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## ***Sabash Bangladesh: Cricket, Nationalism and Culture, 1971-2019***

### **[Abstract**

This essay explores the intricate relationship between cricket, nationalism, and culture in Bangladesh from 1971 to 2019. Emerging from the traumatic experience of the Liberation War, genocide, and political instability, Bangladesh has continuously sought a cohesive national identity amidst deep political, social, religious, and cultural divisions. In this context, cricket has evolved beyond a mere sport to become a powerful cultural force and an emblem of national unity. The game transcends class, religion, ethnicity, and ideological divides, creating a shared emotional and symbolic space where diverse groups coalesce under a unified national sentiment encapsulated in the slogan “Aamar Bangladesh, Sabash Bangladesh.” Despite limited success in major international tournaments, the consistent performance of the national cricket team has fostered national confidence, challenged earlier inferiority complexes, and cultivated a vibrant cricket culture embedded in everyday life. Cricket has thus functioned as a popular cultural unifier, an instrument of assertive cultural nationalism, and a transnational medium through which Bangladeshi identity is reimagined in the era of globalization. By situating sports history within broader socio-political narratives, this essay argues that cricket represents one of the most unchallenged expressions of nationhood in contemporary Bangladesh, particularly in a society still grappling with the complex legacies of war, trauma, and memory.

*Keywords:* Cricket, Nationalism, Cultural Identity, Sports History, Liberation War]

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## Introductory Note

Nations, like individuals, develop and project their self images globally. Bangladesh is said to have been far backward in building up a positive self-image in the eyes of global communities. The areas of concern have been multiple: political turmoil, dreadful economy, impoverished society, natural calamity, man-made tragedy – which continue to plague the country and make material progress almost a difficult task. When Bangladesh attained political independence under Mujib’s leadership in 1971, immense hope was aroused amongst the populace for the creation of what Mujib declared as *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal), which implied the establishment of a democratic secular nation-state, restoration of cultural freedom and pride of the people, and attainment of the economic dignity of the common man. Yet, realistically speaking, the country has not attained much of it as yet. Rather, during the first four decades of its existence, as Abul Kalam reemphasizes: ‘it has at best the image of a nascent democracy, the largest of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) that remains trapped in corruption, lawlessness, misgovernance and poverty, patently manifesting “the destiny of a disadvantaged nation”.’<sup>1</sup> The critical debates that have shaped Bangladesh’s politics and policies since her birth are thus manifold: ‘the identity question; the issue of democratization and community and peoples’ participation; challenges of economic growth; human development and poverty alleviation; social transformation and empowerment of the under-privileged groups; and the role of civil society and effective governance in fostering democracy and development.’<sup>2</sup>

Home to more than 160 million people, despite its abject poverty, Bangladesh is rich in culture and tradition. In the words of Lawrence Ziring: ‘It is a predominantly Muslim entity, but historically accustomed to living among and with peoples of other persuasion. That capacity for expanded community is Bangladesh’s hidden strength. Although contemporary forces have tried to subvert that tradition, it lingers on and offers the people of Bangladesh a possible way out of their state-building dilemma.’<sup>3</sup> It is argued, ‘The way communities identify themselves today is often conveyed through the concept of “nation”, a people with a shared history and

culture. Common bonds of language, history, religion, and ethnicity increasingly determine the parameters of nationhood.’<sup>4</sup> This view of nationhood tends to put too much emphasis on homogenization, ignoring the process of contestation and complexity of responses to such a perceived notion of nationhood. Peter van der Veer argues,

The centralizing force of nation-building itself sprouts centrifugal forces that crystallize around other dreams of nationhood: nationalism creates other nationalisms – religious, ethnic, linguistic, secular – but not a common culture. The modernization paradigm makes too much of homogenization, while it overlooks ‘antagonization’ and ‘heterogenization’. The forging of identity always simultaneously creates diversity.<sup>5</sup>

Concurrently, the secularism of postcolonial nationalism is often challenged by the central role religion is said to have played in most of the countries in South Asia, particularly the four subcontinental nations – India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The status of the non-Bengali population of Bangladesh, on the other hand, poses a more critical challenge to any homogenized sense of nationhood.

