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## From liberation to global presence: The journey of Bangladeshi national identity over five decades

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### Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of Bangladeshi national identity over five decades, tracing its journey from the liberation movement of 1971 to its current global presence. Rooted in the ideals of linguistic and cultural sovereignty, Bangladesh's national identity has been shaped by key historical events, socio-political transformations, and economic advancements. The paper examines the impact of the Bengali Language Movement, the Liberation War, and post-independence challenges, including political instability and the tension between secularism and religious nationalism. The role of globalization, digitalization, and mega infrastructure projects in fostering national pride is analyzed, alongside Bangladesh's contributions to global peacekeeping and climate advocacy. Looking forward, the study predicts an evolving identity shaped by economic progress, environmental leadership, and the aspirations of a digitally connected younger generation. This research highlights the dynamic interplay between tradition, modernity, and global influences in shaping an inclusive and progressive national identity.

**Keywords:** Bangladeshi national identity; Liberation War 1971; Bengali nationalism; Secularism; Religious Nationalism; Globalization; Economic Development; Padma Bridge; Digitalization; Climate Change Advocacy; Cultural Renaissance; Political Polarization

### 1. Introduction

The liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 marked a transformative moment in South Asian history, giving rise to a nation built on the ideals of linguistic and cultural sovereignty. Rooted in the Bengali Language Movement of 1952 and decades of political and economic disparities under Pakistani rule, the struggle culminated in a nine-month-long war against West Pakistan. The liberation war was fueled by mass atrocities, the denial of democratic rights, and the cultural alienation imposed by West Pakistan, which galvanized a shared sense of identity and purpose among Bengalis. By December 16, 1971, the victory of the Mukti Bahini and the intervention of India solidified the creation of an independent Bangladesh, establishing its sovereignty on the ideals of democracy, secularism, and cultural self-determination [1; 2].

Nationalism is often defined as the ideological belief in the right of a nation to self-determination, combining elements of cultural pride, political sovereignty, and social unity [3]. Meanwhile, national identity encompasses the shared sense of belonging among individuals within a nation, shaped by common history, language, and cultural traditions. For Bangladesh, nationalism was the driving force behind its liberation, rooted in the defense of the Bengali language and culture against policies of cultural homogenization by West Pakistan. In the post-liberation era, national identity has evolved as a dynamic concept, reflecting the tensions between secularism and religion, rural and urban values, and globalization and local traditions.

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This study aims to explore the journey of Bangladeshi national identity over five decades, from its roots in the liberation movement to its emergence as a global entity. It examines key historical events, cultural shifts, and socio-political transformations that have shaped the nation's identity. By analyzing the dynamic interplay of tradition, modernity, and globalization, this research contributes to understanding how Bangladesh has navigated challenges to maintain its national ethos while asserting its global presence.

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## **2. The Emergence of Bangladeshi Nationalism (Pre-1971)**

### **2.1. Roots of Nationalism in Colonial Bengal**

The roots of Bangladeshi nationalism trace back to colonial Bengal, where the Bengali Renaissance sparked cultural and intellectual awakening. Influential figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emphasized regional pride, education, and identity, fostering a sense of unity among Bengalis [4]. The economic exploitation of Bengal, particularly during the Partition of Bengal in 1905, exposed administrative inequalities, intensifying regional consciousness and laying the foundation for later political and cultural nationalism [1].

### **2.2. Role of the Language Movement of 1952**

The Language Movement of 1952 was pivotal in shaping Bangladeshi nationalism. The Pakistan government's decision to impose Urdu as the sole state language in 1948 alienated Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis. The protests of February 21, 1952, which saw several students and activists lose their lives, transformed linguistic identity into a unifying force [4]. This movement became a precursor to the broader demand for political and economic autonomy, serving as an enduring symbol of resistance and self-determination [1].

### **2.3. Political and Economic Disparities Under Pakistan's Rule**

Post-Partition, East Pakistan faced systemic economic and political marginalization. Despite being the major contributor to Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings through jute exports, East Pakistan received little investment in development. Politically, West Pakistan's dominance in governance sidelined the interests of East Pakistanis. These grievances were encapsulated in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six-Point Program of 1966, which called for regional autonomy and equitable resource distribution, galvanizing the independence movement [1].

