CHAPTER - II

ELITE POLITICS IN BANGLADESH
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Bangladesh hived off the Pakistani yoke in 1971 as a great champion of self-determination of a people with a distinct language and culture. Populist stunts used by the ruling elites of Pakistan which appealed to the religious sentiments proved futile to keep the two wings of the country separated by language, culture and economic prosperity united as a nation. However, independent Bangladesh soon started facing the problems of daily living which the mere sentiments of national self determination alone cannot solve. The new nation-state encountered the same problem of legitimacy which the united Pakistan did and which made secession the only solution for Bangladesh. This crisis of legitimacy gave rise to similar trends of using religion as ideology by the ruling elites of Bangladesh and the mainstream politics continued to revolve around Islam as it had happened in united Pakistan. Today in Bangladesh, the political elites continue to promote and give indulgence to religious sentiments among the masses in order to stay in political power whereas the masses also use religious sentiments to form political groups so that they get a better distributive justice from the State.

This thesis studies the issue of religion and politics from three perspectives. One from the perspectives of the elites who have used religion either to govern or to maintain their own privileges. A second perspective is to study the issue of religion from the side of the
masses where adherence to common religious symbols have been used by them to gain favours from the elites and also to contest for better distributive gains as against their fellow-beings. A third perspective will be to study the issue of religion from the side of the students who have tried to neutralise and even nullify religion in politics totally in order to create a modern State devoted to solving pragmatic problems rather than selectively pandering to populist demands.

In this chapter an attempt is made to study the politics of the ruling elites and the ways and means adopted by them through the use of religion, to manipulate the masses in order to further their own narrow interests. The use of religion as a political ideology has also given a chance to the military elites to capture as well as sustain power for long stretches of time. After discussing the role of elite theory in politics and the role of the military in politics of the underdeveloped states in general, this chapter proceeds to trace the specific history of the elites in Bengal and their use of religion to help them to come to power and to perpetuate themselves in power. For this, a chronological survey is done from the British period up to Ershad, tracing the gradual use and abuse of religion by the elites.

This chapter starts from the elite theory in political science which contends that political elites, in the sense of being small exclusive groups, are inevitable in any democracy. Elites and democracy are seen as contradictions because elites corner a larger share of resources. The elite theory, in its original form was a sociological response to the relative failure of modern democratic movements, judged by their own highest objectives.¹

Robert Michels propounded a theory of “iron law of oligarchy” which was a tendency of small ruling elites to emerge and persist in complex organisations. Michels thought that there were three basic causes leading to oligarchic tendencies: characteristic of the leaders,

organisational necessities and characteristic of masses. Bangladesh did not develop democratic institutions adequately which would have encouraged a larger participation by the elites. Therefore, the political system of Bangladesh could not accommodate elites except in very small numbers. As a result of this there emerged an acute competition between the ruling elites and the contending elites. Much of the secular-sacred tussle in the political process of Bangladesh may be understood as a competition for power between the ruling elites and the contending elites.

Max Weber contends that charismatic leadership emerges during periods of crisis or social breakdown when things are not working right and people look for solutions which the normal social life cannot provide. Bangladesh polity has been a case of almost perpetual institutional failure. This has made people seek for leaders with outstanding personal qualities who can stand above the system. This has made leadership in Bangladesh to have always been charismatic and religion as the sacred has been drawn upon to become something from which the charismatic leaders draw their legitimacy. This sacred is not the theological sacred, but rather a charismatic sacred, which has made the people bend towards those leaders who have led the masses in the name of Islam, though they were distant from the traditional authority of the ecclesia.

The most outstanding fact is that even after some half a century after the Partition and twenty-five years after having attained nation-hood, the pattern of leadership is still charismatic. The small ruling elites have themselves prevented the development of institutions because then it would have opened up space for a larger recruitment of elites and this would have destroyed their own exclusivity. This made the military one of the institutions through which the contending elites could come close to the State and military coups have been important instruments for the contending elites for coming to power. But

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the failure and the non-development of institutions have made the Bangladesh polity poor at problem-solving and delivering the goods to the people. Religion substitutes through moralism what remains materially unfulfilled.

Mosca argues that all societies have two “classes”, a class that rules and a class that is ruled. He holds the opinion that the ruling class holds power simply because an organised minority is inherently superior than an unorganised majority. This has also been very true in the case of Bangladesh. Here, the small elite has been very organised but the rest of the elites who have no access to State power have remained unorganised. This has made the emergence of an intermediate elites very difficult. Intermediate elites are crucial for the political stability of democracies and one of the major causes why democracy in Bangladesh has not been stable is because there has been no intermediate elite.

The absence of an intermediate elite have also caused a wide gap between the masses and the elites. The absence of the intermediate elites have also caused an economic vacuum where the masses have floated around without being engaged in productive purposes say in factories or land. This has caused violence and mass disobedience forcing the political system devote more time to maintain law and order rather than to attend to the creation of wealth and income generating assets to the people at large. The near absence of productive relations made the people depend upon the State to deliver them their goods. The State also could not deliver because it did not have a strong economy to back it up. Hence populism continued where sentimental sops and empty assertions of moralism were expected to fill up empty stomachs.

S.E. Finer in his well known work has pointed out to several reasons for the military to intervene in the political process of these states. One of the most important reasons he

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pointed out is the failure of the civilian government to maintain law and order and therefore a growing dependence on the military to perform this role. This kind of military intervention can happen under three circumstances: One, overt crisis which is the result of fragmentation of opinion into mutually hostile political movements of such potency and power that the government may feel deprived of any coherent body of popular support, and therefore to survive rely heavily on the military. Two, latent or chronic crisis, which is a more common situation. This connotes a situation wherein a political or a social minority rule in such a way that the masses hate, but they are too weak to overthrow. A third occasion may arise due to a power vacuum.

In the newly independent nation states which have been born out of essentially traditional societies have usually shown an inclination towards military regimes. This has happened because modernity which has been pursued by a small group of educated elites have failed to change the traditional relations in the societies. But unfortunately the zealous efforts to modernise, the doubts and ambivalence of the elites of political democracy and the narrow radius of public opinion, all push towards a greater concentration of power in the hands of a few people than what political democracy would permit. This gives rise to discontent and dissatisfaction among the masses in general as concentration of power in the hands of a few people gives rise to corruption. The State and the society thus enter into a deep conflict which has often been translated into internecine civil violence necessitating military rules. Military rule is one of the several practicable and apparently stable alternatives when parliamentary regimes falter.⁶

The organisational features of the military give them advantage over the civilian regimes. Discipline, cohesion, hierarchy, centralised command and unity both in decision making and execution level, makes it far more suited to tackle the problems of these states than

political parties and civilian institutions. It is mainly their experience in management of violence which enables the armed forces to intervene in the affairs of the State. Some authors are of the view that since the armed forces identify themselves with the nation's honour, sovereignty and power reside with and within the armed forces, the military elite identify their image as guardians of nations interests. This makes the military inherently have a charisma as the guardian of the people and as a saviour of the masses.

Lucian Pye sees the military as a highly modernising force because of its ideological and political superiority. But one of the greatest difficulty faced by the military regime is the lack of legitimacy. Military take-over is highly welcome in a state of chaos to overthrow the corrupt and incompetent civilian elites. But the principal shortcoming of the military is its failure to run civil institutions like the judiciary, or say the planning commissions or even ministries where decisions are taken in order to optimise utilisation and distribution of resources. Military regimes therefore operate in cases of typical power vacuums but not where civilian institutions exist and are supposed to deliver but have failed for some reason or the other. The crux of the above argument is that military rule necessarily means the absence of institutions.

Though the military take over from the civilian regime in a bid to modernise, but modernisation cannot be achieved merely through political gimmicks and populist slogans. Very often it is seen that the military regimes are not able to deliver the goods, but once in power they are reluctant to step down from authority. Though when they take over the power, they justify their actions as transitional to put back the nations on the rails of modernisation and stability. Therefore in order to justify their power they bypass the existing political institutions and appeal directly to the masses with populist slogans and

policies. They also, at times, try to civilianize their rule by creating political parties and holding elections. But very often these are superficial measures.

The conditions for a military dictatorship had always existed in Bangladesh. This is because of the following reasons. Firstly, the elites were small in number and the political institutions which were not very well developed could accommodate only a very small number of elites. The army became a channel of participating into the helm of affairs. This is why, military rule often gives a vent to those contending elites who, otherwise would not have had powers to acquire State power. Secondly, the bureaucracy or the industry or the professions which are prestigious alternatives to State power are not very well developed in Bangladesh. Political power is the only means to acquire social prestige. This is why, it is not an unusual sight to see municipal or school board elections taking place with massive fanfare of a Parliamentary election in Bangladesh.\(^{10}\) Capturing of political power is an important route to upward social mobility in Bangladesh. Hence the military which has the arms is a very good platform to capture power. Thirdly, the masses rely too much upon the central political system to deliver them solutions from their daily problems. The people want a perfectly organised order, where they would find everything organised. This is a psychological escape from freedom, where freedom would mean responsibility as well as accountability\(^{11}\). This makes the masses choose dictatorship over democracy. Fourthly, military dictatorship persists precisely because the army has the physical power to contain mass unrest, when such outbursts occur owing to the continued distress caused by political failure.

**PRE 1947 BENGAL**

The British slowly started consolidating their position in Bengal after Lord Clive won the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Due to the shift in emphasis to trade rather than to a land-
military system of the Mughal imperium, the East India Company had more use for the Hindu financiers rather than for the Muslim nobility. The Muslim elites felt a deep resentment because of this. The Muslim elites of Bengal, unlike the masses were not an indigenous population but hailed from Northern and Central India as State officers of the Mughal Imperium. This is why, culturally and even sometimes linguistically they had no affinity with Bengal. Since Bengal was always away from the centre of the Imperium, it never developed its own bureaucratic or military class as in the North and Central India. The few Muslim bureaucratic elites who were there were mainly immigrants, who retained their roots outside Bengal and hence did not develop attachments with the local people. Muslim elites of Bengal, as a social category was therefore not much of a presence.

Such social insignificance was confounded with economic insignificance when the Muslim elites fell behind the Hindus in commercial pursuits and money lending during the rule of the East India Company. The Muslim elites did not develop commercial pursuits for two reasons. While on one hand Islam did not favour usury, on the other hand, since imperial patronage was considered by the Muslims as something naturally due to them, the Muslim elites did not much care about commercial pursuits or the accumulation of private property. The inequality of the relative strength of the Muslim and Hindu elites where the latter far outnumbered the former, the handicap of the Muslim elites in the economic sphere fell out in educational also. Even in the madrashas, the Hindu students outnumbered the Muslims. Educational disparity, which told on the employment prospects of the Muslim elites during the British period became the fundamental plank of the Hindu-Muslim elite conflict.

The British introduced the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) which created changes in the social structure of Bengal. This system, vested proprietary rights in land and facilitated the sale of land. The land system in Bengal was always different from the rest of India,

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13 Ibid.
because of the prevalence of some kind of private property in land due to the Dayabhaga system of inheritance. The Permanent Settlement institutionalised the private property in land and reinforced the system already existing in Eastern Bengal. The Hindus, who were economically better off with their usurious and commercial pursuits, and many of them were quickly accumulating wealth by financing the East India Company’s trade, emerged as the new Zamindar class, through the purchase of land. Their allegiance with the East India Company was thus strong and their hold upon the peasantry was also firm. By the end of the 19th century most of the land came to be concentrated in the hands of the upper castes well to do Hindus. This in turn increased the gulf between the new rich Hindu aristocracy and the Muslim elites the latter of whom had neither economic nor social power.

