

Clashing Nationalisms and Corrupting Co-Existence: An Analysis of the Shahbag/Hefajot Frenzy in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Shahbag Protest and its aftermath, the rise of Hefajote Islam, signify the existence of competing ideological interests in the public sphere in Bangladesh. Rooted in the early 20th century Bengali-Hindu nationalist movement as well as in the identity politics that resulted in the Partition of the Subcontinent in 1947, the political polarization that gripped Bangladesh in 2013 has since divided the society. The Shahbag Protest, largely middle-class and urban in nature, was peaceful though it was demanding capital punishment against the war criminals. The proponents of the Shahbag Protest tried to evoke patriotic sentiment by emphasizing Bengaliness, a trait associated with the Bengali people, an “imagined community” created to legitimize the existence of Bangladesh. The violent Islamist rhetoric of the Hefajote Islam carried the insignia of the “Islamization” project. The discourse of global Islamism targets Muslim-majority countries in South Asia and South-East Asia as “these countries are not Islamic because their legal structures, norms, the predominant educational systems, popular cultures, etc., are manifestly un-Islamic” (Ahmad 3). In short, the cultural battle that emerged out of a legal demand for maximum punishment of the war criminals, who during the Liberation War of 1971, committed atrocities against their own people, is suggestive of the unresolved problem of nationalism in Bangladesh.

The epigraph, taken from Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address,” is suggestive of a deep division between the North and the South during the American Civil War, a division so intractable that the opposing parties seek

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God's providence to emerge victorious in the war. Lincoln's evocation of the two warring factions seeking God's grace has a tragic undertone, which leads Jonathan Burt in *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism* to argue that "conflicts over moral issues are so entangled with the weaknesses of human nature that all outcomes are tragic and no agents are pure" (649). It can be said that conflicts occur when moral issues are at stake and their outcome is tragic because the agents of a conflict resort to violence which puts into question the very intractability of the moral position.

The event that came to be termed as the '2013 Shahbag Protests,' a rather insignificant political occurrence in comparison to the lives lost in the American Civil War, or in our time the Syrian Civil War, was born when a group of young people protested. They thought the state failed to enact the popular demand of maximum punishment against Kader Molla, one of the war criminals accused of perpetrating genocide in 1971. The month-long sit-in in the Shahbag area of Dhaka city was indeed spontaneous and in many ways represented the anger of a young generation tired of political blame-games and immunities delivered to the rajakars (collaborators). However, implicit in their protest was the unresolved problem of nationalism in Bangladesh. The protesters in Shahbag claimed to represent Bengali nationalism, while their opposition, the Hefajote Islam movement represented Islamist nationalism in Bangladesh. This paper will analyze the ideological battle of nationalisms from the standpoint of Partha Chatterjee's analysis of nationalism in *Nation and its Fragments* (1993) to argue that constructs of nationalism in Bangladesh have continued to occlude the question of peasantry and indigenous people while championing nationalisms that are suggestive of a colonial hangover. I will also argue that the nationalisms have tragedy and moral relevance impinged upon their quest for dominating the discourse of nationalism.

That Shahbag was addressing the problem of nationalism more than it was clamoring for the maximum punishment of those accused of War Crimes in 1971 was not very visible in the early days of the protest. Enthusiasts, in particular the Left, welcomed it as having a revolutionary kernel, which is visible in Bokhtiar Ahmed's article "Shahbag Ki Biplab" ("Is Shahbag a Revolution?"): "Are we experiencing a Revolution? What is happening in Shahbag? Another 1969? 1971? 1990? 1993? Is Shahbag a Revolution? The Spring of Bengal?" (Ahmed). This article is an example of the hope that many pinned on Shahbag. The article celebrates Shahbag as having the potential to become a full-blown revolution by comparing it to the popular uprisings of the past.

It was revolutionary precisely because it rekindled a nationalist fervor similar to that of 1971, but soon it became the government's propaganda mouthpiece to discredit the opposition. Moreover, the internal inconsistency of the movement, somewhat touched upon by Ahmed later in his article, became its own nemesis. Chants such as "Golam Azam Saydee, Banglar Ihudi" or "Fashi fashi fashi chai," which Ahmed views as apparently reactionary yet benign slogans, are not only

signifiers of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and hate-mongering but also suggestive the unchanged nature of Shahbag's discourse that claims to usher change in a political landscape mired by violence and hate-mongering.

Shahbag also began to show signs of colonial nationalism. The framework for such nationalism is to create an 'other' and to annihilate the 'other' at all costs so that a particular form of nationalism can establish its hegemony over all other nationalist ideas, a tendency which can be described as the "fixation with producing a pulverized and uniform sense of national identity (usually along majoritarian lines)" (Krishna xvii). Shahbag defended Bengali nationalism (also one of the founding ideological pillars of the Awami League) while simultaneously antagonizing religio-centric nationalism that sees religion as the yardstick for national identity formation. To counteract Shahbag, the Islamist nationalists representing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, BNP sponsored the pogrom of *Hefajot-e-Islam* that unleashed a reign of terror in Dhaka demanding full implementation of the *Sharia law*.

