

Searching for the greatest Bengali: The BBC and shifting identity categories in South Asia

Reece Jones*

University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Drawing on debates generated by the BBC Bengali Language Service's naming of the greatest Bengali of all time, this article investigates the shifting boundaries between group identity categories in our 'globalising' world. First, the controversy over the meaning of the term 'Bengali', which emerged in contemporary Bangladesh and India in response to the BBC's list, is investigated. Then writings and speeches of several of the individuals who were honoured as the greatest Bengalis are analysed in order to draw out the multiple ways they approached their own Bengali identities. In the conclusion, it is argued that rather than imagining the end of place-based identity categories through the process of globalisation, it is more useful to conceptualise shifting categories that continue to incorporate a place-based aspect, but in hybrid and contradictory ways.

Keywords: categories; ethnicity; nations; globalisation; South Asia

In Spring 2004, following the British Broadcasting Company's naming of Winston Churchill as the greatest Briton of all time, the BBC Bengali Language Service conducted a survey of its twelve million listeners to determine the greatest Bengali of all time (BBC, 2004).¹ Respondents were asked to rank their top five choices and in the end more than 100 individuals received votes. The top twenty were announced one per day beginning on 26 March, Bangladesh's Independence Day, and ending on 15 April, the Bengali New Year's Day, with the naming of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the greatest Bengali of all time. Sheikh Mujib, a leader of the Bangladeshi independence movement and the first prime minister of Bangladesh, easily beat the second place finisher Rabindranath Tagore, the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 and the author of both Bangladesh's and India's national anthems. Even before the voting was over, however, questions were raised about precisely who was eligible to be considered for the honour of being named the greatest Bengali of all time. At the centre of the controversy was the question of how ethnic and national identities are defined – essentially 'who is a Bengali?'

In recent years, the answer to this seemingly simple question has become quite complicated. In academia, scholars across a range of disciplines have become interested in the changing role particular places – states, regions, cities, 'homelands' and borders – play in the development, maintenance and contestation of ethnic and national identity categories in everyday life (Billig, 1996; Brubaker, 2002; Edensor, 2002; Kaiser, 2002; Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2006). The discourse of 'globalisation', which describes a world of 'unprecedented porosity' of borders where populations

*Email: reecejones1@gmail.com

and cultural ideas are moving across political boundaries at levels unseen in history, has provided a sustained challenge to the popular notion that place-based ethnic and national identities are fixed and eternal (Sheffer, 2003, p. 22; Newman, 1999). These movements of populations have resulted in what some scholars have termed a 'de-territorialisation', or the end of place-based identities, in what is becoming a borderless world (Appadurai, 1996; Mlinar, 1992; Ohmae, 1990, 1996). These changes brought about by the processes of globalisation have called into question the 'nation' and other place-based forms of identification as political organising units – as Appadurai (1996, p. 158) succinctly puts it: 'We need to think ourselves beyond the nation.'

But do we? Despite all of the pronouncements of their death, the resonance of discourses that appeal to place-based group identity categories does not appear to be waning in the contemporary world. In many places, political borders and social boundaries often appear to be growing stronger rather than disappearing (Newman, 2005; Newman & Paasi, 1998). Individuals around the world, from Palestine to Sri Lanka, are heeding the call to defend their 'homelands' from outside influence, and many people even appear willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause (Anderson, 1991; Flint, 2005; Jones, 2006; Kaiser, 2002; Pape, 2003).

In this article, the changing role of places in contemporary ethnic and national social affiliations will be investigated by analysing the controversy over the meaning of the category 'Bengali' that was generated by the BBC's naming of the greatest Bengali of all time. The conflicting and disparate views expressed about the meaning of the term 'Bengali' reveal the imprecise and flexible nature of socially constructed categories such as 'nation' and 'ethnicity'. It is argued, following Brubaker, that instead of understanding ethnicities and nations as things-in-the-world, they should be thought of as perspectives-on-the-world that are constantly in the process of becoming (Brubaker, 1996, 2002; Brubaker et al., 2004; Hage, 1996; Rose, 2002). These categories are narrated, performed and enacted in daily life as they are contested, redefined and subverted (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2006). At the same time, however, this article argues that even while the specific appeals to place-based identity categories change over time, the need to anchor these social affiliations in places appears to be constant.

The next section will introduce the main questions about ethnicity and nation that emerged in response to the BBC's list and then will provide geographical and historical context to the debate. The third section will investigate the contemporary controversy more thoroughly by analysing several aspects of the debate that were raised in opinion columns, articles and letters to the editor from English-language regional newspapers and letters posted in online discussion forums.² In the fourth section, writings and speeches of individuals who were honoured by the BBC as the greatest Bengalis of all time will be considered in order to map out the multiple and contradictory ways the term 'Bengali' has been used historically.³ In the conclusion, rather than imagining, as Appadurai (1996) and others have, a future when identity is completely de-territorialised and place-based attachments will cease to be important, it is argued that the conflicting and multiple roles place plays in the meanings of the term 'Bengali' demonstrates that people will continue to identify strongly with places, but in ways that can be contested, shifted and redefined over time.

Is a Bangladeshi a Bengali?

