

Dreaming of a Golden Bengal: Discontinuities of Place and Identity in South Asia

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Abstract: *This article analyses five different representations of the homeland category “Bengal”. The region of Bengal was partitioned twice in the twentieth century and imagined in a multitude of forms at different historical moments. The article describes the conditions that allowed different territories and peoples to crystallise as “Bengal” and “the Bengalis”, and investigates why some versions of the Bengali homeland proved durable as others faded away. Rather than asking who is the real Bengali and where is the real Bengal, it investigates how particular identity categories become popularly practised and why particular images of the homeland come to be perceived as true, legitimate and authentic. It concludes that homeland categories are never fixed and finalised, but are rather always in a process of becoming, and are contested, reimagined and redefined as socio-political contexts change.*

Keywords: *Bangladesh, East Pakistan, geography, homeland, identity, India, West Bengal*

Introduction: Imagining a Bengali Homeland

Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomai bhalobasi: “My golden Bengal, I love you”.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1906

The independence of Bangladesh in 1971, and the subsequent international recognition of its sovereignty, was a major event in the history of South Asia and the world. During the 40-year period after the end of World War II, the Bangladeshi independence movement was the only successful non-decolonisation secessionist movement worldwide (Buchanan and Moore, 2003).¹ Bangladesh's independence

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heralded a new paradigm for defining “national identity” in South Asia, which did not conform to either the pan-Indian identity category that included a mixture of languages, cultural practices and religions, or the Pakistani identity category that was defined only in terms of religion. Instead, it was an ethnically defined nationalism that based its legitimacy on what were described as the common Bengali linguistic and cultural practices of the population, which transcended communal religious differences. One of the slogans of the independence movement was “*Banglar Hindu, Banglar Kristan, Banglar Buddha, Banglar Musalman, Amra Sabai Bengalee*”, which translates to “Hindus of Bengal, Christians of Bengal, Buddhists of Bengal, Muslims of Bengal, We are all Bengali”.

The creation of Bangladesh, and the acceptance of an ethno-linguistically defined state, raised still unanswered questions about the relationship between place and identity in South Asia. On the one hand, if Bangladesh’s religious connections with West Pakistan were not enough to unite the two as a single “nation”, then what prevented Bangladesh from simply joining India? The only reason the eastern sections of the province of Bengal were carved out of British India in the first place was to create a separate homeland for its Muslim majority population (Tan and Kudaisya, 2000). But if religion is no longer the defining characteristic, why should a Bengali linguistic and cultural heritage justify an independent state when other ethno-linguistic regions within India (Tamil Nadu or Gujarat, for example) do not? On the other hand, the independence of Bangladesh revived the debate about what connections the Indian state of West Bengal should have with Bangladesh. If Bengali linguistic and cultural characteristics do make Bangladesh a nation and do justify an independent state, what should we make of the 80 million Bengali speakers who continue to reside in India? Should they not also be part of Bangla-desh, the country of the Bengalis?

In the twentieth century alone, the territory of Bengal was divided twice and imagined in a multitude of different forms.² It competed with other imagined homelands of larger scale (India, Pakistan, South Asia) and smaller scale (Sylheti) to be the primary unit of political organisation. Today, what does it mean to say “Bengal”? Does the term retain any significance as a territorial unit? Or have the divided histories of partition created separate notions of homeland in Bangladesh and West Bengal that are distinct in terms of cultural, linguistic and economic practices? When people hear Tagore’s famous song today, what is the golden Bengal that is evoked in their hearts, minds and dreams?

Of course, there is not a definitive answer to any of these questions. Rather, there is a set of practices that create homeland imaginaries by reconfiguring historical narratives about peoples and places. None of these homeland categories is an ontological reality; rather, each is a socially constructed perspective on the world that is created through boundary making processes that define identity categories and link them to particular territories (Brubaker, 1996; 2002; Jones, 2009; Kaiser, 2002; 2009). Rather than asking who is the real Bengali and where is the real Bengal, this article investigates how particular identity categories become popularly practised and why particular images of the homeland come to be perceived as true, legitimate and authentic.

Despite the important role the idea of the homeland plays in the history of nations and states, it has been theorised by only a few scholars (Azaryahu and Kellerman,

1999; Bishara, 2003; Connor, 1986; Kaiser, 2002; 2009; Ramaswamy, 2001; 2008; Winichakul, 1994; Yiftachel, 2001). Indeed, particularly in research into the processes of immigration, the homeland is often reified as a fixed unit that provides a singular imaginary that is then transcended by diasporic populations operating in transnational space (Brubaker, 2005). However, just as the boundaries of group identity categories are not primordial containers for social processes, homelands are not simply out there in the world. The homeland is not a pre-given “thing” but rather is a territorial ideal that is iteratively reproduced to create its meaning and significance.

These citational practices evoke ways of understanding the world and symbolise sets of cultural markers, which resonate with particular individuals more than others (Brass, 1991; Kaiser, 2002). Defining the homeland is, therefore, imbued with power because it also defines who has the legitimate claim to a particular space. The process of linking a homeland category to a category of people occurs by excluding other categories of people from that territory. By naming the territory, citing it in narratives, and representing it on a map, the idea of the homeland comes into being, order is established, and power over the territory is exercised (Carter, 1989; Mitchell, 1991; Ramaswamy, 2008). While nationalist writings always describe the link between a people and a particular territory as a primordial connection and a historical fact, scholars have for many years questioned these assertions and instead analysed how these claims are made (Jones, 2006; Kaiser, 2002; Paasi, 1996). As Kaiser (2009, p. 23) suggests, the critical question is “under what circumstances do homeland discourses and practices work?”

