not true to say that language changes the message. I have heard wise men saying that mother tongue is a jewel in the treasure-house of languages" (Quoted in Huq, 1957, p. 59).

The writings of Muslim poets in medieval Bengal are replete with apologetics for composition in Bengali. These apologetics may be classified into four categories. One school of Muslim writers tried to justify the use of Bengali language on the basis of doctrine of necessity. The sixteenth century poet Muzammil stated that he composed in Bengali because the people did not understand Arabic language. "Whatever the people might say", argues the poet, " I have already written. I cannot refute whether one calls it good or bad" (Huq 1957, p. 67). In the same vein, Abdul Hakim (1620-1690 A.D.) observed that Arabic is the best medium for expounding the Islamic teachings. He adds that the Persian language can be the second best for this purpose if one does not know Arabic and in case one does not know either the Arabic or the Persian, one should read the scriptures at least in the vernacular (Shahidullah 1374 B.S., p. 138). The second school justifies the use of Bengali on the basis of balance of convenience. Both Syed Sultan (circa 1550-1648 A.D.) and Shaikh Muttalib (1595-1660 A.D.) offered this justification. As Shaikh Muttalib explains, "I have rendered Muslim scriptures into Bengali and certainly I have committed grave sins by doing this. I have, however, a hope in my heart that the faithful will pray for me for getting an opportunity to understand scriptures. Because of the blessings of the faithful, the compassionate Allah will forgive my sins". (Quoted in Huq 1957, p. 198). Similar explanation was offered by Syed Sultan, who was criticised by the Muslim orthodoxy as a hypocrite for writing in Bengali (Huq 1957, p. 161). The third school boldly proclaimed that all languages were comprehensible to God and there is no reason for being apologetic about the use of Bengali language. Abdul Hakim, the seventeenth century poet argued: "The Lord understands all languages, Indian, Bangladeshi or in any other form. Only those who cannot reach various heights of spiritualism hates the Hindu (Bengali) language". On the basis of this argument, he proudly proclaimed, "There are doubts about the parentage of those who, though born in Bengal, hates Bengali language. Those who are not satisfied with the knowledge in the mother tongue should migrate to other countries. Those who are settled in Bengal for generations are likely to be benefited from the advice in

the mother tongue". Finally, a few writers like Muhammad Fasih (17th century) wrote Bengali in the Arabic script hoping that this would be more acceptable to Allah (Huq, 1957, p. 215). In the seventeenth century, *Maqtul Husain*—a Bengali tract was written in the Arabic script.

The wide variety of apologetics for the use of Bengali illustrates the intensity and depth of the conflict between the habitat and faith that tormented the Muslims of Bengal during last six hundred years. The tortuous shifts in the bases of nationhood in Bangladesh are not, therefore, at all surprising; these are deeply rooted in her past. The dichotomy of religion and language is not, however, unique to Muslims in Bangladesh. Similar contradictions surfaced among non-Arab Muslims throughout the world.

The existing literature on the history of Bangladesh underplays not only the inner contradictions of the Muslims of Bengal but also two other significant features of her past. First, unlike other areas of north India, territories which now constitute Bangladesh were not the seats of the mighty empires. Large-scale political institutions on local initiatives were unknown to Bangladesh region; they were occasionally imposed from outside. They, however, disintegrated whenever outside military support failed. The political evolution of Bangladesh region deviated significantly from that of neighbouring Bihar and Assam. Bihar witnessed the emergence of large empires like the Nandas, Mauryas, Guptas and Palas in the ancient period. In Assam, the militarist Ahom rulers succeeded in building a strong empire which lasted for about six hundred years (13th century to 19th century A.D.). Similarly other regions of South Asia also experienced the rise of large empires in different phases of their history. By contrast, political entities in Bengal particularly in the East and South were always small and short-lived.

Secondly, Bangladesh is an island of Muslim majority in the sea of Hinduism. The Muslim majority areas in north west India are physically contiguous to the larger world of Islam in the Middle East. The proportion of the Muslims are insignificant in areas around Bangladesh. The census of 1911 reports that Muslims constituted only 10.6 percent population in Bihar and Orissa and 28.1 percent in Assam. By contrast, more than two thirds of the population in east Bengal were Muslims (see Table 2). The existing literature focuses on how Islam was spread in Bengal. It however, fails to explain why the success of Islamic proselytization varied from region to region.

Table 2. Percentage of Muslim population in India by province, 1911

	Area	Percentage of Muslim population
1.	India	21.0%
2.	Ajmer-Marwar	16.1%
3.	Assam	28.1%
4.	Baluchistan	91.0%
5.	Bengal	52.7%
	a. West Bengal	13.4%
	b. Central Bengal	48.8%
	c. North Bengal	59.0%
	d. East Bengal	68.8%
6.	Bihar and Orissa	10.6%
7.	Bombay	20.4%
8.	Central Province and Berar	18.9%
9.	Coorg	7.4%
10.	Madras	0.7%
11.	N.W.F.P.	92.8%
12.	Punjab	54.8%
13.	United Province of Agra and Oudh	14.0%

Source : E.A. Gait, *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. I.

