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CONTENTS

Islam, Neoliberalism, and Intolerance in Bangladesh: An Analysis

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Abstract

This article problematizes the relationship between neoliberal economic policies and the resurgence of a certain kind of Islamic religiosity in contemporary Bangladesh. It reflects the findings of an empirical study based on a multi-method approach to explore the macro-cultural impacts of the relationship between neoliberalism and Islam in the country and the embedded, nuanced, and complex set of economic and political relationships that appear to fuel social inequality, engender inequitable distribution and growth, and facilitate an ongoing marginalization of minority groups, in which "othering" among the equals emerge as a cemented outcome. Empirical findings suggest that premature or unplanned applications of neoliberal economic policies based on client-patron relations are the main precursors behind these outcomes and they continue to adversely affect Bangla language, Bengali cultures, the country's advanced education sector, and the overall ability for Bangladeshis to think critically and form and produce social relations. Evidence further indicates Bengali cultures appear to become increasingly embedded in a number of rituals in the name of Islamic principles and philosophy. The article refers to this phenomenon as the "great" transformation of contemporary Bangladesh.

Keywords: Islam, neoliberalism, Bengali cultures, state governance, client-patron relations

Introduction

This article traces the emergence and workings of the co-articulation of neoliberalism and Islamism in the domain of state governance in Bangladesh. It aims to explore how the interlinked rise of neoliberalism and religion/Islam produces the conditions for particular outcomes such as "othering" as well as violence against local secular writers and bloggers, intellectuals and critics of "fundamentalism", gay rights activists, as well as members of ethno-religious minorities such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. Considering the lack of scholarly literature on this topic in contemporary Bangladesh, the article offers analysis on the unique coupling of these two forces of neoliberalism and Islamism in the country and the embedded, nuanced, and complex set of economic and political relationships that have fueled socio-economic inequality, as well as an ongoing marginalization of minority groups.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Bangladesh started implementing policies of privatization and deregulation resulting in the broadening of credit and the precarization of domestic labor. Incentives included tax cuts for businesses, some of which were Indian corporations operating in Bangladesh, e.g., Airtel BD, as well as domestic family-owned corporate entities, such as *Beximco, Bashundhara*, or *Pran*. An addition to this category is the former chief of the army's family venture, *IFAD Group* that, since 2009, has rapidly expanded its presence across business sectors (IFAD Group, 2021). In most cases, these neoliberal[1] policies presumed efficiency of the market and went ahead with reducing state interventions in the economy that favored the more subordinate classes (Saad-Filho, 2003). Interpreting these developments through a lens that is critical of neoliberalism, the article seeks to examine the relationship between these policies and the resurgence of a certain kind of Islamic religiosity that engender inequitable growth, and in which some communities are treated as "others" in the socio-economic system and narrative.

Until two decades ago, it was believed that religion was on the decline and held insignificant space in global politics (Kissinger, 1994). However, the influence of religion has risen to play a significant part in today's global world and is at the pinnacle of international political agendas. Building upon this idea through a critical engagement with interdisciplinary, scholarly literature and fieldwork observations on Bangladesh's social and economic

dimensions, this article braids Islam and neoliberalism to open up ways of seeing differently. In particular, it examines how global politico-economic structural factors and processes are in conversation with state governments and how that can lead to disparities, fuel differences, and stimulate certain forms of extremism that dangerously reinforce a belief of "clashing" religious and secular worldviews.

The pursuit of the article inclines towards studying other largely Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia. The findings spearhead the exploration of specific discoveries in Bangladesh, namely, how Islam in the country has aligned with neoliberal development, and why Islamic forces appear to attack foreigners, and non-Muslims in the nation. The article seeks answers by drawing theoretical influence from Casanova's (1994) view that market based economic systems de-privatises religion. Gauthier (2019) argues that presently we are in a neoliberal situation in which otherwise inassimilable economics and religion collectively construct emerging phenomena. In addition, Polanyi's (2008 [1944]) ideas of embeddedness and double movement between society, in which religion is a vital component, is used to illustrate the contested strand between Islam and Bengali[2] (Bangladeshi) cultures. I theorize that social relations and production appear to become embedded in Islam instead of Islam being embedded in Bengali cultures (Polanyi, 2008 [1944]). The author refers to this phenomenon as the "great" transformation of contemporary Bangladesh.

The first section of the article lays out the conceptual framework for understanding neoliberalism's symbiotic coupling with Islamism in Bangladesh as well as briefly discusses the article's multi-method approach in exploring the macro-cultural aspects of the relationship between policy management and a certain kind of resurged religiosity. The second section offers a comparative narrative on outcomes in regards to the roll out of Islam-neoliberalism in contemporary Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia. The last section weaves the connection between neoliberalism and Islam in Bangladesh and offers critical analysis.

Theoretical Influence

In his basic critique of neoliberalism, Barber (1996) argues that neoliberal economic theory is the force behind globalization. The author's argument, consequently substantiated by Chang (2003) and Reinert (2007), is that globalization demands, if not rushes, economic and ecological forces to integrate; this can mesmerise developing countries because they are not necessarily equipped with market, resource, information technology, and ecological imperatives to exchange and trade as efficiently as the developed countries. These scholars point out that globalization imposes a culture of its own on a population, thus making local cultures in developing countries feel vulnerable, threatened, and reactive. In particular, Barber (1996) adds that the crises that arise from these are more than economic, and the confrontations often take on a sacred quality for locals. Barber's critique is significant because his concerns are premised upon a logic that reveals that a failure of proper integration of the imperatives can create unregulated market forces that consequently give rise to growing parochial forces in the form of religion, ethnicity, and region, among others. So, it is no surprise that in his conclusion he claims that Islam resists neoliberalism.

Interestingly, scholars including Brown (2006), Dikecx (2006), Connolly (2005), and Gopalakrishnan (2009) explain that it is not only Islam, but other political rationalities, such as republicanism, neo-conservatism and evangelical Christianity in the western world or Hindutva in India, that can also be found in combination with neoliberalism as a "market-political rationality". Karaman (2013) shared a significant body of literature that build upon the conjoining of Islamic values and modalities of neoliberal development in places such as Cairo (Atia, 2012) and Beirut (Harb and Deeb, 2011). In a parallel vein, this article seeks to explain how Islamism and neoliberalism as two distinct political rationalities came to resonate together in the organizational body of the state in Bangladesh.