This article approaches this question by investigating the history of five different versions of the Bengali homeland that have emerged in the past 150 years. Some of these Bengali homelands gained widespread acceptance, while others, after a groundswell of support, quickly receded into history. The first three homeland narratives are historical and are sketched out through nationalistic poems, songs, images and speeches. The final two contemporary Bengali homeland narratives are described through interviews with residents of West Bengal and Bangladesh at a time when the distinction between the two places seems as stark as ever. This perception is reified by the new border fence that India has built around Bangladesh since 2002, which further inscribes the boundary into the landscape (Kabir, 2005). The data for these sections emerges from 101 interviews and 15 focus groups conducted in Dhaka and the district of Dinajpur in Bangladesh, and Kolkata (Calcutta) and the district of Dakshin Dinajpur in India in 2006 and 2007. All interviews, except for those labelled [in English], were translated from Bengali by the author in collaboration with a research assistant in Bangladesh. The interview questions were not designed to find the “truth”, but rather to think about why people view these categories in the way they do. The analysis of each homeland imaginary also demonstrates a theoretical point about how these categories are created, reproduced and materialised through narratives and practices. The conclusion argues that these competing versions of the Bengali homeland never completely come into being; rather, the idea of the homeland is reproduced through an inchoate process of bounding that marks the limits of categories of people and territories.

Rescaling Place Attachments: A Single (Hindu) Bengal

The process of linking a particular identity category, the nation, to a particular territory, the homeland, is crucial to any nationalist claim. The idea of a homeland provides the symbolic connection between an imagined community of people and a piece of land that is described as being the place from which the group emerged and the place to which that group belongs (Anderson, 1991; Kaiser, 2002; 2009). This mutually constitutive process of national territorialisation (creating a spatial aspect to the national category) and territorial nationalisation (creating a national aspect to the territory) is used to justify the demand for an independent sovereign state (Kaiser, 1994; 2002; 2009). In most places in the world, prior to the modern era, place-based attachments were localised or regional (Hroch, 1985; Kaiser, 1994; Scott, 2009; Weber, 1976). Political and economic processes necessitated larger social units, and advances in communication and transportation allowed people to begin to imagine wider social networks and communities of people that share a common history tied to a particular piece of land (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1991). Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call this process the “invention of tradition” as localised practices are selectively reanimated as representative of the entire group of people that live in a larger territory. In Bengal, this scaling up of connections to places occurred during the Bengali Renaissance and the subsequent *Swadeshi* [self rule] movement as the homeland categories Bengal, India and Asia entered the political discourse (Chatterjee, 1999; Jones, 2006; Sarkar, 1973).

The Bengali Renaissance was a period of substantial literary growth and cultural transformation in Calcutta during the second half of the nineteenth century. Prior to the arrival of the British in South Asia, most people lived in areas nominally under the control of regional rulers, either Maharajas of princely states or Muslim leaders affiliated with the Mogul empire (Bayly, 1983). As Eaton (1993) suggests, the previous centuries were a time of agricultural expansion, political reorganisation and religious experimentation that made the region a space of moving frontiers. As the British gained firmer control over the area, they mapped, surveyed and conducted censuses of the new territories they acquired, accelerating the process of sorting peoples and places into particular categories (Barrow, 2003; Dirks, 1994; Edney, 1997). In Calcutta, as a standardised written Bengali was developed, an understanding of the larger area that shared a dialect of spoken Bengali, and more general similarities in cultural practices, emerged (Anderson, 1991; Basu, 2010; Chatterjee, 1993). Many nineteenth-century scholars recognised that the people and territory of Bengal lacked a written historical narrative, a lacuna that the scholar Haraprasad Sastri suggested made “Bengalees . . . a self-oblivious people” (quoted in Roy, 1999, p. 1). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a leading literary and political figure of the nineteenth century, argued that scholars should fill this gap by writing the history of Bengal. As he famously put it, “We have no history, we must have a history!” (quoted in P. Chatterjee, 1993, p. 76).

This early construct of the homeland of Bengal was expansive, and included a large portion of the Ganges delta in the northeast of British India (Sengupta, 2001). However, the concurrent description of the people of the Bengali nation was much more limited, as the characteristics of a Bengali emphasised the traits and practices of the Hindu-dominated elite of Calcutta (Sartori, 2008; Basu, 2010).

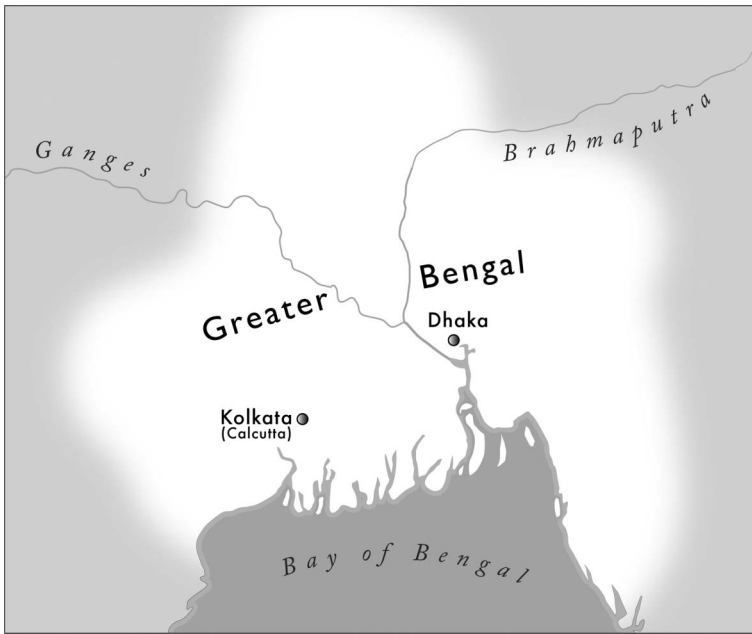


Figure 1. Map of Greater Bengal.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's song '*Bande Mataram*' [Hail Mother], written in the 1870s, is representative of this period.