When the BBC Bengali language service announced its intention to name the greatest Bengali of all time there was a long list of potential candidates to be considered. In addition to Sheik Mujib and Rabindranath Tagore, a few of the other more prominent possibilities were Amartya Sen, the scholar and author who was the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics, Satyajit Ray, the film director who won the 1992 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Lifetime Achievement Award (Oscar), Subhas Chandra Bose, a militant Indian independence leader and a colleague of Mahatma Gandhi who was the president of the Indian National Congress in 1937 and 1939, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh who wrote extensively against colonialism and repression.⁴ In the end, none of these individuals were selected as the greatest Bengali of all time, with Amartya Sen finishing fourteenth, Satyajit Ray thirteenth, Subhas Chandra Bose fifth, and Kazi Nazrul Islam a distant third to Rabindranath Tagore and Sheikh Mujib. However, as people began to debate the possible contenders, substantial disagreement emerged over who was even eligible to be considered for the honour. As these differing views were expressed in regional newspapers and online discussion forums, it became clear that there was anything but consensus about what it meant to be a Bengali.

Initially, some writers argued there was a fundamental difference between a resident of the independent country of Bangladesh and a resident of the Indian state of West Bengal. This letter summarises that concern regarding the use of the term 'Bengali':

The BBC should be clear and definite about using the term 'Bengalee' for the people of Bangladesh. West Bengal ... is simply one of the many provinces of India. The people of West Bengal are known as Bengalee like the people of the province of Gujarat are known as Gujarati. ... Moreover, the nationality of the people of West Bengal is Indian and not 'Bengalee'. ... [I]t is better that the people of Bangladesh may be known as Bangladeshi, instead of Bengalee. (*The Daily Star*, 22 March 2004)

This writer feels confident that the state you live in defines your identity, which means that a resident of Bangladesh should be considered a Bangladeshi and not a Bengali. Often arguments along these lines utilise the logic of the nation-state ideal, which posits that each nation should have its own state and that within each state there should be a single homogeneous nation, to suggest that there is a fundamental difference between being a Bangladeshi and being a Bengali (Gellner, 1983). Despite widespread nationalising efforts by states around the world, this idealised version of the homogeneous nation-state is still far from a reality (Connor, 1990).

The responses to this perspective argued that nationality and ethnicity should be considered separately. The following letter, from a resident of Bangladesh, is representative of that position:

We are Bengali that is our ethnicity. We are Bangladeshi that is our nationality. ... [T]here must be something unique about a person's language, culture, societal beliefs that, together, constitute an inalienable bond, which we call 'ethnicity'. Because of this bond ... we are Bengali. And so are the people of West Bengal. We speak in the same language, we follow similar customs, we look quite similar. But for our religions ... I see no difference between a Bengali from Bangladesh and a Bengali from West Bengal. Yes, they are Indian. And we are Bangladeshi. But so what? (*The New Nation*, 13 April 2004)

These initial arguments about the precise meaning of the term ‘Bengali’ expose two important unresolved issues – the legacy of British colonialism and the role of religion in politics and society – in contemporary South Asia. Colonialism and religion have both had a profound impact on contemporary social affiliations, and their historical and geographical consequences must be considered in order to begin to understand the contingency of these debates (Chatterjee, 1986, 1993, 1997; Chatterji, 1994; Datta, 1999; Gossman, 1999; Jones 2006, 2007).

The fact that the British-run BBC, and not a local or regional organisation, felt the need to name the greatest Bengali of all time is telling. Throughout the colonial period, the British attempted to map, categorise and organise all of their holdings in South Asia (Edney, 1997; Barrow, 2003). By developing a system that explained, or at least accounted for, the vast physical, religious and cultural geographies of the region, the British sought to possess the knowledge necessary to govern it (Dirks, 1994; Foucault, 1971). This massive task was carried out by conducting cartographic surveys of British India, such as the trigonometric survey of the 1840s, and through population censuses, which they began in 1871 (Edney, 1997).

The long-term colonial presence in the district of Bengal resulted in a particularly strong influence on the political and cultural organisation of the area (Chatterjee, 1986). The region of Bengal was the first area in South Asia to be colonised by the British in 1757, and Calcutta was the colonial capital from the late eighteenth century until 1911. Beyond the categorisation of the populations carried out by the British, the most obvious legacy of the British colonial period are the political boundaries that still divide South Asia into several independent states along what were meant to be religious lines (Figure 1).

The British partitioned the region of Bengal twice during the colonial period, once in 1905 in an attempt to weaken a Hindu-led nationalist movement and again in 1947 as they left South Asia (Sarker, 1973; Chatterjee, 1997). The second partition awarded what is today Bangladesh to the newly independent state of Pakistan based on the argument that common religious beliefs made the people of the two places a nation (Anisuzzaman, 1993; Jalal, 1985). After massive movements of populations across the border, and substantial loss of life, the leaders of Pakistan were left with an unwieldy alliance that included two pieces of land divided by a thousand miles of hostile Indian territory. The pairing only lasted 24 years and, in 1971, after a bloody war with West Pakistani forces, Bangladesh gained its independence by rallying populations with linguistic and ethnic nationalism (Jahan, 1972; Zaheer, 1994). Today, the independent state of Bangladesh is the home to only about two-thirds of the world’s 250 million Bengali speakers.⁵ The majority of the rest live across the border in India, in the state of West Bengal.⁶