There are two major weaknesses of the existing literature on the history of Bangladesh. First because of the implicit assumption about the singularity of the history of India, significant regional variations in South Asian history are largely ignored. As a whole, the historians are usually indifferent to the potentialities of comparative analysis. This is particularly true about the historians of Bangladesh. The failure of historians to undertake comparative analysis of life in neighbouring regions of Bangladesh has resulted in total lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of Bangladesh's history. There is an urgent need for the rectification of this weakness. As one of the protagonists of comparative analysis of historical change rightly suggests, "Clearly, history is too important to be left to professional historians alone" (Lorwin 1965, p.603).

Secondly, historians in South Asia are preoccupied with the great unitary states and altogether overlook the grass-roots institutions. Consequently, there is no micro foundation for macro history. What Burton Stein observed about South India is equally valid about the

history of Bangladesh, "Actually, only two levels of government have been dealt with. There are the King with 'his' military and 'his' bureaucratic organisations, and the local level. Linkages between these two levels are poorly defined, for the most part, they are inferred. In some cases linkages are altogether ignored" (1994, p.255).

This study seeks to provide the missing perspective on Bangladesh history by comparing the micro and macro institutions which evolved in and around areas which now constitute Bangladesh with those of other regions in South Asia. The point of departure for this study is that Bangladesh's identity was nurtured in a social and economic environment which was significantly different from other regions of South Asia. The identity crisis that surfaced in the recent decades in Bangladesh is not at all novel. Authority—political, social and religious—in this region had always been weaker than in other areas of the subcontinent. Ironically, the weaknesses of her social institutions which set Bangladesh apart as a distinct region also impeded the articulation of a well-defined identity.

Though Bangladesh is not a distinct natural zone[1], she occupies the heart of a separate region from the institutional point of view. Compared to counterparts in the rest of South Asia, the institutions in this region at both grass-roots and macro levels were feeble. The vitality of all her institutions were undermined by extreme individualism. Life in the region was characterized by an isolation paradox because individuals found it profitable to act in isolation rather than in group. Historically, a definite spatial pattern in the structure of villages may be discerned in the Bengal zone. The village institutions in much of Bangladesh region were mere social entities and were too weak to perform significant administrative and economic functions.

This study contains two levels of analysis—micro and macro. At micro level it starts with an analysis of grass-roots institutions at local level. The first chapter presents a survey of the rural settlements in Bangladesh region in the present as well as in the past. The methodology of this chapter differs from the traditional historical methods. It reads history backwards and starts with an account of villages in Bangladesh today with a view to understanding the past

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[1] In this study, Bengal refers to the undivided province of Bengal in British India. Bengal zone signifies a distinct territorial zone (extending from Chittagong to Teliagarhi) with natural frontiers. Bangladesh region refers to those areas of Bengal zone (roughly corresponding to territorial limits of Bangladesh) where historically social and economic institutions were weak. Bangladesh stands for the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

by the present. Following Marc Bloch (1953), two justifications may be given for this methodology. First, the natural progression of all research is "from the best (or least badly) understood to the most obscure". Secondly, Marc Bloch rightly observes, "For here, at the present, is immediately perceptible that vibrance of human life which only a great effort of the imagination can restore to the old texts".

This study begins with an analysis of micro institutions at the grass-roots level in Bangladesh region. The first chapter surveys the qualitative as well as quantitative evidence on the structure of rural settlements in Bangladesh. A comparison of villages in Bangladesh region with those in other parts of South Asia suggests that the degree of corporateness of a typical village in Bangladesh region was low compared to grass-roots institutions in much of the subcontinent. The weakness of grass-roots institutions in Bangladesh region nurtured vigorous individualism which was antagonistic to institutional development.

The second chapter explores the determinants of the structure of rural settlements. In this connection, psychological and economic theories on "open" and "corporate" villages are examined. It suggests that the uniqueness of the structure of the rural settlements in Bangladesh region can be largely explained in terms of economic costs and benefits.

The third chapter seeks to identify the linkages between micro and macro institutions in Bangladesh. It establishes a strong correlationship between the weakness of grass-roots institutions with political fragmentation, instability, dominance of intermediaries, rent-seeking and factionalism in Bangladesh region. The weakness of political institutions in this region is attributed to lack of grass-roots institutions.

The fourth chapter attempts to explain the unique success of Islam in Bangladesh region. A survey of the existing literature indicates that no satisfactory explanation for the relative success of Islamic proselytization efforts in Bangladesh region has been offered as yet. It puts forward the hypothesis that the weakness of institutions in rural settlements of this region provided a congenial environment for the spread of an alien faith. In other words, Islamic proselytization was arrested in those areas where village government was strong.

The fifth chapter describes the conflict of territorial and extra-territorial loyalties among the Bengal Muslims resulting from the spread of Islam. It also narrates how this dichotomy of faith and

habitat was compounded by the conflicts among the newly emerging middle classes. It offers a broad explanation of recent twists and turns of nationhood in this region. Historical evidence indicates that nationhood in Bangladesh cannot be explained merely as a fabrication of the elites, it was in fact shaped by a blend of primordial and instrumental factors.

The main findings of the study are summarized in the conclusion. It suggests that historically Bangladesh has been a distinct unit in South Asia from the institutional point of view. The weakness of social institutions and the consequential primacy of the individual in social life though detrimental to her political development, enriched her cultural life by encouraging heresy, heterodoxy and the spread of an alien faith. An anatomy of the micro institutions in this region offers very useful insights to an understanding of her historical evolution. They shed light not only on the institutions in the past but also on the current policies. Hopefully, an understanding of her past will make the policy-makers in Bangladesh wiser.