পারফর্মিং দ্য ন্যশনঃ বাংলাদেশে পরিচয়, সহিংসতা ও বহুত্ববোধকতা অন্বেষণ

Performing the Nation: Identity, Violence and The Search for Plurality in Bangladesh

By
Sudip Chakroborthy

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Theatre and Performance Department
Goldsmiths, University of London

Declaration of Authenticity

I, Sudip Chakroborthy, declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own work.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

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Abstract

This research project examines the socio-political context that has generated the contest for national identity in Bangladesh since the War of Independence in 1971. By means of performance and Practice Research, the thesis examines the politics of identity in which the citizens of Bangladesh engage in daily life. It proposes how Practice Research via theatrical performance can provide a space for the acceptance of fluid and heterogeneous cultural identities in Bangladesh. If the "nation" is, as Ernest Renan argues, the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, an on-going present-day consent, and a desire to live together, then the socio-political context of this study explores how religious, cultural and ethnic markers of national identity are imagined, contested and performed among and by various ethnic, religious, and cultural communities. The research is underpinned by "identity" as a notion that is unfixed, that is in constant flux, and that is informed by various and sometime contradictory social practices. This project explores how national identity in Bangladesh is anything but monolithic, and indeed is always-already in flux. The thesis seeks to understand identity in Bangladesh today by presenting the views of multiple contestants representing religious, cultural, and ethnic groups. Via interviews with different demographic groups, workshops discussing individual and community identities, and a devised theatrical performance (presented in filmed form owing to the COVID-19 pandemic), the project investigates how different individuals and communities can meet, play out, challenge, and respect their own and each other's identities and specificities in the theatre space.

Contents

> It is our mission to face the race problem and prove our humanity by dealing with it in the fullest truth. Until we fulfil our mission all other benefits will be denied us. (Rabindranath Tagore, 1918, p. 4).

> Racism is still with us. But it is up to us to prepare our children for what they have to meet, and, hopefully, we shall overcome (Rosa Louise Parks, 2013).

Jagatjyoti Das, a young Bachelor of Arts student at Sunamganj College in Sylhet (north-east Bangladesh), believed in communist ideology. So, too, did Elias Chowdhury, a young Intermediate Arts student at the same college. Both were born in the *haor* region in the northeastern part of Bangladesh, and met during their studies.[1] Later, during the *Muktijuddho*, or Bangladesh War of Independence from Pakistan that ended in 1971, Jagatjyoti and Elias became close, first sharing time together at the Meghalaya training camp (north-east India) where they learned war techniques, and then throughout the war itself.[2] Elias used to call Jagatjyoti *Dada*, and they used to introduce themselves to others as soul brothers. Their only difference was that they came from two different mothers.[3]

Between July and November 1971, Jagatjyoti Das and Elias Chowdhury formed the Das Party (named after Jagatjyoti), with over one hundred young members from diverse

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1 *haor*: wetland in north-east Bangladesh.
2 *Muktijuddho*: Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. I shall use the native term *Muktijuddho* throughout my thesis.
3 *dada*: elder brother.

backgrounds. Together they, became the Bangladeshi *Mukti Bahini*, or "freedom fighters", and took part in a number of guerrilla operations with the aim of freeing the *haor* region.[4] The Das Party developed expertise in foiling the Pakistan Army's use of waterways, and succeeded in most of their operations. But on 16 November, one month before the victory of Bangladesh in the War of Independence, the Das Party became inevitably trapped in a confrontation with the Pakistan Army and their local alliance, the *razakars*.[5] Some of Jagatjyoti's fellow guerrillas had to leave the battlefield and take shelter in the nearest village. At least two guerrillas were killed on the spot. Jagatjyoti and Elias decided that they would stay and fight. Elias was injured by a bullet but not killed. Jagatjyoti, however, was hit by a fatal bullet. Quickly, Elias tried to bury him before he retreated.

The story could have ended there, but in fact it had only just started. The *razakar* sympathizers with the Pakistan Army dragged Jagatjyoti's body to the nearby Ajmiriganj Bazar, tied it to an electricity pole, brought his aged parents to see their deceased son, and set their house on fire. They then forced the locals to come and see the punishment meted out on anyone who fought for, or even supported the *Mukti Bahini* against Pakistan, and called a local photographer who documented the appalling event. After an agonising wait for their son's body, the bereaved parents finally received it, dumped by the *razakars* in the nearby Bheramohona river. That day's bloodbath had symbolically merged into the flowing waters of hundreds of rivers across the country.

Bangladesh is now fifty years old, and Elias is now sixty-eight. Bangladeshi rivers still flow with these memories. Elias cannot wipe his *Dada* from his memory. Often, Elias wakes up in the middle of the night and hears his *Dada*'s clear and caring voice. One of

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[4] *Mukti Bahini*: the Bangladesh Forces of the *Muktijuddho*. The *Mukti Bahini* brought together "members of the armed forces of erstwhile East Pakistan and members of the urban and rural sangram parishads [War Council]" (Ahmed, *Banglapedia*, 2021).

[5] *razakar* derives from Urdu and means volunteer. In Bangladesh, the term has become a pejorative way to refer to people who have been convicted of crimes against humanity in collaboration with the Pakistan Army during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971.

Jagatjyoti's many inspiring thoughts always resonates in Elias: "Once the country is independent, I wish to travel every corner of it like a troubadour and see people smiling. And if I die before that, let our descendants know that we have fought for a country that would be a land of equality for all, for everyone, Elias!"[6]

I open this thesis with this historical story as my experience as a citizen of Bangladesh has taught me that "[o]ur experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is casually connected with past events and objects", in the words of UK social anthropologist Paul Connerton (2004, p. 2). I believe, too, that "[t]he foundation of Bangladesh through the *Muktijuddho* is not only for the soil and the flag. The struggle for values was inevitably associated with it. We cannot vanquish that value", in the words of Anisuzzaman, the Bangladeshi writer and teacher, and translator of the first Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972 (2021, my translation). Thus, this story recounts some forgotten but unforgettable events which illuminate the importance of history. The aim of my study aligns with Hoque's remark that derives from Indian author Dilip Hiro (1971). Hiro maintains that we must strive "to create a better understanding of the problem by highlighting the historical perspective and providing some previously unknown information and fresh insight" (quoted in Hoque, 2010, p. 9). One group struggled for a sovereign Bangladesh which would value indigenous heritage and heterogeneous cultural identities within a humanistic world view. It hoped to reflect Bangladesh's geography, a delta that is fluid; the other group stood for an undivided Pakistan which would foster homogenous religious identities and values. Today, as I write this thesis fifty years after the *Muktijuddho*, I see how the ideal of liberation, which was expected to be driven by the idea of syncretism and the acceptance of plural identities within Bangladesh, has become a follower of

[6] This story is based on the play *Jyoti-sanghita*, written by Ruma Modak, directed by myself, and produced in 2012 by Jibon Sanket Theatre in Habiganj in cooperation with the Bangladesh National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts. The performance team had the opportunity to meet Elias Chowdhury for several face-to-face conversations during the creation of the play,.

majoritarian norms. Bangladesh has become dominated by sectarian forces, espousing a singular identity, which is now continuously expanding and dominating various minority communities. As a result, incessant contestation and struggle continues between these cohorts, and violence is experienced ubiquitously in daily life.

In response to the oppositional, antagonistic and entrenched performances of national identity encapsulated in these polarised positions, this research proposes plurality, which is investigated through a series of filmed devised theatrical performances. Both through a historical approach to Bangladesh and to Bangladeshi performance, as well as via Practice Research, I propose plural identity as a viable way forward for the Bangladeshi nation. I attempt now to understand how theatre and performance might be able to stage these the concepts of fluid identity, plurality and hybridity. My Practice Research highlights the importance of theatre in shaping fluid and heterogenous national identities. I have conducted interviews and workshops with participants from a wide diversity of backgrounds on the subject of homogeneity, plurality and society in Bangladesh, and have then created a performance-film, based on my findings.

Methodology

In order to examine the politics of identity and violence in daily life in Bangladesh today, my research methodology has involved structured/ semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, combined with archival research. The reason for this is that, apart from the number of scholars to which I refer in Chapter One, there are few researchers or writers currently working on the notion of plurality in Bangladeshi society. Therefore, I have complemented their extremely useful publications with my own discussions with as wide a range of people from across Bangladeshi society as I have been able to meet.

My Practice Research has been a qualitative study, based on ethnographic and archival investigations in Bangladesh and the UK, conducted between 2017 and 2020.

Notably, I gathered a substantial amount of information during my research trip to Bangladesh 2019-2020, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. I engaged in four main methodologies: examining archival materials such as diaries, state reports, travel narratives, newspapers, blogs and posts on social media and collections in museums and libraries in London, Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet, as well as artistic performances. This research enabled me better to understand the key moments in Bangladesh's history, and how they have contributed to the notion of national identity today. As the cultural historian Carolyn Steedman states, the archive "is a record of the past at the same time as it points to the future" (2001, p. 7). Therefore, this archival research has enabled me to understand both the barriers in Bangladesh's history to a plural society, and the potential for it in the future. The second research methodology involved conducting structured/semi-structured interviews, workshops and discussions in order to investigate the significance and function of identity in Bangladesh's history, and in contemporary life. The interviews were conducted with individuals with a broad range of different Bangladeshi backgrounds: men and women, people from different age groups, people from different *Adivasi* (indigenous) communities, urban professionals and rural villagers, academics and students representing a variety of disciplines, and political activists.[7] I must admit that, owing to the fact that I myself do not speak any *Adivasi* languages, it was necessary to conduct the interviews, workshops and discussions in Bangla, which meant that they were not as comprehensively inclusive as they could have been. However, *Adivasi* people did participate in these sessions, speaking in Bangla. Moreover, in view of the fact that I was unable to access the leaders of some religious communities, participants from those religious backgrounds did not participate. For example, despite three journalist friends' best efforts, I was initially unable to obtain an appointment to interview the leader of Hefajat-e-Islam and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami.

[7] *Adivasi*/ "আদিবাসী": indigenous; I use the term *Adivasi* throughout my thesis.

Finally, though, I was able to meet one of the young leaders of an Islamist group, with the help of a senior colleague from Dhaka University.

Therefore, while my participants were from a wide range of diverse backgrounds, I could not claim that they represented the entirety of Bangladesh, exhaustively. I anonymise the participants – speakers and performers – in this thesis for safety reasons, given that some of them made mention of sensitive issues regarding religion and secularism. The third methodology involved the observation of the participants who attended my workshops, in order to understand the interaction of people from different backgrounds. Finally, the fourth methodology was my creative practice based on my research, which took the form of a performance-film.

My aim was to frame my Practice Research within the context of the self-narratives of different individuals who participated in the interviews, workshops and discussions, in which people participated with their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, experiences, inspirations, and opinions, which I then wanted to capture both in this thesis, and in more oblique and poetic forms, in my performance-film. I found British-Bangladeshi educator and researcher Aminul Hoque's approach particularly illuminating in this respect. Hoque explains in one of his works, "I have chosen the narrative approach for this research because it enabled me to capture the complexity of identity that I wished to observe." He adds that he aims with his publications to gain via his approach, "I sought to enable respondents to dictate and lead the conversation", in the words of Hoque (2010, p. 63). I therefore encouraged them to speak in the language in which they were most comfortable – Bangla – and interviewed them at their chosen venue, which in some cases was their home, or another place that was convenient for them. My aim was to make the conversation "informal", and in my transcriptions, which appear later in this thesis, "to take greater liberties in syntax, grammar, and allusions than formal speech" (Scott 1990, p. 160). Through this narrative approach, my aim was to gain

insights into the "voice" and "the complex and highly personal accounts of identity, culture and history" (Hoque 2010, p. 63). Based on my analysis of these participants' narratives, on my archival research, on watching plays and productions on the subject of nationhood and community in Bangladesh, I then, with a community of artist-participants invited from my personal connection in Bangladesh, directed a series of devised performances which were then made into a performance-film – my PhD submission.

Alongside my archival academic research and my interviews and workshops with participants from a broad diversity of sectors in Bangladeshi society, I have drawn from Bangladeshi folk poetry. It is a widely held view in Bangladesh, which was reflected in the discussions with participants in my interviews and workshops that, owing to the country's basis in agriculture, folk traditions are intrinsic to individual and community identities. Therefore, motifs and metaphors originating in the country's folk culture and language influence and inform my artistic practice. The imagistic harmony and balance of folk poetry, its rhythms and symbols are intrinsic to my practice. In this thesis I have translated some verses from folk poetry, providing footnotes to the original Bangla.

The concept of Practice Research

My practical approach is based on theories developed by two practice-led researchers Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean. Smith and Dean's interactive cyclic web model of Practice Research provides a "model [that] combines the cycle (alterations between practice and research), the web (numerous points of entry, exit, cross-referencing and cross-transit within the practice-research cycle) and iteration (many sub-cycles in which creative practice or research processes are repeated with variation)" (2009, p. 8). I thus aim to create a "reciprocal relationship between research and creative practice", whereby the two are interpenetrating,

and form part of an ecology, or whole, where they are mutually dependent and at times inseparable. Smith and Dean refer to "bi-directorial focus", where "creative practice can revolutionise academic research" and "academic research can impact positively on creative practice" (p. 1). Their description of this dynamic resonates loudly with my experience, where my archival research in Bangladesh, along with the narratives provided by participants in interviews, discussions and workshops, not only provided me with the content of my Practice Research performance-film, but also influenced its form since, as I have already mentioned, it became evident in during my Practice Research process, that Bangladesh's folk heritage needed to be central to my thinking and artistic approach. Moreover, as I examine and explain in detail in Chapter One, questions of monolithic and plural identities in Bangladesh are not only academic questions, but they are imagined, narrated and performed by all Bangladeshi citizens, in their daily lives. Therefore, the *practice* of theatre and performance and the *research* into the theoretical concept of identity are inextricable, since identity is in itself a kind of performance, as I discuss presently in detail.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic took place in 2020, I had proposed to create a Practice Research theatrical performance. The devised play would have been set in the National Parliament of Bangladesh, and 331 actors and spectators would have taken part. I had envisaged that the actors and audience would have represented the members and speaker of parliament. The proposed theatrical production would have been performed following the traditional style of *Bangla natya* (Bangla theatre) that includes dance, music and speech, blended with modern technology such as audio-visual elements. The MP-actors would have participated in fictionalised parliamentary debates and dialogues via theatrical representation of the narratives collected from the interviews, discussions and workshops that I conducted. I had intended to include actors and audience members from diverse backgrounds in order to reflect the diversity of heritages represented in my interviews and workshops, and so as to

explore how religious, cultural, and ethnic markers of national identity have been imagined, contested, and performed among and by various communities in Bangladesh.

The intention of this Practice Research production was to engage and amplify the voices of people who had been involved in the focus group discussions and workshop sessions which had explored the theme of Bangladesh's violent bringing into being and short history, along with the contested identities that the nation has spawned, and the potential for joyous plurality that it holds within its hands. A three-week devising and rehearsal period would have put the idea of an "interactive cyclic web" into action, involving the interview and workshop participants in discussions with performers, in order to create an artistic piece that reflected the narratives of diversity gathered during my research. Participants and performers, narrators and artists, theorists and practitioners, would have come together to share ideas, thoughts, feelings, and information, by writing, speaking, drawing, and acting.

The show would then have been staged for a week. The production would have taken place in-the-round, so that the audience could be immersed in the debates and discussions on diversity that surrounded them both in the theatre during the performance, and in their daily lives. Thus, the production might, in the words of Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall and English sociologist Les Back, have initiated action in order "to break into the confusing fabric that 'the real' apparently presents, and find another way in". In other words, with this production the dividing line between fictional performance and real life would have become porous and ambiguous for the performers and audience, prompting participants to observe and embrace the actual diversity of identities present in the here and now of the theatrical experience. In this way, the show could have become a "microscope", helping the participants, spectators and performers, including myself, "to look at the evidence" through it and see "the hidden relations" between identity, nation, and nationalism in their everyday

lives in Bangladesh, and in Bangladesh's history and politics (Hall and Back, 2009, pp. 664-665).

I must stress that the pandemic took a huge toll on my research, study and practice. Not only was I unable to access a number of archival sources but, most significantly, I had to radically alter my Practice Research output from the planned live performance that I have just described, to a performance-film. Never having worked with the medium of film, this was a monumentally steep learning curve for me and a hugely stressful experience, even if I am now immensely proud of the skills I have acquired in an almost unfeasibly short period of time, and of the performance-film I have produced. Moreover, my work was predominantly solitary and screen-based, which was a rude change with the collaborative, physical, in-person performance work that I have spent my career making until now. The isolation was very challenging, but I created methods for collaborating with and directing performers online, and I believe our interactions were very collegial and effective.

I had to adapt my original plans, and take from them what was possible and practicable, given the social distancing measures that were imposed from March 2020 onwards, and which are still largely in place in terms of university campuses, international travel, and the theatre and performance industries. Informed by important scholarly studies on socially-applied theatre, along with narratives gathered from the applied theatre and performance workshops that I had held, and the devising methods to be employed during the rehearsal period, combined with *Bangla natya* performance traditions, I elaborated a critical-creative idiom as part of my Practice Research. The approaches to socially-applied theatre that particularly informed my Practice Research are by Ananda Breed, Syed Jamil Ahmed and Joseph A. Scimecca. Applied arts scholar Ananda Breed's experience of grassroots theatre organisations in Rwanda, and their use of art to create new spaces where "genocide survivors and perpetrators live with one another – that they all suffered together" (2014, p.

86), was of particular relevance, I thought, given Bangladesh's unresolved history of violence, which I explain in more detail in Chapter One. Ahmed's theory of "devising artistic performances for peace-building underpinned by ethical imagination and dialogue" in South Asia (2016b, p. 2) was also particularly influential on my Practice Research. Finally, the examples given by sociologist and conflict resolution analyst Joseph A. Scimecca in the book *Conflict Resolution: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (1991) was also significant to my research and performance practice, given the sectarian conflict that has dominated Bangladesh's history, which I also account for in Chapter One.[8]

Applied performance practitioner Alistair Campbell, following the Brazilian theatre director, activist and theorist Augusto Boal, offers critique, memoir and most importantly a guide to how to hold workshops, in his publication *The Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal,* which recounts his experience of working in different parts of the world. Campbell's workshop in Dhaka (2015) went "through the language of performance itself, to identify and extrapolate key, abiding and non-prescriptive principles" (2019, pp. 9-10). Thus, his work with participants was intended to be both "personal and political". Referring to Boal, Campbell "constantly sought to align the judgements of the head with the assertions of the heart: to bring rigorous structure into reflexive dialogue with the storytelling – the telling of Truth to Power" (*ibid*). Campbell's approach encouraged me to open my interviews and workshops up to the personal, affective and emotional, in order for the historical, political and sociological not to dominate. In this way I hoped to "encourage creativity, imagination, self-awareness, critical inquiry, problem-solving, and personal growth" of the participants (Libman, 2021). Another

[8] Scimecca's research provides examples from across the globe to illustrate conflict resolution. These include the conflict between Argentina and Chile over the Beagle Channel in 1984; the civil war in Sudan in 1972 where the All-Africa Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches played an instrumental role; the contribution towards negotiations made by Quakers in the Nigerian civil war 1967-1970; and the conciliation between East and West Germany (pp. 25-26).

key influence on my approach to Practice Research was a series of online workshop entitled *Breaks and Joins* facilitated by applied theatre scholar Sue Mayo, as part of the *Being Human Festival* 2020 (Goldsmiths event, 2020). Mayo's work contributed to my acknowledgement of how the performance of daily life and artistic performance are on a spectrum or scale, rather than in opposition with each other. Her workshops also enabled me to appreciate how creative practice in conflict and post-conflict zones can repair and bridge the gaps between conflicting communities, providing a shared cultural experience and platform to enable diverse forms of activism, thoughts and progressive social change to have a space. In her own work, Mayo "invited people to send a film that showed the audience repairing something, or with something they had repaired" (Mayo, 2020). She asked them to tell the audience "about the object and what it meant to repair it, as well as to reflect on the question: Can everything be mended" (*ibid*)? I found this notion of "mending" particularly powerful, given Bangladesh's broken history of violence and sectarian conflict.

Before examining the complex ways in which identity and performance intersect and interact in the context of Bangladesh, and before ending this Introduction by outlining the contents of each chapter, I must shed light on my own position in relation to being a UK-based Bangladeshi Practice Researcher.

"I" Who Writes Here

This study has introduced me to various opinions that inspire me to act in order "to break into the confusing fabric". I have come to understand, with Hall, that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (1996, p. 4). I go on to discuss the fluidity and

contextual contingencies of identity in detail in Chapter One. But at this point, declaring my own positionality and the multiple identities that I hold within the term "I", or the name "Sudip Chakroborthy", is significant.

The "I" who writes here, seeks to open a critical dialogue, an investigation, on the subject of identity, violence and plurality. This "I" must therefore also be thought of as, itself, "enunciated" (Hall, 1994, p. 222). In other words, I must examine and deconstruct the different contexts that have contributed towards the "narration", "performance", "construction" or "imagination" (terms that I examine in detail in relation to identity in Chapter One), with reference to myself. I grew up in a Hindu-Brahmin family, and I have been in the position of being placed in a socially superior position (not by my parents but by my grandparents) with regard to non-Brahmins and Muslims, whom I was supposed to view as "inferior". Study in secondary and higher education, and in particular engagement with the literature and theatre circuits, assisted me in understanding that these social boundaries were barriers to equality and social justice.

I am Sudip Chakroborthy, a Bangalee male, Hindu by birth, a performing arts practitioner (sometimes paid, sometimes unpaid) working in mostly urban settings in Bangladesh and some other parts of the world, a husband, a father.[9] I was brought up in an agrarian small town and later had the opportunity to study (and later, teach) theatre in a culturally and politically vibrant higher educational institution situated in the capital city. This demonstrates the way that "multiple identities" can be held simultaneously – in the case of this example, geopolitical identities and social, academic and personal identities. Certain circumstances might prompt an individual or group to privilege one identity more than another (Goff and Dunn, 2004, p. 7). However, my own consciousness of the simultaneous

[9] Both "Bengal" and "Bengali" are British colonial terms. In contrast, the native terms are "Bangla" ("বাঙলা"/ "বাংলা") and "Bangalee" ("বাঙালী"/ "বাঙ্গালী"), respectively. I use the native terms throughout my thesis. In addition, in 2015, the Constitution of Bangladesh substituted the colonial words with the native terms. Available from: http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367/section-24554.html [Accessed: 25 May 2021].

positions that I hold and identities that compose me, enables me from a personal, affective, embodied way, as well as a theoretical, academic way, to see identities as plural and shifting.

Throughout my study, I acknowledge that my account is informed by my subject position and is only partial, in that what I may construct and produce is subjective and only "part" of a whole. As postcolonial Indian scholar Homi Bhabha, to which I refer in Chapter One, says, "the truth is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself, [...] within the terms of a negotiation (rather than a negation) of oppositional and antagonistic elements" (1994, p. 22). I have tried to be mindful throughout my Practice Research of the fact that my own identity is a negotiation between a plurality of sometimes oppositional and antagonistic elements, and that I am just one individual within a complex and ever-changing society, for which I can only begin to account.

When I have described the aim of my research project, namely to reflect the plurality of the Bangladeshi nation, very few of my UK Bangladeshi friends believe it to be achievable. They have warned me of the safety and security risks during my research trips to Bangladesh, notably in relation to discussing sensitive topics of sectarianism and social and religious conflict, and the fact that I am from a minority Hindu community. They are aware that "religious extremism and intolerance are growing within Bangladesh" (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 71), contributing to the perception that the acceptance of fluid and heterogeneous cultural identities is far from the present socio-political context of the country, and that my work is therefore controversial and that the search for a plural society is further from its goal than ever in Bangladeshi history.

However, the continued violence across the country and the gradual disappearance of inclusiveness, suggest to me that, as much as the hard-line expands, art must expand its expression in order to emphasise the importance of a plural society which can, I believe, bring mutual respect and understanding. While the difficulties of national identities are

multiplying in Bangladesh, I am still convinced that collaborative performance can provide an alternative picture, of a nation where different ethnicities, religions, genders and other groups of individuals can live in mutual respect. I take sustenance from the words of Bangladeshi political scientist Akhand Akhtar Hossain, who suggests:

> neither ethnicity/language/culture/secularism-based nationalism ('Bengali nationalism') nor predominantly Muslim-territorial nationalism ('Bangladeshi nationalism') alone can dominate and flourish in Bangladeshi society and polity; instead, the objective conditions in the country dictate that a competitive democratic system of politics which accommodates aspects of secularism, language, Muslim identity and Islamic ethical-moral codes remains the feasible political discourse for forming and consolidating the country's multi-ethnic, multi-religious national identity over the long run and its survival as a sovereign state. (2015, p. 368)

Hossain points here to the tolerance and respect that could enable Bangladesh to move forward as a plural society, one that I seek to reflect in my work.

Research Questions

My Practice Research has been framed and guided by the following questions:

1. How has national identity been imagined, shaped, contested, and performed in East Bangla/Pakistan during the time period from the partition of Bangla in 1905, to 2018, when Bangladesh suffered sectarian attacks on civilians?

2. How can theatrical performance provide a space for posing questions about national identity/ies, and function as a forum for dialogues between contesting identities, in order to propose how a plurality of national identities may play out in daily life?

I now explore the key theories and scholarships that underpin my research and shape my methodology. I then go on to specify the methodological approach that guides my Practice Research.

Theoretical Framework

There are several interrelated theories that underpin my thesis, *Performing the Nation: Identity, Violence and The Search for Plurality in Bangladesh*. I now examine questions of nation, nationalism, and the performance of nationalism. Firstly, I provide a brief history of the term "nation" in Europe and as well as in South Asia.

Chapter Outlines

In order to expand the ideas to which I have already briefly alluded, this research is divided into following four chapters. Chapter One, "Nation and Performance", defines some of the key terms in my Practice Research, notably "nation" and the ways that nationhood and nationality have been imagined, narrated, performed, contested and reimagined by various ethnic, religious, and cultural communities in East Bangla/Pakistan and Bangladesh, during key historical events such as the partition of Bangla in 1905, the partition of India in 1947, the *Muktijuddho* (Bangladesh War of Independence) in 1971, the political killings of 1975 and 1981, as well as violence since 1990s. I also propose terms including "hybridity", "plurality" and "cosmopolitanism", and how they can be applied to Bangladesh's highly diverse society. Chapter Two, "The Importance of Theatre in the History and Formation of Identity in Bangladesh", examines the tradition of theatre in Bangladesh from the nineteenth century to today, and its contribution towards the socio-political imagining, narrating, constructing and contesting Bangladeshi national identity. Reciprocally, the chapter examines the effects of government on theatrical performance itself. Chapter Three, "The Imagination

and Contestation of National Identity in Daily Life and Artistic Performance in Bangladesh" describes ways in which notions of hybridity, plurality and cosmopolitanism have manifested themselves across both everyday living, and artistic practice, in Bangladesh. In this chapter I foreground the voices of the participants in the interviews and workshops that I co-ran, with them, in order to present the views of multiple contestants from different religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, Chapter Four, "The Search for a Plurality of National Identities through Performance", describes the processes of my own Practice Research, and how they have resulted in the production of my performance-film. Borrowing from the African theatre specialist Osita Okagbue's belief that theatre can create an assembly, or space, in which people come together with their various specificities, conflicts and tolerances in a shared time and place, I seek to create a forum for the plurality of Bangladeshi identities that I have encountered throughout my Practice Research (Okagbue, 2019).

