

# Paradigm Shift in Attitude: From Pakistan to Bengali Nationalism

**Murshida Bintey Rahman**

Professor, Department of History, Jagannath University, Dhaka.

## Abstract

The people of East Bengal played a significant role in the creation of Pakistan in 1947. However, just 23 years later, East Bengal separated from Pakistan and established an independent Bangladesh following a violent conflict. This article delves into the essential factors that contributed to the rise of Bangladeshi nationalism as a counterpoint to Pakistani nationalism. The primary aim of this article is to analyze the reasons behind the emergence of Bengali nationalism, which disproved the validity of the two-nation theory — a foundational concept that posited Hindus and Muslims as separate nations. This disillusionment propelled the people of East Bengal toward the pursuit of a secular national identity. In developing this narrative, a connection has been made with Benedict Anderson's influential theory of imagined communities, which posits that nations are socially constructed through shared experiences and collective imagination among their members. Through this lens, the article explores how a shared history, culture, and language united the Bangladeshi people in their quest for self-determination. Utilizing a historical research methodology, this article draws upon an array of data obtained from scholarly publications, books, and other relevant literature. The findings presented herein will elucidate how the rise of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state in South Asia marks a significant chapter in both regional history and the broader narrative of nationalism. Through this exploration, the article emphasizes the importance of cultural identity and collective memory in shaping the political aspirations of the Bangladeshi people.

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## Introduction

The politics of colonial power significantly influenced the partition of India. The British created divisions between Hindus and Muslims to maintain their dominance in the region. The British sowed the seeds of various divisions between Hindus and Muslims to establish their dominance in the region. Although these two religious communities in India have been involved in multiple conflicts at different times, no other ruler has provoked these two groups as the British have.<sup>1</sup> After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1858, the British implemented a policy of division between Hindus and Muslims. However, since the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the Hindus gained favor with the British and strengthened their position in all areas of government service, beginning with trade and commerce in Bengal. In contrast, the Muslims, being alienated from the British, fell far behind in the political and economic realms.

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<sup>1</sup> R.C Majumder noted in this regard, "The followers of Islam did not merge themselves into the Hindu pattern. So, for the first time in Indian history, two distinct but important communities and cultures stood face two face, and India was permanently divided into two powerful units". R.C Majumder, *Glimpses of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century*, Calcutta, 1960, p. 101.

Toward the end of the 19th century, as Hindus were increasingly demanding their political rights from the British, the colonial powers skillfully sought to draw Muslims closer to them. In this context, the Pakistan Movement gained popularity as a call for a separate homeland for Muslims in India. The Muslims of East Bengal provided their unwavering support for this demand, and in recognition of their votes, the state of Pakistan was established in 1947. However, from the very beginning, the Muslims in East Bengal began to see themselves as distinct from the rest of Pakistan, increasingly inspired by a sense of Bengali nationalism. This shift in identity and attitude among Bengali Muslims from Pakistani nationalism to Bengali nationalism is significant. This paper aims to explore this transformation in depth, providing insights into the ideological foundations of the state of Bangladesh, which eventually emerged as one of the prominent nations in South Asia. Additionally, it will clarify the role of Bengali Muslims in the Pakistan Movement.

The paradigm shift from Pakistan to Bengali nationalism was a result of structural inequalities, political oppression, economic exploitation and cultural alienation. While Bengali Muslims initially saw Pakistan as a solution to their socio-economic problems and a means to escape Hindu dominance, their experience within Pakistan led to disillusionment, resistance, and eventually a demand for independence. So, understanding why the majority of Muslims in East Bengal wanted to secede from the state of Pakistan is a crucial aspect for the politics of Bangladesh. In addition, understanding the mental formation of the Muslims of East Bengal in the creation of 'Bengali nationalism' is also essential in determining the policies for the future of Bangladesh. For this reason, the position of Muslims during the partition of India, the mindset and role of Bengali Muslims in the Pakistan movement and the situation of Muslims in East Bengal following the formation of Pakistan have been assessed. This analysis aims to clarify the emergence and evolution of Bengali nationalism.

A qualitative research method has been adopted to write the research paper. While crafting the research paper, most of the information was sourced from secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and academic journals. However, to enrich the narrative and provide deeper insights, I've also incorporated autobiographies from individuals directly involved in the events discussed. These personal accounts offer a unique perspective on the circumstances they faced. Additionally, I included contemporary speeches and statements made by key figures during the time, as well as media commentary that captures the sentiments and societal reactions surrounding those events. This multifaceted approach not only ensures a comprehensive understanding of the topic but also highlights the varied human experiences connected to the historical narrative. In this framework, the valuable aspect of transferring the attitudes of Bengali Muslims has been discussed by examining and selecting information obtained from primary and secondary sources in the light of the historical research method. This study explores the ideological and political transformation of Bengali Muslims from supporters of the Pakistan Movement to proponents of Bengali nationalism. The core inquiry centers on how and why this shift occurred in such a short historical span, culminating in the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. To guide this investigation, the research is framed around the following key questions:

1. What were the underlying socio-political and economic motivations behind Bengali Muslim support for the Pakistan Movement?
2. How did experiences under the Pakistani state contribute to disillusionment among Bengali Muslims?
3. What role did structural inequalities, cultural alienation, and political exclusion play in fostering Bengali nationalism?

4. How did the Bengali nationalist identity evolve in contrast to the pan-Islamic nationalism envisioned by the Muslim League?
5. In what ways can this transformation be interpreted through theoretical lenses such as post-colonialism, constructivism, and theories of imagined communities?

These questions aim to uncover the internal contradictions within the Pakistan Movement and examine how Bengali Muslims reimaged their political identity in response to marginalization and unmet aspirations. This inquiry also seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ideological foundations of the Bangladeshi nation-state and the historical consciousness that shaped its emergence.

### **Bengali Muslims under Colonial Rule**

Bengal was the largest and most populous province in India. It covered Bengal, Bihar, Chota Nagpur and Orissa with 48 districts spread over nearly 190,000 square miles. The British seized power in Bengal from the Muslims. Naturally, after the establishment of British rule in Bengal, a distance was created between the British and the Muslims and they suffered both politically and economically. On the contrary, the Hindus strengthened their position. In other words, the Hindus provided all kinds of help and support to the British to establish themselves in this region, and in return, they also received a suitable position from the British. The changes brought by the British to the land system of Bengal in 1793 harmed the Muslim landlords of Bengal. The permanent settlement brought about a huge change in the land system of Bengal. "The Permanent Settlement elevated the Hindu collectors who up to the time, had held but unimportant posts, to the position of landlords, gave them proprietary right in the soil and allowed them to accumulate wealth which would have gone to the Muslims". And the Resumption Regulation 'dispossessed the Muslim owners of their lands. They were subjected politically, and crushed economically.' Fazlul Haq said in his address to the All-India Muslim League that, "Ninety-five percent of the Zamindars of Bengal were Muslims, but within two years, after the completion of the proceedings under the Regulation, the position was completely reversed and the number of Muslim Zamindars dropped from 95 percent to 5 per cent."<sup>2</sup> The British Resumption Regulation significantly altered land ownership. Muslim Zamindars lost their status, and millions of Muslims became landless tenants of a few thousand Hindu landlords. In the new land system context, peasant revolts broke out in Bengal against the Hindu landlords, including the Faraiji Movement (1781-1840), Titu Mir's Rebellion (1781-1831), etc.<sup>3</sup>

At one stage, the Hindus of Bengal were educated in English and held significant positions in various government jobs, leading to the emergence of a new social class dominated by them. By the end of the 19th century, the necessity for English education became apparent among the Muslims, but their numbers in this regard were still quite limited. As the 20th century unfolded, the Muslims of Bengal began to advance in education; however, there remained a strong reluctance among Hindus to concede any job opportunities to them. This created a stark divide, as the Hindu leadership worked to maintain their dominant status in the job market. Chittaranjan Das, a notable figure at the time, attempted to

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Husain, 'Muslim Bengal and Pakistan', *Pakistan Horizon*, vol. 35, No. 2, 1982, pp. 10-28.