It should be noted that the Shahbag protest and its counter-movement represent "caught in its *middleness*" crisis which sways public opinion in their favor through the use of mainstream and alternative media (Chatterjee 55). The growing bourgeoisie and their sentiment became the focus of their struggle. This trend of influencing bourgeoisie public opinion occluded the peasantry and the indigenous communities. Both saw the peasants as "simple, ignorant, exploited by landlords, traders, and moneylenders, respectful of authority, ... but also volatile in temperament, superstitious and often fanatical, easily aroused by agitators and troublemakers...who wanted to use them for their narrow political designs" (Chatterjee 158-159). On the other hand, different ethnicities and indigenous communities were simply ignored as they did not fit into the scheme of nationalisms, one championing Bengali identity and the other advocating an Islamic identity.

Interestingly, Shahbag evoked religious sentiment (by endorsing the *namaj-e-janaza*, or funeral prayer, of the murdered blogger Rajib) which is the rallying cry of its opposition. Contrarily, the Islamist nationalists framed the *namaj-e-janaza* of Rajib as a violation of Islam. Bangladesh's Right-wing media identified Rajib as a *nastik* (atheist) by publishing what they termed as his anti-Islamic blogging. At this point, Islam became the make-or-break political ingredient. Shahbag and its opposition's attempt to add religious coloring to nationalist ideological clashesis colonialist as it was done "at a time when governments of key capitalist countries, the mass media and much of the academic world ... would have us believe in precisely that Islamic exceptionalism, that hyper-religiosity among the Muslims, that civilizational *difference* of Islam which the Islamic revivalists, fundamentalists and would-be martyrs would have us believe in" (Ahmad 10). Their fight for God also signifies their framing national narratives as invested in the tragic and as having a deep moral significance.

Partha Chatterjee's account of nationalism in colonial Bengal is pertinent to understanding the imbroglio in Bangladesh. It is necessary to note that Bengali nationalism, the bourgeoisie ideology dominant during the formation of Bangladesh and also the grand narrative of the Bangladesh Awami League, has roots in the nineteenth century Hindu nationalist movement. Chatterjee argues that Hindu nationalism was promoted by "the *bhadralok*, 'respectable folk'" of Calcutta Hindu middle-class, which included figures like Ramakrishna, Bankimchandra, Mrityunjay Vidyalkar, and Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee 35).

Chatterjee provides a detailed analysis of Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay's *Bharotborsher Itihash*. Tarinicharan writes history from a Hindu perspective. Delineating tragedy of Hindu national life, he chalks out moral imperatives, investing much time to depict the glory of ancient India. Tarinicharan Hinduism makes a linear progress from the north to south, a narrative Chatterjee argues would embarrass "the votaries of political Hinduism today" as the idea that "Rama had subdued the inhabitants of southern India and established a colonial rule" is too reactionary even to their fundamentalist mindset (Chatterjee 96). Tarinicharan's emphasis on the ancientness of the Hindu religion is aggressive and supremacist. What is even more problematic, Chatterjee contends, is that Tarinicharan's story exudes morality; a morality that is willed, imposed and imagined but not historically proven: "His story of ancient glory and subsequent decline has a moral at the end: reform society, remove all of these superstitions that are the marks of decadence, and revive the true ideals of the past" (Chatterjee 98).

Chatterjee mentions Sayid Abdul Rahim of Barisal whose counter-narrative of Muslim misfortune also urges moral reformation. Rahim's historical account of Muslim rule in India was "to repudiate the slander that it was a characteristic of Islam as a religion and of Muslim rulers to be violent, intolerant, and oppressive towards others" (109). Rahim's purpose, Chatterjee is convinced, was to encourage Indians "to listen to Muslim historians telling the story of their own past ... and elicit the respect of others towards Islamic civilization and tradition" (Chatterjee 109). Chatterjee finds Rahim's rationale to be "no different from what Bankim has suggested for the nationalist past" (Chatterjee 109).

The cultural materials presented and circulated in the popular media like Facebook and YouTube by the Shahbag protesters and the Islamists echoed a similar sentiment to that of the colonial nationalists. They conjured up the persistence of tragedy in national life and urged that a moral battle be fought to cleanse nationalism. The song "Tui Razakar" by the band Chirkutt, which is representative of Bengali nationalism, foregrounds the deafening chant of "Rajakarer Fashi Chai" to illustrate that capital punishment of the rajakars is a demand of the entire nation. Implicit in the song is the message that anything other than exterminating

the rajakars would incur national tragedy. The song thus seeks to cleanse the past just as Tarinicharan advocated.

The Islamist video circulated on YouTube by an unidentified Islamist group, explicitly supporting the Islamist cause in Bangladesh, evokes the ‘Islam in danger’ rhetoric and attempts to discredit Bengali nationalism as a threat to Islam and the Muslims. The insistence on the tragic and the moral duty overlap in this propaganda video as it equates Bangladesh’s linguistic nationalism to be un-Islamic, a menace to Islam’s history. This very history provides them the impetus to fight this scar. Since Islam is in danger in Bangladesh, it must be rescued by enacting a global Jihad, the video insists.