However, as I intend to argue in this paper, peculiar modes of cultural self-expression have developed in colonial and postcolonial South Asia, which have nullified the elements of heterogeneity and religiosity in the construction, representation and projection of nationalism. While cricket in contemporary South Asia is an exemplar in this regard, Bangladesh can boast of a few such cultural unifiers since its birth – Language Day or Martyr’s Day (21 February), Independence Day (26 March), Pahela Baishakh (mid-April) and Victory Day (16 December). One Bangladeshi scholar lamented on the eve of the new millennium:

It appears to be the fact that all that had held us together in 1971 has become divided today, whether with or without justification. Bangladesh now looks back to the days when the unity and determination of its people worked wonders. Today it remains a deeply fragmented nation –

fragmentation to which the politics of identity continues to contribute.<sup>6</sup>

While this lamentation still holds much weight in political and social spheres, cricket in the new century has become an emblem of national unity and identity, transcending all divisions in Bangladesh. It also challenges Willem van Schendel's contention that 'there is still (in 2001) no uncontested sense of nation in Bangladesh'<sup>7</sup> because if there is one 'uncontested sense of nation' in Bangladesh, it resides in her cricket. Since Bangladesh is a multicultural society, there are other voices/mediums speaking for/representing the nation. Cricket is probably the strongest *other* voice/medium which helps the nation to assert its identity in a fast-changing world shaped by globalization and transnational movements. It creates a transnational space where Bangladeshi self-images are rebuilt and redefined beyond the conventional contours of nationalist or Islamic discourses.

Rehman Sobhan, writing on the eve of the new millennium, argued: 'the new millennium holds out an enormous promise for Bangladesh. But to realize this promise will demand structural adjustment not just for the economy but in our politics and society. Such a process of structural change is beyond the capacity of any donor and will have to be an indigenous exercise.'<sup>8</sup> Sobhan obviously did not consider sport or cricket to be worthy of mention in his scheme of things. But in the last one-decade cricket has proved one of the very few fields, where Bangladesh has been able to hold out enormous promise, realize it to a significant extent, and assert her national identity through an indigenous cricket culture.

### **The Rise of Bangladesh as a Cricketing Nation**

Bangladeshi passion for football as the most popular mass spectator sport gave way to the state's rising status as a cricketing nation from the end of the 1990s. While cricket progressed slowly as a popular game in independent Bangladesh since the 1970s, it was only at the turn of the century that the people and the government of Bangladesh came to appreciate the sport's potential as a socially viable politico-cultural tool to assert national identity in South Asia as also to prop up the process of nation-building. This fundamental

transformation in the Bangladeshi approach to sport can be meaningfully understood in terms of the state's appropriation of cricket as a political instrument and economic means in an age when the country has also to cope with the challenges posed by globalization and its attendant ramifications such as economic liberalization, commercialism, mediatization and professionalism. Three crucial developments – Bangladesh's win in the ICC Trophy 1997 to qualify for the 1999 World Cup, her victory over Pakistan in the 1999 Cricket World Cup and her attainment of 'Test' status in 2000 – made a transforming impact on the psyche of the Bangladeshi masses, heralding the rise of Bangladesh as a cricketing nation and making the game a marker of the nation's unitary identity in the 21st century.

While Bangladesh slowly made desired progress in cricket in terms of performance and organization in the first two and half decades of Independence,<sup>9</sup> its cricket culture tended to remain *colonized*. In the context of their nation's marginal presence and poor performance at the international level, Bangladeshi public used to support either Pakistan or India and admire Pakistani or Indian cricketers as idols at the international stage. Despite Bangladesh's absence from major international cricketing fixtures, people in large numbers followed passionately the cricketing prowess and rivalry of their two big neighbours, particularly when the latter played against each other on the soil of Bangladesh. Pakistani cricketers like Zaheer Abbas, Imran Khan, Javed Miandad, Wasim Akram and Ramiz Raja and Indian nationals such as Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev, Ravi Sashtri and Md. Azharuddin became the cynosure of all eyes. The support for Pakistan, however, was overwhelming till the late 1990s predominantly due to the religious factor although, given India's crucial role in bringing about Bangladesh's freedom, support for India should have been natural. Pakistan team's charisma under Imran Khan's flamboyant personality, the team's high success rate against India particularly in Sharjah, and their subsequent World Cup victory played a major role in making the majority of the Bangladeshis aggressive Pakistan fans. The situation began to change from the mid-1990s, as Shayma Dasgupta rightly pointed out, 'with the post-1971 generation taking centre stage'.<sup>10</sup> The come-back of the Awami League to political power was also

probably an important factor in transforming the mindset of the people: ‘Basically, as the value of India to our country was propagated, and that filtered through to the masses, a slight shift could be seen. If today you see a fair number of Indian supporters, that’s the reason. For the enlightened classes, the religious factor was overshadowed by the political factor.’<sup>11</sup> The rise of Sachin Tendulkar added more vigour while the emergence of Sourav Ganguly as an international Bengali cricketing icon and a charismatic Team India under his leadership at the turn of the century made a fundamental impact on the psyche of cricket fandom in Bangladesh. Thus, the success and impact of great performance and stars of her two giant neighbours – India and Pakistan – in international cricket during the 1980s and 1990s made common Bangladeshis supportive of any of these two teams, and worshipper of cricketing icons of these nations. This in turn implied the growth of a *colonized* cricket fandom in Bangladesh in the absence of the nation’s powerful self-image as a cricketing force. A major breakthrough was needed to change the image of Bangladesh cricket as well as also its cricket culture. Bangladesh’s win in the ICC Trophy of 1997 leading to her qualification for the World Cup, her smart performance in their World Cup debut in 1999, and her consequent accession to Test status in 2000, provided a series of such much-needed breakthroughs, bringing about in consequence a fundamental transformation in Bangladesh cricket for ever.