Casanova (1994), in his explanation of the function of the two distinct political rationalities, points out that market based economic systems de-privatize religion. As he puts it: "de-privatisation […] is the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, disruptive legitimisation, and redrawing of the boundaries." (Casanova, 1994, pp. 65-66). Building upon these arguments, Turner (2011) and Gauthier (2019) interpret changes in religious interpretations and perspectives in relation to the outcomes of an economics-led globalization. Turner (2011, p. 278) explains that such remodeling of religion is deepened by consumerism because it converts religion into lifestyles and voluntary union, rather than belief and belonging-oriented methods. In a similar tone, Gauthier (2019) explains that neoliberalism affects religion through the political and societal stages, such as institutional and organizational levels. However, consumerism affects religion via material conditions, at the level of ethos and cultural

ideologies and practices. Alternatively, neoliberalism "impacts and shapes religion from above", while the consumerism acts from "below" (Gauthier, 2019, p. 202). In his words,

> *Global-Market regime de-nationalises, transnationalises, de-territorialises, marketizes, sometimes re-ethnicises religion within a cultural environment framed by consumerism and market ideologies. The marketisation of religion signifies its transformation along (or against) the structures and dynamics of consumer and financial capitalism, in which the expression of choice is constitutive of subjectivities, identities, agencies, communities, and so forth. ... Marketisation transforms religion into lifestyles, practices, and voluntary adhesion rather than belief and belonging-oriented forms. Marketisation also profoundly modifies religious organisations and their rapport to tradition, whose former modes can be dismissed, challenged, and/or renewed. (Gauthier, 2019, p. 201)*

Gauthier's critiques highlight that neoliberalism encourages all organizations, big or small, to perceive themselves on an entrepreneurial model, and to perceive their actions as that of actors within market segments, with an obligation to brand and market themselves and their missions in order to "survive" in a competitive environment (Gauthier, 2019, p. 202). He points out that consumerism commodifies in the opposite direction, in which consumer goods offers meanings, authenticities, and identities competing for choice. As he puts it, "consumerism profoundly changes how social actors engage in religion, and how 'religious resources' become mobilized for producing and expressing identities and constructing meaningful lifestyles" (p. 202). Building upon this, Gauthier (2019) contradicts Barber's (1996) views that claimed Islam resists neoliberalism. Gauthier argues that presently we are in a neoliberal situation in which otherwise inassimilable economics and religion, in particular Islam, collectively construct emerging phenomena. Such constructions render a non-commodity as a commodity and part of a lifestyle, such as knowledge, water, or life itself. Finally, Gauthier concludes that neoliberalism and consumerism are theoretically distinct processes but at the same time both are paradigmatically coextensive with complementary sets of processes.

The last pillar of this article's theoretical framework encompasses Polanyi's (2008 [1944]) embeddedness and double movement between society and market that helps to explain how Islam is used as a vehicle for economic development in Bangladesh. Polanyi (2008 [1944]) argues that the entire tradition of modern economic thought is based on the concept of the economy as an inter-locking system of markets that automatically adjusts supply and demand through the price mechanism. He points out that before economists invented the free market system, the human economy, since the dawn of time, was always embedded in society. Polanyi argues that the system of self-regulating markets has subordinated society to the "logic" of the market. As a result, the self-defined "developed" [neoliberal] world now runs society "as an adjunct to the market, where instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system" (Polanyi, 2008 [1944], p. 24). This concept will help to ask if the system of self-regulating markets has subordinated Bangladeshi society to the "logic" of the market, in which identity formation and social relations are represented through consumerism, lifestyles, and voluntary unions under the overarching symbols of Islam, such as fashionable hijab, stylist beard, and brand apparels (e.g., classic kurta for men and shalwar kameez for females), rather than Islamic philosophy and inclusive-oriented wisdom.

Integrating these three theoretical frameworks: Casanova (1994), Gauthier (2019), and Polanyi (2008 [1944]) in the context of Bangladesh poses significant challenges. First, as briefly mentioned earlier, scholarly literature that connects neoliberalism and consumerism in studying Islam in Bangladesh offers considerable limitations. Second, to explore the intersections of neoliberal-Islam in Bangladesh requires a broader focus because traditionally Bengal as a region is known for its multiple *jati-shotta* or nationalities that existed in the land before the arrival of Islam as well as co-existed and evolved with Islam for the last eight hundred years (Roy, 2014 [1983]; Eaton, 1993). Acknowledging these limitations, my theoretical framework attempts to provide a critical lens to understand two seemingly unrelated contemporary phenomena in Bangladesh: absorption of wealth on the one hand, and an increase of marginalization on the other, which leads to growing socio-economic inequality and finally, drastic outcomes such as attacking the so called "others" in the nation.

Methodology

This study takes a multi-method approach utilizing interdisciplinary, historical and literature review, general communication, in particular an observational study, and qualitative data analysis. These were employed because each allows for a particular understanding of the phenomenon, but none alone allows for the whole picture to be explored.

The author observed this emerging phenomenon involving Islam and neoliberalism in Bangladesh during doctoral fieldworks in 2014 and 2016. This was a supplementary finding and not covered as the main research objective for the doctoral fieldwork. Therefore, the author could not engage with participants on the observed finding and conduct formal, recorded interviews.

The author observed urban, rural, and intersectional areas in Bangladesh. In urban areas, the author engaged with the residents in their everyday settings, including streets, retail shops, cafes, and inside their homes, and visited industrial and *bazaar* (market) areas in the city and beyond. The author was also able to engage, at times, with members of various social groups including homemakers, bureaucrats, students, educators, entrepreneurs, and media personnel. These male and female informants were based in rural and urban regions and observation data were collected through informal, general conversations, with notes taken. The author contextualized these observations according to the conceptualized framework shared above. In addition, the author collected qualitative and quantitative data from printed and electronic secondary and media sources, documents or materials produced by government, academics, businesses, NGOs, and independent film or documentary maker, as well as archival materials stored both at Dhaka University Library and the Public Library. These "gray" literatures or sources were not stored and catalogued in major sources such as prominent databases or indexes. However, they have collectively contributed to the analysis shared below.

