

**Cultural Narratives, Ideological Discourse, and Shaping Identity Construction:
Implications for Post-Uprising Bangladesh**

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Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted process through which cultural narratives, ideological discourse, and national identity are constructed in post-uprising Bangladesh. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006), it highlights how religion, language, history, culture, and ideology converge to shape a nation's identity. The discussion explores national narratives, political ramifications of cultural dynamics, international cultural diplomacy, and the impact of media and the arts. By referencing examples from India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey, it demonstrates how ideological and cultural interplay influence national identity formation. In light of the 2024 mass uprising, the paper argues for a renewed national identity rooted in inclusivity, civic consciousness, and generational aspiration. It contends that the absence of a cohesive cultural narrative has resulted in a fragmented identity, making a case for crafting a new, forward-thinking national story.

Introduction

Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities* reframes nationalism not as empirical truth but as a political fiction—one that unites individuals through shared imagination rather than direct interaction (Anderson, 2006). National identity emerges from cultural rituals, ideological propulsions, and common aspirations, which together create the illusion of unity and belonging. This myth-making is sustained through narratives: stories embedded in religion, language, history, and collective memory.

In Bangladesh, the formation of identity is deeply influenced by religion and language, which serve as both powerful and contested factors. The conflict between global Islamophobia and national pride has heightened internal divisions, while cultural memory is often exploited for political gain. The 2024 uprising presents a pivotal moment: a chance to reimagine a national

identity within the context of a sustainable and resilient Bangladeshi state that emphasizes unity, justice, and a shared purpose.

National Narrative: Pillar of Identity

Every nation tells itself a story—about its birth, destiny, and distinctiveness. These stories, however, are often stitched together with myth, omission, and power (Anderson, 2006). In shaping public consciousness, culture becomes not just a backdrop, but a battleground.

Cultural narratives encode values, rituals, and beliefs. They determine what is celebrated, what is erased, and who gets to define the “we.” Consider the American Dream—a mythos of self-made success—that has guided generations despite systemic inequality. Such narratives operate as secular scripture, defining belonging and aspiration simultaneously.

Culture and Development: Intertwined Dimensions of Societal Progress

National development must move beyond GDP metrics. A truly developmental state must nurture cultural capital— ideology, tradition, heritage—as vital components of growth (Open OK State, n.d.). Development that erases identity is not progress; it’s colonialism rebranded.

Rooting progress in cultural authenticity empowers citizens. A culturally sensitive development model doesn’t impose technocratic fixes but draws from indigenous knowledge and shared moral codes.

Identity and Division: Bangladesh’s Overlooked Realities

Bangladesh’s cultural narratives—though resilient—are fractured. The ideological discourse, often devoid of philosophical grounding, reflects a decaying consensus. Social contract theory, once central to political thought, has faded from relevance, replaced by patronage and populism.

This fragmentation undermines national cohesion. Rather than embracing pluralism, politics often exploits identity fault lines—ethnicity, language, religion—for short-term gains. To counteract this, a robust national narrative rooted in inclusive citizenship must rise above narrow sectarian agendas.

Cultural Exchange: Influence and Conflict

The cultural influence of India is significant in Bangladesh. The shared language and extensive **border** allows for a fluid exchange of media, ideologies, and sentiments between the two countries. Indian cinema, in particular, acts as a form of soft power—shaping regional identity

and reinforcing political ideologies (Commons Social Change Library, n.d.).

Indian nationalism has deep roots in cultural expressions, especially through Indian films. However, in the context of India's Citizenship Amendment Act and the rise of Hindu nationalism, this influence has taken on a political dimension. In Bangladesh, support for pro-Indian governments has, in part, been cultivated through ideological osmosis rather than solely through diplomatic strategies.

Cultural Narratives in Muslim-Majority Nations

Islamophobia remains a global force shaping the perception—and misperception—of Muslim-majority states. First spotlighted at the 2001 Durban Conference (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.), this prejudice now infiltrates both policy and cultural expression, this also presents a significant obstacle to development and progress in these nations. The role of media and cultural expression is vital in dismantling such prejudices and reshaping global narratives (Saeed, 2007).

