



Novel Insights, *An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)

Impact Factor: 4.25(IIFS), 8.2(IJIN)

Volume-II, Special Issue, February 2026, Page No. 38-46

Published by Uttarsuri, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.2.issue.specialW.066



Creation of Bangladesh Out of the Chaos of Pakistan: Showing Religious Theory of Nationhood as a Hoax

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Received: 01.01.2026; Accepted: 20.02.2026; Available online: 28.02.2026

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Abstract

At the threshold of Indian independence, the internal politics of the subcontinent took a bizarre turn when religion became one of the determining factors. The British and the leaders of Indian National Congress and All-India Muslim League were entrapped in an imbroglio of indecision. Ultimately, Gandhian brigade had to swallow the bitter pill of Partition to rein the unbridled stallion of communal violence. But within a quarter-century, the erstwhile successful two-nation theory proved to be a fiasco when East Pakistan revolted against its western wing and seceded from it to shape a sovereign country called Bangladesh in 1971. The corrosive policies of West Pakistan lacerated the ethnic integrity of the Bengali Muslims and gashed the idea of Islamic brotherhood preached in 1947. My research paper intends to show how the liberation of Bangladesh falsified the two-nation theory. It will also try to analyse why and how the brittleness of religious theory dismantled the idea of building a nation based on only religion.

Keywords: Congress, League, Partition, Two-nation theory, West Pakistan, Bangladesh

The British ruled the Indian subcontinent for nearly two centuries with the accurate reading of the pulse of the complex native societies. The colonists understood that the subjugated people's obsession with religion and caste could be a boon to boost their empire-building aspiration. On the other hand—despite the presence of many internal conflicts—diverse castes, cultures, cuisines, races, regions, and religions strengthened the idea of a syncretic and pluralistic India for centuries. The foreign rulers were bent on spoiling that very great Indian melting pot with the introduction of various nefarious schemes. “The British saw and discussed Indian society and politics in terms of Hindus and Muslims as separate political and cultural entities” (Singh 9). After the revolt of 1857, the coloniser became more cautious about Hindu-Muslim unity of the natives. Moreover, the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 became a stumbling block for them. They shrewdly started to dismantle this secular political spine so that they could rule India unchecked. To calibrate their imperial agenda, they introduced and implemented ‘divide and rule’ policy.

Since the nineteenth century, Bengali intelligentsia were playing a major role in the country to shape social and political opinions of the masses. The rulers were thinking to throttle the growing Bengali nationalism. They declared the division of Bengal in 1905

citing the need for better administrative handling of the large province. Clearly, the scheme was a sham and was originally designed to divide Bengalis along religious lines and thereby to weaken Hindu-Muslim unity. The decision sparked vehement protest among the Bengalis across religions and compelled the conspirators to repeal it in 1911. Though the nasty British attempt to divide Bengali Hindus and Muslims failed, it did not fail to scratch a communal line on the body of harmonious Bengal.

There is no parallel in history to the paradox that while in 1905 a majority of the people of Bengal rejected the British-directed partition of their land and fought against it, only four decades later, in 1947, the same majority asked for a partition of Bengal between Muslim majority and Hindu majority areas. (Sengupta, Preface ix)

The establishment of British-sponsored All-India Muslim League in Dhaka in 1906 was intended to make it an able contender of the Hindu-dominated Congress. In the coming decades, both the parties would be at loggerheads on various issues and communal politics would show its worst.

The seed of two-nation theory gave a harvest on the threshold of Indian independence. The country was besmeared in the blood of communal riots. Mohammad Ali Jinnah's call for direct action on 16 August 1946 showed the worst of religious intolerance. "The Calcutta Killings reinforced, in a graphic way, the *idea* that Hindus and Muslims were incompatible, and planted this seed in the minds of British and Indian policy-makers" (Khan 66). Consequent Noakhali and Bihar riots accelerated the fall of Hindu-Muslim unity bastion. The diversity and degree of these violence paved the way for an irrevocable communal discord in the Indian subcontinent. M. K. Gandhi said, "[T]o me the sins of the Noakhali Muslims and the Bihar Hindus are of the same magnitude and equally commendable" (qtd. in Guha 822-23). However, the decision-makers failed to address the abhorrent religious politics and resorted to severing the soul of Indian diversity. In the decisive elections of 1945, ninety-six per cent Bengali Muslims voted for Pakistan whereas it was only forty-nine per cent in case of Punjabi Muslims. Bengali Muslims hardly imagined not to achieve the entire Bengal with all its beauties and bounties but they had to eat the humble pie. "But just when Pakistan had become a certainty as also the inclusion of the whole of Bengal in it, a totally unforeseen development took place, namely, the idea of partition of Bengal, which, paradoxically, Bengal had rejected half a century ago" (Sengupta 147). Maloy Krishna Dhar remarks how Partition crushed Bengali ethnicity: "Our culture and tradition was split into many pieces" (Author's Note ix-x).

