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A Pendular Theory of Nationalism

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A Pendular Theory of Nationalism¹

Habibul Haque Khondker

Embracing Ambiguity:

Let us start with a higher threshold of tolerance for ambiguity. Nation, class, culture, race, religious community – and similar [other] concepts of collective identity are often ambiguous. The main problem seems to be drawing boundary, i.e., delimiting the scope of these concepts. Seeing concepts as containers, i.e., as a device to capture some aspect of social reality will always remain a challenge for the social scientists. Nation is bounded by Nation-state but without it the contours of a nation are often nebulous. It is here postmodernist theory which favors deconstruction, fluidity and liminality might have some use. However deconstruction is not rejection; it is a process of critical unraveling. In a fine book Donald Levine (1985) - titled *The Flight from Ambiguity* – lamented that sociology (mainstream sociology) has always wanted to avoid ambiguity, which is an almost impossible task. As analysts of society, we are condemned or shall I say, destined to deal with ambiguity. Yet we need to grapple with definitions of concepts. Levine is not a post-modernist. And that is the point; one does not need to be to ask unsettling questions. One can, like Ilya Prigogine, define our time as the end of certainty on the basis of not some pseudo-theories but serious scientific analysis. Someone like Bauman with some post-modern credentials (although he is critical of postmodernity, he uses ideas such as “liquid modernity”) or Neil Smelser with a solid mainstream, modernist credentials can concur that between the polar positions of being enchanted with modernity and thoroughly disenchanted with modernity and rationality, there is a position of ambivalence. Modernity generates its own ambivalence. A reflexive modernity straddles the middle ground of the modernity project of the evolutionary and neo-evolutionary sociologists and their nemesis the post-modernism of deconstructivist variety. My sympathy lies in the position of reflexive modernity where reflexivity is not equal to theoretical or philosophical musings but a critical engagement with modernity, a modernist understanding of modern society (Beck et al 2003).

Why do I drift into this theoretical excursus? Because, I think most writers of nationalism – more or less- viewed it in terms of a modernist project. Gellner (1983) was explicit about it so was Eugene Weber (1979). The rest were more implicit. This is not to suggest that there is a singular narrative of modernity or modernist project that would capture all the diverse histories of nationalism. Various taxonomies of the theories of nationalism can be found ranging from primordialists to constructionists, or ethnic versus civic, or integrative versus disruptive, or colonial vs. anti-colonial, or official vs. popular and so on. In all these dualities we see an implicit position of linearity. Now, with growing skepticism of the idea of linearity and progress, one might be tempted to reject the entire history of nationalism as a “meta narrative” which might even be congruent with the seeming absurdities of our time. However, such an interpretation will empower the forces interested in re-constructing nationalism and re-writing history. We need to find a theoretical middle ground that would help us understand the shifts and swings of nationalist discourse.

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It may be useful to begin any discussion of nationalism with the wise remarks of Benedict Anderson. Anderson points out that there are two “common kinds of misunderstanding” concerning nationalism. I would add a third.

The first is that nationalism is something very old and is inherited from ‘absolutely splendid ancestors.’ Thus it is something that arises ‘naturally’ in the blood and flesh of each of us.” Anderson reminds us: “In fact, nationalism is something rather new, and today is little more than two centuries old.” The first Declaration of Independence (of USA) proclaimed in 1776 Philadelphia said not a word about ancestors or Americans. The utter dismay – not to say incredulity – of the co-author of the “invention of tradition”, Eric Hobsbawm (1993), at a book produced in Pakistan titled: “Five Thousand Years of Pakistan” may easily be appreciated. Pakistan gained independence in 1947, while the proposal for the formation of such a state was mooted in 1940. The very name Pakistan was supposedly the brainchild of Choudhury Rahmat Ali who while at Cambridge in 1933 invented the name Pakistan for a separate north-western region of India with no mention of Bengal. Yet, Shahid Javed Burki, a Pakistani scholar with World Bank credentials, claims: Pakistan’s history really begins with the arrival of Islam in India in the eighth century” (1999:2). Bangladesh has not claimed a thousand year scale history yet and the country’s constitution drafted a year after her independence in 1971 did have the word “nationalism” as one of the state principles. We will come back to that in a moment. Anderson tells us: “the mania for seeking ‘absolutely splendid ancestors’ typically gives rise to nonsense, and often very dangerous nonsense” (Anderson, 1999:3).

“The second misunderstanding”, according to Anderson, “is that ‘nation’ and ‘state’ are, if not exactly identical, at least like a happy husband and wife in their relationship. But the historical reality is often just the oppositeNation and state ‘got married’ very late on, and the marriage was far from always happy. The state – in general – is much older than the nation (Anderson 1999:4). Here Charles Tilly’s (1990) distinction between nation-state and national-state is helpful. National state appeared on the scene much earlier rivaling city-states and other non-national entities.

The third misunderstanding that I would like to add concerns the much celebrated “nation as an imagined community”. Here so-called “social construction” theory or phenomenological tradition in sociology seems to overstate the case to the extent that it falls in to the abyss of subjectivism or perspectivism. Nations are imagined; but they are not imaginary, they are not fabrications or constructions. In fact, Anderson rebukes Ernest Gellner for claiming that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist”. Anderson points out that Gellner confuses “invention” with “fabrication” and “falsity” rather than “imagining” and “creation” (McCrone, 1998). *Natio* originally meant ‘birth’ or ‘descent’; a community to which an individual belonged by reason of his birth. For Cicero it used to mean a section of the population (e.g., the aristocracy). Over time who belonged shifted but in general, it became more, rather than less, inclusive.

Definitions:

Let’s consider some definitions of nationalism. A good starting point as always is Ernest Renan’s speech in 1882 at the Sorbonne, a speech that, in part, reflected the French nationalistic aspirations of the late nineteenth century. In that famous speech Renan stated: A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in undivided

form (Renan quoted in Bhabha, 1990:19). Renan used the phrase “a daily plebiscite” in the definition of nation so as to stress on the dynamic aspect of the nation’s existence. For him a nation is a soul, a mental principle. It is also a store of memories...(awareness of the past sacrifices). And there is the wish to live together... the desire to continue a life in common.

