

Is the unfolded process of nation-building in Bangladesh a masculine, Muslim, Bengali and class agenda?

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Introduction

Nation-building is considered to be a 'normative'ⁱ concept. But it has different meanings to different people depending on various definitions of nation. Nation is usually defined as a group or race of people who share a common history, tradition and culture, sometimes religion and common language and nation-building is the building of that common identity. The aim of this paper is to examine the historical formation and contemporary state of the cultural project of nation-building in relation to gender, religion, class and ethnicity. The paper will also explore the relationship of various power apparatuses in the process of nation-building.

Nation and Gender Relations

Hegemonic theorisations (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Kedouri 1993, Smith 1995)ⁱⁱ as well as some women's writings (Greenfeld 1992)ⁱⁱⁱ on the discourse of nation and nationalism have ignored gender relations as irrelevant. Some 'influential' schools of nation-building (Geertz 1963; Van den Berge 1979)^{iv} have observed nation as a natural and universal phenomenon.

While highlighting 'production' and 'reproduction' in the literature of nation, these theorists have ignored the role of women. Nation has been embodied as essentially a masculine agenda. They defined the process of nation-building as a set of activities that involve going out fighting to defend the nation, laying down lives for it, carving out the nation, defining its boundaries and creating laws and social mores,

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which the traditional gender roles associate strongly with masculinity. The history of nation-building in Bangladesh is no exception to this trend. Some notable exceptions to the gender-blind theorisations of nation have emerged from Balibar (1990), Chatterjee (1990) and Mosse (1985)^v. They were influenced and nurtured by a small but rising group of feminist scholars (Jayawardena 1986; Kandiyoti 1991; Parker et al. 1992; Patman 1988; Yuval-Davis 1993; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, quoted in *Gender and Nation* by Nira Yuval-Davis 1997)^{vi}.

Since nation is seen as a part of the public political sphere and women are considered a part of the private domain, exclusion of women from the public political sphere has affected their exclusion from the discourse as well (Pateman 1988; Grant 1991). However, women's entry into the national world is not a recent phenomenon; they were always there, they are in there, and they will remain central to its formation and reproduction. Despite the continuous theoretical struggle of the feminists, incorporating women explicitly in the analytical discourse on nation and nationalism is a recent and partial encounter. In the context of Bangladesh, Naher (1996) has shown that theorisation of national identity is not gender-neutral. Drawing from theoretical debates on gender and nationalism, she has shown the diversity of women's positions in the historical and contemporary national culture.

Shift from feminity to masculinity in nation-building process in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the formation of nation began to take shape after the Partition in 1947, especially on the basis of language. The demand to make Bangla one of the state languages of Pakistan, raised by the Bengali people of East Pakistan, instigated the Language Movement in 1952. From the movement onward, the demand for autonomy had gathered momentum and finally, in 1971 they won independence through a nine-month war. Bengali nationalism, matured by Bengali culture, language, history and tradition by the time, acquired then its institutional shape.

But within the broader concept of nation women were excluded, as they were not considered a part of it. Women's participation was not acknowledged in the history of the War of Independence for a long time and the accepted discourse denied women of any active role in the war. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first president of Bangladesh, built the myth of 'Sonar Bangla' to forge a relationship between the concept of nationalism and tradition, and also to relate it with femininity as a model of nation of the Indian subcontinent, since nature and tradition are the symbols of femininity. Mahatma Gandhi avoided the unilineal frame of nation which was extremely masculine and based on western concepts and Gandhi rejected the masculine and western-based policy and replaced it with a feminine policy rooted in Indian tradition. It is important to note here that Erikson (1958) presented Martin Luther as a symbol of masculinity. Referring to Luther's statement, 'I am staying here,' which represented determination, metaphysics, politics, economics and intellectuality, Erikson observed that the authority of puritan ideology and unconquerability was a gendered representation.