Jinnah's religious theory of nationhood fructified and Pakistan came into being comprising West Punjab and East Bengal. Karachi became the capital of the new country. Bengali Muslims who were the majority populations were denied their first natural right of having the country's capital. Jinnah, *Quaid-i-Azam*, addressed the people of Pakistan on 11 August 1947,

You are free. You are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in the State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed, that has nothing to do with the business of State . . . ect., etc., etc. *Pakistan Zindabad!* (Sidhwa 144)

His overt liberalism towards people of other religions somewhere hinted at his inherent secular or atheistic nature. He hardly took religion seriously but for his ego and political

aspiration. But his cultural insecurity came to light after some months. "Jinnah declared Urdu the Pakistani national language in 1948, deaf to the passion of Bengali linguistic patriotism and the complaints of the majority of Pakistanis who could not speak the language" (Khan 189). Jinnah undemocratically ignored Bangla or Bengali, the language of the majority population of the country. The declaration created a cultural commotion in East Bengal because the alien Urdu culture was feared to annihilate the centuries-old cultural inheritance of the Bengalis.

Gradually, East Bengal was deprived of its economic opportunities. People from West Pakistan had control over government jobs. Army and other administrative posts had no openings for the Bengalis. "From a look of the things it seems that East Bengal has been reduced to the status of a colony. Everything is run by West Pakistanis" (Gangopadhyay 1: 104). The Bengalis were exploited by their coreligionists who promised a better future for all the Muslims of Pakistan after being freed from the clutch of Hindu-dominated India. Reality ruled out the religious theory of betterment. "For each single rupee spent in East Pakistan they spent ten in the West. Employment ratio was one to ten. East Bengal exported goods, the imports all went to the West" (Gangopadhyay 1: 166). Muslims wanted a separate homeland as they no longer wanted to be treated as second-rate citizens in India. Now the majority Muslim population of Pakistan are being treated as second-rate citizens by their minority coreligionists. It exposed that religious theory was a hoax. The step-brotherly attitude of the West towards the East caused much ire among the Bengalis.

On 25 February 1948, Begum Ikramullah stated in the Constituent Assembly that, 'A feeling is growing among the East Pakistanis that Eastern Pakistan is being neglected and treated as a 'colony' of West Pakistan'. This shows that along with the Bengali language, the alleged discrimination against East Bengal and her economic exploitation was also becoming a major issue. (Sengupta 172-73)

Noticing the discontents of the Bengalis against the people and policies of West Pakistan, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan resorted to the tested formula of religious politics and raised baseless propaganda that Islam was in danger and to save it, Pakistan needed the unity of its citizens. An anti-India campaign was launched throughout the country and it was equated with anti-Hindu sentiment so that aggrieved people of the country could be consolidated on religious lines. Bangla was marked as part of Hindu identity and it must be replaced by Urdu to authenticate pure Islam in Pakistan. A section of the Bengalis first tried to adapt to the alien language but soon the Bengalis felt the thirst for their mother tongue.

Before Partition Jinnah had been cautioned by several experts that it would be difficult to manage both western and the eastern wings separated by twelve hundred miles of foreign territory and 'inhabited by people different in their habits, customs and lifestyle'. But he had such confidence in the supremacy of his leadership that he believed that he would be able to put everything right. Now he became aware that neither he nor the bond of Islam would be able to knit together two such diverse peoples. The gulf in every respect—political, economic and social—was so wide that even Islamic brotherhood could not keep them together. (Mukhopadhyay 150)

Very soon language became a bone of contention between two parts of Pakistan. A voice of protest started smouldering in the hearts of the Bengalis. On 21 February 1952, students and common people organised huge rallies and meetings in Dhaka to register their demand ignoring the government's ban on public gathering. Five protestors were killed and many were injured in the repressive action taken by the callous government. Leaders like A. K. Fazlul Huq were also injured. The incident was unparalleled in the history of the world where people were ready to let down their lives for the dignity of their mother tongue. The incident raised a question about the efficacy of the idea of an Islamic brotherhood while Muslims were killing Muslims. The totalitarian action broke the hallucination of the Bengali Muslims and it showed that their West Pakistani coreligionists could never be their co-citizens only because of religious proximity.