Chapter One

Nation and Performance

The Political History of Bangalee Identity Since the Early Nineteenth Century

Owing to colonial rule and geopolitical and religious issues, the name and geographical position of *Banga* (Bangla) has altered several times. With specific reference to nation and performance, South Asian political performance theorist Jisha Menon examines the performance of nationalism and the memory of partition of India and Pakistan in her recently published book. She states, "the introduction of the colonial census throughout India in 1881 had far-reaching effects in the ossification of religious identities. By imposing orientalist grids, such as the census, the British calcified fluid, flexible, and heterogeneous cultural practices into the antinomies of religious majority and minority" (2013, p. 9). The census, which obliged inhabitants of British-ruled India to declare their religion, created sectarianism on a scale that had never existed on the scale that it has since the census. The Muslim League was established just twenty years after, to support the interests of Indian Muslim minorities. BBC journalist Kavita Puri's study shows, "[i]dentity politics began to grow stronger in the early twentieth century – exacerbated by the British decision to grant separate electorates to different religious communities so that they were represented by their 'own' politicians" (2019, p. 17). As a result of the British colonial census, 1905 the Bangla geographical area was separated by the British colonial administrators into two separate areas, one Muslim-dominated, and the other Hindu-dominated: East Bangla and West Bangla. Scholars agree that the effect of this partition was severe, as "it brought out in the open deep-seated resentment and suspicion of the Hindus and the Muslims against each other, most clearly exhibited in the communal violence of Comilla and Jamalpur in 1907" (Ahmed, 2001, p. 10). In August 1947, when the British finally ceded independence to India after nearly two

centuries of rule, power was transferred to two separate nation states: India and Pakistan. Historian Willem van Schendel describes the reasons that made Pakistan a specifically and problematically unique state: "religious nationalism, administering two discrete territories (West Pakistan and East Pakistan), separated from each other by about 1500 km of Indian terrain, and these two factors combined with a third – Pakistan did not become heir to any of the colony's central state institutions" (2009, p. 105). In *The Partition of India*, historian Ian Talbot and political scientist Gurharpal Singh state that, "[t]he numbers killed in partition violence will never be known. Monsoon floods, mass disposal of bodies and administrative collapse meant corpses could not be fully recovered or enumerated" (2014, p. 7). Puri adds to the chorus of voices who have articulated the avoidable human tragedy of Partition, in her book *Partition Voices* (2019). Here, she articulates untold stories of the Partition of India, that displaced between ten and twelve million people along religious lines, causing refugee crises on a scale never before seen in the history of humanity, and violent tensions that continue to this day.

I must briefly outline the history of Islam in Bangladesh in order to shed light on the Partition and Muslim identity in Bangladesh today. The historian of religion Rafiuddin Ahmed reveals a confusion between Bangalee culture and Hindu religious culture in the Bangla region. Ahmed shows, "Islamification was promoted in Bengal in the nineteenth century by strongly emphasizing that the common lifestyle of a Bengali Muslim opposes Islamic principles" (1981, p. 41). Since Bangalee Islam was considered to be insufficiently orthodox because it combined the international religion with indigenous rituals and practices, there was a focus on increased Islamification. Notably, at the beginning of nineteenth century, the Faraezi Movement targeted Muslims living in agrarian societies, prescribing a particular mode of Islam for them. Led by Haji Shariatullah, this movement produced fundamentalism and did its best to stamp out the syncretistic between Islam and local Bangla

traditions. Emphasising a distinctive brand of Islam based on Middle Eastern values, the Faraezi Movement thus established a breach between Muslim peasants and their Hindu neighbours. The effects of Islamisation began to be seen clearly through the importation of Urdu and Persian words in literature. Ahmed explains that, "[t]he Muslim elite of Calcutta, with their vehement dislike of Bengali, began championing the cause of Urdu. All this – for a separate identity" (2000, p. 14). Furthermore, after the independence of India and Pakistan from British rule, in 1949, the Education Minister of the Government of Pakistan argued:

> Not only Bengali literature, even the Bengali alphabet, is full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess from the Hindu pantheon. […] Pakistani and Devanagari [Sanskrit] script cannot co-exist. [...] To ensure a bright and great future for the Bengali language it must be linked with the Holy Quran. (cited in Anisuzzaman, 1993, p. 107)

In addition, the traditional Bangalee *dhoti-chadar* costume was rejected by Bangalee Muslims. Instead, the north-Indian more Muslim *kurta-pajama* was adopted (Ahmed, 1981, p. 106-113). Today, as what Jay Straker calls, "state scripted nationalism" (2007), Quranic verses in Arabic and other Muslim signs and symbols have increased in visibility and audibility in public spaces, for example the prime minister's cabinet meetings. These religious markers serve to "perform" Bangladesh as a Muslim nation, in spite of the supposed secularism confirmed in the Constitution.

All this serves to explain why, in 1947, what could have been a secular emancipation from British rule, was diverted into religious nationalism. Historically, the Indian National Congress had been established in 1885 as an "all-India" broadly popular secular political party in response to British rule and growing nationalist feeling. Meghna Guhathakurta examines how the Partition of 1947 generated religious divisions among people by creating a

concept of majority-minority groups, which in fact had already been set in motion by the British census in the nineteenth century, where regions had to be defined according to which religious group was most prevalent. Since Hindus were the majority in India while Muslims dominated in the region now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Partition took place in 1947. Menon offers analysis which enables the situation that has persisted for over seventy years, into the present, to be understood: "[t]he partition resurfaces as a repressed historical memory that continues to mold both secular and religious identities" (2013, p. 1). Throughout my study, I shall be accounting for this long-term trauma that has been provoked by religious separation and Partition, dating back to colonial rule.

Post-Partition in 1951, the Awami League gained massive common support in East Pakistan, when the word "Muslim" was dropped from the party's name in order for it to become identified as more secular. This was owing to the fact that a significant portion of the Hindu population of East Pakistan wished to be involved in Pakistan's politics. In 1952, the Language Movement was a significant milestone in Bangladesh's journey towards independence from Pakistan. The Language Movement, founded in 1952, galvanised language-based Bangalee cultural nationalism. A political protest against the economic, political and cultural oppression in East Pakistan culminated in the area breaking away from West Pakistan and forming Bangladesh in 1971. Consequently, Bangladeshi author Ghulam Murshid argues:

> this was against the proposition of the former British-India where the main aim was to put all the Muslim areas united under one state. From then on, the Awami League stood for freedom of speech, equal rights for the people of East Pakistan, and eventually independence. (2010, p. 65, my translation)

Puri describes how, "East and West Pakistan were untied by religion, but profound differences in language and culture proved stronger" (2019, p. 85). Religion was not a strong enough glue to bind East Pakistan to its western non-neighbour, divided from it by India, this resulting in the secession.

The Bangladesh War of Independence

The general election of Pakistan in 1970 finally led to a bloody war. The Pakistani military rulers refused to hand over power to the Awami League following the Awami League's public mandate in the election, so the latter party was unable to form a government. Pakistan's Army invaded East Pakistan instead of handing over power to the Awami League, who had been democratically elected in Pakistan, leading war between the people of East Pakistan and the military force of West Pakistan.

At midnight on 25 March 1971 the Pakistan Army launched "Operation Searchlight" in Dhaka. The Pakistani junta and their willing local collaborators from Jamaat-e-Islami took measures against the Bangalee nationalist rebellion in the then province of East Pakistan.[10] A nine-month war ensued. Sensing imminent defeat, on 14 December 1971 the local collaborators executed the Pakistan Army's blueprint to eliminate the East Pakistan's intelligentsia and scholars, in what is known as *Shaheed Buddhijeebi Dibash* (Martyred Intellectuals Day). The number of intellectuals killed has never been ascertained, but the figure mentioned in *Bangladesh*, the memoir published by the then Ministry for Information and Radio, on 16 December 1972 – the first Victory Day of the newly independent Bangladesh, cites an estimated 981 academics, writers and doctors; thirteen journalists; forty-nine physicians; forty-one lawyers, and sixteen others, including artists and engineers

[10] Jamaat-e-Islami is one of the largest political parties in Bangladesh. "It is committed to the creation of an Islamic state with a *sharia* legal system, and to the removal of 'un-Islamic' laws and practices". The party strongly supported the Pakistan Army during the *Muktijuddho* (DFAT, 2019, p. 27).

(Patoari, 1972, pp. 81-88). Syed Manzoorul Islam, an academic and writer, compares this day to similar killings of intellectuals during the Nazi occupation of Poland (Islam, 2018). More generally, Pakistan's military operation has been described by one US-based Bangladeshi author, Navine Murshid, as, "a genocidal campaign that involved mass murders, mass rapes, and torture" (2016, p. 52). Puri, too, emphasises the genocidal nature of the war: "[i]n 1971 the Bangladesh liberation war resulted in an estimated 10 million people fleeing for their lives from East Pakistan to India, as West Pakistan brutally suppressed the secessionists [Bangalees]. Hundreds of thousands were killed" (2019, p. 85). Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh, where I conducted archival research, describes the war as "the worst genocide after the Second World War" (LWM, 2021). Admittedly their position is likely to be partisan, but it is clear, from this sample of journalists and historians, that countless atrocities were committed during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971.

The toll was particularly high for women during the war. According to Murshid, "[w]hile the number of people killed is disputed, as is often the case in such instances, it is estimated that between 300,000 and three million were killed by the rampaging Pakistani forces and these collaborationist militias" (2016, p. 52). For her part, the US feminist journalist Susan Brownmiller has estimated, that "200,000, 300,000 or possibly 400,000 women (three sets of statistics have been variously quoted) were raped. Eighty percent of the raped women were Moslems, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindus and Christian women were not exempt" (1975, p. 80). In *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Brownmiller compares the rape of Bangalee women to the rape of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers at Nanjing between 1937 and 1938. Sufia Kamal (1911-1999), one of the leading literary figures, who was particularly prominent in women's organisations and protests against the suppression of Bangla language and culture, has attempted to create a

space for women in the Bangladeshi narrative of war, calling them *birangonas* (war heroines). She also declares that men fought with weapons, but women fought with their bodies (Schendel, 2009; Mookherjee & Das, 2015).

I have already cited Puri, for whom religion was insufficient for binding together the two parts of the Pakistan formed in 1947. Historian Sharmila Bose outlines the image of this war "between two competing cultural nationalisms – one based on the common religion of Islam and the other based on the linguistically defined ethnicity of being a Bengali" (Bose, 2004, cited in Bose, 2011, p. 404). Owing to Bangalee-language and cultural nationalism, it was not sustainable for East Pakistan to remain part of Pakistan, so in 1971 it finally gained its own independence.

Bangladesh as a Secular Republic

On 16 December 1971, East Pakistan became a sovereign state, named the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

In the face of pressure from the world community, Pakistan announced the release of their political prisoner Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as *Bangabandhu* (*The friend of Bangla*), the key leader of the Bangalee Nationalist Movement and the architect of independence (Shehabuddin, 2016; Majumder, 2016), "who earlier had been convicted to death in a mock trial by a military court on charges of waging war against Pakistan" (Liton, 2016). Sheikh Mujib returned to Bangladesh on 10 January 1972 via the alternative route of London.

Upon Sheikh Mujib's return, a Bangalee nationalism-based secular, democratic, and socialist state was formulated, via the new Constitution. Bangladeshi political scientist Shantanu Majumder argues, "unlike, most of the Muslim-majority states, [Bangladesh] included secularism in the constitution in December 1972 as one of the four state principles"

(2016, p. 41). On the other hand, some scholars argue that the idea of secularism and the elimination of Quranic recitation from the beginning of public events and the change of the weekend from Friday to Sunday in Muslim majority Bangladesh, did not reflect the people's wishes (Absar, 2014, p. 443). Thus, Bangladeshi researcher ABM Nurul Absar argues, the secularisation of "the new Bangladeshi government demonstrated an intense hostility towards Islam as a political and cultural symbol" (*ibid*). This became increasingly apparent post-independence. Social scientist Tazeen M. Murshid argues that, "there was no absolute national consensus about what secularism meant". Sheikh Mujibur Rahman might have answered Murshid by stating, as he did, "[s]ecularism does not mean the absence of religion" (1997, p. 11).[11] However, there was an increasingly growing consensus that the popular demand for Islam as a state religion and identity was not being listened to, and that there was therefore exponential distrust in the government.

Sarah Tasnim Shehabuddin, specialist in Muslim-majority countries, describes what happened after the *Muktijuddho*, or War of Independence in 1971, where Bangladesh "dove into the challenges of reconstruction and state building with a weakened civil bureaucracy, a factionalised military, and a depleted economy, amidst concern about Indian hegemony and uncertainty about international recognition and financial support" (2016, p. 19). In such a context, in the first parliamentary election in 1973, the Awami League secured two hundred and ninety-two of the three hundred seats. Sheikh Mujib tried to maintain order and coordinate reconstruction, although it was a struggle, for the reasons outlined by Shehabuddin. Sheikh Mujib therefore, controversially, used the Awami League's parliamentary dominance to amend the Constitution rule and establish a one-party

[11] This meant that broadcasts of "citations from the scriptures of Islam, Hindu, Christianity and Buddhism" would be permitted on national radio and television. In addition, this involved "participation in the Islamic Summit held in Pakistan in 1974, awarding General Amnesty to collaborators of the Pakistan army, and establishing an Islamic Foundation in Bangladesh" (Murshid, 1997, p. 13). Murshid acknowledges that "Sheikh Mujib's action brought religion to the public domain instead of keeping it in the private sphere as was his stated goal" (*ibid*).

presidential system. In early 1975 the Awami League government banned existing political parties and invited citizens to join a single national party, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) (Shehabuddin, 2016, p. 20). Shehabuddin describes how, "this move aggravated grievances and heralded the end of Bangladesh's first democratic experiment" (*ibid*). For the Independence Generation and those involved in the guerrilla movement against Pakistan military rule during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971, Sheikh Mujib had been the most cherished figure of their dreams. Then, Ahmed remarks, "[t]he man who led the nation to fight for equal rights was the man who turned out to be a dictator. He had his opponents shot dead and went all out for one-party rule" (2001, p. 3).

On 15 August 1975, arguably one of the most seismic moments in the new Bangladeshi state's very brief history, and in its history since, took place. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all but two members of his family – his two daughters, one who is current prime minister of the country, Sheikh Hasina – were assassinated in a military coup. From 1975 to 1990, around fourteen military coups and counter-coups were staged. As a result, for fifteen years after independence, Bangladesh was ruled by military or quasi-military regimes.

Islamic Identity as a New Marker in The Political Landscape

After 1975, two Pakistani-trained strong men, General Ziaur Rahman and General Hossain Mohammad Ershad, took numerous steps to disassociate the state machinery from the ideal of secularism and to propagate anti-secular ideologies in society and confront secular values. General Zia invited back the top war criminals from Pakistan, rehabilitated them in Bangladeshi politics and in 1976 reinstated Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim League (Schendel 2009; Majumder 2016; Shehabuddin, 2016). General Zia also formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 1978 which "was established on a platform of Bangladeshi nationalism, and Islamic identity" (DFAT, 2019, p. 26), while General Ershad founded Jatiya

Party (National Party) in 1986 on the basis of the following principles: “nationalism, democracy, Islamic ideals and progress” (Refworld, 2011). Ironically, Zia, being a *Muktijoddha* (“freedom fighter” of the *Muktijuddho* in 1971), alienated many who had supported the Bangladesh War of Independence because they had wanted a new secular nation., such that “the Awami League, […] the Hindus and the syncretists, including literary circles, musicians, artists, dancers, and painters, people who drew their inspiration from the common cultural heritage of Bengal”, also felt excluded (Murshid, 1997, p. 17). Shehabuddin explains, “Zia replaced ‘secularism’ with ‘Absolute Trust and Faith in Almighty Allah’ and inserted ‘In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful’ [the Quranic verse, ‘Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim’] into the preamble of the constitution, while Ershad declared Islam the state religion” (Shehabuddin, 2016, p. 21). Zia would continue to purge the army of revolutionary leftist officers and erode the strength of leftists in Bangladesh.

When Zia was assassinated in 1981 and his party removed from power shortly after through another military coup, his former ally Ershad acceded to power. In the context of the country’s political unrest, Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujib, led the Awami League party on her return from exile in India to Bangladesh in 1981. Meanwhile, in 1982 Zia’s widow Begum Khaleda Zia took the chief position in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

While General Ershad had taken power in 1982 as I have stated, he was ousted following a popular uprising in 1990 (Schendel 2009; Majumder 2016; Shehabuddin, 2016; Murshid, 1997). Schendel posits, “the army never really went back to the barracks. It has continued to loom as the life-or-death-dispensing power behind the throne of successive civilian governments up to the present” (2009, p. 193). For decades after independence by violent means, violence therefore dominated Bangladeshi politics and daily life.

“By the 1990s, the narrative of the nation assumed essentialist, coercive, oppressive, and exclusionary character” (Ahmed, 2012), where the “religious, social and communal

harmony" (Majumder, 2016, p. 42) upon which the state had been founded, was at serious risk of being irreparably eroded by exclusionary Islamist and repressive military dominance. In the formation of the state of Bangladesh, which has been ruled for almost one third of its existence by military or quasi-military governments, Stuart Hall's explanation in an interview with cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg can be relevant: "religion had become the valorized ideological domain, the domain into which all the different cultural strands are obliged to enter, and no political movement in society can become popular without negotiating the religious terrain" (1996, p. 143).

Something must be said briefly about the language-based Bangalee nationalism in Bangladesh. In this respect, the folklorist Sahityabisharad Abdul Karim (1871-1953) is a key figure. Abdul Karim enriched Bangalee literature by collecting more than 2,000 *Puthis* (manuscripts) from the medieval period during the twentieth century, in order to prevent them, and the culture they represented, from disappearing.[12] Abul Ahsan Choudhury highlights the key importance of Abdul Karim for the Bangla language (Choudhury, 2020). Choudhury explains that in 1903, shortly before the British created a defined Bangla region in 1905, Abdul Karim demonstrated how the Bangla language had been developed by both Hindus and Muslims, together. Abdul Karim's progressive, liberal views were heeded and enabled the Muslims of the region to see Bangla as their language as much as a tongue belonging to the Hindus. Abdul Karim stated, "[n]o language other than Bangla can be the Bangalee Muslims' mother tongue and national language. If a new language is imported, it will be catastrophic for the whole of society" (*ibid,* my translation). In part as a result of Abdul Karim's tireless work and advocacy, Bangla became the language of the region for both Hindus and Muslims.

[12] *Puthi* is a manuscript of poetic fairy tales and religious stories. Studies show that *Puthis* found in the Bangla region are in both Sanskrit and Bangla (Bhowmik, 2015).

Adivasi, or Bangladeshi Indigenous Communities

In order to understand the problem of national identity in Bangladesh, the reality of ethnic and linguistic oppression on the *Adivasi* communities must be considered. A strong connection between Bangalisation and the denial of *Adivasi* recognition is revealed in the scholarly and activist discussions which appear in the annual publication of the Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, entitled *Solidarity*. In August 2019, the study showed that there are fifty *Adivasi* communities in Bangladesh, which include three million people, speaking forty languages. However, scholars are not agreed on the question of the identities and living languages of *Adivasi* communities in Bangladesh. Mesbah Kamal, coordinator of the Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous Peoples & Minorities (2010-) and head of the survey committee of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of 2018, has investigated the current state of *Adivasi* communities in Bangladesh, and his studies have revealed different sets of figures. Between 67 and 78 Adivasi communities live in different regions of the country (Kamal, 2020). Moreover, a survey conducted by the UNESCO Dhaka office in 2014 revealed that 43 *Adivasi* languages exist in Bangladesh. On the other hand, the International Mother Language Institute reports that the number of living languages in Bangladesh is 41 (IMLI, 2018-2019). And yet, the Government of the country what is ironically called the People's Republic of Bangladesh, does not recognise the diverse languages used by the *Adivasi* people across Bangladesh. It is clear that, "[t]here is no indication anywhere in the constitution that languages other than Bangla exist in Bangladesh" (Tripura, 2017).

Following a Constitutional Amendment in 2011, an official press release was issued by the government claiming that there are no *Adivasis* in Bangladesh. According to the anthropologist Prashanta Tripura (2017), who belongs to the Tripura ethnic group, this resulted in television and other broadcast discussants and presenters being required to refrain from using the term *Adivasi* on air. This obligation clearly contradicts many government

documents including official declarations by the Head of the State and certain members of parliament on the annual *Adivasi Dibash* (Indigenous Day) in Bangladesh. "More recently, in 2008, the electoral manifesto of Awami League explicitly referred to the 'indigenous people', outlining the party's pledge to address their needs and concerns along with those of religious minorities" (Tripura, 2017). Santu Larma, the president of the Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, notes, "although 21 years have passed since the signing of the 'Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord 1997', its core clauses are yet to be implemented" (Larma, 2019).[13] As evidence, the "Accord was signed between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti" (a Chittagong Hill Tracts-based political organisation whose aim is to uphold *Adivasi* communities' rights) "on 2 December 1997, ending more than two decades of conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region" (CHT – the south-eastern part of Bangladesh that lies between the Bay of Bengal, India and Myanmar) where *Adivasi* are largely concentrated (UN, 2000).[14] "After the signing of the CHT Accord, the indigenous armed resistance was demobilized although the over-whelming military force of the Bangladesh army remained stationed in the CHT, in violation of the Peace Accord", reports the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA, 2012, p. 12). In addition, in 1972, Bangladesh ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107). Despite all these measures that have been put in

[13] This Accord is popularly known as the "CHT Peace Accord 1997", but the official name of the document is the "CHT Accord 1997". "The Accord upholds the political, social, cultural, educational, and economic rights of all the citizens of the CHT and expediting their socio-economic development process" (UN, 2000). The Bangla-language Accord is available from https://www.jumjournal.com/পার্বত্য-চুক্তি/ [Accessed: 15 May 2020].

[14] The Chittagong Hill Tracts: the British colonial administration delimited the district in 1860. In 1947 it became a district of Pakistan. In the 1980s, the CHT was divided into three separate districts – Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. "The CHT [..] is a distinct region in Bangladesh in terms of their geography, topography and politico-economic-administrative system and ethno-national identity, culture, and religious beliefs of its people" (Al-Ahsan and Chakma, 1989 in Chakma, 2016, p. 306). In the 1920 the CHT (Amendment) Regulation declared the CHT an "excluded area", independent of general administration. "In the 1935 the government of India Act, the CHT was declared a 'totally excluded area'" (Chakma, 2016, p. 306). "In 1947, the CHT, despite being an overwhelmingly non-Muslim area (97.2%) became part of Pakistan against the wishes of the hill people" (Chakma, 1986 in Chakma, 2016, p. 306).

place, the Government of Bangladesh and the ILO have not addressed the development needs of indigenous populations in the country.

Given this context, the aim of my study is to understand the significance of fluid and heterogeneous identities that encompass various communities in the present conflictual context of Bangladesh. In this endeavour, the research will engage with a range of theoretical ideas, notably those of the performance theorist and theatre director Richard Schechner, who acknowledges in an editorial note for the Seagull edition of his work, that, "[t]o perform is to imagine, represent, live and enact present circumstances, past events and future possibilities"; and that "[p]erformance takes place across a very broad range of venues from city streets to the countryside, in theatres and in offices, on battlefields and in hospital operating rooms" (Schechner, no date). Schechner adds, in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, that "[p]erformances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships" (2002a, p. 22). Each of the theories proposed by Schechner here presents identity, whether individual, communitarian, social or national, as a public performance, on a spectrum with theatrical performance. For this reason, my project uses more formally recognised theatrical performance in order to demonstrate the potential for fluidity and flexibility in the performance of individual and national identities in Bangladeshi daily life.

I root my engagement with Schechner's performance studies in the specific Bangladeshi context by complementing his theories with those of specialists in Bangladesh's identity and politics, notably Ali Riaz, a US-based Bangladeshi political scientist, Meghna Guhathakurta, a Bangladeshi scholar in the field of international development, gender relations and minority politics, and journalist Abul Momen. Consequently, my research will explore how the partition of Bangla in 1905, the partition of India in 1947, the *Muktijuddho* in 1971, the political killings of 1975 and 1981, as well as the violence since the 1990s all of which I have just outlined, affect the imagination and performance of identity/ies in everyday

life in Bangladesh. I try to reflect both the richness of diverse religious, cultural, ethnic and gender communities, and the fractures that have appeared on a local and national scale (Riaz, 2018 and 2016; Renan, 2017, Guhathakurta, 2016; Momen, 1996).

There have been many sociological studies conducted on Bangalee and Bangladeshi identities in recent years (Riaz 2018 and 2016; Ahmed, 2016, 2012 and 2008; Khan, 2009; Murshid, 1995). Much of the literature has focused on issues such as identity, nationalism, religion, fundamentalism, violence, and education (Riaz, 2018 and 2016; Drong, 2019 and 2018; Tripura, 2020 and 2015; Guhathakurta, 2016; Ahmed, 2016, 2012 and 2008; Momen, 1996). Borrowing from Hoque's ideas, I examine complex notions of identity and their relationship to language, ethnicity, religion and society (2010, p. 10). Therefore, my study, which brings together history, sociology, performance studies and Practice Research, for the first time demonstrates the enactment of plurality and Bangladeshi identities. In this research, therefore, my aim is to bridge the gap between the philosophical or socio-political concept of a plural society and the enactment of this concept via performance, in order to understand how theatre can function as a forum for dialogues between contesting identities, and to propose how a plurality of national identity/ies may play out in daily life in the context of conflicting national identities in Bangladesh. In this respect, my study is innovative.

Using Practice Research theatrical performance has enabled me to use individual, personal self-narrative of the various community members which I represent. My extensive workshops have enabled me to interview people from different language groups, different religions, and different ethnic communities, including *Adivasi* taking part in community activism and in artistic practices. Therefore, I have been able to listen to the various voices that make up Bangladesh's plural society.