To quote Gellner, for example: "Nations are not inscribed into the nature of things," ... and "Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: that is a reality" (Gellner, 1983:49). "Nationality, though very important in certain circumstances, which have prevailed for the past two centuries, is not a universal characteristic of human beings" (Gellner, 1993:19). Or to quote Bhabha (1990:1) "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye". The view that nation is a myth featured in the writings of Jose Carlos Mariategui, a Peruvian in the 1920's: "The nation ... is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined" (quoted in Brennan, 1990). Hans Kohn also emphasized the point that a nation is a state of mind. A political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Peter Sahlin: National identity is a socially constructed and continuous process of defining ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’. Nationalism does not express or reflects a natural, primordial reality. Joseph Stalin’s definition is quite inclusive. “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” (Stalin, 1994:21). This is an ideal-type of nationalism. The real life nationalisms are only approximations of it.

Partha Chatterjee raises some important points about the problems of historicism. Despite the problems raised by Chatterjee, history – and certain universal categories with it - is unavoidable. I don’t share the Henry Ford version that “History is bunk”. A Fordist or postmodernist denial of history is bound to play in the hands of the powerful. History is one of the resistors against arbitrary power. “Nationalists make use of the past in order to subvert the present” (Kedourie, 1994:51). In some sense history makes nations and nations make history. Duara (1998), amongst others, makes this case and finds a corrosive influence of nation on history. In any case, the relationship between history and nation cannot be ignored. History unifies, history divides. For example, the demolition of Babri Mosque in India in 1992 divided the nation of India not so much between the Hindus and the Muslims but also between the secular liberals on the one hand and the religionists and conservatives on the other. History is both a matter of interpretation as well as evidence.

The relationship between history and nationalism in India is illustrated in the variable interpretation of the “Sepoy Mutiny” of 1857. In 1857 there was a soldiers’ mutiny – popularly known as “Sepoy Mutiny” – in India against the British colonial rulers. Karl Marx in his essays written for the *New York Daily Tribune* characterized it as “The First War of Independence”. Indian historians have debated as to whether it could be seen as an early sign of Indian nationalism or not. Many, however, agree that to characterize that rebellion as nationalist is somewhat anachronistic. Depending on the time and context when historians commented on that event, it was a mutiny, a nationalist struggle and a pre-nationalist reaction to restore a feudal kingdom. The historiography rather than the history of this event shows the rise and decline of nationalism in the post 1850s India (Khondker, 1989).

It is the meaning of history that has led Partha Chatterjee to contest Ben Anderson’s notion of “modularity of nation”. Chatterjee avers: “If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain “modular” forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?”

(Chatterjee, 1993:5). At the risk of oversimplification, Anderson's thesis can be presented in the following, though schematic manner. Anderson (1991) provides a historical sketch and does not worry about east/west difference. He grants print-capitalism a main role in the development of nationalism which in concrete terms led to an explosion in book publications and spread of vernaculars. Print-capitalism not only gave fixity to language it also paved the way for the rise of national consciousness. Unless we find a more plausible explanation, Anderson's schema seems to be sound.

It may be useful to illustrate this point with a contemporary – though one may think, somewhat trivial – example. Let me use the example of changes at National University of Singapore from “paper” system when a course or “paper” would be taught for one academic year to a “modular” system. Although the change in organizing curricula took place at the instruction of University administrators, very little directive came from the top on the contents of courses we should teach. At least, in terms of the contents faculty members retained a great degree of autonomy. It is possible that some of us can check out the website of Harvard or Berkeley sociology programs and unimaginatively copy their course contents. However, the fact is that most faculty members develop their own, especially in subjects that have some context-dependency. Individual faculty members do exercise certain autonomy of selection and in exercising their judgment and criteria of selection, they balance the modular effects of homogenization. Here, of course there will be variations across disciplines. Physics 101 can simply teach the same contents without causing any harm to anyone except perhaps, national pride. Now if you think I am using a trivial example. Let me use the example of nation-state and the idea of similarities in the state systems around the world. John Meyer and his team have found a certain isomorphism in the pattern of state systems around the world and they have considered the academic curricula around the world. Isomorphism refers to a correspondence between two sets or similarities despite difference in origins.

The same argument of isomorphism can be made with regard to “nationalism” or for that matter various institutions of the national state such as national constitution (Markoff and Regan, 1987) or symbols such as national flags (Weitman, 1973) or any other concepts or categories we use in academic or public discourses. Chatterjee continues, “History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized” (Chatterjee, 1993:5) A good example of colonization of imagination can be found a few pages later in criticizing certain English claims of the achievements of British rule in India when he says: “Having read our Michel Foucault, we can now recognize...etc.” (Chatterjee, 1993:15).

Chatterjee argues that “...nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the ‘modular’ forms of the national society propagated by the modern West” (1993:5). Chatterjee uses the term identity in the sense of similarity. Ironically, the focus on difference is an outgrowth of identity politics. Chatterjee's main point that there is a difference between inner/spiritual and outer material and so on are well rehearsed in the politics of Gandhi and Nehru and clearly stated by Tagore. This was a popular position in the nationalist ideological circles. The West is strong in the material aspects of civilization, the East is strong in spiritual sides. Therefore, the East and the West are complimentary to one another. Who can disagree with platitudes? We can all live happily ever after.

Ashish Nandy is more critical of the West and presses charges of imperialism of categories: this is fine. Here he is repeating some of the criticisms earlier made by Susantha

Goonatilke (1982). But let us consider the story of Keshab Sen's visit to England in 1870 drawn from Chatterjee. "He had been astonished to discover in England an institution he "certainly did not expect to find in this country – I mean caste. Your rich people are really Brahmins, and your poor people are Sudras" (Chatterjee, 1993:38). Now is this an example of imperialism of categories? No. In my opinion, we need concepts and categories to communicate. Categories are always provisional – we use them in different contexts with great success. Most sociologists would jump to accept Sen's analysis – where caste would mean a rigid, ossified stratification without accusing him of reverse imperialism of categories.

Peter Alter (1989) viewed nationalism both as an ideology and a political movement. Such a combination is often manifest in the nationalist struggle in the Third World. "In the doctrine of Pakistan, Islam is transformed into a political ideology and used in order to mobilize Muslims against Hindus; more than that it cannot do, since an Islamic state on classical lines is today an impossible anachronism" (Kedourie, 1994:51). Nationalism, in sum, is not the awakening of an old, dormant force; rather a consequence of new conditions. Once the historical link between nationalism and modernization has been made; now it would be useful to show nationalism as an expression of globalization

NATIONALISM IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD:

Paraphrasing Marx one can say: the whole world is now being haunted by the specter of nationalism. Nationalism is back. In the past two centuries history has witnessed the rise and ebb of nationalisms sometimes with deadly consequences. The verdict is out: globalization viewed as global modernization is not going to erase differences and create a homogenized world. Nationalism and globalization are destined to coexist. Interestingly, some of the processes of globalization, i.e., formation of supra-national entities and the perceived threat to the local and national enhanced an awareness of self vis-à-vis "others", thus reviving the issue of national question.