<sup>3</sup> A number of research studies have been done on the economic, social and political history of Bengal during colonial period analyzing with varying emphasis the two currents in Bengal's life Hindu and Muslim. The important published works are: S. Gopal, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal and its results*, London, 1949; Jayanta Maiitra, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1855-1906: Collaboration and Confrontation*, K P Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1984; N.K Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal from Plassey to Permanent Settlement*, 1962; Pradip Sinha, *Nineteenth Century Bengal: Aspects of Social History*, Calcutta, 1965; A.K.N. Karim, *The Modern Muslim Political Elite in Bengal*, Dacca, 1972;

negotiate rights for Muslims through the Bengal Pact in 1923. Unfortunately, his efforts were ultimately thwarted by the entrenched Hindu leadership, which led to the pact's failure. This disappointment was a pivotal moment for Muslims in Bengal, fostering a growing sentiment that their political and economic rights would not be safeguarded within a Hindu-dominated India. Consequently, this mindset contributed to the development of the idea of a separate homeland, as the Muslims began to believe that their aspirations would be better served by pursuing their own political identity. They took a stand that the political and economic rights of the Muslims would not be protected in Hindu India.

The awareness that had developed in the Muslim community of Bengal about the British was primarily concentrated among the elite and middle-class Muslims. If we saw the picture of the urban areas of Bengal we found that the Muslims were disadvantaged numerically as well as socially and economically. "Only 15.3 percent of the Muslims in 1911 in Calcutta were literates as against 32 percent of the Hindus ... The Muhammadan population of Dacca city in general remained economically subordinate to the few rich Hindus."<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the 19th century, various organizations adopted the idea of modernizing education and raising awareness among the Muslim community in Bengal.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the Bengali Muslim Society was divided into two classes- Ashraf and Atraf. However, these two classes existed among Muslims even before the British came to Bengal. The Ashrafs were mainly Urdu-speaking urban elites who felt proud of their non-Bengali aristocratic background and belonged to the upper stratum.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the Atrafs were Bengali-speaking rural masses who formed the bulk of the indigenous population and belonged to the lower economic level of society. The Ashraf and Urdu-speaking non-Bengali Maulvis showed no respect to the Bengali language.

However, although most of the people of East Bengal were Muslims, most were from the peasant Atraf class.<sup>7</sup> In economic terms, they were severely oppressed by the Hindu Zamindars of East Bengal. The 'racial' or 'cultural' dimension is henceforth an important factor underlying the tensions between Muslim peasants and their Hindu landlords.<sup>8</sup> As a result, peasant revolts also occurred in Bengal against the British and Hindu Zamindars. The number of elite or middle-class English-educated Muslims in this region was scarce. The general peasant community was largely unaware of its rights. They were not even sufficiently aware of Islam in which they had been educated. Amalendu De mentioned, "By the end of the nineteenth century, when the Muslim population outnumbered that of the Hindus in Bengal, the Muslim theologians put more emphasis on the process of rapid Islamization. The ignorance of the Muslim masses was so exposed that even in 1883, there were many of them in rural Bengal who could

<sup>4</sup> See details, Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, p. 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Among these were Nawab Amir Ali's National Mohammedan Association (1856), Abdool Luteef's Mohammedan Literary Society of Calcutta (1863) and Syed Ammer Ali's Central National Mohammedan Association of Calcutta (1977) etc.

<sup>6</sup> "The *ashraf* were particularly conscious of their 'racial superiority' and always emphasized that they were different from the indigenous population, known to them by various contemptuous terms." See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Shila Sen wrote, "The root cause of the economic backwardness of the Bengali Muslims lay in the fact that they were essentially an agriculturist community, and, therefore, poorer than Muslims in other regions of India. Though Bengal was ruled by a Muslim Dewan/Subedar under the regime at Delhi or otherwise, the ruling elite during those times formed a negligible minority in comparison to the vast mass of peasants and cultivators, majority of whom were converts from poor Hindus.", *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1947*, Impex India, New Delhi, 1976, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> P. Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question*, Calcutta, 1984, p. 128.

not perform their namaz in the Arabic language. Moreover, there was a dearth of competent Imams for conducting namaz in certain areas.”<sup>9</sup>

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Muslim intellectuals and the Muslim press of Bengal became more vocal than ever about the position of Muslims in India.<sup>10</sup> All of their activities, thinking, speaking, writing and versifying were directed toward the liberation of Muslims. However, Muslim organizations did not raise much voice for the rights of Muslim farmers in Bengal. Since 1884, the Muslim media has been highlighting the economic backwardness of Muslim farmers. “They pointed out that most of the Zamindars, Mahajans, businessmen, doctors, lawyers and teachers who formed a dominant group, were Hindus and the bulk of the peasantry was constituted by Muslim peasants. Moreover, the Muslims held a position of insignificance in Government services.” Muslim writers also pointed out that the economic resources of Muslim society were being exhausted as Muslim landlords spent their money on luxurious living. “Money and property of the Muslim society were transferred to the British treasury and to the ‘pockets of the Hindus’, and thus the Muslims were thrown in distress. They characterized this drainage of money as the ‘economic drain of the Muslim Society’.”<sup>11</sup>

In view of the political situation in India, although the All India Muslim League was established in Dhaka in 1906, the initiative to form a separate political organization for Muslims was taken through the formation of the National Mohammedan Association in 1878. In the 20th century, several events played an important role in the idea of forming a separate political homeland for Muslims: The Partition of Bengal (1905) and its Annulment (1911), the Hindu Conservative Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, the Hindu-Muslim Communal Riots, the First World War and the Defeat of Turkey and the Khilafat Movement. In the early 20th century, conservative Hindus significantly influenced the Indian National Congress. At the same time, the writings of Bankim Chandra and later Savarkar bolstered the call for Hindutva as a dominant ideology in India. Consequently, as one of these two primary groups aimed to assert its hegemony, the survival of the other group was jeopardized, prompting demands for a separate independent state. Although there was a strategy behind British policy regarding the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, it can be said that the activities of Hindutva conservative leaders frightened the common Indian Muslims. Even the Congress's governance policy under the Government of India Act of 1935 could not properly address the crises of the Muslims. Regarding this, Fazlul Haque stated that, “The Congress set the stage for the blatant arrogance of the militant Hindu to burst the bounds of restraint which nonpartisan governments have hitherto imposed.” He also enumerated different manifestations of this: “Mother cow must be protected ... Muslims must not be allowed to eat humbled because the Hindus believe it was their land. Hence, the forbidding of Azan, attacks on worshippers in mosques, insistence on the triumphant passage of noisy processions before mosques at prayer times.”<sup>12</sup>