The Permanent Settlement, made the zamindars pay a fixed revenue to the East India Company, and thus, the relationship between the zamindar and the government was spelt out. The Zamindar -Raiyat relations, continued to be determined by the prevailing local conditions and customs. This led to the exploitation of the peasants, who were pressurised to pay more and more to the zamindar, causing indebtedness and finally landlessness. There, thus grew in Bengal, landlessness in a significant manner, and a proletariat among the peasants came to exist. This proletarised peasantry was mainly Muslim. Elite-mass differentiation also brought forth a Hindu-Muslim differentiation.

The zamindari system, led to the subinfeudation of land, because, each zamindar was quite eager to reduce his risks. This caused the fragmentation of land. The Muslim laws of inheritance, caused further land fragmentation and subdivision, which made them, once more economically worse off than their Hindu counterparts. Thus, between the poor Hindu peasant and the poor Muslim peasant, the latter’s plight was even more severe.

15 n. 12, p.13
16 Sen, n.2. Also see Pecivai Spear, History of India, Vol. 2, from 16th to 20th Century, (New Delhi, Penguin), 1965.
17 Ibid
Land owning having become a very profitable venture, many were now eager to buy land. Acquisition of land due to the failure to pay debts was also a method of acquiring land. Rents were high, as a result indebtedness also increased to make money lending an important business. This trend saw the rise of the intermediate class in the agrarian situation. Among this intermediate class, was also a class of the well-to-do farmer, who hailed mainly from the Muslim community. They formed the jotedar class. They increased their wealth, through subletting of land, and through the commercialisation of agriculture. This intermediate class of peasants, who were mainly Muslims, and the intermediate class of rent-collectors and money lenders, who were mainly the Hindus, became the most important players in the elite conflict in Bengal that formed the back-bone of the two-nation theory later on.18

Agrarian poverty in Bengal would not have been so severe had the investments in land continued. But the Hindu zamindars who did not hail from the traditional agricultural class became absentee landlords. There was a drain of wealth from the rural to urban Bengal, mainly used for speculation or spent on conspicuous consumption. The high rent and the rigid payment schedules further discouraged the investments into the land. Conditions of a mass society thus began to develop among the poorer peasants of East Bengal.

The Hindu zamindar was an absentee landlord and hence peasant loyalty grew around the Muslim jotedars, who often lent support to the peasants in the times of crisis. This created an axis between the peasants and the new intermediaries, both of whom were Muslims. This is why though the conditions for the development of left politics were rife in Eastern Bengal it became difficult to organise the peasants as a mass because their bonds with the intermediate land elites were strong in whom the peasants found their patrons and succours. This class of intermediaries were the conservative elements, who neither supported the communist movements nor appreciated the Hindu-Muslim unity. These

18 Ibid
intermediaries became the contenders of Hindu power and it is through the politics of this class of contending Muslim elites that the two-nation theory found most favour.

The Permanent Settlement which created the category of *zamindar* gave rise to the "Bhadralok" class. The Bhadraloks took advantage of the English education and paved the way for the wider Hindu recruitment in the government services. The Muslim elite who was mainly agrarian did not have the same advantages of urban employment as his Hindu counterpart. The Muslims elites became mainly rural and the Hindu elites became mainly urban. This added another dimension of the rural-urban divide to already uneven development of the two main religious communities - Hindus and Muslims, leading to further increase in the existing gap.\(^{19}\) The Partition of Bengal, whether it was the one of 1905 or the one of 1947, was also a desire on the part of the Muslim elites to "control" Dhaka as their city as opposed to Calcutta.

The scheme of Partition of Bengal in 1905 had a positive effect on the Muslims psyche in Bengal who by that time had acquired some level political consciousness. They welcomed the decision of partition of Bengal and thought that it would give them an opportunity to participate in public affairs which were previously denied to them.\(^{20}\) The dominant opinion among the Muslims was that the Hindu version of the partition was politically motivated because the Hindus felt the partition to be a British conspiracy to separate a united people. To the Muslims the Hindu sentiment of being one people appeared as being a highly imagined one and they upheld the British propaganda that the sole reason for the partition was better administration.\(^{20}\)

The political use of religious symbols for the anti-partition movement led by the Indian National Congress generated hostile reaction among the Muslims.\(^{21}\) It was against this social upheaval generated by the anti-partition movement that Nawab Salimullah(1871-

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\(^{19}\) Radhakamal Mukherjee, *Land Problems of India*, (London, Longmans Green and Co. Ltd.).


1915) of Dhaka led the Simla deputation to Lord Minto and a political organisation of the Muslims were envisaged to ensure large political support in East Bengal. The birth of All India Muslim League (1906) which started off the process towards the formation of Pakistan originated in the anti-partition movement in Bengal. To the Muslims it appeared as the first time ever since their loss of power to the British where they could once more become politically relevant and active in the power politics.

The Bengali Muslim elites who struggled for space with the Hindus in the British bureaucracy and jobs, formed the main support base of the Muslim League. However soon after it was formed the Muslim League came under the influence of other North Indian Muslims whose were not interested with issues affecting East Bengal at all. This belied the original purpose with which Nawab Salimullah undertook to form a political body of the Muslims on an all India scale. There thus grew a tussle between the Ashrafi elites, who were the erstwhile ruling elites and the newly emerging, agrarian middle class Muslim elites, who were aspiring to find favours in the British system. It was from the latter class, that the demand for reservations came during the course of the struggle for Independence. Within the Muslim League there thus grew a power tussle between the old Muslim aristocracy and the new Muslim elites. In the struggle for leadership the older generation could remain in ascendancy due to the constant encouragement and patronage of the British. The new generation of elites who aspired for bureaucratic jobs and modern education were anti-British.

At this juncture, Fazlul Haq (1873-1962) emerged as the leader of Muslims in Bengal. Unlike the older generation of elite groups of Muslims, who were pro British, Haq believed that the continuation of British power in India was not to the best of interest of the Muslims. Fazlul Huq spoke about the exploitation of the peasants in general, be it by

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24 This was explicitly and forcefully propagated in his speeches. Dey ed. Pakistan Prastab O Fazlul Haq. (Pakistan Demand and Fazlul Haq). (Bengali). (Calcutta. Ratna Prakashan), 1972.
the Hindus, or the Muslims. Krishak Praja Party, henceforth to be referred to as the KPP, came into existence to voice the concerns of the peasants. Haq's support of the peasants annoyed the Muslim intermediary elites. To this elite Haq appealed as a Bengali. This was important because there was already a Bengali versus non-Bengali struggle in the Muslim League. It must be noted that while the Muslim elite was a Muslim when contending against the Hindus for jobs and so on but when it came to join the Muslim mainstream, they preferred their regional identities. This is why, the seeds of Bangladesh were sown even prior to that of Pakistan.

With the annulment of the partition of 1905, it became evident to the Muslim elites that the Hindu will could prevail against the British imperial decree. Therefore, soon after the annulment of the Partition the League leaders generally felt was that some kind of understanding with the Hindu community must be achieved without which the future of the Muslim community could be jeopardised.

However, the desire of the Muslim League mainly through Jinnah, was to seek an alliance with the Hindus, and particularly with the Congress. This was an attempt to participate in the mainstream of politics, education, profession, and bureaucracy. This resulted in the famous Lucknow Pact of 1916. The Bengali Muslims resented the Lucknow Pact because it gave the Muslims greater representation in the Muslim minority provinces, and by the same token, in the provinces, in which they were in a majority, i.e. Bengal and Punjab, the Hindus were given overrepresentation. Thus, in Bengal where the Muslims constituted 52.6% of the total population, they got only 40% of the legislative seats. The Lucknow Pact destroyed the very desires of the Muslims which was to be masters in a province where they were in a majority. All the leaders who participated in the Lucknow Pact were

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25 Das, n.23.
considered to have betrayed the cause of the Bengali Muslim. The principal among them was Fazlul Haq.27

The Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1918 disapproved of the communal electorates in principle but did not undo the Lucknow Pact. The Muslims continued to hope for the reservations in the states where they were in a minority, as in the Lucknow Pact, but they resented the Hindu reservation in the States where the Hindus were in a minority. This created a rift between the “majority” and the “minority” Muslims. As a mediation of interests between the two situations viz; one of Muslim majority and the other of Muslim minority, the way out appeared to be a distinct and an exclusive territory for the Muslims. This discourse when articulated further gave birth to the two-nation theory. Riots broke all over Calcutta and the Muslim League raised the slogan of “Islam in danger”.28 Riots showed to the Muslims their numerical strength,29 and soon staunch communalists were beginning to be preferred in favour of those who stood for the Hindu-Muslim unity. It was in response to this growing communalism that Fazlul Haq organised the peasants of Bengal into the Krishak Praja Party in 1922 so that economic exploitation would gain precedence over communal identities.

Meanwhile the Government of India Act of 1919 envisaged the slow opening up the administration to the Indians in the model of the Lucknow Pact. The Muslims of Bengal welcomed greater provincial autonomy, but through the minority clause the Hindus gained power over them. The Act of 1919 thus completely nullified the very meaning of the Muslim political struggle. Minority representation which worked very well with the Muslims all over India was the very reason why it came under fire in the Muslim majority province of Bengal. This is why, though the Hindu-Muslim unity worked fairly well all over India where the Muslims were in a minority, such a unity failed in the Muslim

27 Das. n.23.
28 Broomfield. n. 21
29 Das. n. 23, p.37
majority provinces of Bengal and Punjab. These were to be later Partitioned as the separate nation of Pakistan.

With the Government of India Act it became evident that the British was seriously considering the transfer of power. This made the Bengali elite, both Hindus and Muslims to take preparations for receiving autonomy. The Swaraj Party formed in 1923 by C.R. Das was a parting of ways with the Gandhian Non-Cooperation and ultimately with the Congress. The Swaraj Party because of its disagreement with Gandhi, started representing the Bengali regional interests by default. The Swaraj Party when in power gave very heavy concessions to the Muslims by way of reservation of jobs. It realised that in Bengal for any party to remain in power concessions to Muslims was needed.\(^{30}\) This would not have been possible under the minority policy of the Congress by which the Hindus and not Muslims qualified for special treatment in Bengal.

The Swaraj Party won the election in the seats reserved for the Muslims by placing Muslim candidates against the Muslim League candidates. The experience of Bengal showed to the Muslims that joint electorates were better than communal electorates, because of their numerical strength over the Hindus. But joint electorates would belie the case for job reservations for the Muslims. The disparity in education would not have enabled the Muslims to compete in the job market. While reservation in jobs was needed, reservation in electorates was a problem. Caught in this paradox, autonomy was the only way out. Hence the demand for the Partition was seeded in Bengal.

That the Muslims in Bengal and in Punjab behaved differently from the rest of India was very apparent in the elections of 1937. The Congress won everywhere in India, except in the Muslim dominated provinces. It was clear that the Muslims as minority and the Muslims in majority were two different propositions. The minority Muslims were with the mainstream, the majority stood for secession. The elections results of 1937 showed to the

Muslim League which claimed to represent the Muslims as a community, that it had failed to compromise between the minority Muslim and the majority Muslim, the former showing an inclination towards the Congress and the latter showing a preference for Muslim parties other than the Muslim League. The Muslim League which tried to represent the Muslims in general was thus a failure. This made the Muslim League harden its line on the Muslim homeland, a matter which concerned the Bengalis and the Punjabis but not the rest of India as such.

In the elections of 1937 the KPP formed the second largest party in Bengal. The Congress obtained the largest number of seats though it could not win a clear majority. But the Congress Central Committee refused to form coalition ministry in any of the provinces. As a result the KPP formed the government with the Muslim League. An alliance of the ML and the KPP came to power in Bengal in 1937 with Fazlul Haq as the Prime Minister. This alliance was important because the left wing politicians, who tried to organise the peasants against the landed elites could not separate the big peasants and the Muslim jotedars. Much of the peasant vote was lost to the left parties. Meanwhile the KPP also lost out on some of its peasant votes because some votes went to the left parties. The KPP having lost the support of the leftists sought an alliance with the League.