Islam-neoliberalism in Contemporary Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia

According to Islamic scholar Tahir Zaman, most cases of Islamic responses to "the challenge of neoliberalism to date has been characterized by simply inserting Islam within a capitalist framework through a selective reading of Islamic jurisprudence" (Zaman, 2014, online). He came across examples, in particular, from Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia where the interests of conservative Islam appear to be married to powerful business interests. The author also shared his observations on the energy-propelled, autocratic Gulf states, where "an increasingly consumer-driven culture casts a pernicious shadow over social relations wherein a hierarchy of humanity fixes migrant labour drawn from populous nations in south and east Asia firmly on the lowest rung" (Zaman, 2014, online). The author argues that political articulations of Islam acknowledge the significance of class struggle in the lives of ordinary Muslims. These articulations make us aware of the potential harmful implications of unbridled competition and caution against the impulse of modernity with its unremitting drive towards acquisition and accumulation. However, since the late-19th century, and for the best part of the 20th century, capitalist forces have tirelessly engaged a proliferation of Muslim intellectuals, political activists, and movements with the burgeoning ideas of "socialism" (Zaman, 2014). Consequently, Islam's rather reactionary responses to capitalism largely subsided.

Beginning with Turkey, the section below shares the implantation of neoliberalism in other Muslim countries including Egypt and Indonesia to better understand the relationship between domestic processes of socio-economic change and political conflict in tandem with global institutional structures and processes of capital accumulation. These macro findings are distinctive and significant but limited with respect to information on the advent of consumerism in these economies.

Gönenç (2019) explains since the neoliberal transition in the 1980s, Islamic symbols and references in Turkey became increasingly articulated in the state's ideology premised upon the fusion of domestic, Western, and Gulf capital interests. Together, they contributed to the rise of the Islamist bourgeoisie in the country (Doğan, 2013, p. 291). "The Islamist bourgeoisie refers to certain fractions of bourgeoisie that use Islam as a system of norms and values to regulate relations between labour and capital, and intra-capital relations (Gönenç, 2019, p. 5; Hoşgör, 2015). Gönençfurther explains that both the Islamist and Westernized bourgeoisie, which developed and maintained organic and dependent relations with Western capital and "paid lip service" to Turkey's constitutional principle of secularism (Öztürk, 2011, p. 109), supported the Islamization of state ideology. The product was an uneven spatial reproductionin urban and rural areas, and within the urban sections. In urban areas, workers faced significant and suppressing deindustrialization, reduced real incomes, and curtailment of labor rights, despite some organized resistance against

the neoliberal restructuring (Atılgan, 2012, p. 351). In rural areas, while smallholders were turned into agricultural workers in their own lands through contract farming, large masses of peasants lost work as a result of privatization of agricultural state-owned enterprises, removal of agricultural cooperatives, and seizing of lands. The majority of peasants and smallholders were forced to migrate to urban areas and became a precarious labor force, often subcontracted by especially the Islamist bourgeoisie (Gürel, 2015, p. 337).

Such migration further resulted in an increase in unproductive labor in urban areas, which maintained relations with rural areas in the form of seasonal agricultural workers (Boratav, 2014, p. 72). This unproductive and/or underemployed labor was often mobilized with Islamism due to the lack of class-consciousness and organization (White, 2002, p. 233). Gönenç (2019) argues that the neoliberal restructuring of class relations was detrimental to subordinate classes in urban and rural areas, thus requiring the strengthening of political Islam to veil classantagonisms and suppress the subordinate classes. Therefore, the subordinate classes in rural and urban areas remained increasingly vulnerable to the influence of political Islam.

Compared to Bangladesh, Turkey is a unique transcontinental country that is home to a number of different cultures and ethnicities. The former is not composed of mainly one homogenic group either, considering the variety of indigenous languages spoken all over Bangladesh, along with a number of dialects of the Bangla language. One or two specific cultural groups in Bangladesh speak Urdu as well. Many of the findings from Turkey are applicable in the context of Bangladesh, such as neoliberalism giving rise to Islamist bourgeoisie, further deepening the urban-rural disparity, creating more underemployment, and making subordinate classes in rural and urban areas increasingly vulnerable to the influence of political Islam. At the same time, the country's privileged social, political groups, along with the Islamist bourgeoisie, veil class antagonisms while suppressing subordinate classes by overplaying the influence of founding fathers and political Islam.

Findings from Egypt cast a similar picture. Joya (2020) offers a critique of market-oriented economic reform policies in Egypt implemented at the order of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and a rising faction of neoliberal-oriented capitalists within Egypt's former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Although her critiques point out the significant role that international financial institutions (IFIs) and domestic actors played in shaping the conditions that led to the Egyptian popular uprising of 2011 and continue to influence political and social conflicts, Joya argues that Egypt's chronic socioeconomic problems need to be situated in a broader context of the country's transition toward authoritarian modes of neoliberalism in the wake of the foreign exchange debt crises of the late 1980s or early 1990s and the water-shed "structural adjustment" agreement with the IFIs. She discusses the adverse social impacts of neoliberalism, detailing the particular spaces within which citizens have been pushing back against neoliberal transformation. Joya argues that authoritarianism has been part of how neoliberalism unfolded in Egypt, which, with the financial support from international backers, reoriented the state to use its coercive power to appropriate values and public funds by forcing liberalization, privatization, and marketization. The logic driving neoliberal policies has been the premise that the growth generated from the private sector and free market-based development would achieve strong economic growth and sustainable reduction in poverty. Joya's research, however, reveals the opposite, which is a typical impact of trickle-down economics.