A society, that is, a people living in a state juridically defined, bordered, etc., becomes an official nation only under certain favorable historical junctures. Such nations have certain definable and taken for granted characteristics. It has become a part of our everyday idioms, we know what it is - sort of. Let's say, we speak of the Swedes as a nation which seen in another light refers to the people who inhabit the state known as Sweden. Nation and state do overlap in certain instances. Are French Canadians a nation? Those who say no are thinking of the overlap between state and nation. In a referendum held in late 1995 the majority of the voters in Quebec voted against separation from Canada, therefore, French Canadians are not a nation. They are part of the Canadian nation. However, if the results of the poll had swung the other direction, they would be known as Quebecois. Those who insist that Quebecois are a nation despite the outcome of the referendum, see nation and state as different and not as overlapping categories. There are, indeed, many possibilities.

First, there are nations in the making either with long-held national aspirations; or twists and turns of history produce national sentiments and aspirations where there were none or very little. Certain markers, in part objective, in part subjective, separate one group of people from another. Group identity based on religion or language or some other criterion or criteria can give shape to a nation.

Secondly, there are multi-national states. The former Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia are examples of multi-national states that have since dissolved into multiple states, each claiming its own historical nationhood sometimes with outside help. Does this

mean multinational states are potentially unstable and it is only a matter of time before each “nation” achieves its own “state”. Here the possibilities are as immense as the problems of fairness, authenticity and justice. Let’s take the example of India a federal state with twenty-five odd states. Kashmir is often in the news these days but the problems of this sad but beautiful place go back to the days of the partition of the British India in 1947. Is Kashmir a nation? The flame of nationalism has been alive since 1947. But what about the Punjab? Do the Sikhs have a rightful claim to nationhood? Militarily, they are now subdued. The high tide of nationalist fervor of the 1980s in the Punjab has ebbed in the 1990s thanks to an effective handling of the crisis by the Indian government. But is there any guarantee that the flames of nationalism will remain extinguished there permanently and that a new wave will not recur? During the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, the Sikhs were the most valiant fighters on the Indian side as were the Bengalees on the Pakistan side. Barely six years later, Bengalees fought the Pakistanis for autonomy and then, independence, and succeeded (with the help of the Indians) in attaining their own homeland. In India, barely a decade or so later, the Sikhs became vociferous in their demands for a separate homeland and failed. The Sikhs also fought valiantly in the 1971 war between India and Pakistan over Bangladesh. For many Bangladeshis who lived through that war identified Sikhs with India so much so that the Sikh separatism was rather baffling to them.

The functioning democracy and its attendant flexibility in India seems to be more successful in fusing diversity than, say, a command polity as represented in the former Soviet Union or the militaristic Pakistan regime. Here we have another point worth pondering - the relationship between nationalism and democracy. Nationalist movements often emerged hand in hand with a call for democracy, especially in the colonial situations. But then in several instances the call for a heightened nationalism ended up mingling with the rise of fascism of various sorts. The critics of nationalism and, especially, patriotism have that fear in mind. The idea of nationalism has historical connections with romanticism. Sociologists and other skeptics question the sham of nationalism in a class-divided, individualistic society. Empirical studies of nationalism reveal that the idea of nationalism often originates with the elite or with an aspiring middle-class, bourgeoisie, the rest of the society are conned into it. From a rational choice perspective, it is often self-seeking elites and certain groups play the game of nationalism for their own individual or group benefits. Such a view borders on a conspiracy theory. Conspiracies are not unknown in history, but we do not belong to just a conspiratorial world. The scheming elites may have political ambition or the aspiring bourgeoisie may have economic gains in mind, but the masses of the people may have other, non-economic gains in mind. A sense of nationalism can give a group of people a sense of group-worth. Such sentiments and psychic satisfaction are important both to the rich as well as to the poor. The popularity of nationalist leaders lies not simply in the demagoguery of the leaders or its converse the naiveté of the ordinary people but in a coalition of interests. Objective conditions provide the realm of possibilities, the context that are “constructed” or “re-constructed” subjectively. Here the role of intellectual elites is crucial. It can be said that a discourse of nationalism is a precondition for and a prelude to the rise of a nationalist movement. National sentiments are not primordial, they emerge in the interplay of a variety of historical and contingent social forces most significant of which are the forces of globalization.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the rise of various ethno-nationalist movements in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system led many to doubt the inevitability of the globalization process. If globalization is conceived of as a steamroller erasing all forms of differences leading to homogenization; only then the ethno-nationalistic, particularistic movements around the world can be seen as reversing the process. But if we

view globalization as a complex, transnational, and multicultural project then it is not only congruent with but to some extent dependent on plurality and heterogeneity. As some of the globalization theorists have argued - I think, quite convincingly, that the spread of nation-states around the world, the rise of a common set of diplomatic norms and conventions guiding the relationships among the nation-states, are markers of the processes of globalization (Robertson, 1992; Meyer, 1980).

Historically, certain key processes of globalization coincided with the flowering of nationalism in the last century. For example, the laying of inter-continental submarine cables, the standardization of time (internationally), and the initial thrust for inter-national war conventions took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. Nationalism, first as a sentiment then as a movement emerged as a discourse that emphasized differences. It was "we" versus "they". The intellectual discourse of nationalism of the present century was in itself an appendage to the nationalist movements. What is interesting in the recent globalization theory is that it pointed out how similar the rhetoric of differences was. Nationalism assumed a modular form. For the emergent intellectual and political elites in various parts of the world there was a model of nationalism which they adapted to their own circumstances. They did not blindly emulate. Globalization, according to Robertson, implied unity, not integration, of the world. Nor does it imply homogenization. Globalization as Hannerz and Appadurai argue is the celebration of hybridity, creolization and heterogeneity. The new wave of nationalism in the twilight of the second millennium was surely not a reaction, but a sub-plot in the drama of globalization.