During the division of Pakistan and India on the basis of 'two nation theory', nationalists portrayed India in feminine terms. They called India the 'Motherland' and when another nation Pakistan was carved out of her territory, it was as if the body of the mother - India - had been violated. Maps of India, with the body of a woman, often a goddess, mapping her territory, were commonplace among Indian nationalists. On August 14 in 1947, the day before the country was divided, the right-wing weekly Hindu carried a map of India on which lay a woman. Her right limb (which mapped Pakistan) had been severed, with Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, leaning over her holding a bloody knife in his hand (Urvashi 1996).

In marked contrast to Luther, Gandhi adapted a feminine concept of nation in Indian continent. But in practice, masculinity here also reigned supreme.

Mother-woman dilemma in the process of nation-building

Following the Gandhian discourse, the people of Bangladesh also call the country as mother. The interconnection of mother and land was drawn from discourses that mother is near to nature and both the land and mother have reproductive capacity. Though country is rhetorically called motherland, it does not affirm any essential relation between land and women as a whole. Here, land is translated as mother, but it is not synonymous with women. If we take into account the songs of anti-British movement, we will find that all the prominent songs aiming at inspiring the leaders and the people were gender-biased. Most of the songs of Tevagha movement also bear a strong masculine undercurrent.

Oh, peasant brothers of Bengal
Oh, peasant brothers of Bengal, be conscious.
Your lives are in the hand of the landlord.

The song gives the impression that all the participants of the anti-British movement were men. But in reality, women had a vital role in the movement. This trend of ignoring women's roles was also followed in Bangladesh after the independence war. The feminine image of Bangladesh was upheld, particularly in mass media and literature, but women's voices were ignored in core activities that are considered essential for giving the nation its shape.

Feminist scholars have complained against several patriotic songs which played an important role in the war in 1971. For example:

Mother of Bengal, untackled, we are youngmen
We are proud of Surjosen, Titumir
And the rhythm of Hosein Shah and Nazrul'.
(Source: Songs of Liberation)

The song says that Bengal (land addressed as mother) does not need to be worried as she has young sons who will protect her. The song says the people are proud for their valiant sons like Surjosen, Titumir, Hossein Shah and Nazrul Islam, but the song preferred not to highlight even a single woman. The accounts of the independence war are abound with sentences like 'The indomitable boys joined the war to protect the mother,' where land is hailed as mother. Though mother is respected within the boundary of the nation, there is no

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significant space for women as a whole. Showing respect to mother does not necessarily ensure respect to women or women's rights. This image of mother here is one of weakness, a person who needs help to protect herself. There is a tendency to relate nature with mother. National anthem of Bangladesh highlight it,

My Golden Bengal , I love you
Forever, your skies, your air sets my heart in tune
As if it were a flut.
In Spring, Oh mother mine, the fragrance from
Your mango groves makes me wild with joy-
Ah, what a thrill !
In Autumn, oh mother mine,
In the full-blossomed paddy fields,
I have seen sprad all over sweet smiles!
Ah, what beauty, what shades, what a affection
And tenderness!
What a quilt have you spread at the feet of
Banyan trees and along the banks of rivers!
Oh mother mine, words from your lips are like
Near to my ears!
Ah, what a thrill!
If sadness, oh mother mine, casts a gloom on your face
My eyes filled with tears!

(Original in Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore, trnaslated by Professor Syed Ali Ahsan)

Though women and women's body are generally relegated to the margin, they become central to the process of nation-building at times of nationalist struggle. Women, then, come to symbolise the honour and virtue of the nation. They become the icons, the mother-figures, for whom men are willing to lay down their lives. It is on this notion of womanhood that the cultural identity of the community and the nation is staked.

Motherland which came to signify 'home' and 'country' for men, had a different meaning for women. For the Bengali women, the process of nation-building was not one of finding an identity, rather it was simply one where old, existing patriarchies, models of hierarchy and control found new expression.