For example, by the end of the 1980s, economic crises forced the state to press forward with far-reaching structural reforms recommended by the IMF and the World Bank. These reforms have primarily supported capital accumulation by the propertied and trading classes at the expense of peasants, workers, and the urban poor, pushing many people into the informal economy. Growing poverty and inequality in Egypt occurred simultaneously with higher economic growth, particularly through the 2000s, which Joya argues is the normal functioning of neoliberal development strategies that result in unequal distribution of wealth. Here Joya utilizes Harvey's (2003) theory of "accumulation by dispossession," which is an extension of Marx's writing on primitive accumulation, to provide insights into how law and policy reforms, as well as changes in land tenure and trade liberalization, produced violent dispossession processes that were "necessary" to establish the conditions for capital accumulation in Egypt (Joya, 2020, p. 68).

Moreover, the author points out that the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to institutionalize an Islamic economy as an alleged third way between Western capitalism and socialism or communism. The idea of an Islamic economy signified an attempt to subordinate capitalism to a traditional body of Islamic ethics (and *shari'a*) including the rejection of the "possessive individualism" that forms the basis of Western capitalism. These include prohibition on the payment or taking of interest on loans and mainstreaming *Zakat*, a voluntary tax to finance private, religiously administered charitable programs in opposition to the welfare state, and Islamic inheritance laws that prevent the

concentration of property (Joya, 2020). However, El-Sherif (2014) argues that the Brotherhood's inclusion in Egypt's political system did not lead to its democratization. The Brotherhood also failed to either appease or successfully confront institutional power bases and the secular elites that were aligned to typical neoliberal mechanism.

Joya (2020) also examines the evolution of the Egyptian military into a dominant faction of the capitalist class with an autonomous institutional power within the context of Egypt's post-colonial capitalist development. She notes that through active engagement in the economy, the military increased its economic role in exchange for staying out of politics, instead accumulating power and wealth through strong ties to investors and major economic powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia (Joya, 2020, p. 119). Overall, these examples evoke a broad-based discussion regarding the significant role the Egyptian state and IFIs have played in the process of facilitating capital accumulation by polarizing wealth distribution and access to economic resources. This finding is quite relevant to the discussion of Bangladesh.

Finally, in contemporary Indonesia, the most notable assemblage of Islamic and capitalist ethics is termed a "spiritual economy" (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 106). This concept is in contrast to the "occult economies" that treat religious resurgence as a refuge from the disruptions wrought by a global "culture of neoliberalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). As Indonesia faced a new political economic landscape increasingly characterized by transnational competition, the state employed a top-down approach reasoning that by cultivating the religious virtues of the workforce, it could increase productivity, reduce corruption, gear towards international benchmarks, and in the process train employees for privatization of state-owned enterprises. The training sessions for this "spiritual economy" drew on a stirring and often heavy mix of Qur'anic recitations, business leadership training, Islamic history, and popular psychology. This training program, known as "Emotional and Spiritual Quotient [ESQ] Training," invokes both Islamic tradition and Euro-American management knowledge in the interest of creating a more disciplined employee work ethic (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 104). According to Rudnyckyj (2009), the concept of spiritual economics elucidates how two domains, religion and capitalism, are brought together to create a new ethical orientation toward oneself, one's work, and one's collectivity. "Islam is not merely a vehicle in this process, as spiritual reform is taken to both enable Islamic virtue and effect dispositions that enhance corporate productivity and competitiveness in an increasingly global market" (p. 107).

Evidence from literature review and general communication indicates that the government of Bangladesh is yet to employ a top-down "spiritual economy" approach to train its government personnel and national labor pool based on the guidelines of Islamic ethics and western professional accountability. However, a version of the ESQ initiatives used to be practiced by the personnel at the banking, medical, academic, and NGO organizations owned or run by the Islamic bourgeois. However, arguably, the state made a more than moderate attempt to break up the country's Islamic bourgeois, who was their political opponent, and this may have curtailed the rhythm of the course of ESQ expansion in Bangladesh.

A comparison of the findings from Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia indicates that in Bangladesh, neoliberal outcomes generated an absorption of wealth on the one hand, and an increase of marginalization on the other, leading to growing socio-economic inequality. The process presumed efficiency of the market and inefficiency of the state and went ahead with outlawing state interventions in the economy in favor of the subordinate classes (Saad-Filho, 2003, p. 7). Interestingly, except for a few unrelated events of terrorism in Indonesia, the other two Muslim countries did not necessarily encounter "othering" of religious minorities as an outcome of the neoliberal process that we observe in Bangladesh. This is where the contextually specific dynamics of Bangladeshi nationalism comes into play and is explained in the following section, which begins with a discussion of the emergent consumerism in the country that was induced by economic globalization.

Bangladesh: Analysis and Discussion

Before digging deeper into unweaving the relation between Islam and neoliberalism in Bangladesh, this section highlights few quintessential characteristics of Bengali culture. According to Lewis (2011), the complex blend of religion, culture, and language is the catalyst for the country's unique socio-cultural and political formations. However, since the arrival of wide-spread neoliberalism and the subsequent consumerism in the country, Bengali cultures and Bangla language have been influenced far more rapidly by varieties of external forces than they were earlier, for example, during the "Pakistan period." As a result, social and economic relations have started to rely heavily on religion, particularly Islam, as an attempt to produce a new kind of "authenticity" in the country's cultures and

language. Scholarly research on this theme also reveals tensions around Islamophobia triggered by the so called "War on Terror" and other forms of stigmatization of Islam may contribute to the overall trend towards Islamic orthodoxy in Bangladesh (Peek, 2005; Schmidt, 2004; Siddiqi, 2019). A comment from a male informant, government official in this context stands out:

> *When I grew up in Dhaka in a conservative Muslim family during late 1950s and early 1960s, hardly any women I knew like my mother, aunts, neighbours and classmates used Hijabs and Niqabs. But they [women in Hijab and/or Niqab] are in abundance in Dhaka. ...Bangladeshis want to be Islamic so that their culture and identity do not disappear. (personal communication, August 11, 2016)*