But the League was a body which mainly reflected the interests of the zamindar class. Haq’s cabinet consisted of leading members of the Zamindar classes whom Fazlul Haq had opposed politically. This created great dissident in the cabinet ministers in Bengal. This coalition government also gave an opportunity to the ML to strengthen their position in Bengal. Fazlul Haq’s government faced polarisation between Bengali Muslim political elites who were joined by the left wing Hindu political elites on the one hand and right wing Hindu politicians joined by Hindu conservatives on the other. Haq also invited the dissatisfaction of the Muslim League over the abolition of zamindari. This is where we find the importance of H.S. Suhrawardy’s (died in 1963) “undivided Independent Bengal”, where the Muslims being the majority would be able to hold on to their own and by
eliminating the Muslim League, the interests of the common Bengali Muslim, would not be jeopardised.

There were many coordinates of conflict. One was between the Muslim peasant and the Hindu landlord, a second one between the peasant and the land intermediaries, the third was between the Hindu and the Muslim elites and a fourth one was between the Bengali Muslim elite and the Hindu elite. But all these coordinates intersected at the conflict between the Hindu and the Muslim elites. Hence a Muslim homeland in the sense of an exclusive geographical territory was assumed to be the solution for all problems. The Muslim League appropriated the politics of the region because it was quick to monopolise the demand for Pakistan.

In the Lahore session of the Muslim League in 1941 Fazlul Haq was called upon by Jinnah to move the Pakistan Resolution. It chalked out the basic principles viz.:

"... that geographical contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims were in a numerically in a majority as in North Western and Eastern zones of India, should be grouped and constitute independent states in which the constituent units should be autonomous and sovereign". 31

Day by day several negotiations like the Simla Conference (1945), Cripps Mission (1942) and Cabinet Mission (1946) failed to bridge the gap between the two major communities.

The elite conflict in united Bengal can well be illustrated in H.S. Suhrawardy’s plan for “Sovereign Independent Bengal” at a press conference on 27 April 1947 the last Premier of Undivided Bengal. His proposal was supported by Abul Hashim left wing leader of Bengal Provincial Muslim League along with Bengal Congress led by Sarat Bose, Communist Party of India and M.N. Roy’s Radical Democratic Party. At the all India level Suhrawardy, as the Chief Minister of Bengal wanted Bengal League and Congress to

work together in order to create confidence in Hindu mind and dispel their fear of grouping as envisaged under the Cabinet Mission Plan. Within this lay the germ of "Independent Bengal". This call for independent Bengal created a lot of confusion among the Muslim League leaders and the Congress leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel adamantly opposed it on the ground of being regional. 32

Hence with the failure of all attempts of negotiations between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, Bengal was partitioned in 1947 and formed the Eastern wing of Pakistan. On 14th August 1947 Pakistan came into existence.

**BENGAL DURING THE PAKISTAN PERIOD (1947-1971)**

Political stability never came to Pakistan. The Indian National Congress had a long political tradition behind it, a solid political platform and as well as a well defined programme of action. The Muslim League on the other hand was basically concerned with mobilising the Muslim masses in India for one object only, viz. winning a separate homeland for Muslims. 1 This limited their political objectives and the absence of a well defined and widely based political platform made it difficult for the Muslim League to be pragmatic in its political actions after their main aim i.e. secession from India was achieved.

With the winning of Pakistan the Muslim League's topmost priority was fulfilled. It now concentrated on the State building activities. In this Pakistan politics faced certain contradictions. Since the basis of the State was religion it had to be accommodated into the foundation of the Constitution. But the State as a delivery system relies on its institutions which are difficult to be achieved without a certain degree of secularism. 33 The importance of secularism is not an antonym of the religious, but it is that pragmatism

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32 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics In Bengal*, (New Delhi, Impex India), 1976, p.p. 203-244.
which is needed to give any idea its concrete shape. The failure to evolve pragmatic solutions to the problems facing the nation made Pakistan rely on the charismatic rather than the rational-legal forms of authority. This is precisely why despite the basic leanings of the people towards secularism and modernity the sacred has always entered Pakistan on the back of the charismatic leadership. The prevalence and the need for charismatic leadership shows the conditions of institutional failure always prevailing in Pakistan. During times of dire crisis that are witnessed through its military coups such conditions of institutional failures erupt with vengeance.

The style of functioning of Pakistan’s charismatic leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah prevented intermediary leaders from sharing party’s decision making process. The leadership thus created led to Jinnah’s assumption of autocratic powers. This further limited political training to intermediary leaders. The later political instability could be attributed to the lack of opportunity for grooming middle level leaders. In Bengal where the Muslim League members won strongest popular support, League’s political and organisational weaknesses became more pronounced.

Since raison d’être of Pakistan was based upon religion, futile efforts were made by a few highly placed secular minded persons to separate religion from politics. Therefore Pakistan meant an Islamic State, Islamic government and Islamic constitution. It was an effort of self determination of the Muslims in the sub-continent, an attempt to articulate an abstract ideology into pragmatic nation state. During the constitution making process, four important points of view were expressed: a traditionalist view which was exclusively dominated by the Ulema who thought that with recognition of Islam, their own institutions would be established; a modernist view which was held by most politicians, westernised business men and many professionals; third was the secularist view which was held by the

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34 Zillur R. Khan. Leadership in Least developed Nations, (Foreign and Comparative Studies/South Asia Series, No.8, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University), 1983.
civil servants and the military and fourth was the *fundamentalist view* which was held by the religious political parties.\(^{35}\)

It should be noted that with the birth of Pakistan the Bengali leaders of the Muslim League who were vanguards of the Pakistan Movement were thrown to the background. For example Fazlul Haq and Suhrawardy were dropped from the Muslim League hierarchy on the question of political autonomy.\(^{36}\) The bureaucratic and the military elites of Pakistan were overwhelmingly non-Bengalis.\(^{37}\) It was for this reason that East Bengal always harped on parliamentary democracy because its numerical superiority would out weigh its disadvantage of not having enough representation in the bureaucratic and military elite. Conditions of elite competition thus prevailed from the very outset of the formation of Pakistan where the Bengalis thought that it was unto them that the entire credit of Pakistan should come. At the same time the West Pakistanis believed that they were the pure Pakistanis and true Muslims since they were the descendants of the erstwhile imperial nobles who ruled India all through the medieval period. The psychology of the West and the East Pakistanis were different. In very precise terms, the West Pakistanis were restorative, the East Pakistanis were renascent. In the course of this chapter this point will be further clarified.

Jinnah laid the foundation of the Constitution of Pakistan and its federal formula. The absolute importance of an Islamic Constitution was produced through religious slogans and exhortations which were used by the politicians to build morale in the face of unprecedented social and economic problems faced by the state. These included uniting the country behind the war with India (1947), to encourage private and provincial effort of rehabilitation of refugees to show tolerance towards Hindus in the name of Islamic tradition and to unite the population behind the Islamic Universalism.\(^{38}\) Religion was the

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\(^{38}\) Binder, n.35.
base for mobilising a people into a national unity so that national-religious sentiments would perform the functions of the rational-legal institutions in solving the problems.

The main Committee set up by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan was called the Basic Principles Committee which was entrusted to make necessary recommendations on the basic principles of the future constitution of Pakistan. But it could not formulate a programme acceptable to both the wings because of the conflict between the Punjabi and Bengali faction within the Muslim League. The main criticism against this report is that it was a mixture of parliamentary and presidential system allowing too many prerogative powers to the President. The Report also did not offer effective autonomy to the provinces. The emergency powers of the President and the recommendation of Urdu as the only national language of Pakistan were opposed by the Eastern wing. The Eastern wing saw in all of the above measures an attempt at hegemony by the West Pakistanis over them. This realisation was translated over the years into a demand for provincial autonomy and from thereon to complete secession from Pakistan.

As a counter proposal to the Basic Principles Committee recommendations a group of political workers, journalists and lawyers of all opposite shades and groups formed a Committee of Action for Democratic Federation to mobilise public for full provincial autonomy. The Committee later on came to be known as Democratic Federation suggesting that the federation of Pakistan should be a democratic one so that the rights of the majority could be protected. The Democratic Federation was not a political party and had heterogeneous elements whose views did not always coincide. This federation soon lost on its organisational ability. The leftist democratic parties continued to give leadership to the democratic movement for autonomy and the Language Movement which subsequently followed.

39 Sen, n.2.
It was in this context that exploitation and domination of the ruling elite started over East Pakistan. The National Language Policy and the Economic Development Policy were aimed directly or indirectly to dominate the people of East Pakistan and all this was done in the name of Islamic State and Islamic Constitution. The League leaders needed great insight and political skills to understand the problems of the diverse regions in order to establish guideline for an equitable distribution of political and economic power.

The masses expected that the State was expected to solve the mundane problems like poverty, health and education. The masses in East Bengal have always looked towards someone in authority, at the helm of affairs, a person, directly accountable, responsible and approachable, who would solve the problems of the people. The search for this person is the basis for inwardly desiring a dictator in East Pakistan. In reality, a modern State is supposed to facilitate individual initiatives at solving their own problems and not solve the problems for the individuals. But in East Pakistan, the State was expected to do things in place of the individual agents. This created perpetual disappointments in the minds of the people about the efficacy of the State machinery.

Regional elites were thus expected to attend to the problems of delivery. Regional autonomy was a desire to derive more practical solutions from the State. Once in history, this regional autonomy was sought through the projection of the Muslim autonomy against India, which was for better distributive gains than what the national-level politics would have allowed. This time it was greater democracy and larger provincial autonomy, once again for the same purpose viz; to make the State deliver better and attend more efficiently to the problems of everyday life of ordinary people.

For the people of East Pakistan, the Muslim League had failed as far the expectations of the people out of it was concerned. Under such expectations perhaps any other party

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41 The Objective Resolution passed in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan laid down the broad framework.
42 Murshid, n. 4.
would have also failed but what annoyed the people of East Pakistan very much was the attempt of the Muslim League to deny their demands. The Pakistani government tried to neutralise the regional problems and provincial organisations through populist slogans and branding the opposition as “anti-national”. This aroused political passions as the people of the East felt betrayed and let down. The Muslim League tried to take the credit of bringing about Pakistan and demanded submission of all other opposition organisations. This was resented by the Bengalis.

As the League leaders came under fire, there were no leaders from the Eastern wing to contain the mass discontent. Muslim League leaders like Nazimuddin and Nur ul Amin had no roots in rural Bengal. As the Muslim League started losing legitimacy, the non-secular forces gained ground. The Muslim League did not lose legitimacy because it was secular, it lost out on its legitimacy because it could not propound the Islamic ideology strongly enough and in this led the legitimacy of the State to be questioned.

By 1956 it started becoming clear that the secular believers in parliamentary democracy were loosing out to non-secular Islamists who received support not only from West Pakistan religious parties such as Jamaat-i-Islami, Nizam-i-Islam but also from the conservative faction of the Muslim League. The greatest victory of the Islamists was the Constitution of 1956 in which the religious principles were incorporated as an integrated part requiring setting up of an Islamic body to review laws and also making it mandatory for the President of the Islamic Republic to be a Muslim by faith. It should be noted that most of the ruling elites who tried to pass off as Islamists were individuals of Western education who were basically secular in their political attitude, but they sought justification of their policies under the garb of Islam in order to pacify the growing dissatisfaction of the deprived region. In the debates which concerned the structure of the State, the actual problems of East Pakistan remained unattended. The need for a strong, identifiable,

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44 Ibid.
personalised government grew as the pragmatic counterpart of what had been merely ideological. This was the underlying condition producing an inner need for military dictatorship.