According to Giddens: "Globalization is not a single process but a mixture of processes, which often act in contradictory ways, producing conflicts, disjunctures and new forms of stratification. Thus, for instance, the revival of local nationalisms, and an accentuating of local identities, are directly bound up with globalizing influences, to which they stand in opposition" (Giddens, 1994:5). However, to see the revival of nationalism as a redoubt, or as a resistance to the forces of globalization presents a view that is only nominally true. A careful analysis must entail an examination of the interface of the global and local in understanding issues of nationalism and national identity.

Globalization can be defined as deterritorialization and compression of the world to the extent that a singular society can hardly be studied without reference to the broad ideological and cultural currents at the global level. Deterritorialization refers to increasing irrelevance of territorial space and its corollary, the disjuncture between space and events. An example of deterritorialization would be the demonstrations against Rushdie in Bangladesh where the controversial book was not even allowed in the first place. The controversies in England where the book was initially available freely kicked off a controversy that had direct repercussions in Bangladesh. As one writer has recently shown, there is a great deal of influence of radical Islamic views on Bengali youth in certain neighborhoods in London which is caused both by a sense of alienation and generation gap but also due to forces of ideological/religious globalization (Glynn, 2002). Compression of the world refers to the speed at which controversies, debates, and ideas can travel from one part of the world to another.

In order to explore the sources of national identity, we need to examine as to how much of it is generated by local culture and how much of it can be attributed to the differences in social structures, historical experiences, maintenance of memories, construction of memories etc. In contemporary societies media images, movies, and self-presentation of the nations are powerful means in shaping the national identity. Although constructivist position has gained a good deal of popularity, it would be erroneous to neglect certain essential attributes of social structure whether language, or political-economy,

ideology, religion, a shared culinary or aesthetic preference or a shared memory on which national identity or nationhood can be built. I would argue that the national identity is historically constructed both by the impersonal forces of social institutions, events and processes; the deliberate "construction" via "invention of traditions" constitute only one facet of these processes.

According to Raymond Williams: 'Nation' as a term is radically connected with 'native'. We are born into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and 'placeable' bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial (Williams, 1983: 45). In the context of Bengal, a sense of "nation", though highly ambiguous, arose by the middle of the nineteenth century, long before the emergence of the nation-state of Bangladesh. The embryonic notion of nation was embedded in the notion of the native. The "native" which is the basis of a nation with all its appearance as a given is also, to a large extent, a construction especially in the context of colonial legacy. Surely, in the initial stage the natives saw themselves as passive subjects of the colonial rulers and tried to emulate their habits but with time and growing self-confidence they became more assertive and challenged their rulers. Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) depicts the construction of native – a self-reassured, coherent community losing its meaning and bearings in the face of colonial incorporation. In the context of Bengal, the process of nativization began somewhere in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, with the British solidly entrenched, influenced both the structure of the society as well as its culture. The construction of Bengali identity took place largely in the context of the British colonial rule. The acceptance of the colonial masters and their definition of the subjects as "natives" began to be accepted by the natives themselves.

Writing in 1840, Thomas Babington Macaulay waxed as eloquent about the resources of Bengal as he was derisive of the Bengalis: "Bengal was known through the East as the garden of Eden, as the rich kingdom. Its population multiplied exceedingly. Distant provinces were nourished from the overflowing of its granaries; and the noble ladies of London and Paris were clothed in the delicate produce of its looms. The race by whom this rich tract was peopled, enervated by a soft climate and accustomed to peaceful employments, bore the same relation to other Asiatics which the Asiatics generally bear to the bold and energetic children of Europe. The Castilians have a proverb, that is in Valencia the earth is water and the men women; and the description is at least equally applicable to the vast plain of the Lower Ganges. Whatever the Bengalee does he does languidly. His favorite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and, though voluble in dispute, and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane, he seldom engages in a personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier" (Macaulay, [1840] 1907:503). In another occasion, he wrote: "What the Italian is to the Englishman, what the Hindoo is to the Italian, what the Bengalee is to other Hindoos.... The physical organization of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapor bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavorable. His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of mainly resistance; but its suppleness and its tact move the children of sterner climates to admiration not unmingled with contempt.... What the horns are to the buffalo, what the paw is to the tiger, what the sting is to the bee, what beauty, according to the old Greek song, is to women, deceit is to the Bengalee. Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissues of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery, are the weapons, offensive and defensive, of the people of the Lower Ganges" (Macaulay,

[1841]1907:562).

Whether Macaulay's views on the Bengali character were shared by other colonial rulers cannot be ascertained but it can be assumed that such a condescending and derogatory view shook the Bengali elites and thus contributed to a renewed self-assessment. The introduction of modern education with the establishment of Hindu College in 1817 and the rise of a middle class paved the way for the emergence of a new Bengali identity. Surely, the Bengali character was essentially that of the middle class origin. It was the character of the *Bhadrolok* class and not that of the masses of peasantry. An urban-based nationalist discourse evolved centering around the new educated Bengali elite which was a "derivative discourse" (Chatterjee, 1986) but surely, it was also a "different discourse" (Guha-Thakurta, 1992).

Nationalist movement was an unintended consequence of the modern education introduced by the British with the active support of the knowledge-loving local elite. Raychaudhuri finds it significant "that the very first generation of western-educated Bengalis felt attracted to the ideals of national liberation and post-enlightenment rationalism, which were by no means the only components of the nineteenth century European tradition. Mazzini and Garibaldi, but not Bismarck, were the admired heroes" (Raychaudhuri, 1988:4). The influence of the early Utilitarian thinkers such as James Mill (1773 - 1836) who served the Company administration and the humanist ideas of August Comte, the founder of sociology, on the Bengali intelligentsia was discernible in the mid-nineteenth century (Dhali, 1985). The new consciousness, identity - a fusion of western liberal idea and a search for Indian traditions - arose among the Bengali elite shaping their character. The ferment of the intellectual activities was displayed in the formation of various associations and publication of a whole host of journals and magazines. The Partheonon which appeared in 1830 "described itself as the organ of people who were 'Hindu by birth, yet European by education'" (Raychaudhuri, 1988:21). Here we clearly see the echo of Macaulay.