Religion alone cannot alone forge a tie . . . strong enough to unite a nation. Muslims also killed Muslims. Muslims too exploited fellow Muslims. Pakistan was created so that Hindu dominance could end, but even in the newly formed state emerged a class of exploiters – there was a clear division between tyrants and their victims. The fact was that tyrants and exploiters had no religion-they were everywhere. (Gangopadhyay 1: 166)

Failing to thwart the protest, the government gave Bangla the recognition of a state language on 7 March 1954. The protest and its success somewhere set the tone for larger movements in near future. "There can be no doubt that the language movement played a leading role in weakening the Muslim League and in building up a secular/linguistic Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan . . ." (Sengupta 179).

In 1953, the Awami Muslim League, the main political party in East Bengal dropped the word 'Muslim' to attract Hindus. Next year, Pakistan's first provincial general election to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly was held. Awami League emerged as the representative of Bengali nationalism against the military and political establishment of West Pakistan represented by Muslim League. Fazlul Huq-led coalition United Front formed the cabinet and Huq became the Chief Minister of East Bengal. The liberal Muslim leader thought to withdraw the passport system launched in 1952 between India and Pakistan so that people could freely meet their near and dear ones across the borders. He also took measures to establish Bangla Academy in Dhaka. Huq's secular bent of mind and activities led to his dismissal within two months of the cabinet formation. He was sent behind bars on a charge of sedition. It was an attempt on the part of the government to abolish Bengali political upliftment.

If the geographical distance dividing the two halves of Pakistan would be great, however, the psychological distance between the two peoples inhabiting them would be staggering. Apart from a common faith in Allah the One, the Merciful, Punjabis and Bengalis shared nothing. They were as different as Finns and Greeks. Neither history nor language nor culture offered a bridge by which those two peoples might communicate. Their marriage in the common state of Pakistan would be a union created against all the dictates of logic. (Lapierre & Collins 163-64)

In 1955, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan to scrap out the Bengali identity. "The demand of their language was conceded but at the cost of their Bengali identity. The word 'Bengali' smacks of Hindu religion, at least this is what the West Pakistani leaders felt"

(Gangopadhyay 1: 300). In 1956, Pakistan got its constitution which declared the country as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The demand for regional autonomy was becoming loud and clear in East Pakistan but the new constitution of 1956 denied it. It enraged the Bengalis and somewhere sent the message that the government was not interested to fulfil its promise of 1940 Lahore Resolution. Bengali nationalist leader Maulana Bhashani declared in 1957, "If you keep up your exploitation, if you do not give autonomy to East Pakistan then there is only one thing we have to say to you – Asalam Alaykum, you go your way, we'll go our's" (Gangopadhyay 1: 364). It was definitely a clarion call for the secession of East Pakistan. Once Bengali Muslims responded to Jinnah's call to get respite from the socio-political and economic exploitations by the Hindus. Ironically, now their coreligionists were demolishing their dream of a dignified life. Bengalis were now out of the frying pan into the fire. Repeated repressive actions by the government reinforced the notion of a separate Bengali nation.

All of a sudden President Iskander Mirza imposed martial law on 7 October 1958. On the 27th of the same month, General Ayub Khan ousted Mirza and became the President. For the next four or five years, the military rule silenced all kinds of political activities in East Pakistan. "Anyone could be arrested any time. All the political parties are banned and the leaders are put under the bars" (Gangopadhyay 1: 502). The Bengalis never expected that they would have to pay such a huge price even under an Islamic regime. Somewhere a desire of liberal democracy like India lurked in their heads and hearts but it was completely choked by the despotic rulers of West Pakistan. Suddenly Ayub Khan wanted to wear a mask of democracy but his project of 'Basic Democracy' with a limited franchise of eighty thousand affluent people failed in 1960. People demanded universal suffrage and this time he launched a political party called Pakistan Muslim League to fight elections. Leaders of other parties were released to contest elections. To allure the students, he formed a students' wing called National Students Federations whose members created anarchy in the education system. "Students most loyal to the government would be rewarded with scholarships up to one thousand rupees" (Gangopadhyay 1: 544). It was an attempt to make a whole generation of educated Bengali youths' sycophants of the government.