When the military elite led by Ayub Khan took over power in 1958 the little representation that East Pakistan had in the decision making process was lost as in the military the Bengalis were very poorly represented. Ayub Khan did not undertake any special provision to give the Bengalis a share in the decision making process. Ayub Khan’s mission was to build the institutions of the State and since the people were not attentive to secular institutions it had to be forced upon them through military dictatorship. Ayub’s military regime tried to do what democracy should have done in Pakistan. The institution of Basic Democracy launched by Ayub Khan was not only designed to limit urban participation but also to create a legitimacy for his regime. He also raised populist slogans like “Islam in Danger” in order to discredit the movement for autonomy.\(^45\)

The Basic Democracy system introduced by Ayub Khan was essentially a strategy to beat the political parties. It was a system of indirect elections, which limited the scope of direct democracy and increased the power of the bureaucrats. Hence the system came to be heavily influenced by administrators. This perpetuated the rule of bureaucrats similar to that of colonial India. Ayub argued that the politicians had had their chance and failed completely. The petty jealousies and the narrow self-interests of the politicians were attempted to be curtailed through paid officers of the bureaucracy.\(^46\) This policy of giving predominance to the bureaucracy over the political leaders worked to the disadvantage to the people of East Bengal since their representation into the bureaucracy was limited.

The Martial law under Ayub Khan regime claimed to bestow democratic rights of the people by means of democratic franchise and indirect election. It was a five tiered pyramidal scheme beginning from the Union Council at the bottom and the Provincial

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\(^{45}\) It should be noted that this slogan originated in Bengal during the riots of 1918.

Advisory Council at the top. Ayub justified indirect democracy by saying that the people were not yet ready to take up the responsibility of matured democracy. Hence his was a scheme of "guided democracy". But it was this very bureaucratic structure, guided by abstract and distant rules and not the direct, personalised patrons, that irritated the East Bengali people. "Guided-democracy" was destined to fail in East Pakistan. The real face to face relations between the people and their leaders has been the aspiration of the East Bengalis. "Guided democracy" belied this aspiration because it spoke of impersonal institutions and distant rules. This is why, a government with abstract rules was essentially against the grain of the Eastern province. The demand for autonomy intensified.

The 1962 Constitution of guided democracy widened the gap between East and West Pakistan instead of bringing harmony. With its enactment began the disintegration of Pakistan as a single unit. Ayub Khan's coterie of advisors consisting of bureaucrats and business men looked upon national integration as a strong centre which alone could keep Pakistan together. But unfortunately it seems that they knew very little of East Pakistan and hence they made mistakes in handling the issues. Pakistan as a single unit could survive under two fundamental conditions: (1) a political machinery to help the people of the two wings to play an equal and effective part in the political institutions of the country and (2) institutionalised decentralisation in order to enable East Pakistan to manage its own affairs.47

Islamic resurgence under Ayub Khan continued on a different plane. Songs of Tagore were banned because of its secular overtones. Public dancing was regarded as un-Islamic and Ayub put a stop to them.48 These were very much a part of the culture of the people of East Bengal and hence had deep sentimental connotations. Ayub raised the slogan "Islam in Danger" in order to precipitate communalism and whip up anti-India feelings and thus consolidate his position. The Islamic emphasis in the constitution was enlarged under

47 Moudud Ahmed, n.40.
48 Jayanta Kumar Ray, Democracy and Nationalism on Trial: The Case of East Pakistan, (Simla Institute of Advanced Studies), 1968, p.308.
Ayub Khan. The fundamental rights and power of litigation all had a distinct Islamic fervour, without mentioning the word. The Constitution had also declared Pakistan to be an "Islamic Republic".49

Ayub in order to further consolidate his position announced Presidential elections on 2 January, 1965. Ms. Fatema Jinnah stood against Ayub Khan as the candidate of the Combined Opposition Party with a view to carry out the popular movement especially in East Pakistan. On 26 September, 1964 twenty three prominent theologians issued a statement in Karachi that no woman could become the head of the State in accordance to the Islamic law. Though this propaganda had relatively little impact in East Pakistan, Ms Jinnah did not get an overwhelming majority as observers expected.50 The reason behind this could be that being neglected by Provincial government they preferred a strong President. Furthermore Ayub had created a feeling that they could expect a better deal from a strong government.51 It was this basic nature of the electorate consisting of 80,000 Basic Democrats which in fact decided the fate of Ms. Jinnah.

The Hazratbal Incident, (1963) i.e. the theft of the sacred relic of the Prophet was used by the Pakistani government to whip up communal feelings in East Pakistan. Ayub’s regime thought that war with India could distract the Eastern wing from their demand for autonomy, but in reality the result was different. The demand for autonomy was strengthened after the war.52

Thus the sacred and the secular entered into a renewed battle in Pakistan as East Pakistan, demanded more autonomy. The sacred, which was the differentiating factor for the Muslims when demanding a separate homeland for the Muslims had different connotations for the East and the West Pakistanis at the very outset. The West Pakistani Muslims, who were the descendants of the erstwhile nobility, felt their exclusivity eroding with the rise of

49 For details see Afzal Iqbal, *Islamization in Pakistan*, (Delhi, Vishal Publishers), 1984, p.p.75-83.
51 Ray, n. 48. p.278.
52 Ibid.
the Hindu elites under the British rule. It is obvious that the Muslim elites of the Western provinces due to their social inertia and their arrogance of having been once in power had become somewhat change resistant. These elites, therefore sought an exclusive area for themselves through a separate homeland for the Muslims where the Hindus would be automatically eliminated from competing. This made the West Pakistanis were restorative.

But the Muslims of East Pakistan were different. As we have already mentioned in the history of Islam in the earlier chapter, they wanted to use Islam as a world view to wrest the soil from the Hindus and to fight exploitation in a general scale. Thus through Islam, they wanted to universalise themselves as a separate people. This is why, they wanted to project themselves outwardly as a people, in a similar fashion as the Vaishnavites had done in the 15th century, or the Faraizi movement had done in the 18th century, and later the Bengal Renaissance, which started with Raja Rammohan Roy. The Muslim elites in Bengal, wanted to participate in this grand Renaissance, through their religion and through their own symbols of power. One thing becomes clear and that is, Islam in East Pakistan was renascent. This is why, the West Pakistani Islam could not appeal to the East Pakistani because of the two very different interpretations of Islam itself. When East Pakistan fought for autonomy, the sacred was relegated into the background in favour of the secular, through which, regional autonomy could be secured.

It has been observed in the history of pre-Pakistan Bengal that the Muslim identity grew in response to several factors. The poor peasants saw the roots of their exploitation be in the callousness of the absentee zamindars and unscrupulous Hindu money-lenders and thus sought the patronage of the Muslim middlemen, viz.; the jotedars. The jotedars wanted to appropriate rural power and the ownership of land and thus wanted the Hindus to move out. The urban Muslims who after having accumulated some wealth through the jute trade wanted to have a better chance in the competition for jobs and so on. The Muslim intelligentsia who were the professionals and the intellectuals felt left out of the Bengal
Renaissance wanted to have their own share of the modernisation process.\textsuperscript{53} The elites therefore, competed at various levels with the Hindus and for their own reasons sought a pan-Indian fraternity to contain the Hindus in numbers.

The search for an Islamic identity made the elites also come closer to the orthodox elements which belied their essential search for modernity through a religious identity. It should be highlighted as a contrast that the masses did adhere to the orthodox elements to inspire themselves to action, but the elites stressed the sacred as an ethnic identity, which related to political power and economic entitlements. This is why the elites of Pakistan were a heterogeneous group, having different interests and goals.

The elites who led the demand for regional autonomy initially were the then ruling elites of East Pakistan. They had wanted autonomy from the Hindus in order to realise themselves as a people who claimed inheritance of the soil of Bengal. They had combined forces with the West Pakistani elites to gain a numerical preponderance over the Hindus, but for the West Pakistanis to have judged this as a desire on the part of Suhrawardy et al, to be with Pakistan as a nation had been a gross error. With the formation of Pakistan the East Pakistanis naturally sought a much larger share in the power set-up than what West Pakistan had warranted. This is because, from the creation of the Muslim League to the winning of Pakistan was essentially a contribution of the Bengali leaders and most importantly of the students. Had the Bengalis not taken so much of an interest it is doubtful whether the Muslim League would have gained such legitimacy at all.\textsuperscript{54}

Therefore, when the Bengalis were ignored it hurt both their sense of fair play and also egos. The character of the Bengali elite is such that he does not suffer domination and the character of the Punjabi elite is such that he cannot but dominate. Egos clashed to make the demand for autonomy and the War of Liberation to be one of the most hotly fought battles of our times.


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
The issue of the official language, whether it should be Urdu or Bengali, became the symbol of a Bengali identity. Urdu was not only identified with Pakistani domination, but with an entire system that stood for economic exploitation and internal colonialism. It should be mentioned that the demand for regional autonomy in East Pakistan as in the erstwhile East Bengal was combined with economic exploitation. In the Pakistan era the same exploitation and drain of wealth as in East Bengal, continued. What was taken away from the land was never returned in the form of investments. This made the elites together with the masses be irked by the Pakistan government. Urdu signified all those elements who supported this regime. The Bengali language was the symbol who wanted the soil to belong to its own sons and not to the outsider.\textsuperscript{55}

Along with the disparaging of Urdu as a symbol of a centralising and exploiting regime, there was also a disparaging of Urdu as a orthodox system. The Bengali elite in stressing their Muslim identity never said that they were traditional. Their Muslim identity was emphasised to receive a better political deal after being swamped by the Hindus and treated as being backward. Therefore, the Bengali Muslims wanted to continue the battle of winning a larger space within the modernising process for which the stressing of a secular bent of mind was very important. This is because, if the Muslims remained orthodox while the Hindus modernised, then the entire question of a Muslim identity and the awakening of the Muslim consciousness would not have arisen. This is why, not orthodoxy, but modernity was the order of the day. Urdu was the symbol of orthodoxy, Bengali was the symbol of modernity, liberation and therefore of secularism.

However, in this desire for modernity and thus secularism, only the first liner elites, i.e., the professionals and the intellectuals were deeply interested. The Awami League drew its main support from this group of elites. The elites who were not among this cream of the society, i.e., the more middle class, clerical staff, or the rural elites, or even the parvenus, did not share this desire to continue the Bengal Renaissance more than a century later after

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid
it was started by Raja Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar. But they too shared the secular purpose of the Awami League because in religion they saw the desire of the Pakistani leaders to ignore and exploit Bengal. The later return of Islamic orthodoxy during the regime of General Zia-ur-Rahman was an assertion of the second liner elites against this snobbish first-line elites, whose arrogance was not matched by their performance because even after the winning of Independence the concrete problems of Bangladesh continued.

**POST 1971 BANGLADESH**

**Mujib Era**

During the Liberation Movement the issue of religion never came into the fore ground and the sacred disappeared from the public space into the private. Hindus and Muslims fought hand in hand for a common cause. Some authors feel that it was a part of Awami League’s strategy to win support of the radical and Hindus. However this strategy would never have worked if the people did not accept it. The Jamaat-i-Islami on the other hand opposed the Freedom Movement. They set up Razzaks a militant groups who actively opposed the Mukti Bahini and joined hands with the Pakistani occupied forces.

One of the dilemmas faced by Bangladesh immediately after independence was the degree to which Islam would be given formal expression in the legal foundation of the state. Awami League government from the beginning determined to exclude religious consideration from the country’s Constitution and prohibit political activities of several religious groups and the use of religion in public space. This was because the religious political parties did not support the Liberation Movement.

The 1972 Constitution proclaimed secularism as one of the four principles of state policy, disallowing state support for any particular religious community, explicitly prohibiting

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political action by religious organisations, and banning political parties bearing religious bias. The basic principles of secularism shall be realised by elimination of:

1. communalism in all forms;
2. the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion;
3. abuse of religion for political purposes;
4. any discrimination against people practising a particular religion.