Mother, I bow to thee!
 Rich with thy hurrying streams,
 Bright with thy orchard gleams,
 Cool with thy winds of delight,
 Dark fields waving, Mother of might,
 Mother free.

[. . .]

Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,
 With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen,
 Thou art Lakshmi lotus-throned,
 Pure and perfect without peer,
 Mother, lend thine ear. [. . .] (Ghose, 1947).

The song begins inclusively by describing the shared connection the population has with the land, but ends by defining the boundaries of the true people of the Bengali nation as those that recognise the land as an embodiment of a Hindu mother goddess (Bose, 1997; Jones, 2006; Ramaswamy, 2001; 2002; 2008). By casting the motherland in religious terms, '*Bande Mataram*' excludes the majority of the population in the territory of Bengal from the definition of the Bengali nation (Jones, 2006; Sil, 2002).

During the Bengali Renaissance, the debates about writing a history of Bengal and the representations of the homeland as a Hindu mother of the population were limited to elite communities in Calcutta and were not widely disseminated. These homeland narratives first entered the public political discourse during the *Swadeshi* movement after the 1905 partition of the Bengal Presidency. At the time, the Bengal Presidency was a huge administrative district that included all of contemporary Bangladesh and the Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Orissa, Tripura and West Bengal. The British argued that the partition was necessary for administrative efficiency, but it was evident that weakening the growing nationalist movement in Calcutta was of equal importance. As H.H. Risley, the secretary to the government of India, wrote in 1904, “Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in different ways” (quoted in Sarkar, 1973, p. 17).

The *Swadeshi* movement adopted the homeland narratives from the Bengali Renaissance to unite the rural population in the east with the urban population of Calcutta in their opposition to the partition. As Chakrabarty (1995, p. 114) argues,

This idea of “home” was extended during the course of the nationalist movement into the idea of the “motherland” where Bengal became the name of the part of the world marked sacred by the habitation of the ancestors of the Bengali people.

During the movement there were contradictory messages about who was truly a Bengali. The movement used the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity in the face of British oppression to initiate a boycott of British goods, and much was made of the cultural and linguistic unity in Bengal (Chatterjee, 1999; Sarkar, 1973).

Rabindranath Tagore’s famous song ‘*Amar Sonar Bangla*’, written in 1906 during the anti-partition movement, exemplifies the theme of unity. As with ‘*Bande Mataram*’, the song describes the shared connection the people have with the land as their mother, but it presents a much more inclusive version of the homeland because it lacks the religious imagery. In the song, the rural is presented as the iconic essence of Bengal and Bengali-ness, creating the connection between the urban elite’s political goals and the territory inhabited by the largely rural population. The Golden Bengal of Tagore’s song – in 1906 at least – was a dream of a single united Bengal.

Despite these inclusive overtures, the *Swadeshi* movement also selected Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s ‘*Bande Mataram*’ as its slogan, which was chanted at rallies around the region (Sarkar, 1973). The result was a mixture of rhetoric that proposed a linguistic and culturally based Hindu-Muslim unity, but in a homeland that was defined through Hindu mythology and through a movement that had mostly negative economic and political consequences for Muslims (Sarkar, 1973). These contradictions set the stage for the conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century as alternative, religiously defined homeland narratives emerged in the lead-up to the decolonisation of British India.

A Place of Security and Belonging: Scaled Up to India and Pakistan

In the uncertain years between the reversal of the first partition of Bengal in 1911 and the second partition in 1947, violence and exclusion in South Asia were

increasingly represented in religious terms. In the process, communally defined homelands for Hindu and Muslim populations became the dominant way of understanding the connection between identity and territory and were represented as the only places that would provide the necessary security for each population. One of the most effective homeland-making narratives is the description of the people and territory as a single unit that has been repressed throughout history while it waited for its destiny as an independent state. In this homeland narrative, the territory is represented as a symbolic home for the entire group that provides a sense of belonging, security, and a common purpose (Bishara, 2003; Mack, 1993; Yngvesson, 2003).

Although the 1905 partition of the province of Bengal was eventually reversed, it did begin to create the social and political divisions between Hindus and Muslims the British colonial authorities desired. While Hindu leaders in Calcutta were pleased with the reversal, Muslim leaders in eastern Bengal were disappointed that their briefly held authority was taken away. In his first speech in the Bengal provincial legislature in April 1913, Fazlul Huq (1978, p. 2), who would become one of the dominant politicians in the twentieth century, made the point that not everyone was satisfied with the 1911 reversal:

I would only remind the officials that they are honour bound to render adequate compensations to the Muhammadan [Muslim] community for all the grievous wrongs inflicted on them by unceremonious annulment of the partition.

These grievances played out over the tumultuous years before the 1947 partition. During that period, there were simultaneous efforts to unite the population against British colonialism but divide it into political constituencies for provincial elections. Sugato Bose (1986) argues that it was in this local, agrarian politics that the strong split between Hindu and Muslim communities emerged. Patricia Gossman (1999) also points to local political contests, but emphasises how representations of violence as “communal riots” created fear within each religiously defined group. The emergence of communally defined politics, and the growing fear of majoritarian exploitation, resulted in new versions of homeland imaginaries.