The Persecution of Religious, Ethnic and Other Minorities

In *Religious minorities,* Guhathakurta (2016) gives an account of the violence against Hindus and ethnic minority groups across Bangladesh. Hindu communities and their properties suffered incidents of violence, intimidation, rape and looting on, temples and worshipping rituals during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971. But the violence did not cease with independence. In 1992, far-right Hindus demolished the Babri Mosque in India and in retaliation, there were communal riots in both India and Bangladesh, in which thousands were killed on both sides of the sectarian divide. Owing to these instances of unrest and others, many Hindu families migrated to India. According to government sources, in 1974 the Hindu population of Bangladesh was 13.5%. In 1981 it was 12.1%, in 1991 it was 10.5%, and in 2011 it was 8.5% (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2014). In the *Political Economy of Reforming Agriculture-Land-Water Bodies in Bangladesh*, Economist Abul Barkat explains that, "[t]he rate of exodus over the past 49 years points to the direction that no Hindus will be left in Bangladesh 25 years from now" (2016, p. 1). From his thirty year-long research, Barkat has found that, due to religious persecution and discrimination, above eleven million Hindus left Bangladesh between 1964 and 2013, meaning that on an average 632 Hindus left the country each day, and over 200 000 left annually (*ibid*).

But it was not only Hindus who were targeted. The extreme forms of the "politicisation of religion" shown during the pre-elections and post-elections since 1990 have been characterised by attacks on Buddhist monasteries, shrines, and houses; and sporadic attacks on Christian churches, Sufi shrines, and Ahmadiyyas.[15] In addition, the humiliation of

[15] The Ahmadiyya Muslim community was founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed Quadian (1835-1908). There are some differences between Ahmadiyyas and other mainstream Muslim groups. "Members of Ahmadiyya community ('Ahmadis') profess to be Muslims. They contend that Ahmad meant to revive the true spirit and message of Islam that the Prophet Mohammed introduced and preached. But virtually all mainstream Muslim sects believe that Ahmad proclaimed himself a prophet, thereby rejecting a fundamental tenet of Islam" (Guhathakurta, 2016, p. 322).

Baul (mystic singers) society has become commonplace. This systematic discrimination inevitably causes the social exclusion of minorities in contemporary Bangladesh (Guhathakurta, 2016; Ahmed, 2012). In this context, Ahmed argues, "religion has acted as the norm for the majoritarian demarcation of identity" (2008, p. 306). Not only religious minorities but also moderate Muslims are threatened, notably via violence and intimidation by means of threatening phone calls, text messages, emails, and letters sent by extremist groups (Amnesty International, 2017).

Robert Watkins, United Nations resident coordinator in Bangladesh, provides a balanced statement about the "common perception in Bangladesh that religious communities generally live together in peaceful coexistence". He states that, "the United Nations in Bangladesh seeks to underline the importance of promoting a culture, which respects the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion" (Watkins, 2016). Underlining the importance of equity and justice in Bangladesh, he carefully expresses the UN's concern about "acts committed in recent years by radical Islamists on different religious and ethnic minorities' property, livelihood, prayer halls and priests" (*ibid*). The problem of the persecution of religious minorities has been evident since the cessation from Pakistan, and persists to today.

"Fake news", via "manufactured Facebook contents and comments" has also increased. The violent attacks on artists, academics, researchers, thinkers, atheists, writers, journalists, publishers, online activists, secular activists, *Adivasi* ethnic minority activists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTQI) people, human rights activists, and even politicians, present evidence of religious and ethnic intolerance (DFAT, 2019; Amnesty International, 2017).[16] According to an Amnesty International report (2017/18), the right to

[16] Since 2013 five online activists have been assassinated for articulating dissent against Islamist intolerance in their blogs. They are Ahmed Rajib Haider (15 February 2013), Avijit Roy (26 February 2015), Washiqur Rahman (30 March 2015), Ananta Bijoy Das (12 May 2015), and Niloy Neel (7 August 2015) (Amnesty International, 2017).

freedom of expression in Bangladesh is further restricted as the government frequently applies repressive laws and presses criminal charges against its critics, such as writers, cartoonists, university teachers, folk singers, artists, journalists and photojournalists, while the country's constitution purportedly guarantees freedom of speech to its citizens.

In such a context, the deportation and/or migration of religious and other minorities to India, Myanmar and the Global North, has increased. In 2013 *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Shaikh Azizur Rahman reported that Bangladeshi Buddhist families were crossing the border into Myanmar, and receiving help from local Rakhine Buddhist groups and government agencies. The irony here is clear, given that at the same time, Rohingya Muslims persecuted in Myanmar, have fled in their hundreds of thousands to Bangladesh. The report illustrates how "the move has created pressure on the minority Rohingya Muslims, who have long alleged persecution by the Buddhists to leave" (Rahman, 2013). From a personal point of view, from 1980 to 1990, a portion of my own family and a large portion of my in-law's family sold their property or left it to Muslim neighbours and quietly, in the dark of a night, crossed the border into India, never to return.

Sectarianism in Bangladesh

It has already been argued in critical scholarship produced in Bangladesh that the entire life span of the country as a sovereign nation state is a striking example of contested national identity. Examples of such discourse are to be found in the works of Ali Riaz (2018, 2016 and 2010), Prashanta Tripura (2020 and 2015), Meghna Guhathakurta (2016), Syed Jamil Ahmed (2012), Serajul Islam Choudhury (2011), B. K. Jahangir (2002), Abul Momen (1996), Tazeen M. Murshid (1997 and 1995), and others. Social scientist B. K. Jahangir, for example, argues, "the effects of nationalism, militarism, fundamentalism, and democracy in

Bangladesh manifest themselves as a powerful pressure with significant effects on our human environment" (2002, p. 7).

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is a South Asian "developing" country, and the eighth most populous country in the world. According to the 2011 census, 89.7% of the population practises Islam, 9.2% adheres to Hinduism, 0.7% to Buddhism, 0.3% to Christianity, and 0.1% to Animism and indigenous faiths. 98% of the population are ethnic Bangalees, with the remaining population made up of forty-five ethnic communities (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2014). The citizens struggle with low income and the cost of living, natural and human-made devastation, including food and accommodation insecurity, a shortage of medical facilities, social insecurity, political volatility, religious intolerance, and institutional corruption.

The effects of violence in Bangladesh have clearly divided Bangladeshi society. In this regard, theatre scholar Saleque Khan describes "the identity crisis of the people of Bangladesh" in *Performing the (imagi)nation: A Bangladesh Mise-en-scence*. Here, Khan states, "[t]he political instability of Bangladesh in itself creates a national identity crisis". He examines, "[t]he tension between the state and the cultural identity of the people" that is "reflected in the protest performances of urban Bangladeshis" (2009, pp. 1-8). Khan argues that contemporary Bangladeshi performance gives birth to invention and imagination by staging interactions between political culture and social culture. He continues by arguing that "[p]eople perform the (imagi)nation" that finally turns into "a clash between the people on the street [common people], and the people in power [the government and the groups backed by the State]" (*ibid*). Following cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of social drama as a "sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type, [which] may provide materials for many stories, depending upon the social structure, political, psychological, philosophical, and, sometimes, theological perspectives of the

narrators" (1988, p. 33), Khan uncovers the hidden mechanics of social action that are "processually structured", according to Turner, which identifies the following four stages, namely "breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism". Khan's study shows, "[o]nce the crisis subsides and order is temporarily restored, the whole process starts over again. Given the profound contradictions inherent in 'being' Bangali and 'being' Muslim, there does not seem to be a way to end the repetition of this Bangladesh social drama" (2009, p. 2).

The crisis can be traced back to 1905 when colonised Bangla was divided into two parts based on the religious line that was called *Banga-bhanga* (literally, Partition of Bangla). This became the key idea behind the partition of India and the creation in 1947 of two new states, India and Pakistan. The suppression of Pakistan's authority in the East put an end to unity based on religious lines and accelerated the emergence of the Bangla language-based identity that led to a series of movements, protests, and demonstrations with the aim of independence, which was finally achieved in 1971.

Article 9 of the Constitution of Bangladesh 1972 asserted that, "[t]he unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, [which] deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the War of Independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism." Furthermore, Article 3 (Part 1) declared Bangla as the state language, Article 6 (Part 1) announced that the citizens of Bangladesh were to be known as Bengalis, and Article 12 (Part 1) stated clearly that there would be no place for communal or religion-based political institutions in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Constitution, 1972, pp. 2-5). However, studies show that the assassination in a military coup in 1975 of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, led to a series of reversals in the constitution, which included the overthrow of secularism in 1977 and the declaration that "[t]he state religion of the Republic is Islam" in 1988 (Bangladesh Constitution, 2010). Momen castigates constitutional amendments that adopted a "fundamentalist character" by

abandoning the secular democratic principles-ideals-consciousness. He shows that state power moved towards building a new nationalism and national cultural consciousness based on Muslim nationalism (1996, p. 85, my translation). Bangladeshi researcher Shahnaj Husne Jahan's study, likewise, explores the "normative standard of national identity" in Bangladesh that "has repeatedly shifted its ground from Islam before 1971 to Bengali language and culture in 1971, and then back to Islam between 1977 and 1987 and now again back to Bengali language and culture from 2009 to date" (2019, p. 18).

The recent rise in sectarian politics in Bangladesh is inescapable, as the Bangladeshi performance practitioner and researcher Syed Jamil Ahmed outlines. The aspect of Ahmed's work that is most significant to my study is his insight into the wide-ranging apparatuses of theatre, politics, society, and identity in South Asia. According to Ahmed (2012), "Islamist militants began to execute acts of terrorism with the objective of establishing Islamic *hukumat* (rule) in line with the *sharia* [Islamic law]." These include, setting off bombs at *Pahela Boishakh* (first day of the Bangla calendar / Bangla New Year) celebrations in Dhaka, killing eight people in 2001; a grenade attack on the rally of the then leading opposition party in Bangladesh killing twenty-four people and injuring scores of others including the Awami League party chief and current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2004; and country-wide serial bombings at 459 locations that killed at least two people and injured 100 others in 2005.[17] Besides these violent attacks, the sectarian groups detonated bombs at the following places: a cultural evening hosted by the performance troupe associated with the Bangladesh Communist Party at Jessore in 1999, and many other instances, which left scores of people either dead, injured or terrorised.[18]

[17] The Awami League traces its history to the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan (DFAT, 2019, p. 26), and emphasises its role in the Independence of Bangladesh. It has traditionally been broadly secular, liberal, and in favour of relations with India.

[18] The many other examples of violent attacks include an assault on the Communist Party rally in Dhaka in 2001; the bombing of the party office of the leading opposition political party the Awami League in Narayanganj in 2001; an attack on the Awami League election rally in Bagerhat in 2001; an attack on the

A key quotation by Syed Jamil Ahmed, sums up the dominance of Islam in Bangladesh and the inextricable relationship between the two in national identity today. He cites the then Bangladeshi member of parliament Delwar Hossain Sayeedee from the Jamaat-e-Islami party (now serving a life sentence, having been charged with crimes against humanity committed during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971) who addressed the crowds during a *waz mahfil* performance at the Chittagong City Parade Ground in December 2002:

> We must never forget that our primary identity is that we are Muslims. Then we are Bangladeshis. But we are not Bengalis. Hindus of West Bengal also speak the Bengali language. A Bengali may be a Hindu. But we are not Hindus. And so we are not Bengalis but Bangladeshis. But above all that, we are Muslims. (quoted in Ahmed, 2006b, p. 74)[19]

Sayeedee sums up here the manner in which local Bangalee identity must be secondary to Muslim identity in Bangladesh today. Secularism, for now, is sidelined.

The State Failure of Secularism

As I have already stated, Awami League has shifted gradually from its position on secularism when Bangladesh was founded, to become an increasingly Islamic state. This was begun with General Ershad's regime and continues to today, despite legislation and parliamentary promises. The Awami League befriended religious fundamentalist parties in order to oust its arch-rival the Bangladesh Nationalist Party from power in the post-1991 years (Majumder, 2016, p. 44). Over the years, prioritising Islam in politics has strongly

Awami League meeting in Sunamganj in 2001; on a cinema in Satkhira in 2002; on four cinemas in Mymensingh in 2002; a second blast at the shrine of the Sufi saint Shah Jalal in Sylhet in 2004; an attack on two cinemas in Sylhet in 2004; a militant attack at Holey Artisan restaurant in Dhaka City, which killed twenty-two people in 2016 (Ahmed, 2012; *The Daily Star*, 2004; *South Asian Terrorism Portal*, 2021).

[19] Translated by Syed Jamil Ahmed.

shaped religious identity and violence in everyday life in Bangladesh. Shehabuddin provides the following interpretation of recent activities led by the Awami League, describing it as a known centre-left party that "initially articulated a platform based on socialism, secularism (non-communalism), Bangalee nationalism, and close relations with India and the Soviet Union, but over the time, […] has embraced economic liberalisation, emphasised its commitment to Islam, and strengthened relations with the United States" (2016, p. 18). The Awami League government's negotiation with the Hefajat-e-Islam, which commonly held to be an extremist group, is an example. The leaders of Hefajat-e-Islam were invited to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's office *Gana-Bhabhan* (People's House), on the occasion when declared that *madrasah* (Islamic religious educational institution) Quranic religious education was equivalent to general education. Moreover, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received the honour of the title *Qawmi Jononi* (Qawmi Mother) at the *Shukrana Mahfil* (Thanksgiving Rally) on 3 November 2018 in Dhaka, organised by Al-Haiyatul Ulya Lil-Zami'atil Qawmiya Bangladesh in association with Hefajat-e-Islam (*The Daily Star*, 2018).[20] It is clear from these examples that the Awami League courts religious extremists for popularity, but this is at the expense of non-Muslim, non-Bangalee and other minorities, who are increasingly marginalised in Bangladeshi society.

Capitalising on a record victory in the 2008 parliamentary elections, that secured 230 out of 300 seats, the Awami League started to express its willingness to take necessary constitutional steps to reinstate secularism. In 2010, the Bangladesh Supreme Court declared the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution in 1979 and the martial law regulations issued between August 15, 1975 and April 6, 1979 by the first military dictator General Ziaur Rahman, to be illegal. "Despite ongoing Islam-using opposition from anti-secular camps, the Awami League government, […] reintroduced secularism as one of the state principles,

[20] *Qawmi* derives from the Arabic word *Qawm*, meaning a community of people.

through the Fifteenth Amendment of the constitution on July 3, in 2011" (Majumder, 2016, pp. 43-44). Nonetheless, at the time of writing, the state religion of Bangladesh remains Islam.

To understand the current ruling party's political position, the US Department of State's *Report on International Religious Freedom: Bangladesh* can be cited by way of just one very stark example. The report shows that, "[i]n April 2017, the government announced it would provide approximately 76 billion BDT ($904.76 million) under a two-year project to construct madrasahs in every electoral constituency in the country." This support of the Awami League government for Islamic schools has been criticised by think tanks and considered as "a political tactic by the government to use religion to influence voters prior to national parliamentary elections in December [December 2018]" (US Department of State, 2018). In 2020 the same organisation's report says, although Islam is the state religion in the constitution, Bangladesh is a secular country (US Department of State, 2020). They sum up the fact that Bangladesh is officially a secular state whereas, as the multiple examples I provide here demonstrate, the everyday practices of the state are far from this ideal.

National Identity and Violence Today

In his book *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny*, the philosopher Amartya Sen states, "identity politics can certainly be mobilized very effectively in the cause of violence. And yet it can also be effectively resisted through a broader understanding of the richness of human identities" (2011, p. 5). The oppositional directional movements that I have described so far in this chapter, towards dominant Bangla language and culture, Islam and nationalist homogeneity on the one hand; and towards the respect for equality, the celebration of diversity and the commitment towards inclusion of people from all different ethnic, religious, gender and other backgrounds on the other, provide the context, setting,

structure, backdrop and situation for my Practice Research project, *Performing the Nation: Identity, Violence and The Search for Plurality in Bangladesh.*

A Brief History of the Term "Nation"

The term "nation" was first used in the thirteenth century in Europe in order to demarcate students from various foreign countries who came to study in some of the oldest European universities. Students were divided into "nations" in the universities, based on their language and place of origin (Cornor, 1978). The movement of nationalism emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth century, alongside the emergence of nationalism on the other side of the Atlantic, spurred by American Revolution between 1775 and 1783, and the subsequent winning of American independence (Roberts, 1997; Bonwick and Wood, 1992).

"What is a Nation?" was an 1882 lecture by French historian Ernest Renan, who first conceptualised the nation state. Famously, he coined the statement, "[a] nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present" (2017, p. 19). However, Renan adds, "[y]et the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (p. 11). Here, Renan appears to warn that a nation brings its citizens together, sometimes at the expense of some of their individual specificities, which must be sacrificed. As I have already stated in relation to the Bangladeshi nation, individual ethnicities, cultures and religions have been subsumed into the increasingly sectarian Islamic state, imposed by successive governments. In South Asia, the term "nation" emerged some time later than the eighteenth century, in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, the Indian nationalist and independence activist Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) appealed "to a Hindu India, with its Sanskrit, Vedic, and Aryan culture, which invariably excluded Muslims and Sikhs from the new genealogical-cum-

religious nation" (Smith, 1986, p. 146). The idea of a Muslim state emerged later, in the early twentieth century.

In 1947, after nearly two centuries of British colonial rule, the colonisers transferred their power to two separate nation-states: India and Pakistan. The partition of British India and creation of Pakistan divided Bangla, so that one section of the Bangalee-language and culture-based community belonged to Pakistan, and the other section to India. The central motivation of the division was religion. Whereas in 1947 the *Adivasi* communities of the CHT were first included in Pakistan, after 1971 they subsequently belonged to Bangladesh. The British-determined political boundaries of India did not reflect the theory of nation provided at the end of the twentieth century by, for example the British historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith. Smith describes the nation as a "named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historic memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (1991, p. 14). In the context of Bangladesh, religious and ethnic minority communities, for instance Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and the *Adivasi*, struggle to survive and to achieve their "common rights". Tripura (2020 and 2015), Ahmed (2016b, 2012 and 2008), Guhathakurta (2016), Riaz (2018 and 2016), and Momen (1996) articulate the socio-political context of Bangladesh, where more than one tenth of the total population is from an ethnic or religious minority, and where these minorities are oppressed by the state and majoritarian norms.

Immediately after the partition of India in 1947, Dhaka University-based intellectuals, poets and playwrights advocated for Bangalee nationalism. Bangalee nationalism incorporated cultural nationalism, in other words pride in the Bangla language and cultural practices, which were reinforced with economic nationalism, in other words financial autonomy. Bangladeshi political sociologist Habibul Haque Khondker explains that this was later supplemented with political nationalism (2016, p. 33).

Critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha provides one of the most important postcolonial problematisations of the notion of nation. Given that Bhabha originates in the Indian sub-continent, his theories are particularly pertinent to the Bangladeshi context. The following passage captures the essence of Bhabha's ideas: "[n]ations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical" (2017, p. 1). Bhabha's notion of the nation as a "narration", or an image or imagination "in the mind's eye", resonates with my conceptualisation of national identities as a "performance": both are artifices, or ideological constructs.

Shortly after Renan's conceptualisation of the nation, the world-renowned Bangalee poet Rabindranath Tagore rejected the notion of the nation not just as an artificial constructed, but as a "Western" construct, on the basis that it is founded on "the spirit of conflict and conquest", and on the absence of social co-operation. Rabindranath, a polymath, poet, playwright, composer, and artist from the Indian subcontinent, urged his readers "never to follow the West in its acceptance of the organised selfishness of Nationalism as its religion", and denounced nationalism by asserting that "the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation" (1918, pp. 21-39). As Rabindranath states in the epigraph to this thesis, "[i]t is our mission to face the race problem and prove our humanity by dealing with it in the fullest truth. Until we fulfil our mission all other benefits will be denied us" (1918, p. 4). For him, the issue of racial or ethnic identity, underscored mainly by the British colonial forces, must be replaced by a common humanity, a "mission" that has guided my Practice Research.

I have examined the history of the term "nation", and the manner in which it has been awkwardly applied to Bangladesh, grouping together a diversity of ethnicities and religions under the same flag. With reference to both Bhabha and Rabindranath, I have also associated the notion of "imagination", "narration" or "performance" with nation. From an

anthropological perspective, Benedict Anderson explores the origins of nationalism in his book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson also contributes to the concept of the nation as "imagined", defining "nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group." He proposes a definition of the nation: "it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation", for instance Bangladesh, "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them" (2015, pp. 5-7). In the case of Bangladesh for instance, communities in the northern and south-eastern parts of Bangladesh have little interaction with each other ally. The means of production of various communities – Bangalee Hindus, Bangalee Muslims, *Adivasis* and others, their respective languages, food, education systems, socio-religious rituals surrounding marriage, birth, and death, religious festivals, daily rituals at home and in workplaces, meetings and rallies held by social, cultural, and political parties, and so on (Ahmed, 2016b) – are neither widely celebrated in the arts, notably in theatre, nor accurately portrayed in educational textbooks. What can be seen in Bangladeshi theatre and education is partial and mostly determined by the majoritarian schema. For this reason, members of various communities do not know each other or each other's cultures. Moreover, the notion of nation is, as Anderson reminds us, "imagined as *limited*" because even the largest nation "has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (p. 7, Anderson's italics). Anderson mentions, in addition to his own notion of "imagination", the philosopher Ernest Gellner's concept of the "invention" of the nation. Gellner argues, "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (1983, p. 56). The fact is, as Renan says, "nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end" (2017, p. 20). The narration of the nation is an on-going process which paradoxically means that "nationalism" is a fluid construction – "always in flux, un-finished, reforming and re-

formulating" (Ahmed, 2016b, p. 7). For example, Bangladesh has seen British India, Pakistan, and sovereign Bangladesh shaping its various identities within only a quarter of a century, which Murshid explains, is, "[…] twice forging new states out of old territories, each time involving the need to redefine the nation, nationhood and national boundaries" (1997, p. 10). To borrow the terms of both Gellner and Anderson, nations are invented or imagined, and are subsequently reinvented and reimagined. Therefore, while Bangladesh is currently a sectarian and Muslim-dominant state, it bears the potential to evolve and transform, as it has in the past.

Now that I have identified the concept of the nation as an artificial construct, and entity that is invented, imagined and reimagined, or that is narrated in the words of Bhabha, I describe the relationship between the nation and performance, or theatricality. Theatre scholar Sophie Nield examines the key concepts of a number of important European thinkers in relation to "the 'theatricality' of the border" (2006, p. 61). Following one of these thinkers, the philosopher Etienne Balibar (2002), "the border 'constructs and performs' difference applies not only to the identification and delimiting of the feared 'other', but of the citizen, the subject himself or herself" (Nield, 2006, p. 67). According to Balibar, Nield implies, nations construct and perform national identities, and they also construct and attribute roles to the "feared" other, foreigner or non-national. Nield goes on to suggest that the border is a "supposedly concrete and visible entity", but itself, is "vulnerable", "'porous' and 'permeable'". Moreover, "this patchwork of superimpositions, mistakes and gaps speaks more of the lines that are imagined", arbitrary and artificial (2006, p. 68). Like Bhabha, Gellner and Anderson, Nield describes the border and the nation as "artificial" and "imagined". In addition, she highlights its porosity and vulnerability, since it is a created, constructed entity, and not a fixed, immutable and eternal essence. Neild's study goes so far as to say that "[the border] 'appears', or is produced, wherever the encounter, the narrative or

story of movement takes place. It is the site at which identity (or its lack) is staged, enacted and performed" (pp. 68-69). Therefore, borders and frontiers are not only formed by the checkpoints, walls and fences between nations, but also when citizens from those nations encounter or confront each other. This concept is particularly useful for understanding how the different ethnicities and religions within Bangladesh, while supposedly contained within the borders of one nation, can perform separation and sectarianism when they confront each other. Continuing with the development of the relationship between borders, nations and theatricality, theatre scholar Nadine Holdsworth's *Theatre & Nation* provides elucidating arguments. Holdsworth states that it is important to be clear from the start that "there is simply no consensus on what nations are, what drives nationalism or how we should define national identity" (2010, p. 9). Like the philosophers and social scientists to whom I have already referred, for Holdsworth the nation is not an essential entity. Rather, the nation is a political, social, and cultural production of meaning. She determines the "the multifaceted approaches" that inform our understanding of "our place in the world, our sense of belonging and our identity as individuals" (*ibid*).

From Nation to Nationalism

Turning my attention from nation to nationalism, I refer to philosopher Hans Kohn, who states that, "[n]ationalism is a state of mind permeating the large majority of the people and claiming to permeate all its members; it recognises the nation-state as the ideal form of political organisation and the nationality as the source of all creative cultural energy and economic well-being" (1961, p. 16). This description of a "state of mind" that permeates "the large majority of the people" and "claims to permeate all its members", is particularly pertinent to Bangladesh, where the majority government currently imposes Islam as the dominant religious and cultural ideology, and where religious and ethnic minorities are

marginalised. With specific reference to nationalism in Bangladesh, Serajul Islam Choudhury, a literary critic, discusses the subject in *Jatiotabader Swapna O Duswapna* (*The Dream and Nightmare of Nationalism*). Choudhury admits, "we all are nationalists." However, the fundamental question he raises is, "who makes up the nation? Are both poor and rich people to be included? Or only the rich?" (2011, p. 30, my translation). He adds, "the first Constitution of Bangladesh was nationalist because the objective of the constitution was to achieve the people's freedom. But we shifted from this objective." In addition, he defines two types of nationalism: "progressive and regressive". Bangladeshi nationalism was first progressive and necessary, in order to gain emancipation from Pakistan in 1971, as Indian nationalism before it had been necessary, in order to gain independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Progressive nationalism stands for the oppressed, for people's freedom. Regressive nationalism, on the other hand, according to Choudhury, agitates people in the name of the nation and in the interest of the few, who are in power. To sum up, he explains, "nationalism is a desire. It might be a desire of the opportunist or a desire of the endangered. Sometimes both might be united. However, this unity is temporary." Choudhury contextualises this idea: "Pakistan was created based on a nationalist desire that was impermanent. But the *Muktijuddho* was the desire of an endangered people" (pp. 31-44, my translation). In other words, Pakistan separated from India because of an ideology that sought to create a separate territory for Indian Muslims. While this might have appeared in some respects as an ideal because Muslims could then be protected from Hindu domination, in fact the Muslim nationalism was fleeting and impermanent, and did not serve to unite Muslims from West and East Pakistan. For this reason, Bangladesh separated in 1971. The nation is thus an ephemeral and complex entity and the nationalism that it projects is equally shifting. This means that both nation and nationalism are vulnerable to be co-opted to create profit for the dominant and dominating, at the expense of the vulnerable and disadvantaged. At the

same time, the impermanence means, as my project seeks to demonstrate, that the parameters of the "nation" can be drawn and redrawn, narrated and re-narrated, performed and reperformed, in order to create a fluid, dynamic community of identities.