When the independence war began, women were the vital participants in every aspects of the struggle. Young and old women served as spies and couriers, in fields they fought against Pakistani soldiers along with the men fighters. As men went off to the war, women had to take over the management of farms, household chores, adding multiple new tasks to their already existing domestic and child care duties. They leaned on the job under the worst of circumstances—rising inflation, growing scarcity, danger and uncertainty. In the war, about three lacs women were raped or abducted by the Pakistani soldiers. After the war, the new state of Bangladesh refused to accept them ideologically and did not make any state policy to build new formula to merge them in the nation-state concept except establishing a Women Rehabilitation Centre and entitling them with 'Birangona' (heroic women), which gave them a special status but did not offer anything for their inclusion in the mainstream of the nation. And even the names of many women who were killed by the Pakistani army were not posted in the list of martyrs prepared by the government of Bangladesh. The gender-biased politics of memory and amnesia has acted strongly behind it.

It is true that there is hardly a place in the world where national liberation movements have meant liberation for women. Women have always been treated as incomplete national subjects.

As nation is a territorial concept, land is a central issue in the project of nation-building. Women's rights on land are not equal to men in Bangladesh and in some cases they do not have right on land, which also contributes much to the 'mother-women' dilemma in nation-building discourse. And even the constitution of Bangladesh gave no special space for women. Land is regarded as mother, but this image of mother does not address the women status and creates space for mother-women dilemma.

Male priority in language discourse

Language, another important component in nation-building, also has gendered character. It prioritises males in society and reproduces and ensures males' power. It also strengthens the relation between nation

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and masculinity. Foucault (1972) argues that discourses are much more than linguistic performances. They are players of power which mobilises rules, codes and procedures to assert a particular understanding. The construction of knowledge takes place within these rules, codes and procedure. They organise reality in specific ways that involve particular epistemologies, (Ahmed 1994) Foucault argues that discourse needs to be studied archeologically and geneologically so that we can uncover its effective formation through non-discursive practices. Language is the core part of nationalism. Bangla language plays an important role to create nationalist sentiment. But Bangla, like most languages, tends to give priority to men rather than women in alluding or addressing at almost all aspects. For example, chele-meye (boys and girls), bar-kone (groom-bride), tarun-taruni (youngmen-youngwomen), chhatra-chhatri (male student-female Student), shwami-strii (husband-wife), and a lot more words priotitise males.

Nation-building in relation to ethnic, religious and class discourse:

Ethnic Discourse

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 complicated matters—what was once a socio-economic region became divided on the basis of religion. Religion, therefore, was used time and again as a defence of the national boundaries. The narrow definition of the nation-state adopted by the Bangladesh government makes it reluctant to define the political movement of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as an indigenous movement. This 'indigenous' is defined as being internal or external to political boundaries of the nation-state as opposed to a cultural definition of the indigenous. The narrow conceptual boundary of the nation-state therefore gives rise to a kind of cultural hegemony where groups such as the ones mentioned above are excluded or marginalised. The constitution of Bangladesh has undergone qualitative changes from its first draft since the principles of socialism and secularism were modified. Two hegemonic discourses dominated the text: linguistic and religious (Thakurtha 2005)^{vii}

In Bangladesh, apart from Bengali people, more than 70^{viii} different ethnic^{ix} communities are living. The nation-building process that began with the language movement had denied the language of the ethnic people and was not able to involve the ethnic people in the liberation movement. The liberation has been projected as a nationalist movement or the victory of the Bengali people. On the other hand, it has been propagated that the total ethnic people were against the independence war, pointing to the role of Chakma King Tridib Roy who had served as the collaborator of the Pakistani army. And the mainstream history maintained that some parts of the CHT were used as the weapons practice ground for the Pakistani soldiers. Though many ethnic people fought in the independence war and sacrificed their lives, their contribution has been kept out of the history by making generalised comments on the entire ethnic groups. The growth of the concept of nation has denied integrating these people in its process. On the other hand, since the war has been portrayed as a war between Bengali and Pakistani people it becomes difficult to understand why the ethnic people of Bangladesh should have joined the war. Here, it is also important to note that the Bengali leaders, who played the vital role in the war, were not able to win support from all ethnic people. Despite all the limitations of the leadership, more than 5,000 people from ethnic communities, from both hills and plains, had joined the independence war as freedom fighters, and a huge number of ethnic people were killed. Then the question arises why only the case of Tridib Roy in the CHT is brought into light while considering the contribution of the ethnic people in the war. The answer lies in the process of nation-building. By showing the case of Tridib Roy, it was easy to overlook their existence in the newly independent country. The independence war was glorified as a victory of Bengali people and the new constitution of Bangladesh recognised the national identity of Bengalis only excluding the identities of ethnic people. The constitution left the ethnic people with no space for their cultural distinctiveness or special rights. The only provision that are often referred to in this regard is Article 28 Clause 4, which states,