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (the Muslim Caliphate) following the First World War, its effects extended to the Muslims of British India. Individuals motivated by Muslim and Islamic nationalist sentiments struggled to come to terms with the fall of the Islamic Caliphate. During this period, the Khilafat Movement emerged in India, fostering a renewed sense of unity among Muslims

<sup>9</sup> Amalendu De, ‘The Social Thoughts and Consciousness of the Bengali Muslims in the Colonial Period’, *Social Scientists*, vol. 23, No. 4/6, (Apr.-Jun. 1995), pp. 16-37.

<sup>10</sup> Among the Muslim leaders Syed Ameer Ali (1849), Maulana Obaidullah al-Obaidi Suhrawardy (1834-1886), Nawab Salimullah (1860-1915), Syed Ismail Husain Shirazi (1880-1931), Maulavi Abdul Hai (1875-1942), A.K.M Fazlul Haq (1873-1962), Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1893-1963), Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) etc. were notable.

<sup>11</sup> Amalendu De, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> A.K.M Fazlul Huq, *Muslim Suffering Under Congress Rule*, Dacca, December 1939, p. 18.



under the banner of Islam. The partition and its annulment within less than a decade had far-reaching consequences on the shaping of Muslim politics. The first event fostered political consciousness among them and second further strengthened it.<sup>13</sup> The communal riots in India during the first half of the 20th century, along with the Swadeshi movement led by radical Hindus and the decline of the Islamic Caliphate, created a backdrop that united Muslims in the region. While negotiations were underway between the British and Indians over independence, Muslims evaluated their position in India and decided on a separate homeland. Writing about the Muslims of India, P. Hardy has mentioned that, “Politically they were unorganised and lacking in sense of direction, but, as the ‘anti-cow-killing’ riots of the eighteen-eighties and nineties, the Cawnpore mosque disturbances of 1913 and the Khilafat movement of 1919-22 showed, they were quick to be seized by religious passion.”<sup>14</sup> Among Indian Muslims, leaders from Bengal, facing various forms of discrimination from Hindus and influenced by international politics, strongly advocated for the creation of a separate homeland for Muslims. P. Hardy also mentioned in this regard that “Muslims in Bengal remained more actively aware than the Muslims in the other parts of the subcontinent. They were critically conscious of the fact that, unlike West Pakistan, East Pakistan was surrounded by the Hindus- nearly on all sides. This fact influenced the feelings of the Bengali Muslims, their attitudes and fear which intensified their determination to fight on for a separate, united, homeland for all the Muslims of the subcontinent.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Towards Pakistan Movement**

In December 1930, during the annual session of the All-India Muslim League, the prominent philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal articulated the vision of a separate Muslim state. This concept was focused specifically on the north-western provinces of India, where Muslims formed a significant majority. In 1933, Chaudhri Rahmat Ali, a Cambridge student, was inspired to create the term ‘Pakistan’, which means the ‘land of the pure.’ Each letter in ‘Pakistan’ corresponds to a different region: ‘P’ for Punjab, ‘A’ for Afghan (North West Frontier Province), ‘K’ for Kashmir, ‘S’ for Sind, and ‘tan’ for Baluchistan. Unlike Allama Iqbal’s vision, which was firmly rooted in the all-India context, Rahmat Ali envisioned a confederation of Muslim states within the subcontinent. He proposed linking this ‘original Pakistan’ to all Muslim nations in West and Central Asia, extending as far as the Bosphorus. However, his proposal provoked accusations of an Islamic conspiracy from certain segments of the Hindu press, and it was met with skepticism by many established Muslim politicians due to its irredentist overtones and the suggestion of substantial population relocations. By the late 1930s, the ideas of Iqbal and Rahmat Ali had given rise to a wealth of Muslim political schemes, each striving in its own inventive manner to address the political dilemmas faced by the minority community.<sup>16</sup> After that, in March 1940, without specifying the exact geographical boundaries, the famous resolution passed at the All India Muslim League’s Lahore session which formally demanded independent Muslim states in

<sup>13</sup> Shila Sen, *op.cit.* p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 169, For details see also: C. H Philips (ed.), *The Evolution of India and Pakistan 1958-1947*, Selected Documents, London, 1962; Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, *The Evolution of Pakistan*, Lahore, 1963; V.P Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India*, Calcutta, 1957; A. H. M Nooruzzaman, *Rise of the Muslim Middle Classes as a Political Factor in India and Pakistan 1858-1947* (Unpublished Doctorial Thesis), London, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, Routledge, New York, Second Edition, 2004, p. 143.

the north-west and the north-east of India, marked the transition of the Indian Muslims from a minority to a 'nation'.<sup>17</sup>

The establishment of Pakistan became a fundamental goal for the Muslim League with the passing of the Lahore Resolution in 1940. However, for several years, the leadership of the League did not clarify the specifics of the Pakistan proposal until 1946. However, there were demands for seven Muslim states in India.<sup>18</sup> While Jinnah seemed to conceptualize a unified Pakistan that included both the North-West and North-East regions of India, he never clearly communicated this vision to the League members and supporters before 1946. In the meantime, efforts emerged from some Muslim League leaders and intellectuals in Bengal to outline a more concrete vision for Pakistan, particularly focusing on the Eastern Zone. This led to the development of the concept of Eastern Pakistan, which was envisioned to include Bengal, Assam, and part of Bihar as a distinct sovereign entity.<sup>19</sup> It is important to highlight that, in addition to the Muslim League, several other significant organizations that represented the interests of Muslims in India, such as the Ahrar Party, the Khaksar Movement, and the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, did not align with the Muslim League's proposal for the establishment of Pakistan. The Ahrar Party, known for its emphasis on anti-colonialism and secularism, and the Khaksar Movement, which focused on self-reliance and social reform, both advocated for a united India rather than a separate nation for Muslims. Meanwhile, the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, an influential body of Muslim scholars and clerics, sought to strengthen the position of Muslims within a united India, viewing the demand for Pakistan as contrary to their vision of communal harmony and national unity. These organizations collectively represented a significant segment of the Muslim population, illustrating the diversity of thought and opinion within the community regarding the question of partition.