Almost without exception, *Adivasi* minority communities in Bangladesh have experienced social and institutional discrimination since independence from Pakistan failed to give birth to a genuine "People's Republic". The Bangladeshi scholar Bhumitra Chakma points out that Bangladesh had been founded as an idealised nation state, where diversities were ignored in order to create homogeneity. As a consequence, for example, according to Chakma, "the process of marginalization of the hill people accelerated after East Pakistan seceded and became the independent state of Bangladesh. […] In 1972, when the constitution was being drafted, a delegation of hill people met the prime minister" and placed four demands including autonomy of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (2016, p. 307). Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rejected the demands and advised them to forget their ethnic identities and merge with Bangalee nationalism. "In the parliament, the hill people's parliamentary representative, M. N. Larma, made a sustained argument against this assimilationist attitude and policy of the government" (p. 308). Larma asserted:

> You cannot impose your national identity on others. I am a Chakma, not a Bengali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh − Bangladeshi. You are also Bangladeshi, but your national identity is Bengali. … They [hill people] can never be Bengali. (Bangladesh National Assembly Debates, 1974, cited in Chakma 2016, p. 308)

Since this early period of Bangladeshi history, the obligation to assimilate into dominant Bangladeshi culture, language and religion has never diminished. On the contrary, it has grown.

Bangladeshi political scientist Taj I. Hashmi discusses "Bangladeshi nationalism" in contrast to "Bangalee nationalism", which was promoted by General Zia, who took power when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated: "one may argue that 'Bangladeshi' is inclusive of the different non-Bengali minorities; nevertheless, the term highlights the Muslim identity of the country, differentiating its Muslim majority Bengalis from their Hindu majority counterparts in West Bengal in India" (2004, p. 35). Therefore, Bangalee nationalism is an exclusionary kind of nationalism, that does not embrace the diversity of ethnicities and religions within the geographical area of Bangladesh.

To give an illustration of state-backed homogeneity, the Human Rights Report (HRR) 2013 on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh, and the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) 2004 study can be consulted. These studies demonstrate that the Bangladesh government's policies of establishing "a homogeneous Bangali Muslim society by eroding the ethnic identity of the indigenous Jumma people provide a continuing catalyst for the conflict in the CHT" (Punday and Jamil, 2009, p. 1057). Between 1979 and 1983, about five hundred thousand "illegal settlers were implanted into the CHT." Moreover, the settlers were provided incentives, such as land ownership of the indigenous communities' property, rations, and other monetary benefits (*ibid*). At a conference on Civil Society, Human Rights and Minorities in Bangladesh, Ushathan Talukder, Secretary for Political Affairs of Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti, presented the increasing trend of non-ethnic Jumma people in the CHT demography. Following the latest available statistics, Talukder (2005) shows that the ethnic Jumma population, which comprised 98% of the total population in 1947, declined to 51% in 2003. Simultaneously, the Bangalee Muslim population was around 2% in 1947, but rose to 49% in 2003. The HRR (2013) study shows two different figures for the *Adivasi* population in Bangladesh. One is the official census of 2011 that shows the total number is

around 1.6 million. Another is the *Adivasi* community statistics that claim their total population to be over three million.

On the subject of Bangladesh's International Day of World Indigenous Peoples, Larma posits that indigenous people are being ignored by the state. He presents a recent statistic that shows "the indigenous people are being forced to leave the country due to human rights violations, threats, violence against women, land grabbing, insults and humiliation" (2018, p. 5). Therefore, nationalism in Bangladesh is driving minorities into hiding or exile.

In 2011, the Bangladesh Parliament passed the Fifteenth Amendment to the constitution, Article 6 of which describes all people of Bangladesh, irrespective of their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, as "Bangalee", while Article 23A stipulates the terms "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities" for ethnic minorities (Bangladesh Constitution, 2015). Therefore, there is a paradox that on the one hand the minorities are mentioned, but on the other they are all subsumed into "Bangalee" culture, ideology and nationalism. Thus, Hana Shams Ahmed, the former coordinator of the International CHT Commission, states, "Recognition in the constitution is only a symbolic representation of the political marginalization of the indigenous people by the Bangladeshi nation-state" (2019, p. 73). The political marginalisation by the Bangalee hegemons is both the result of internal Muslim colonisation and the production of Bangalee ideologies and physical force and intimidation. Ahmed argues:

> By exercising power through overt coercion and torture, limiting public dialogue and debate, and manipulating the thoughts of subjugated peoples, the majoritarian narrative of the nation has emerged as a neo-colonial tool mobilized for the continuation and reinforcement of centuries-old discrimination, stigmatization,

marginalization, pathologization, criminalization, and romanticizing mind-set against the ethnic communities. (2012)

Ahmed's study summarises the geopolitical weight of sectarian politics and its current domination in Bangladesh, saying, "it is time to reconsider if the Bengali-speaking people's mentality has already become like the autocratic regime of Pakistan who once tried to force the Bengalis to give up their own language and the Bengalis take pride in rebelling the effort of imposing" (2012).

Based on these theories of nation and nationalism, my study explores their contemporary relevance by placing them in the context of the crisis of identity that Bangladesh faces, in order to question, interrogate and challenge the homogenous monologue with which Bangladeshi identity is currently constructed.

Bangladeshi Nationhood Today

The following two opposing political protests illustrate the problem of national identity and violence in Bangladesh today. The first was the Shahbag Protest Movement organised by the *Ganajagaran Mancha* (Platform for the People's Uprising) at Shahbag Square in Dhaka on 5 February 2013 (Murshid, 2016, pp. 52-60). This protest was formed in reaction to the life sentence handed down to the topmost war criminal and "Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami" leader Abdul Quader Mollah by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT).[21] Bangladeshi political activist and writer Badruddin Umar points out, "the protesters suspected that this judgment has a reflection of a hidden collaboration between the pro-Liberation War

[21] "The INTERNATIONAL CRIMES (TRIBUNALS) ACT, 1973 (ACT NO. XIX OF 1973) was enacted by the sovereign parliament of Bangladesh to provide for the detention, prosecution, and punishment of persons responsible for committing genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other crimes under international law" (ICT-1, 2015).

political party Awami League government and the anti-Liberation War Islamic political party Jamaat-e-Islami" (2014, p. 73, my translation).

Navine Murshid, widely known for her work on political violence in Bangladesh, shows in her study that the movement at Shahbag Square initially attracted mostly Dhaka-based bloggers and online activists, and later Dhaka University-based cultural activists, artists and students from diverse backgrounds, belonging to both the Bangalee community, and several *Adivasi* communities (2016, p. 56). Moreover, the protesters on the street were united to a certain "narration" of Bangalee and *Adivasi* cultural identities in "their demand for the capital punishment of the convicted war criminals, the ban of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party from politics and the boycott of institutions affiliated with the party" (Sajen, 2014).

Importantly, activist A (anonymised to protect their identity), states in an in-person interview with me that "the movement was not well organised like a political organisation, it was a movement where people participated spontaneously" (2020).[22] When A was asked about one of the slogans that displayed Bangalee identity only, despite the participation of the *Adivasi* communities, A answered, "[w]e followed the trend of popular slogans without thinking deeply about their impact. As soon as the frontline protesters realised that the slogan did not include the *Adivasi* communities, we changed it" (*ibid*). According to A, the slogan that dominated the movement at the very beginning (5-7 February 2013) was:

> তুমি কে আমি কে
> বাঙ্গালী বাঙ্গালী
> (who are you, who am I,
> Bangalee, Bangalee)

[22] A is used to anonymise the interviewee.

And, the slogan announced from 7 February 2013 is as follows:

> তুমি কে আমি কে
>
> আদিবাসী বাঙ্গালী
>
> (who are you, who am I,
>
> Adivasi, Bangalee)

Murshid suggests that "the Shahbag movement opened the floodgates and revealed once again, on a mass scale and with all its contradictions, what the nation as a whole had repressed for four decades" (2016, p. 52). This was the biggest spontaneous movement in Bangladeshi history, beginning at Shahbag Square on 5 February 2013 and continuing for 90 days, gathering an enormous number of pro-Independence supporters. Ahmed (2015) suggests that the movement spread like "wildfire" across the country. Murshid analyses the *Ganajagaran Mancha* as a "festival of the oppressed", where the protestors peacefully showcased performing arts and fine arts including theatre, art, songs, poetry, film screening, painting, beautiful installations of candles and flowers on the streets. "This blogger-initiated culturally enriched movement enabled a huge online presence with people posting Twitter and Facebook updates every second, communicating what was happening at the *chattar* [square]" (2016, p. 56, Murshid's italics). This was not only a cultural display of creativity, but it also had political aims and demands, to enhance the ideas of secularism that had been erased from the constitution by the military rulers between 1975 and 1990.

While, problematically, this movement was exclusively urban, whereas sixty-three per cent of Bangladesh's total population is rural (The World Bank, 2019), it was nonetheless a significant movement.

Following Schechner's study of performance in everyday life, it can be said that this movement was performed "to make or change identity" as well as "to foster community" (2002, p. 39). Indeed, the movement led to a change in the law regarding the plaintiff's

appeal against the verdict. Consequently, the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh hanged Abdul Quader Mollah and several other leaders who were accused of crimes against humanity during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971. While the death penalty is of course controversial and by some groups is considered to be the ultimate infringement of human rights, it is legal in Bangladesh. Given the fact that these warlords, supported by Pakistan Army, had been responsible for the murder of countless Bangalees, their punishment was considered, rightly or wrongly, just by members of the *Ganajagaran Mancha* movement.

In reaction to these verdicts and sentences, Jamaat-e-Islami called a series of strikes, and violence erupted across the country. From the beginning of the war crimes trial, Jamaat-e-Islami had performed attacks on minority communities, as reports by journalists and independent researchers revealed (Sajen, 2014; DFAT, 2019). Jamaat-e-Islami also published largely fabricated news and photos representing the *Ganajagaran Mancha* protesters as anti-Islamic, or else atheist. They therefore both intimidated the protesters, and spread false and defamatory information about them, according to these national and international witnesses.

The second example is offered by the rallies organised by the Hefajat-e-Islam, the largest radical Islamic movement group of *Qawmi madrasah* (Islamic religious educational institution) launched in the port city Chittagong in 2010, at Shapla Square Dhaka on 6 May 2013. According to press reports, the group served notice to the Awami League government, "demanded capital punishment of the leaders of Shahbag movement [*Ganajagaran Mancha*] accusing them of demeaning Islam" (*The Daily Star*, 2014), and launched a thirteen-point charter (BBC*,* 2013).

According to BBC Bangla Editor Sabir Mustafa, the thirteen-point charter made the following demands:

- enactment of an anti-blasphemy law with provision for the death penalty
- exemplary punishment to all bloggers and others who 'insult Islam'

- cancellation of the country's women's development policy
- a ban on erecting sculptures in public places
- a ban on the mixing of men and women in public
- a ban on candlelit vigils
- ending what they call 'shameless behaviour and dress'
- declaring the reformist Ahmadiyas as 'non-Muslims'. (Mustafa, 2013a)

In order to hold onto their political platform, the senior leaders of the major opposition political parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jatiya Party, attended the rally at Shapla Square. They expressed solidarity with the sectarian groups, with the intention to persuade the crowds. The Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefajat-e-Islam movements thus enhanced the "narration" of identity in Bangladesh, since they succeeded in influencing more mainstream and less extremist parties, which tried to appease them by surrendering to their Islamist ideologies. Khondker has made a vital contribution to the understanding of rising sectarian politics in Bangladesh. He states, "the veneer of secular Bengali culture was almost lost that day. Bangladesh was exposed as a divided nation" (2016, p. 29). The government's joint law enforcement operation in Dhaka dispersed the Hefajat-e-Islam rally from Shapla Square at midnight. Simultaneously, the *Ganajagaran Mancha* stage was demolished from Shahbag Square. However, the Awami League government had already aligned themselves with the Hefajat-e-Islam demands.

To sum up, the *Ganajagaran Mancha* (Platform for the People's Uprising) movement and Hefajat-e-Islam rally had confronting social roles with two completely different political notions of identity: the former championed language-based Bangalee cultural identity and cultural diversity; and the latter endorsed religious-based Islamic national identity. Both were

active on the streets with their own vision to shape, as Anderson writes in relation to nationhood more generally, their own "imagined political community" (2015, p. 6).

I have taken time to provide contextual information to the formation of the Bangladeshi nation, and its twinning with Islam, which has become dominant and exclusive in recent decades. The aim of my Practice Research has been to propose an alternative conceptualisation of identity, which draws on notions of hybridity, plurality and cosmopolitanism, rather than monotheism and nationalism.

Questions of Identity, Plurality and Hybridity

In order to understand the concept of identity as a process rather than an essence, I borrow from Hall's studies. Hall explains, "[identity] is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable positions" (1986, p. 46), it is fluid and in constant flux. Following Hall, Ghanaian researcher Ekua Ekumah-Asamoah explains the concept of identity that is "informed by various and sometimes contradictory social practices. We construct our identity in relation to and within the context of where we are" (2015, p. 15). Thus, states Hall, "any identity is more of a process of becoming, rather than being" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Similarly, Bhabha, to whom I have already referred in relation to the narration or myth-making upon which nations are founded, and who writes around the same time as Hall, states, "[i]dentity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (1994, p. 51). Ahmed, contextualising the notion of "identity" within Bangladeshi society, suggests, "[w]e are always more and less than a woman, a man, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Bangladeshi, a Pakistani, an Indian, a Taliban, a Bengali, a Bihari, a Chakma, a proletariat, a capitalist, [...]." "We are", Ahmed explores further, "always submerged in a process of becoming, always on a line of fluctuation, always separated by a gap from this or that axiom constituting the category of a nation" (2011b, p. 279). Identity is networked, and

continuously reconstructed. With reference to Bangladesh's political context, social analyst Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq argues in his book *Rajnitite Dhormo Motadorsho O Sangskriti* (*Religion, Ideology and Culture in Politics*), that the cultural identity of an individual is to be found in their activity and personality, and the cultural identity of a nation is to be found in the people's activities and collective personalities. Thus, Haq points out, "national culture is constructed by thinking, actions, production and creation of the people of a nation" (2016, pp. 21-30, my translation). Each of these postcolonial thinkers, each one from a former British colony, considers identity, whether national, ethnic, religious, gender or other, to be the product of an ever-evolving process, and not a fixed essence.

Both Hall and Bhabha describe plural, shifting identities as "hybrid". Hall defines his own experience, "not by essence or purity, but by a recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' that lives with and through, not despite, difference; but *hybridity*" (1994, p. 235, Bhabha's italics). Situated, like Hall's writings, within a postcolonial tradition, Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) explores questions of identity by also developing the concept of hybridity and its related ideas of what he calls the "third space" and "the in-between". These notions have "gained considerable currency as a counter-language to the monolithic constructedness of national identity […]" (Maitland, 2016, p. 17). With these terms, Bhabha promotes, as academic Sarah Maitland argues, "a politics of cultural encounter where new forms of identity are advanced to contradict hegemonic representations constructed by colonial authorities" (pp. 17-18). According to Bhabha, the concept of the "third space" encapsulates the space for hybridity. It is this interstitial space betwixt the ex-coloniser and the ex-colonised that Bhabha sees as disruptive of oppressive structures and practices. Medievalist Zrinka Stahuljak explains Bhabha's ideas by defining hybridity "as the site as resistance and negotiation, fusion, and bricolage" (2010, p. 256). "Hybridity is also the space where all binary oppositions and antagonisms", typical

of colonial ideology and patriarchy – for instance civilised and savage, self and other, man and woman – , "cease to hold" (Buden and Nowotny, 2009, p. 201).

In my study, I choose to adopt the term "plurality" as well as the term "hybridity". J.S. Furnivall observes in his study of Burma and Java in 1948, "the medley of peoples – European, Chinese, Indian and native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine." He goes on to show that in a plural society, each group has the possibility to maintain "its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas, and ways" (1948, p. 304). Furnivall states, "[t]here is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit" (*ibid*). Furnivall's description of Burma and Java is very apt for understanding Bangladesh today, where different ethnicities and religious groups live side-by-side, coming together predominantly for commerce, for instance at markets. Four decades later, the Norwegian social anthropologist Frederik Barth echoes Furnivall, demonstrating that the idea of a "plural society" is still relevant. Barth (1986) describes a plural society that combines ethnic differences, economic interdependence lying at the centre.

In Bangladesh, society is thus plural, given that there is such a diversity of religions and ethnicities. In addition, as Hall, Bhabha, Ahmed and other poststructuralist thinkers insist, all of these identities are "hybrid", shifting and fluid. Indeed, the noted Bangladeshi writer and folklorist Shamsuzzaman Khan states that plurality and hybridity are the basic elements of Bangladeshi society. He explains that Bangladeshi culture is based on plurality of different traditional myths and folk tales, rather than one single Bangalee or Muslim source. Khan thus describes plurality as the key characteristic of societal formation in Bangladesh. Finally, the notion of the "rhizomatic", derived from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's famous publication *A Thousand Plateaux*, can be added to the series of terms suited to describing Bangladeshi society. Ahmed employs this term in order to argue that, far

from having one monolithic and single identity, Bangladesh must capitalize on its potential for networks or rhizomes, "that continually evoke and erase […] totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (2011b, p. 280). The "imagined communities" of which Anderson writes must, according to Ahmed, be made up of a plurality of identities, all interacting and interpenetrating. Ahmed seeks, "trails and errors, to channelize their re-presenting the community to highlighting difference and hybridity, unsettling norms and limits, by means of infinite lines of flight leading to deterritorializations" (*ibid*). Borrowing again from Deleuze and Guattari, Ahmed proposes the notion of a nation that is "deterritorialized", in other words, that is unmoored from essential categories and fixed, immovable identities. For me, Nadine Holdsworth aptly brings together the concepts of "plurality" and "hybridity" in ways that succinctly reflect the dynamics of national identity in Bangladesh. In her book *Theatre & Nation* Holdsworth also accounts for the impact of migration and globalisation on the nation. Using ideas from Bhabha (1990), she presents "the ambivalent nature of the nation that is subject to competing discourses, change and periods of progress, regression and stasis". Thus, "the reality of the nation is reliant on its impurity, its ability to accommodate the mixing and blurring of cultures that make up the contemporary nation through migration, exile, transnationalism and globalisation, which leads to the presence of hybridised identities characterised by splitting, doubling and mixing" (2010, p. 22).

Cosmopolitanism

Plurality, hybridity and the rhizome are, for me, all encapsulated in the notion of "cosmopolitanism", that I have used as an overarching dynamic in order to conceive of the Bangladeshi nation, and the ways in which I represent this nation in my Practice Research.

With regard to cosmopolitanism, as elsewhere in my thesis, I refer both to international postcolonial scholars and also to thinkers from Bangla region, Bangladesh and their diasporas, who display unique insights into the specificities of the Bangladeshi context. Here, I employ the theories of postcolonial literary scholar Timothy Brennan (2000) and the greatest Bangalee poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1918). In contrast to the rise of nationalism, both contribute to my discussion of the performance of national and international identity, with their discussions of cosmopolitanism. Around a century separate the theories of Rabindranath and Brennan. The former's approach is poetic and philosophical, and acknowledges, as Ahmed (2011c) illustrates, "the necessity of being anchored in inherited tradition and at the same time a line of flight in humanity". In other words, Rabindranath embraces both his native, local heritage and traditions, and the whole of humanity, on a global, international, cosmopolitan scale. The latter's interdisciplinary critical cultural study, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, as the title suggests, is "at home", not within one single community, ethnicity, religion or nation, but in the entire "world". In the editorial note to Brennan's book is provided by one of the foundational figures of postcolonial studies, along with Homi Bhabha, Edward W. Said:

> [Brennan] reveals how the transformation of the global economy, the dependence of new nations, the hybridity of national culture has given rise to a new form of cosmopolitanism that necessitates plastic, dynamic interpretations of such things as the publishing industry, local traditions and markets as they interact with media conglomerates, critical theory, and the literary career. (Said, 1997, back cover)

"Plasticity", "dynamism" and "interpretation" are notions that I have already set out in my approach to Bangladeshi identity, since they indicate the fluidity,

plurality and hybridity inherent in the nation. Brennan broadens out these notions to a supra-national level, where they denote dynamism and fluidity on an international scale.

While Brennan's argument is certainly helpful to my study, he focuses mainly on the US context. Therefore, Rabindranath enables me to situate my arguments specifically in the context of Bangladesh. In *In The Way to Unity*, he writes:

> I have come to feel that the mind, which has been matured in the atmosphere of a profound knowledge of its own country and of the perfect thoughts that have been produced in that land, is ready to accept and assimilate the cultures that come from other countries. (1996, p. 467)

Like Brennan, Rabindranath Tagore juxtaposes the national with the international, tradition with global commerce and exchange, introspection with outlook.

Saranindranath Tagore, in his treatment of Rabindranath Tagore's cosmopolitan position, makes the claim that the poet "is not derived from a conception of reason that in its universality always tends toward abstractions; rather, it is dependent upon reason's articulation of the universal through an engagement with the local" (2008, p. 1077). Saranindranath highlights the fact that Rabindranath Tagore's pride in local heritage and culture is far from nationalist or myopic. Rabindranath Tagore's politico-philosophical writings highlight his constant "quest of the polivocality of the other", and in a letter to his English friend C. F. Andrews, he writes, "whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly become ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own"

(quoted in Saranindranath, 2008, p. 1078). *Avant la lettre*, Rabindranath's writings point to the discipline of international politics.

In order to bring my discussion of cosmopolitanism up to date, I finally turn to the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who acknowledges the "pluralistic nature of the world". However, Mouffe warns that cosmopolitanism, an idea that is "very fashionable and influential" (2005, p. 90). However, Mouffe's "issue" with the idea of cosmopolitanism is that it seeks to extend "liberal values: free trade and liberal democracy", which ultimately glorify "globalisation as bringing the benefits and virtues of capitalism to the whole world", thereby accepting the leadership of the USA and support from the IMF and the WTO (*ibid*). Instead, she proposes a "multipolar world order" in which "several autonomous regional blocs" exist in order to "provide the conditions for an equilibrium of forces among various large areas, instituting among them a new system of international law" (2005, p. 116).

An examination here of both Brennan and Rabindranath Tagore, and also of Mouffe, enables me to define cosmopolitanism as a dynamic that embraces plurality and hybridity on international scales, whilst being mindful that this dynamic is vulnerable to being co-opted by globalisation and capitalist market forces. Therefore, it is possible for me to follow Rabindranath Tagore's position and to examine the idea of humanity in opposition to the idea of nation (1918). In both my approach to Bangladeshi identity and nationhood, and to my own Practice Research, the idea of cosmopolitanism as conceived by Rabindranath Tagore, has guided me.

Chapter Two

The Importance of Theatre and Performance in the History and Formation of Identity in Bangladesh

Theatre activities play an important role in the history as well as the daily lives of Bangladesh, and have contributed crucially towards both national and other senses of identity. I shall now briefly address the notable performances and theatrical traditions that have interacted with Bangalee, the Bangladeshi nation and nationalism since the British colonial era.

There are ambivalent, paradoxical, and complementary genealogies to be traced, all of which have "imagined" or "narrated" or "performed" the nation in multiple ways. Whether as part of a postcolonial project in the reconstruction of the "collective imagination" or, on the other hand, as the creation of a new aesthetic, mirroring an emergent intercultural heterogeneity, or proposing intervention for social transformation, Bangladeshi performance has formed part of a vivid tableau of complex, shifting live spectacle in Bangladesh. This chapter will examine theatre and performance in Bangladesh both from the point of view of artistic practice, and as an agent for change.

Theatre movements in Bangladesh have provided a vibrant response to the colonial era (1757-1947), the Pakistan era (1947-1971), the *Muktijuddho* era (March-December 1971) and sovereign Bangladesh, that included the newly independent and war-torn Bangladesh (1972-1975), the military and quasi-military regime (1975-1990), and post-military "democratic" governments era (1991-2018), all of which I have alluded to in Chapter One. I now use this historical timeline in order to map the theatre practices that were taking place during each period. This history of Bangladeshi theatre is important in order for me to situate my own Practice Research and to demonstrate how my art draws from a long and rich heritage to which I am indebted.

Theatre During the Colonial Era (1757-1947)

Two examples are central to examining theatre activities in colonised Bangla: Dinbandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo) and Mukunda Das's *Swadeshi Jatra* (the performance related to anticolonial *Swadeshi Movement* in Bangla region). The former was the first play performed in Dhaka in 1861. "Dinbandhu Mitra", as Ahmed argues, "may claim to have inaugurated modernism in Bengali theatre". It was a "bourgeois drama in the European romanticist style", blending a realist story with formal experimentation (2016a, p. 272). Ahmed's study shows that *Nil Darpan* "initiated a heated public debate all over Bengal regarding the intolerable oppression of the indigo planters and marked the beginning of postcolonial resistance in Bengali theatre" (*ibid*). The latter, *Swadeshi Jatra* performances, was based on themes "such as colonial exploitation, patriotism, anti-colonial struggle, feudal and caste-based oppression" in early twentieth century Bengal (Ahmed, 2016c, p. 14), to protest the 1905 Bangla Partition which I detailed in Chapter One. It took part in the first Bangalee nationalist movement, which mainly involved "an economic strategy aimed at removing the British Empire from power and improving economic conditions in India. […] Strategies of the Swadeshi movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. […] It was the most successful of the pre-Gandhian movements" (Absar, 2014, p. 442). These plays, that showed an agrarian community, clearly criticised the colonial appropriation of land and land rights.

In response to the political movement behind the creative activities of Bangalee people and their theatre industry, the British administration implemented *The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876*, which was "an Act for the better control of public performances" of a play, pantomime, and any other public drama. Postcolonial Indian theatre scholar Rustom Bharucha states that it was, "expedient to empower the Government to prohibit public

dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious or obscene" (1993, pp. 21-23). The key aim of the Act was to keep the Bangalee activists in check.[23]

Theatre After Independence from British Colonial Rule (1947-1971)

Kolkata was the centre of the Bangalee urban elite theatre after Partition in 1947. The city was the centre of economic and political activity during the nineteenth century in India. However, after Partition, Dhaka gained significance as the urban cultural centre in the eastern part of the region.

According to Ahmed, "Bangladesh became deeply entangled with cultural nationalism" when Munier Choudhury's *Kabar* (*The Grave*) was performed in Dhaka Central Jail on 21 February 1953 (2016a, p. 274). Influenced by the theme of US playwright Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead*, Chowdhury's *Kabar* was directed by Sree Foni Chakrabarty and performed by the political prisoners for a group of spectators in the prison. The audience were all held together by their common identity as members of Communist Party and had come together to commemorate the crisis of 21 February 1952, which was the first major protest against Pakistani rule of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (Majumder, 2018b; Ahmed, 2016d; Biswas, 1988).