During the Indian independence movement, the most widely disseminated homeland narrative was of a single Indian territory that was repressed by the British. In this framing of the homeland, local or regional identifications such as Bengal were subsumed into the collective struggle for self rule in India (Tan and Kudaisya, 2000). Nevertheless, these narratives still drew on the same motherland imagery that was developed during the *Swadeshi* movement, but instead of describing Bengal as the motherland, it was re-scaled to represent all of South Asia as the mother of the population.

Despite the inclusive rhetoric of unity in the face of British oppression, the movement continued to use the song ‘*Bande Mataram*’ to rally support for creating an Indian homeland. The most explicitly Hindu references in the song were removed, but there was still a rather unambiguous connection between Hinduism and the motherland imagery, particularly when the mother was represented as *Bharat Mata* (Ramaswamy, 2001). Depictions of the homeland as a space of

belonging and nurturing are often gendered, with the land represented as a benevolent mother from which the population was born and by whom food was provided (Bose, 1997; Ramaswamy, 2001; 2008). Gendered motherland imagery is also used to justify personal sacrifice in order to protect the territory from outsiders who seek to exploit or harm the mother in times of conflict (Mayer, 2000; Rasmussen and Brown, 2005; Ramaswamy, 2008).

These religiously tinged representations of belonging left minority leaders, particularly Muslims, feeling marginalised by the Indian nationalist discourse (Goswami, 2006). In 1937, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the leader of the All-India Muslim League, protested the singing of '*Bande Mataram*' saying,

What did the Congress do when it got powers? With all its pretensions, it straight away started with '*Bande Mataram*'. It is admitted that '*Bande Mataram*' is not the National Song, yet it is sung as such and thrust upon others. It is sung not only in their own gatherings, but Muslim children in Government and Municipal schools are compelled to sing it . . . It is idolatrous and a hymn of hate against Muslims (Ahmad, 1942, p. 80).³

The Muslim League began to argue that the Muslims of British India constituted a separate nation and should be granted an independent homeland free from Hindu dominance (Jalal, 1994). The idea of a separate homeland for Muslims emerged quickly in the early 1940s, without a clear notion of what it would look like or how it



Figure 2. Two paintings of *Bharat Mata*. The image on the left is the most widely circulating but the artist is unknown. On the right is a 1937 painting by P.S. Ramachandran Rao.
Source: commons.wikimedia.org

would be organised politically. The 1940 Lahore resolution, the first formal articulation of the demand for a Muslim homeland, simply argued that:

Geographically contiguous units [should be] demarcated into regions which would be so constituted with such territory readjustment as may be necessary that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North-Western and Eastern Zones of India should be grouped to constitute Independent States in which the constituent Units shall be autonomous and sovereign (Huq, 1978, p. 140).

The eastern districts of Bengal had majority Muslim populations, and one argument was for the entire province of Bengal to be a separate independent state – note the plural “Independent States” in the declaration above – or a part of a single state of Pakistan (Chakrabarty, 2003). Another was for Bengal to be divided, with only the eastern Muslim majority districts joining the separate state, which is what eventually occurred (Bandyopadhyay, 2001; Chatterji, 1994; 2007).

The fear and uncertainty about communal relations in Bengal came to a head in August 1946 with the violence in Calcutta that surrounded the Muslim League’s Direct Action Day. The event was planned as a general strike in support of the Pakistan demand, but quickly devolved into violence that eventually left 4,000 people dead and recriminations on both sides. The representations of that event in the media cemented the notion in many people’s minds that neither community would be safe in a homeland governed by the other (Chatterji, 1994; 2007; Gossman, 1999). The communally framed violence and fear that characterised the lead-up to the 1947 partition resulted in the feeling that the only homelands that could provide the necessary safety and security were divided, religiously defined territories.

A Functional Cultural, Economic, Political Unit: United Bengal

Although the idea of separate Muslim and Hindu homelands captured the public’s imagination in the years before the 1947 partition, in some political circles in Calcutta it was actively resisted (Chakrabarty, 2003). In addition to symbolic historical claims of a connection between the people and the territory that creates a place of security and belonging, many homeland narratives describe the territory as a longstanding functional economic or political unit. The homeland is represented as a place that was already operating as a separate closed system even though it was not officially an independent state. The idea that Bengal was a single economic and political unit was used in the months before the 1947 partition, and during the 1971 Bangladeshi independence movement, to pursue an alternative homeland narrative that included all of the people who lived in the region as members of the Bengali nation.

Early in 1947, when it became clear that some form of partition was likely, many of the major political leaders in Calcutta, both Hindu and Muslim, proposed the creation of a separate Bengali state that would be independent of both India and Pakistan (Chakrabarty, 2003; Murshid, 2001). H.S. Suhrawardy, the premier of the Bengal Assembly and the strongest proponent of what came to be known as “the United Bengal Scheme”, sought “an independent, undivided and sovereign Bengal



Figure 3. Map of 1947 Partition.

in a divided India as a separate dominion” because Bengal needed “economic integrity, mutual reliance” for “a strong workable state” (quoted in Chakrabarty, 2003, p. 195). The supporters of the United Bengal Scheme, who included prominent Hindu leaders Sarat Bose and K.S. Roy, insisted that the region was a functional economic unit that would be devastated and substantially weakened if divided. Their argument was that the ports and mills of Calcutta were completely dependent upon the fertile agricultural production of eastern Bengal to provide the raw materials, primarily jute, for processing and export. If that connection was broken, the economies of both sides would suffer, as was borne out in the aftermath of the 1947 partition.