In Bengal, the concept of Pakistan resonated with Muslims not out of a sense of religious insecurity, but because it offered a system of administration, economy, and governance free from Hindu competition, coupled with the aspiration to establish a Muslim national state in Eastern India. While the Muslims of Bengal were unwilling to be dominated by Hindus, many were also hesitant to share power with Muslims from other regions of India. Between 1943 and 1945, the Pakistan movement in Bengal sought to create an independent sovereign state that included Bengal and Assam. It aimed to democratize the movement and broaden the political party's base, ensuring that the leadership did not control the fate of the Muslim masses during the formation of Pakistan. In this context, this period saw the crystallization of distinct attitudes and ideas among Bengali Muslims regarding the Pakistan demand articulated by the All-India Muslim League, as well as the internal conflicts within League politics.

The Pakistan Movement was a complex political phenomenon that intertwined various elements such as religious ideology, elite interests, anti-colonial sentiments, and modern nationalism. It's essential to understand this movement not just as a straightforward or purely ideological process but as a strategic re-imagining of identity in the context of colonial and post-colonial power dynamics. From the perspective of Nationalist Theories, including the works of scholars like Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Anthony D. Smith, the Pakistan Movement can be seen as a manifestation of religious nationalism, particularly that of Muslim nationalism. This ideology viewed Indian Muslims as a distinct nation. The fundamental idea underpinning this movement was that Muslims were a 'nation' rather than

<sup>17</sup> Ayesha Jalal, 'Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia', Sugata Bose & Ayesha Jalal (ed.), *Nationalism, Democracy & Development*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistani failure in National integration*, University Press Ltd. 2023, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, United Press Limited, 2021, p. 165.

merely a religious community. According to Anderson argues the Muslim League played a crucial role in shaping an imagined political community among Indian Muslims by highlighting shared religion, a collective historical memory—such as the legacy of the Mughal Empire—and the apprehension of Hindu dominance in a democratic setup. Conversely, the Pakistan Movement emerged in a late-colonial setting when viewed through the lens of Post-Colonial Theories. During this time, the British colonial administration had entrenched communal divisions through mechanisms like separate electorates and religious census categorization. The leaders of the Muslim League leveraged these colonial structures to assert a distinct Muslim political identity. Ultimately, the creation of Pakistan illustrates a post-colonial aspiration for cultural and political autonomy, albeit achieved through the very categories established by colonial powers, particularly the notion of a ‘Muslim nation.’

The ideological foundation of the Pakistan movement in Bengal can be understood as a multifaceted endeavor that extended beyond the efforts of the All-India Muslim League, despite the League’s significant role in driving the movement forward. This initiative was not solely the product of a single organization; rather, it emerged as a collective effort involving the League, esteemed Muslim intellectuals, enthusiastic youth, and the broader Muslim populace. Muslim scholars and intellectuals played a pivotal role, not only in voicing their support but also in shaping the conceptual framework of the Pakistan idea. They worked diligently to clarify its principles, effectively dispelling any confusion surrounding its aims and ambitions. A critical aspect of this movement was the specific vision of ‘Purba-Pakistan’, which resonated deeply with the Muslims of Bengal and Assam. This vision was intricately tied to the Lahore Resolution, which outlined the demand for independent states for Muslims in the northwest and eastern zones of India. The notion of ‘Purba-Pakistan’ became a symbol of hope and aspiration, embodying the collective dreams of Bengal’s Muslim community as they sought to secure their identity and political rights in a diverse and often tumultuous landscape.

In their speeches, the League leaders explained the idea of Pakistan in terms of socio-economic conditions as existed in the eastern parts of Bengal and Assam. The idea presented to Muslims was that Bengal and Assam would comprise an autonomous region within the Pakistan scheme. They argued that this would allow backward Muslims to prosper, who were in the majority. The perspective of Bengali Muslims regarding the Pakistan Movement can be understood through the statements of the Muslim League leaders associated with the movement at that time. In the leading Muslim journals of that period Zahur Hossain said,<sup>20</sup>

That the ‘Musalman chasi’ (meaning Muslim peasant) of Bengal can make friendship with ‘Kabuli Mahajan’ (meaning money-lender from Kabul) can only be imagined by those who do not have any connection with the soil of the country. Some time it is said that Urdu is the mother-language of the Indian Musalmans. But the leaders of Pakistan movement in Bengal have clearly said that the state-language of ‘Purba-Pakistan’ will be Bengali and not Urdu. That Peshawar and Chittagong cannot be brought under one state, Pakistan idea accepts this truth only.

A leading journalist and well-known radical leader of Bengal Mujibur Rahman Khan wrote in his book named *Pakistan* that,<sup>21</sup>

... the different nations and the different provinces of India should get self-determination. The Dravidians in the South want to establish a state there. The Muslims of India want to establish two

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<sup>20</sup> Shila Sen, *op.cit.* p. 176

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178



independent states in the north-west and eastern India. This demand of the Muslims is known as the Pakistan proposal.

Mujibur Rahman Khan also attached the following map of two Pakistans in his book titled *Pakistan*. In which it was showed the zones in the west as Pakistan and the zones in the east (Bengal and Assam) as Purba-Pakistan.



Source: Mujibur Rahman Khan, *Pakistan*, Calcutta, 1954, p. 177 cited in Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1947*, Impex India, New Delhi, 1976, p. 179

In 1943, the *Purba-Pakistan Renaissance Society* and the *Purba-Pakistan Sahitya Sangsad* jointly organized annual sammelans. There presiding over a session Abul Mansur Ahmed said,<sup>22</sup> Religion and culture are not the same thing. Religion transgresses the geographical boundary but ‘tamaddun’ meaning culture) cannot go beyond the geographical boundary. Rather flourishes within depending on that ‘sima’ (geographical limit). Here only lies the difference between Purba-Pakistan and Pakistan. For this reason the people of Purba Pakistan are a different nation from the people of the other provinces of India and from the ‘religious brothers’ of Pakistan.

In his presidential address at the Sammelan Abul Kalam Shamsuddin said that the “ideal of Pakistan does not give a call for self-awakening in the field of politics only but it inspires self-awakening in the field of literature and culture also. Purba Pakistan should portray the life and tradition of the people of this land.”<sup>23</sup>

The great leader of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a student leader of Bengal Muslim League at that time. He wrote about the Pakistan movement in his memoir, published after his death. Sheikh Mujib wrote<sup>24</sup>,

... I decided I would have to concentrate on explaining the causes behind our movement for Pakistan. There would be two Pakistans, as envisaged in the Lahore Resolution. One would comprise Bengal and Assam and would be called East Pakistan. It would be an independent and sovereign nation. The other Pakistan would consist of the Punjab, Baluchistan, the Frontier Province and Sind. This would be called West Pakistan and it too would be an independent and sovereign nation. As for Hindustan it would consist of the Hindu-majority areas of India but Muslims would have equal rights there too. I always carried a map of India with me. I would also have Mr Habibullah Bahar’s *Pakistan* and Mujibur Rahman

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 179

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *The Unfinished Memoirs*, University Press Limited, 2020, p. 23.

Khan's massive book of the same name with me. I knew both books almost by heart. I would also have cuttings from the daily Azad in my bag whenever I travelled.