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## **3. Nationalism during the Liberation War (1971)**

### **3.1. Cultural and Political Catalysts for Independence**

The Liberation War of 1971 was driven by cultural and political catalysts that defined the Bengali identity. The Language Movement of 1952 laid the foundation by uniting the people around the preservation of the Bengali language. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six-Point Program articulated demands for autonomy, challenging the systemic political and economic exploitation by West Pakistan. The brutality of Operation Searchlight in March 1971, which targeted civilians, intellectuals, and activists, was the final spark that galvanized the call for independence. Bengali songs, poetry, and art also served as powerful tools to inspire and unify the masses [4].

### **3.2. Unity in Diversity: Contributions to the Liberation Struggle**

The Liberation War exemplified unity in diversity, as people from different walks of life came together for a common cause. The Mukti Bahini, composed of civilians, military personnel, and students, became the backbone of the armed struggle. Women participated as freedom fighters and supporters, enduring and resisting wartime atrocities. Ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Hindus, also played critical roles in the resistance. Despite political differences, the shared vision of an independent Bangladesh transcended all divisions, forging a collective spirit of unity during the war [1].

### **3.3. Emergence of the "Spirit of 1971"**

The "Spirit of 1971" emerged as a cornerstone of Bangladesh's national identity. It symbolizes ideals such as justice, equality, secularism, and the sacrifices made during the struggle. The spirit continues to inspire national celebrations like Independence Day and Victory Day, as well as policies aimed at inclusivity and social justice. It has become a unifying principle, reflecting the values and aspirations of a free and independent Bangladesh [1; 4].

## **4. Post-Liberation Challenges to National Identity (1971–1980s)**

### **4.1. Building a New Nation: Political Instability and Governance Challenges**

The immediate post-liberation period in Bangladesh was marked by widespread political and economic instability. The war of independence left the country in ruins, with millions displaced, widespread poverty, and a collapsed infrastructure. Amidst these challenges, efforts to establish a democratic governance structure were undermined by political strife and weak institutional frameworks. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the subsequent coups led to military rule, disrupting democratic processes and delaying the creation of a stable national identity [5; 6].

Economic mismanagement during this period, exacerbated by global crises like the 1974 famine, further strained the fragile unity of the newly independent state. Political instability fostered divisions, where diverging ideologies competed to define Bangladesh's identity in its formative years [6].

### **4.2. The Role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Shaping Early National Identity**

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a foundational role in articulating Bangladesh's initial national identity, rooted in Bengali nationalism, secularism, socialism, and democracy. These principles, enshrined in the 1972 Constitution, reflected the aspirations of the liberation movement. Mujib envisioned a state where communal harmony and inclusivity prevailed, providing space for all communities to thrive under a unified identity [5].

However, Mujib's tenure was marred by economic crises and governance challenges, leading to growing dissatisfaction among the populace. His implementation of a one-party state under the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) in 1975 drew criticism for undermining democratic principles. While his vision of secular nationalism was a cornerstone of Bangladesh's early identity, his administration struggled to address the socio-economic realities of the nation, highlighting a gap between ideals and governance [6].

### **4.3. The Tension Between Secularism and Religious Nationalism**

One of the most enduring challenges to Bangladesh's post-liberation identity was the tension between secularism and religious nationalism. The 1972 Constitution declared secularism as a foundational principle, but this faced resistance from sections of society who sought to integrate Islamic values into national policy. After Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination, subsequent military regimes, particularly under Ziaur Rahman, diluted secular ideals by emphasizing Islam in state policies, including the addition of "Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rahim" in the Constitution preamble [7].

The ideological shift towards religious nationalism continued into the 1980s, with Islam being declared the state religion. These policy changes reflected the increasing influence of religious identity in public life, which often clashed with the secular foundations laid by the liberation movement. The evolving national identity during this period highlighted the complexities of reconciling the secularist aspirations of the founding leaders with the socio-political realities of a predominantly Muslim population [7].

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## **5. Economic and Cultural Transformation (1990s–2000s)**

### **5.1. The Impact of Globalization on National Identity**

The 1990s ushered in economic liberalization, allowing Bangladesh to integrate more deeply into the global economy. The rapid expansion of the ready-made garment industry, which became a cornerstone of the nation's export economy, not only spurred economic growth but also influenced societal shifts. While globalization introduced modernity and new technologies, it also challenged traditional cultural values and intensified urban-rural divides. However, these global influences were often indigenized, preserving the nation's unique identity while engaging with global markets [8; 9].

