



Cartographic Anxieties, Identity Politics and the Imperatives of Bangladesh Foreign Policy

Meghna Guhathakurta

Abstract

Cartographic anxieties have been imprinted on the statecraft of South Asian states from its very inception. It has suppressed the diversity of multiple identities and led to the growth of identity politics which has cross border implications. Different identities in states of South Asia have been marginalized through the adoption of centralized growth oriented development rather than devolution and self-administration as its core principles of development. Globalizing tendencies have enhanced these modernization trends and negated a legitimate ground for identity politics. This does not augur well for addressing either the root causes of conflict that such identity politics seeks to assuage or addressing issues of justice and equality both within its state borders and internationally. It is crucial that states such as Bangladesh must take cognizance of the complexities of the situation and rethink its foreign policy imperatives.

Author profile

Meghna Guhathakurta taught International Relations at the University of Dhaka from 1984 to 2007. She is currently Executive Director of Research Initiatives, Dhaka, a research support organization which specializes in action research with marginalized communities. Dr. Guhathakurta currently writes on gender, migration and minority rights. She is also Associate Editor of Action Research Journal published by Sage.

Boundaries of the Nation-State

Many scholars have interrogated the application of the the Westphalian model of the West to the South Asian situation. ¹ It is a notion that needs to be demystified through decoupling or disassociating the two notions, nation and state. In South Asia, there are cultural constituencies that clearly cut across national lines - evidently there are many 'nations' in one state and members of one 'nation' shared by more than one state. For example Bengalis, Punjabis, Tamils are not confined to any one state in South Asia and in any given point of time there are multiple identities of nationalities and citizenship that any South Asian may possess. ²

These multiple identities are tellingly captured in an anecdote from Pakistan when a Pakistani politician of the Northwestern Frontier Province of Pakistan, Mr. Wali Khan, in response to a question by an American journalist on his identity, replied "I am a 6000-year-old Pushtun, a 100 year old Muslim and a 27 year old Pakistani!" ³ Similarly a Bengali speaking inhabiting current Bangladesh may also claim to be both Bengali and Muslim in identity as a subject of British Empire, as a citizen of Pakistan and currently as a Bangladeshi. This layering of identities in the flux of history creates a political reality in South Asia which is often the cause of cartographic anxieties among policy-makers of the region. I will first try to explore the root causes of these anxieties by looking at three 'textbook' characteristics of the nation state and apply them to the context of Bangladesh. In a later section I shall try to relate them in the construction of identity politics in the Bangladesh state.

Territoriality

The textbook notion of the nation-state is entrenched in the notion of territoriality. The defense of its borders therefore becomes a centrality of focus in national security concerns. However irrational or incidental borders may be, whether they are seen to be a result of a fluke of history or antithetical to the economic well-being of the nation, it is defended with all the military and ideological might that a state can muster. This is not only true of security concerns but also of nation-building projects.

¹ T. K. Oommen, "Ethnic' Dimensions of Security: Situating India in the Context of South Asia," in *Comprehensive Security in South Asia: Ethnic Dimensions Seminar Proceedings* (New Delhi: Delhi Policy Dialogue, 2003), 1-40. Amena Mohsin, "The Nationalist State and the Chittagong Hill Tracts 1971-1994," *The Journal of Social Studies* 74 (1996).

² Ibid.

³ Cited by T.K. Oommen in his discussion of Meghna Guhathakurta's paper, "Security in Flux: Coping with South Asian realities in Comprehensive security in South Asia: Ethnic Dimensions," *Seminar Proceedings* (New Delhi: Delhi Policy Dialogue, 2003), 115.