According to Ayesha Jalal,<sup>25</sup> "The Bengali Muslims' idea of 'Pakistan' was very different from that of Muslims in other parts of India, and certainly different from what Jinnah had in mind. It was not a question of how Muslims would get a share of power in the rest of India, but rather the ideal of an independent sovereign state consisting of the whole of Bengal and Assam (and free of the exploitative Permanent Settlement system), which was the real motivating force behind a movement which, for the lack of a better name, called itself the Bengali Muslim League."

The Bengal Muslim League emerged as a significant political force, capitalizing on the extensive groundwork laid by the Praja Samity's grassroots activities over several decades in various local communities. This groundwork created a fertile environment for the League's growth. As the Huq-League coalition government began implementing various legislative reforms to enhance the conditions of the peasantry, the momentum of the Krishak Praja movement began to wilt, losing its earlier vigor. The Krishak Praja Party, under the leadership of Haq, became increasingly beset by internal divisions and defections, ultimately dwindling into a weakened faction with minimal influence. By the early 1940s, the Bengal League dominated the political landscape of Bengal, which had positioned itself as the province's sole active Muslim political entity. The League's inclusive approach attracted former members of the Krishak Praja Party, who gradually sought refuge within its ranks as they navigated the shifting political tides following the reforms. This influx of former Krishak Praja members continued steadily until the pivotal elections of 1945-46, further solidifying the Bengal League's stature in a time of political uncertainty.

During the Pakistan movement, there was a crisis in the politics of the Muslim League in Bengal. Although Khwaja Nazimuddin was the favorite of the parliamentary group of the Muslim League and Jinnah in this region, Husain Shahid Suhrawardy was strong in the organizational field of the party. Besides, Abul Hashim was one of the most prominent figures in the progressive politics of the Muslim League in East Bengal. The students of that time were also loyal to Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim's group. Along with the All India Muslim Chhatra League, the Students Federation also supported this group. When Jinnah declared the 1946 elections as 'a plebiscite of the Muslims of India on Pakistan', the Muslim League of Bengal took it very seriously. During the election campaign, several statements and speeches were made by top Muslim League leaders like Liaquat Ali Khan and Hasan Ispahani, giving the impression that there would be more than one Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> At that time, elections within Muslim constituencies emerged as a starkly uneven battleground, primarily pitting the influential Muslim League against a few notable figures from the Krishak Praja Party. The landscape was charged with fervor, as independent candidates found themselves at a significant disadvantage, compelled to lean on their personal charisma and local appeal. Amidst the clamor for a separate nation, discussions were overwhelmingly dominated by the fervent aspiration for Pakistan, overshadowing crucial conversations about social justice, economic progress, and political reforms. The stakes were high, and the voices advocating for change were frequently drowned out by the relentless wave of nationalistic fervor. As a result, the Muslim League won a landslide victory in Bengal.

<sup>25</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, The Muslim League and The Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.* p. 175.

During an interview with a foreign press soon after the elections, Suhrawardy expressed a vision of unity, advocating for the inclusion of all Bengali-speaking individuals—both Hindus and Muslims—within a single ‘Sovereign Zone’ in East India. He emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of community and collaboration among diverse groups to promote a harmonious society. However, on 3 April 1946 Suhrawardy’s foreword to the book, *Why Pakistan?* might further reflect his views concerning the shape of Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> While commending the book, Suhrawardy wrote: “Any reasoned book today on Pakistan .... is welcome.... this book makes an attempt to present the picture as we see it .... I commend it to those who wish to know the case for Pakistan.” The question of whether Pakistan would be a single entity or two separate nations was decisively resolved at the Muslim League conference in Delhi from April 7 to 9. With remarkable foresight and leadership, Jinnah championed the proposal for one united Pakistan during the conference. However, the implications of establishing a singular Pakistan later revealed significant challenges, particularly felt in East Bengal. “Thus the nationalist movement does not serve a firm integrative bond between East and West Pakistan. The East Pakistani autonomists refer to the original Lahore Resolution in support of their demand for independence, while the ‘centrists’ refer to the modified 1946 version to challenge this demand.”<sup>28</sup> In the 1946 elections, Jinnah and the Muslim League achieved significant success, winning all Muslim seats in the central assembly and capturing 75 percent of the total Muslim vote in the provincial assembly elections. The rallying cry for ‘Pakistan’ invigorated the Muslim electorate, yet it became apparent that voters were not united around a specific agenda, as the League had not articulated one. The concept of ‘Pakistan’ itself remained ambiguous, lacking clear definitions or geographic boundaries. The electoral triumph was largely driven by local leaders who formed strategic alliances with various provincial Leagues, raising concerns about the durability of these coalitions in light of events beyond Jinnah’s control. In Bengal, the radical posturing of the Abul Hashim faction of the Muslim League, coupled with their efforts in famine relief during a time when many Muslim peasants suffered due to exploitation by Hindu traders and landlords, resulted in defections from local Krishak Praja leaders and a significant swell of support for the League.<sup>29</sup> While Jinnah depicted this electoral victory as a strong mandate for a ‘Pakistan’ that would encompass a united Punjab and Bengal, the prevailing circumstances complicated this assertion. Tensions were escalating, with Sikhs in Punjab preparing for conflict against Muslims, and many Hindus preparing for similar actions both there and in Bengal. Such realities suggested that Jinnah’s claims were not as indisputable as he portrayed.

### Embrace Bengali Nationalism

The Muslims of East Pakistan, who played a pivotal role in the founding of Pakistan, became increasingly disillusioned and resentful due to the ongoing neglect and unjust treatment from the central government that remained indifferent to their plight. This government, dominated by West Pakistanis situated over twelve hundred miles away in Karachi, fostered a strong sense of alienation among the

<sup>27</sup> Suhrawardy ‘Strictly confining’ himself to the 1940 Lahore Resolution, the author in the book suggested the divisions of the British India into ‘three fully independent and sovereign states’ viz. (1) Muslim Pakistan State of the North- Western Zone, comprising the provinces of Sind, the Punjab, North-West Frontier and Baluchistan; (2) Muslim Pakistan State of the Eastern Zone, comprising the provinces of Bengal and Assam; and (3) Hindustan State, comprising all the remaining provinces. See details Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.* p. 202.

<sup>28</sup> Rounaq Jahan, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, Routledge, New York, Second Edition, 2004, p. 148.

people of East Bengal. The roots of this neglect and unfair treatment can be traced back to the colonial and racist attitudes of the ruling elite in the West. So, the initial exuberance of liberation from colonial domination quickly gave way to disillusionment for the people of East Bengal. Instead of nurturing a sense of belonging and unity, the rulers of Pakistan treated East Bengal with indifference and neglect, akin to a stepmother who cannot truly embrace her stepchildren. This lack of recognition and support left the people feeling alienated and overlooked, as if the central government did not value their vibrant culture and contributions. The promise of freedom started to feel hollow as the aspirations of the East Bengali populace clashed with the harsh realities of political marginalization and economic disparity.