### **5.2. The Rise of Cultural Nationalism Through Literature, Cinema, and Art**

During the 1990s and 2000s, Bangladesh experienced a cultural renaissance, with artists, writers, and filmmakers addressing themes of identity, independence, and resilience. Novels and stories by authors like Selina Hossain and Shahaduzzaman explored historical and social changes, while the acclaimed film *Matir Moina* (The Clay Bird) brought global recognition to the Bangladeshi perspective on tradition and modernity. Art exhibitions celebrated rural life and struggles, while cultural festivals highlighted Bengali heritage, reinforcing a sense of pride in national identity [9].

### **5.3. The Role of the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Fostering Global Awareness of National Identity**

The Bangladeshi diaspora has been instrumental in promoting global awareness of the nation's cultural and historical identity. Through cultural organizations, academic contributions, and international media projects, diaspora communities emphasized Bangladesh's rich heritage and the struggles of the Liberation War. These communities also played a key economic role, contributing significant remittances that bolstered the national economy. Diaspora writers and filmmakers, such as Monica Ali and Rubaiyat Hossain, spotlighted Bangladeshi culture and issues, enhancing global understanding of the nation's complexities [8].

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## **6. Nationalism in Modern Bangladesh (2010s–Present)**

### **6.1. Shifts in National Identity in the Face of Economic Development and Political Polarization**

The national identity in Bangladesh since the 2010s has experienced a notable transformation driven by economic development and intensifying political polarization. Economic growth, symbolized by mega projects like the Padma Multipurpose Bridge, has fostered national pride and reshaped societal perceptions of progress and identity. Concurrently, political divisions rooted in historical narratives and elite-driven polarization have created ideological rifts, emphasizing the dual pillars of Bengali nationalism and Islamic identity. The political system's fragmentation continues to stifle consensus, exacerbating instability and influencing Bangladesh's evolving identity [10].

The ongoing debates over secularism and religion, intertwined with economic achievements, reflect the juxtaposition of modernity and tradition. Political crises like the trials of 1971 war crimes have further inflamed divisions, positioning political cleavages as central to Bangladesh's identity discourse [11].

### **6.2. The Influence of Mega Projects and Global Recognition**

Mega infrastructure projects have emerged as significant contributors to Bangladesh's economic growth and global image. The Padma Multipurpose Bridge stands as a landmark achievement, symbolizing Bangladesh's financial independence and engineering prowess. By improving connectivity, reducing travel time, and stimulating regional trade, the Padma Bridge is expected to boost GDP by 1.23% annually [12; 13]. This economic integration aligns with Bangladesh's aspirations to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs), showcasing its capacity for large-scale projects without foreign aid [14].

Additionally, the garment industry, as Bangladesh's largest export sector, has cemented the nation's position on the global economic stage. By providing employment and driving industrial growth, this sector has simultaneously fostered national pride and economic self-reliance.

### **6.3. The Interplay of Digitalization, Social Media, and National Pride**

The rise of digitalization and social media platforms has transformed the dissemination of national narratives, amplifying sentiments of pride and progress. Government initiatives for "Digital Bangladesh" have expanded internet access and technological literacy, enabling citizens to actively engage in national discourses. Social media has become a powerful tool for promoting achievements like the Padma Bridge and Bangladesh's economic success stories, galvanizing collective pride and fostering identity reaffirmation among younger generations [15].

At the same time, digital platforms have exacerbated political polarization, as opposing political factions leverage social media to propagate their ideological narratives. This dual role of digitalization highlights its influence in shaping both unity and division within modern Bangladeshi society.

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## **7. Global Presence and the Future of Bangladeshi Nationalism**

### **7.1. Bangladesh's Contributions to Global Peacekeeping, Climate Change Advocacy, and International Diplomacy**

Bangladesh has emerged as a significant actor on the global stage through its active participation in international peacekeeping, climate change advocacy, and diplomatic initiatives. As one of the top contributors to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions, Bangladesh's military has played a pivotal role in maintaining international peace and security, notably in conflict zones such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo [16]. This contribution has enhanced Bangladesh's image as a responsible global partner, leveraging soft power to showcase its commitment to peace and humanitarian values [17].