In so far as the Bengali-Hindu identity was concerned which was coterminous with Bengali identity, certain variation notwithstanding, the story can be told in a less cumbersome way, but when we begin to isolate the distinctiveness of the Bengali-Muslims, the issue becomes murkier. According to Anisuzzaman, one of the consequences of Muslim rule in Bengal from the thirteenth century was the large-scale conversion of Buddhists and low-caste Hindus to Islam. Despite the egalitarian ideal, Muslim society had also been influenced by the caste system. In Bengal Islam appeared not in its orthodox form, but in the mystic form preached by the Sufis (1993:19). The syncretic traditions left their marks on Bangladeshi national identity. Yet the role of Islam and the systematic effort to Islamicize in the last decades of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century went a long way in their implications (Ahmed, 1981). The process of Islamization continues in Bangladesh even today under the auspices of Islamic movements which have always been transnational, hence, global.

ISLAM AND SECULARISM IN BANGLADESH:

The April 4, 2002 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), the Hong Kong-based weekly, in a lead article portrayed Bangladesh as a country with a religious-fundamentalist bent, even a potential breeding ground of the Al-Qaeda. The merit of the article, titled "Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror" is less important to me than the sharp reactions that it evoked from the government of Bangladesh. The issue was banned and court proceedings were initiated against the Magazine. The article among other things accused the government of "inaction" with regard to dealing with "creeping fundamentalism".

Why was the Bangladesh government so touchy about Islamic fundamentalism?

Bangladesh relies on the America-led West for trade and aid. So it is somewhat understandable why the government was in a hurry to dispel any association with such a tag, especially after 9/11. Yet in the early 1990s during the previous rule of the BNP Taslima Nasrin, a firebrand feminist writer who attacked Islam as practiced in Bangladesh, was fiercely attacked by the religious right and the government exiled her. Many of the letters written by Bangladeshis in Bangladesh as well as overseas were particularly critical of FEER article. Now it could be seen as an attempt to present a secular and tolerant face to the world for pragmatic reason on the part of those letter writers who were embarrassed to be viewed as fundamentalists. When the leader of the opposition, in her various overseas speech engagements termed the present government as an associate of religious right Jaamat-i-Islami etc. she was widely criticized in Bangladesh for her seemingly “unpatriotic utterances”. Many Bangladeshi intellectuals tried to present a more tolerant Islamic face of Bangladesh.

Why does Bangladesh present this Janus-like face? On the one hand religion, which for the majority is Islam, remains central, yet there is a tendency to present a secular face, at least, internationally. One writer of a letter to the popular English Daily, *The Daily Star* while commenting on the controversy over a recently mounted Arabic neon sign of Zia International Airport, Dhaka pointed out – such a move was ill-thought out and inappropriate under the present circumstances. Why does not this tension between Islam and secular nationalism in Bangladesh go away? Does the tension between religion and secularism continue to reveal deep ambiguities about Bangladesh’s national identity? This question deserves serious intellectual attention. But before proceeding with this question let’s ask: what is about “national question” that makes it so durable?

The durability of nationalism as a force in history is to a large extent rooted in the notion of national identity which has gained importance both in sociological discourse as well as in public discussion. The historically rooted social and political conditions in Bangladesh have contributed to a return to the pendulum like movement in the construction and reconstruction of national identity. Today secular, tomorrow Islamic and again secular, and now Islamic Bangladeshis as a nation seem to be unable to make up its mind. The swings of national questions, the construction and reconstruction can be attributed to the interface of local traditions and the global forces.

Bangladesh has the 4th largest concentration of Muslim populations in the world, trailing Indonesia, India and Pakistan. 87% of Bangladesh’s 130 million people are Muslims predominantly of sunni sect who follow the Hanafi school of Islamic traditions. Islam came to this deltaic agricultural land with the Turkic conquest of the region beginning in 1204. Religious preachers followed suit through the historical trade routes at the beginning of the 13th century. The religion became a mass religion under the official patronage of the Mughal rulers who ruled India incorporating Bengal (the precursor to Bangladesh) in 1576 until 1757.

There are at least four theories about the spread of Islam in Bangladesh. 1. The oldest theory, which Eaton (1994) calls “the Religion of the Sword thesis”, is quite implausible. This theory gives the state, especially its military arm too much credit in the dissemination of Islam. The puzzle that this theory cannot explain is: why Islam is more widely present in the rural hinterland far from the centers of power than in the surrounding area of the State power? 2. The second theory suggested that migration of Muslims from the Islamic belt in the Middle East to Bengal was the main reason. This theory emerged initially as a response to the notion that the majority of the Muslims in Bengal were converted from low-caste Hindus. In 1872 soon after the publication of the first official census, Abu A Ghuznavi proposed the thesis that the majority of the Muslims came from outside. Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee provided a similar argument in his book *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal*,

published in 1895. 3. The third theory that Eaton calls “the Religion of Patronage theory” that conversion to Islam was motivated by the favors from the ruling class. Again the geographic distribution of the Muslims is incompatible with this thesis. 4. The “Religion of Social Liberation” (Eaton 1994) suggests that in order to escape the repression of the caste hierarchy, many members of the lower-caste embraced Islam.

Although the conversion of the oppressed downtrodden classes from the yoke of the Brahminical domination thesis enjoys a great deal of popularity in Bangladesh, Eaton suggests that this is like reading history backwards and doubts the appeal for egalitarianism in the medieval Bengal. According to a number of writers, Sufi saints played an important role in the diffusion of Islam into the interior regions of Bengal. The influence of the Sufis can be found in the existence of the *mazars* in various interior parts of Bangladesh. The religious conversion resulted in a syncretic tradition in Bengal (Roy, 1983). It would be quite obvious to notice the differences in the practice of Islam in Bangladesh compared to say, Pakistan or Malaysia. Islam as practiced in Bangladesh is marked by a heavy influence of local cultural traditions. Much of the religious debates between what Islam in Bangladesh is versus what it ought to be centers around the question of the degrees of cultural amalgamation. For example, many of the secular minded Muslim women who would say their prayers regularly and fast in the month of Ramadan would also wear a spot on the forehead not so much to keep the evil away but after a fashion. It is only the puritanical Muslims who would label such practices as “unIslamic”. The puritanical Muslims would define Muslim practices in terms of their distance from those of the Hindus.