One might say that during this period there was both theatre protesting against Pakistan rule, and also other forms of performance, notably street protest and other cultural manifestation. In 1947, students in East Pakistan held meetings and demonstrations – themselves a kind of performance – and formed the Language Action Committee. As a result, in 1948, the governor-general of Pakistan addressed a large audience in Dhaka and announced that the Bangla language could be used in East Pakistan, but that "the state

[23] Surprisingly, after the Partition in 1947, the Act was not repealed in independent India and Pakistan, although it is no longer enforced in the way it was under British colonial rule. Instead, most of the states of the two respective countries have introduced their own amended versions with certain modifications.

language of Pakistan [would] be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead people is really the enemy of Pakistan. [...] Without one state language no nation can remain solidly together and function" (Schendel, 2013, p. 111). Looking back to the pre-independence period performing arts scene, particularly from 1947 to 1971, Ramendu Majumder, a Bangladeshi theatre-maker actively involved in Bangla language-based theatre practice since 1960s, examines the political environment of that period. In a public lecture, Majumder (2015) stated that, "[t]he theatre, music, dance and other elements of Bengali culture were not only discouraged but, in many cases, prohibited also in the name of religion by the then Pakistani rulers and their sycophants." After a series of movements and demonstrations, protestors confronted armed police. Many were injured and nine people were killed on 21 February 1952, the "crisis" I have already mentioned. In this context, the performance of *Kabar* in jail in 1953 carried a political importance. Therefore, both formal theatrical performance, and street performance in the form of demonstrations, were mobilised during this period, in the interests of political emancipation.

Ahmed (2011a) provides an extensive study of the history and development of language-based cultural identity and Islamic religious identity in Bangladesh since the Pakistan period. He suggests that while during the colonial period there were three spheres of influence – British, Hindu and Muslim – now, "there were two: one defined by religion based in the 'Pakistani' camp upholding Islamic and feudal values, and the other defined by language based in the 'Bengali' camp upholding the Bengali language and liberal democratic-humanistic values." His study illustrates that outside Dhaka, areas were upholding the "religious-based trend". This trend praised Islamic history via the performance of historical plays about the Muslim rulers of the Middle East, India and Bangla, and the independence struggle of Pakistan. On the other hand, Dhaka University-based productions mainly belonged to the "language-based nationalists' trend" (Ahmed, 2011a). It must be noted,

however, that no evidence demonstrates that the *Adivasi* were present in the pre-Independence Bangladeshi theatrical performances. Therefore, it was clear from the start, on examining theatrical performance, that the choice was between Muslim or Bangla-language dominance, or both, but that plurality and diversity were not evidently embraced in this brief period before the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country.

Theatre as Resistance During the *Muktijuddho* (March-December 1971)

The independence struggle for Bangladesh greatly influenced theatre-makers and their performances. According to Majumder (2015), theatre became a vibrant art form in the country during this period. Indeed, one could almost go so far as to say that the *Muktijuddho* "served as a treasury of never-ending wealth for Bangladeshi playwrights". The themes of many plays were based on the history as well as the impact of the liberation war. The history and the impact of the *Muktijuddho* were the themes of many plays since the independence of the country. "The sense of resistance was portrayed in plays which dealt with the subjects of fundamentalism, communalism, and social injustice." "Theatre is", Majumder explains further, "a strong weapon to fight against all these odds in our society. It is indeed a matter of pride that our theatre makers are socially committed and use their creativity in order to move towards a society free from all injustice and oppression" (2015). For example, when the country was in turmoil in 1971, with people were being brutally killed and tortured every day, the politically-committed theatre-makers incessantly performed their creative resistance in order to mark their emerging identity.

Ahmed's study reveals three wartime plays: *Biplobi Bangladesh* (*Revolutionary Bangladesh*), *Pratham Jatra* (*The First Journey*) and *Agacha* (*The Weeds*). *Biplobi Bangladesh* was written by Khairul Bashar, and "portrays a war-torn image of the country", described in graphic detail. "*Pratham Jatra* was written by Narawan Biswas, shows a

middleclass Bengali family, having fled from war-torn East Pakistan, passing their days in economic hardship in a refugee camp in India after their Indian relatives refused to shelter them". *Agacha*, a rod puppet performance, was a series of improvised skits featuring the victory of the *Muktijuddho* in 1971 (2006a, p. 70).

Many of the spontaneous performances of that period are unfortunately not documented. Their scripts or tangible evidence of their existence are either lost, or not preserved. However, they remain in the memory of those who saw and wrote about them, notably the theatre scholar Ahmed, on whose writings my study leans heavily (Bharucha, 1993). In addition, thanks to my archival research in Bangladeshi libraries, I have collected some evidence of the then emerging patriotic themes of Bangla plays, notably Bidyut Kar's *Bikkhubdho Bangla* (*Agitated Bangla*), performed on 24 March 1971. A group of young theatre-makers performed in a village named Raykail in the Sylhet region (Goswami, 2021). In addition, two open-air theatre productions named *Ebarer Songram* (*This Revolutionary War*) and *Swadhinotar Songram* (*The War of Independence*) written by Momtazuddin Ahmed, were staged in Chittagong in March 1971 (Uddin, 2013, pp. 132-145). Another example is provided by the fact that, right after the war began, a group of young Bangalee writers, singers, theatre-makers and recital artists joined *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (the Independent Bangla Radio Centre) based in Kolkata. With the help of the Indian Government, the artists regularly presented stories, songs and news, which was broadcasted all over Bangladesh during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971. According to artist-activist Kamal Lohani, Kalyan Mitra's *Jollader Dorbar* (*Court of Executioners*) was one of the popular radio drama series at that time (Lohani, 2021). Such theatre-maker-initiated movements are extremely important for an understanding of the challenges as well as other contemporary struggles of the soon-to-be-born nation, but have been long forgotten. Thanks to the

interviews I conducted and my archival research, I have been able to unearth these examples of the thriving resistant, activist theatre scene at the time.

Newly-Independent and War-Torn Bangladesh (1972-1975)

Notable plays include *Jay Din Faguno Din* (*Gone are the Spring Days*) by Milon Choudhury and *Subachan Nirbasone* (*Words in Exile*) and *Ekhon Duhsamay* (*Bad Times Now*) by Abduallah Al Mamun (Heera, 2018). The theatrical productions during this era mainly addressed the mixed feelings of frustration, deprivation, the black market and famine, which were condensed into the representation of the newly-independent, war-torn Bangladesh.

In the Post-Independence era, the theatre was one of the most high-spirited and effective forms of artistic expression in Bangladesh. Many non-profit and non-professional theatre groups were created all over the country, shaped by the Kolkata-based Group Theatre Movement. The regular staging of plays became a new phenomenon in the cultural life of Bangladesh. According to Ahmed, "[s]uch organizations, which produce plays entirely in Bengali, and which emphasize collective egalitarianism against the dominance of celebrity performers, began to emerge in the country in 1972, […]" (2016a, p. 272).

In an analysis of the post-Independence theatre movement of Bangladesh, South Asian theatre scholar Bishnupriya Dutta observes the national aspirations, identity, and the euphoria of Independence, which was explored by playwrights when the movement spread across the country. Dutta states, "[a] wide range of plays was produced from the early 1970s to the early 1980s reflecting politically sensitive issues related to the liberation war. [...] By the mid-1970s, other groups had come into being and taken on nationalist themes" (2007, p. 45). The post-independence period was one of nationalist pride in the newly established

Bangladesh, and also disappointment in the economic failure and the traumatic aftermath of the war.

The Military and Quasi-Military era (1975-1990)

On 19 November 1980, in reaction to the Bangladeshi military regime's political failure, to economic grief, socio-economic deprivation, restoration of the Islamic force and rising religious fundamentalism, a group of theatre makers formed Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation. They successfully spread their vision of a secular, plural Bangladesh across urban settings in the country through their non-profit theatre movement.

The dictatorial regime in Bangladesh was amply represented in theatre all around the country. Indeed, the expression *natak hok gono-manuser hatiar* ("Let the theatre be people's means of protest") indicates the importance of theatre as activism during this period.[24] For instance, street theatre was a vibrant expression for 1980s theatre-makers in Bangladesh.[25] Street plays performed in urban settings, which boldly expressed artists' ideological and political opinions against the military and quasi-military regimes. In 1980s, along with university students and political activists, theatre artists came out into the streets, joined the demonstrations, played an active role through performing numerous satirical, farcical and comedy plays based on the contemporary situation, and identified themselves as activists rather than the entertainment artists. This continued until a popular uprising and return to parliamentary democracy in 1990.

With the euphoria slowly receding during the 1980s as the autocratic and dictatorial rule increased, "a feeling of disillusionment gave way to a critical attitude that sought to explore in theatrical terms the political, philosophical, and psychological issues left shelved

[24] *natak hok gono-manuser hatiar:* "নাটক হোক গণমানুষের হাতিয়ার"; translated from Bangla by Farah Naz.
[25] *Poth-natak morcha* (Street Theatre Front) founded during the anti-dictatorship movement in the 1980s. *Bangladesh Poth-natak parisad* (Bangladesh Street Theatre Council), founded in 1992, is the largest theatre organisation in Bangladesh.

during the years of nationalist struggle when other problems had priority", as Dutta's study reveals (2007, p. 45). In addition, her study shows that plays by Bertolt Brecht were staged during this period. Close readings of the political subtext of the staging reveals that they provided astute reflections and interpretations of contemporary Bangladesh.

There were two other significant mass performance manifestations evidenced during this period: *Mukta Natak* (*Liberated Theatre Movement*) and *Gram Theatre Movement* (*Village Theatre Movement*).[26] *Mukta Natak Movement* was an initiative of the Marxist theatre-maker, Mamunur Rashid, along with his theatre troupe Aranyak Natya Dal in 1984. "Mukta Natak performed political activism which was basically inspired by a vision of social change based class struggle" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 153). *Gram Theatre Movement* was initiated by Selim Al Deen, a Bangladeshi playwright, in cooperation with the theatre group Dhaka Theatre. The central aim of this group was to sustain the *Bangla natya* – Bangla theatre – and its diverse forms of expression, in rural areas of the country. This initiative is still active and regularly generates many programmes Indeed, Ahmed demonstrate that the early 1990s carry significance for Bangladeshi theatre, since during this period urban theatre-makers were "deeply engaged with a 'theatre of the roots' in shaping a design aesthetics […]". In other words, *Bangla natya* performance traditions and styles were championed in the urban theatre practice (2016a, p. 276).

It is to be noted that urban theatre in Bangladesh is dominated by the proscenium arch auditorium, and even the National Theatre's main stage is a proscenium-arch playhouse. "Nevertheless,", states Ahmed, "the fact that the complex also offers two studios with the provision for flexible staging, shows that the post-colony of Bangladesh is confidently

[26] *Mukta Natak Movement* / "মুক্ত নাটক আন্দোলন": *Liberated Theatre Movement*; *Gram Theatre Movement*/ "গ্রাম থিয়েটার আন্দোলন": *Village Theatre Movement* (Ahmed, 2014).

moving away from colonial-imperial heritage" (*ibid*). Thus, there are performance spaces today that can accommodate *Bangla natya* as it is traditionally staged, in the round.

Ritual Performance in Bangladesh

Waz mahfil and *kirtan* are religious performances, which are also considered to be artistic performance, much like theatre. Performance scholar Richard Schechner argues that it is difficult to separate "art" from "ritual". By presenting the example of two US church services, he considers that "religious services with music, singing, dancing, preaching, speaking in tongues, and healing", are also a form of performance (2002a, p. 26). At a *kirtan* - a Bangladeshi Hindu or Buddhist ritual, participants go into a trance, to the dance, music and song. Radha Krishna's love and separation are narrated, and the qualities of the Hindu deities and their deeds are recounted, along with the Buddha's life stories. Study shows that before the Partition in 1947, both Bangalee Hindus *and* Muslims attended *kirtans*. Moreover, the national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam, himself a Muslim, wrote a number of acclaimed *kirtans* (Sayeed, 2021).

Another religious ritual in Bangladesh is *waz mahfil*. In the case of this ritual, as Ahmed observes, lay devotees gather to listen to an Islamic scholar elucidating one or more religious issues believed to be of importance. Often held in the evening, sometimes running through the entire night, the *waz mahfil* is a very popular form of religious education. By asking questions and seeking responses, the scholar constantly encourages his audience to participate in the discussion. "Therefore, when led by a skilful speaker, a *waz mahfil* may mesmerise the participants, arousing the deepest devotional fervor" (Ahmed 2006b, p. 73). Schechner states, "[i]ndeed, more than a few people attend religious services as much for aesthetic pleasure and social interaction as for reasons of belief" (2002a, p. 26). This is

certainly the case for these two religious rituals in Bangladesh, which cross the dividing line between religious practice, and theatrical art form.

The Post-military "Democratic" Era (1991-today)

After the overthrow of the military regime in 1990, many proscenium, experimental and street theatre productions were staged on the themes of rising sectarianism, the free market economy and industrial development. Group theatres are non-profit repertory companies, where members volunteer their time in the evenings, weekends, and holidays to produce theatre productions with professional competence. The groups regularly perform their plays in rented theatre halls and sometimes on the festival circuit. Majumder asserts, "theatre in Bangladesh is a theatre of love, theatre of passion" (2012, p. 3). Majumder (2015) finds the following major trends in contemporary Bangladesh theatre: plays based on the Independence movement, social satires, protest and resistance, reinterpretation of myths, narrative tradition, and translation and adaptation.

Today, the Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation is a network of over 400 non-profit city/town-based groups of theatre makers (BGTF, 2019), "who are mostly middle-class students and professionals belonging to the media, advertising agencies and other private services" (Ahmed, 2016a, p. 272), which afford them salaries in order to sustain their theatrical activities. Ahmed's study shows, the groups bring professionalism to the work that they produce and are run by the "voluntary contributions of its members, box-office receipts, revenue accrued from advertisements published in souvenir [programmes], and occasional sponsorship from national and multinational industrial and trading companies" (*ibid*). He adds, "[o]ccasionally a few directors, designers and performers are paid, but it is not enough to produce a body of full-time theatre practitioners" (*ibid*). Contemporary Bangladeshi group theatre activities are described in Majumder states elsewhere:

> Bangladesh does not have a professional theatre as far as earning a living from the theatre is concerned. In such a social and economic context, one cannot afford to earn one's living only from theatre performances. However, there are a number of artists who earn their living from television plays regularly put on air on many television channels in the country. (2012, p. 1)

However, many non-governmental organisations are active in their use of theatre techniques, including Theatre for Development, Theatre in Education, and Therapeutic/ Psycho Theatre. These are used especially in rural areas in Bangladesh by Proshika, Ain O Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Transparency International Bangladesh, Save the Children, Help Age, Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts to name a few, for the purposes of improving health, wellbeing, education and livelihoods.

It is also important to mention the development of theatre academia and the state of research in the country. Extensive examinations of *Bangla natya* include Deen (1996), and Ahmed (1995 and 2000). These consider the seventy-plus genres of the theatre tradition that still exist in rural areas of the country (Ahmed, 2006b). Among these traditional theatre practices, "nearly fifty are rooted in the various religious beliefs and faiths of the people; the rest are absolutely secular in nature" (Majumder, 2015). Deen is the founder of the Drama and Dramatics Department at Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh, and a pioneer in researching the traditional and folk theatre of Bangladesh that originated a thousand years ago. His major study is entitled *Maddyajuger Bangla Natya – Medieval Bangla Theatre* – and was published by the Bangla Academy in 1996. Deen has also published many other Bangla-language books and scholarly articles. Ahmed, for his part, is the founder of the Department of Theatre and Music at the University of Dhaka, and is a noted researcher and theatre-maker. His Bangla-language *Hajar Bacar: Bangladesher Natak O NatyaKala* – a critical

appreciation and history of Bangla Theatre dating back a thousand years – was published by The Bangladesh Academy of Fine and Performing Arts in 1995, and his other major publications include *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh* in 2000.

In spite of this critical and academic attention, over the years most forms of traditional/folk theatre have been in decline and "some are at the point of extinction" (Majumder, 2015). In order to attempt to combat this, at present, six "public universities in Bangladesh offer BA and MA programmes in theatre and performance studies. Most of the students who graduate from these universities are unable to sustain themselves by working full-time in theatre" (Ahmed, 2016a, p. 272), but at least they have gained knowledge of local and ancient performance traditions, in the hope that they will be preserved in embodied memory.

The Socio-Political Role of Theatre in Present-Day Bangladesh

Since 2000, I have been actively participating in academic, amateur, semi-professional and non-governmental theatre activities in urban settings, and I have remarked that the era of "diversification" and plurality that dominates theatre practice in the twenty-first century, is constantly confronted with the *Bhoyer Songskriti* ("climate of fear"), where citizens in Bangladesh are terrified of sectarian violence (Riaz, 2018, p. 11). Riaz claims that *Bhoyer Songskriti* is introduced, developed, and normalised in society by producing and reproducing fear. It is such an environment of fear, intimidation and force that exercises power in Bangladeshi society. It is not always necessary to enforce fear through physical force or violence, since the perception of force and violence is enough to create an ambience, or "climate", of fear (pp. 11-13).

With specific reference to theatre, artists face strong resistance from intolerant political circles, as well as religious fundamentalists. From his lived experience, Majumder

(2018a) explicitly states, "[i]n rural Bangladesh age-old Jatra, a popular folk theatre, has been replaced by religious gatherings where sermons are given and where dance, music, and theatre are not permitted, according to Islam. Instead, reactionary ideas are preached."[27] Majumder (2018a) notes that, "religion is also being abused by many political parties, and now, fundamentalism reigns over reason", resulting in the fact that in many areas, especially rural regions, it is almost impossible to perform theatre.

The secular forces are losing their influence on society. When it comes to freedom of expression regarding religion or politics writers feel insecure about expressing their thoughts. Self-censorship is the norm today. In such a context, it is unsafe for a theatre group to perform a play which could raise questions and debates in some sensitive areas (Majumder, 2018a).

With my Practice Research, I have sought ways to explore and challenge contemporary issues and experiences, without for that matter placing myself or my performers in danger. The responses I received from the Dhaka-based on-stage and off-stage performers, via a series of informal text messages and voice calls, and from one theatre director's personal interview during his short trip to London, provided invaluable insights for me about how theatre-makers feel intimidated and fearful. In response to an informal request to collaborate with me during a student movement in Dhaka in 2018, two performers I have worked with in the past – a renowned film-television-theatre artist and an emerging theatre and dance artist – explained why they declined to work with me.[28] The former directly

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[27] Jatra/ "যাত্রা": a traditional Bangla theatre genre, which originates in Hindu ritualistic performance depicting Krishna.

Similar instances can be found in African performance scholar Osita Okagbue's study, where he demonstrates the struggle for cultural dominance between indigenous religious and cultural practices such as *Bori* and Islam in present-day Northern Nigeria (2008, pp. 270-271, Okagbue's italics).

[28] Sunday 27 July 2018. A speeding bus killed two school children in the capital city Dhaka. The Dhaka streets were filled with young protesters chanting "We want justice" and demanding improved road safety. For eight days, the young students protested with processions, sit-ins, slogans, songs, by controlling road traffic and inspecting driving licenses. C. R. Abrar, a Bangladeshi researcher and academic, writes, "[t]he teenagers' protest touched the hearts of millions. Mothers brought in snacks and bottled water for them. [...] By the fourth day of the protest, ordinary people—parents, guardians, and admirers—joined the rallies" (2018). The "road

answered, "[n]o, I cannot perform", while the latter, ignored the request. Later, in the comparative safety of a friendly and private moment both revealed that they say that they did not wish to take part in protest performance because one supports the ruling party, and another feels forced to support it. Moreover, both are the recipients of the Government's Ministry of Culture fund, and therefore they fear being excluded from the ruling party's "list of favourites", and therefore losing their funding.

Therefore, before my performance-film project even started, it was victim to forms of censorship, or self-censorship, since artists were reluctant to be involved either because they were on different partisan sides, or else because they were fearful of intimidation or even violence, if they were seen to oppose dominant politics and religion.

In an informal discussion with me in 2019 in London, theatre activist C stated, "we, the artists, and cultural activists, support the Awami League.[29] Therefore, we cannot perform anything that goes against the party because we do not want to create a negative public impression of the Awami League to the people" (2018, my translation). The Awami League has a visible and vibrant connection with theatre-makers and artists. When the Awami League formed a government for the first time in the post-military era (1996-2001), under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, on 30 January 2001 it withdrew the colonial *Dramatic Performances Act 1876*, which had controlled theatre, through a Bill in the National Parliament, setting a unique example in post-colonial South Asia. Furthermore, the Awami League created a separate Ministry for Cultural Affairs in 2014 and amplified its funding for the performing arts and fine arts for the first time after independence (though the amount of budget allocated for this ministry is less than one percent of the total budget of the country). But while C, whom I interviewed, expressed their support for the Awami League, they then

safety" movement formed not to bring down the present government, but to raise questions and demand accountability. However, the movement was targeted by the ruling party and law enforcement agencies. According to press reports, the protesters were physically assaulted, arrested and tortured.

[29] C is used to anonymise the interviewee.

stated, on the other hand that, ideally, artists should be non-partisan. “So, you can say, we are compromising our art” (2018, my translation). C is a theatre-maker who protested the rape and murder of a young civilian girl in an army cantonment of Bangladesh with his street theatre production of 2016. Nevertheless, C explained that, after the overthrew of the military government, theatre gradually lost its characteristics of resistance against injustice and prejudice in Bangladesh. For the main part, theatre today avoids political or religious controversy, owing to the “climate of fear”. Moreover, as soon the theatre receives government funding, its inherent character of resistance tends to disappear, since it remains in fear of having its funding cut. Government-commissioned, or government-funded theatre productions are mostly centred around the *Muktijuddho*, and by implication support the Awami League, which was behind the struggle for independence in 1971. Some funded works are focused on the remaking of traditional folk performances. However, funded theatre productions do not tend to raise questions about the current political context, or challenge the ruling party’s policy.

In 2019, Bangladeshi theatre literally became a site of conflict when cultural and political activists protested about the fact that two plays were taken off stage. As part of their protest, the activists occupied the lounge of the National Theatre in Dhaka. The productions were *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota* (*Life and Political Reality*) by Shahidul Jahir, directed by Syed Jamil Ahmed, and produced by the Spordha repertory, and *Stalin* by Kamal Uddin Nilu, a noted Bangladeshi theatre director and designer based in Norway. The latter was produced by the Centre for Asian Theatre repertory. Both plays were accused of the distortion of history. *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota* was about the General Amnesty of 1971’s war criminals announced by the then leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after the *Muktijuddho*; *Stalin* was about the Soviet Union communist leader Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin and the atrocities he committed during his regime in the name of communism. Both of these productions

encountered opposition because they were seen to criticise, whether directly or indirectly, the Awami League and their allies.

These events afforded me an opportunity to explore the socio-political role of theatre and how governmental approaches affect the role of theatre in society. Holdsworth states, "[t]heatre at a basic level is intrinsically connected to nation because it enhances 'national' life by providing a space for shared civil discourse" (2010, p. 7), where anyone and everyone can equally discuss and debate, agree or disagree. As the examples I have provided in this section demonstrate, this is not currently possible in Bangladesh. However, I hope that I have found a way, in my Practice Research, to express ideas of plurality, hybridity and cosmopolitanism, in ways that neither endanger my performers and me, nor come up against different forms of censorship.

Theatre Destabilising the Narration of Nationalism

In Chapter One, I accounted in some detail for the concept of "nation", and how it is imagined, narrated and performed. My Practice Research has investigated how Bangladesh's history has created a notion of nation that tends to be nationalistic and exclusionary. My own practice seeks, on the contrary, to destabilise these monolithic and homogenous conceptualisations of nation, and to embrace the diversity and plurality that are the reality of contemporary Bangladesh. Holdsworth argues, "people have constructed group formations to distinguish 'us' from 'them', whether territorial, linguistic or around bloodlines or religion, for example" (2010, p. 9). Today "nation" is the most powerful marker of this identity and belonging in Bangladesh, but I seek to challenge this with my theatrical practice.

In recent years, campaigns for national identity or ideas about which ethnic group has the "right" to dominate the nation, are the sources of the most bitter and bloody conflicts, as this thesis has amply demonstrated. However, the nationalist narrative has been destabilised

by various theatre productions that revolve around the lives and struggles of the country's indigenous and marginalised communities, who have not been recognised in the nationalist narrative. These include *Aikti Marma Rupkotha* (*A Marma Fairy Tale*), based on the daily life and rituals of the Marma community; *Mimangchina* (*A Colourful Flag of The Mandi Elite's Crematorium*), a story that relates the socio-politics and impact of globalisation on the life of a young woman who belongs to the Mandi community; *Birsa Kabya* (*The Song of Birsa*), that presented the war of the Mundas people that was waged against British colonisers; *Rarang* (*The Distant Drum*), which showed the struggle of the Saontal people and their war against British colonisers and their local collaborators; *Paital* (*The Rhythm of Footsteps*) and *Mulluk* (*The Motherland*), which featured the unheard stories of oppression, exploitation and discrimination that the tea plantation workers have been facing since the inception of British colonial India.

In 2013, during the creation of a play named *Chaka* (*The Wheel*), written by Selim Al Deen, which I directed for MA students in the Theatre Department at the University of Dhaka, the on- and off- stage performers conducted an investigation in a village in Rajshahi (the northern part of Bangladesh). The aim was to know more about one of the central characters of the play, a real-life figure who belongs to the Saontal *Adivasi* community. The students learnt about the ongoing violence and intimidation of the Saontal community in Rajshahi. In an unstructured discussion, the Saontal activists I, J and M informed the students that since British colonial rule, the Saontals have been forced to leave their home, land, and religion.[30] Many Saontal community members converted to Christianity and Islam. At one point, the Saontal activists revealed the perpetrators behind this domination to be the local police administration, the local politician-backed Bangalee-Muslim community, and Christian missionary. During a walk to a Saontals prayer hall, H, a Saontals man, suddenly

[30] I, J and M are used to anonymise the interviewees.

stopped and indicated a paddy field, saying, "all you see was ours, but is no more. We are here but nowhere. There is no justice or laws for Saontals in Bangladesh" (2013, my translation).[31] H took a long pause. Then he said, "people come, sit and talk to us, and listen to our struggle and at the end of their work they go back to the city. There are very few people who speak for us and stand for us" (*ibid*, my translation). The MA students' aim, therefore, was to carry the voices of these indigenous people back to the urban centre, and to articulate and stage them. Not denying the fact that our visit to the Saontal village was for artistic purposes, it still shaped the public performance of *Chaka* as a piece of resistance to dominant society, that sought to destabilise the narration of nationalism. This, and other activist theatre groups in Bangladesh today focus on representing contemporary issues such as public life, property, security, dignity, and resistance as a means by which to destabilise assertions made by the ruling party, political elite, and religious nationalists. For example, Jahangirnagar University Theatre performed *Chakravyuh* (*Battle Formation*) on the street in order to protest against the joint action of the ruling party's student wing and the police force on the student movement which was demanding road safety in 2018; Nagarnat Theatre in Sylhet performed *Bhumi-Putro* (*The Son of The Land*) written by Arup Baul against the aggression of the ruling party's followers to the Saontal community in Gaibandha District in 2017; *Shikaree (Hunter)*, written by Mannan Heera, was a vibrant street theatre production that protested against the rape and murder of a young college student and a local theatre activist in an army cantonment in Cumilla District in 2016; *Ami Malaun Bolchhi* (*I Who Speak, am Malaun*) an itinerant performance piece devised by the theatre students of Dhaka University, was performed in response to the violence against the Hindu community following a manipulated Facebook post in 2015; Bottala theatre company regularly perform *Jotu-Griha* (*Home of Lac Dye*), that addresses the injustice, intimidation and sexual

[31] H is used to anonymise the interviewee.

harassment in the garment industry; finally, *Dokkhina Sundari* (*The Beauty of the South*), a play based on Bangla pantheism, was performed in the National Theatre of Scotland's Tin Forest International Theatre Festival as part of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games cultural programme in 2014. The play was written by Shahman Moishan, directed by myself and performed by theatrEX Bangladesh. It was created in reaction to the official decision to building a power plant in the Sundarbans territory, which is considered to be the "green wall" of Bangladesh's coastal area and the world's largest mangrove forest.