Although the term ‘Bengali’ has been used for several centuries, it gained political currency in the nineteenth century as the British attempted to classify the various populations under their rule in South Asia (Sengupta, 2001). Before the twentieth century, the terms ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ could be used interchangeably to refer to the people from the administrative unit of Bengal (Ahmad, 1975). ‘Bengali’ is the English translation of ‘Bangla’, which refers to both a language and a people. ‘Bangla-deshi’ is literally the people from the place of Bangla, making it synonymous with latter meaning of Bangla as a people.⁷ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the British generally used the term ‘Bengali’ (alternatively, ‘Bangladeshi’) to refer specifically to the Hindu elite class with whom they dealt in

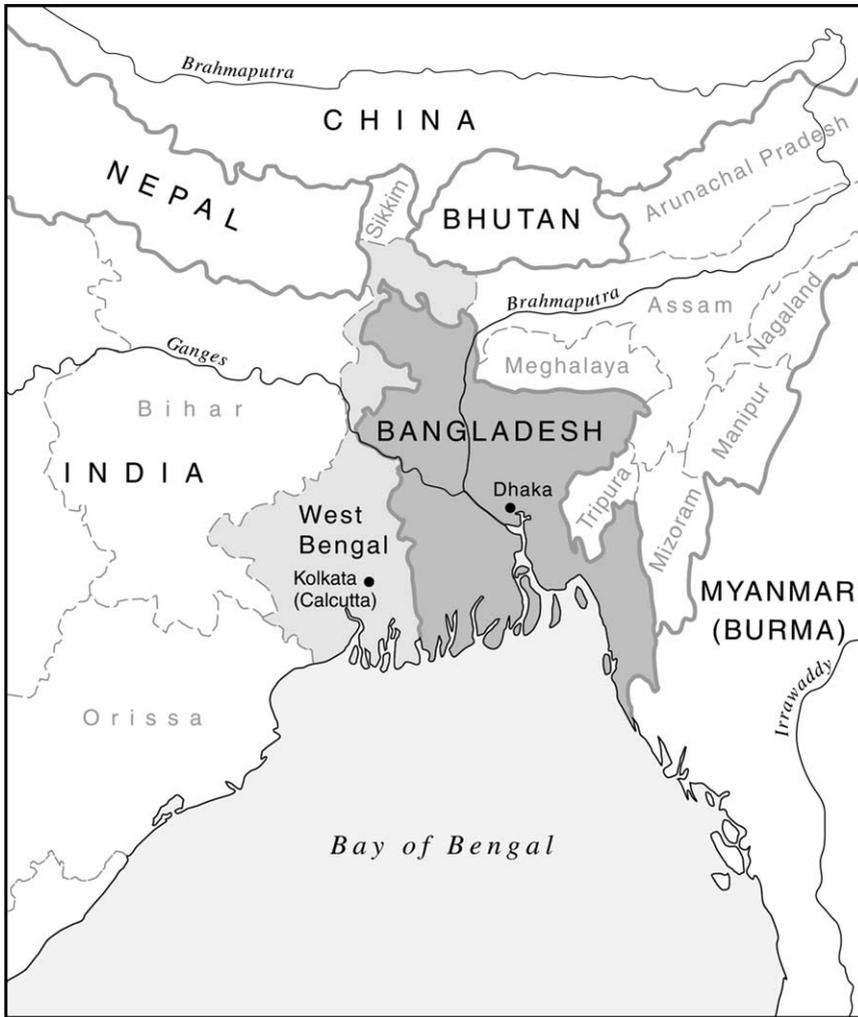


Figure 1. Contemporary political map of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Calcutta (Ahmed, 1981, 2001; Gossman, 1999). Indeed, until the census of 1872 it was assumed that the vast majority of the residents of the administrative unit of Bengal practiced some form of Hinduism similar to the residents of Calcutta. The 1872 census, the first undertaken by the British, surprised many by showing that just under half of the population considered themselves to be Muslim (Ahmed, 1981, p. 1). In the years that followed, most writings continued to use 'Bengali' for the Hindu populations, while the Muslim populations were called 'Muhammadans' or 'Musulmans' (Gossman, 1999). Contemporary writers still struggle over this difference. In *Understanding the Bengal Muslims*, Ahmed (2001) felt the need to justify in the preface the intentional replacement in the title of 'Bengali' with 'Bengal' when discussing the Islamic populations.

The history of Islam in South Asia sheds some light on this distinction (Eaton, 1993, 2003). In the late nineteenth century, Muslims were often described as a

monolithic religious community, but in reality many differences existed within the population in Bengal (Ahmed, 1981, 1990). The largest divide was between the *Ashraf*, the old aristocracy that were Persian or Urdu speaking and whose ancestry came from outside of Bengal, and the masses that spoke local dialects of Bengali and did not claim foreign ancestry. Ahmed (2001) has noted that the *Ashraf* did not even consider this other group to be Muslims due to their syncretistic beliefs. Although it is often debated exactly when and why a large portion of the population in the area converted to Islam, it is accepted that during the nineteenth century the beliefs and daily religious observances of the converted populations were often still very similar to their local Hindu counterparts (Ahmed, 1981; Eaton, 1993; O'Malley, 1917; Roy, 1983).