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Iranian government has significantly influenced the nation's artistic and cultural landscape. This influence is particularly notable in state-controlled media, including radio, television, and cinema, where a strong emphasis is placed on religious and ideological values. While the regime remains dedicated to upholding these values, it has also adjusted its policies to utilize art and culture for conveying political and religious messages. In response to perceived cultural encroachments by global influences, the government has increasingly highlighted "soft power" as a vital strategic approach. A significant trend in recent years has been the growth of collaboration between governmental institutions and artists or academics, reflecting a more proactive involvement that aligns with the state's ideological and national objectives.

Saudi Arabia's efforts to modernize, particularly under the framework of Vision 2030, have greatly enhanced its international reputation. By championing cultural diversity, the Kingdom is broadening its soft power and presenting a more inclusive and modern identity on the global platform. With continued investments in cultural diplomacy and soft power initiatives, Saudi Arabia is poised to become a powerful player in influencing global narratives.

In Southeast Asia, the relationship between Islam, multiculturalism, and contemporary nationalism is vividly illustrated by Malaysia and Indonesia. Films like "The Journey" engage with themes of postcolonial identity politics, while Indonesia's democratic approach merges Islamic principles with constitutional governance, successfully integrating political Islam into mainstream politics without resorting to authoritarian methods. Directed by Chiu Keng Guan, the 2014 Malaysian film "The Journey" offers an intricate exploration of the dynamics between multiculturalism and sub-state nationalism. It sheds light on Malaysia's colonial history and investigates the cultural interplay among its three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The film effectively shows how cultural representations can influence societal perceptions and reveal underlying power structures, rather than merely reflecting the realities of everyday life (Khoo, 2016).

Indonesia, a nation of vast cultural and ethnic diversity, has embraced the challenges of globalization with vigor. Indonesian nationalism today emphasizes technological progress and global integration. The country's multiethnic character is not merely a historical artifact but a central feature of its social fabric. Western influences have significantly impacted Islamic societies, leading to nationalist movements that seek to harmonize Islamic values with modern demands (Effendy, 2003). As democracy has deepened, Muslim civil society has played a vital role, with Muslims holding substantial representation in parliament. Indonesia's artistic traditions—some of which predate Islam—have absorbed Islamic elements over time, enriching their spiritual and cultural meanings.

Turkey, guided by the AKP, serves as a noteworthy case of the integration of Islamism and democratic principles. The government employs popular culture as a tool to strengthen national unity. This political trajectory highlights the potential for ideological narratives to be modernized while preserving their cultural authenticity.

Conclusion: Strategies and Prospects for National Reconstruction

Bangladesh's divided nationalism highlights a more profound issue: the decline of a shared sense of meaning. The 2024 uprising has exposed weaknesses in the established order, but it is essential to fill this gap with something more substantial than just political rhetoric. This moment presents an opportunity to rebuild a social contract based on shared dignity, cultural diversity, and civic responsibility.

Alongside addressing immediate challenges, there should be a focus on cultivating a cohesive national identity. By taking advantage of the ideological framework that emerged following the uprising, it is possible to create a unified cultural narrative that fosters a sustainable and deeply rooted national identity. This development will ultimately aid in establishing an inclusive, diverse, and progressive nation. Presently, Bangladeshi cultural activism suffers from a lack of a clear and objective ideological narrative. Therefore, building an inclusive cultural narrative requires a solid ideological foundation that genuinely reflects the perspectives and values of the Bangladeshi people.

This endeavor goes beyond policy-making; it necessitates a compelling Bangladeshi national narrative that resonates with the youth, encapsulates the country's spiritual and historical essence, and inspires a shared moral vision. Without this narrative, Bangladesh risks exchanging one form of authoritarian populism for another, leading to cycles of uprisings without meaningful change.

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Ahmad M Dipu is a passionate independent writer dedicated to exploring pressing issues, particularly in the dynamic sociopolitical landscape of Bangladesh. His work blends theory with lived reality, drawing on diverse academic and experiential insights. Through unaffiliated research and cultural commentary, he seeks to inspire reflection and dialogue around national identity, governance, and the moral imagination.