The aspirations that motivated Bengali Muslims to support the Pakistan movement present an important chapter in history, though many of those hopes ultimately remained unrealized. It's significant to recognize that this movement also garnered support from a segment of lower caste Hindus in East Bengal, who rallied under the leadership of Yogendranath Mandal. Their involvement was driven by a strong desire to overcome the historical domination and oppression from upper caste Hindus. Basically, the narrative that suggests only Muslims were instrumental in the fight for Pakistan is misleading. In fact, the movement for Pakistan saw participation from a diverse array of communities, including Scheduled Hindus who rallied under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the Buddhist community in East Bengal also expressed support for the formation of Pakistan, recognizing the potential for greater autonomy and political representation in a separate nation. This participation underscores the multifaceted nature of the movement, which attracted individuals from various backgrounds who saw merit in the idea of a new political entity.

On the other hand, it's crucial to acknowledge that there were many Muslims<sup>31</sup> who fervently opposed the notion of Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> This segment of the Muslim population believed in a united India and actively campaigned against the partition. These individuals contributed to the rich tapestry of responses to the political upheaval of the time, highlighting that the conflict was not purely a religious divide. Rather, it was a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that involved the aspirations and voices of multiple communities, each with their unique concerns and perspectives. However, as the newly formed Pakistani state began to exercise internal colonialism over the people of East Bengal, a powerful Bengali nationalism emerged. This movement sought political, economic and cultural liberation for the people of the region. "The Bengalis led to believe that in the eyes of the central Muslim League government the position of East Bengal was nothing more than an appendage. A feeling of being relegated to 'a colony of Western Pakistan' began to grow rapidly among them."<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, in 1971, the struggle culminated in a historic turning point when the narrative of the two-nation theory was fundamentally challenged through conflict, leading to the establishment of the independent state of

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Ambedkar, a prominent social reformer and advocate for the rights of minorities, emphasized the need for representation and recognition of marginalized communities in the political landscape. His advocacy drew significant support from Scheduled Hindus, who actively engaged in the discourse surrounding the demand for Pakistan.

<sup>31</sup> Several Muslim groups and leaders, including the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (JUH) under the leadership of Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani and other Deobandi scholars, the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Ahrar-ul-Islam (Ahrar Party), the Khudai Khidmatgar (Red Shirts) led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (commonly known as Frontier Gandhi), the All India Shia Political Conference including Pir of Manki Sharif and some Bareilvi scholars like Maulana Syed Hamid Raza Khan opposed the Pakistan Movement, which sought the establishment of a separate Muslim-majority state (Pakistan) within British India. Their opposition was rooted in a combination of ideological, political, and religious perspectives. Despite this resistance, the Muslim League succeeded in rallying significant support from the Muslim community, ultimately leading to the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

<sup>32</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmad, 'Desh, Rastra o Nation', *The Daily Ittefaq*, 5 December 1969.

<sup>33</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.* p. 332.



Bangladesh. The journey towards self-determination and recognition of identity remains a significant achievement for the people of this region.

Aisha Jalal wrote about the newly independent state of Pakistan, “Neither religion nor religiosity was much in evidence in the early years of the new Muslim homeland. It was the pursuit of material advancement and plenty of opportunities for those who were unscrupulously greedy that kept things ticking.”<sup>34</sup> An example of how the Pakistani state establishment valued the Bengalis can be found in the comments of the then Chief Secretary of East Bengal, Aziz Ahmed, which Taya Zinkin<sup>35</sup> has recorded in his book. Taya mentioned Aziz Ahmed’s statement and wrote,<sup>36</sup> “The Bengalis were backward and undisciplined; they prayed in Bengali as they did not know Arabic. There was no *lingua franca* between them and the administration. They even swore by Kali and Durga (Bengal’s favourite Hindu goddess), he said in genuine disgust. Although he did not actually call East Bengal a colony of West Pakistan, his whole attitude was that of a good colonial administrator. In this he was a typical West Pakistani.”

Researchers analyzed that Pakistan is characterized by governance, whereas East Pakistan is distinguished by its vibrant political nature. West Pakistan, particularly the Punjab region, has historically played a significant role in the civil-military administration. The British referred to the Punjabis as “martial races”, fostering a longstanding tradition of military service in the area. In contrast, the Bengalis have been recognized as the most politically engaged segment of the subcontinent. They initially took the lead in the Indian nationalist movement and, during the 1920s and 1930s, increasingly gravitated toward more radical forms of politics, including violent tactics. Both terrorism and leftist movements gained traction in Bengal during this period. Following independence, Bengal was partitioned; however, the three main currents of Bengali politics—a call for greater autonomy (or special consideration for Bengal), the use of violence as a political tool and leftist ideology—continued to thrive in both East and West Bengal.<sup>37</sup> But after independence, the political policies of the West were marked by a persistent refusal to share power with the East. Culturally, there were deliberate efforts to marginalize the Bangla language and culture in favor of Urdu. Economically, East Pakistan faced discrimination in the allocation of funds, effectively relegating it to the role of a mere market for West Pakistan’s industrial products. This economic strategy reduced East Pakistan to a colony that supplied foreign exchange to support the development of the West. Consequently, the West-dominated central government operated as a mechanism for exploitation, diminishing the status of East Pakistan to that of a colony focused solely on providing resources and markets for its western counterpart.<sup>38</sup> Within this framework, Pakistan effectively established a colonial structure in which East Pakistan became a consumer of West Pakistan’s products.

The exploitation of the people of East Bengal by the Pakistani government is a significant historical issue, highlighting systemic injustices that deprived the population of their rights. Evidence from various sources during that era points to how these actions affected the people’s lives, illustrating a broader context of oppression and exploitation. Such events remind us of the importance of acknowledging past

<sup>34</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> Taya Zinkin was the daughter of a Russian aristocratic family, educated in France and America. Her husband, Maurice Zinkin, was a British ICS officer. Taya came to India as a correspondent for *The Economist of London*, *The Manchester Guardian* and *L’Oréal* of France and *the Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of Zurich. Her book *Reporting India* is considered one of the most important eyewitness accounts of the 1950 riots in East and West Bengal.

<sup>36</sup> Taya Zinkin, *Reporting India*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1962, p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> Rounaq Jahan, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Nurul Kabir, *Birth of Bangladesh : The Policies of History and the History of Politics*, Samhati Publication, Dhaka, 2022, p. 158.



grievances to better understand the present socio-political landscape. In July 1955 a former Muslim League Minister commented, “The situation became so bad that one could walk through the secretariat and not find a single Bengali among the secretaries in the ministries.”<sup>39</sup> Below is a picture of discrimination by the Pakistani government-

## Economic benefits extended by the central government to the provinces for the period 1947-55

	<b>West Pakistan Rs. (millions)</b>	<b>East Pakistan Rs. (millions)</b>
Financial Assistance	10,000	<b>1,260</b>
Capital Expenditure	2,100	620
Grants-in-aid	540	180
Educational Grants	1530	240
Foreign aid allotted	730	150
Defense expenditure	4,650	100
Foreign Trade (Exports)	4,830	4,940
Foreign Trade (Imports)	6,220	2,580

Source: Dawn (Karachi), January 9, 1956

## The regional origin of Pakistan Civil Service Officers

	<b>From West Pakistan</b>	<b>From East Pakistan</b>
Secretaries	19	0
Joint- Secretaries	38	3
Deputy	123	10
Under	510	38

Source: Dawn (Karachi), January 18, 1956

## The regional origin of Officers in the Services in 1955

	<b>From West Pakistan</b>	<b>From East Pakistan</b>
Lt. Generals	3	0
Major Generals	20	0
Brigadiers	34	1
Colonels	49	1

<sup>39</sup> Richard D.Lambert, ‘Factors in Bengali Regionalism in Pakistan’, *Far Eastern Survey*, vol. 28, No. 4 (Apr. 1959), p. 49-58.

