

Imagining “Bengal”’: Borders, Homelands, and Belonging in West Bengal and Bangladesh*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes 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 paper describes the conditions that allowed different territories and peoples to crystallize as ‘Bengal’ and ‘the Bengalis’ and it investigates why some versions of the Bengali homeland proved durable as others faded away. It concludes that homeland categories are never fixed and finalized, but rather always in a process of becoming and are contested, re-imagined, and redefined as socio-political contexts change. The disputes over the name Bengal provide a useful illustration to students of how place names are contested markers of imagined geographical ideas of homeland and nation.

This paper describes the contested and shifting meanings of the place name Bengal in order to demonstrate the importance of geographic name in control over territory. The name Bengal was first used approximately 800 years ago to refer to the delta area of the Ganga or Vanga river. The British used the term ‘Bengal’ to refer to a large section of South Asia running from contemporary Burma all the way to Delhi. In the twentieth century alone, the territory of Bengal was divided twice and imagined in a multitude of different forms. In 1905 the British first tried to partition Bengal into two parts to weaken a nationalist movement. It was reunited in 1911 (Sarkar 1973). It was divided again in 1947 with the partition of British India into the India state of West Bengal and East Pakistan. East Pakistan fought for its independence and in 1971 became Bangladesh, a name that means the country of the Bengalis.

The creation of Bangladesh, and the acceptance of an ethno-linguistically defined state in South Asia, raised still unanswered questions about the relationship between place and identity in the region. On the one hand, if Bangladesh’s Islamic 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

* This paper is an excerpt from a forthcoming paper entitled ‘Dreaming of a Golden Bengal: Discontinuities of Place and Identity in South Asia’ in the journal *Asian Studies Review*.

out of British India in the first place was to create a separate homeland for its Muslim majority population. 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 Bangladesh, the country of the Bengalis?

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 Rabindranath Tagore’s, winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1913 and is the interesting distinction of being the author of the national anthems of two countries (both Bangladesh and India). When they hear his famous song “Amar Sonar Bangla”, my golden Bengal, 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 but 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. Rather than asking who is the real Bengali and where is the real Bengal, this paper investigates how particular identity categories become popularly practised and why particular images of the homeland come to be perceived as true, legitimate, and authentic. As Kaiser (2009, p. 4) suggests, the critical question is “under what circumstances do homeland discourses and practices work?”

I approach this question by investigating several different versions of the Bengali homeland that have emerged in the past 150 years. Some of these Bengal homelands gained widespread acceptance while others, after a groundswell of support, quickly receded into history. In addition to a discourse analysis of historical texts, I will also draw on data from 101 interviews and 15 focus groups conducted in Dhaka and the district of Dinajpur in Bangladesh, and Kolkata and the district of Dakshin Dinajpur in India in 2006 and 2007. In terms of

geographic education, the case of the place name Bengal is a perfect illustration for students of how these categories are not fixed entities, but socially constructed ideas used to claim authority over a people and territory.

The process of linking a particular identity category, the nation, to a particular territory, the homeland, is crucial to any nationalist claim (Brubaker 1996; 2002). 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. This mutually constitutive process of national territorialization (creating a spatial aspect to the national category) and territorial nationalization (creating a national aspect to the territory) is used to justify the demand for an independent sovereign state (Kaiser 1994; 2002). In most places in the world, prior to the modern era, place-based attachments were localised or regional. 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 (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.

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 are ... a self-oblivious people.” (Roy 1999). 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!”

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. 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. These homeland narratives first entered the public political discourse during the *Swadeshi* movement after the 1905 partition of the Bengal Presidency, which was a huge administrative district. The British

argued 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” (Sarkar 1973).

The *Swadeshi* movement adopted the homeland narratives from the Bengali literary renaissance of the 1880s to unite the rural population in the east with the urban population of Calcutta in their opposition to the partition. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (1995) 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. On the one hand, a poem written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee entitled *Bande Mataram* [hail mother], which describes the homeland as a Hindu Mother goddess, became the slogan (Sil 2002).

On the other hand, 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. Rabindranath Tagore’s famous song “*Amar Sonar Bangla*,” written in 1906 during the anti-partition movement, exemplifies the theme of unity. 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 Tagore’s 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 (Sarkar 1973). The Golden Bengal of Tagore’s song—in 1906 at least—was a dream of a single united Bengal.

The years between the reunification of Bengal in 1911 and the second partition in 1947 were tumultuous. Many different ideas were proposed for what should follow British colonialism and eventually religiously defined states of Pakistan for Muslims and India for Hindus were chosen. The province of Bengal had roughly equal numbers of Hindus and Muslims so despite the shared linguistic and cultural history, it was decided to make the eastern sections part of Pakistan and the Western sections part of India (Chatterji 1994; 2007).

In the newly created East Pakistan, however, the idea of Pakistan as a single homeland for Muslim populations dissolved as quickly as it materialised. From the outset, political power

in Pakistan was maintained in the western half, although the majority of the population was in the east. Every time there was an election, eastern parties would win, and they would be a coup by the western led military. 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. The students were hailed as martyrs who were willing to sacrifice their own lives for their mother tongue and motherland (Murshid 1997; Van Schendel 2009).

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. 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. In a speech on 15 February, 1971 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the main political leader of the independence movement, 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 Bengalis. You are all brothers. But you must identify with the soil on which you live (Rahman 1972).

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. 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. Indhira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India at the time, had no intentions 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. Rabindranath Tagore's "My Golden Bengal" was chosen as the national anthem of Bangladesh, a song written specifically to protest the idea of a divided Bengali homeland. 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 symbolised a secular Bengali identity and homeland in opposition to the religiously defined Pakistani state. The flag was dark green with a red circle and a golden outline of the borders of East Pakistan in the middle (Hannan 2001). 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 politician 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 Bengalis could be reunited in the future (Interview, 10 December, 2006).

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. 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.

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. The successive governments of Bangladesh 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”. 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”. 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 (Murshid 1997; Huq 1984). In an interview, a 48-year-old Muslim male 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.

A 57-year-old Hindu male 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.

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. The reanimating of Bangladeshi as a “Muslim from Bengal,” mirrors this distinction (Ahmed 2001).

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 Islamization of Bangladesh is seen as confirming the special connection between Hindus and the Bengali motherland. A 44-year-old Hindu male 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. ... As long as there is the Koran in Bangladesh the land cannot be fair. It cannot be a place of civic people.

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. 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.

In the public discourse in Bangladesh, there is also the sense that there has been a shift in cultural practices over the sixty 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 (Basu 2010). 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.

The 1952 language movement was initiated 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. 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. A 51-year-old Muslim male 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.

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.

In conclusion, these competing versions of the Bengali homeland never completely come into being, but rather the idea of the homeland is reproduced through an inchoate process of bounding that marks the limits of categories of people and territories. 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 unilaterally built a fence along long stretches of the border, including almost the entire section that divides Bangladesh and West Bengal (Kabir 2005; Jones 2009). The barbed wire fence is patrolled by armed border security forces from all over India who often do not speak Bengali. India 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 a map from the 1947 partition has been forcefully

inscribed into the landscape. As a 70-year-old Muslim male 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 they ever have been 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.

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, the case of Bengal is idea for demonstrating to geography students that 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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