The *Ashraf* Muslims, those who could trace their ancestry outside of Bengal, probably made up less than 2% of the total Muslim population (Ahmed, 1981). However, because west Asia was perceived to have a more authentic Islamic heritage, and because Arabic, Persian and Urdu were considered to be more Islamic languages than Bengali, as a Muslim it was desirable to trace one's lineage outside of Bengal and to speak one of those languages. Consequently, the nineteenth-century revivalist movements that sought to purify Islam in Bengal created a sharp increase in the number of people claiming foreign ancestry as Syeds, Sheikhs, Mughals and Pathaans (Ahmed, 1981).

Given the foreign origins of Islam, the pan-Islamic aspirations of many members of the Islamic population in the region and the disavowal of local roots by many Muslims in attempts to become more Islamic, it is not surprising that members of the Hindu population often described their community as the true children of the land of Bengal and as the authentic Bengalis. The writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the rhetoric of the *Swadeshi* movement (1905–1911), which attempted to overturn the first partition of Bengal, both used a Hindu mother goddess, who protects the Hindus of Bengal as her children, to symbolise the land of Bengal (Chatterji, 1992 [1882]; Ghose, 1920; Pal, 1911). At the same time, the early nationalist movements in Bengal recognised that the Islamic populations were mostly converts and often attempted to include them in the movements with the underlying assumption that they would eventually accept their true religion and roots in Hindu culture (Ghose, 1947; Bose, 1997). Aurobindo Ghose, a leader of the *Swadeshi* movement argued that: 'The vast mass of Mussalmans in the country were and are Indians by race, only a very small admixture of Pathan, Turkish and Mogul blood took place, and even the foreign kings and nobles became almost immediately wholly Indian in mind, life and interest' (Ghose, 1947, p. 86).

Recent scholarship discounts the common assumption that the Islamic and Hindu populations of Bengal have different histories developed through centuries of distinct, monolithic religious traditions (Roy, 1983). Instead, it appears that as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century there were relatively few differences between the daily practices of the two religions in the region. However, in the twentieth century, as these categories became important political tools, the ebb and flow of religious and ethno-linguistic nationalism did play a critical role in shaping political affiliations (Brass, 1991). The following section expands on the debates around the ethnic meaning of 'Bengali', beyond the distinction of citizenship, and demonstrates that contemporary understandings of the term vary considerably.

What does it mean to be a Bengali?

As the results of the BBC's poll were released over twenty days in Spring 2004, debates about the list exposed additional fault lines between ethnic, linguistic and religious definitions of the category 'Bengali'. There was substantial controversy, for example, about how to consider people who were either born outside of Bengal or those who were born in Bengal, but whose ancestors were indisputably from elsewhere. One resident of Bangladesh made the point that the last leader of 'independent Bengal', before the arrival of the British, should have been recognised on the list:

'I was surprised when [I] didn't find the name of last independent 'Nabab Sirajuddaulla' of Bengal. . . . Why is he not in the list of twenty persons? I think he would have been in the first three' (*The Bangladesh Observer*, 20 April 2004).

Sirajuddaulla had only been the nawab of Bengal for one year when his army was defeated by the British in 1757 at the battle of Plassey, which is generally regarded as the first time the British gained a substantial foothold in South Asia. His Bengali roots could be questioned because the nawabs were the local Mogul rulers whose ancestors were from west Asia. He was born in Bengal, but almost certainly did not speak Bengali.

In response to the suggestion that Sirajuddaulla should have been included in the list, several authors argued that he could not be considered a Bengali at all. These authors made the argument that language was more important than birthplace in defining a Bengali identity:

'It is shame that a Bengali thinks that Nabab was a Bengali. . . . By the way the word Nabab is not even a Bengali word' (News From Bangladesh, 23 April 2004).

Others, however, disagreed with a definition of 'Bengali' that was limited to only people whose ancestors had been in the region for generations and who spoke Bengali fluently. Instead, they suggested that a more inclusive definition of Bengali should include anyone who lives in the region and participates in the region's culture.

'What makes a person a Bengali? . . . Sirajuddaulla was born and brought-up in Bengal and he considered himself a Bengali and that, surely, makes him a Bengali (News From Bangladesh, 27 April 2004).

'If you mean by the word "Bengali" as ethnic Bengali, then Nawab Serajdulloh [sic] was not definitely Bengali. So was not Hussain Shaheed Surwardhy. If you mean the word Bengali as sons and daughters of the land of Bengal, then they were definitely Bengalis' (News From Bangladesh, 26 April 2004).

Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy, who finished twentieth on the BBC's list, was a politician in Bengal from the 1920s until his death in 1963. He was born in Midnapur, West Bengal, but his family also traced their ancestry to west Asia. Suhrawardy had an illustrious political career that included leading the provincial government of Bengal in 1946, founding the Awami League (one of the two main political parties in contemporary Bangladesh) in 1949, and serving as the prime minister of Pakistan from 1956 to 1957.

In response to these more inclusive definitions of 'Bengali-ness', others reiterated a more exclusive definition of ethnicity suggesting that one's ancestors' place of birth and one's mother tongue play a fundamental, and fixed, role in defining nation and ethnicity:

'Shiraj[uddaula] was born in Bengal to oppress Bengal in Urdu/Farsi language. Shiraj was not a Bengali – he didn't speak the language – he winged it. . . . By the way there were some English who were born in Bengal too' (News From Bangladesh, 27 April 2004).

Further responses pointed out that the surnames of some of the writers arguing for an exclusive definition of Bengali ethnicity indicated they also had ancestors who migrated from west Asia to Bengal, just like those of Sirajuddaula and Suhrawardy.