Arguably, this reminds us of Hegel's (1979 [1807]) definition of nationalism, which is premised upon the need for people to feel proud of where they come from, to identify with something beyond merely their own achievements and to anchor their identities beyond the ego. Although group identities in Bengal have long been fluid and influenced by various structural forces — political, religious, and economic, the formation of the Bangladesh nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) has been fraught with ideological ambiguities in determining the role of secularism and religion in the democratically elected government. While it would be naïve to think that social divisions did not exist in the past, what is apparent is that communal consciousness in Bengal was heightened by certain "investigative modalities" that became central to political legitimization and governance in colonial South Asia. These modalities include the formalization of an "official" historiography, land surveys, census enumerations, surveillance, and curatorial practices (Cohn, 1996). Through these "cultural technologies of rule" (Cohn, 1996), communal identities and ethno-religious differences were reified by the imposition of western educated, Macaulay- oriented knowledge production, conjoined with new modes of governmentality. In using the term "communalism," the author refers to a particular form of identity construction in the Indian subcontinent that emerges from a nexus of colonial discourse and state practice that involves the "othering" of religious communities (Rahim, 2007). In Rahim's words, "Dividing communities along religious lines not only produces a binary political and social division, but also diffuses intra-community contradictions, creating an aura of homogeneity within the rank and file of the community in question" (p. 556).

Building upon that, initially, the Awami League (AL) government in 1972, under Sheikh Mujib's leadership, enacted a constitution that recognized equal status to all religions, and launched a moderate socialist program to encourage opportunities for social mobility and development that was not available under the Pakistani regime. In support of the constitutional ban on communalism and religious discrimination, the AL government in 1972 declared Bangladesh a People's Republic, picked a national anthem composed by Tagore, and designed a flag completely devoid of Islamic symbolism (Kabir, 2007). Geopolitically, the early 1970s was the waning years of the Cold War and the beginning of Western led neoliberalism.

> *The country [Bangladesh] found itself entrapped in Cold War proxy politics. The United States, which in a bid to renew relations with China had actively supported West Pakistan during the 1971 war, initially refused to recognize Bangladesh's sovereignty; it was also profoundly suspicious of what it saw as the nation's overtly socialist bent. (Siddiqui, 2018, p. 244)*

Thus, it was not a surprise when Muijb's period of relative optimism in the wake of independence, followed by famine in 1974 caused by various natural and human-made conditions (Sen, 1982), led to a series of CIA supported military coups in 1975 (Chossudovsky, 2003, p. 161). Siddiqi (2018, p. 254) marks that period as one when Bengali cultural majoritarianism started to attain a distinctly "Islamic" bent.

Siddiqi's remarks foreground the military coup that brought General Zia-ur Rahman and his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to materialize a twin desire to de-nationalize the economy through private capital incentives and to establish a pro-Islamic government. In 1977, General Zia amended the national constitution by replacing a commitment to secularism with *Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar Rahim*—the supreme confidence and faith in almighty Allah as the base of all actions. General Zia also added a new clause to Article 25(2) stating the state shall endeavor to

consolidate, preserve, and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity (Siddiqi, 2018). Secondly, within the period of 1977 and 1979, General Zia withdrew the ban on religion-based political parties with several executive orders. This gave Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) recognition as a political party, and it consequently became the county's biggest religion-based political party (Khan, 2019). These constitutional amendments fostered transnational ties with other Islamic countries, especially Saudi Arabia. It was not until the assassination of Mujib and Zia's accession to power that the Royal Saudi government formally recognized the new state of Bangladesh. This change of regime "expedited the flow of aid from the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia as the most important source" (Kabeer, 2011, p. 149).

Following his assassination in 1981, Zia was succeeded by General Ershad and his new Jatiya (National) Party, a conservative political party that through the Eighth Amendment in Article 2A declared Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. Ershad also established a *Zakat* fund under the President and made the call to prayer mandatory before all television broadcasts (Kabeer, 2011, p. 147). Backed by a powerful military, including the dispersion of military representatives in various central and local government positions, Islam was given a central place in state ideology as secular and liberal opposition were marginalized (Sobhan, 1984, p. 202). During Ershad's rule, development policies, as influenced by Western neoliberal prescriptions, drifted further to the private sector and export-oriented growth, and economic dependency on OPEC countries such as Saudi Arabia increased (Chossudovsky, 2003, p. 161).

Building upon these macro-level changes, the implementation of neoliberal policies in Bangladesh initiated a surge of commodification of public or commonly held goods including education, water, and healthcare, and ushered in a consumerist individualism (Gauthier, 2019; Polanyi, 2008 [1944]). For example, various aspects of Bengali cultures, such as *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali New Year) appear to be celebrated with embellished commodification. In addition, *Eid-ul-Azha* (Qurbani Eid) and regular lifestyle have been affected by this phenomenon. In particular, among the people of urban Dhaka, eating out and outsourcing food related responsibilities to catering services have become a common trend. In the words of a seasoned female informant,

> *When I was a child we rarely ate at restaurants, we had our clothes tailored and had houses that were very small in comparison to now and they held few clothes, the changes that happened in the 80s, 90s, etc. altered the quality of life - people went abroad more, donors were widespread, financialization spread, people began to migrate to cities. (personal communication, July 13, 2021)*

Moreover, the author came across a number of crowded "hijab boutique" stores in Dhaka that sold hijab and related accessories and attire. This was a striking discovery compared to a decade-old Dhaka the author knew of. In addition, online outlets for "Islamic clothing" appeared on Bangladesh's social media platforms. At the same time, in Dhaka's social scenes, increasing number of females show up with full-sleeve outfits and headgears. This was also an interesting finding because during my lived experience as a child and teenager in the 1980s and until mid-1990s in Bangladesh, I did not come across such consciousness regarding an Islamic identity in social gatherings. According to a university educated, practicing Muslim female informant, "*ghomta* (hijab) in Bangladesh these days represents more like a fashion or a trend than representing an individual's moralistic views and religious expression". In another social event, I heard an elderly female relative listening to a conversion that included "diamond embedded hijabs." These examples of de-privatized faith remind me of Gauthier's (2019, p. 201) arguments that neoliberalism facilitates producing and expressing identities and constructing meaningful lifestyles through marketization of religion. It converts religion into lifestyles and voluntary union rather than belief and belonging. These practices can profoundly modify institutions and their rapport with tradition, whose former modes can be dismissed, challenged, and/or renewed.