Although the United Bengal Scheme was supported by some political leaders in Calcutta, it was resisted by the Indian Congress Party. The Congress leadership, influenced by the communal riots that had swept Calcutta in 1946, was concerned about the treatment of a large Hindu minority that would reside in an independent Bengal (Chatterjee, 1999). The scheme never gained popular support and Suhrawardy lamented its failure in June 1947:

Nobody can be happy that the march of events has divided the Bengalee people... Perhaps a time may come when the realization of a common language and common outlook and the necessity of a common economic development may again bring the two parts together (quoted in Chakrabarty, 2003, p. 211).

Despite the concerted effort of these politicians, the divided rhetoric of communal homelands seized the public imagination and the 1947 partition of the province of Bengal occurred.

In the newly created East Pakistan, however, the idea of Pakistan as a single homeland for Muslim populations dissolved as quickly as it had materialised. From the outset, political power in Pakistan was maintained in the western half, although the majority of the population was in the east (Jahan, 1972). In addition to the perception of political and economic exploitation, the attempt in the early 1950s to make Urdu the only official state language of Pakistan, despite Bengali being the most widely spoken language, spread fears of cultural subjugation. On 21 February 1952, at a protest against Urdu as the national language, several Dhaka University students were killed by the police, which symbolically began the Bangladeshi independence movement (Jahan, 1972). The students were hailed as martyrs who were willing to sacrifice their own lives for their mother tongue and motherland (Murshid, 2001).

In a speech on 15 February 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the main political leader of the independence movement, described the events of 1952 as the symbolic beginning of the struggle to create an independent Bengali homeland:

The movement of 1952 was not only a movement for language but also for the establishment of social, economic, cultural and political rights of the people of Bangladesh... Bengalee nationalism is a great force today. The Bengalees have awakened and no power on earth can any longer suppress or exploit them (Rahman, 1972, pp. 58–59).

The Bangladeshi independence movement, which began primarily as an effort to gain greater autonomy within Pakistan, attempted to eschew communal politics and instead described the identity category Bengali as a post-communal grouping of everyone who spoke the Bengali language and lived in Bengal (Van Schendel, 2001). The territory of Bangladesh was recast as the homeland of all Bengalis, as a space that had to be governed by Bengalis to protect their culture and their people from external threats. Whether the leaders of the movement truly believed this rhetoric is debatable, but it was deployed because it was politically expedient to create a united population to contest Pakistani authority.

Even the *Adivasi* [aboriginal] populations of North Bengal, who today are often referred to as “non-Bengali”, participated in the movement. In an interview, a 60 year-old *Adivasi* farmer in Bangladesh explains why he fought with the freedom fighters in 1971:

A: We joined because we had to free our country, to save our country. Many people joined for this. I have seen we have to save our *desh*. Our *desh* had to be

protected. Without us it will not happen. Educated and uneducated people, young and old people, everyone joined the struggle.

Q: What do you mean by *desh*?

A: When you say *desh* you mean [in English] “country”. I mean Bangladesh. That’s it.

Q: Does *desh* mean people or land?

A: But the people and the land are connected. If you say *desh* then it does not only mean country because in the country you need people. Because of that when we say *desh* the meaning is that the people and the country are one and the same. For example, Bangladesh means [in English] “the Bengal country” (Interview, 15 September 2006).

The independence of Bangladesh was the zenith of a popular narrative of a singular Bengali identity category that belonged in a single homeland of Bengal, irrespective of religious differences (Van Schendel, 2001). The jubilant post-independence period in Bangladesh also raised expectations of the possibility of reversing the 1947 partition, just as was done in 1911. Although certainly apocryphal, some people in Bangladesh tell a story of a speech that Sheikh Mujib gave upon returning to Bangladesh after being released from a Pakistani jail in early 1972, in which they claim he said “I return to Bangladesh with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow because the Bangladesh I have been given, is not the Bangladesh I dreamed of”. As with most homeland narratives, whether this actually occurred is less important than the ways it is remembered and recounted by some people.

The dream of reuniting West Bengal with Bangladesh was of course just a dream. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India at the time, had no intention of giving up the state of West Bengal and Sheikh Mujib was in no position to make any demands of Gandhi, who had just helped secure Bangladesh’s independence militarily. Despite these impediments, the national symbols of the newly independent Bangladesh emphasise the idea of a single united Bengali homeland. The country was named Bangla-desh, a term that had previously referred to the entire province of Bengal during the British period and which means land/country of the Bengalis (Dimock et al., 1966). Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘My Golden Bengal’, a song written specifically to protest the idea of a divided Bengali homeland, was chosen as the national anthem of Bangladesh. Finally, whether intentionally or not, the flag of independent Bangladesh was altered in a way that symbolically represents the idea of a united Bengali homeland. During the independence movement, the original flag was designed by Sibnarayan Das to symbolise a secular Bengali identity and homeland in opposition to the religiously defined Pakistani state (Hannan, 2001). The flag was dark green with a red circle and a golden outline of the borders of East Pakistan in the middle (Figure 4). The green was meant to represent the lush green landscape of rural areas, the red represented both the blood shed for independence and the rising sun of a new day for the nation, and the golden outline of East Pakistan was a reference to Tagore’s ‘My Golden Bengal’.

The official flag of independent Bangladesh, adopted in January 1972 only a few weeks after the end of the war, no longer has the outline of the territory of East Pakistan. Instead it includes only the red circle on the green background. A 34 year-old Muslim male union chairperson in Bangladesh explains his understanding of why the change was made:

Previously there was a map of East Pakistan in the middle of the flag. Sheikh Mujib said it was not necessary to keep the map on there and he told them to remove the map from the national flag. Bengal should not be limited to that map. I think he had in mind that West Bengal would come with us. I think that Sheikh Mujib was thinking that the two Bengals could be reunited in the future (Interview, 10 December 2006).