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Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.^x

This provision is ambiguous, and derogatory. It does not in any way specify who or what constitutes the 'backward'. Even if one is to accept that backward sections are constituted by minorities, then one has to recognise that the Bangladesh state is a hegemonic institution that relegates a portion of its citizens to periphery as 'backward'

State policies have consciously promoted the language and culture of the dominant community. Article 3 of the Constitution recognises Bangla as the state language and Article 24 states,

The State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture.^{xi}

Article 17(a) of the Constitution calls for the establishment of a uniform system of education. This uniformity hinders plurality and is also problematic since the state promotes a particular culture.

The state by its very ideals alienated the non-Bengali population of the state, hence constructed political minorities. The state failed to present itself as an emancipatory force by institutionalising the ideals of nationalism in its constitution. Article 6 clause 1 states that the citizens of Bangladesh will be known as Bengalis. The imposition of the clause upon the entire population of Bangladesh turned the non-Bengali population into ethnic minorities, as Bengali is a cultural category and article 9 made it explicit that Bengali nationalism is rooted in the culture and language of the people. Adoption of Bangla as the state language has turned the non-Bengali population into linguistic minority as well.

Change in the ideal of nationalism, from Bengali to Bangladeshi, further marginalised and alienated the ethnic communities. Bangladeshi nationalism was based on the elements of race, the independence war, Bengali language, culture, religion (in this stance, Islam is the religion of dominant community), land (geographical

area) and economy. The state also moved towards Islamisation that greatly frustrated the ethnic minorities as they are mostly Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or Animist.

The concept of nation promulgated in the Constitution treated the ethnic people as 'other'^{xii}. The text books also testify it, 'We are Bengalis, we speak in Bangla'^{xiii}. Some slogans were also created such as, *Ek Jati Ek Desh, Banglir Bangladesh* (One nation, one state, Bengalis' Bangladesh) and '*Tumi Ke? Ami Ke? Bangali, Bangali*' (Who are you? Who am I? Bengali, Bengali).

Religious Discourse

The binary opposition of 'minority' and 'majority' is a modern state construction. The state of being marginalised, alienated, and to a large extent derogated is inherent within the very etymology of 'minority'. It implies something minor as opposed to major, subordinate as opposed to super-ordinate or dominant, hence less important. 'Minority' does not necessarily have to do with numbers, but is rather a matter of status, role and, more importantly, access to power and resources. Thus one might be a minority in ethnic, religious, injustice, gender, sect, caste, language for that matter, sexual terms.^{xiv} However, the question remains how the process of majority and minority construction works within a nation, or is it only a matter of numbers?

The 1972 Constitution based its fundamental principles on nationalism, socialism (meaning economic and social justice), democracy and secularism, aiming at establishing a society free from exploitation in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, justice and equality were to be secured for all citizens. The Constitution also guaranteed freedom of conscience, speech, press and religious worship. Two amendments of the Constitution in 1977 and 1988 replaced secularism with Islam; Islam was declared the state religion. In the process, the country officially adopted a Muslim identity. And the religious minorities (Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and Animist) suddenly found themselves outside the boundary of the nation.

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Democracy has, in effect, turned into an instrument of oppression of the minorities. Based on the principle of majority rule, politics has turned into a game of numbers. Individuals and communities instead of being viewed as human beings are viewed as 'vote banks' by political parties. The violent and polarised state of Bangladesh politics has turned the minorities into victims of extreme political violence inflicted upon them by the political parties and their supporters in a bid to either 'win' over the 'vote banks' or stop them from exercising their voting rights through coercion and violence.

