

An Empathetic Inquiry into Ethno-Nationalist Movement in East Bengal: A Struggle from Cultural Recognition to a Separate Nation-State

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Abstract:

It's ironic that East Bengal, the region with the majority population, found itself striving for autonomy and eventual separation from the region with the minority population. Scholars have extensively studied this movement for autonomy and separation. However, these studies often lack proper contextualization within a nation-state framework that sensitises ethnic groups regarding their share of power. Since ethnic consciousness is inherently subjective, this study aims to understand the evolution of the movement from the perspective of Bengali intelligentsia and political activists involved in the movement. Therefore, an empathetic inquiry has been employed in this study.

It is argued that the continual decline in East Pakistan's share of power fueled sentiments of autonomy and separation among its populace. Consequently, there existed a negative correlation between the diminishing share of power and the growing public commitment to a distinct Bengali identity in the case of East Bengal. In conclusion, the movement evolved from cultural expression, followed by economic rationalization, and escalated to its political manifestation through mass mobilization and ultimately led to civil war because of denial of due share in power through electoral means.

Keyword: East Bengal; Bangladesh; Ethno-nationalist movements; debacle; Awami League.

In terms of population, East Bengal, now Bangladesh constituted the majority part of the unified Pakistan at the time of independence in 1947. The Pakistan movement also enjoyed significant support from East Bengal. However, within less than a quarter century, East Bengal, officially named East Pakistan, became a separate nation-state known as Bangladesh. It's ironic that in this case, the region with the majority population was advocating for autonomy and ultimately separation from the region with the minority population. This movement for autonomy and separation has been extensively studied by scholars. However, these studies often lack contextualization within a nation-state framework that sensitises ethnic groups to become conscious of their share in power. Since ethnic consciousness is

inherently subjective, this study seeks to understand the evolution of the movement from the perspective of Bengali intelligentsia and political activists related to the movement.

Theoretical Debate:

The initial viewpoint regarding ethnic assertiveness was essentialism, also known as primordialism. Essentialism categorizes human groups based on inherent biological or genetic traits, which can lead to long-standing animosities rooted in history. According to essentialism, inherited characteristics create intrinsic differences between groups, fueling intergroup prejudices and perpetuating historical tensions. Geertz was among the early advocates of the primordialist perspective (Geertz, 1973). However; Conner further solidified it philosophically by arguing that “man is a national not rational animal”, with the allure of shared ancestry holding significant sway (Conner, 1994). However, essentialism falls short in explaining why certain ethnically diverse societies are peaceful while others are not.

Instrumentalism seeks to provide a logical rationale for this phenomenon by suggesting that political and economic elites create and manipulate ethnic identities to serve their interests. However, instrumentalists struggle to explain why elites don't exploit other identities, such as class or occupational identities, in a similar manner. Schelling proposed that members of the same ethnic group share common expectations, which he termed as a "focal point." Therefore, due to this shared focal point, it is easier for instrumentalist elites to mobilize ethnic groups for their purposes (Schelling, 1963).

Constructivists and Postmodernists argue that modernity has altered the dynamics of human interaction, shifting from personal, local face-to-face encounters to impersonal, widespread contacts. This change has led to a broader, extra-local awareness of shared ethnicity among people of the same language and culture. Consequently, ethnicity as a widespread expression is considered a modern development. The advent of the printing press and capitalism are seen as modern mechanisms that have enabled individuals to envision their communities on a larger, extra-local scale (Anderson, 1983).

Postmodernists argue that the way knowledge is constructed, especially regarding social phenomena, plays a significant role in shaping power dynamics. Consequently, knowledge elite create narratives about social realities that either reinforce existing power structures or assist the ruling elite in maintaining control. Thus, ruling elites propagate these narratives

through institutional channels, while alternative narratives are marginalized or suppressed (Foucault, 2002). The discourse between constructivists and postmodernists primarily centers on either modernity or power relations, with the modern nation-state serving as the focal point of reference. As a result, many scholars in this field connect phenomena such as ethnic consciousness and mobilization with the concept of the modern nation-state.