In order to understand the oscillation of identity question in Bangladesh, it may be helpful to recount, albeit briefly, the history of anti-colonial struggle in the Indian subcontinent. Nationalist movement in India was an unintended consequence of British colonial rule itself. The emergence of a predominantly Hindu middle class and the attendant call for social reform and enlightenment gave rise to the Indian nationalism. The uneven modernization of the Indian Muslims was responsible for the rise of a separate Muslim nationalism which justified the creation of Pakistan. Although the alleged differences between the two communities were exaggerated to strengthen the justification for Pakistan, the uneven economic development provided the infallible material context. The formation of Bengali Muslim identity, part of that process was based on a long historical legacy. The British colonial rule displaced the Muslims from the ruling/dominant class to class in ruins, economically decimated/declined, politically humiliated, the Muslims sought to maintain its cultural superiority and unity. Permanent Settlement of 1793 by Lord Cornwallis created a mainly Hindu landed class. Then in 1843 the switch from Persian to English further handicapped Muslims chances of social mobility.

There was no equivalent figure such as Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1774-1833) to pave the way for Muslim enlightenment in the early nineteenth century. The Muslim reformists came to the scene half a century later and were unable to confront religious orthodoxies at the same level as did their Hindu counterparts. For Ram Mohun Roy and later Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Hinduism as practiced in India and the social customs and rituals were deeply problematic. They were critical of their culture. The birth of the first wave of Indian renaissance largely left the Muslims out. The Muslim reformers once they appeared were more interested in purifying Islam rather than criticising various social ills directly attributable to the practice of religion. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1899) was an exception, yet rather than attacking the roots of problems, he called the Muslims to embrace modern English education which had revolutionary implications. His contribution to the establishment of the Aligarh Muslim University and his leadership pushed the Muslims out of their somnolent condition. Other social reformers such as Nwab Abdul Latif (1828-1893),

Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) and Delwaar Hosaen, (1840-1913) who was the first Muslim graduate tried to play a role in the emancipation of the Muslims. The later two were from Bengal. Delwar Hosaen's writings were little known until recently. His collection of essays written in English was published in early 1980s. Hosaen provides a fairly open-minded interpretation of Muslim backwardness for which he put the blame on the religion itself. For example, he takes up the issue of prohibition of charging interest which inhibited the formation of capital.

The Hindu-Muslim difference was given centrality in the political discourse in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The creation of Pakistan was contingent upon the construction of a Muslim identity that emphasized their "differences" with the Hindus. As the movement for the creation of Pakistan was gathering momentum, Bengali Muslims were mobilized to play a key role. The Bengali Muslims sought emancipation both from the grip of British colonial rulers as well as their local Hindu overlords.

Alongside the reformist movement – if it can be called movement at all – there were two other movements. One, a movement for purifying Islam, and the other was a resistance from below. The two important figures were Titu Mir (1782-1831); and Dudu Miyan (1819-1862). Their struggles were not grounded on religion as such, it was a clear manifestation of class struggle. There were other examples of peasant uprising against both Hindu and Muslim lords. There were little vertical connections between the Muslims educated class though tiny with the rural masses. The only mobilizing attempt was on religious lines. A Muslim sense of nationalism could not grow independently except as a mirror opposite of the Hindu nationalist movement. The national identity of the majority Muslim inhabitants of Bangladesh today reveals a similar ambivalence towards Islam. They seek to incorporate the beliefs and ritual practices of Islam, yet they want to maintain a certain amount of autonomy in their cultural practices.

The turn of events in the early part of the twentieth century, that subsequently launched a new movement for the creation of Pakistan, a "homeland" for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent, reconstructed the identity of the Bengali Muslims. The new category "Bengali-Muslim" was a product of history and the changing political circumstances. No doubt the political movement for the creation of Pakistan accentuated the Islamic aspect of the Bengali at the expense of the Bengali identity which was syncretic. The inhabitants of Bengal in the past were identified as Bengalis as were Punjabis as natives of the Punjab. The hyphenated new category, Bengali-Muslim, was a response to the expressions of the new political demands made by the sections of the politicians. The religious identity which was implicit now came to the foreground. The national identity of the Bengali Muslims was now reconstructed in opposition to the "essential" character of the Bengali Hindus.

While Bengali Hindus were painted as docile, despite such fiery leaders as Surja Sen (Masterda), Netaji Subhash Bose and others, and cerebral; Bengali Muslims were imagined as pugnacious, as if an inheritance from the days of holy wars from the Middle Ages. The result of such a reconstruction involved a process double essentializing. The Hindu-Bengalis as well as the Muslim-Bengalis were essentialized to a set of popular stereotypes. The national character of the inhabitants of the then-East Pakistan was a deliberate construction. Here one might make a distinction between "social construction" and "political construction" where the latter refers to a systematic, deliberate manipulation. The Bengali Muslims who lagged behind their Hindu counterparts in education, wealth and influence for historical reasons developed a double identity Bengali-Muslim. The English language Muslim weekly, Mussalman which was launched by the Calcutta-based Bengali Muslim elite to reflect the opinions of the western-educated Muslims in its first editorial declared: "Indian Muslims, politically and economically are Indian first, Muhammadans afterwards, and

morally...Muhammadans first and Indians afterwards” (Quoted in Sarkar, 1991:26). The Pakistan movement clearly reversed the sequence.

The Bengali nationalism was not independent in itself; it was incorporated within the penumbra of Indian nationalism. Bengali identity, thus, emerged primarily as a cultural force though contributing to the larger struggle of Indian national independence. Insofar as the pan-Indian nationalism was concerned the religious overtone of Hindu revivalism had to be concealed to appeal to the multi-religious, multi-ethnic population of India. The Indian National Congress emerged in 1885 as a secular party seeking to mobilize the Indian population. Its leadership as well as its aspirations were as much global as they were national. Yet, the Hindu undertone in the Congress could not be completely suppressed since that was the *raison d'être* against the British colonialism. In order to fight the foreign domination, the native lores and sentiments had to be revived and imagined. The deep ambivalence towards secularism and alternately, religion in India and Bangladesh today remains a heritage of the past. The Bengali nationalism that began to emerge in the middle of the nineteenth century created ambivalence towards the colonial rulers. The Bengali *Bhadralok* - both Hindu and Muslim - sought to emulate the British virtues, as they were awed and impressed by the education and civilization of the British, yet they also wanted autonomy from the colonial domination.