I was told the following story by Mr. Tajul Hussain, who was the first secretary of Health in the independent state of Bangladesh, and who as a member of the Bangladesh government in exile in 1971 had accompanied the then Prime Minister (PM) in exile, Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed to meet the then PM of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi to seek permission for the Bangladesh Government in exile to reside in India. During the meeting, the PM of India brought up the question as to why she should let a Liberation War that based its premises on Bengali nationalism reside in a country that itself has a large Bengali population bordering East Bengal and what guarantees the exiled Government could give to India that it will not let the movement for Bengali nationhood also embrace Indian West Bengal. The answer that Mr. Tajuddin gave was based on territoriality rather than ideology. He pointed out that the flag of the independent Government in exile contained the territorial map of the erstwhile East Pakistan, and hence the Bengali nationalist movement that was represented by this flag was already predetermined. Thus territoriality was entrenched into the making of the current Bangladesh state from its earliest stages. Whether the cartographic anxieties were assuaged sufficiently was an issue that was to unfold over the years in the political relations between the two states.

State ideology

State boundaries are often more defined by ideological markers than physical borders. Hence in the history of South Asia, we have the concepts of Muslim Pakistan (or the Islamic Republic of Pakistan) and Hindu India popularly known as Hindustan notwithstanding the fact that each state had a sizeable number of religious minorities living within their boundaries.

At the time of independence in Bangladesh secularism was one of the four pillars of the first Constitution that was drafted. This principle was constructed largely in response to the use of Islam as an ideology of domination by the Pakistani state vis-à-vis the Bengali population. During the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh the military crackdown and genocide committed by the Pakistani Army was often justified by calling the Bengali Muslims *kaffirs* or non-believers or Hindus. In this war non-Muslims in East Bengal were consequently specially targeted. Therefore the way in which secularism entered the political discourse in Bangladesh, did not mean the absence of religion or a separation of the state from religion but rather recognition that each will observe their own religion while respecting the observance of other religious practices. It was also noted that religion cannot be used for political ends.

The above principle resulted in a state practice where all religions were tolerated. For example in ceremonial state functions not only would the Quran Tilawat be recited but also verses from the Gita, Bible and Tripatak. Such tolerance at the religious level was however not matched with toleration of ethnically and linguistic diverse population, because the independent state of Bangladesh rested on a cultural hegemony of the Bengali speaking people and hence excluded the political demands of ethnic minorities.

Even the issue of secularism, could not withstand the political turmoil of the mid seventies, which saw the assassination of President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by a bloody coup and the eventual takeover of President Ziaur Rahman, first, as Chief Martial Law

Administrator and then as President. The constitutional changes, which accompanied this political changeover of power was equally radical. Secularism as a principle of statehood was replaced by the clause "the principles of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah." Socialism was replaced with the phrase 'economic and social justice.'⁴ It was also a time when the banned party of Jamaat-e-Islam which had collaborated with the Pakistan Army was rehabilitated back into mainstream politics.

1981 saw the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman and from 1982 to 1991 Bangladesh came under the autocratic rule of General Ershad. A further constitutional amendment (the 8th amendment) declared Islam to be the state religion of Bangladesh. It was a ploy to use Islam as policy of statecraft so as to gain more friends and allies in the Islamic countries as well as to legitimize his autocratic rule. It is interesting to note that even the right wing parties such as the *Jamaat-e-Islam* opposed this since it fell short of their ideal which was to make Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic.

It may be asked why over the last three decades there was *a volte face* in the 'secular' politics of Bangladesh. There were several possible reasons - public reaction to the misgovernance apparent in Sheikh Mujib's Government; territorial contiguity with Hindu majority West Bengal creating cartographic anxieties (and hence the need to forge ideological distance) ; diplomatic strategy of governments; failure to address issues of economic upliftment of the common people and increasing influence of global Islam.

However it is the use of religion to defend state borders which has been most responsible for generating hostility between nation-states as well as endangered minority communities living within state boundaries. In a system of majoritarian democracy, minorities often become pawns in the chessboard of politics and have to face the backlash as in the case of the post-Godhra incidents of murder and rape of Muslims in Gujarat ⁵and the post-election (2001) violence on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh.⁶

⁴ Government of Bangladesh, *The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh, 1991).