He makes a great mistake when he writes that Sirajuddaullah was not a Bengali. The majority Indian Hindus . . . consider[ed] the Muslim rulers of India foreigners because their forefathers came from Central Asia, Iran or Afghanistan forgetting that the Aryan stock of Northern Indians themselves were immigrants in India like the former. (News From Bangladesh, 3 May 2004)

Who is then a Bengali? With a name like yours [referring to a previous letter written by a Mr Khan], I would have to surmise that your origins are from the Pathaans? How then do you feel the urge to define who is or is not a Bengali? Wouldn't it be more appropriate for a 'true' Bengali to comment on Siraj's Bengali connections – if there is such a person in Bengal? (News From Bangladesh, 30 April 2004)

These exchanges, initiated by the BBC's list, highlight many of the different ways that ethnicity and nationality can be fluid and multiple, which makes these categories hard to define. Some of the writers suggest that the answer to the question of who is a Bengali might be that a Bengali is someone who lives in the region of Bengal. As others note, however, there may be a difference between someone who lives in the Indian state of West Bengal and the independent country of Bangladesh. Some readers think it is sufficient to have been born in the region to be considered a Bengali. However, others note that even though Sirajuddaula and Suhrawardy were born in Bengal, their ancestors were not. Given these arguments, what was to be made of a person born outside of Bengal to parents from the region? Are they Bengali? Other writers suggest a Bengali is simply someone who speaks the Bengali language. However, there are many variations in spoken Bengali and outsiders can learn the language, too. Also, there are people who speak Bengali, but live in the Indian states of Assam, Bihar, Orissa and Tripura. All of these debates overlook the populations that can trace their lineage in the region to times before the presence of Indo-Aryan peoples. Another writer points out the ancestors of almost everyone who currently lives in Bengal migrated there at some time. How long do you have to have lived in the region to be a Bengali? To complicate things even more, where exactly is Bengal? Is it simply where people speak Bengali? Or do the current political borders in South Asia mark the boundaries of Bengal? What at first had seemed to be a relatively simple question becomes extremely complex, which calls into question the utility of the terms 'ethnicity' and 'nation'. As the last writer notes, it might be appropriate to have a 'true' Bengali comment – if such a person exists.

The greatest Bengalis

If such a person exists, then the BBC's list of the greatest Bengalis of all time would certainly be a good place to find them. However, just as the contemporary exchanges highlight the unraveling of the meanings of 'ethnicity' and 'nation', several of those named as the greatest Bengalis of all time also had dramatically different understandings of what it means to be a Bengali. In this section, the writings and speeches of Swami Vivekananda, Fazlul Huq, Mohammad Shahidullah, Sheikh Mujib and Ziaur Rahman – all honoured by the BBC as greatest Bengalis of all time – will be critically analysed in order to compare the multiple, and often contradictory, ways they approached their own Bengali identities.

In recent years, many scholars have recognised that population migrations and diasporic communities threaten the perception that each state contains a single, stable nation. It is often noted that these movements of populations can result in hybrid identities that do not fit easily into any singular category (Narayan, 1993; Leonard, 2001). As Appadurai (1996, p. 48) has argued: 'The landscapes of group identity – the ethnoscapes – around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialised, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous.' Undoubtedly this is the case with countries like the United States to which populations from different parts of the world have migrated for centuries. Still, one might imagine that a country like Bangladesh, which has a population that the 2004 CIA *World Factbook* describes as 98% ethnic Bengali, could be the 'tightly territorialised', 'spatially bounded' and 'culturally homogenous' 'anthropological object' that Appadurai describes (CIA, 2004). However, not only does the contemporary debate over the meaning of the term 'Bengal' demonstrate that the Bengali ethnoscapes described by Appadurai are *no longer* tightly territorialised, spatially bounded and culturally homogenous, the writings and speeches of the individuals named as greatest Bengalis will demonstrate that they *never were*.

The work of Swami Vivekananda, a religious leader who finished seventeenth on the BBC's list, are representative of a limited view of indigenous identity, common in the nineteenth century, which included only the Hindus of the region. Vivekananda was a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and was famous for his speeches as the Hindu delegate at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Afterwards he toured North America giving talks about spirituality and Hinduism, and received a hero's welcome when he returned to South Asia (Bagchee, 1977). Vivekananda's writings often refer to the ancient history of Hinduism in the region and the importance of an Indian nationalism based on the people's common Hindu heritage (Basu, 2002). For example, in a lecture in New York he describes the differences between the indigenous, and therefore authentic, roots of Hindu spirituality and the foreign origins of Islam:

Wave after wave had flooded the land, breaking and crushing everything for hundreds of years; the sword had flashed, and 'victory to Allah' had rent the skies of India, but these floods subsided, leaving national ideals unchanged. The Indian nation cannot be killed. Deathless it stands ... so long as her people do not give up their spirituality. (Vivekananda, 1900, p. 7)