This study contends that it was the discourse surrounding the nation-state rather than its structural framework that contributed to the development and intensification of ethnic consciousness. During the colonial era, particularly amidst nationalist anti-colonial movements, discussions about the emerging social order—the nation-state—fostered a societal awareness regarding fundamental rights, such as equality (entailing empowerment and self-governance), and the populace's entitlement to essential resources provided by the state (representing public interest). However, the incomplete reforms instituted by colonial powers and the limited reach of nationalist movements failed to sufficiently dismantle the old social hierarchy, preventing the establishment of a robust, rational democratic structure. Consequently, neither did a culture of democratic inclusivity and acknowledgment emerge, nor did a unifying cultural framework conducive to harmonious interethnic interactions develop within the nascent state in the aftermath.

The study seeks to explore how groups and actors construct meaning through their perceptions. Therefore, perceived cultural marginalization, economic exploitation and unequal share in power have been discussed from the viewpoints of ethnic groups concerned, in this case the East Bengal.

The Context:

In the nascent state, where a cohesive national identity was still evolving and the elite had yet to grasp peaceful norms of collective engagement and dispute resolution, disparities in economic development and power distribution inevitably fostered ethnic animosity and a divide between the central and regional elites.

Within this new state, Punjabis and Muhajirs, who boasted higher literacy rates, held disproportionate representation in the civil bureaucracy and military. This trend extended to the ruling party, PML, where a similar imbalance persisted. The dominance of the bureaucracy in the power hierarchy further solidified the influence of Muhajirs and Punjabis.

To perpetuate their dominance, Muhajirs emphasized "Muslim nationalism," advocating for the preservation and promotion of their own language and culture. Following partition, the Muhajir intelligentsia positioned themselves as guardians of "Muslim culture" and steered public discourse in alignment with their values. Similarly, Punjabis, another influential group whose language closely resembled Urdu with minor variations, also endorsed "Muslim nationalism" in contrast to the resurgence of ethnic groups relegated to the margins.

Colonial governance was justified by asserting the racial and intellectual superiority of the colonizers, which normalized differential treatment by colonial authorities. However, the process of decolonization and the establishment of postcolonial states instigated shifts in attitudes towards legitimate governance. This transition replaced notions of superiority with equality, disempowerment with empowerment, and foreign rule with self-governance. Therefore, any form of discrimination would be considered a departure from these principles rather than a routine occurrence that should be tolerated.

Articulation of Grievances and Evolution of Bengali Movement:

“The Punjabis, the Pathans and the Sindhis of the West are of Aryan stock, and tend to look down on the Mongoloid races of East Pakistan. The latter resent this attitude of superiority and the remote control of Karachi” (Innes, 1953). Therefore, the authoritarian dominance exercised by Punjabis and Muhajirs was certain to breed sentiments of alienation and colonization among other ethnic communities, consequently exacerbating pre-existing ethnic divisions. In opposition to the centralized power dynamics characterized by arbitrary authority, there was a growing trend toward calls for decentralization, autonomy, and even secession.

The sense of alienation was particularly pronounced in East Pakistan. The two regions of the country, separated by a considerable distance of over a thousand miles of Indian territory, exhibited distinct cultural characteristics, with the exception of their shared religion, Islam. A parliamentarian from East Pakistan underscored the disparities between the two regions, stating:

These two wings differ in all matters, except two things, namely, that they have a common religion, barring a section of the people in East Pakistan, and that we achieved our independence by a common struggle. These are the two points which are common to both the

wings of Pakistan. With the exception of these two things, all other factors, viz. the language, the tradition, the culture, the costume, the custom, the dietary, the calendar, the standard time, practically everything, is different (The Second Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, Debates, 1956).