Gauthier (2019), in his explanation of such emerging phenomena, highlights the interconnection between diaspora communities with the effects of emigration, multiple communication technologies, and the global financial system. He argues that in contemporary times, the diaspora remains strongly tied to their communities and homelands. Moreover, it functions as an influential agent for economic development and "in the on-going religious revival" (p. 210). For example, many members of Bangladeshi diaspora around the world also function as influential agents for "the on-going religious revival" through, for example, mainstreaming halal meat consumption and online Quran classes for children, while making contributions for the economic development of the country (Gauthier, 2019; Turner, 2011). An informant mentioned the "contribution" of migrant workers to this emerged phenomenon. It is important to

acknowledge that remittances earned by Bangladeshi migrant workers contribute significantly to the economic development of the country, and they remain underappreciated and marginalized both at home and abroad. However, the wife and elder daughter of a migrant worker, who was present at the time of my informal chat with his family, mentioned that "*Uni* [the husband] after returning home from *Arob desh* [the Middle East] encouraged me and my daughter to wear *niqab.*"

Kibria (2008) explores the identity transformations of Muslim Bangladeshi labor migrants to the Gulf states of the Middle East. She explains that for the Bangladeshis, developments of national consciousness, in particular of a critical nationalism, remain a key feature of the migration episode. The migrants affirm the *ummah* – the idea that the bonds of Muslims, based on their adherence to the core tenets of Islam, are far more important than differences of culture and nationality. In addition, Gardner and Osella (2004) highlight that the intertwining of religious practice and consumption in this process: "as migrants and their families reinvent themselves as high-status members of their community, how they worship and how they spend their earnings – activities which are often closely linked – tend to take centre stage" (p. xxxiii). Kibria (2008) further elaborates that "in an assertion of modernity, the returned South Asian migrant rejects the local folk Islam of his/her home community in favor of a global and 'pure' Islam" (p. 521).

Whether through diaspora or local consumerism, a certain emerging phenomenon brought in a more conservative strain of Islam that is being enforced at the socio-political and individual level through consumerism in the name of preserving the "authenticity" of Bangladeshi Muslim culture. For example, Griffiths and Hasan (2015) in their study of rural *madrassahs* in Bangladesh found that these institutions frown upon women's empowerment and openly preach men to enforce wearing *hijabs* and *niqabs* on women. During my general communication with farmers, owners of small business, and laborers, I observed that Bangladesh's urban and rural bourgeois establish new mosques and madrassahs in their rural constituencies and encourage others to donate to these establishments. It is argued that this Islamism veils the struggle of unproductive and/or underemployed labor and their lack of class-consciousness and organization (White, 2002).

During the trips to rural Shirajganj and Munshiganj districts, as well as during a trip to Cox's Bazar, I came across loudspeakers in bus stations, rickshaw stands, and market areas that continuously played *waz mahfil* (Islamic sermons), preaching the benefits of following the five pillars of Islam, and praising Prophet Mohammed for his conduct in educating the masses. In the first two locations, which were purely rural settings, the author noticed such sermons often involved giving vulgar, misogynistic speeches regarding females, and derogatory comments about "others," rather than discussing the five pillars of Islam. For example, in Bangladesh's social media, a fraction of speakers in *waz mahfils* events claim self-coined rhetoric, such as "women are born to pleasure males" and "Allah wouldn't punish a Muslim when he seizes the property of a non-Muslim" (Bangladesh'r Rajniti, 2021, online). Stille (2020), based on fieldwork and interviews, analyzes an archive of several dozens of sermons, and argues how popular preaching shapes roles and rules of what can be said, imagined, and felt. He adds that since the 19th century, *waz mahfils* have become so popular that today it is possible to participate in them on a daily basis in many regions of the country. Despite their significance in the rise of popular politics, the sermons are often disregarded as Islamist propaganda, and very little research is dedicated to them.

Although reasonable Bangladeshi Muslims reject any propaganda-filled *waz*, the role of the state in tracking down the ill-educated preachers, who apparently have large number of followers, is unclear. These were surprising discoveries for me because growing up as a male in the late-80s and early-90s, I witnessed *waz mahfils* as indoor events for special Islamic occasions, in particular, before Friday's *Jummah* prayer. However, what I witnessed two decades later suggested Islam had become de-privatized (Casanova, 1994). Moreover, the money or "donation" collection aspect of these stalls reminds of Gauthier's (2019, p. 202) critique that neoliberalism encourages all organizations, big or small, to perceive themselves on an entrepreneurial model, and perceive their actions as that of actors within market segments, with an obligation to brand and market themselves and their missions in order to "survive" in a competitive environment.

Citing these measures as examples of "creeping Islamisation," Schendel (2009, p. 38) argues that they polarize a Bengali vernacular cultural model (and traditional identity) with more "authentic" Islamic religious conduct, now considered pious by villagers and many in the country's urban sphere. This can be explained as globalization imposing a culture of its own on the Bengali population, and through this, the market dominating the three main cultural elements: language, culture, and religion, in particular Islam (Barber, 1996; Casanova, 1994). Thus, an emerging phenomenon is constructed, in which otherwise unassimilable economics and religion coexist to complement sets of processes (Gauthier, 2019). I argue that in contemporary Bangladesh, the development of a

majoritarian, nationalistic discourse of Islam is an outcome of an emerged phenomenon (Gautier, 2019), in which social relations and production have become embedded in Islam instead of Islam being embedded in the larger culture (Polanyi, 2008 [1944]). The author of this article refers to this phenomenon as the "great" transformation of Bangladesh. Explaining how this has materialized in the span of two decades is a challenging task (Figure 1).
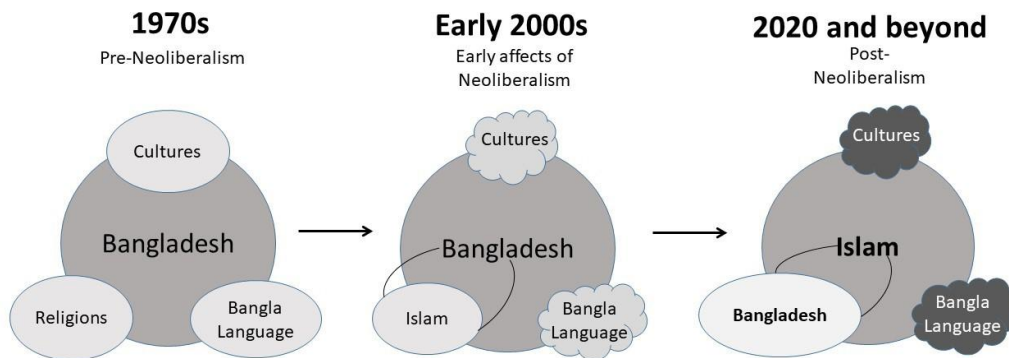
Figure 1: Bangladesh – The "Great" Transformation