The Part I of the Constitution framed in 1972 dealt with the National Language and other National symbols of the State. *Amar Sonar Bangla* a song written by Rabindranath Tagore was chosen as the National Anthem. The song was un Islamic in tradition since it pictured the country as the "Mother". In the National flag the rising sun instead of the moon was used. The citizens were called "Bengalis" an identity for which the people had fought for.

Reasons for this early emphasis on secularism were several. Firstly, the raison d’être of the new state was Bengali nationalism that is emphasising on their distinct cultural and ethnic identity and not Islamic fraternity was highlighted by the Liberation struggle. Secondly, Bangladesh retained a large number of non Muslims (about 20%) by following a state policy of neutrality of religious matters the government hoped to minimise the religious and communal conflicts, a well known phenomenon in South Asian politics. Finally the pro Islamic parties were opposed to Liberation war and to neutralise such orthodoxy secularism was perhaps the best method. It should be noted that secularism was a distinct strategy taken by the Awami League government which aimed to curb the

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59 Bertocci, n. 58. P.p. 77-78.
orthodox and hence in this case anti-government activities of the Islamic parties and their collaborators. The government had no specific policy on religion worth the name.

But very soon the mounting pressure from both within and outside the state forced Mujib to change his stand. By the middle of 1973 although a vast number of countries had recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign state, it was still unable to get admission in the United Nation. This was because of the veto power exercised by People’s Republic of China which along with Pakistan and several other Islamic States did not recognise Bangladesh. 60 This was detrimental to Bangladesh as the new nation could not get aid from the Arab World. This meant that among the Islamic nations, the sanctity of Bangladesh was questioned. It also meant that in its pursuit of secularism, Bangladesh was looked upon as having committed a sacrilege to Islam. This undid the prestige of the new nation to a considerable extent.

Pakistan linked the issue of recognition of Bangladesh as an independent nation to the freeing of the ninety thousand Prisoner’s of War (POW) held in Indian camps. In the initial years following liberation the Awami League took a strong stand against the release of the POWs. But later, Mujib compromised on the issue as the search for international prestige and need for international economic cooperation made Bangladesh’s entry into the UN important. It also became important for Bangladesh to be recognised by the Muslim world because aid which was much needed for the war torn economy of Bangladesh. The World Islamic Summit was scheduled to be held at Lahore (1974) and Bhutto invited Mujib to take part in the Summit with the understanding that the pending cases against the POWs would be dropped. 61 With the formal recognition by Pakistan, Bangladesh’s entry into the UN became simpler. Moreover the orthodox states of the Gulf now recognised Bangladesh and started giving aid.

60 Ahmed, n. 59, p. 165.
61 Ibid, p. 203.
While the main objective of Mujib's attendance was political, some observers also believed that it appeased the Fundamentalist elements in that country. In fact it can be observed that from that time onward Mujib was slowly yielding to the Fundamentalist and Islamist forces in the country. Some observers have rightly pointed out that all the governments including the Awami league were responsible in one way or the other for rehabilitation of the collaborators. Bangladesh won independence with the crucial help provided by the Indian troops. Even after the withdrawal of Indian troops, the strong influence of Indian government persisted in Bangladesh. As events developed, Bangladesh ruling elite ought its identity through the opposition to Indian influence and predominance in Bangladesh.

It may seem surprising that in what may appear to have been a convincing victory of secularism over religion Mujib still felt the need to fall upon the sacred once more. This was because of two separate trends in which prevailed in Bangladesh society and polity during the early 70's. One trend was that the general lot of Muslims had fought against Pakistan because of their regional demands and not to disown their religious identity. They chose the secular over the sacred because of the misuse of the sacred by the Pakistanis. The Bangladeshis now wanted to prove that their Islamic identity had by no means taken the backseat. In a fashion similar to their pursuit of Bengali language and culture which they wanted to win back from the Hindus, they now wanted to wrest the Pakistani exclusivity over Islam. This is why to stress the Islamic brotherhood on an international scale was intrinsic to fully establish and realise Bangladesh as a nation. However, later the fact that Mujib would use "Khuda Hafiz" instead of "Joy Bangla" in his speeches showed that he was already under the pressure to prove the legitimacy of the State to the people because, the masses were beginning to grow restless and a return to Islamic ideas was an attempt at appeasement. Islam was then evoked as an order from which all things would.

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62 Ekattarer Ghatak O Dalalra Ke Kothay, (Bengali), (Where are the Killers and Middlemen of 1971), (Muktiyuddha Chetna Bikas Kendra), 1988.
64 Shircen, n. 54.
derive their legitimacy precisely because the legitimacy of the State was slowly slipping due to non-deliverance and non-performance.

Mujib government failed to contain the growing corruption and inflation of prices of daily necessities which day by day increased the discontent of the masses. Mujib’s effort at disarming factions of the Mukti Bahini did not succeed. This led to widespread terrorist activities. The private armies that were formed during the Liberation Movement declared that they would surrender arms only if Awami League was prepared to share power with them. But Mujib felt that the former freedom fighters could not be trusted because of their previous habit of disobedience to the State. Mujib had little experience of administration to shoulder the responsibilities of leading the new independent nation. Neither did he have any deep intellectual conviction nor did he have the knowledge of the problems of the new states of Asia and Africa. He tried to personify the entire nation of Bangladesh through his emotional speeches and charismatic attributes. Therefore he created a coterie around him for distribution of patronage. Mujib started rewarding his friends and loyalists. This made the genuine freedom fighters feel deprived and betrayed. Mujib therefore instead of being associated with freedom fighters was judged unworthy of leading the nation.

To meet the challenge of the revolutionary leftists the government, soon after the Liberation raised a special security force known as the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini. The recruits came mainly from Mujib Bahini and Kader Bahini and were affiliated to the Awami League. The army was divided into two main factions - the freedom fighters and repatriates. These two groups did not trust each other. Mujib thought the regular army to be an unprofessional and an undisciplined force. In doing so Mujib failed to realise that he was alienating the army, since the budget of the army was cut to provide for the Rakkhi

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65 Ziring, n. 43.
Bahini. The Rakkhi Bahini leashed a reign of terror in the country and assumed the role of eliminating all the adversaries of Mujib.\(^{68}\)

Since the Liberation Awami League gradually lost its effectiveness as an organisational weapon because of increasing factionalism within the party, Mujib in order to control his party started being more and more authoritarian as his unpopularity rose among the masses. But the crux of the problem was that Mujib was unable to solve the country's economic problems and set the nation on a path of sustainable development. Opposition to Mujib's authoritarianism rose within and outside the party circles. In his final bid to survive in power in 1975, Mujib moved the Fourth Amendment on the Constitution and changed the Parliamentary form of government to a Presidential one. This he called to be the Second Revolution. The objectives were laid down as follows:

- to weed out corruption,
- to increase production of agriculture and industry,
- to control population growth,
- to foster national unity.\(^{69}\)

Thus this new national platform was radically different from the Awami League since it adopted certain measures for basic political change. The BAKSAL (name of the new political party) had five fronts - peasants, workers, students, youth and women. There was a clear attempt to extend the organised institution of the government apparatus to cover more population.\(^{70}\) The BAKSAL also created new civil groups which a democracy always needs but have been absent in Bangladesh. With BAKSAL all other political parties were dissolved. The civil bureaucracy and the army were allowed to join the BAKSAL.

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\(^{68}\) Ziring, n.43.
\(^{69}\) Jahan, n 36
\(^{70}\) For details see "Mujib's Silent Revolution", *Far East Economic Review*, 16th May, 1975, p.p. 32-34. Also see Sen in n. 2.
This party gave the appearance of widening the participation of the people in the government but in reality the BAKSAL became a disguised forum for renewed authoritarianism.

BAKSAL did not change the basic characteristic of the Awami League. The same people and the institutionalised system of patronage was not discarded. Therefore, it was obvious that it did not fulfil the expectations of the people. Mujib singled out pressures from the underground Communist Party as the main cause for restructuring the system. The new model tried to rationalise the old model on which Mujib ruled, more on charisma than on institutions. The only difference was that the older model was opened to criticism while the new model was not. The new system did not do away with Awami League factions. As there were no channels of constitutional opposition factional fights intensified. The Western model of a rational-legal State was rejected as the new system found it inadequate for the purpose of regime maintenance.\(^{71}\)

Mujib alienated the minorities by the Enemy (vested) Property Law in Bangladesh. The Law owes its origin to the Defence of Pakistan Ordinance (1965) promulgated following commencement of war between India and Pakistan. By this law the property belonging to anybody who deserted the land would automatically be taken over by the government. Despite the emergence of the sovereign State of Bangladesh in 1971 certain illegal actions and improper legislation continued under the behest of the above mentioned Law. The misapplication and the abuse of the Law in Bangladesh are constantly creating a number of human problems leading to distress and difficulties to the minorities.\(^{72}\) Even after coming to power Mujib did not repeal the Law. The Enemy Property Law affected the Hindus deeply because the Hindus had continued their habit of keeping property in Bangladesh and living in India. In fact, the Hindus carried away much of the wealth earned in

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Bangladesh to Indian banks. This law was designed to contain the transfer of wealth by the Hindus.

Mujib’s life and his regime ended in a military coup on the 15th of August, 1975. General Zia-ur-Rahman took over power and important changes took place in the Bangladesh polity for the few years to follow.

The meteoric rise of Mujibur Rahman and his complete crashing down from power has the dialectics and the dynamics of a process which is complicated and subtle. It is not a simple fall of a leader from grace but is a culmination of a very long drawn battle between opposing forces in the Bengali society, which in fact has marked both the Hindu as well as the Muslim society in Bengal. With the Bengali language and the secular identity, the political discourse of Mujib came to signify the tradition of the prestigious Bengali Renaissance, from which the Muslims were disinherited on the basis of their being “mlechcha”. This was the source of Mujib’s strength.

The Bengali Renaissance of the nineteenth century was without adequate studies in the anthropological history of Bengal. There was a mistaken notion which many Bengali scholars held during those days was that the Muslims were migrants. The immigrant Muslims were in fact the nobility, or the Ashrafs, whom the local people always resented. Islam in Bengal came through the Sufis and not through the sword. Islam in India, but more specifically in Bengal, is much older than the conquerors. In fact, it was the Hindu upper caste who were immigrants in Bengal. The Brahminical order and not Islam was imposed through conquests, specially during the Sena period. But this historical fact was never identified by some scholars.3

Thus with Mujib, the Bengali Muslim elite inherited the Bengali Renaissance. With secularism and Bengali language he forgot the fact for a while that Pandit Ishwar Chandra

3 Shireen, n.54.
Vidyasagar's legacy was not his. This is why, with the independence of Bangladesh, when Calcutta and the Indian Bengalis went ecstatic over their support for Bangladesh, called them to be blood brothers and claimed that the same umbilical chord bound them and even contemplated a united Bengal, The Muslim intelligentsia of Bangladesh felt finally accepted by the Hindus as equals. The centuries of disregard and dishonour of the Muslims by the Hindus was over. This was Mujib’s moment of glory - he recovered a very long standing due of the Hindus towards the Muslims. In this recognition alone the Muslim elites journey into history was completed. This is why, the contending elites, who were jealous of the creamy layer and who had neither the culture nor the resources to educate themselves to such sophistication, attacked India the most when they criticised the first-liners. The Awami League intellectuals even today are favourably inclined towards India but the second-line elites vehemently oppose it.