It is clear that theatre and performance have been inextricably intertwined with Bangalee and Bangladeshi identity for over a century, and that resistance to repression and homogeneous nationalism has provided a major impetus for theatrical creation.

Conclusion

I conclude this chapter by referencing a personal interview that I conducted in 2014 with Tim Butchard, Secretary of the Charles Wallace Bangladesh Trust (CWBT). As recipient of the CWBT artist residency, I was asked why I introduce myself as a *natya-karmi* (theatre activist) rather than a *natya-shilpi* (theatre artist).[32] My answer was that theatre in Bangladesh today is created not for profit, but as part of a social movement. However, Bangladeshi theatre-maker Avijit Sengupta articulates, "the concept *andolon* (activism) is disappearing from view for Group Theatre nowadays. Instead, there's a focus on *chorcha* (artistic practice)" (2007, p. 171, my translation). Recently, the Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation's influential leaders advised its member organisations "to foster" their member-artists' identity as *mancha-shilpi* (stage artists) instead of *natya-karmi*, or theatre activists.

[32] The interview took place in Dhaka. As a recipient of the CWBT Artist Residency award in 2014, I spent eight weeks in London exchanging skills and ideas with Chickenshed Theatre.

Meanwhile, state-scripted nationalism is continually and explicitly performed in daily life in Bangladesh.

Having spent the past four years in the UK in order to conduct research for my PhD, I have been inspired by the political engagement of young theatre-makers and encouraged by it, even if it is increasingly proscribed in my home country of Bangladesh. Charlotte Higgins, the theatre reviewer for *The Guardian*, writes, "[t]here is a young generation of theatre artists for whom art and politics, or art and activism, have cohered", thus, "[t]heatre is politics, in its blood and bones" (2015). Higgins continues, "[n]o art that is made can avoid reflecting its time and the particular political, social and economic circumstances of its making. Theatre, however, is the art form that does this most easily and consciously" (*ibid*). I feel inspired by her words and by the theatre I have seen over the course of my PhD, and in spite of the threats and fear that I and my colleagues have encountered in Bangladesh, feel that I shall continue to find ways to make my art activist.

Chapter Three

The Imagination and Contestation of National Identity in Daily Life and Artistic Performance in Bangladesh

Sociological Studies of Plurality in Bangladesh

This chapter draws on ethnographic research into Bangladeshi society, aiming to understand how society is becoming increasingly monocultural, as religion, politics and ethnicities are obliged to become less and less diverse across the country. In Chapter One, I examined the obstacles to plurality. In Chapter Two, I described theatre and performance practices across the past century in the Bangladeshi region, and how they have contributed towards narrating and re-narrating the nation. In this chapter, I take further the possibilities for co-existence in Bangladesh, with equal rights and responsibilities. There is very little already existing research into the concept and practice of plurality in Bangladeshi theatre; this chapter seeks to address this lack.

There are relatively few sociological studies of plurality in Bangladesh, making my study timely. These studies include Shamsuzzaman Khan (2016) who states that many of the communities in Bangladesh are *onokkhor,* in other words, illiterate. However, this agriculture-based society has absorbed its life skills, rationality, intellect, and worldviews from folklore and traditions, that enhance and stimulate social interaction. As a result, cultural exchange, understanding and solidarity have developed around these folk traditions, to produce a system of comprehension and relative harmony. The various religions in Bangladesh have also contributed to the co-existence of folk singers, thinkers, and storytellers, to create a pluralistic, humanitarian consciousness in Bangladesh. For his part, thinker Abdul Momin Choudhury (2019) shows that in their long history, the Bangalees have

come into contact with a very wide diversity of folk traditions and religions, to develop a heritage of social conduct which is synonymous with a pluralistic modern world view.

Therefore, it is all the more dismaying that Bangladesh today is moving towards a less, rather than more, pluralistic society. Prashanta Tripura (2015) places this celebration of diversity into the context of repression today, arguing that if different ethnic groups live in Bangladesh, why does the constitution state that "the people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation" (Bangladesh Constitution, 2015)? Why, one might ask, does the state not recognise its diverse language and cultural heritage?

In order to discuss plurality in Bangladesh, this chapter describes my process of interviewing a wide range of participants on the question of individual and national identity in daily life in Bangladesh today. I interviewed participants from multiple backgrounds, including religious, cultural and ethnic groups.

The Participants in the Discussions and Workshops

In order to gain a greater understanding of the inherent plurality of all societies, notably Bangladeshi society, via theatre – the aim of my Practice Research – I conducted interviews, discussions, and workshops with over one hundred participants of different ages, genders, faiths, political ideologies, and ethnic backgrounds in Bangladesh. My central aim was to listen to people from diverse communities and their previously untold stories and unheard voices, to create and blend my critical discussion and creative practice. Most of the participants were known to me before I began this study.

I tried to invite an equal number of male and female participants from various communities actively involved with ethnic, cultural, political, and religious activities in Dhaka, Chittagong and Rangamati. However, the female invitees did not respond to the same extent as the male invitees. Therefore, unfortunately only one fifth of the total participants

were woman, which is, in my view, the main limitation of my study. The reason for the low participation of women is no doubt became women have greater caring responsibilities and therefore less time; and also because Bangladesh is still a male-dominated society, where women tend to defer to men's voices and opinions in public fora. Sometimes male participants even attended my workshops without any invitation, an example of how confident men tend to feel in public spaces in Bangladesh, as opposed to women. Two non-binary LGBTQI community members attended the personal interview, providing invaluable contributions on their lives and rights in Bangladesh today.

I asked the participants to describe both their sense of individual identity, and national identity, in order to start to create a dialogue between various communities, and to examine the possibilities for plurality in Bangladeshi society today. Moreover, I asked them how concepts of identity as presented in the Bangladeshi Constitution, and how the Constitution affects their daily lives. I also asked the artists and theatre-maker participants how they felt concepts of individual and national identity played into their performance-making. These discussions, led by an intuitive process as opposed to a fixed programme of questions – a process which will be examined later in this chapter – enabled me to find, as sociologist Anthony Giddens suggests, "the reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems" (1991, p. 5). The narrative approach to identity allowed the participants of this research to tell, imagine, narrate, construct, their individual and national identities (Hoque, 2018, p. 185). It is important for me to emphasise that every single view of my participants has contributed to my study, and I am hugely grateful to them.

Examining the Politics of Plurality: Inspiration from the Workshop Participants

The prominent dance and theatre artist Lubna Marium states that "[t]he real beauty of Bangladesh is its plurality of beliefs", and the tolerance amongst the communities in accepting these plural beliefs. In addition, Marium does not believe that, "Bangladesh is being overwhelmed with fundamentalism" (Marium, 2014). However, the participants in my workshops expressed the view that Bangladesh exists on a scale, or spectrum, between tolerance and intolerance, plurality and monoculturalism.

Conversations during workshops with the young theatre-makers from diverse backgrounds involved in several non-profit theatre organisations in Bangladesh, have crucially informed my thinking.[33] These young artists offer excellent insights. For instance, they have taught me that, in the theatre, a human being can examine his/her ability and skills, and theatre is a place where one can engage with critical dialogue. The young theatre-makers, for example, perceive theatre as an act of imagination, where one can discover the self, for example, via the *Baul* (mystic bard) Lalon.[34] The piece of Lalon's song that the young theatre-makers quoted during our discussion was, *manus chara khepa re tui mul harabi, manus bhojle sonar manus hobi* ("Oh my insane mind,/ You will not be worthy./ without devotion to human, you will lose the essence").[35] These words, that they revealed to me, were particularly useful during the making of my own performance-film, since they celebrate the importance of all humanity, over difference.

Another example was provided by the Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum activist and writer, G, who revealed that theatrical performance in Bangladesh is apathetic to the life

[33] The theatre groups include, but are not limited to: theatrEX Bangladesh, Theatre Cycle, Friday Theatre, Padatik Nattya Sangsad TSC, Hill Ribeng Theatre, Tirjok Natya Goshthi, Kathak Theatre, Gonayan Natya Sampraday to name a few.
[34] Lalon was a mystic bard, philosopher, social reformer, and thinker in British India.
[35] *manus chara khepa re tui mul harabi, manus bhojle sonar manus hobi*: "মানুষ ছাড়া ক্ষ্যাপা রে তুই মূল হারাবি, মানুষ ভজলে সোনার মানুষ হবি"; translated from Bangla by Farah Naz.

and struggle of the Adivasi communities.[36] According to G, "[w]hat we see in the theatre is mostly centred on the Bangalee community. The socio-political reality of *Adivasi* communities requires more attention in the theatre space" (2020, my translation). This prompted me to think about the inclusion of *Adivasi* communities in my own Practice Research, whether in my interviews and workshops, in this thesis, or in my performance-film.

Two key findings emerged from my ethnographic study via the interviews and workshops. First, the complex and fluid concept of identities, both individual and national, which I have been keen to stress in Chapter One, was apparent across their conversations and dialogues, demonstrating that the participants were constantly negotiating the signification of what it means to be a Bangalee/ *Adivasi*/ Bangladeshi. Second, through a detailed examination of two aspects of their lives related to their multifaceted identity –daily life and creative life with regard to the theatre-makers I interviewed – it became apparent that questions and problems of individual and national identity in Bangladesh are key questions for the theatrical sphere.

Bangladeshi philosopher and writer E's observation is important to note.[37] E pointed out, "the delusion of holding on to power" and "political short-sightedness" has led the country in a direction that is opposite to the aims and objectives of the *Muktijuddho* in 1971, in which a secular Constitution was achieved (2020, my translation).

The Formation of Individual Identity According to the Workshop Participants

In the context of the formation of identity, Hoque examines the lives and multifaceted identities of a group of young UK Bangladeshis from East London in ways that hold significance for my study, even if it is situated several thousand miles away, in Bangladesh.

[36] G is used to anonymise the interviewee.
[37] E is used to anonymise the interviewee.

Hoque states, "[t]he project of identity is complex, multifaceted, fluid and dynamic. Identity is not easy to capture or to discuss, as it can be challenging and also controversial" (2018, p. 193). Based on ideas of identity and pedagogy, his study focuses on the participants' own narratives and how they emphasise identity issues. The principles behind self-narrative that guide Hoque's research, also informed mine.

The impression I received from most of the participants' answers are that in their daily lives, each individual plays many roles that are related to family, and livelihood. At the same time, each individual was shaped by numerous markers, such as class, religion, sexuality, gender, age, "race" and ethnicity (where hybridity is most apparent and increasing), nationality that is also often challenged by dual citizenship. Importantly, each of these markers are in themselves fluid. More importantly, all the individuals are always already engaged in relations of power that are themselves fluid and changing. Thus, every individual is located multi-axially so far as individual identity is concerned. Consequently, individual identity is fluid, just as cultural or national identity is fluid, as I have explained in Chapter One, depending on the role an individual is playing in changing social circumstances, where any of the numerous markers mentioned may become significant because of the social situation the individual is placed in, and the relations of power they are engaged in. I provide some examples of these multiple and shifting identity markers.

Theatre practitioner and academic K prefers to describe himself as a non-practising Muslim by birth, a sexagenarian citizen of Bangladesh, a male who consciously contests patriarchy but invariably slips into its snares. He also considers an important part of his identity to be the fact that he is a *Muktijoddha*, in other words someone who fought for Bangladesh's independence in 1971, but that simultaneously, he consciously renounces nationalist narratives (2020).[38]

[38] K is used to anonymise the interviewee.

With regard to *Adivasi* rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, L reflects that one's identity evolves over time since identity is not static, and faces different circumstances.[39] For instance, L remarks that some young Bangladeshi *Adivasi* people who born and brought up in a foreign country often do not embrace *Adivasi* identity until they are in later life, when they might mingle with other *Adivasi* people if ever they travel back to Bangladesh (2020).

N, a Hefajat-e-Islam leader and *madrasah* teacher, stated when I interviewed him, "[h]umanity contributes to the formation of an individual identity."[40] He added, "Islam considers everyone in the world as a human being, and everyone is equal" (2020, my translation). Therefore, for him, common humanity was as prominent and significant as his Muslim identity.

This study thus understands that any singular point of reference cannot in and of itself identify one person, but that identity is vastly complex, and a constantly moving picture. The individuals that I interviewed possibly have everything and yet nothing in common, except a fluidity of identity that is rich, detailed, and manifold and that is defined as non-linear, relational, fluid and a socio-political construction as I detailed in Chapter One.

The Formation of National Identity: Participants' Views

Although today it has been "rendered transparent at the level of conscious awareness" (Billig 1995, p. 8), nationalism and nationality are not ahistorical concepts, but are constructed as necessitated by historical contexts. Nationalism may become an obsolete term in the future, although it is ubiquitous and omnipresent today. Nationalism is a political ideology that involves the strong identification of a group of individuals with the notion of the nation. As I detailed in Chapter One, nationalism came to play in Europe in the 1770s,

[39] L is used to anonymise the interviewee.
[40] N is used to anonymise the interviewee.

and in South Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Nationalism, as I have already stated, involves the ways in which the nation is imagined, narrated, constructed or performed. The embroidered quilt of a people's past is stitched together via nationalism. Moreover, socio-economic aspirations for the future are brought together under the name of nationalism. According to participant K, Bangladesh is victim to a struggle between cultural and religious nationalisms. "A nation may be imaged in terms of civic ideals of equal and shared political rights and allegiance to similar political procedures, as in the case of the US" (K, 2020). O, an historian belonging to an *Adivasi* community, states that "[t]he constitutional recognition is a big achievement for any group or community. The communities feel safe and proud when they see their identities are recognised in the highest law of their country" (2020).[41] Both K and O recognise that the Bangladeshi Constitution upholds equality and shared justice, even if these are not always implemented and enacted in everyday life in Bangladesh. L does not support the concept of national identity. In her view, "[i]f anything, it marginalizes minority populations who do not fit into the categories that supposedly mark national identity" (2020) L goes on to say that the Constitution makes it clear that Bangladesh's national identity includes the language and ethnicity of the majority population, the Bangalees. Moreover, L notes that, even if the constitution does not specify religion as a marker of its national identity, Islam has still been recognised as the state religion. L believes that Islam will eventually become the state religion and define national identity, unless revolutionary changes in the political sphere take place in Bangladesh (2020). Therefore, L is more sceptical than K and O about the potential of the Constitution to protect and promote ethnic and religious minorities who are not Bangalee and Muslim. P, a government official working in the area of the arts and a theatre-maker in Bangladesh, is more sanguine, and believes that, sooner or later, secularism will be restored in the Constitution.

[41] O is used to anonymise the interviewee.

My interviews with university students in Dhaka reflected many of the ideas that I have already discussed in this thesis, but importantly, added to it the discrimination that Muslim students sometimes feel in secular settings. Without commentary, I list some of the remarks that they made:

> My teacher threatened me because of my Islamic look – cloak dress, turban and beard.
>
> Continuous comparison with the state of India.
>
> The Constitution emphasises Bangalee ethnicity and Islam and this creates a problem.
>
> Why are all discussions centred around the state religion Islam, why not the state language Bangla?
>
> As a Hindu, I am a second-class citizen of the country.
>
> There is no commitment to the constitutional recognition to *Adivasi* people.
>
> Bangladeshis from different backgrounds has never coexisted in tolerance and don't today.

I have already observed in Chapter One that Bangladesh as a "nation-state" has been a problematic and ceaselessly contested site of national identity, and the opinions of my participants, whether experienced professionals or young students, highlighted this view. Given that so little has been written on questions of plurality, hybridity and cosmopolitanism in Bangladesh, hearing their opinions was all the more important, in order to confirm and endorse my theoretical premises.

Views on State Religion and Secularism

One of the most dominant strands of conversation during the interviews and workshops I conducted, was the role of Islam in the state of Bangladesh. In order to provide some context, it is worth rapidly summarising, again, some of the arguments and developments around secularism and religion, that I discussed in Chapter One.

Bangladesh's first Constitution detailed the vision of a secular Bangladesh; Article 9 rejected religion as the normative sign of national identity and replaced it with Bangla language and culture. The rejection of all forms of religion was further reinforced with the help of Article 8, which established secularism as one of the four "fundamental principles of the state policy" (1972, p. 5). Secularism was to be established, as stated in Article 12, "by the elimination of (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; and (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practising a particular religion" (*ibid*). Furthermore, the Constitution sought to proscribe any mobilisation of religion from the public space by instituting Article 38 which provided that "[n]o person shall have the right to form or be a member or otherwise take part in the activities of, any communal or other association or union which in the name or on the basis of any religion has for its object, or pursues, a political purpose" (p. 13). These articles of the Constitution of 1972 encapsulate *Muktijuddho*, or the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. Indeed, Q, a *Muktijoddha* ("freedom fighter") and former Bangladesh Army officer who was forced to resign during General Ershad's regime in 1981, stated during one of my interviews, "[e]veryone participated in the *Muktijuddho* –Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Bangalee, Chakma, Marma, Manipuri. Everyone contributed, together we made the country independent.

Secularism in the Constitution of 1972 was the reflection of that collective achievement." (2020, my translation).[42]

However, "[t]hrough a series of reversals dating from 1977 to 1988, Islam was re-mobilised as the normative sign of identity, and the fundamental principles of the state policy were de-secularised" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 307). Chitta Ranjan Dutta (1927-2020), popularly known, C. R. Dutta, the first Bangalee Hindu officer in the Pakistan Army in 1947, who fought for Pakistan in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965, and then fought for Bangladesh's independence in 1971, spoke to a Bangla newspaper:

> as a *Muktijoddha*, I never thought I would have to fight for the rights and security of the minorities in this country because I believed in the spirit of Bangaleeness. When Islam was introduced as the state religion by the parliament in 1988, the country returned to the Pakistani model. At that time, I told my contemporary officers and juniors that we did not wage a war to turn Bangladesh into a religious state. I still say this – this is my belief. (2020, my translation)

When the bill instating Islam as a state religion was sent to Parliament, Justice Debesh Bhattacharya, Justice Ranadhir Sen, KB Roy Chowdhury, Suranjit Sengupta MP, Sudhanshu Shekhar Haldar MP, Journalist Nirmal Sen, Major C. R. Dutta whom I have just mentioned and other minority community members protested that, not only had the Constitution become sectarian that day, but also the country had moved towards becoming a religious state by making Islam the state religion. Thus, Dutta adds, "[t]he process of turning twenty-five million followers of other faiths into second-class citizens had started; people who fought in

[42] Q is used to anonymise the interviewee.

1971 with a non-sectarian spirit and established Bangladesh, were seeing that the country had moved away from that spirit before their eyes" (*ibid,* my translation).

In order to update the situation, I must mention that, as of 2020, the Constitution has been further amended by reinstating the principle of secularism in articles 8 and 12. But so far, there is no discernible evidence of secularisation in Bangladesh. According to K, these are nonetheless heartening signs for theatre-makers in Bangladesh who have fought to have Islam removed from the Constitution as the official religion. Nasir Uddin Yousuff, a theatre and film director and activist, and a *Muktijoddha*, observed that "[t]he society and the state are going into an illegal agreement with the sectarian groups" (Yousuff, 2019, my translation). In contrast, Q believed that "Bangladesh will never be a radical country like Pakistan. The people of this country will never let this happen" (2020, my translation).

Even though Bangladesh does not have a blasphemy law unlike Pakistan, the situation is no less frightening, and several interviews observed that the accusation of "hurting religious sentiment" can be used to seek persecution of anyone regardless of the severity of their actions (C, 2019; L, 2020, G, 2020). As L said, "[i]t does not need to be a derogatory comment; even something as harmless as an analytical or insightful piece on Islam can be regarded as speaking against Islam, and considered as hurting the majorities' sentiments" (2020). On the other hand, digital platforms are widely used nowadays in order to issue threats against non-Muslims, and derogatory comments are made against women, yet no actions are taken against them on the grounds of hurting the sentiments of others (L, 2020; G, 2020; R, 2020).

In response to my question as to how this conflict will resolve itself or how it will further transmute, many interviewees stated that it would depend on how strongly the state can implement its secularising policy in all aspects of public life, and how family and

institutional education re-imagine the question of national identity in the consciousness of the people (G, 2020; K, 2020; L, 2020; R, 2020).

Bangla Language and Bangalee Culture

In response to the question concerning the "Bangalee" identity of the nation, respondents had a range of answers.

The Islamisation process in Bangladesh has affected language in certain ways, notably by censuring some words for supposedly being too "Hindu" (K, 2020; L, 2020). This is especially apparent with regard to some names, which have been labelled as "Hindu", and therefore not appropriate for Bangladeshi Muslims, even if these names are in fact Bangla names and not Hindu names. R, a university teacher and researcher, explained his own story in this respect:

> When my wife was expecting our second child, we had to fight with our parents to keep the child's name in Bangla. My father – an educated person – did not visit my house, did not even see my daughter for the first twelve years of her birth because her name is Bangla. According to my parents, in Islam, a person cannot enter heaven after death without an Arabic name. (2020, my translation)[43]

It is relevant to mention that when I interviewed N, I noticed that all written signs inside and outside the *madrasah* were in Arabic and English, and none were in Bangla. Moreover, in the two popular business areas for the middle class in Dhaka, Elephant Road and Natak Soroni, – shops are branded in English and there is nothing written in Bangla. In

[43] R is used to anonymise the interviewee.

other words, there appears to be an effacement of Bangla language and culture, owing to its associations with India and with Hinduism.

The school curriculum is also affected by this denigration of Bangla language and culture, according to a number of the interviewees that participated in my workshops. Stories of Islamic history/historical characters and morals have entered Bangla literature and history books while works of literature by Bangalee Hindu writers as well as progressive Muslim writers have been taken out of textbooks; and Home Economics books now have contents on appropriate behaviours, practices for girls and women practically depicting the Islamic way of life. These were the views expressed by two of the participants (R, 2020; L, 2020).

G argued that the state imposes Bangalee identity and language on its people, regardless of their diverse ethnic identities, while hypocritically proclaiming to uphold and protect equal rights for its citizens regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, and birthplace. "How can a state protect its citizens' rights when it wilfully and forcefully imposes an identity which is not their identity", he asked (2020, my translation)? W and X, two university students from *Adivasi* communities, expressed their resentment over the naming of their communities with the word *Upajati* (subspecies). The Constitution describes ethnic minorities as "tribes, minor races and ethnic sects and communities" (2011), but the term can also be pejoratively used to denote an inferior group. The students argued, "what does it mean to identify us 'Upajati'? We are not a sub-species of the Bangalee ethnic group. We have independent identities" (2020, my translation).[44] Y and Z, two Bangalee female student activists at Dhaka University, echoed this: "it is disrespectful and insulting to recognise the *Adivasi* communities as 'Upajati'" (2020, my translation).[45] ZA, a leftist student activist added, "the *Adivasi* communities are being defined constitutionally as 'minor races'. These

[44] W and X are used to anonymise the interviewees.
[45] Y and Z are used to anonymise the interviewees.

are the politics of words" (2020, my translation).[46] AB, an *Adivasi* student activist, told the following story:

> We all know, during the university holidays, students visit their homes and families. But no one knows what students like me who are from the Hill Tracts, do. We cannot go home because our parents discouraged us for our own safety. When I call my father before a vacation to let him know about my plan to visit them, he replies, "my son, do not come home. It is not safe here now. Stay where you are." My question is, why am I not safe at my own home? (2020, my translation)[47]

This story was startling to the student's fellow students, who did realise the level of intimidation and danger that ethnic minorities are forced to endure in Bangladesh today.

It is to be noted that the army patrols the Chittagong Hill Tracts so that the indigenous villagers in the CHT have the impression of being under constant surveillance. For L, "it is like two administrations in one country. It seems we are expatriates in our own land" (2020, my translation).

As a key member of the government committee on minor ethnic affairs, P emphasises that the national narrative must recognise its language and cultural diversity.[48] I reminded him, however, that the official notification issued by the Bangladeshi Government in 2014 urged civil society not to use the term Adivasi.

[46] ZA is used to anonymise the interviewee.
[47] AB is used to anonymise the interviewee.
[48] P is used to anonymise the interviewee.

The Struggle Between Religion, Ethnicity and Culture

The struggle between religion, ethnicity and culture was reflected in the words of many of the interviewees, who expressed how the dominance of Islam influences daily practices including the way people dress, and how they greet each other.

Ahmed observes how religious radicalisation encroaches on daily life, "such that liberal Islamic practices common to the people of Bangladesh have been displaced by the stern Wahabi influences imported from the Middle East […]" (2014, p. 154). "Today, the colourful saris of Bangalee women in public places have largely been replaced by the *burqa* or the *hijab*. On the other hand, the economics of neo-liberal living have led to greater visibility of working women in the public sphere" (K, 2020).

K mentioned that it is almost impossible to be a non-practising Muslim in Bangladesh:

> to the best of my knowledge, it is not possible legally to declare oneself atheist. In the 1970s, I had made it a point that in order to uphold my secular principles, I would not salute anyone by the customary Muslim greeting ("As-salamu 'Alaykum", or "Peace be upon you"). Today, I have given up because of uncomfortable situations this practice raises. The multiplicity of religious faiths went unquestioned even in the 1980s. I used to be greeted by my students in a range of ways including "Namaskar" (if they were Hindus and Buddhists), to "Good Morning" (if they were Christians), to "As-salamu 'Alaykum" (if they were Muslims). Today, all I hear is the latter greeting. (2020)

State Islam has influenced not only daily practices, but also theatre practice. Along with K, D, a theatre practitioner, stated that theatre-makers belonging to the Bangladesh

Group Theatre Movement now refrain from performing plays during the month of Ramadan, and also throw *iftar* parties for their friends and families in their performance spaces (K, 2020; D, 2020).[49] D was dismayed by this, stating, "[o]n 26 May 2019, when the Group Theatre Federation organised an *iftar* party following a *Dua mahfil* for the very first time in its 40 years history, the secular principle of this organisation was demolished" (2020, my translation).[50]

With regard to actual performance, certain genres of popular narrative performance that are not strictly Sunni, notably *Satya pirer gan*, *Madar pirer gan*, *Gazi pirer gan*, *Khawaj Khijirer gan*, *Bono-Bibir Gan*, are now hardly performed. because of their violent condemnation by the sectarian forces.[51] Moreover, participants/performers in non-Muslim religious processions, artistic performances or festivities have to be extremely careful, and especially have to be silent when the *Azan* (call to prayers) is issued from the mosques.