Source: Author's own formulation.

Quadir (2015) provides an alternative that can be contextualized in the de-privatization of Islam in Bangladesh. He explains that politicized and unaccountable state practices have unleashed a wave of privatization [neoliberalism] that suggests that politics has become the main vehicle for accumulating capital in contemporary Bangladesh. For example, close ties between government bureaucrats and businessmen turned party loyalists have led to a surge in granting operating licenses to start private banks, private television channels, and private universities in the country (Amundsen, 2016; Ruud, 2011). Political patronage is the most critical component in this context and has also been known to protect the members of party student wings, trade union groups, and grassroot party volunteers (Lewis, 2011; Riaz, 2014; Ruud, 2011). In this context, Ahmad adds,

> *But one of the biggest challenges which we did not understand, confront or defeat was corruption.*
> *It did not remain a set of discrete criminal acts; it gradually became a way of life that engulfed us,*
> *practiced openly and boldly. (Ahmad, 2021, online)*

In principle, a version of such reconfigured client-patron relations existed before this new phase of capitalism, but its newly emerged form under neoliberalism fostered conditions for disaffection and desperation, presently leveraged through the provision of free healthcare, education (e.g., Qur'anic schools) by Islamic political parties, such as the *Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islami* (BJI) and others including *Hefazot-e-Islam* and *Islami Oikya Jot* (Islamic Unity Front) (Riaz, 2012, 2014; Tasnim, 2012; Mishra, 2012). Casanova refers to such instances as a de-privatizing moment for a religion because this is how Islam in Bangladesh abandons "its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, disruptive legitimization, and redrawing of the boundaries" (Casanova, 1994, p. 66). In addition, Lewis (2011) critiques such client-patron relations in that they created a space for Islam that was consequently used for political expediency. Lewis's conclusion echoes Riaz's (2004) findings that ascendant conservative Islamization is the outcome of a deliberate act of economic and political partnerships that have been in function in Bangladesh for the last 25 years.

"associational nexus," religious parties such as *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Bangladesh combine political activities with social development and treat society as subordinate to the economy. This is what Polanyi highlights as the self-defined "developed" world running society "as an adjunct to the market, where instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system" (Polanyi, 2008 [1944], p. 24). In addition, Riaz (2004) argues that under an overarching political umbrella, this has emboldened student members, trade union leaders, and grassroot party volunteers to employ a "politics of fear" for capital gain. He points to radical branches of these parties that recruit vulnerable, desperate and marginalized young minds, and draw them into the so called "Islamic forces" that consequently attack "others" in the nation. Prominent Bangladeshi filmmaker Tareque Masud (2010), in his award-winning feature film *Runway,* showcased this recruitment aspect of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, the religious demography in Bangladesh has changed considerably in recent decades. The most salient demographic trend is the declining number of Hindus in the country. At the time of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the Hindu population amounted to approximately 23 per cent of the country's entire population. Current estimates put that figure at around nine per cent (Sunandapriya, 2013). There are a number of factors and motivations contributing to this migrant outflow. Two critical dimensions noted by the UN special report were the role of contested property relations between Hindu and Muslims, and the experience of harassment, and at times, physical violence towards religious minorities (UN, 2015, pp. 6-7). In the words of a male, aged mid-40s, informant:

> *Bangla language, Bangladesh is my ancestral right and land but as a Hindu minority, frankly speaking, I do not always feel safe. Most Bangladeshi Muslims are kind and warm but I have come across a few odd, Islami radicals like RSS or BJP-esque. When you have small children at home, you need to feel assured. So, I, like many other Hindu families in Bangladesh, managed Aadhaar[3] cards for my family as a backup in case we ever need to move to India to save our lives. (personal communication, August 24, 2016)*

In addition, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, where the religious landscape has distinctively differed from the rest of Bangladesh, demographic changes have been even more pronounced, not least as a result of government-induced population resettlement, particularly since the late 1970s (UN, 2015). Unlike a few decades ago, when the indigenous peoples living in that region — mostly following Buddhism and Christianity — constituted the vast majority, the proportions of indigenous and Bengali populations have by now become more or less even. As a result of those changes, Islam has become quite visible in the shape of many newly erected mosques and *madrasas,* similar to the rest of Bangladesh. Findings from field observations indicate remittances from the Middle East and the influence of global Islam have significantly contributed to this spatial transformation (Kibria, 2008). In addition, the northwest of Bangladesh, where many Hindu and indigenous groups have been living for generations, has started to experience religious violence, in particular Islamic extremism (World Watch Monitor, 2015; European Country of Origin Information Network, 2018). This has resulted in the migration of many Hindu families to the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, where they feel safer than in other parts of Bangladesh (UN, 2015). It should be noted that, in this region, ethnic and religious minorities, although largely overlapping, are not identical. For instance, some of the Buddhists or Christians living in the region have a Bengali background, while the majority of the followers of those two religions are indigenous from the Chakma, Marma, Tanchangya, and Khyang tribal groups. Despite these common cultural histories and ties, religious minorities in Bangladesh have faced threats of displacement, harassment, and violence. Siddiqi (2019) adds, "For the hypernationalist and authoritarian state, I contend, queer and politically dissident bodies are equally disposable" (p. 2).