The conflict between the elites who were loyal to Mujibur Rahman and those who propelled Zia-ur Rahman to power was over the latter’s arrogance in thinking that they were the true inheritors of Bangladesh. The second liners felt the same contempt and had the same feeling being ignored by these elites as the Muslim elites had been by the Hindus. This is why, the second-liners raised such anti-Hindu slogans, called Mujib to be an agent of India, and thus of the Hindus and reverted back to religion, where religious orthodoxy would give them a ritual purity over those to whom they were subservient socially, economically and most importantly culturally. To appreciate this syndrome fully the inner snobbery of the Bengali society must be understood.

As has been mentioned earlier, the prevalence of caste is not very acute in Bengal. Instead, kula, or rakta, i.e.; lineage and blood are the most important factors of social differentiation. Small cultural gestures assume very important markers of family status, for instance, the Bengalis are very particular about the quantity of milk in their tea, a larger amount signifying a lower cultural background and so on. These cultural markers can go a

74 Observations made during my field work.
long way in affecting the life chances of a Bengali. Parvenues are specially discredited for their being culturally backward despite having accumulated wealth, which makes their acceptance into the social mainstream difficult. This snobbery of the Bengali society, specially of the first-line elites, who were the main supporters of Mujibur Rahman made them the target of extreme social contempt, jealousy and scorn.

During Zia’s regime Mujib was effaced from public memory. No road, no public place is named after him, no portraits of who is among the most charismatistic leaders of the world today adorns the walls of the national museum of Bangladesh. Hailed once as “Bangabandhu”, i.e. “Friend of Bengal” Mujib came to be regarded as a traitor, who is best wiped out not only from the public eye, but also from memory and even perhaps from history.\footnote{“Memories of the Seventies”, \textit{Sunday}, (28 July to 3 Aug.), 1996. Also observed during my field trip.}

A major complaint which the detractors of Mujib have against the Awami League, is that it claimed the full credit for the liberation of Bangladesh though it was a combined effort and sacrifice of numerous people all over the country. The elites of the Awami League, who used the secular platform and who were better educated to shoulder a modern political State along the rational-legal lines cornered the entire decision-making process along with the full credit of having won the battle.

\textit{Zia Era}

After the Liberation the political parties occupied a more influential position vis-a-vis the military and the bureaucracy. Initially friction ridden and weak civil military elite was in no position to challenge the authority of the party rule.\footnote{Veena Kukreja, “Militarism in Bangladesh. in Veena Kukreja ed., \textit{Civil military Relations in South Asia}, (New Delhi. Sage). 1991, p. 126.} The Zia period witnessed the
ascendance of civil and military elite over the political elements in the intermediate regimes' tri-institutional structure of state power.⁷⁷

During that time global forces worked towards bringing religion into politics of the ruling elites. A worldwide resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism coupled with discovery of immense oil wealth had its repercussions in Bangladesh. In a country with such a vast majority of Muslims, where Islam as a religious faith is so deep rooted, it is almost impossible to ignore the religious sentiments of the people. Bangladesh turned to the Islamic world in response to the pressures exerted, both internally and globally and by the changes in its own economic environment and economic need.

When Zia-ur Rahman took over office he took some positive steps to bring about Islamization in the country in order to play upon the religious sentiments of the masses. He selectively liberalised the activities of the Islamic political parties, by proclaiming Political Parties' Rule in May 1976. With this the President had the discretionary power of giving recognition of political parties. As a result Zia engineered splits in the existing political parties including the Awami League as well as the opponents in the Islamic camps and maintained a precarious balance between the pro and anti Liberation forces. It is of significance that after the ouster of the democratically elected government of the Awami League in order to seek popular support Zia had to appeal to the religious fundamentalists.⁷⁸ Religion was placed as the antithesis of a rational-legal secular state represented by the Awami ideology. Among the Islamic parties, three political parties were allowed to revive - they were two factions of the Muslim league and the Islamic democratic League.

Zia believed that Mujibism was the cause of all misery of the people. Therefore it had to be expelled. Therefore secularism being one of the pillars of Mujibism had to be deleted.

The constitution was amended to delete the word “secularism”, which was replaced by “Absolute Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah”. He also inserted the words *Bismillah ar Rahman ar Rahim*,79 (In the name of Allah the Beneficent and Merciful). In addition the following sentence was added to Article 25 of the Constitution:

"*The State shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim Countries based on Islamic Solidarity.*"

It should be noted that these changes were not incorporated through proper constitutional procedures. These were first promulgated as Martial Law Ordinances and then incorporated into the amendment passed by the Parliament, *Jatiya Sansad*, where Zia’s party was in an overwhelming majority. He not only formally annulled the validity of the Anti-Collaborator’s Act and smoothened the way for the Pakistani repatriates to partake in the national politics but under his appeasement policy the higher grade civil servants of the Pakistan Civil Servants were reinstated in important posts. Shah Azizur Rahman, a prominent member of the anti-liberation Muslim League was appointed in a key post.

The populist politics of Zia did not have a well defined notion of religion or of culture. He manipulated symbols continuously though intelligently, to win the support of the Islamists. He emphasised on Islamic symbols and slogans in public meetings and appearances. Under Zia, Bangladesh became an important member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and strengthened its position among the Islamic nations. But it also enabled him to gain some legitimacy. The country was also able to secure a position in five major Special Committees of OIC. In its commitment to the cause of Islamic *Ummah*, Bangladesh became the cofounder of the Islamic Development Bank in 1975. Finally the choice of Dhaka as the venue of the 14th Islamic Foreign Minister’s Conference in 1983, and the successful holding of the same under the most difficult circumstances earned for itself the reputation of the most dynamic partner of the Islamic

Zia also adopted some symbolic measures like hanging of posters in the government offices with the quotations from the Holy Koran, flying \textit{Id Mubarak} festoons with the National flag etc. He resumed diplomatic relations of Bangladesh with the Middle East countries, which spilled over in many other fields: trade, aid and labour migration being the major ones. (See table 2.). The oil price hike bolstered the economic power of these countries and a favourable shift in Zia’s policies made it easier for the pro-Pakistani camp slowly to get back to Bangladesh. The personal relations these people had built up in the business and religious organisations in the Middle East helped them to act as liaison agents in business and politics. Moreover increased number of \textit{Hajj} pilgrims indicated closer attachment to the Islamic world among the people and also reflected the growing opportunities among the people to perform this highly aspired obligation. The Islamic card paid off well in Bangladesh’s relation in South Asian countries. It brought ready support to the country’s long dispute with India on Farakka barrage, Teen Bigha and New Moore Islands.

In order to build support by skirting around the traditional institutions, he built up an ideology around “Bangladeshi Nationalism”. It has been quite aptly said that he justified the emergence and continuation of Bangladesh as a “Bengali Muslim and Muslim Bengali” identity. This meant that Zia could unify the consciousness of the Bangladeshi as a cultural specificity in the Islamic universal and also to maintain his religious difference in the cultural universal. Thus he was independent of both categories, that of a Muslim as well as that of a Bengali. He grew into an independent universal, a citizen of Bangladeshi origin. This was Zia’s source of appeal and strength. In his speeches Zia asked the Hindus to spread “Bangladeshi Nationalism” which had a distinct religious overtones but which

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\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{81} Hasanuzzaman, \textit{Bangladeshe Dharma Babshadey Rajniti: Swaroop Unmochan}, (Bengali), (Political and Religion Business in Bangladesh: Real Faces). (Dhaka Subarna Publications), 1987. \\
\textsuperscript{82} Shireen, n. 54. \\
also incorporated a definite idea of citizenship.84 By incorporating Islam into the Constitution and the State ideology, Zia created the concept of Bangladeshi citizenship which was not an antonym of Pakistan.

At the administrative level too certain changes were made. A new Division of Religious Affairs under a full fledged minister was created. Modern education was introduced in Madrasah. Islamic Academy was expanded. Several Non Governmental Organisations and Institutions were opened to teach students Islamic traditions. The Islamic institutions and socio religious organisations were engaged in preaching Islam and teaching Islamic principles at the societal level, having particularly the same objective in view, i.e. to make Bangladesh an Islamic State85. In a limited way Zia also gave permission to the religious parties to function which were previously banned under Mujib.

Zia in order to legitimise his authority went to polls thrice. First there was a Referendum in May 1977, where 98.87% population voted in favour of Zia. In 1978 he went for Presidential elections. He created a political platform called the JAGODAL for the purpose. Here too he won by 80% of the votes cast.

Once the Presidential election was over he scrapped the JAGODAL and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed. He declared to hold Parliamentary elections which were long over due. BNP presented a 19 Point Programme for social and economic upliftment. The 19 Point Programme was originally issued as a manifesto by Zia during the Referendum of 1977. In the course of time this became the programme of BNP. The main feature of this programme was that it was general in nature and content and promised to provide to the people basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health facilities and mass literacy. The programme also offered amenities to women, youth, workers and government employees. It proposed certain economic and administrative

reforms, the most important among them being the encouragement of private enterprise. The participation of the people in development activities and decentralisation of the administration was proposed and great importance to national self reliance was highlighted. In the elections BNP won with a convincing margin. Therefore civilianising the military regime was complete.

Zia-ur Rahman introduced a system of decentralisation which he named as *Gram Sarkar*. This was started in sixty eight thousand villages in Bangladesh. The *Gram Sarkar* would be created by the villagers themselves consisting of old people, intellectuals and people in the village who have a knack for social service. No one outside the village could be appointed in the *Gram Sarkar*. It was assigned to look after the general administration of the village. It was based on co-operation basis. It was supposed to generate awareness about socio economic problems of the village and also to organise the people. The *Gram Sarkar* had four point programme:

- To double food production.
- To participate in national literacy mission.
- To check population growth
- To look after law and order of the village.

But unfortunately the scheme did not succeed. Lot of tension arose in the village as to who would form the *Gram Sarkar*. This created a lot of animosity among villagers. Some observers say that through the *Gram Sarkar* Zia wanted to give his party a solid base in the rural areas.

Zia's period was the period of consolidation of what Bangladesh is today. It not only relieved the Bangladeshi society of its snobbish elements, but brought back Islam to

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continue the journey of the Bangladeshis as a people in their struggle against their Hindu legacy which made them outsiders in their own land. With the bringing back of Islam, the Bangladeshis could safely forget their intermediate period with Pakistan, which was only a distraction in their path of realisation of self-determination in a cultural space thought to have been appropriated by the Hindus. This is why, the middle class rushed towards the Bengali culture, incorporating and reviving some of its very typical but essential features. In this cultural reawakening, a Bangladeshi culture was distanced from the “Indian Bengali” culture. The term “Bangladeshi” was coined by Zia, to differentiate themselves with the more general term, “Bengali”. This also created the foundation for an international identity of Bangladesh. The acute competition over Bengali New Year celebrations between the non-resident Indians and the non-resident Bangladeshis express the inner conflict between the Muslims and the Hindus over the inheritance of the Bengali culture and perhaps also its history.

**Ershad Era**

With Ershad’s coming to power the ruling elites’ use of religion as a political weapon increased. This was because Ershad’s entire stake depended on his acceptance by the conservative element in the State as the Awami League as well as Zia’s BNP had no support for Ershad. As soon as he came to power in the middle of 1982, he made Arabic compulsory at the primary level. This was a political move in order to steal the winds away from the Islamic political parties who posed as the upholder of Islam. In public speeches he told his people to “... speak about Islam, think about Islam and dream about Islam...” He also took certain steps like declaring of Friday as holiday, free water and electricity to mosques etc. Whether these pro-Islamic steps increased any inflow of aid to Bangladesh or not under Ershad regime is doubtful, but inflow of foreign capital through non residential Bengalis increased quite dramatically. See Table 1.