The construction of Muslim identity can also be seen as a devious ploy of the colonial administration. The partition of Bengal in 1905 mainly on religious line was done ostensibly to advantage the economically and politically weaker, but numerically larger, Muslim community of Bengal. The partition was disputed both by the Hindus and section of the Muslims in Bengal who saw in it a cynical plot of “divide and rule” policy of the colonial rulers. The partition was annulled in 1911 in the face of growing resistance of the middle class elites. During the years of the divided Bengal, Muslim League was formed in Dhaka, the capital of East Bengal in 1906 and a provision for separate Muslim electorate was legislated in 1909. The annulment created resentment among the Muslims and helped form a constituency that was receptive to Jinnah’s “two nation theory” which was the basis for the creation of Pakistan in the succeeding decades. Although the creation of Pakistan cannot be dismissed as either an accident of history or the manipulation of the self-serving Muslim elites, it provided an excellent example of a constructed nation. It showed that construction is not pure fabrication. There had to be some basis in the material and ideological circumstances historically formed that could be used by the leaders of the nationalist movements. With the help of hindsight, one could agree with Jinnah’s detailed description of the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims and, then could ask: so what? The two major religious communities lived in India for centuries with remarkable absence of conflict and animosity. Differences between the two communities remained unproblematic until the political need for differentiation arose. It was only in the fervor of nation construction, differences were problematized and politicized; minor differences were accentuated and amplified and substantive areas of cooperation forgotten. Invention of nation relies on both remembering as well as amnesia.

Yet, soon after the creation of Pakistan, supposedly a homeland, a sanctuary for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, Mr. Jinnah its founder downplayed the religious theme. In his speech as the first president of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, he declared: “You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state” (quoted in Ahmed, 1990:19). However, Pakistan has a nation-state, because of its geographical detachment had to play up the point of common religion as the basis of the nationhood. The movement for autonomy in

the eastern part of Pakistan led to the emergence of Bengali nationalism, which underlined language rather than religion as the basis of nationhood. The long-standing linguistic identity was at the basis of the formation of national identity in Bangladesh. The importance of language as a basis of nationality was recognized by philosophers such as Herder who maintained that “every language has its definite national character” (quoted in Kohn, 1951:432).

Both language and secularism became justifications of a separate identity for the inhabitants of Bangladesh from her very inception. Bangladesh emerged as a nation on four cardinal principles, which were enshrined in the constitution of this republic. Nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism were the four pillars on which Bangladesh stood. However, the political turn of events that led to the tragic coup d’etat in August 1975, which dislodged not only the rule of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the founding leader of the country, but also took the country towards a path of religious orthodoxy. Bengali nationalism based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity was redefined after the 1975 coup on the basis of political calculations (Murshid, 2001). Not that the new rulers were any more religious than the ones they replaced but in order to show that they were different, they began to pose themselves as the custodians of religion. Since 1975, the country has clearly drifted towards Islam. This timed with a global resurgence of Islam. The Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh also owed to the funds received from the Gulf states that began to establish links with various religiously affiliated political parties in Bangladesh.

It is interesting to note that Bengali Muslims too sought to maintain this dual-identity with all its ambiguities. The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 inherited this challenge of maintaining a distinctive Bengali-Muslim character which entailed an equidistance from both the manipulated “Pakistani” identity as well as the Bengali-Hindu identity. The Islamic revivalism, however, never assumed a strong fervor, it managed to whittle the secularist traditions which were essentials parts of Bangladeshi cultural heritage. Today, for any visitor to Bangladesh, it would present itself as a highly religious country. One of the in-flight “entertainment” channels on Bangladesh Biman, the national flag carrier presents recitations from the Koran. Other channels present Western pop music, and of course romantic Bengali music. In a rather coincidental way, it reflects the pluralism of Bangladeshi culture. In the Hajj season Biman gears itself up as if to face a national crisis when it has to ferry thousands of pilgrims from Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia. The same planes are filled with jeans-clad Bangladeshis returning home from the United States in the New-York – Dhaka flights. Islam alongside blue-jeans, and cricket is another patch in the multi-colored quilt of Bangladeshi culture.

There are a number of features that need serious consideration in explaining the growing influence of Islam in Bangladesh. The most important of which has been the growth of Islamic education locally known as Madrasah education nationally. In 1994 there were 5762 Madrasahs in Bangladesh with a student population of 1.7 million. Compared to 4.8 million secondary school students the same year the figure may not be as overwhelming as it looks, still it is a number that one has to reckon with.

The Islamic party won more than 12% of the votes in the election of 1991. In 1996 their percentage fell to 3. This is not an indication of their declining popularity. In the latest election of October 2001, the share of votes of the Islamic parties is hard to ascertain because as an electoral strategy they formed an alliance with Bangladesh Nationalist Party which assured BNP a resounding electoral victory. Rather one can see in it an acceptability of Islamic trappings in the political establishment. Clearly, a desecularization process has been taking place in Bangladesh. It has become a routine for the newly elected Prime Ministers to perform Hajj before taking over the new government.

The process towards de-secularization or for that matter secularization is not irreversible. The process is very much linked to the politics of the day. One political scientist by conducting a content analysis of the speeches of Khaleda Zia, the current (2003) Prime Minister and the leader of Bangladesh Nationalist Party reported that she began every speech with Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Merciful). In most of her speeches Khaleda Zia upheld the Islamic provisions incorporated in the constitution during the rule of Ziaur Rahman, namely by insertion of Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim; dispensing with secularism and substituting instead “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah”; (Maniruzzaman, 1992:209). Sheikh Hasina, the leader of Awami League in her speeches accused that both Zia and Ershad had rigged elections and used Islam to increase their appeal to the people. Sheikh Hasina in contrast promised a living, secular democracy (Maniruzzaman, 1992:210). Jamaat-i-Islami promised to build up an Islamic state strictly on the basis of the Quran and Sunnah. Its stance was anti-Indian and its attack was against Awami League for the latter’s secularism. “The secularists and the leftists were badly defeated by parties who espoused various levels of Islamic orientation” (Maniruzzaman, 1992:211).