Unfortunately, certain patterns that emerge from the above case of the Hill Tracts indicate that religious minorities suffer from displacement, forceful out-migration, and continue to feel insecure and vulnerable in Bangladesh. Feldman (2016, p. 2) maps how intertwined processes—"a set of ongoing and contradictory policy reforms and practices that reproduces both difference and majoritarian rule"—made Hindus as national "others*"* and dispossessed them of their land in contemporary Bangladesh (Qutb, 2006 [1964]; Rahim, 2007). Informal conversations with Bangladeshi academics, human rights activists and retired high ranking military personnel show that they acknowledged the correlation between the political agenda and violence induced displacement of religious minorities in Bangladesh that is often driven by economic motives and has accompanied the broader shift towards unregulated markets and increased privatization. Essentially, this confirms Harvey's (2003) theory of "accumulation

by dispossession" in the case of Bangladesh, a version of which Elyachar (2005) and Joya (2020) cited as a neoliberal outcome in contemporary Egypt.

These examples suggest a peculiar, uncalled for outcome of forceful materialism under a neoliberal umbrella that appears to be legitimized by employing Islam. However, if we interpret the two key concepts, *Rabbaniyat* and *Khalifat*, as explained by Hashim (1965, p. 33) and Huq (2013, p. 56), to know and live Islam means is to sustain one's own self and other creatures around him or her faithfully. These scholars further explain that a Quranic exegesis mutes the question of religious culpability of non-Muslims and highlights one to focus back to the self, whereby any human being, through uncontrolled material desires and an ill-directed use of power, can deny god. Therefore, what we can presently observe in Bangladesh in the name of Islam, can be explained as an emerging phenomenon induced by neoliberalism and consumerism (Gauthier 2019).

Although ethno-religious minorities have borne the brunt of this Islamization within the changing landscapes of Bangladesh, they are not the only ones feeling marginalized and dislocated. Other ethnic minorities, local secular writers and bloggers, intellectuals and critics of Islamic fundamentalism, and gay rights activists — that challenged the rise of extremism and fundamentalism — have also faced discrimination in recent decades. This has been, in particular, apparent among the country's growing youth population. These examples reemphasize that neoliberalism and consumerism are two different, but complementary, sets of processes. In addition, the examples affirm that modernity includes land as a commodity, and neoliberalism deepens that trend. Overall, they indicate a marketization of Islam that in the last few decades triumphed at the cost of fueling ethno-religious conflict and communal tensions in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This article attempted to weave the connection between neoliberalism and Islam in Bangladesh by illustrating how an overarching theme of neoliberal development brought in a commodity culture through privatization and an increased consumerism and carved room for Islamic symbols to form identity for the locals. The article also provided arguments in favor of the existence of a certain kind of patron-client setup that employs "Islamic forces" to attack "others" for capital gain and terrorizes foreigners.

The author anticipates readers will confer that Bangladesh is at a crossroads after its 50 years and in the 21st Century. Despite tremendous potential for economic growth, it has done little to protect, let alone strengthen, the legal rights and freedoms of religious minorities that was part of the bedrock of its constitution. This is not unique to Bangladesh. It is well known that the state's involvement in religious life under a neoliberal umbrella remains a contentious one in Bangladesh, elsewhere in South Asia, and around the world. Arguments and evidence presented in this article do not indicate that the Islamization of Bangladesh foreclose the possibility of a just and moral society, nor do they intend to reinforce the common trope that Muslims are somehow resistant to secular ideas. Rather, the explanations indicate, as Max-Neef (2012) puts it, "neoliberal economics which has conquered the entire world backed by most politicians and corporate people is killing more people than the armies put together" (online). Finally, when ascendant forms of religious nationalism emerge alongside economic policies that foster conditions of socioeconomic inequality and marginalization, they create conditions where violence and extremism thrive. The question moving forward is not that religion should be taken off the agenda in political and public life in Bangladesh, but rather what are the best practices for thinking about civil society where there can be positive cooperation between religious views and the state (Calhoun et. al, 2011).

Endnotes

[1] A new phase of understanding of the politics of development began in the 1970s when the Bretton Woods financial institutions imposed structural changes in the modern era that ultimately changed the meaning of development, especially for those countries trapped by these new arrangements. For example, these international financial donor institutions removed the control of the state on capital that consequently weakened the capacity of a state to promote national economic growth. At the same time, the dominant economic players encouraged increased cross border capital flows. These changing policies are frequently defined as neoliberalism. See Harvey (2005), Chang (2003), Husain (2019), Reinert (2007), and Venugopal (2015) for details.

[2] Bengali culture is based on the material conditions – agriculture, food, weather, and climate, among others, for the ethnic *Bangla* (Bengali) speaking peoples living in the Ganges Delta region of the Indian subcontinent. Rivers, boats, monsoon, agriculture, and folk music, among others, are the backbone of the Bengali culture. Bengali people speak in various dialects of the Bengali language. Traditionally, rivers form as boundaries as to where one dialect will begin and another will end (e.g., people on both sides of the *Padma* River speak in two different dialects of the Bengali language). Various historical and political events and influences divided the Bengali culture into two countries: West Bengal province in India and to the east, Bangladesh. This consequentially led to the construction of two cultural capitals for the Bengali culture: Kolkata (previously, Calcutta) in West Bengal and Dhaka (previously, Dacca) in Bangladesh. In the 21st century, Bengali culture has expanded globally to the various corners of the world due to emigration. At the same time, this culture appears to be slowly disappearing vis-à-vis other dominant South Asian cultures based on Hindi and Urdu languages. Moreover, the influence of English language and culture, as a result of colonization, remains strong in the region. Collectively, one can argue that these external cultural influences, as they mix with various external economic and political forces, subtly cause a sense of insecurity among the Bengalis (collected from anonymous interviewees).

[3] *Aadhaar* means "foundation" or "base." In the context of India, the term refers to a 12-digit unique identity number for the residents or passport holders in India, based on their biometric and demographic data. Presently, *Aadhaar* is the world's largest biometric ID system. Ref: https://uidai.gov.in/about-uidai.html.

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