On the environmental front, Bangladesh has become a global advocate for climate change mitigation and adaptation due to its vulnerability to climate-induced disasters, such as sea-level rise, cyclones, and flooding. Despite contributing minimally to global emissions, Bangladesh has been instrumental in highlighting the challenges faced by climate-vulnerable nations. The country's climate change diplomacy calls for stronger international cooperation, emphasizing financial and technical support for adaptation efforts [18]. Furthermore, Bangladesh's policies and initiatives for reducing greenhouse gas emissions reflect its growing commitment to environmental sustainability [19].

Diplomatically, Bangladesh continues to navigate its regional and international relationships with pragmatism. Its emphasis on multilateralism, particularly in forums addressing economic development and security, underpins its strategy to engage with global stakeholders while safeguarding its sovereignty [23].

## **7.2. The Evolving Role of Religion, Ethnicity, and Regionalism in National Identity**

The interplay of religion, ethnicity, and regionalism continues to shape Bangladesh's national identity. Post-independence Bengali nationalism initially embraced secularism, focusing on linguistic and cultural unity. However, over time, the resurgence of Islamic identity has played a growing role in shaping the political and cultural discourse, often challenging secular ideologies [20]. While Islamic values remain prominent, there is a balancing act between religious inclusivity and secular principles in contemporary governance [22].

Ethnic and regional identities also play a significant role, particularly among indigenous populations and regions outside the Dhaka-centric political and economic framework. Movements advocating for regional autonomy and recognition of minority cultures underscore the need for an inclusive national identity that accommodates diverse ethnic and regional aspirations [21].

## **7.3. Predictions for the Next 50 Years of Bangladeshi Nationalism**

Looking ahead, Bangladeshi nationalism is expected to evolve in response to global and domestic forces. Economic growth, driven by mega projects and technological advancements, will likely strengthen a sense of national pride and identity. Bangladesh's role in peacekeeping and climate advocacy positions it as a key player in international diplomacy, fostering a sense of global citizenship alongside nationalistic sentiment.

However, political polarization and the continued negotiation between secularism and religious identity could remain central to Bangladesh's future trajectory. The challenge lies in fostering an inclusive nationalism that transcends ideological and regional divides while addressing the aspirations of minority groups. The younger generation, shaped by digital connectivity and global exposure, is likely to champion a progressive, pluralistic form of nationalism that aligns with global values.

Furthermore, Bangladesh's proactive stance on climate change adaptation may establish it as a global leader in sustainability and resilience. The country's success in balancing economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion will define its national identity over the next five decades.

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## **8. Conclusion**

Over the past five decades, the journey of Bangladeshi national identity has been a dynamic interplay of historical experiences, socio-political transformations, and global engagements. Emerging from the crucible of the Liberation War of 1971, Bangladesh initially anchored its identity in the ideals of linguistic pride, secularism, and cultural unity, epitomized by the "Spirit of 1971." However, the post-liberation period revealed challenges in translating these ideals into governance and social cohesion, with political instability, economic hardships, and ideological tensions between secularism and religious nationalism shaping the nation's early trajectory.

The 1990s and 2000s ushered in a period of economic liberalization, globalization, and cultural renaissance, marking a new phase in Bangladesh's identity. The expansion of the ready-made garment industry, the rise of diaspora communities, and cultural expressions in literature, cinema, and art reinforced a sense of national pride while navigating modernity and tradition. Simultaneously, the tension between secular values and religious nationalism continued to define societal and political debates, reflecting the complexities of an evolving identity.

In the modern era, economic development, symbolized by transformative mega projects like the Padma Multipurpose Bridge, has become a key driver of national pride and progress. Digitalization and social media have further amplified national narratives, fostering a renewed sense of unity among younger generations while also intensifying political

divisions. Bangladesh's active role on the global stage—through contributions to peacekeeping missions, climate change advocacy, and international diplomacy—highlights its emergence as a responsible and influential actor in global affairs.

Looking ahead, Bangladesh's national identity will continue to evolve, shaped by economic advancements, technological progress, and its role in international diplomacy. While political polarization and the negotiation between secularism and religion remain enduring challenges, there lies an opportunity for fostering an inclusive and pluralistic nationalism. The next generation, empowered by digital connectivity and global exposure, will play a pivotal role in shaping a progressive, resilient, and sustainable national identity that honors Bangladesh's history while embracing its aspirations for the future.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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