⁵ On 27 February 2002 following an attack on the Sabarmati Express train resulting in the death of 59 people, massacres against Muslims on a large scale was unleashed with the alleged complicity of the state machinery. The exact circumstances under which the train carrying *kar sewaks* was attacked and 59 passengers charred to death and the extent of the state involvement in the massacres on the Muslim community that followed that left thousands dead and homeless remain issues that continue to be debated in India.

⁶ The post- 2001 election violence in Bangladesh specifically targeted the Hindu minority population though in a broader frame it also encompassed Awami League supporters and other progressive forces in the rural areas. The violence has largely been known to be initiated by supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party who after winning the elections decided to "punish" the 'Hindu vote-bank' which had supported Awami League during election propaganda. The backlash after the elections was systematic and severe. Bangladeshi press has reported that attackers have entered Hindu homes, beaten family members and looted their property and rape and abduction of women too were reported. It was the south-western and southern part of Bangladesh, popularly known as the 'Hindu belt' that was most affected. See Meghna Guhathakurta, "The Nature of the State in Bangladesh," *Human Rights in Bangladesh*, ed. Hameeda Hossain (Dhaka:ASK, 2001).

Modernity And The Politics of Modernization

The idea of modernity in the European sense of the term came to south Asia through colonial encounters and was ensconced in the notion of nationalist movements that gave birth to the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh. The paradigm of modernization with its associated politics of strengthening the state apparatus invariably led to the marginalization of communities, values and thought processes such as those of indigenous people and their movements, as these fell outside or interrogated this framework.

Security analysts both traditional and new are generally not averse to thinking of the economy or economic well-being as essential to mainstream security. They follow closely therefore those in favor of the modernization paradigm⁷ in developmental thinking. The dominance of the growth-oriented model of development has exacerbated the modernization paradigm in the development discourse of many South Asian states. Choice of technology is also a prime factor in this way of thinking. From this perspective it would appear that nuclearization is a more desirable objective for a South Asian state than the goal of self-sufficiency in food grains. From defense to communication, from trade to local government, the dominant development discourse has moved towards the creation of a modern nation-state as opposed to the sustenance of a peasant society. This thinking has permeated all levels of society through the help of the electronic media, so much so that an alternative thinking would appear to verge on the preposterous or insane. It seems therefore 'logical' to think of modernizing the Chittagong Hill Tracts⁸ as opposed to readapting indigenous technology as a solution to many of the development problems of the region. It is more popular for each regime to think of equipping an army with modern technology rather than making it pro-people. It is more advantageous to think of earning more foreign exchange through introducing shrimp cultivation

⁷ Bangladesh's tryst with self-reliance has been short lived. From the self-reliant model of development explicated in The First Five Year Plan, Bangladesh has gravitated towards the goal of integration into the world economy. The dominance of the donors' agenda and the growth-oriented model of development has exacerbated the modernization paradigm in the development discourse of Bangladesh. In the international sphere the modernization paradigm has come to be interpreted as when a stagnant economy is transformed into sustained growth through increase in human skills, a rise in level of investments and savings, adoption of a more productive technology and development of new institutions. See Hollis B. Chenery et. al, *Redistribution with Growth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 680. The emphasis is more on industrial enterprises that will generate a growth rate that will ultimately trickle down to benefit the poor.

⁸ The Chittagong Hill Tracts occupies a physical area of 5093 square miles in south eastern Bangladesh, bordering Mizoram and Tripura borders of India and Myanmar. It is inhabited by about 14 ethnic groups among whom the Chakmas, Tripuras, and Marmas constitute the majority. According to the 1991 Census, 49 percent are reported to be Bengalis from the plainland.

Over the last quarter of a century, the indigenous people of the CHT has been involved in a struggle for autonomy from the Bangladesh state, the main roots of the conflict being the land issue, the transfer of population from the plainlands to the hills and the control of administration by non-hill people. In 1997, an accord was reached between Government representatives and the armed wing of the resistance, the Shanti Bahini, which brought an end to the armed struggle, but in subsequent years the non-implementation of accord especially those dealing with the devolution of power to hill people, failed to address the root causes of the conflict, thereby perpetrating continued violence in the region.