East Pakistan, despite its majority population, held a disadvantaged position within the power structure. As noted by G.W. Chaudhury, “the ruling elite was composed of senior bureaucrats, none of whom was an East Bengali” (Choudhury, 1993). Chaudhury further elucidated the situation:

All significant decisions, spanning political, defense, economic, or diplomatic realms, ultimately rested with the ruling elite, predominantly comprised of civil and military officers from West Pakistan. Even within their own province, key positions were occupied by individuals from West Pakistan, affording them direct influence within the central ruling circle. Social interactions were limited, with West Pakistani officials viewing themselves as socially superior to Bengali Muslims, often regarding them as converts from lower-caste Hindus (Choudhury, 1993). The hub of power, including the capital and the headquarters of the army (GHQ), were situated in West Pakistan.

Over the course of twenty-five years from 1947 to 1971, only one individual from East Pakistan attained a position in the upper echelons of the military elite, reaching the rank of Lieutenant General (Alqama, 1997). Additionally, only one person from East Bengal was among the 133 Muslim officers who chose Pakistan during the Partition in 1947. Despite the implementation of a quota system by the Pakistani government, the representation of East Pakistanis in the civil services remained below one-fourth of the total positions until 1971 (Nazrul Islam, 1990). East Pakistani officers were unable to secure key roles in ministries dealing with economic policy till 1969 (Sayeed, 1980). Consequently, the bureaucratic dominance exerted by individuals from a vastly different cultural background, coupled with their sense of superiority evident in their actions and discourse, created an atmosphere akin to alien rule, fostering colonial sentiments among East Pakistanis. This perception of superiority is even evident in the writings of President General Ayub Khan.

It would be no exaggeration to say that up to the creation of Pakistan, they had not known any real freedom or sovereignty. They have been in turn ruled either by the caste Hindus, Moghuls, Pathans, or the British. In addition, they have been and still are under considerable Hindu cultural and

linguistic influence. As such they have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races and have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the newborn freedom. Their popular complexes, exclusiveness, suspicion and a sort of defensive aggressiveness probably emerge from this historical background (Khan, 1967).

The process of identifying with a newly formed nation-state is largely influenced by cultural values and symbols. Consequently, the ideology of the state and its language policies, which mold cultural norms, becomes a matter of concern for every ethno-linguistic group within a diverse society. Moreover, the designation of the national language for education and official communication significantly impacts the employment opportunities and economic advantages available to various linguistic communities, contingent upon their proficiency in the designated language. Therefore, Jinnah's unilateral declaration that Urdu would be the sole official language of Pakistan sparked resentment, leading to agitation over the language issue in East Pakistan.

Intellectuals and students actively advocated for the recognition of Bengali language alongside Urdu through the distribution of pamphlets and leaflets. The government's harsh response to this agitation further alienated East Pakistanis. Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin's reaffirmation of the unilateral language policy during a public gathering in the province heightened tensions, particularly among the already frustrated populace grappling with food shortages due to a famine. Consequently, the provocation by the ruling elite fueled increased mobilization, which manifested in strikes and protests led by political factions in the region. Government crackdowns on these strikes and demonstrations resulted in multiple fatalities, exacerbating feelings of animosity and resentment, particularly toward the ruling ethnic groups and more broadly against West Pakistan.

These sentiments contributed to the emergence of a distinct nationalism centered on the Bengali language rather than a shared religion. As described by Jahan, 'The language movement created myths, symbols and slogans that consolidated the vernacular elite. It gave them not only a popular common cause but also their first martyrs. A whole new literary and cultural tradition grew out of the events of February (Jahan, 1972).

Despite East Bengal's disadvantaged position within the power structure, East Pakistanis utilized the parliament as a platform where their politicians could express grievances and engage in mediation with the central authority. This provided a semblance of empowerment

and fostered hope for practical realization. Hence, alongside the language movement, there existed a campaign for autonomy and representation in the parliament based on population, as East Pakistan constituted fifty-four percent of the total population at the time. In 1955, an agreement was reached between East Pakistani and West Pakistani parliamentarians, guaranteeing regional autonomy. However, East Pakistan had to compromise its numerical majority in favor of the principle of parity with West Pakistan in the Parliament.