Lt. Colonels	198	2
Majors	590	10
Air force Personnel	640	60
Naval Officers	593	07

Source: Dawn (Karachi), January 18, 1956

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The Bengali community initially united against the oppressive policies of the Pakistani government during the language movement from 1948 to 1952. This crucial endeavor not only advocated for the recognition of the Bengali language but also served as a catalyst for the development of Bengali nationalism. The elections of 1954 and the subsequent political events played a significant role in advancing Bengali political identity. Following the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched the six-point movement in 1966, which contributed to the strengthening of the Bengali nationalist movement. In the face of military oppression, the Bengalis emerged with a heightened sense of political, economic, and cultural awareness, actively engaging in the quest for independence in 1971. This collective effort led to the formation of Bangladesh, an independent state founded on the principles of Bengali nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism, reflecting the aspirations and values of its people.

This shift from Pakistani nationalism to Bengali nationalism can be explained in the light of Benedict Anderson's theory. Anderson, in his book titled *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) explained the concept of 'imagined communities'.<sup>40</sup> According to him, nations are socially constructed communities and are imagined by individuals who perceive themselves as part of the same collective. These communities are 'imagined' because members of the smallest nations never recognize most of their fellow members, yet they maintain a deep sense of unity and kinship. The fact that nations are imagined does not mean that they are unreal, but rather that they are socially constructed through shared symbols, language and culture. In the case of the Bangladesh Liberation War, the rise of Bengali nationalism and the struggle for independence can be seen as the result of the creation of a strong imagined Bengali community, defined by shared language, culture and historical experience. This imagined community was increasingly seen as distinct from the West Pakistani-dominated state of Pakistan, and demands for autonomy and later independence were rooted in a growing belief in the legitimacy of this distinct national identity.

According to Anderson, language is instrumental in shaping imagined communities by enabling individuals to communicate and share experiences, thereby fostering a collective identity. A notable example of this is the Bengali Language Movement of the early 1950s. During this period, Bengalis united in resistance against the imposition of Urdu as Pakistan's sole national language, turning the Bengali language into a powerful symbol of their distinct cultural and national identity. This movement not only highlighted the differences between East and West Pakistan but also catalyzed political and cultural resistance. The quest for Bengali to be recognized as a national language was fundamentally about preserving and affirming Bengali identity within the Pakistani context. This struggle contributed to the formation of a collective Bengali identity, distinguishing it from the singular vision of a unified Pakistani identity proposed by the West Pakistani elite. The movement exemplifies how language can empower communities and drive a shared sense of belonging and purpose.

<sup>40</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, Verso, London, 2006.

## Anderson's Application on Bengali Nationalism

Anderson's Concept	Bengali Application
Imagined Communities	Transition from imposed Islamic nationalism to organic Bengali cultural nationalism
Vernacular Culture	Print Spread of Bengali consciousness through literature, newspapers, and political rhetoric
Language and Identity	Bengali as a cultural anchor and resistance to Urdu imposition
Shared Experience	Economic, political, and cultural alienation experienced as collective trauma
Commemoration	Martyrs of 1952 and 1971 as unifying symbols of Bengali identity

Anderson argues that imagined communities form when people come to see themselves as part of a shared story—even if they never meet each other. In Pakistan's case, the original community was imagined through Islamic identity across regions and languages. However, that identity was abstract and imposed from above (a classic 'top-down' nationalism). It lacked a shared vernacular or cultural infrastructure to sustain it, especially in East Bengal. In contrast, Bengali nationalism was imagined through a lived cultural experience, embedded in language, literature, and everyday life. It was organic and bottom-up. Bengali Muslims did not reject Islam, but they refused to allow it to override their deeper, daily reality as Bengali-speaking people. Anderson's insight that nations are constructed through shared cultural products (like newspapers, literature, and education in the vernacular) directly explains how Bengali nationalism gained traction in ways Pakistani nationalism could not in East Bengal.

Another important aspect of Anderson's theory is that shared grievances—whether economic, political, or social—helped to shape national consciousness. In the case of East Pakistan, the growing economic disparity between East and West was a key factor in the formation of a collective Bengali identity. East Pakistan's economy was heavily exploited by West Pakistan, especially in the jute industry, which generated significant revenue but was primarily controlled by West Pakistani elites. Despite its economic contribution, East Pakistan's underdevelopment became a shared grievance that united Bengalis across classes and sectors of society. This economic exploitation became a defining narrative within the Bengalis' imagined community, reinforcing their sense of being oppressed and marginalized by the West. Again, in the political sphere, the Pakistani government's strategy after the United Front's electoral victory in the 1954 Provincial Council elections did not last long, which could be assessed as an undue interference in the exercise of Bengalis' political rights. As a result, it can be seen that the way the Pakistani state and establishment were depriving East Bengal gave rise to a unified consciousness among the people here, which manifested itself in the name of Bengali nationalism.

## Key Events Reflecting the Shift in Attitude

Phase	Key Events & Factors	Attitude Shift	Outcome
1947–1952	- Partition of India, creation of Pakistan	- Initial loyalty to Pakistan as a Muslim homeland	- Hope for shared identity under Pakistan

1952	- Economic & political marginalization of East	- Growing discontent due to West Pakistani dominance	- Seeds of distrust sown
	- Language Movement	- Assertion of Bengali identity ('Bangla' as a mother tongue)	- First major resistance against West Pakistan
1954–1966	- Dissolution of United Front government	- Distrust in central leadership	- Rise of regional parties (e.g., Awami League)
	- Six-Point Movement (1966) by Mujib	- Demand for autonomy, economic justice	- Clear Bengali nationalist agenda
1969–1970	- Agartala Conspiracy Case & mass protests	- Shift from autonomy to full independence	- Mujib emerges as undisputed leader
	- 1970 Elections (AL wins majority)	- Mandate for Bengali self-rule ignored by West Pak	- Final break in trust
1971	- Operation Searchlight (March 25)	- Full-scale armed resistance begins	- Liberation War (Muktijuddha)
	- Declaration of Independence (March 26)	- Complete rejection of Pakistani identity	- Birth of Bangladesh (Dec 16, 1971)

In the subsequent chart, the various phases that mark the transition from Pakistani Nationalism to Bengali Nationalism are presented. This transformation encapsulates key historical events, cultural shifts, and political movements that influenced the identity and consciousness of the Bengali people. Each phase examined to reflect the socio-political dynamics that contributed to the rise of Bengali Nationalism, illustrating the growing desire for autonomy and self-determination among the Bengali population in response to the policies and governance of the Pakistani state.