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, a new group of leaders emerged that challenged this limited version of nationality and argued for the rights of the Islamic populations in the region. A. K. Fazlul Huq, known as '*Sher-e-bangla*' or the 'Lion of Bengal', who finished fourth on the BBC's list of the greatest Bengalis, was at the forefront of this effort. Huq was born in 1873 and was involved in the formation of the All India Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906, which was the organisation that eventually succeeded in achieving the separate state of Pakistan for South Asian Muslim populations. He joined the Bengal legislative assembly in 1913 and served in that body for the majority of the next thirty years. He was also the mayor of Calcutta in 1935, the Chief Minister of Bengal from 1937 to 1943, the Home Minister of Pakistan in 1955, and the governor of East Pakistan from 1956 to 1958. Earlier in his career, Huq worked on issues that affected the Islamic population of the region, but in his 1935 speech after being elected the mayor of Calcutta he was more conciliatory and emphasised the unity of all the people of Bengal:

There are those who think that Moslems and Hindus in India live only to quarrel and cut one another[s] throat. . . . They say that the future of India is doomed, that these two communities can never come to common understanding. . . . May I say that this combination of Hindus and Muslims in one common endeavour [his election as mayor] is something like the hand of providence working out some good for our common Motherland. (Huq, 1978, p. 132)

Although Fazlul Huq participated in the founding of the Muslim League, for most of his political career he had a distant relationship with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the most prominent leader of the Pakistan movement, and did not associate with the League's political agenda (Jalal, 1985). However, in 1937, when the Congress Party refused to form a coalition government in Bengal with his Praja Krishak Party (PKK), he was forced to form a joint Muslim League-PKK provincial government. By 1940, as the leader of the only Muslim League government in British India, Huq was at the forefront of Muslim politics. Consequently, when Muslim League leaders were deciding who should present the Lahore Resolution, which proposed that separate states be established for Muslims in South Asia, Huq was selected. In his remarks before moving the resolution he said: 'Though I am leading a coalition government in Bengal, I am Muslim first and Bengalee afterwards. I will take revenge on the Hindus of Bengal if the Muslims are hurt in Congress ruled provinces' (Huq, 1978, p. 138).

In 1947, British India was indeed partitioned along religious lines. However, the multiple states that many earlier advocates had imagined were not formed and instead just two states – India and Pakistan – were created. The district of Bengal, with almost equal sized religious populations, was divided with the western third joining India and the eastern two-thirds becoming East Pakistan. In the years that followed, Bengali linguistic and cultural nationalism became the dominant political force as the residents of East Pakistan were increasingly marginalised in the Pakistani political process (Jahan, 1972). Fazlul Huq, writing only ten years later in 1950, criticised his fellow Muslims in West Pakistan saying: 'The gods of Karachi seem to be convinced that the people of East Bengal are no better than goats and may be slaughtered with impunity in any way they like. They think that East Bengal contains only milch cows and that the traditional Royal Bengal Tiger is dead' (Huq, 1978, p. 183). Huq asserts that a united Bengali identity, symbolised by the Royal

Bengal Tiger, is not dead and instead argues that the Bengalis, referring to everyone living in East Pakistan, will rise up to prevent their exploitation.

These three quotations demonstrate Fazlul Huq's shifting understandings of the meaning of a Bengali identity. In some cases, Huq denies any connections with the Hindu populations of the region and instead feels allegiance to a separate Muslim nation. At other times, he suggests that the connection to place is more important than any other social affiliation.

Undoubtedly politicians like Fazlul Huq are often forced to change their political views to match popular sentiments. However, even some non-politicians on the BBC's list displayed similar shifts in their understanding of Bengali identity. Muhammad Shahidullah, who finished sixteenth on the BBC's list, was born in 1895 in Twenty-four Parangas, a district in what is now West Bengal, and dedicated most of his life to studying languages. He received a PhD from the Sorbonne in Paris, and was the first chair of the Bengali language department at the University of Dhaka where he researched the origins of Bengali. In addition to his writings on language, he was at the forefront of the movement to establish Bengali, in addition to Urdu, as a national language of Pakistan.

In an address to a literary conference in 1929, Shahidullah described his Islamic identity as being more important than his Bengali linguistic heritage (Anisuzzaman, 1993). He suggested that the pan-Islamic community (Umma) was more important than local place-based attachments in defining identities. By 1948, however, in his presidential address to the East Pakistan Literature Conference, he argued that East Pakistani literature should be written in Bengali and that links should be maintained with the Bengali-speaking communities in India. He concluded by acknowledging that part of their identities were defined as Hindu and Muslim, but that it was truer that they were all Bengali (Anisuzzaman, 1993, p. 100).

In East Bengal, as the writings and speeches of Fazlul Huq and Mohammad Sahidullah attest, there was a fundamental rethinking of the association between place, religion and identity during the middle of the twentieth century. During this period, many people began to question whether religious connections alone were enough to bind populations together, and instead a common, place-based Bengali heritage was emphasised. At the forefront of this movement was the individual who was honoured by the BBC as the greatest Bengali of all time, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Mujib was born in what is now the Gopalganj district of Bangladesh in 1920, and in the years after the formation of Pakistan became a leader in the Bengali language and independence movements. He was the first prime minister of Bangladesh and served until he was assassinated in 1975. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, took over the leadership of his political party, the Awami League, and served as the prime minister of Bangladesh from 1996 until 2001. The selection of Sheikh Mujib as the greatest Bengali of all time is not surprising because he succeeded in the ultimate goal of nationalism: securing territorial control of the 'homeland' for the 'nation'.