The Western ruling elite capitalized on the division among East Pakistani parliamentarians and successfully secured the approval of the country's first constitution from the parliament in 1956. While the constitution maintained the principle of parity, the demand for regional autonomy was disregarded in favor of a centralized government. However, the Constitution did recognize Bengali language alongside Urdu as the two official languages, with the provision that they would replace English after twenty years. Consequently, both Urdu and Bengali attained recognition as state languages of Pakistan (Pasha, 1995). Despite failing to fully address the demands of East Pakistanis, the constitutional arrangement instilled hope among them that their grievances could eventually be addressed through political and parliamentary means.

The imposition of martial law in 1958 disrupted the political process, resulting in the exclusive dominance of civil-military bureaucrats. With Bengalis notably absent from the upper echelons of civil-military bureaucracy, this move effectively nullified any representation they had in the power structure through the parliament. Without intermediary politicians from East Pakistan, the prospect of addressing their grievances and the sense of solidarity forged during a shared struggle began to diminish.

Simultaneously, a sense of disempowerment spurred intellectuals to contemplate a separate identity, scholars to justify the pursuit of a new identity, and poets to evoke emotional connections with this newfound identity. The literature produced by intellectuals, scholars, and poets proved potent in mobilizing political activists, especially among the youth. The governing elite, aligned with the discourse of the modern democratic nation-state, lacked both the capability and the inclination to quash this alternative narrative.

East Pakistani parliamentarians persistently raised concerns about discrimination against Bengalis in job opportunities, particularly in military recruitment, as well as unfair allocation of funds for their province (National Assembly Debates, 1962-65). At the time of

independence, both wings of the country were similarly industrialized, with limited manufacturing industries. However, by 1958, seventy percent of Pakistan's industrial output was concentrated in the western wing. The majority of development funds (70 percent) and the budget (80 percent) were allocated to West Pakistan (Rahiduzzaman, 1970). Despite contributing 65–70 percent to foreign exchange earnings, East Pakistan received only 30 percent of the allocated funds (Gourgey, 1972).

Political economists from East Pakistan calculated that over the span of two decades, resources amounting to one billion dollars had been diverted from East Pakistan to West Pakistan, a phenomenon Sheikh Mujibur Rahman referred to as, 'An intolerable structure of injustice' (Nanda, 1972).

The government's modernization initiatives, aimed at enhancing infrastructure, communication networks, literacy rates, job opportunities, and urban development in the province, inadvertently provided a platform for political mobilization and dissemination of messages by various factions. Consequently, grievances and the consequent development of identity consciousness proliferated. By 1966, the East Pakistan provincial secretariat had become predominantly staffed by local Bengali employees (Maniruzzaman, 1982).

Ayub Khan's victory in the 1965 presidential election, despite opposition from all major political parties in East Pakistan, underscored the systematic exclusion of Bengalis from the power structure. However, despite this, some Bengalis harbored a sense of inevitability regarding unity with West Pakistan due to their reliance on it for security against a perceived common threat. Consequently, Bengalis in East Pakistan may have reluctantly accepted authoritarian control by West Pakistanis out of necessity. The 1965 war dealt a decisive blow to the narrative of a united country facing a common threat from India. East Pakistan found itself vulnerable and unprotected by the Pakistani military during the conflict, highlighting its isolation from West Pakistan, upon which it had relied for security (Choudhury, 1993).

Disillusionment with the concept of a unified defense effort intensified resistance and hardened attitudes, providing an opportune moment for autonomist political parties and leaders to take decisive action. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the Awami League, put forward his six-point plan, envisioning Pakistan as a state comprising two autonomous regions, with the center retaining control over only defense and foreign affairs. The

entrenched governing elite, accustomed to centralized authoritarianism, could not tolerate such open defiance. However, the autocratic military regime, seeking democratic legitimacy, failed to recognize the necessity of employing effective coercion or accommodation at the appropriate juncture.