The chances of the spread of fundamentalism in Bangladesh are very remote. The poverty and the backwardness in Bangladesh measured in conventional social indicators should not be seen as denying this country its rich cultural tradition of secularism which I think is a product more of local traditions, a combination of religious syncretism and cultural mysticisms than an imposition from outside. One of the errors in the perception of the Western media is to look for a particular brand of (Western) secularism in every corners of the world without any regard for cultural and historical diversities. If we take the issue of particularity of Bangladeshi culture seriously, the emergence of both an Iran under Khomeini or Afghanistan under Taleban-style Islamic revolution or a West-European secularizing trend are both equally unlikely.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONALISM IN BANGLADESH: REACTIONS TO RUSHDIE AND TASLEEMA NASREEN

The ambivalence built into the Bangladeshi identity incorporating Islam and secularism came to surface following the two controversies that ranged the believers of Islamicists against the secularists. The first controversy revolved around Mr. Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*. The second controversy involved the author Taslima Nasreen whose writings led to a major row in the early 1990s. Taslima Nasreen attracted a great deal of attention in the early 1990s because of her controversial writings. Taslima Nasreen, an anesthesiologist-turned poet, columnist and novelist has been both prolific and polemical. She has been treated with disdain by some, mute appreciation by others, and many chose to ignore her. Some of her writings have evoked the wrath of the so-called Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh to the extent that a "fatwa" has been issued by a relatively unknown group with a prize-money posted on her head. The outspoken writer went into hiding for fear of her life since the "fatwa" was declared. But this extreme move on the part of the "fundamentalists" and an official order of arrest was issued on charges of insulting Islam after an interview she gave to the *Statesman* of India on June 4 was reprinted in the *Bangladesh Times*, a pro-government daily in Dhaka few days later. In that interview she was quoted as saying that "the Quran should be thoroughly revised". From her hiding Nasreen denied saying that and claimed that the Indian reporter confused between the Quran and the *Sharia* and that she had recommended the *Sharia* should be thoroughly revised. Her

disclaimer did not satisfy her opponents. On August 3, 1994 she surrendered to the High court and was granted a bail and the permission that during the court proceedings the accused would not be required to be present at the court. No restriction was imposed on her travels. A week later the controversial writer arrived in Stockholm at the invitation of the Swedish branch of the PEN. The pro-Islamic political parties in Bangladesh were furious and brought out processions accusing the government of complicity and harboring the "apostate" writer. Now that the matter is in the hands of the due process of the law, a process that is known for its notorious sluggishness in Bangladesh, it seems the matter will be forgotten in due course. These two controversies revealed not only some of the deep-seated tensions between Islam and secularism in Bangladesh but also unwittingly the possibility of a reasoned dialogue between alternative modes of modernities. The secularists in Bangladesh agree with Nasreen's identification of the negative functions of religion in society, a source of conflict, disharmony, bloodshed etc., yet they will be reluctant to express their support for her openly.

However, as the irreversible march of globalization continues, we will not only discover how similar we are but also how strong and divisive are our economic interests. The print-capitalism did **create** nationalism in the majority countries of the world, in the same vein the electronic media is creating opportunities for various "nations" to see how close they are to each other paving the way for the rise of a global culture. The complexity of globalization is manifested in the overlap and contestation of cultural passions and economic interests. The feelings or sense of a transnational culture is, sometimes, an aspect of a globalism or cosmopolitanism. Tagore best expressed the cosmopolitan notion of nationalism, an outgrowth of Bengali renaissance. The poet in his own way championed the enlightenment project in Bengal and the Indian subcontinent at large. He wrote: "During the evolution of the Nation the moral culture of brotherhood was limited by geographical boundaries, because at that time those boundaries were real. Now they have become imaginary lines of tradition divested of the qualities of real obstacles." He continued, "There is only one history - the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one (Tagore, 1976).

As the principles of secularism seem to be on retreat in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the opening years of the new millennium due to whole host of local and global factors, the cosmopolitan secularists seem to be on the run. However, as a return to Islamism and anti-secularism leads to a sense of despondence, the very possibility that a reasonable, secular and tolerant political regime can emerge given the oscillation of the ideological swings provides a basis for hope. The enlightenment project is not off; it is merely on hold. The very pendular nature of things give us the possibility of a tolerant polity characterized by democracy and human rights, it also presents the threat of a turn to right, to intolerance and new orthodoxies. The swing of the pendulum is no longer dictated by the forces within but beyond the national border of Bangladesh by the forces of global political and ideological fault-lines.

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APPENDIX

PROMINENT PERSONALITIES

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772 – 1833)
 Ramkamal Sen (1783 – 1844)
 Sir Sayyid (or Syed) Ahmad Khan (1817-1899)
 Debendranath Tagore (1817 – 1905)
 Keshabchandra Sen (1838 – 1884)
 Rabindranath Thakur (1861 – 1941)
 M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948)
 A.K. Fazlul Huq (1873-1962)
 Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948)
 Jawharlal Nehru (1889-1964)
 Nazrul Islam (1899- 1974)
 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920 – 1975)

KEY EVENTS

1757 – 1947 British Rule in India
 1793 Permanent Settlement
 1823 Change of Court Language from Persian to English
 1857 “Sepoy Mutiny” First war of Independence – Marx
 1857 - 1858 First Universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras
 1871 – 1872 First Census in India which revealed Muslim concentration in lower Bengal
 1871 onward British government started encouraging autonomous Muslim leadership
 1875 Sir Syed Ahmad Khan established Anglo-Mohamedan Oriental College (was renamed at Aligarh Muslim University in 1920)
 1885 Inauguration of Indian Congress Party
 1905 Partition of Bengal
 1906 Birth of Muslim League in Dhaka
 1909 Separate Electorate for Muslims
 1911 Annulment of Partition of Bengal
 1920 Establishment of Dhaka University
 1947 Birth of Pakistan
 1948 Demand for Bengali as a state language was made
 1949 Awami Muslim League was established
 1952 Language Movement
 1954 Electoral Defeat of Muslim League in the Provincial election
 1958-1969 Rule of General Ayub Khan
 1969 Movement for autonomy
 1971 Liberation of Bangladesh
 1975 Overthrow of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s government in a military coup
 1976 Replacement of Bengali Nationalism by Bangladeshi Nationalism
 April 21, 1977 General Ziaur Rahman assumed the office of President
 April 22, 1977 amended the Constitution by a proclamation order dropping secularism
 May 1977 Constitutional provision banning religious parties was removed
 May 30, 1981 Assassination of President Ziaur Rahman
 March 1982 General Ershad removed BNP President Sattar
 1988 Ershad declares Islam as the State religion of Bangladesh
 1990 Fall of Ershad in popular uprising
 1991 Begum Khaleda Zia of BNP is elected Prime Minister
 1996 Sheikh Hasina of Awami League is elected Prime Minister
 2001 Begum Khaleda Zia of BNP is returned as Prime Minister