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87 Ray, n. 48, p. 123.
Ershad's Islamisation was calculated to build bridges with the fellow Islamic nations so that the large number of Bangladeshi migrants into these countries could be more at ease. The Islamisation programme definitely helped Ershad to win the loyalty as well as the approval of the non-resident Bangladeshi as is evident by the increased flow of remittances into the country. Table 2 shows the increase in the number of Bangladeshis going to various Middle East countries in search of jobs. As a solidarity to the Islamic countries Ershad also increased pilgrimage to these countries. Table 3 shows the increase in the number of pilgrims in these countries over the years.

Bangladesh also introduced Islamic slogans into its family planning programmes, something which is a contradiction in terms. In its family planning programme the government has also quoted from the Koran. The National Family Planning Programme published promotional booklets on Islam and family planning and organised seminars and workshops with religious leaders. Bangladesh had won twice the UN award for controlling birth rate. Observers say that this has been possible because of the international goodwill earned by Ershad.89

In order to circumvent the existing political parties and to directly appeal to the masses, Ershad upgraded the thana and downgraded the district as the key level of the rural administration. Peasant leaders would thereby hold offices similar to that of district officers. In this lay the germ of Upzila System which he heralded as an epoch making system in the history of democrat in the world.90

Political decentralisation went hand-in-hand with the Islamization programme of Ershad. That Ershad pursued Islam as a State Religion and not an Islamic State was also not coincidental. It has been mentioned that in a Bengali society, social power through subtle

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cultural insignia is not only a measure of status but is also essential in social mobility. Islamic orthodoxy gave a power, a certain kind of ritual purity to the people over the elites, who were more educated and prosperous, but less "pure". This was a peculiar way to empower the people. Political decentralisation only institutionalised this process of doing away with the institutions of the State which, by definition, were secular. Islam, thus addressed the community and the folk and not the depersonalised and the formal State. This evoking of the community is a common fascist technique, where the State machinery fails to solve the pressing needs of the people.

In order to pursue a policy of patronage, Ershad’s government underlined two concepts, “Islam as the State Religion” (*Rashtra Dharma*) and “Masjid Centred Society” (*Masjid Kendrik Samaj*). In Ershad’s Islamization policy three factors played a very strong influence - the army, Islamic intellectuals and Islamic political parties.91

*Army:*

During the time of Ershad the inner composition of the army changed as the repatriates outnumbered the freedom fighters. Thus the army played a very important role in “Islamizing” its institutional goals and nomenclatures. Several innovations were made to promote Islamic mores among the personnel and profuse Urdu terms were used in the documents.92 This was because the army as an organised unit has no legitimacy to run the state administration. In order to legitimise his rule it had to take up this populist stand. Ershad sent many of his officers to Saudi Arabia in order to strengthen his relations with Middle East countries. It is quite obvious that Ershad wanted the support of the Islamic world in general. This can be explained by the change in the inner composition of the army, which lost most of its leaders of the Liberation war and the top posts were filled by repatriates.

91 Sato n. 79.
92 Hasanuzzaman, n. 66.
Chapter II, Elite Politics in Bangladesh

Islamic Education:

Though Ershad’s first move of introduction of Arabic at the primary stage had to be withdrawn because of the stiff opposition of the people, but promotion of Islamic education was one of the main planks of his Islamization programme.

The Education Commission appointed after the Liberation War made a thorough review of the existing education pattern including the Madrasah education. The findings of the Commission tells that the people generally approved religious education at the Secondary stage. Refer to Table 4. But nothing much was done in this regard during the Awami League period because the teachers and the students were discarded as “collaborators”. From Zia onwards the picture changed totally. The number of Madrasahs increased so did the number of students. Both Zia and Ershad made far reaching changes in the Madrasah education to make it at par with general education. The Madrasah teachers forged an alliance with the government. The Madrasah teachers forged a strong alliance with the government. The number of teachers and students increased steadily as shown in table 5 and table 6.

Political Parties:

Mujib had issued a ban on political parties using religion as a part of their manifesto. Zia allowed only three political parties with Islamic pronouncement to function. However, after Ershad took over the number jumped to sixty five in 1984. The proliferation of religion-based political parties during Ershad showed how much Islam had become a politically tradable commodity.

The causes behind this proliferation of Islamic parties were several. Firstly, the two military regimes encouraged the revival of these religious parties. Islam was frequently

93 Abdul Haq Fared, Madrasah Sikkha and Bangladesh, (Bengali), (Madrasah Education and Bangladesh), (Dhaka Bangla Academy), 1986.
used by these rulers to legitimise their authority. Even parties with little religious background utilised the religious banner in order to become easily acceptable to the people. Secondly, Islam was used to denounce the secularist programme which the Awami League upheld and which failed to evoke a suitable response from the people. Thirdly, there was the Middle East connection. Not only did Bangladesh want aid from the richer Arab nations but many migrants from the country went to these places to work as labourers. Islam served to make the people a part of the world where they lived as migrant labourers.

_Eighth Amendment:_

The Eighth Amendment declared Islam as the State Religion. By this Ershad hoped to split the opposition in the sense that Awami League’s positive secularists and the middle path walkers of BNP who tried to compromise between the secular principles and religious agenda now entered into a contention between themselves. Thus Islamic propaganda on the one hand and the split of oppositions on the other hand perpetuated and legitimised Ershad’s hegemony.

Incorporating a State Religion was against Awami League’s principle of secularism. Moudud Ahmed, Ershad’s Prime Minister, who pioneered the Bill in its defence cited from various documents of the autonomy movement of East Pakistan including the 21 Point Programme of the United Front in 1954 and argued that secularism was not mentioned anywhere. But it was an irony that Ahmed did not realise that as far as the autonomy movement was concerned secularism was implied and assumed and hence there was no need to have it mentioned separately. During that time freeing the country from political and economic dominance of West Pakistan was more important. Their ethno-centric cultural identities as Bengalis vis a vis that of the Punjabis and Sindhis was more important than their religious brotherhood. Ahmed argued that by this Amendment the nation was

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95 _Courier, 24-30 November, 1984._
given an identity, a national consciousness and a national expression. The ethnic identity which made the Bangladeshis realise themselves as an independent people underplayed religion and relegated it into a private affair. But subsequently, by the eighth amendment, the private religion was brought into the public space and converted it into the fundamental attribute of a national identity.

After refuting the secularist tradition of the country, Ershad sought to find a more positive rationale by saying that it has given the people a *Jatiya Satta* (National Identity), a national consciousness and a national expression. He claimed that independence so far was devoid of true substance without element of Islam. By this Ershad gave "ideological amnesty" to the Islamic forces who took a negative stand during the independence movement. It is clear therefore that mere ethnic identity as Bengalis was not enough. They had to be different from the Bengalis from West Bengal. Bangladeshi nationalism was propounded by Zia for the same reason. This time a clear emphasis was given to the Islamic identity over and above their linguistic identity.

By defining Islam as the State Religion and not an Islamic State, Ershad deviated from the Pakistani formula. He claimed a harmony between Islam and nationalism. By doing so, he very intelligently divided the Islamic parties. Though there is very little difference between "Islamic State" and "Islam as a State Religion", it saved Ershad from a section of the population who identified "Islamic State" with the stigma attached to it from the Pakistani period. They remembered their exploitation under the garb of "Islamic State" and "Islamic Brotherhood".

The inherent anti minority bias of the Eighth Amendment was evident. Concerns about the social oppression against the minorities was expressed in many sections. Though the amendment said of the minorities that "they can observe their religion peacefully" but left the issue of rights of minority of being defended by the State in the event of actual
discrimination against them, unattended. The government was less conscious about the social impact against the minorities that could be generated by this Amendment. 96

One of the objectives of declaration of State Religion was to establish a reciprocal relationship of patronage and support with religious leaders. Every major policy statement regarding the State religion was announced in the congregation on the occasion of Ershad’s visits to religious places like Mastoids, Mazars and Madrasahs.

Masjid Centred Society:

The policy of making Islam the State Religion was coupled with the initiative of patronising local religious leaders who were the potential supporters of Ershad’s Islamization. The Masjid Centred Society was put forth to rationalise this concept. It was however evident that Ershad never thought of surrendering his religious power to religious leaders, and domains of the State and society implied to be separate. 97 It can be pointed out that he never invited leaders in the cabinet.

While officially sponsoring concept of Masjid Centred Society, the government had to face a consequential issue of resolving the traditional conflict between the Masjid and the mazars, two core places of worship of Bangladeshi Muslims. It has often been the case that the mazar become the dens of social vices like selling of narcotics, liquors and prostitution. But there was also another reason apart from the mere purification efforts of the mazars. Mazar was the local and the contextual tradition of Bangladesh. This was attempted to be replaced by a textual version of Islam with its own ecclesia and clergy and thus attempted to impose a notion of purity, which could dominate over the local traditions and customs. In this way, the masjid fitted into the larger plan of re-establishing Arabic as a compulsory language and thus eroding the very basis of the nation whose basic agenda was the non-imposition of foreign languages upon the population. Ershad tried to

create a society over the nation at one level and to project the nation into a larger international identity on the other. While the former gave power to the people over the institutions, the latter raised the State above the constraints of the institutions. This is why democracy, which means a prevalence of political institutions, was basically alien to Ershad’s politics.

Several fundamentalist groups including the Jamaat propagated and worked against mazar worship. Ershad too was not committed to the mazar ideology, and though the minister of state for religious affairs admonished “anti Islamic” acts in the mazar compounds. Several grants to masjids had started during Zia but increased during Ershad.

Imam Training Programme (hitherto referred as the ITP) was an integral part of Masjid Kendrik Samaj. It started in 1979. The original objective of this programme was to encourage Imams to take place in national development efforts. But more recent programme document clearly states that the masjid and the Imams ought to be the central in every aspect of Muslim life. Mufti Wakkas minister of State for Religious Affairs, called upon the Imams not to confine in namaaz and Masjid but to participate in social service and constructive programme. From the available data about the Imams it is quite doubtful whether the ITP trained Imams could give any leadership. The training programme was to distribute patronage among the rural Imams who were hitherto neglected by the rural development programme.

Military rule, as discussed, was temporary and like his predecessors and other military rulers all over the world, Ershad required to civilianize his regime. Therefore Ershad decided to carry through his civilianization process despite opposition from political parties. The government constructed its own political party known as the Jatiya Party to represent its own goals. JP was successful in recruiting a number of opportunist.

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Ershad announced Parliament elections on 26th April, 1986. But he was not ready to lift martial law as demanded by the opposition. However he made certain concessions towards the opposition:¹⁰⁰

1. Ministers wishing to contest the polls must resign from their present offices.

2. All posts of Zonal Martial Law Administrators would be terminated.

3. All martial law courts would be abolished.

Among the major opposition parties the Awami League and Eight Party Alliance contested the polls. JP won by a slim majority which was far less than what Ershad expected. The Awami League won 76 seats and Jamaat won 10 seats. A comparative study of election results is given in the table 8.

Bangladesh’s Islamization appears to be rather an effort of the government to distribute patronage to Islamic forces. It also seems to be an essential component of national identity, not through the State, but through the community. In its political outcome it envisaged to divide the Islamic forces by giving selective patronage. Moreover Islamization in Bangladesh seems to depend on the nation’s dependence on foreign resources particularly the Middle East.

SUMMARY

The British policy of divide and rule had its final culmination in the formation of Pakistan, a separate homeland for the Muslims in South Asia. Pakistan promised to give an opportunity to the South Asian Muslims to realise themselves as a nation. But, this separate nation soon found itself straddled with problems which could often not be solved, precisely because of the charismatic and the theological basis of its nationhood rather than a rational-legal system, based on modern institutions and liberal democracy. The most

¹⁰⁰ Ittefaq. 27 April, 1986.
important problem which Pakistan faced was the secession of its eastern province, which realised its independence as the separate nation of Bangladesh. The war of liberation for Bangladesh was fought against the very religious foundation of the Pakistani nation. Based on religion, both Bangladesh as well as Pakistan continues to face concrete problems like poverty, economic growth, social equity, which neither religion nor ethnicity can solve. This raises the need for secularism now and again. But failure to solve the problems and the need to cover up such failures once more brings in the ideology of religion. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to trace out the struggle of religion and secularism in the politics of Bangladesh in the context of the elites’ competition for power.