In the months before the independence war began, Sheikh Mujib gave many speeches that questioned the authority of the government in West Pakistan and asserted the rights of the population in East Pakistan. In these speeches, Sheikh Mujib described an inclusive interpretation of a Bengali identity that essentially included anyone who lived in the region. In a televised speech on 28 October 1970 before the Pakistani parliamentary elections, he said:

We believe firmly in the equality of all citizens. . . . Mohajirs [populations who migrated from India to both parts of Pakistan at the time of partition] should be integrated into the national life so that they may become assimilated with the local people and thus enjoy equal rights and opportunities with them in all walks of life. (Rahman, 1972, p. 11)

Rather than limiting the term ‘Bengali’ to the Hindu populations, or those whose ancestors were from Bengal, Sheikh Mujib even included populations who had only recently migrated in his definition of a Bengali.⁸ In a later speech at the Race Course in Dhaka on 3 January 1971, after the Awami League had won an almost total electoral victory in East Pakistan, in front of approximately two million people, Sheik Mujib said:

Christians, Hindus, Buddhists should all enjoy equal rights with Muslims. . . . I advise the refugees to merge with the local people. After living in Bangladesh you are refugees no longer. You are all Bengalees. You are all brothers. But you must identify with the soil on which you live. (Rahman, 1972, p. 40)

After Bangladesh gained its independence, the country’s constitution was written with inclusive language that emphasised secularism and downplayed the role of religion in society (Murshid, 1997). However, in the years after independence, the political utility of unifying the entire population of East Pakistan passed, and more exclusive versions of Bangladeshi identity emerged, the results of which were present in the reactions to the BBC’s list.

Shahid Ziaur Rahman (Zia), nineteenth on the BBC’s list, also played a crucial role in Bangladesh’s independence movement by leading a rebel unit of the Pakistan army and by being the first person to officially declare the independence of Bangladesh in a radio address. He was born in 1936 in what is now the Bogra district of Bangladesh and was the martial law administrator, and later the president, of Bangladesh from 1975 until his assassination in 1981. He also formed the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), which is the other major political party in Bangladesh, and his wife, Begum Khaleda Zia, was the prime minister of Bangladesh from 1991 until 1996 and was re-elected in 2001. In the late 1970s, Zia made several changes in the wording of the constitution of Bangladesh in an attempt to redefine the meanings of the terms ‘Bengali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’. First, ‘Bengali’ was replaced with ‘Bangladeshi’ throughout the text. Later ‘*Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim*’ (‘In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful’) was added to the beginning and the word ‘secularism’ was replaced in the preamble with ‘Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah’ (Banu, 1992, p. 148; Murshid, 1997).

In 1978, in a speech to the central convening committee of the BNP, Zia described specifically how a Bangladeshi differed from a Bengali:

Bangladeshi nationalism means we are Bangladeshi. We have a different history. Our country has been born through a different process. Our traditions and culture are different. Our language is different, we are moulding it in our own way – we are modernising it. We have different prose and poetry; we have different arts and thoughts. Our geographical position is different, our rivers and soils are different. Our people are different. . . . [T]oday a consciousness has grown among our people, which is different from that of the people of our neighboring country. (quoted in Huq, 1984, p. 58)

Zia argues that the history, geography, culture, traditions, literature and even the languages of Bangladesh and West Bengal are substantially different. He is attempting to make an absolute distinction between the terms 'Bengali' and 'Bangladeshi', and clearly sees himself as not a Bengali.

Just as there was disagreement over the meaning of the term 'Bengali' in the BBC debates, the greatest Bengalis of all time also appear conflicted. In the nineteenth century, the colonial authorities, early nationalists and religious leaders, such as Swami Vivekananda, only considered the Hindu populations of the region to be Bengalis and viewed the Muslim residents as a separate group with foreign origins. Fazlul Huq and Mohammad Shahidullah both shifted their understanding of the term 'Bengali' and at times argued that Muslims constituted a separate nation distinct from the Bengalis. At other times they suggested that religion was secondary and all of the residents of the region who spoke the language were united as Bengalis. Sheikh Mujib went further to include everyone who lived in the region in the definition of a Bengali, even the non-Indo-Aryan populations and the Mohajir populations that had only migrated there a generation before. After the formation of Bangladesh, leaders like Ziaur Rahman began to redefine the term 'Bangladeshi' to give it an Islamic and national meaning that was separate from the ethnic connotation it had previously held. As the debate around the BBC's poll demonstrates, even today the exact meaning of 'Bengali' is still contentious and unclear.

Conclusion

By drawing on the debates generated by the BBC's naming of the greatest Bengali of all time and by critically analysing the writings and speeches of some of those honoured as the greatest Bengalis, this article has sought to make three claims about ethnic and national identity categories. First, by demonstrating the multiple and contradictory ways 'Bengali' has been used in both contemporary debates and historically, it has provided evidence to support the argument made by many scholars that ethnic and national identity categories are not things-in-the-world, but imagined perspectives-on-the-world. Ethnic, national and racial identity categories exist only to the extent that people believe that they do.