Available from <http://www.wiscomp.org/peaceprints.htm>

notwithstanding the fact that it is displacing both agricultural land and forestry of the locality. It becomes almost natural to assume that real estate agencies and shopping complexes will solve the housing and consumption needs of the middle-class although millions of slum dwellers, whose labor sustains middle class life styles may be made homeless and jobless in the process.

Boundaries of the Self: Ethno-nationalism in the backdrop of historical movements of populations

Juxtaposed against the above state-centric position, minority ethnic communities formulate and define their own identity politics, mostly in the shape of ethno-nationalist movements.

In the backdrop of history, the movement of people in South Asia has been initiated through conquests, through the needs of labor caused by droughts and famines, or through settlement plans of the ruling authorities. Subsequent drawing of political boundaries has created the following consequences. First stretches of the same ethnic community who had previously lived in contiguous regions have been divided as is evident in the case of Santhals, Garos, Khasis, Chakmas, Tripuras and Manipuris. Second, Government settlement plans have created diasporas of isolated ethnic communities separated from their 'mother' communities by political boundaries such as the tea-plantation workers in Sylhet who come from Andhra in India or the sweeper colony in Dhaka who came from Uttar Pradesh and Andhra again, in India. This has had implications for their well-being and livelihoods. For one, although there has been general stability in the ways which British colonial laws applied to ethnic communities throughout the sub-continent, the change of political authorities has brought about certain changes in the options open to them. Ethnic communities which fell under the Pakistan or later Bangladeshi constitution did not enjoy many of the benefits that were offered to their counterparts in India in terms of affirmative action policies, or rights gained from a uniform personal law. Governance practices too have differed. In many parts of tribe-inhabited regions of India the right to swidden cultivation methods and collective ownership of land has been legalized, whereas in the Bangladesh state, it has remained a bone of contention and an issue of heated debate.

However despite the different legal regimes that govern them, communities such as these are quite apt in making their own people to people linkages across borders. Information and understanding between these communities across borders often help build awareness of their rights in a fast and effective manner. The spread of education among these communities serves as a principle guiding light and has been a building block of most indigenous movements. The movement for autonomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) for example was based on the Headmaster's movement, the core element of which was that recruits to the *Shanti Bahini*⁹ would have had to teach at three years at a school before being inducted into the movement. This meant that education was given a core place in the movement's agenda. Since their leader Manobendro

⁹ The Shanti Bahini (Peace Corps) was the name given to the military wing of the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. It was fought to safeguard the rights of the tribal people in south eastern Bangladesh and fought for many years against the government.

Narayan Larma was a Headmaster in a school, the movement came to be known as the Headmaster's Movement.'¹⁰

Throughout the history of Bangladesh, mainstream politics have shown divisiveness between a religion-based nationalism (Bangladeshi) and a language-based nationalism (Bangali). However when it came to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, both streams united to establish cultural hegemony over the hill people. During curfew hours, *Paharis* or hill people were expected to carry a pass to go to the market. The pass said, permission granted: Bangladesh is my life.¹¹ Free mobility of the hill people of the CHT was therefore made conditional on their loyalty to the Bangladesh state. Thus it mattered not to a Pahari whether the party in power possessed a religion-based nationalism or language-based one, their cultural identity would always be subordinated to that of a 'Upajati' a sub-nation (the official terminology ascribed to them in the CHT accord).

It is easy for identity politics to become essentialist in nature. As such they become ethnocentric. This often leads to the suppression of other identities within the ethnic community like that of gender or religion. This may be deemed necessary by the leadership during the period of crisis, but once peace-building or at least the normalization of relations start, these variations invariably surface. If there is no agenda to address these differences then that peace may soon be fractured. It is therefore useful to think of multiple identities even within the framework of a community so that when it comes to addressing questions of social justice and equality, gender relations will not have to be subordinated to issues of ethnicity or religion. It is a difficult thing to do at a time when the very existence of an ethnic community may be at stake, but if the issues are addressed from within rather than imposed from outside, there is a far likely chance for it to be in the agenda for peace rather than being left for the future. Readings of women's perspectives of the 1971 war of liberation in Bangladesh, and the Hill Women's Federation (HWF)'s assessment of the peace process in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have brought us to this conclusion.¹²