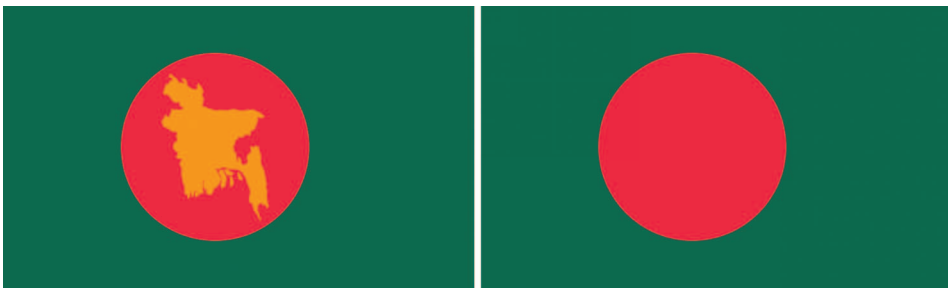


Figure 4. The flag of the Bangladeshi independence movement (left) and the official flag adopted a few weeks after independence.

Source: commons.wikimedia.org.

There is little evidence that this chairperson's view of Sheikh Mujib's thinking in 1971 is accurate – but that is beside the point. Homeland narratives are about symbolic representations and invented traditions, not reason and facts.

Nevertheless, just as the idea of a religious homeland, which was rapidly assembled before the 1947 partition, quickly evaporated in its aftermath, the narratives of an economically functional and culturally homogenous Bengali homeland that characterised the 1971 war period were also eclipsed by exclusionary rhetoric in Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh was founded on the principles of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism, and it seceded from an Islamic state, in the years after independence Islam became a contested marker of national identity (Feldman, 2006; Murshid, 1997). The colour of Bangladesh's flag is one site of this contested history. In recent years, the green colour of the flag has been reinterpreted as an Islamic symbol – green is the traditional colour of Islam and most Islamic countries have green flags – and has been used to represent the separate Islamic history of east Bengal.

Othering Homeland Narratives: The Real Bengal – West Bengal

The process of othering (Said, 1979), in which the characteristics of the other category are described in order to define the self in opposition to it, can be an

important method for representing homeland categories. In othering homeland narratives, the distinctiveness of the homeland itself is less important than the perceived problems with the practices in a territory outside the homeland. By arguing that those practices do not occur in the homeland, the category comes into being through negation. In contemporary West Bengal, homeland narratives emphasise how the population in Bangladesh drifted away from a connection to the Bengali motherland as Islamic practices replaced other traditions.

Although the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 appeared to validate a post-communal Bengali nationalism, there has been a substantial erosion of the principle of secularism in Bangladesh in the almost four decades since (Feldman, 2006; Murshid, 1997; 2001; Huq, 1984; Van Schendel, 2001). The process began just after the end of the war as Sheikh Mujib, in an effort to garner recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign state by Middle Eastern countries, released 35,000 prisoners accused of collaborating with Pakistan. After Mujib's assassination, the restrictions on Islamist parties were removed and they rejoined mainstream politics (Huq, 1984; Murshid, 1997). Since then, these parties have consistently resisted what they consider to be Hindu-derived "Bengali" cultural practices and do not recognise 21 February – the day the language protestors were killed in 1952 – as a national holiday in Bangladesh. In recent years, some groups have been linked to bombings at non-Islamic events, such as the 14 April 2001 bombing at a Bengali New Year's Day event in Dhaka that killed seven people (Feldman, 2006).

The successive governments of Bangladesh have also shifted official policies away from secularism towards a more overtly Islamic state. After Sheikh Mujib was assassinated and Ziaur Rahman came to power, he replaced the term "Bengali" with "Bangladeshi" throughout the constitution and removed "secularism" from the preamble in favour of "Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" (Banu, 1992, p. 148; Murshid, 1997). In 1988, General Hossain Ershad amended the constitution again to declare that "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic" (Feldman, 2006). Through these changes to the constitution, the idea of a distinction between the categories Bangladeshi and Bengali was institutionalised in the political discourse in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Van Schendel (2009) interprets these as competing narratives about place and identity. While the Bengali-ness narrative, embodied by Sheikh Mujib and the Awami League, frames itself against the mistake of the Pakistan period, the Bangladeshi-ness narrative, embodied by Ziaur Rahman and the Bangladesh National Party, embraces Pakistan as a logical step in the path to a separate homeland for Muslim Bengal. In an interview, a 48 year-old Muslim primary school teacher in Bangladesh explains:

Q: What distinguishes Bengali culture?

A: Actually, we are slowly reaching the end of being Bengali; now we are Bangladeshi. Our heritage was Bengali but it is at the end of the road.

Q: [My research assistant asks] Ok, then how do we know we are Bangladeshi?

A: Our religious fervour is slowly increasing. People are thinking more, and differently, about religion. This [Islam] is our best asset and last hope (Interview, 3 September 2006).

A 57 year-old Hindu photographer in Bangladesh has also seen this change:

Q: Are there differences between the two Bengals?

A: Culture and teaching have all changed. Their culture and our culture have become different. Many differences have occurred. This is a Muslim state.

Q: What differences are there?

A: Religious culture. Many differences have occurred in that. In an Islamic state, Islam comes first.

Q: But you are Hindu –

A: Yes, I am Hindu. But I am only a Hindu in name. We are a minority here. That which is the majority must be done. My family is Hindu. I am born into it. I am Hindu. Everything else is from here. My speaking, behaviour, otherwise everything is Muslim (Interview, 4 September 2006).