Many of the theatre-makers, artists and academics that I interviewed expressed serious concerns about freedom of expression. These concerns ranged from political instability to religious proscription, and economic concerns. Dhaka-based Bangladeshi television drama maker AD, singer AE, actress and theatre director AF, and Sylhet-based English language teacher AG, all articulated their concerns.[52] AE said, "[m]y freedom of expression is affected by the political instability. I think twice before writing an article or singing in public" (2020). AD added, "[i]f I create a fiction based on the life and struggle of a *madrasah* student or on the indigenous communities of the CHT, I will be blacklisted in the television industry, since the issues are now considered too sensitive" (2010, my translation). Moreover, one of AD's television dramas was banned because it addressed same-sex

[49] D is used to anonymise the interviewee.
[50] *Dua mahfil* is a profound act of worship in Islam.
[51] According to Ahmed, "A *pir* is a spiritual guide among Muslim mystics from the Sufi branch of Islam" (2006b, p. 76).
[52] AD, AE, AF, and AG are used to anonymise the interviewees.

relationships and AD had to have police protection and go into hiding for six months. Therefore, on a number of fronts, including political, religious and cultural, freedom of expression is threatened in Bangladesh according to these artists and academics.

AG observed the different types of intimidation that artists are subjected to. He stated that certain groups active on social media spread misinformation about artists. He stated, "I am a Muslim, I believe in my religion, but when I show my passion for theatre and music, then the sectarian group tries to indicate that my activity is going against Islam" (2020, my translation). AG added, "I rarely respond in those situations, most of the time I keep silent" (2020). AF continued, explaining that a promising actress of one of her directed plays recently informed her via a text massage, "I shall not perform in the theatre anymore because my religion does not support this type of activity." AF tried to persuade the actor to return to the theatre and she finally replied via a text massage, "[i]n the theatre, I must face other men and hold their hands. These are not allowed in my religion" (2020, my translation).

In *In Praise of Niranjan: Islam, Theatre and Bangladesh*, Ahmed notes that there is nothing in the *Hadith* to suggest that theatre is un-Islamic. [53] Following scholars such as Al-Gazzali (1980) and Ahmed Muhammad Isa (1981), Ahmed (2001) presents on particular part of the *Hadith* where in fact the Prophet Muhammad invites Ayesha to watch a performance. Ayesha narrates:

> One festival-day, some Negroes were performing in a mosque. The prophet said to me, "Do you wish to see them?" I replied, "Yes". Accordingly he lifted me up with his own blessed hand, and I looked on so long that he said more than once, "Haven't you had enough?" (Al-Gazzali, 1980, quoted in Ahmed, 2001, p. 23)

[53] *Hadith*: a record of the traditions or sayings including the words, actions, and the silent approval of the Prophet Muhammad.

> Ahmed also presents another *Hadith* on dance-performers, where the Prophet says:
>
> Dance well, O Banu Arfidah, so that the Jews and the Christians may know
> that there is latitude in our religion! (Isa, 1981, quoted in Ahmed, 2001, p. 23)

Evidence shows, in Ahmed's words, that, "during its formative years Islam had not yet formulated any clear position about representations. That the Prophet viewed representation and the performing arts rather critically is obvious, but his attitude does not amount to a taboo" (2001, pp. 23-24). Notwithstanding, theatre and other forms of performance such as music and song, are increasingly considered as a taboo in contemporary Bangladesh. AF lamented, "I grew up in an environment in Old Dhaka where I woke up in the morning and practised singing first thing. The sound of music used to come from almost every neighbour's house. Those were the golden days" (2020, my translation).

The Possibility for Plurality[54]

I end this chapter with ample evidence of the will and desire and possibility for a plural, hybrid, cosmopolitan society in Bangladesh. I asked each group, "Do you see any problem if in any given space multiple faiths, ethnicities and cultures co-exist with equal rights and responsibilities in Bangladesh?" Many interviewees argued that, in an ideal world, this should not be a problem. However, in reality, in Bangladesh's present political and social context, they stated that multiple faiths seem unable to co-exist with equal rights and responsibilities, owing to political issues and nationalism which I have already alluded to.

[54] Translated from Bangla.

Some evidence, which I wish to relate, is provided from the focus group discussion with the Dhaka University's students from diverse backgrounds, facilitated by me in cooperation with two of my Dhaka-based colleagues:

Participant 1: We believe in co-existence and tolerance.

Participant 2: But Bangladesh never had tolerance and never will.

Participant 3: We can only achieve this co-existence if national identity is emphasised, not individual and religious identity.

Participant 4: To achieve a society of co-existence, it is essential to ensure democratic space and its protection of both our individual and our social rights.

Participant 5: If we do not try to control and suppress others, then I think there is a possibility to see a country of equality.

Participant 6: Two important things will help us towards plurality: tolerance and mutual respect. If we ensure these two things, I think, we do not need anything else.

Participant 7: It is important to change the political culture of this country. If we can keep religion in the private sphere and stop using religion as a political weapon, and recognise plurality in the State order then, I think, it is possible.

Participant 8: Personal mentality, mutual respect, and surroundings are important in this regard.

Participant 9: Complete co-existence in a society is not possible.

Participant 10: Freedom of expression and practice of one's own religion can bring a society of co-existence.

Participant 11: We need to be careful about the coalescing of religious ideology with political ideology. Also, we should not use religious extremism

for political purposes. Mutual respect and tolerance must be maintained in society.

Participant 12: Co-existence is possible when it ensures equity in society.

Participant 13: The Constitution should not contain anything that divides everything.

Participant 14: The State must ensure that the system will exclude discriminatory behaviour in the Constitution, such as state religion, which makes me feel I am a second-class citizen in this country.

Participant 15: Why is co-existence not possible? If we look back, we see, irrespective of religion, class or ethnic identity, our predecessors fought together for the independence of the country and sacrificed their lives. So, if they made it possible to imagine a society where people could live together in 1971, why has it become impossible now, in the twenty-first century?

Participant 16: Co-existence is not possible because it is impossible to combine "our values" [*Adivasi*] with "their values" [*Bangalee*], because we are not given equal rights there [Chittagong Hill Tracts]. It is only possible if everyone follows the way we [*Adivasi*] want it.

Participant 17: Conflict will be there, as conflict exists everywhere. However, we need to act to keep the conflict to a minimum to live together with equal rights and responsibilities.

I have tried, here, to transcribe a section of the conversation as it appeared, in order to attempt to express both the vast complexities of the search for plurality in Bangladeshi society and the multiple competing narratives, but also the hope provided by the workshops full of people who came together to listen to each other and be together, all trying to pull in

the same direction, towards mutual respect, tolerance, acceptance and a better Bangladesh. The conversations were challenging and thought-provoking, yet necessary and insightful. The testimonies indicated that the identities in present-day Bangladesh are diverse and in continuous play among various communities and identities. They testified to the fact that Bangalee cultural nationalism has been a predominant ideological instrument for the majoritarian power over "other" ethnicities, but how those ethnicities and other minority groups certainly have a voice, and are determined to be heard.

Social psychologist Leonard W. Doob states in a foreword to the *Conflict Resolution*: *Cross-Cultural Perspectives* that hope can be found "when peoples with different cultures and goals come together and interact" (1991, p. 1). This was provided by the workshops, and I hope that the optimism is reflected in some small part in my account here.

Conclusion

K declared, "[i]t is time to reconsider whether the mental space in which the Bangla-speaking people dream and act may not have already turned barren and dangerous in a manner not too dissimilar to that of the autocrats of Pakistan, against whom these people have always prided themselves in rebelling" (2020). In such a society, it is important to remember that, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, to whom I alluded in Chapter One, "the majority, insofar as it is analytically included in the abstract standard, is never anybody, it is always Nobody"; "whereas the minority is the becoming of everybody, one's potential becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 105). Throughout this chapter I have tried to capture the voices of the workshop, discussion and interview participants who articulated the antagonistic relation between constitutional orders and citizens' rights and recognitions. I should like to end this chapter by emphasising Chantal Mouffe's theories of hybridity, to which I alluded in Chapter One: "every order is political and based on some form of exclusion" (2005, p. 18).

Mouffe adds that groups "that have been repressed and that can be reactivated" cannot fully be oppressed, and therefore there is hope, I believe, that a plural Bangladesh can exist (*ibid*).

My interviews enabled me to gather absolutely essential and fascinating information, that invaluably advanced my research. Just some of the opinions, which both endorsed and enabled the theorisations of the narration and performance of nation, and the fluidity of identity. My research workshops and interviews were designed to teach me about Bangladesh, but they also taught me about myself, as a Bangladeshi.

I should like to end the chapter with an illustrative anecdote around my experience of travelling to my hometown Nabiganj in Sylhet from the country's capital city Dhaka by Shyamoli bus. This trip, I feel, illustrates the micro-politics of identities that I account for in this thesis. Shortly after the bus left Dhaka, it broke down due to a mechanical problem. Immediately, the highway police came and started checking the documents of the vehicle. While the bus driver was talking to the police officer about the documents at a shop on the side of the road, a few passengers, including me, gathered on the roadside to ask about the problem and how long it would take to be resolved. The questions transformed into a discussion between the passengers and the ticket collector, which illustrated the contested views of Bangladeshi identity today:[55]

> Ticket collector: Don't you understand what the problem is? "Mechanical problem" is an excuse to stop and search the passengers' documents. The basic problem is, *(pause)* that the Shyamoli bus company is owned by a Hindu businessman. That's why the police often don't cooperate.

[55] Translated from Bangla.

Me: Why are you dragging religion in here? If your bus documents are authentic, if the bus has its certificate, does anyone have the right to make problems for you?

Ticket collector: You have no idea! We drive on the road; we know what the problem is.

Passenger 1: You think you know everything!

Passenger 2: There are Hindu people in all high-ranking administrative posts in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh runs the country the way India wants!

Passenger 3: Hindus are living comfortably in Bangladesh. Go to India and see how Muslims are being tortured! Look at Kashmir, look at Assam. Everywhere, Muslims are being tortured. Bangladesh is a country of communal harmony. Nowhere in the world can you find such harmony.

Passenger 4: Exactly! Despite all the opportunities, [Hindus] never stop complaining.

Ticket collector: Brother, do you know, if a Hanif bus [Hanif company is owned by a Muslim businessman] doesn't have any documents, the police don't take any action against them. But we are facing this problem all the time. We can't even be saved by bribery.

Me: You have to pay a bribe because the bus isn't in a condition fit for the highway. And your documents probably aren't correct.

Ticket collector: All right, all right! Say what you think. But only the victims like us know the reality.

At that point, the bus driver came to the passengers, borrowed some money, and went back to the police officer. After a while, he came back. I found this experience both confusing and revealing. Of course, while the ticket collector had said that they could not even bribe the police, they did indeed bribe the police. But whether or not they were actually persecuted by the authorities and by the police for being a Hindu bus company, the fact is that they felt and perceived that persecution to be real; and the other bus passengers felt and perceived the Hindus to be superior, even if they are often discriminated against. Just this short incident revealed the tensions and complexities of ethnicity and religion in Bangladesh which, as I explained in Chapter One, dates back to the separation of peoples under the British Empire, during the nineteenth century.

Chapter Four

The Search for a Plurality of National Identities through Performance

Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, my childhood friends and I used to celebrate the *Saraswati puja* – worship of the Hindu goddess of knowledge and wisdom – which would typically take place in the winter. We collected funds from all local businessmen, both Hindu and Muslim, in order to celebrate the *puja*. Many local Muslims visited the temporary shrine of worship and shared *prasad* (worship food) with Hindus. At that time, we were able to celebrate the *puja* during *Azan* prayers without keeping silent. Reciprocally, I remember very well that my Hindu family joined in *Eid-ul-Fitr* celebrations with our Muslim friends.

Today, it is almost mandatory to keep silent and take a break during *Azan*. Besides, during religious gatherings, many Islamic religious preachers advise their followers and lay devotees not to participate in non-Muslim worship and even not to observe Muslim celebrations such as *Eid-e-Miladunnabi* or *Ashura*, since these are not, or less, celebrated in the Middle East, and they embrace local Bangla forms. According to the preachers' views, participation in these Bangladeshi Muslim rituals are *shoriot-birodhi* (unlawful) and *haram* (forbidden) in Islam.

In January 2020, during a research visit to Bangladesh, I noticed that I could simultaneously hear the sound of *Azan* from the local mosque, and evening-prayer in my home. This resonance is rare in Bangladesh today. It is rare but it has not completely disappeared, and this moment was an inspirational impetus for me, resonating with hope for a society that can "live side by side within the same political unit" (Furnivall, 1948, p. 304). In such a context, my aim with my Practice Research has been to explore the multifaceted expressivities offered by theatre and performance traditions from Bangladesh, along with those to which I have been exposed during my PhD study in the UK, to examine the existence of the fluidity and heterogeneity of national identities in Bangladesh.

In this chapter, I explain how my Practice Research project has explored various cultural, religious, and ethnic performance traditions to examine how theatrical performance can provide a space for posing questions about national identity/ies, and function as a forum for dialogues between contesting identities, while proposing how a plurality of national identity/ies may play out in daily life in Bangladesh today. I hope that my Practice Research reveals the theatrical performance of Bangladesh can expose ways in which the nationalist identities and homogeneity are negotiated and refused, and heterogeneity is celebrated.

The first part of this chapter focuses on three performance traditions or theatrical productions. In this section, I first examine a theatrical performance which is based on Hindu rituals, but which goes beyond the normative structures of both Hinduism and Islam. Secondly, I analyse a theatre production that presents cultural nationalism and questions Muslim majority rule, instead proposing a plurality of identities. Finally, I allude to a theatrical production that celebrates the *Adivasi* Saontal community. In the second part of this chapter, I place my own work within the context of these other recent theatrical productions on the subject of plural identities in Bangladesh. I discuss my own performance-film that have devised in response to my ethnographic research on plurality and fluidity in relation to identities in Bangladesh.

Recent Theatrical Productions on Plurality in Bangladesh

Kandoni Bisaharir gan (2012)

Kandoni Bisaharir gan, based on the medieval Hindu text of *Padma-puran* which is composed in rhyming metrical verse by Narayan Dev, is set in a secluded agrarian community. It is a theatrical performance based on the traditional performance of the life of the Hindu goddess Manasa. The well-known narrative of Manasa describes how she is the

goddess of serpents. Snake worship is a popular form of adoration across the Indian subcontinent and Manasa is a popularly worshipped deity by subaltern communities in Bangla region. The goddess herself is only a snake in the eastern part of the subcontinent, Bangla, however. Manasa is also identified as *Padma* (lotus), because a lotus gave birth to Manasa. The deity is called *Bisahari*, a name consisting of the two opposite words, *bisa-dhara* and *bisa-hara* (carrying venom and removing venom). Moreover, the word Manasa is derived from *manas* (desire or will). Therefore, Manasa is a goddess who, according to local Bangalee Hindu belief, represents both poison and cure, both danger and protection, both desire and will.

Many performances in Bangladesh employ texts popularly known as *Padma-Puran* or the *Manasa-mangal* which, as I have already mentioned, is a performance made of rhyming rhythmical verse. *Kandoni Bisaharir gan*, on the popular deity Manasa. Its narrative performance technique presents "a single performer [who] describes an event and/or portrays various characters related to the event, all in third person" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 18). *Kandoni Bisaharir gan* is generally "composed of dance, instrumental music, and speech rendered in prose, verse or lyric, either in the form of narration or that of dialogue" (p. 111). The structure of *Kandoni Bisaharir gan* is epic, yet non-linear, and includes around ten events. In the final episode, the elite male merchant Chandra Sawdagor offers *puja* to the goddess Manasa, thus placating her anger.

A performance group named Tilay Loko Theatre were invited to stage *Kandoni Bisaharir gan* at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts), in Dhaka in 2012. The Bangladeshi playwright and researcher Shahman Moishan's study of *Kandoni Bisaharir gan* illuminates how it represents multiplicity and plurality. The performers staged the piece end-on. However, Moishan informs that when the performance takes place in rural settings in Dinajpur, the northern district of Bangladesh, for

example, the seating arrangement is a little different: the inner yard of a house is transformed into a round or square performance space that utilises minimalist scenographic elements. *Puja* or worshipping rituals provide the central premise for this performance because the female goddess Manasa desires offerings from Chandra Sawdagor. *Kandoni Bisaharir gan* is performed frequently in Hindu households in order to fulfil the wishes of Manasa's devotee. However, the important point to be made is that, in spite of the fact that this musical form is a Hindu ritual, the interweaving of so many different stories at subverts any singular narrative, meaning that the stories transcend religion, according to Moishan (2014, pp. 181-186).

Moreover, in this particular production, the performers were both Hindu and Muslim, creating an interreligious collaboration. It is in fact important to note that, owing to the popularity of Manasa in the Indian subcontinent, she is in fact worshipped Muslim households. Therefore, both the tradition of *Kandoni Bisaharir gan*, and its performance at the Academy in Dhaka, break the traditional confines of religion (p. 182).

For instance, Anisuzzaman points out, "[w]hen we identify a group of people as Bangalee Muslim, we highlight only one aspect of their self-identity. But if we observe closely, we shall see that they contain multitudes" (2017). Being active participants in the Hindu performance, both the Muslim performers and spectators/devotees reject one fixed self-identity, embracing the complexities of South Asian identity.

Similarly, *Madar pirer gan*, *Satya pirer gan*, *Gazir gan*, *Khawaj Khijirer gan*, *Bono-Bibir Gan* which are artistic performances staged at shrines and conducted by *fakir*s, *pirs* and *sadhus* across the Bangladesh Delta region, exemplify and illustrate the syncretism and symbiosis of different performance and ritualistic traditions characteristic of the region.[56] According to Ahmed's study of *Madar pirer gan*, one of these performance rituals staged at shrines, "the very act of performing, sponsoring, and witnessing" the aforementioned

[56] *Fakir* and *sadhu*: mendicant dervishes or religious ascetics who live solely on alms.

performances are the "act of resistance to the ideological stance taken up by the Islamic scholars at *waz mahfils*" (2006b, p. 79). Thus, these performance traditions are at the very basis of theatre and performance in the Bangla region, and are a key influence on my own practice.

Bisad Sindhu **(1991-1992)**

Just three years after declaring Islam as the state religion, and immediately after the fall of General Ershad's dictatorship, Dhaka Padatik, a theatre group, produced Mir Mosharraf Hossain's *Bisad Sindhu* (*The Ocean of Grief*), an adaptation of a nineteenth-century Bangla novel. It was staged in two parts, in 1991 and 1992 consequently. *Bisad Sindhu* was adapted by Biplab Bala while Syed Jamil Ahmed designed and directed the theatrical production to seek, as Ahmed argues, "a third space of enunciation that lies in the unoccupied middle ground on the axis of the dichotomous positions held by religious and linguistic normative standards" (2014, p. 143). By mentioning the idea of the "third space", Ahmed was clearly citing Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, where different identities can come together and meet in a "third space".

Bisad Sindhu presented the story of the martyrdom in Karbala of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, Hasan ibn Ali and Husayn ibn Ali. The production dealt with "possibly the most uncomfortable issue" in the history of Islam, notably the separation of the religion into Sunnis and Shi'ites, which "gave rise to the most painful schism within the fold of the believers" (*ibid*). Ahmed argues:

> In the context of the Islamic resurgence in post-liberation Bangladesh, the performance deployed the quasi-historical legend of Karbala that has been familiar to the Muslims of Bengal since the sixteenth century (although an overwhelming majority of them are Sunnis), in order to challenge religious

> bigotry by structuring the narrative of the performance around incessant questioning of supposed "Islamic" values. (2014, p. 143)

This production consequently created an intellectual platform in which to question the sectarian values that are imposed on people in the name of a particular faith.

Bisad Sindhu used poetic visuals rather than realist scenography, transforming the proscenium stage of Mahila Samiti theatre to create a thrust stage, where the show literally "thrust" itself into the audience, demonstrating the fact that this story from Islamic history was of keen relevance to Bangladeshi society today. Ahmed explains:

> The spectators seated on the three sides of the thrust, were treated to a feast of song, music, indigenous martial art, acrobatics, narration, and dialogue. The performance of the play is still remembered by the spectators for stunning visuals, such as representation of the Prophet (unimaginable in Islamic culture) by a beam of light, the entry of Shimar (the fabled murderer of Hussein) from behind a moving army of cardboard figures, his subsequent disappearance under a pyramid of white cloth, and horse riders represented by hobby horse dancers, to mention only a few. (2014, pp. 143-144)

Therefore, while the show provided critique of contemporary politics and religion, it was presented obliquely, poetically and expressionistically. In this way, *Bisad Sindhu* was able to questions:

> Islamist assumptions of an imagined bond of a Muslim nation that evokes uninterrogated allegiance to legendary heroes of a pristine character. […] In the inclusive encounter that *Bisad Sindhu* succeeded in becoming, it imagined

> a Bangladeshi nation by consciously putting together diverse cultural shreds, even from Sanskrit-culture, and sought to pose the problem of outside/inside in 'a process of hybridity, incorporating new "people" in a relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning […]'. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 144).

Bisad Sindhu thereby celebrated plurality in a third space by displaying cultural elements from Sanskrit-vedic sources, and *Bharatanatyam* (a classical genre of dance drama widely practised across South Asia), bringing together Hinduism and secular cultural paradigms into the theatre.

Rarang **(2004)**

Rarang (*Distant Drum*), staged in 2004, represented a point of departure from the metropolitan, national centre, to the indigenous periphery.

The indigenous intellectual Aongiyojai Marma argues, "[…] cultural interventionist representations are only but misrepresentations not only because they are representations of the colonized by the colonist, but because they camouflage events to allow the consensus reality to remain unaffected. Consequently, it makes the colonized more subservient" (Marma, 2010). Deen argues that "the Bangalee majority dominates the ethnic minorities economically, politically, and culturally" (1995, p. 9, my translation). In order to combat this kind of "colonial" and "dominant" attitude by Bangalee culture over *Adivasi* indigenous people, Aranyak theatre group staged *Rarang*, a play written and directed by Mamunur Rashid, a noted theatre maker and cultural activist. A group of Bangalee artists from Aranyak then performed this play.

Employing a set of non-hierarchical and horizontal systems principles, *Rarang* engages "the struggle of ethnic communities" in the domain of theatrical practice in

Bangladesh, where Bangalee cultural nationalism exists predominantly (Ahmed, 2014, p. 145). *Rarang* presents the Saontal resistance against oppression by the British and their local Bangalee agents. It is a historical play that spans the period from the Nachole uprising in 1940s led by Ila Mitra and other communist activists, to the murder of the Saontal leader Alfred Soren in 2000. It staged Saontal performance aesthetics, using Saontal dance, music, and simplified realist acting. Ahmed describes the further use of non-realism:

> for the scenes that depict the devious Bengali characters and their duplicity, the production makes use of caricature and a homegrown version of Brechtian alienation technique that mellows down the 'dry' and 'intellectual' mode, as seen in Berliner Theatre's application in Brecht's very own *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, and brings home the play's political statement. (2014, p. 145)

Often when *Adivasi* indigenous people are represented in Bangalee culture, "an oversimplification of their [indigenous communities]" takes place, (Marma, 2010); or else a "pathetic" and folkloric representation is given, in the name of "cultural celebration" (Tripura, 2015, pp. 142-143). Marma expresses that, "[i]t is disheartening that the distorted, neglected and bypassed cultures and peoples are being once again given the false impression of permanence by the narrators who belong to the centre" (2010). Therefore, a production like *Rarang* was important, because it portrayed the *Adivasi* people with dignity, humour and respect.

Admittedly, *Rarang* was staged in the centre of power, Bangladesh's capital city. Moreover, it was not staged by the *Adivasi* people themselves, but instead it was *about* them. However, Tripura describes *Rarang* as a potentially important representation of ethnicity, since it was relatively unprecedented to represent *Adivasi* people positively. He did, though, express his doubt whether this play, however sincere, can stop the oppression against ethnic

minorities in Bangladesh (2015, p. 143, my translation). A writer from one of the ethnic communities did describe *Rarang* as a "sincere" play, and stated that it signifies the diversity of the nation's ethnicities, and how they should be "accommodated within the monolithic narration of the nation as posited by the cultural nationalism" of the Bangalees (Ahmed, 2014, p. 145).

Rarang staged the idea, expressed by many participants in my interviews and workshops, that human existence is impossible without following the principles of co-existence.

Part 2: An Analysis of my Practice Research

Mindful of comment by the UK environmental social scientist Joanne C. Jordan, I am cognisant that it is a huge responsibility "when someone tells you their story and entrusts you to put part of their life on the stage"; I need to "treat [their] stories with an ethics of care", particularly when I present the stories of people "who have experienced vulnerability, marginalisation, and trauma" due to political, religious, and ethnic supremacy (2020, p. 573). Furthermore, as Schechner suggests, "performing other cultures" is not "just reading them, not just visiting them, or importing them – but actually doing them. So that 'them' and 'us' is elided, or laid experientially side-by-side" (1982, p. 4) I aim to depict the stories of the people I have interviewed in my Practice Research; communities who are not silent, but silenced. I feel the weight of this responsibility, and know that, as Schechner states, I am directly implicated, since I am representing people rather than just writing about them.

My performance-film, entitled *Amra Bangladesh* (*We are Bangladesh*), examines identity/ies via the ideas of transgender, religion, ethnicity and language-based culture, and brings them together in order hopefully to reflect cosmopolitanism.[57]

[57] *Amra Bangladesh*/ "আমরা বাংলাদেশ": *We are Bangladesh*

In order to highlight the syncretic-humanist-cosmopolitan view that I have thus far explained, described and advocated in this thesis, I consciously chose not to depict the traditional beginning of a *Bangla natya*, where religious references are made. Instead, I include an audio-visual motif with European piano music and flowing water, which forms the soundtrack to an image of the various books (research, religious and literary) which informed the theoretical dimension to my project. The European music and the books represent my period of academic research in the UK, as does the laptop computer on the table, sticky notes on the wall, and surgical mask, an obvious indicator of the COVID-19 pandemic which, as I have stated, had a profound impact both on my academic research, and especially on the form that my performance output took.