The institution of majoritarian democracy also does not allow them a voice in the national parliament. There is hardly any scope for a meaningful representation of the minorities in the parliament or other representative institutions. In the October 2001 elections, seven minority candidates got elected; five of them are from the Hindu community, one from Chakma and the other from Marma community.^{xv}

Class Discourse

The critique of nation-building in respect of class needs more historical explication than it has so far received. Its sources are complex, and are rooted in anti-colonial movements. In post-1945 decolonisation era, much emphasis was given on combining fight for freedom with building a national culture. It had produced an all too persuasive autonomous analysis which was in many ways radical in its discussion of colonialism, but implicitly conservative in its assumptions about social hierarchy. Without the class perspective, the nation-building project, with its emphasis on natural, essential and unified national culture that overlooked the centrality of capitalism to the colonial project, had reproduced the ideological values of a class society.

The transforming events of Bangladesh's independence war in 1971 strongly linked the people's imagination and its products to the optimistic, speculative construction of a virtuous citizen subject for a new world. However, the ruling groups' holistic ideological claims of 'Bengali' nationalism have sought to homogenise a multitude of differences of class, gender, and ethnicity. Gender, ethnicity and

class were relegated as less immediately relevant than the basic questions of post-war stabilisation and reconstruction. But as Rosa Luxemburg (*The National Question: Selected writing* (New York: Monthly Review, 1976)) wrote 'in a class society, "the nation" as a homogenous entity does not exist. Rather, there exists within each nation, classes with antagonistic interests and "rights".'

Bengali nationalism also produced a construction of a subaltern class. The official history of independence war (edited by Hasan Hasfizar Rahman)^{xvi} has mostly documented the upper class voices. The war is also glorified as people's war. Most of the historians of the war more or less overlooked the subaltern.

The political order that emerged from the independence war—with its unambiguous consensus, shared by the major political parties alike, on principles of democracy, socialism, secularism and nationalism—has now collapsed. Bangladeshi political life today appears to have been restructured in such a way that all accept the logic of the capitalist order and market economy. The nation-building experience in Bangladesh indicates that the process has never gone against the logic of class—the fundamental subordination of labour to a dominant class, the arrangement that has persisted since Antiquity and the process implicitly views it as inevitable. The constitution of nation will change, as the immediate goals of class' interest change, from conjuncture to conjuncture change. The appearance of the nation will change with every change in the conjuncture-taking the face of the dominant social groups, or forces.^{xvii}

Interrelation of different power apparatuses

Father of the nation: Combination of masculine and Bengali power

It is also not a new idea to glorify a person by labelling him as 'the father of nation'. Many states have the father of the nation, but none have the mother of nation. It is obviously because the concept of nation is itself a masculine agenda. In the context of Bangladesh, a debate is going on the issue of the father of the nation. He is also remarkably a Bengali. The masculine and Bengali powers are interlinked here with one another. The function of this combined

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powers in the formation of nation have led to the search for the father of the nation.

National Interest: Who's interest?

Though the initiatives and policies of the government are said to bring benefits to the people, the subaltern usually are the victims of their adverse effects. In case of the CHT, lands had been acquired by the government to set up military camps in the name of national interest. Kaptai hydro-electric dam was also built in 1959 in the name of national interest that resulted in forced migration of about 100,000 Chakma from the CHT to Tripura, India, where many of them are still living as refugees. But, most of the areas of the CHT are yet to get electricity supply. Here, the government of Bangladesh is obviously serving the Bengali elites.

Conclusion

The class subjectivity of the citizen-subject, their sexual and ethnic identities thus become welded together in nation-building discourses and took on new and sinister dimensions of meaning. Ruling groups had used the morality and virtue of the subaltern as a way of valorising their moral authority. By focusing on the issue, new questions about the economic and political integrity of dominant groups could be raised.

The paper has also investigated the relation of different power apparatuses in relation to nation-building. Gender, class, religion and ethnicity were considered to get through the channels of power operations. The notion of the father of the nation has been handled by exploring the combined power functions.