The final fissure in the West and East Pakistan relations came when the assault on the Bengali language and culture became unbearable. The West Pakistani regime never liked the Bengali culture because Hindu poets, artists, singers, writers had many contributions to it. Urdu-cultured Muslims hardly had the capacity to understand the syncretic cultural experience of the Bengalis across religions. The writings of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and other Hindu writers were targeted and pre-Partition books were discarded. Sanskrit words were replaced with Arabic and Persian words. Singing Rabindra Sangeet was treated as sin and accordingly, it was banned. They feared that Tagore's songs could invigorate Bengali nationalism. The nihilistic government curtailed the cultural connections of the Bengalis across borders and religions. British perforated the wall of the common cultural heritage of the Bengalis by dividing it and now the Pakistani regime was bulldozing it. People of East Pakistan were angered and disgusted at the chauvinistic attitude of West Pakistanis towards the shared Bengali culture. The cord of common religion failed to be the saviour in this regard and proved to be bogus. "The Ayub Khan government's prohibition in 1961 of the celebration of the birth centenary of Rabindranath

Tagore and the ban imposed on singing of Rabindra Sangeet were bitterly resented by the public in East Bengal, which defied these orders" (Sengupta 206).

The constitution of 1962 reinforced the idea of a pure Islamic state by denying rights to people from other religion except Islam to be the president of the country. Hindu-influenced and liberal Bengali minds could not digest the radicalisation or Islamisation of politics. It was a clear aberration of the dream of *Quaid-i-Azam* who hardly dreamt of an Islamic country though he fought the entire Pakistan Movement on its basis.

However, it seemed that East Pakistan was doomed to be ruled by the military anarchy of West Pakistan. Amid all this chaos, India defeated Pakistan in the 1965 war. Though the war was fought on the western border of India, people of East Pakistan realised that the government had not made adequate security arrangements in their region to ward off any foreign attack. The feeling of insecurity more intensified the master-slave attitude of the government. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became more vocal for greater autonomy of East Pakistan and on 5 February 1966, he presented Six-point Programme in Lahore underlining the need for restructuring the government to give it a proper shape of an unbiased federation. The activities of Mujibur Rahman and many like-minded Bengalis were divisive in the eyes of the government and they tried to gag it by arresting the leader on 8 May 1966. A general strike in the support of the Six-Point Programme shook East Pakistan on 7 June. Ruthless authoritarianism descended on the innocent people, including students, children and women. "Ayub Khan is going to use the language of weapon if anyone utters the six-point demands" (Gangopadhyay 1: 975). Subsequently, Rahman was released but later in 1968, he and his associates were arrested in Agartala Conspiracy Case and was charged with encouraging sedition with the help of Indian government. As a matter of fact, Bengali leaders were suppressed so that they could not be at the helm of the country. This very attitude raised doubt about the integrity of the West Pakistani leaders to incorporate Bengali Muslims in the political process of nation-building. The failure of religious attachment was conspicuously visible. However, the incident led to a mass uprising in the initial months of 1969 and compelled the government to withdraw the case and release Rahman and others. On 25 February 1969, Ayub Khan resigned from his office and General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan took over the charge under martial law.

After the Partition, Muslims from West Bengal and Bihar chiefly chose East Pakistan as their destinations. The arrivals of the Muslim refugees had many social implications in East Pakistan. Native Bengali Muslims could not accept the alien culture and language of the migrants. On the other hand, Bihari Muslims thought that their Bengali neighbours were less Muslim than the West Pakistanis. Interestingly, Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis had a superiority complex towards their Bengali and Bihari coreligionists. To build a nation religion cannot be the sole stakeholder as other connections of life like culture, tradition, language play vital roles.

The Biharis looked different, spoke a different language and practised social rituals and habits that were alien to the Bengalis. They flaunted long and complicated Arabic names. A new and strange culture invaded us. . . . People with fair skin and knowledge of the language of the Muslim rulers demanded social superiority. The dark-skinned Bengali Muslims, they said, were half-Hindus and were inferior to the direct inheritors of the Mughals and Pathans. (Dhar 140)

Bhola cyclone caused havoc in East Pakistan on 12 November 1970 and killed nearly half a million people. Surprisingly, President Yahya Khan showed indifference to cyclone-affected Bengalis. In the general election that took place in December, Mujibur Rahman-led Awami League clinched a sweeping victory both in the National Assembly of Pakistan and the Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan. When Mujibur Rahman claimed to form the government, opposition leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan People's Party and Yahya Khan opposed it as they did not want a Bengali prime minister. This was utterly a gross violation of the electoral mandate and the democratic aspiration of the Bengalis. Bengali Muslims got the clear message that political animosity was stronger than religious affinity.