Situated in the uncertainty of the pandemic, I was obliged to find alternative ways of making my Practice Research, which I had originally to present as a theatrical performance. instead, I was obliged to become a filmmaker overnight, and to produce what I am calling a performance-film. Since I had no experience whatsoever in filmmaking, I stepped hesitantly but willingly into the unknown world in order to accomplish my study. Thanks to the advice of tutors, watching performance-films, notably those of Pina Bausch's dance-theatre, and attending Sue Mayo's online workshops I rapidly acquired skills and confidence in order to develop my own eclectic aesthetic performance-film. I feel that I made a distinct journey from a series of literal, explicit and descriptive performances, to poetic, expressionistic, symbolic, metaphors. Devising the performance and making the film was achieved through continuous and intensive e-communications and dialogues with my tutors in the UK and theatre colleagues in Bangladesh. My film-editing skills were mainly the product of auto-didacticism.

At the beginning of the devised performance-film (0:20 – 2:10 mins) the motifs, props, and elements, as I have stated, in part denoted my study in the UK. The flowing water,

however, was a key indicator of the Bangladeshi context. Bangladesh is situated on a river delta and on the Bay of Bengal, and water travel, rice paddy fields, fertile land and also flooding and boat disasters, are features of Bangladeshi daily life. The sound of water thus signifies the geo-cultural context of Bangladesh, a delta that has diverse cultural strands and fluid narratives. The sound of water functions here as a threading device that unites various acts throughout the film. In addition, the motif also symbolises the fluidity of identities.

The first section (2:11 – 9:05 mins) comprises a dance performance that I co-devised with a performer in Bangladesh, and it is entitled *The Reincarnation*. This section reflects a journey from the real world to the imagined world with a boat that departs from the former and enters the latter on a river, which also denotes the Bangladeshi landscape. The performer, RR, enters the bush in a remote part of the jungle, which becomes a sort of stage. RR is a queer artist, and is therefore marginalised in Bangladeshi society. They perform a personal story, that has remained untold for many years. RR uses the audio-visual narrative of dance, movement, music and the costume – a *tupi* (cap) on their head and *burqa*, and pieces of jewellery that signify a Muslim Kathak dancer.

The performance is based in part on the question of Allah's gender. The name "Allah" found in *Asma-ul-Husna* (*The Ninety-Nine Names of Allah*) could be both feminine and masculine. The narrative of the performance originates in a very personal question that struck RR in their childhood: "Is Allah Queer, since He (why not She?) is considered by Muslims as the one who knows everything and created people with all sexual diversities" (2021)? As a result, the performance seeks to convey, as RR believes, the infinitude of Allah that is all-inclusive. Allah represents everyone regardless of gender identity: male, female, non-binary, the in-betweens. If Allah creates the universe and the universe reflects Allah's presence, then surely Allah excludes nobody and nothing. The pain of the questions RR has been bearing since childhood seeks a way of healing by burning the Arabic letters made of jute rope, that

spell the name Allah. The act of burning symbolises the ritual of reincarnation. Afterwards, RR takes a seat on a wooden chair painted in ash and writes *Al-Waasi*, one from the ninety-nine names of Allah, on his forehead in Arabic with a vermilion mark like a red dot or *bindi* worn by South-Asian women. Following the naming tradition in Bangladesh, RR says, "*Al-Waasi* sounds feminine or gender non-confirming (non-binary) to me. The word means all-encompassing or boundless" (2020). This queer performance queers both the performer, who adopts both traditionally male and female dance movement and costume; religion, since both Hindu and Muslim signs and symbols are drawn from; and Allah, whose supposedly male gender is questioned.

In Bangladesh, according to the majoritarian Muslim line of thinking, placing a red dot on the forehead is an expression of Hindu culture, and is considered a sin for Muslim women. The way of thinking that RR learnt in childhood is that if a Muslim woman places a red dot on her forehead, she will be condemned to hell. Queer people in Bangladesh are also considered to be sinners. However, the performance continues with dance and music behind the fire, as RR starts to write the verse, "Allah is the judge [...] the everlasting." On the one hand, the performance thus displays the ways in which women's and non binary people's bodies have been dominated and controlled in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, the performance envisions freedom, which is not possible in the real world but in this secreted, hidden fictional world. In this world that the dancer has created for themselves, the creator (Allah) and the creature (RR) come together in order to confront the power of practising "Islam" in a prescribed way, and to confront the ways in which the bodies of certain members of society are controlled by majoritarian norms. Hence, personal questions, political subversions and spiritual celebrations come together in this performance, in order to challenge rigidity, embrace fluidity, and search for the vital hope for plurality.

Based on a real-life story of intimidation and the frequent "stop and search" that certain members of Bangladeshi society must endure, the second section (9:06 – 14:02 mins) depicts, in oblique and sublimated ways, the violence that takes place on a daily basis within the country. RA and MU perform an ideological clash, in part symbolised by their costumes. MU, a bearded young man wearing a *pagri* (turban), pyjama and punjabi, is challenged by RA – a shaved young man wearing a t-shirt and trousers. When MU is forced to remove his *pagri*, his sense of personal belief is attacked. Feeling intimidated, MU tears the small sticker of the national flag from a wall, denoting his conflicted conflictual position in relation to national identity. MUI then puts on one *pagri* after another, all piled on top of each other, while chewing up the flag. He stages a "silent" resistance to the domination experienced in his daily life.

Afterwards, MU feels conflicted about his costume. During his afternoon walk, he takes off his *pagri* and throws it into a roadside pond. The idea of throwing it immediately gives him the idea of an alternative, so he himself jumps into the pond and grabs his *pagri*. He puts it on again and performs a *monajat* (prayer), while half-submerged in the water. MU imagines breaking the cyclic order of intimidation, rage, and hatred. The water becomes soothing and calming. The water also cleanses or purges the rage and hatred and, like the fire in the previous dance scene, enables a kind of reincarnation or new beginning. Finally, the water, again, symbolises fluidity, where MU can hope to respect both his own faith, and his nation, without conflict or contradiction. At the end of this section, MU starts walking in his everyday clothes on an endless path, as if he hears the call to go towards an open road that is free from the confinement of inferiority and instead brings transcendence.

The third section (14:03 – 14:51 mins) provides a photographic sequence, depicting a Bangalee cultural celebration in a public space. As I stated in Chapter Two, these kinds of celebrations are becoming increasingly proscribed and censured in Bangladesh, and now

require state security. *Hefajat-e-Islam* and other sectarian groups condemn these celebrations, such as the Bangla New Year, and spread the message that *Pahela Boishakh* celebrations, erecting sculptures, singing songs and engaging in other performing arts, are against Islamic practice and belief, publicly denouncing the celebrations. The scenes in my performance-film therefore depict police security and restricted public spontaneity during the celebrations, in order to denote the violent lack of respect for religious diversity in Bangladesh today. The painted papier maché birds and animals, the popular motifs in this celebration, are both fragile, precarious and temporary, and also symbolise free expression and the collective ethos of the creativity of the Delta.

At the end of the film (14:52 – 16:20 mins) both displays and plays with the destroyed objects and bodies that have resulted from the lack of tolerance for diversity in Bangladesh. The silent and still moments in this section of the film present a nation's conflict and pain. In a tight frame in close-up, in order to depict the constriction and oppression, a demolished sculpture and musical instrument indicate the mounting sectarian politics that proselytise sectarian groups' ideas in the Delta. Simultaneously, in a quiet act of rebellion, the performer's body-in-movement constantly portrays an opposition and resistance to the proselytization. Moreover, the performer's gestures, movements and postures suggest those of a swimmer, again denoting both the Bangladeshi geography of the Delta region, and also the fluidity of identity. Thus, the self-reflexive scene presents the idea of an engrossed artist or auteur who sets off on a quest to destabilise notions of fixed identity. The very end of this performance-film positions the "I", the researcher as the practitioner on one hand, and on the other hand, it suggests an abstraction of the "I", as merely a social construction of ideas and influences, a "narrated", "imagined" "I". The scene I attempt to set is of "I" as a point of in-between, as well as a drop or a bubble within a flow and flux, in order to emphasise the fluidity of identity that I have examined, explored and explicated throughout my thesis.

Finally, the water motif again returns, as female figure cups water in her hands and sings Rabindranath Tagore's song *anondoloke mongolaloke biraj satya sundor* ("truth and beauty prevail in the auspicious light, in the place of joy").[58] The *mise-en-scène* visually represents violence on the one hand and transcendence on the other, in a dynamic that repeats and echoes that of previous scenes, where reincarnation and transformation provide resistance to repression and oppression. The piece depicts sectarian acts of violence in present-day Bangladesh. In contrast, the male and female performers, both with movement and voice, enable and propose transcendence as an alternative, the choreography and sound hinting at an endless searching and journey of infinity against the coercive structures of repression. While the film until this point has been dominated by non-binary or male figures, it ends with a powerful female presence, who summarises all of the performance-film's main themes: the fluidity of identities, pride in the diversity of Bangladesh's myriad cultural traditions, and liberation through creativity.

Amra Bangladesh, therefore, becomes a metaphor of contestation, negotiation, hybridisation, that seeks neither the answer nor the solution. Instead, being informed by my ethnographic research in Bangladesh, the performance creates an embodied form of knowledge that seeks a new understanding of reality and sets a vision of plurality for the collectivity of people living in the Delta.

[58] *anondoloke mongolaloke biraj satya sundor*: "আনন্দলোকে মঙ্গলালোকে বিরাজ সত্য ও সুন্দর"; my translation.

Conclusion

This Practice Research project has attempted to examine the socio-political and cultural realities of identity and plurality in Bangladesh first by analysing the country's history, going back over a century. Informed both by official publications on history and on the oral history of personal stories told by people I have interviewed, the reality of violence, intimidation, and domination over the various minority communities throughout Bangladesh's history, has informed my project in the extent to which it is evident that violence and repression shape the Bangladeshi nation today. Since the early nineteenth century, dominating socio-political forces have emerged in this region, for instance, British colonialism, Pakistani power elites and sectarianism. This turbulent history has severely affected the societies and communities in this region.

Minorities, both religious and ethnic, have been bearing the complex memories and profound injuries of the socio-political turbulence, for decades. Notably, post-Independence Bangladesh has witnessed constant intimidation and exploitation by Bangalee sectarian groups. Thus, this examination provides an understanding of how the "nation-state" of Bangladesh has gradually lost its promise to preserve citizens' rights. Schendel's account summarises some of the main historical and socio-political realities that this thesis has sought to identify:

> The leaders of the movement for Bangladesh had imagined a society based on democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism. […] These ideals were expressed in the name of the new state—the People's Republic of Bangladesh—and in the image of a Golden Bengal. Officially Bangladesh is still a 'people's republic' but to most citizens the old ideals sound pretty hollow. Only nationalism has withstood the ravages of time. Socialism and

> secularism were ditched in the mid-1970s, and democracy has had a chequered and interrupted career. (2009, p. 251)

The Proclamation of Independence in April 1971 articulated three basic principles: equality, human dignity, and justice. But Bangladesh has lost its constitutional fundamental principles which it embraced immediately after the independence. This research has demonstrated that Bangladesh is currently not generating any initiatives that may enable its citizens to live "side by side" with equal rights, responsibilities, respect, and dignity.

However, this research has also found some reasons for hope. The concept of plurality, as Khan (2016) argues, and fluidity and hybridity, as Ahmed (2014) argues, are the key elements in Bangladeshi society, which just need to be harnessed, embraced and celebrated, as my research project and performance-film have sought to do. Rabindranath, the most famous poet to emerge from the region, firmly believes in the fundamental nature of "diversity" in the Delta (1918, p. 114). For Rabindranath, "mutability […] is the law of life". For this reason, the notion of "fluidity", I feel, is absolutely apt in a Bangladeshi context. He also celebrates society "where it uses [the] diversity for its world-game of infinite permutations and combinations", and appropriates life "where it is ever moving" (p. 116). Rabindranath champions an undivided Bangla and even subcontinent of India, "worshipping with all ceremony the magnificent cage of countless compartments that she has manufactured" (*ibid*). The "plurality" and "hybridity" that I have referred to throughout my project echo Rabindranath's description of the "magnificent cage of countless compartments", which depicts Bangladesh today.

This research has also investigated the artistic performance of the nation in Bangladesh. Bangla language-based cultural nationalism has dominated in Bangladeshi theatre. Nonetheless, theatre in this region also celebrates the expressivities of fluidity and

plurality that challenge the monolithic idea of national identity. These performances imagine a multi-axial space of co-existence and inclusion, rather than the inflexible mode of exclusion. Informed by the plurality expressed in some contemporary Bangladeshi theatrical performances, the Practice Research element of this project – the central element – sought to create a new performance that can celebrate diversity.

On the occasion of "World Theatre Day" in 2005, Ariane Mnouchkine, the French theatre director of epic pieces with historical and political themes, exclaimed:

> Help!
>
> Theatre, come to my rescue!
>
> I am asleep. Wake me
>
> I am lost in the dark, guide me, at least towards a candle
>
> I am lazy, shame me
>
> I am tired, raise me up
>
> I am indifferent, strike me
>
> I remain indifferent, beat me up
>
> I am afraid, encourage me
>
> I am ignorant, teach me
>
> I am monstrous, make me human
>
> I am pretentious, make me die of laughter
>
> I am cynical, take me down a peg
>
> I am foolish, transform me
>
> I am wicked, punish me.
>
> I am dominating and cruel, fight against me
>
> I am pedantic, make fun of me
>
> I am vulgar, elevate me

I am mute, untie my tongue

I no longer dream, call me a coward or a fool

I have forgotten, throw Memory in my face

I feel old and stale, make the Child in me leap up

I am heavy, give me Music

I am sad, bring me Joy

I am deaf, make Pain shriek like a storm

I am agitated, let Wisdom rise within me

I am weak, kindle Friendship

I am blind, summon all the Lights

I am dominated by Ugliness, bring in conquering Beauty

I have been recruited by Hatred, unleash all the forces of Love. (Mnouchkine, 2005)

Theatre can create a forum for debate on the co-existence of individuals and the communities from diverse backgrounds. Hence, my performance-film employed embodied form of knowledge to problematise monolithic notions of identities in Bangladesh. My aim was to propose plurality as the basis of living both in theatre and in real-life contexts in Bangladesh. Paul Gilroy, a British cultural theorist, writes of identity in ways that summarise my own approach to identities in Bangladesh "the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being made" (1993, p. 39). This concept of the hybridity of identities has been combined in my study with a belief that multiple heterogeneous identities must be tolerated together, in society. French sociologist Alain Touraine's *Can We Live Together?: Equity and Difference* states:

> We can live together only if the primary objective of our laws, institutions and forms of social organization is to safeguard our demand to live as the Subjects of our own experience. (2000, p. 158)

The hybridity of individual identities, "Subjects", as Touraine calls them, must all be enabled to live together in harmony, and both tolerance, and laws, can assist with this. Touraine writes of a "common task", which a nation can share, and which can be protected by law (Touraine, 2000).

I aspire to Rabindranath's idea of cosmopolitanism which "is not derived from a conception of reason that in its universality always tends toward abstractions; rather, it is dependent upon reason's articulation of the universal through an engagement with the local" (cited in Saranindranath, 2008, p. 1077). Rabindranath's "polyphonic orchestration of cosmopolitanism" within a specific South Asian context has been particularly pertinent to my study. In other words, my research has borrowed both from more universal notions of plurality, hybridity and cosmopolitanism, and it has taken account of the very specific conditions of Bangladesh's history and contemporary society and politics.

Bangladesh is a country where barefoot troubadours walk through the agrarian landscape and sing: *nanan boron gabhire bhai, eki boron dudh,/ jogot bhormiya dekhinu eki mayer put* ("Oh my friend, just as cow's milk is always white no matter the herd or species, so too are all human beings universally bound together by suckling the mother's milk").[59] My Practice Research has been an act of travelling that has sought to discover the unique specificities of individuals living together in a single nation: Bangladesh.

[59] *nanan boron gabhire bhai, eki boron dudh,/ jogot bhormiya dekhinu eki mayer put*: "নানান বরণ গাভীরে ভাই, একই বরণ দুধ, জগৎ ভরমিয়া দেখিনু একই মায়ের পুত"; translated from Bangla by Rebecca Haque;

Glossary

Adivasi: indigenous communities; however, the Constitution of Bangladesh (2011) uses the term tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities

Adivasi Dibash: Indigenous Day

Amra Bangladesh: We are Bangladesh

andolon: activism

Banga: the Bangla region

Bangabandhu: friend of Bangla

Banga-bhanga: the Partition of Bangla in 1905

Bangla: the language/region of the Bangalee people

Bangalee: the people who belong to the Bangla language and culture; the Constitution of Bangladesh states that, "the people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation" (2011)

Bangla natya: Bangla theatre

Baul: a heterogeneous group of mystic singers in Bangla

birangonas: war heroines

bisa-dhara: carrying venom

bisa-hara: removing venom

chorcha: artistic practice

dada: elder brother

dhoti-chadar: traditional male costume of the Bangla region

Gana-bhaban: the official residence of the prime minister of Bangladesh

Ganajagaran Mancha: Platform for the People's Uprising

Gram Theatre Movement: village theatre movement

haor: wetland, lowland

jatra: a traditional Bangla theatre, village opera

kirtan: artistic performance where people go into a trance with dance, music and song that is related to the Hindu and Buddhist religions

kurta-pajama: north-Indian clothing

madrasah: Islamic religious educational institution

manas: desire or will

mancha shilpi: stage artist

Mukta Natak Movement: liberated theatre movement

Mukti Bahini: freedom fighters

muktijoddha: freedom fighter

Muktijuddho: 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence

namaz: the ritual prayers to be observed five times a day in Islam

natya-karmi: theatre activist

natya-shilpi: theatre artist

pagri: turban

Pahela Boishakh: the first day of the Bangla calendar/New Year

Parbattya Chattagram: Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

prasad: Hindu worship food

puthi: manuscript

Qawmi: the Arabic word for a community of people

razakar: the Urdu word for a volunteer. In Bangladesh, the term has become a pejorative term

to mark people convicted of crimes against humanity in collaboration with the Pakistan Army during the *Muktijuddho* in 1971

Shaheed Buddhijeebi Dibash: Martyred Intellectuals Day

Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra: Independent Bangla Radio Centre

waz mahfil: lay devotees gather to listen to an Islamic scholar who elucidates one or more religious issues believed to be important

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Appendix A: Objectives of the in-depth interviews

The objectives of this qualitative study are to research the socio-political context that has generated the contest for national identity in Bangladesh since the War of Independence in 1971. The research seeks to delve into the politics of identity that the citizens of Bangladesh as well as the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain engage in, in daily life and in artistic performance. The research asks how Practice Research theatrical performance can provide a space for the acceptance of fluid and heterogeneous cultural identities in Bangladesh. The method is based on conducting structured/semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observations, and the social media/platform discussions to investigate the significance and function of identity in past, present and future life. The proposed interviews will be conducted with different individual from diverse background in Bangladesh. Information will be collected from these interviews to explore how the participants envisage their national identity and how they see it in the future. The aim is to examine how the partition of India in 1947, the War of Independence in 1971, political killings in 1975 and 1981, as well as the violence on various ethnic and religious communities since the 1990s, affect the performance of identity in everyday life and in artistic performances in Bangladesh. Data will be gathered from these interviews, where people will participate with their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, experiences, inspirations and opinions. I aim to keep the questions as open as possible and keep records (including email responses and/or AV documentation) according to the interviewee's consent. The language medium for the interviews will led by the respondents. The reason I choose this approach is because I believe it will enable me to capture the complexity of identity that I wish to observe. Through a narrative approach my aim is to gain insights into the "voices", the life stories and the complex and highly personal accounts of identity, culture and history.

At the beginning of this session, I shall introduce myself. I am Sudip Chakroborthy, performing arts and travel lover, studying for a PhD in theatre and performance at Goldsmiths, University of London, on study leave from a theatre-teaching position at the University of Dhaka, and a theatre practitioner (sometimes paid, sometimes unpaid) in Bangladesh. I was brought up in an agrarian small town under the district of Habiganj and later had the opportunity to study theatre in the University of Dhaka. At the beginning of this interview, would you please introduce yourself?

(Long answer) …….....

Appendix B: Questionnaire

1.a. In your opinion, which identity markers (from the following list) play a key role in the formation of individual identity? (আপনার মতে ব্যক্তি পরিচয় গঠনে কোনটি মুখ্য ভূমিকা পালন করে?)

Language (ভাষা)		Race (বর্ণ)		Ethnicity (জাতিগত সত্ত্বা)	
Religion (ধর্ম)		Class (শ্রেণি)		Birthplace/homeland (জন্মস্থান/জন্মভূমি)	
Gender (লিঙ্গ)		Sexuality (যৌন লক্ষণ)		Multiple (বিচিত্র/মিশ্র)	
None (কোনোটি নয়)		Other (please specify) / অন্যান্য (উল্লেখ করুন):			

1.b. Could you develop your arguments in favour of your choices (from the list above)? (আপনার যুক্তির স্বপক্ষে বক্তব্য উপস্থাপনের জন্য সবিনয়ে অনুরোধ করছি।)

(Long answer) …….....

2.a. In your opinion, which markers play a key role in the formation of national identity? (আপনার মতে জাতীয় পরিচয় গঠনে কোনটি মুখ্য ভূমিকা পালন করে?)

Language (ভাষা)		Race (বর্ণ)		Ethnicity (জাতিগত সত্ত্বা)	
Religion (ধর্ম)		Class (শ্রেণি)		Birthplace/homeland (জন্মস্থান/জন্মভূমি)	
Gender (লিঙ্গ)		Sexuality (যৌন লক্ষণ)		Multiple (বিচিত্র/মিশ্র)	
None (কোনোটি নয়)		Other (please specify) / অন্যান্য (উল্লেখ করুন):			

2.b. Could you develop your arguments in favour of your statement? (আপনার যুক্তির স্বপক্ষে বক্তব্য উপস্থাপনের জন্য সবিনয়ে অনুরোধ করছি।)

(Long answer) …….....

3. The Constitution of Bangladesh opens with "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim (In the name of Allah, the Beneficient, the Merciful)/ In the name of the Creator, the Merciful."

The Republic Part 1 recognises “Islam” as the state religion, but the State ensures equal status and equal right to citizens who practise Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.

The Constitution states that the people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis.

In the Fundamental principles of state policy Part 2 mentions that the principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of - (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.

- The Constitution also declares that the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minority races, ethnic sects and communities.

- The Constitution declares that the State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between citizens and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and of opportunities in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic and to ensure equality of opportunity and participation of women in all spheres of national life.

(গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশের সংবিধানের প্রস্তাবনায় ‘‘বিসমিল্লাহির রাহমানির রাহিম’’ ‘‘(দয়াময়, পরম দয়ালু, আল্লাহের নামে)/ পরম করুণাময় সৃষ্টিকর্তার নাম’’ সম্বোধন করা হয়েছে।

প্রজাতন্ত্রের প্রথম ভাগে রাষ্ট্রধর্ম হিসেবে ‘‘ইসলাম’’ ধর্মকে স্বীকৃতি দেয়া হয়েছে, পাশাপাশি হিন্দু, বৌদ্ধ, খ্রীষ্টানসহ অন্যান্য ধর্ম পালনে রাষ্ট্র সমমর্যাদা ও সমঅধিকার নিশ্চিত করবেন বলে উল্লেখ রয়েছে। এবং নাগরিকত্ব প্রসঙ্গে উল্লেখ রয়েছে যে বাংলাদেশের জনগণ জাতি হিসাবে বাঙালী এবং নাগরিকগণ বাংলাদেশী বলে পরিচিত হবেন ।

রাষ্ট্র পরিচালনার মূলনীতির দ্বিতীয় ভাগে ধর্ম নিরপেক্ষতা নীতি পুনঃঅধিষ্ঠিত করা হয়েছে। এই নীতি বাস্তবায়নের লক্ষে যা কিছু বিলোপ করা হবে বলে উল্লেখ রয়েছে তা হল - (ক) সর্ব প্রকার সাম্প্রদায়িকতা, (খ) রাষ্ট্র কর্তৃক কোন ধর্মকে রাজনৈতিক মর্যাদা দান, (গ) রাজনৈতিক উদ্দেশ্যে ধর্মীয় অপব্যবহার, (ঘ) কোন বিশেষ ধর্ম পালনকারী ব্যক্তির প্রতি বৈষম্য বা তাহার উপর নিপীড়ন।

- এছাড়া উল্লেখ রয়েছে যে উপজাতি, ক্ষুদ্র জাতিসত্তা, নৃ-গোষ্ঠী ও সম্প্রদায়ের সংস্কৃতি এবং ঐতিহ্য সংরক্ষণ, উন্নয়ন ও বিকাশের ব্যবস্থা গ্রহণ করা হবে।

- কেবল ধর্ম, গোষ্ঠী, বর্ণ, নারীপুরুষভেদ বা জন্মস্থানের কারণে কোন নাগরিকের প্রতি রাষ্ট্র বৈষম্য প্রদর্শন করা হবে না, রাষ্ট্র ও গণজীবনের সর্বস্তরে নারীপুরুষের সমান অধিকার এবং মানুষের উপর মানুষের শোষণ হতে মুক্ত ন্যায়ানুগ ও সাম্যবাদী সমাজলাভ নিশ্চিত করার উদ্দেশ্যে সমাজতান্ত্রিক অর্থনৈতিক ব্যবস্থা প্রতিষ্ঠা করা হবে বলে উল্লেখ রয়েছে)

3. a. How do you see these Constitutional provisions playing out in everyday life? (এই সংবিধানিক বিধানগুলি একে অপরের সাথে অথবা পারস্পরিক যেসব ভূমিকা পালন করছে তা আপনি কীভাবে দেখেন?)

(Long answer) …….....

3. b. How do you see these Constitutional provisions playing in artistic performances such as theatre, music, *waz mahfil*, *kirtans*? (দৈনন্দিন জীবনে এবং শৈল্পিক পারফরমেন্সে যেমন থিয়েটারে এই সংবিধানিক বিধানগুলিকে আপনি কিরূপ ভূমিকা পালন করতে দেখেন?)

(Long answer) …….....

4. Do the Constitutional provisions have any effect on your daily life and creative life? (উপরিউক্ত সাংবিধানিক বিধানগুলো কি আপনার দৈনন্দিন জীবন এবং সৃজনশীল জীবনে কোনও প্রভাব ফেলেছে, অর্থাৎ আপনার ব্যক্তিগত জীবনে এবং জনজীবনে?)

(Long answer) …….....

5. Do you see any problem, if in any, to multiple faiths, ethnicities and cultures co-existing with equal rights and responsibilities in Bangladesh? (বাংলাদেশে যদি কোনও নির্দিষ্ট স্থানে একাধিক বিশ্বাস, বিভিন্ন জাতিসত্তা ও সংস্কৃতি সমান অধিকার ও দায়িত্বের সাথে সহাবস্থান করে এতে কি কোনরূপ সমস্যা দেখা যায়?)

(Long answer) …….....