I have here attempted a preliminary exploration of the ways in which question of gender, ethnicity and class have been handled in the process of nation-building. Even such a limited focus may reveal major difficulties of incorporation that we must uncover and consider, in both its positive and its negative effects, so that we work towards change.

Notes

- i. The politics of 'normative' is in question. How does the process take place in a 'normative' way? See Foucault, M (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London, Routledge.
- ii. See, Gellner (1983) *Nation and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, Habsbawm, E (1990) *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. Kedourie, E (1993) *Nationalism* (1960). Cambridge, Blackwell. Smith, A (1995) *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*. Cambridge, Polity.
- iii. For Details, please see Greenfeld, L (1992) *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.
- iv. For elaboration, please see, Geertz (ed) (1963) *Old Societies and New States*, New York: Free Press. Van den Berghe, P (1979) *The Ethnic Phenomenon*. New York: Elsevier.
- v. Balibar, E (1990) 'The Nation form History and Ideology', *New Left Review*, XIII (3, summer): 329-61, Chatterjee, P (1986) *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A derivative Discourse?*, London: Zed. This is also important to see Mosse, G.L (1985) *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- vi. They were the pioneer of this field, see Jayawardena, K(1986) *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London: Zed. Kandiyoti (1991) 'Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation'. *Millennium*, 20(3):429-44. Parker, et al (1990) *Nationalism and Sexualities*, New York: Routledge. Yuval, D,N (1993) 'Gender and Nation', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16(4):621-32. Yuval, D,N and Anthias, f (eds) (1989) *Women -Nation-State*. London: Macmillan. Yuval, D,N 1997 *Gender and Nation*, Sage publication, London.
- vii. She has brought up the history in her writing, For details, see Benergee .P, Sabyasachi, B.RC and Samir, K.D (edited 2005) *Internal Displacement in South Asia*, Sage Publications, New Delhi/ Thousand Oaks/ London
- viii. The Survey is conducted by Bangladesh Asiatic Society (2004-2007). The author was the part of that survey.
- ix. The term 'ethnic' actually derives from the adjectival from the Greek word 'ethnos' referring to the people of a nation. In the relevant literature, 'ethnic' still retains this basic meaning, describing a group of people possessing some degree of coherence and solidarity who are, lately at least aware of their common origin and interests. Therefore an ethnic group is not a mere aggregate of people or a sector of a population, but a self-consciousness collection of people united, or closely related, by shared experiences. Those experiences are usually, but not always of course, ones of deprivation, characterizing, for example, immigrants and their descendants. The consideration of ethnicity is very difficult, since several controversies run over this term. The term ethnic communities in the paper are used in the same sense as in 'Bulletin of Jana Sanghati Samity' (Jana Sanghati Samity is the Political Organization of the

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Ethnic Hill People), according to which there are twelve ethnic communities in the CHT

They are, respectively, Chakma, Marma, Pankho, Khumi, Lusai, Murong, Bonojog, Tanchanya, Bom, Khyang, Chak and Tripura. However the census reports of Bangladesh and the military report treat them in many different names. The census report in 1991 named two groups, 'Tipara and 'Tripura; though they belong to the same group in ' Bulletin of Jana Sanghati Samity; And in the 1991 military report, ethnic communities are divided into Chakma, Tripura, Murong, Tanchaya, Bom, Reyang, Pankho, Khumi, Usai, Khayang, Chak and Lusai.

- x. The Constitution of Bangladesh, 1996, Dhaka, govt of Bangladesh.
- xi. Ibid, Page 16
- xii. It is very interesting to understand the politics of 'us and 'other' through the curriculum or text books or institutional practices. Knowledge is not free from power. See, Said, E (1978) Orientalism. Vintage publications.
- xiii. See, Gammer Book of Class V, Published by Bangladesh Text Book Board
- xiv. Amena Mohsin Rights to Minority, Human Rights 2001, Ain O Salish Kendra, published in 2002
- xv. Mohsin, Ibid, p-246
- xvi. The volume of Independence War of Bangladesh (1-15), Edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Govt. Republic of Bangladesh.
- xvii. For details, see Partha C and Pradeep J (2007) Community, Gender and Violence, Subaltern Studies XI

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