Nationalism as (Re)Governmentalization

Studies related to the themes of nationalism are vast, still growing, and scholarship specific to Bangladeshi nationalism is similarly expanding. Though many such studies are descriptive in nature, Jahangir’s (1995) work problematizes opposition to Pakistani colonialism and perceives nascent nationalism as a tool for decolonization.

Exercising nationalism in patriotism leads a regime to denounce its opposing political forces as “non-patriotic,” branding them as “enemies of nationalism,” and this is essentially a process of decolonization. After the creation of the nation-state of Bangladesh, the idea of nationalism became a tool of state legitimacy—either despotic or democratic forms of government. This chapter offers an interpretation of Bangladeshi nationalism as an exercise in governmentalization of the postcolonial nation-state. We will also analyze the various attempts to formulate counter-governmentality in Bangladesh.

Nationalism: Governmentalization of the State

Eschewing deterministic sociological ideas, Benedict Anderson (1983/1995) uses the term “print capitalism” to argue that nationalism is the only imaginary domain that is well-conceived and practiced. Anderson’s thesis and Chatterjee’s (1986, 1993) critique of nationalism, however, lack one significant aspect: the idea of power. As Foucault teaches us, Nationalism as a discourse is not immune from the matrix of power. Anderson’s thesis focuses on national consciousness in Europe, while Chatterjee’s explores colonial and postcolonial India. Using Chatterjee’s and Anderson’s works, the postcolonial context of Bangladesh can be explained, and here the nationalism discourse took different historical trajectories of “double colonialism.” Before 1947, East Bengal was a part of colonial India; from 1947 to 1971, it was
known as “East Pakistan,” a part of Pakistan. This historically unique phenomenon shapes nationalism in Bangladesh in two ways.

1. Since the independence of Bangladesh, the idea of nationalism has disintegrated into two mainstream forms. The first remaining as “Bengali nationalism,” but some trends segregated toward “Bangladeshi nationalism.” In the practice of both, a nationalist discourse based on consensus and unity remained integral to governmentalization.

2. This attempt at governmentalization is flawed because Bangladesh is essentially heterogeneous. The intrusion of nationalistic governmentality on heterogeneity creates a rift at initiation. The space of conflict is the possibility of counter-governmentality.

It is known that an indigenous Bengali bourgeoisie class did not develop during the Pakistani colonial rule (Alam, 1995; Sobhan, 1980). Instead, there was a class of petty bourgeoisie comprising groups such as small traders, well-to-do farmers, and professionals like teachers, writers, and lawyers. Essentially a colonial creation, the petty bourgeoisie was formed by politics, most notably the education system. In 1971, this petit bourgeoisie class ascended to power in Bangladesh. These fragmentary and heterogeneous groups were often in conflict with one another (Alam, 1995, 64–75). In that context of instability, there was an urgent need for a hegemonic discourse that would bring the warring factions together within the ruling governmentality.

Nationalism was then used as a panacea. During the colonial period, nationalism provided the counter-hegemonic discourse. The postcolonial ruling elite was in search of universality; and the petty bourgeoisie had long been waiting to converge into the hegemon. In other words, the Bangladeshi petty bourgeoisie could achieve hegemony and bring all segments of society into a uniformed nation-state by wrapping their “common interest” into one unified discourse—nationalism.

The ruling petty bourgeoisie always claims to represent the nation and its people. During the Pakistani colonial period, the state claimed to “represent” the Bengali populace or “East Pakistani” by providing selective recruitment in bureaucracies such as the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) and the Pakistan Army. The Bengali nationalist forces under the Awami League rejected such representation claiming that it was unfair and the plight of the Bengali remained unheard. Thus, they demanded the representation of the Bengalis themselves and constructed a nationalist discourse identifying the West Pakistanis as the enemy of the “Bengali heritage.” During the late 1960s, Pakistan was correctly blamed for economic exploitation and disparity. The 1968