The disambiguation of Bangladeshi and Bengali, which were historically synonyms, in some ways reconfirms the original framing of the Bengali identity category during the Bengali Renaissance as only including Hindus. In that original articulation, Muslims were thought of as separate and referred to as simply Muslims or Bengal Muslims (Ahmed, 2001). The reanimating of Bangladeshi as a “Muslim from Bengal” mirrors this distinction.

In the West Bengal borderlands, the shift away from the secular Bengali nationalism of 1971 towards more overtly Islamic practices is perceived as a repudiation of any shared Bengali cultural heritage. The Islamisation of Bangladesh is seen as confirming the special connection between Hindus and the Bengali motherland. In the words of a 44 year-old Hindu teacher in India:

Q: Do you think Bengal could ever be united again?

A: [In English] Perhaps it is not possible because Bangladesh is completely Muslim dominated. No civic Hindu would be willing to merge with them. If anyone opined like this, it is imaginary. It is not possible. No civic minded Hindu, Buddhist or Christian would agree to merge with them because they are like beasts...You may contrast it with the case of Germany. Their cultural heritage is the same. When it was divided the culture, language, and heredity of East Germany was the same as the West. Their language, culture and religion were the same. They were same minded, so it was possible to be reunited. But because Bangladesh is comprised of Muslim communities, it is unthinkable. No Hindu will agree to mix with them. So it



Figure 5. Map of West Bengal.

is impossible to imagine. As long as there is the Koran in Bangladesh the land cannot be fair. It cannot be a place of civic people (Interview, 15 January 2007).

These othering narratives are increasingly dominant in West Bengal as the people of Bangladesh are described as disavowing their connection to the land and culture of Bengal (Saikia, 2003). West Bengal, conversely, is perceived as maintaining the spirit of the Bengali Renaissance through its continued respect for traditional (Hindu) Bengali practices. In this homeland narrative, Bengal increasingly means only West Bengal.

Language, Symbols and Sites of Memory: The Real Bengal – Bangladesh

In the public discourse in Bangladesh, there is also the sense that there has been a shift in cultural practices over the 60 years since partition, but in West Bengal not Bangladesh. The people of West Bengal are described as losing their connection with the homeland as they stop using their mother tongue in favour of Hindi and English. Language has traditionally been an important marker that has defined the Bengali identity category. The Bengali Renaissance was characterised by the standardisation of a written Bengali script and the emergence of a literary tradition in Bengali. The movement for an independent Bangladesh was also rooted in the protection of the Bengali language. In this version of the Bengali homeland, Bangladesh alone remains the true Bengal because the people maintain their connection with the land through their use of the Bengali language.

Symbolic objects and sites of memory play an important role in creating and reiterating a homeland category in the collective memory of a population. Particular homeland narratives are reproduced by mapping the boundaries of the territory, by disseminating the history of the people and land in school curricula, by visiting symbolic sites that memorialise critical events, and by romanticising the symbolic connection through songs, writings, artwork and performances (Edensor, 2002; Kaiser, 2002; Till, 2003; Williams and Smith, 1983; Winichakul, 1994). However, as Azaryahu and Kellerman (1999) suggest, symbolic spaces never represent a fixed and finalised historical fact but instead become the sites for the invention and reinvention of tradition. As the past is reimagined, these invented traditions are depicted on stamps, coins, flags, posters, maps and textbooks to reify new representations of the homeland category within the imagination of the population.

In contemporary Bangladesh the 1952 language movement is memorialised through museums, monuments and a national holiday that celebrates 21 February as Language Martyrs' Day. The importance of the language movement in Bangladesh is even recognised internationally by UNESCO, which designated 21 February as International Mother Language Day. In Bangladesh, despite the resistance of Islamist groups, 21 February is the most widely celebrated national holiday, rather than Independence Day on 26 March or Victory Day on 16 December. The main *Shaheed Minar* [Martyrs' Monument], located on the Dhaka Medical College campus at the site of the 1952 violence, evokes motherland imagery with a large column in the middle that symbolises the mother and four smaller columns beside it representing her martyred children. The original monument was completed in 1963 and was an important protest site in the years before the 1971 war. During the war, the monument was eventually destroyed by the Pakistani army and replaced by a sign that read simply "Mosque" (Imam, 1989). After Bangladesh's independence, the monument was rebuilt on the same site in Dhaka. The government also built smaller monuments throughout Bangladesh, often at schools and colleges. Apart from the different flags flying at government buildings, the language monuments are one of the only other tangible objects that differentiate Bangladeshi towns from towns just over the border in West Bengal. These monuments, performances and events institutionalise the perception of a unique connection between Bangladesh, the Bengali language, and the land.

The 1952 language movement was embarked upon to protest the use of Urdu as the only national language of Pakistan. In India, article 343 of the constitution recognises only Hindi as the official language of the country (Government of India, 2000). English is recognised as another language for official government business. Bengali, as a regional language, is only recognised at the state level. Residents of Bangladesh point out that under a similar circumstance, they stood up for their mother tongue and refused to accept the imposition of another language in their homeland. In the words of a 51 year-old Muslim farmer and former freedom fighter in Bangladesh:

Q: But why did people rebel against another language as the national language here and not there?

A: I have not seen any history of it there. We did it, they didn't.



Figure 6. Map of Bangladesh.

Q: Do people on both sides have an equal affinity for the language?

A: I think in terms of language our affection is greater. We have more affection for the Bengali language. History is telling us this (Interview, 25 October 2006).

Although the imposition of a non-local language can result in people rallying around the threatened language, as the language movement in Bangladesh demonstrated, often government language policies institutionalise and standardise languages by reinforcing a single language in school curricula, public documents and offices (Anderson, 1991; Crystal, 2006). While in Bangladesh Bengali is the dominant language in everyday life and in official transactions, in West Bengal Hindi and English are required for many official functions.