Women's voices both as victims and survivors of war have foregrounded the varied manifestations of identity based oppression that impacted on them as well as the many dimensions of survival strategies that they often had to adopt. For example women victims of 1971 spoke of perpetrators who not only belonged to the enemy side but also their own neighbors, friends, who acted as collaborators or grabbed their abandoned properties. Kalpana Chakma, the organizing secretary of the Hill Women's Federation spoke of the need for equal treatment of women in party structures. She writes: "Despite

¹⁰ Meghna Guhathakurta, "Narratives of Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts," in *Women War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*, ed. Rita Manchanda (London: Sage, 2001).

¹¹ Hill Women's Federation (HWF) (1995) leaflet distributed in *NGO Forum*, Hill Womens Federation. The book *Paharer Ruddho Kontho: Pahari Narider Nipiron O Protirodh* (the Silenced Voices of the Hills: The Oppression and Resistance of Hill Women) was published in Dhaka in 1999.

¹² Hameeda Hossain, *Human Rights in Bangladesh 2001*, (Dhaka: ASK, 2002). Hill Women's Federation (HWF) (1995) Leaflet distributed in *NGO Forum*, Hill Womens Federation (HWF) (1999) *Paharer Ruddho Kontho: Pahari Narider Nipiron O Protirodh* (the Silenced Voices of the Hills: The Oppression and Resistance of Hill Women), Dhaka.

the fact that women constitute half the population, they are not taken seriously in any movement for social change. As an example one can point out that the numerous demands voiced during the current movement, even the ten point demand of *the Chhatro Shongram Parishad* does not speak specifically of problems faced by the woman! Many conscious men seem to think that such problems are not important enough to be dealt with at this hour. Therefore the issue of woman's emancipation have remained neglected in agendas for class struggle and political change."¹³ It is voices like these which need to be incorporated in the struggle for freedom and justice and not cast aside as untimely or in opposition to the cause.

Challenges and Imperatives of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy

The matrixes in which both cartographic anxieties and ethno-nationalist sentiments work are open to challenges and confirmation stemming from an era of globalization with accompanying threats of global terrorism.

With the advent of globalization, the dual trends of migration and global terrorism has led states like Bangladesh to adopt contradictory policies, on the one hand having to deal with an increasing number of economic migrants, both documented and undocumented and on the other, having to deal with global pressures to contain terrorism. This has meant having more vigilant borders and taking hard line policies that has affected fundamental freedoms of dissenting groups and aggravating cartographic anxieties. On issues of economic out-migration, the Bangladesh state denies the undocumented migrants working in many cities of India to be theirs. Thus when dealing with cartographic anxieties of India manifest in its 'push-back' policies, Bangladesh reaches a stalemate.

On the other hand, with respect to both documented and undocumented Rohingyas from Myanmar,¹⁴ Bangladesh demonstrates the same xenophobic tendencies as that of India. Although Bangladesh has acknowledged the existence of 30,000 registered refugees many more around, 3 to 4 lakhs reside incognito in the villages of the districts of Cox's Bazaar. Interestingly, in the months preceding the last national election of 2008, when Bangladesh Government subject to the pressure of many western Governments

¹³ Kalpana Chakma, *Kalpana Chakma's Diary*, published serially in *Bhorer Kagoj*, July 24, September 29 and October 6, 1996.