## Key Paradigm Shift: Pakistani Nationalism → Bengali Nationalism

### Phase 1: Foundational Pakistani Identity (1947-1952)

[1947: Partition]

—[Hope]: Muslim unity under Pakistan

—[Reality]: West Pakistani dominance

—Economic: Jute profits diverted to West

—Cultural: Urdu imposed (1948)

—[1952: Language Movement] (First defiance)

Shift Trigger: Cultural identity crisis

**Phase 2: Erosion of Trust (1952-1969)**

[Language Martyrs' Day]

- [1954]: United Front electoral win → dismissed
- [1966]: Six-Point Movement (Mujib's autonomy plan)
  - 'We are exploited colonists!'
- [1969]: Mass uprising (Agartala Case protests)
- Slogan: 'Bengal's independence!'

Shift Trigger: Political betrayal + Economic rage

**Phase 3: Revolutionary Break (1970-1971)**

[1970 Elections: AL wins 167/169 seats]

- [March 1971]: Yahya delays power transfer
- [March 25]: Operation Searchlight (Genocide)
- [March 26]: Independence declared
- [April-Dec]: Liberation War
- Indian support
- [Dec 16: Victory]

Shift Trigger: Genocide → Total rejection of Pakistan

**Phase 4: New National Identity (Post-1971)**

[Bangladesh Constitution (1972)]

- Secularism + Socialism
- National Symbols:
  - Flag (Red-Green)
  - Anthem ('Amar Sonar Bangla')
  - Martyrs' Monument (Savar)
- Narrative:



└─‘Muktijuddho’ over ‘Pakistan’  
└─Mujib as ‘Father of the Nation’

**Final Identity:** Linguistic + Cultural + Economical + Political Nationalism → Bengali Nationalism

## Conclusion

The Muslims of East Bengal did not support the Muslim League’s Pakistan proposal from a religious point of view. The movements that Muslim scholars including Deoband and others had in India were not compatible with the Pakistan movement of the Muslim League. The people of East Bengal did not support the movements of religious organizations, but supported political movements like the Pakistan movement of the Muslim League. That is why when the people of East Bengal faced political, economic and cultural crises in the state of Pakistan, they were inspired by Bengali nationalist consciousness. A different form of Bengali thinking about the state became clear, which culminated in 1971.

Theoretically, the Pakistan Movement under the Muslim League represents a top-down, ideological nationalism rooted in religion. Bengali Muslims initially accepted this framing but rejected its homogenizing tendencies when their own language, culture, and political agency were threatened. The shift in Bengali Muslim political attitude—from support for Pan-Islamic nationalism (Pakistan Movement) to regional Bengali nationalism—is clearly reflected in key historical events. These events mark stages of transformation, where Bengali Muslims re-evaluated their political identity, leading ultimately to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The 1946 elections marked the height of Bengali Muslim alignment with the Muslim League’s Islamic nationalism, showing confidence in a united Muslim nation. However, the 1952 Language Movement was the first clear rupture in Bengali Muslims’ commitment to Islamic nationalism, signaling a shift toward ethno-linguistic nationalism and exposing intra-Muslim inequality.

Further, the Six-Point Movement (1966) was a watershed moment, transforming the political discourse from provincial rights to nationhood, laying the ideological foundation for Bangladesh’s independence. Thus, the trajectory from 1946 to 1966 marks a paradigm shift from participating in Islamic nationalism to asserting a culturally grounded, regional nationalism—a shift well-explained by constructivist, identity, and post-colonial theories. The final shift from Islamic nationalism to Bengali nationalism underscores a deeper truth in modern nation-building: No nationalism can endure without embracing pluralism, cultural equity, and democratic inclusion. Bengali Muslims initially imagined Pakistan as their homeland, but when that imagination became exclusionary and oppressive, they reimagined themselves as Bengalis first. This re-imagination paved the way for Bangladesh’s liberation in 1971, not just as a political act, but as a profound cultural and ideological rupture.

The Pakistan movement, orchestrated by the Muslim League with the fervent slogan ‘Islam in Danger,’ was fundamentally a calculated political maneuver. As the Muslim League sought to galvanize support for their cause, the specific details regarding the structure and governance of the proposed Pakistan state remained vague and poorly articulated, particularly to the electorate in Bengal. This lack of clarity prompts an essential inquiry: what informed the citizens’ ballot decisions during this crucial election period? In reality, it was the local leaders and influential figures within Bengal who played a more significant role in molding public sentiment and mobilizing voters than the overarching strategies of the All India Muslim League. This localized influence was particularly impactful, as these leaders understood the cultural and social dynamics of the Bengali populace better than the central authorities.

Despite the significant electoral victories achieved by the Muslim League in Bengal, under the leadership of prominent figures such as Husain Shahid Suhrawardy and the Abul Hashim group, the ambitious vision of Pakistan they promoted ultimately fell short. A critical observation is that the very concept of 'Pakistan' as envisioned by the All India Muslim League largely marginalized Bengal, implying that the dreams and aspirations of the Bengali Muslims were inadequately represented. This situation led to a growing sentiment of disenfranchisement among the Bengali people, and it became increasingly apparent that the Muslim League had misled them regarding their role in the new nation. This disillusionment intensified under the newly established governance of an independent Pakistan, where the concerns and identities of Bengalis were largely overlooked. In light of this perceived betrayal and neglect, a powerful wave of 'Bengali nationalist consciousness' began to take hold among the people, as they sought to assert their identity and rights within the political landscape of Pakistan. This emerging consciousness not only sought recognition but also laid the groundwork for future demands for autonomy and self-determination within the broader context of the country.

This study sought to understand the shift in political identity among Bengali Muslims, from advocates of Pakistani nationalism to pioneers of Bengali nationalism through a critical examination. In exploring why Bengali Muslims supported the Pakistan Movement, it is clear that their motivations were largely pragmatic rather than purely ideological. The desire for relief from Hindu socio-economic dominance and aspirations for Muslim political representation drove East Bengal's enthusiastic support. However, this initial alliance was not rooted in the homogenized pan-Islamic identity promoted by the All-India Muslim League, but rather in a regional desire for self-improvement and recognition. The analysis revealed that structural inequalities—economic, cultural, and political—were not incidental, but systemic, reinforcing a sense of internal colonization. The paper provided evidence of how economic disparity, exclusion from civil and military services, and denial of cultural rights (especially language) contributed to a growing perception of East Bengal as a subordinated region within Pakistan. Through the lens of post-colonial and constructivist theories, particularly Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities*, this study interpreted Bengali nationalism as an organically constructed identity. It was born out of shared grievances, collective memory, and a cultural-linguistic bond that resisted the imposed identity of West-centric Pakistani nationalism. Finally, the shift from Pakistan to Bengali nationalism was not a sudden rupture but a process rooted in historical experience, structural inequity, and cultural assertion. The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 marked not only a geopolitical realignment but also the redefinition of political identity among Bengali Muslims—from religious unity to ethno-linguistic self-determination. This transformation reaffirms that sustainable nationalism must be inclusive, rooted in justice, and reflective of the lived realities of its people.