A 32 year-old Muslim mayor of a border town describes his experiences when travelling in India:

Q: What language do you speak with people in India when you are doing business?

A: Hindi, Bengali, and some English. In Indian Hili [just over the border] they speak Bengali. But if you go to Calcutta city you have to speak in Hindi or English.

Q: I thought they spoke Bengali in Calcutta...

A: Yes, some. But not so much anymore. Now it is Hindi and English (Interview, 23 October 2006).

Although this mayor dramatically overstates the decline of the Bengali language in Calcutta, the reality is often irrelevant in homeland narratives. What is important is the perception by people in Bangladesh that the residents of West Bengal are leaving their linguistic heritage behind as they imagine their future with the larger Indian homeland. Calcutta was the centre of the Bengali Renaissance and the official, standardised written Bengali language is based on the Calcutta dialect. Nevertheless, in this fifth Bengal homeland narrative, Bengal increasingly means only Bangladesh.

Conclusion: Pulling in Different Ways?

Despite, or perhaps because of, the linguistic, cultural and historical connections between the two Bengals, the political border between West Bengal and Bangladesh has been substantially strengthened and securitised in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Since 2002, India has unilaterally built a fence along long stretches of the border, including almost the entire section that divides Bangladesh and West Bengal (Jones, 2009; Kabir, 2005). This barbed wire fence is patrolled by armed border security forces from all over India who often do not speak Bengali. India has also built roads along the border fence and many sections include floodlights that are switched on all night long. In the process, the imagined line on the map from the 1947 partition has been forcefully inscribed into the landscape. As a 70 year-old Muslim retired teacher and politician in India laments,

I feel very sad that it has been divided at all. Just look at how much money the three countries are spending on security. If it was one, they could spend it on other things like education . . . The whole country could be like one family (Interview, 23 February 2007).

Despite these regrets – and the billions of dollars spent on weapons and security – the boundary narratives that justify the border fence are as strong as ever, and this man's opinion is not shared by many in West Bengal. The “settled fact” of the 1947 partition of the province of Bengal has resulted in divided homeland imaginaries that are indeed pulling in different ways, as H.H. Risley predicted in 1904.

But does it have to be that way? This article began by wondering what homeland comes to mind when people hear Rabindranath Tagore's song 'My Golden Bengal'. Is it an abstract image of a Hindu mother goddess that nurtures the population? Or does the homeland image conform to the borders, fences and territoriality of the modern era? Is it the outline of the country of Bangladesh, which uses the song as its national anthem, but whose shape was first imagined by a British lawyer in the summer of 1947? Or is it the city of Calcutta and the sliver of West Bengal that remained with India, which is a territory that lacks a clear logic except when understood in relation to its neighbour? Is it the unrealised dream of a larger united Bengali homeland? Or has the homeland category Bengal lost all of its meaning and been relegated to the dustbin of history?

Although this article has described five homeland narratives that were popularly practised over the past 150 years, a sixth elegiac homeland category persists. The two Bengals have been separate for over 60 years, there have been political efforts to differentiate the populations by narrating divided histories and futures, and the border is fenced and securitised. Nevertheless, everyone interviewed for this project, even those who had very negative things to say about the people on the other side of the border, described a strong sense of loss regarding the idea of a single homeland of Bengal. A 45 year-old Muslim male business owner in India articulates this sentiment:

Q: How do people feel about the division between the Bengals?

A: Of course there is pain. Dividing two countries means that one man's chest has been torn in two. We have the same type of pain that Bengal is divided into two. We are all part of the Bengali community, it started with our culture, our friendship, our love. I would like to say every aspect was cut off... In the middle of our motherland is a barrier. That attraction to our motherland, the attraction of the womb, to cut it is very painful. Each and every one of us has pain because of this matter (Interview, 26 January 2007).

The elegiac homeland narrative does not dwell on economic or political considerations, but rather is infused with a lingering disappointment that an inclusive homeland could not overcome cynical and divisive narratives that emphasised communal religious differences. It is pervaded by a sense of sorrow that brief interludes of fear were allowed to replace the multitude of connections that could exist.

In the end, of course, none – and all – of these homeland categories are the real Bengal. These divergent narratives about the true meaning of Tagore's Golden Bengal only exist to the extent that people believe that they do. They are, and always will be, in an ongoing process of becoming, a process of striving to reach an imagined and unreachable conclusion. Homeland categories are symbolic imaginaries and each different version is rooted in a unique political situation, one that necessitates particular claims about who has a true connection to the land. Therefore, although contemporary geopolitical boundary narratives are actively and forcefully creating separate homeland imaginaries that appear fixed and naturalised, they will always be inchoate, evanescent and contestable as new political realities emerge.

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Notes

1. During that period there were many other newly independent countries but all of those gained their independence via decolonisation.
2. Throughout this paper the identity category “Bengali” and the homeland category “Bengal” will be used to refer to substantially different representations of peoples and lands. The point is that none of these representations is the true category because the meaning is always in the process of becoming, rather than being fixed and finalised. Subsequent uses of these terms should be understood as such, but will not include repeated use of “scare quotes”. The area has been organised into many different political units over the past 150 years. In this paper, the relevant period-appropriate term will be used. “The Bengal Presidency” refers to the British era political unit that covered most of northeastern South Asia until it was partitioned in 1905. “The province of Bengal” refers to the political unit that included contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal from 1911–47. “East Pakistan” refers to the eastern sections of the province of Bengal that eventually became “Bangladesh” in 1971. “West Bengal” refers to the Indian state that was created in the 1947 partition.
3. The quotation is particularly ironic because today ‘*Bande Mataram*’ is indeed the national song of India.

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