¹⁴ Muslim residents from the Northern Rakine State of Myanmar, commonly referred to as the Rohingya, are an ethnic linguistic and religious minority that are de jure stateless in accordance with the laws of Myanmar. The systematic and continuous persecution of the Rohingyas has resulted in a constant stream of migration into Bangladesh over the past five decades. The most recent influx of about 250,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar, began on July 18, 1991, as a consequence of the Pyi Thaya campaign launched against the Rohingya community by Myanmar. About 236,618 who sought refuge in Bangladesh and were registered were repatriated by the help of UNHCR, but even after 18 years after they fled Burma, about 28,203 Rohingya refugees continue to reside in two main camps. But about 200,000 to 400,000 unregistered Rohingyas are estimated to be residing in localities. The Bangladesh Government has taken a strong stance about not registering any further refugees and also not allowing any activities that may help to create a 'pull factor' for further migration from Myanmar.

took to issuing out national identity cards for the holding of a free and fair election, many of these undocumented Rohingyas were forced out of their villages by the local government officials who issued those cards, because they were not considered to nationals. Many of these migrants took 'refuge' in a makeshift site adjacent to the existing refugee camps. There they still reside in limbo, because the Bangladesh Government has taken the decision not to register any further refugees in its camps as it may generate a 'pull factor' for further refugees.

Terrorism, counter-terrorism and the new security regime

A new security era has emerged in the world after 9/11 and one in which the southern states have been caught up as pawns in the war against terrorism. Much of the dominant security concerns of these states centre around following policies of counter-terrorism, which entail adopting strong vigilante technologies and techniques that bolster and reinvent dominant cartographic anxieties of the state. Needless to mention these technologies, sometimes derived directly for western economies fail to combat actual acts of terrorism and only manages to strengthen a xenophobia that ushers in a new security regime. Thus in a period of fluid population movements, states are compelled to engage with reinvented phobias of the cold-war instead of taking up creative policies of engagement.

One very recent example of such a hard line policy taken by the current Bangladesh regime is with respect to curbing violence in the CHT.¹⁵ This plan which was placed at a review meeting on the situation in the hill tracts districts on May 5, 2010 subsequent to incidents of violence taking place in the area called Bagaihat and the district town of Khagrachhari¹⁶ included rehabilitation of families affected by ethnic violence, readjustment of the boundaries of the three districts, curbing poppy cultivation, rehabilitating poppy growers and regulating the destabilizing activities of one of the indigenous parties. The regional parties in an instant reaction to the plan said that it contained elements that go against the spirit of the CHT Accord and can be considered to be a "non-political hard line " policy to be implemented by officers not having a positive attitude towards the hill people. It was also perceived to pave the way for greater military supervision in the hill districts. All this does not augur well for a well thought out pro-people policy that will not only assuage fears derived from a global state of insecurity, but will be based on the aspirations of its own citizens.

¹⁵ www.chtcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/CHTC-memoToPM-28June2010.pdf, last accessed December 6, 2010.

¹⁶ CHTC Memorandum to the Prime Minister dtd. June 28, 2010 on the Commission's Visit to Khagrachhari and Rangamati, June 19-24, 2010. See BDNews24, "CHT Commission Submits Probe report", June 30, 2010 on <http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=166236&cid=2> accessed on September 1, 2010.

Conclusion

Cartographic anxieties have been imprinted on the statecraft of South Asian states from its very inception following the acceptance of the Westphalian model of the nation state in a terrain of diverse and multiple nationalities. One of the prime targets of such cartographic anxiety has been the growth of identity politics which had cross border implications. The classic example is that of Bangladesh itself, which was borne out a struggle based on linguistic identity *vis-à-vis* religious identity and yet failed to acknowledge the different ethnic and linguistic groups within its own borders once it gained independence.

Identity politics in states of South Asia have been marginalized through the adoption of centralized growth oriented development rather than devolution and self-administration as its core principles of development. Modernization trends have been aggravated by globalizing forces that have induced states to integrate with the world economy and at the same time coerced them to take up vigilante technologies and technologies that affirm their cartographic anxieties. In such a situation, identity politics have become doubly suspect as destabilizing forces within ones borders as well as possible breeding ground of or refuge for terrorist activities. This does not augur well for addressing either the root causes of conflict that such identity politics seeks to assuage or addressing issues of justice and equality both within its state borders and internationally. It is crucial that states such as Bangladesh must take cognizance of the complexities of the situation and rethink its foreign policy imperatives.