On 20 December, Z. A. Bhutto, referring to Mujibur Rahman's majority in the National Assembly, made an uncharitable remark that 'majority alone did not count in national politics'... That the dominant political group in West Pakistan was not willing to hand over political power at the national level to the Bengalis became clear from Bhutto's statement. (Sengupta 219-20)

Bengalis were quite disappointed with the high-handed attitude of the West Pakistani leaders. Socio-economic and political exploitation reached a boiling point in 1971 and Bengalis took to the streets with the candid demand for independence. On 7 March 1971, Mujibur Rahman delivered a historic freedom speech in Dhaka and appealed to his people to brace for a final assault on the tyrannical government. As expected, government crackdown came down heavily on Bengalis and many lost their lives. Operation Searchlight was launched on the midnight of 25 March to weed out Bengali intelligentsia, academics, students, armed personnel, and politicians and kill them so that the brutal intimidation would halt the ongoing freedom movement.

Then all of a sudden General Yahya Khan left for Karachi on the evening of 25 March, leaving the army a free hand to eradicate the Awami League... This was the signal for the Pakistan army to virtually declare a war on the entire population of East Bengal. There were en masse dishonouring of Bengali women, murder of Bengali nationalist activists and destruction of property. (Sengupta 224)

The plan of the military clampdown was to kill as many as possible and annihilate the Bengali Hindus as they were thought to be the real instigators of the independence movement. Minority Hindu population became a major impediment to absolute Islamic rule in East Pakistan since the Partition. Unlike the Muslims of East Pakistan, West Pakistani Muslims were not tolerant of the Hindu cultural heritage and its influence.

From 1947 to 1971 West Pakistan's ruling elite blamed the disaffection in East Pakistan on the province's Hindu population and their influence on Muslim Bengalis, whom they considered insufficiently Islamised. What the latter had failed to do in 1947, because they were 'bad' – Hinduised – Muslims, the Pakistan Army was brainwashed into attempting in 1971. (Haq)

Before his arrest on 26 March, Mujibur Rahman declared East Pakistan to be a free and sovereign country called Bangladesh. Civilians and Bengali armed forces united and formed Mukti Bahini to fight against the Pakistani military. Bihari Muslims living there

colluded with West Pakistani oppressors. Religious theory of nationhood was completely shattered as Muslims were killing Muslims to grab political power.

People in these two areas are completely different from one another from every respect except religion. It is one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally different. (Azad 248)

Surprisingly, common people of West Pakistan remained the mute observers of the unbound atrocities incurred on their Bengali coreligionists. They somewhere felt no religious attachment for their Bengali brothers and sisters.

Indian government supported the freedom movement of the Bengalis and extended all possible help to make their dreams realise. The joint force of India and Bangladesh fought a severe war for two weeks. Pakistani military staged a full-scale genocide in the region and killed millions of Bengalis with the intention that it would break the backbone of the movement. Women and girls were raped extensively to make a whole new generation of Bengalis fathered by West Pakistanis. All attempts were futile to stop the freedom wheel of the Bengalis and ultimately Pakistan surrendered before the Indo-Bangladesh joint command in Dhaka on 16 December 1971.

Each area developed its own special character because of historic reasons. For instance, Bengalis are politically more conscious than the West Pakistanis because political and social movements have started in Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century. The Bengalis have tasted democracy already, the people of West Pakistan do not understand the meaning of the word. West Pakistan has still remained largely feudal, there is hardly any reaction to army rule, unlike in the east. (Gangopadhyay 2: 209-10)

Right from the Partition, West Pakistanis always thought that the Bengali-speaking Muslims were 'hinduised' and did not deserve to be the equal citizens of the country. The imposition of the Urdu language and culture was aimed at their purification to make them real Muslims. Religious proximity proved to be nothing more than a hoax to politically capture a huge landmass. The much-propagated two-nation theory was crushed to dust within twenty-four years. Amartya Sen remarks in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*: "Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan was not based on religion at all, since a Muslim identity was shared by the bulk of the population in the two wings of undivided Pakistan. The separatist issues related to language, literature, and politics" (15). A quarter century of religious exploitation ended with the culmination of a sovereign Bengali identity. An impractical religious theory of nationhood tried to impose a singular identity on the majority population of a country in the garb of religion and it was a gross mistake. Prejudice and hunger for power snapped the thin line of religion that was used to tie the two wings and accelerated the fall of Pakistan and rise of Bangladesh.

East Bengali Muslims were cornered on social, lingual, cultural, economic, political fronts to undermine the existence of a separate Bengali identity. Religious monopoly does not always define the geography of a nation but sometimes embitter relations among the inhabitants of the land to such an amount that no ties can keep them together. Creation of Pakistan on religious theory and an ardent attempt to yoke two distinct cultures and distant geographies well anticipated the fall of the nation. The hoax and hallucination of

religion could not sustain for a long time and showed its inefficacy and irrelevance when people became more conscious about their rooted culture and society.

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