Second, in contrast to claims made by some scholars of globalisation who suggest that the messiness of contemporary national and ethnic identity categories is largely the result of recent trends in migration and communication, this article has argued that these identity categories have never been fixed, even in places and with peoples for whom we might assume they would have been. The term 'Bengali' seems to have had drastically different meanings to different people during the past 150 years – which is precisely the point. Because nations and ethnicities are not fixed things-in-the-world that have always existed, they can mean whatever people want them to mean in a particular situation. The term 'Bangladeshi' is the perfect example. During the colonial period, it was interchangeable with the term 'Bengali' and was used to refer to primarily the Hindus of the region. It specifically excluded the Islamic populations, who were perceived to have foreign roots. Today it has the exact opposite meaning. 'Bangladeshi' refers to the mostly Islamic population of the eastern portion of the region and excludes the largely Hindu population in West

Bengal. This incoherence in definitions is not unique to our postmodern, globalising world, but rather has always been the case.

Third, despite this flexibility in the definition and use of identity categories, it appears that places will continue to play a significant role in how people identify themselves and categorise others, but inchoately. For each individual, the precise meaning of a place-based identity category is different, and the location of the place shifts, but the need to identify with a place appears constant. This calls into question many of the underlying assumptions of scholars who argue that the changes brought about by globalisation will fundamentally alter the political organisation of the world. Therefore, rather than suggesting that territorial identity categories will become less important in light of growing networks and flows of people in a globalising world, it is more useful to imagine shifting social affiliations that continue to incorporate a place-based aspect, but in hybrid and contradictory ways.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Robert Kaiser, Kirin Narayan and David Waskowski for commenting on earlier drafts, and to David Kaplan and two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions in the final stages. Thanks also to Heather Francisco and the University of Wisconsin Cartography Lab for developing the map. This work is based in part on work supported by US National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0602206 and the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies. Any errors that remain are mine.

Notes

1. The BBC Bengali language service has been broadcasting in the region for sixty years. Due to its larger population, the majority of its twelve million listeners are in Bangladesh, but it also broadcasts in West Bengal. For additional information see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bengali/>.
2. The data for these two sections were collected from letters to the editor, articles and opinion columns from four English-language Bangladeshi newspapers (*The New Nation*, *The Daily Star*, *The Independent* and *The Bangladesh Observer*) and letters posted in online discussion forums (Bangladesh-web.com; News From Bangladesh). Online sources are becoming more common in academic research (for a commentary, see Madge & O'Connor, 2002). The selected quotes are not meant to be 'representative', but rather to demonstrate the contradictory and multiple ways people understand the term 'Bengali'. Of course, using only English-language sources limits the breadth of responses to those who are conversant in English. Although statistics that document who reads these papers, or who writes letters to the editors, are not available, there appeared to be a mix of residents of Bangladesh, residents of West Bengal, and immigrants residing in Europe, North America and Australia. It should also be noted that all of the writers in the contemporary debates and all but one of the greatest Bengalis (i.e., No. 6: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat) were male. Undoubtedly the perspectives presented here are consequently gendered.
3. In this section, textual analysis of writings and speeches of several of the greatest Bengalis was conducted. The individuals were selected in order to incorporate: both Hindus and Muslims; individuals with both high and low rankings on the list; individuals from different parts of the region; and individuals from different historical periods. The quotes are not meant to provide a definitive perspective on what each individual thought about the meaning of Bengali. Instead, the point is that the meanings are multiple, hybrid and shifting. Each individual undoubtedly had other perspectives. Rabindranath Tagore was intentionally excluded because his impact on Bengali culture has been widely noted and

thorough analyses have been conducted elsewhere. Historical dates and events without other citation were confirmed using the banglapedia – an online Bangladeshi history resource (<http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/index.html>).

4. The BBC Bangla Language Service's list of the top twenty Greatest Bengalis is as follows: (1) Bangabandhu [friend of Bengalis] Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, (2) Rabindranath Tagore, (3) Kazi Nazrul Islam, (4) *Sher-e-Bangla* A. K. Fazlul Haque, (5) Subhas Chandra Bose, (6) Begum Rokeya Sakhawat, (7) Jagadish Chandra Bose, (8) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, (9) Mawlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, (10) Raza Ram Mohon Ray, (11) Shaheed Meer Misar Ali – Titumir, (12) Lalon Shah, (13) Satyajit Ray, (14) Amartya Sen, (15) Martyrs of language movement, (16) Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, (17) Swami Vivekananda, (18) Attish Diponkar, (19) Ziaur Rahman, and (20) Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy.
5. It should be noted that Bengali, like all other languages, was only recently standardised. There are many dialects, which can vary greatly, that are lumped together under the term 'Bengali', and there are also ongoing attempts to either Islamise or Sanscritise the language (Anisuzzaman, 1993).
6. Before the partition of Bengal in 1947, there were relatively similar numbers of people who considered themselves Hindu and Muslim in the different parts of the region. After the partition, Hindu populations moved to India and Muslim populations moved to Pakistan, resulting in the current religious percentages of approximately 85% Muslim in Bangladesh and 80% Hindu in West Bengal. See Ahmed (1981, 2001) for discussions about religion in the region.
7. For more on the synonymous meanings see, e.g., Edward Dimock et al.'s (1965) *Introduction to Bengali* that continues to use 'Bangladesh' to refer to all of Bengal after the partition of the region into India and Pakistan (this, however, was before the formation of the independent state of Bangladesh).
8. In spite of Sheikh Mujib's inclusive rhetoric, the populations that migrated to East Pakistan at the time of partition (now called 'Biharis') are still not given citizenship in Bangladesh. The government argues they are Pakistanis and that all 300,000 should be repatriated there.

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