Mainstream intellectual responses to Shahbag were also condescending to opposing nationalist sentiments. They evoked similar senses of tragedy and perpetuated moral messages as that of the music video and the Islamist clip. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal’s article “Onek Onek Onek Bhalobashi” is representative of Pro-Liberation bourgeoisie sentiment. Iqbal emphasizes the moral necessity to withstand what he considers the tragedy of Bangladesh. He identifies Islamic nationalism as the sole reason for the political crisis in Bangladesh, blaming its upholders as conspiring against religious minorities as well as the nation: “What the Pakistan army did in 1971 is being repeated now. Besides burning Hindu houses, temples and religious institutions, Awami League or the *Muktijuddho* murals have been destroyed ... there are *hartals*, power stations are demolished, offices and courts are burned. The loss of resources due to this violence could have contributed to the construction of the Padmabridge” (Iqbal, n.p., my translation). He reflects on the 1971 Liberation War as a classical past and hails the Shahbag Movement as reliving that past: “They did not see Ekattor; they did not see the valor or sacrifice of the freedom fighters. No proper weapon in hand, neither garment nor food, yet the freedom fighters waiting for Pakistani soldiers with fingers on the trigger and the chin on the rifle is a sight they missed. Also they didn’t see the courageous youth waiting for the military convoy with an unpinned grenade in his hand hiding behind the trees, ...they didn’t see the energetic youth facing certain death because he uttered the words *Joy Bangla*” (Iqbal, n.p., my translation). It is important to note that Iqbal’s “impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical” celebration of the prowess of the freedom fighters is remarkably similar to Tarinicharan’s celebration of Hindu militarism in Ancient India (Bhabha 1). Iqbal does not mention the implicit xenophobia and anti-Semitism of some of the slogans in Shahbag either, nor does he mention the peasants’ struggle or the indigenous people. His mission is to uncritically celebrate Bengali nationalism and discredit Islamic nationalism.

Farhad Mazhar’s “Bangali Jatiyotabadi Rajnitir Porinoti” (“The Consequences of Bengali Nationalist Politics”), similar to the YouTube video, projects the religion-in-danger sentiment. He identifies Bengali nationalist politics as anti-religious: “On one side there are Bengali nationalists and on the other there are the religious

people of Bangladesh. Linguistically and culturally, they are Bengali but religion is also integral to their identity. But when you consistently and continually claim that language and culture are key to your identity but not religion, you create a new conflict” (Mazhar, n.p., my translation). Islam, Mazhar argues, can confront nationalism based on culture and language: “When language and culture become your political weapons, whether you want it or not, Islam, as a religious weapon, stands to confront it” (Mazhar). Islam is presented as a catch-all force as Mazhar’s nationalist vision excommunicates Bangladesh’s different religious communities. It suggests his glorification of the Islamist attempt to shape Islam into “a standardized religion of a standardized majority” (Nandy vii).

Deeply problematic in the article is Mazhar’s accusation of Bengali nationalist politics as the sole reason for unrest in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region: “If you demand that ‘Bengali nationalism’ is your political identity and this notion of identity has to be made an integral part of the constitution, you are throwing a political challenge to the other CHT and plain-land indigenous communities including the Chakmas” (Mazhar). Mazhar deliberately occludes the role played by military dictators of Bangladesh whose nationalist ideology he endorses as a discredit to Bengali nationalism. Indeed, both nationalisms have contributed to colonization and occlusion of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh as is evident in Jenneke Arens’ argument: “Although Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had threatened to flood the area with the Army and Bengali settlers, it was General Ziaur Rahman who fully militarized the Chittagong Hill Tracts after he came to power in 1975 through a military coup” (Arens 120). It can be said Mazhar’s Islamic nationalism, as it is divisive and xenophobic, has no answer, except for blaming the ‘other’ nationalism, for the exclusion of the working class, peasantry and indigenous communities from Bangladesh’s nationalism discourse.

To conclude, nationalisms that confronted each other during the tumultuous days of the Shahbag/Hefajot frenzy and continue to do so in Bangladesh are heavily invested “in the patriotic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism” because they see political unity to be “a continual displacement of its irredeemably plural modern space” (Bhabha 300). It is Fanon who long ago said, “Colonization or decolonization: it is simply a power struggle” (Fanon 23). In Bangladesh, nationalism has become a power struggle as the peasantry and the indigenous are “systematically left out” from discourses of Bengali nationalism or Islamic nationalism (Fanon 23). Bhabha asks for counter-narratives to “disturb the ideological man oeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (300). Persistent questioning of the dominant narratives of nationalism, as this paper does, is a way to look beyond the contesting nationalisms that have rendered impossible co-existence of religions, ethnicities and ideologies.

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