The regime's policy of limited coercion and tolerance for dissent provided dissidents like Sheikh Mujib with an opportunity to construct a political platform by articulating ethnic grievances and mobilizing the masses. However, when the military government recognized the significant challenge posed by Sheikh Mujib and his six-point formula, it resorted to detaining him under defense laws. The handling of the situation revealed the regime's confusion regarding the escalating issue in the eastern wing. Sheikh Mujib was implicated in a conspiracy case, and the decision to hold an open trial by the Ayub government inadvertently granted him widespread publicity among the disgruntled Bengalis, elevating him to hero status overnight. Ultimately, the Ayub regime, facing mounting pressure for democratic legitimacy amidst mass protests in both wings, found it untenable to detain Sheikh Mujib indefinitely and was compelled to release him on political grounds. This outcome served to validate his six-point agenda (Choudhury, 1993).

Gen. Yahya, who succeeded Gen. Ayub amidst a political crisis, opted to address the political mobilization through accommodation and democratic processes. However, the prolonged military rule and frequent interventions in political affairs by military-bureaucratic institutions hindered the cultivation of a democratic ethos and the growth of national political parties capable of garnering widespread support in both wings of the country. Consequently, the general elections of 1970 starkly highlighted the political divide between the eastern and western wings, exposing the culture of non-accommodation and undemocratic practices (Khan, 2016).

Sheikh Mujib's Awami League achieved a sweeping victory in the eastern wing, emerging as the predominant party, yet without any representation in the western wing. Conversely, the PPP dominated the western wing but failed to secure a single seat in the eastern wing. Rather than transferring power to the majority party, the military regime exploited the political discord and undemocratic culture to pursue and safeguard its own interests in the power structure of future Pakistan. This resulted in a political deadlock and the military's eventual

decision to launch an army operation in East Pakistan, tarnishing Pakistan's international reputation and triggering an influx of Bengali refugees into India (Khan, 2016).

At this juncture, India's propaganda against Pakistan and its grievances regarding the refugees should have served as a warning of the impending threat of Indian intervention. The army ought to have recognized that, even at the time of high morale and public support in the masses, simultaneous engagement in a civil war in East Pakistan and a national conflict with India was untenable. Therefore, the decision of the ruling elite to launch a military operation without public support in East Pakistan, particularly when socio-political institutions, including the military, were morally compromised, dealt the final blow to the unity of Pakistan (Khan, 2016).

Conclusion:

The authoritarian ruling elite in West Pakistan disregarded the legitimate demand for the recognition of Bengali as a national language. Additionally, the center of power, including the capital and military headquarters, was situated in West Pakistan. Furthermore, East Pakistanis were inadequately represented in the powerful civil-military bureaucracy, while the parliament functioned more as a symbolic institution. The imposition of direct military rule shattered the hopes of East Bengalis to address the imbalance of power through parliamentary means, particularly considering they constituted fifty-four percent of the total population. The 1965 war dealt a final blow to the optimism of East Pakistanis, as they were left entirely abandoned by the military leadership from West Pakistan during the conflict. Thus the concept of a united defense and a unified nation-state lost its appeal in East Pakistan. The ruling elite in West Pakistan, due to its authoritarian aptitude, remained indifferent to demands for equal power sharing. The continual decline in East Pakistan's share of power further fuelled sentiments of autonomy and separation among its populace. Consequently, in the case of East Bengal, there existed a negative correlation between the diminishing share of power and the growing public commitment to a distinct Bengali identity.

Initially, the assertion of the group identity was manifested through cultural symbols, with Bengalis' primary demand being the recognition of their language and culture. While cultural expression served to bolster group solidarity and lay the groundwork for a collective resistance against perceived oppression, it alone was insufficient to spur individuals to engage in active resistance. Consequently, intellectuals sought to rationalize the nationalist

movement by emphasizing factors such as economic exploitation by the dominant group. In East Bengal, scholars and economists meticulously documented the economic injustices inflicted upon East Pakistan by the western wing. As cultural expression and economic rationalization became integral components of the nationalist movement, nationalist politicians found it increasingly feasible to articulate grievances and rally people against the centralist elite.

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