At the close of the medieval era of the history of India, Bengal, which was somewhat isolated from the power centres developed a social structure peculiar to its own. In such a social set up, the usual form of the caste society was absent. Despite all its ills, the caste system, still had a cushion in creating a series of intermediate social classes, which allow social mobility and also prevent the complete destitution of the society. However, the attitudes of the caste system, which look down upon people by claiming ritual purity over them, prevailed in its fullest form in the Bangladesh society. Islam, which came into Bengal mainly through the Sufis, had the discourse of protest against the Brahmins, who were mainly immigrants. This is why, a certain form of Islam, which was much adapted to the local conditions came in to fight the oppressive Brahminical order. Though emancipatory for its adherents, yet, for the Brahminical elites, Islam came to represent the religion of the lower castes. Opposition towards Islam as a religion and later on the general competition between the Muslim ruling elites and the contending Hindu elites in the medieval period, the Muslims of Bangladesh, though closer to the soil, came to be called as outsiders.

The Muslim ruling elites, who constituted the ashrafi class in Pakistan and in Bangladesh, were the nobility. They had little sympathy for the local Muslims. The Hindu elites, who were of a higher caste and thus economically better off also, exploited the peasants who
were the Muslims. The absence of a graded society, made it difficult for the Muslims to climb up socially into intermediate classes. The gap remained. Though there were poor Hindu peasants, but there were Hindu elites also, but the bulk of the Muslims were poor and the elites were very few, barring the ashrafis, who were in general very unsympathetic to the local people. It is only in the British period, that due to the commercialisation of agriculture, the growth of jute trade and the rising agricultural prices, that an intermediate class of jotedars grew among the Muslim peasants. This group was very important in the history of Bangladesh all through the modern period. It is the preponderance of this group of rural and intermediate elites, who contend for urban jobs and education, who have a hold on the masses in the villages, that religion in politics have become such a dominating force in Bangladesh twenty-five years after it won its own independence on a secularist agenda.

Competition among elites have importantly marked the politics of Bangladesh. Many strands of competition can be discerned. One was the competition among the erstwhile ruling elites, the Ashrafis and the newly emerging zamindars with the Permanent Settlement of Cornwallis. The new rich, among the already economically better off Hindus were not only favoured by the British, but in fact favoured the British institutions. In the British rule, they saw a chance to revive the Indian society with the spirit of modernity. The Muslim ashrafis were reluctant to adapt as expected. Because, having been in power, the ashrafis were in no mood to adapt to the ways of the dispossessors. But, for the Bengali society, this had an important consequence, which is perhaps true for all the Muslims in India, that among them emerged no elite who would guide them to modernity. Syed Ahmed at al were exceptions and they were so strictly opposed by the bulk of the Muslim elites, that they remained a small influence, only upon some rational thinking Muslims. In contrast, among the Hindus, modernity was generally adopted because the Hindu elites, even those of the fundamentalist colour, agreed to the need of ridding a backward looking tradition of its superstitions, prejudices and illusions of purity. In the absence of the reform movement, the Muslim elites also lost out to the very modernising
process itself. The Hindus, on the other hand, obtained education, got jobs and thus dominated in professions and the administration. This made the Muslim elites lose out in competition. Soon political consciousness among them grew which sought enclaves of protection against the Hindu competition. This competition was in the urban sphere, among the educated elites.

The Muslims in rural Bengal were in general poor, but the *zamindari* system reduced them to further destitution. The Hindus were either the absentee landlords or the money lenders, both causes of misery of the peasants. However, there came a relief in the form of commercialisation of agriculture and jute trade, whereby, a small rural elites among the Muslims emerged. These were the land intermediaries, who would organise the sale of land, collection of rents and so on. In the absence of the *zamindar*, who was away in the city, the *jotedar* became the guardian of the rural masses. He was a patron of the peasants, though very exploiting, but nevertheless the only form of guardianship which the unorganised masses had. The *jotedar* had an acute competition with the Hindu moneylender, who also was based in rural Bengal, but had access to urban education and ultimately to jobs in clerical positions. It was this intermediate Hindu, who was not the sophisticated rationalist like Raja Rammohan Roy, or Vidyasagar, or Ramtanu Lahiri, but was the main backbone of political extremism and even terrorism and who used his Hindu symbols offensively against the Muslims. It was as a reaction to this Hindu, that the Muslim intermediate elite, strengthened his communal fervour.

There was another set of Muslim elites, who were not as advanced or radicals as the rationalist Muslims of the "Buddhi Muktir Andolan," but who nevertheless wanted to be a part of the Bengal Renaissance and inherit the history of his land as the Hindus have done. This elite formed the backbone of the Muslim League in Bengal. Later, in the course of history, this elite was the group who was responsible for the independence of Bangladesh and the group who most eagerly adopted secularism and modernism. Undoubtedly, this elite in East Pakistan was the cream of the society.
With the formation of Pakistan, the elites, who were at the helm of affairs in East Pakistan, competed against the hegemony of the West Pakistanis and formed the basis of a Bengali identity. This was the backbone of Mujib’s Awami League. A Bengali identity, based on the secular culture was used to stave off the hegemony of the Pakistani elites. Religion was relegated to the background and secularism held forth.

Though the Awami League had identified the need for secular and liberal political institutions, yet they could not resolve the crisis of the nation. This is because, soon after winning of independence, the intermediate elites, who were earlier excluded from the affairs of the state, contended for power. The economy of Bangladesh being underdeveloped, the level of economic activities being low, politics became an important area of social prestige. This intermediate elite had fought severely in the liberation war but found themselves to be ignored in the process of State building in the new nation. This happened because the firstline elites, did not consider the second liners to be talented enough to run a government based on liberal principles, which needed knowledge and education. This was the basis of contention between the first-liners and the second liners.

The intermediate elites, who had their stronghold in the rural areas, tried to indulge in populist politics of mass mobilisation. Hence religion came in once more as the instrument for gathering mass support to defame the existing regime. Later on, with Zia onwards, the ruling elites had to use religion to appease the people and contain the masses. Religion became a ground for contest and the ruling elites took to greater and greater authoritarianism in order to contain the mass mobilisation by the contenders. This is by no means to deny that Mujib’s regime was free from all faults, but the rule of the Awami League was not worse than the others that followed it. The main reason for the Muslim elites for secession from Pakistan and India was a desire to appropriate important positions in the government, which would not have been possible in competition with the Hindus. But, even with the Hindus away, the elites were at a loss to handle modern institutions, with their codified laws and informal and impersonal systems. Thus, there
grew a slow differentiation among the Muslim elites of Bangladesh between those who were comfortable with modernity and those who resented the change. Such a differentiation had occurred in the pre-Partition Bengal between the Hindus and the Muslims and such a differentiation was bound to occur once more with a modern secular State based on the rational-legal principles. Therefore return to the Islamic republic was a means to stop the process of change.

More resistance that Mujib's government received, the more adamant it became in commanding absolute obedience. The educated elites, who knew the rules well, could not pragmatically apply them to solve the problems encountered in everyday living. Thus as hunger and poverty ravaged the countryside and floods devastated the villages, the Bangladeshis saw in it a failure of a polity with which they were not comfortable from the very beginning. Calamities only gave them a ground to rise up against it.

Zia's regime was more of a comfort for the Bangladeshis. It had the familiarity of Islam, not as the textual religion but in its contextual assimilation with the local customs and conventions. This made the middle-level elite identify better with Zia. Zia's regime was not as sophisticated as a rational-legal State and was based more on the ad hocism that was comfortable to the Bangladeshi middle-class. However, Zia's regime drew flak from yet another group of elites who were not adequately placed in the positions of influence and power. For the Bangladeshi elite, service in the government was the only means towards upward social mobility, because with little economic activities the "merchant office", which served as an alternative route to social success among the Indians, was not possible in Bangladesh. This is why, the elites depended heavily upon the worth of their offices for their rewards.

It is important to note that for the actual administration of the State one needs secular institutions. Religion, no matter how important it is as a social philosophy, is not viable as an administrative philosophy. Therefore a modern State needs a bureaucracy and judiciary.
to carry out its functions. The Bangladesh society, which was charged with cultural nationalism, fell short of organised bodies of the State to run the administration. The military was the most organised arm of the government. This is why, the elites contending the modern State had to take recourse to the military regime time and again. The Bangladeshis, who resented any form of organisation and hence were against modern institutions, raised the slogan of democracy to be free from the shackles of institutionalised administration.

If Zia’s coming signified the rise of the middle-class vernacular elite over the modern English educated elite of the Awami League, then Ershad’s ascent to power was mainly supported by another group of elites who had very different reasons for supporting Ershad. These elites were mainly from the ordinary walk of life, who had perhaps neither the inclination nor the hope to accede to the organs of administration. Instead, they projected their daily stagnation onto the future of the nation as a whole. They wanted to strengthen the nation by strengthening its ideology so that as nationals they could project themselves as being worthwhile. It must be noted that during such time there was a large scale emigration out of the country. The emigrants as well as the resident Bangladeshis started conceptualising themselves as an international community. Thus, the Islam which they took up as an ideology was neither the contextual Islam of a local tradition of familiar surroundings but rather that of pan-Islamism, the ecclesiastical and textual version of the religion.

Ershad’s regime was once more based upon the military, but the feature that marked it from the others was its insistence upon the clergy for support. This is why, with Ershad the local traditions were in fact attacked and opposed by the government. The elites who were the main supporters of Ershad were the ones who came up from the younger generation and were nurtured under the conditions of a mass society. They were born out of a social vacuum which Bangladesh was slowly encountering with the political failure of institutions and the inadequate growth of the economic activities.
As corruption has been an important slogan to bring down regimes irrespective of the real causes of discontent, Islamisation or an adherence to the Islamic principles has been a means to impose a holier than thou attitude upon the others, something similar to the way notions of purity maintains caste differences in India. Islamisation has been an instrument to impose a feeling of inadequacy or inferiority upon the one who adheres to it less intensely. This is why, Islamisation has been very important in the competition among the elites.

Efforts have always been made to contain the rural masses and bring them under some kind of a political axis. Religion was one of the instruments of the elites to contain the masses when in power and to excite them when out of power. But various efforts like BAKSAL of Mujib, Gram Sarkar of Zia and Masjid-centred Society and the Upzila system of Ershad, were attempts to contain the rural masses. BAKSAL wanted to create a series of minorities, like peasants, labour, students, youth and women. The Gram Sarkar of Zia wanted to create a small elite in the villages more in the spirit of social service than along political lines. Ershad wanted to create a clergy to contain the villages on one hand, while on the other hand, political decentralisation was done to open up avenues of political participation at the micro level which was as far as the thana. Thus the ruling elites have always wanted to dig at the power base of the intermediate elites, who are kept out of power.

Depending upon who is in power and who is out of power, the ruling elites have used religion for variously interpreting Bangladeshi nationalism. Mujib, for instance, wanted to base nationalism on the firm footing of a cultural identity but sought international support on the basis of Islamic brotherhood. Zia, used religion to contend the oligarchy of the snobbish modernistic elites and promote the middle class elites by returning them their essence, Islamic purity. Ershad, used the theological Islam, to override the national spirit and project the Bangladeshis as a people rather than a nation with the pan-Islamic unity. At the root of the use of religion lies the failure of development of political institutions in
Bangladesh. The failure of democracy is related to the low growth of economic activities, which makes the people believe in political solutions. This demand for the State to intervene directly into the affairs of the people created the conditions for authoritarianism.