Bangladesh's achievement in the sixth ICC Trophy, which took place in Malaysia in 1997, granted her the qualification to participate in the World Cup for the first time. As Bangladesh reached the final of the tournament, it obtained the passport to the next World Cup. But people back home wanted to see their national team win the Trophy for the first time. Bangladeshis living in Malaysia and Singapore had already given the team a warm welcome, inviting them to lunch and dinner. They also assembled in large numbers to watch the final match at Denanga Sports Complex Ground. It seemed as if the match was being played in Bangladesh as the fans came with colourful banners, festoons and placards, donning red-and-green colour onto their faces and waving the national flags. As Bangladesh won the match, thousands of fans thronged on to the ground to congratulate the team.<sup>12</sup> Back home in

Bangladesh the match seemed to have brought everyday life to a standstill – from office to court, while the roads became desolate as all assembled before the television or radio set. Ecstatic celebration followed the victory of Bangladesh with the fans coming out of homes, offices, schools and colleges, markets and workplaces into roads to express their joyous excitement.<sup>13</sup> Later on the captain of the Bangladesh team, Akram Khan, recounted the true significance of the victory thus: ‘Truly speaking, everything seemed to have changed after this victory. I think, not only in cricket, but in general Bangladesh came up to the world with a new identity. We emerged as a cricketing nation. To date Bangladesh has been known as a recurrently flood-hit country. But after the ICC Trophy win, global communities came to recognize Bangladesh as a cricketing nation.’

<sup>14</sup> In fact, people all over the country became jubilant as the dream to play in the World Cup became true. At the same time, Bangladesh also became a regular ICC member with the right to play one-day internationals. The government declared a national holiday to celebrate the occasion.

Bangladesh’s maiden participation in the World Cup was crucial in changing the outlook of the Bangladeshi masses towards the game. Till then they used to support either Pakistan or India in the competition for the Cup in the absence of *their* team. It was time to shout for their *own* team in 1999. The red-and-green brigade of Bangladesh would make the nation’s presence felt and identity asserted in large parts of the world.<sup>15</sup> Bangladesh achieved its first victory in the World Cup against Scotland on 24 May. Then it went on to stage a big upset by defeating one of the tournaments favourites, star-studded Pakistan, in their last group league match on 31 May. This win came to be regarded as a historic victory for Bangladesh on more counts than one. The comprehensive victory of Bangladesh over Pakistan in an otherwise unimportant match in Northampton became a watershed in the history of Bangladesh cricket primarily because this victory was considered by many, including the then ICC president Jagmohan Dalmiya, as clear evidence of Bangladesh’s growing stature as a cricket-playing nation and an ample justification for her elevation to Test status. The victory brought in its wake wild jubilation throughout the country. From Teknaf to Tentulia, people came out of their homes

in joyous excitement once the last wicket of Pakistan fell. They never saw such a victory since that against the same Pakistan in the Liberation War of 1971.<sup>16</sup> As one journalist commented: ‘The people of this small country on the bank of Jamuna have forgotten all its poverty, sorrow and woes. They have become optimistic about their future in cricket. They waited for 28 long years to achieve such a victory.’<sup>17</sup> Partha Tanvir Naved, one of the few Bangladeshi journalists covering the World Cup in England, wrote later:

On the balcony of the pavilion at Cardiff players and officials were hugging each other. Everyone was in a state of jubilation, some waving their hands to the fans in the stadium. My mind was lit with peace. 16 December 1971. Bangladesh became free from the clutches of the murderers. While arranging sweets to treat friends in order to celebrate our freedom, I shouted on a silent evening ‘Joy Bangla! Joy Bangla!’ (Victorious Bengal! Victorious Bengal!) expressing my excitement to gain emotional soothing.

The same indescribable feeling has come back to me today. I feel like bathing in a sea of joy. The only regret is that I am unable to share the limitless jubilation of my fellow countrymen back home.<sup>18</sup>

Wisden acknowledged the rumours of match-fixing, but added: ‘Nothing diminished the Bangladeshi fans’ euphoria. It was the greatest day in their cricketing history, and perhaps no event since independence had united the country with such delight.’<sup>19</sup> This victory instilled a lot of confidence into the hearts of an otherwise ailing nation, making the people aware of their potential in different fields of life.<sup>20</sup> Poet Shamsur Rahman considered the victory to be the ‘most glorious victory in the history of Bangladesh cricket’ and hoped that it would inspire the Bengalis in every sphere of life.<sup>21</sup> Prof. A.K. Azad Chowdhury, the vice chancellor of Dhaka University, reckoned the feeling of the victory to be similar to that of the famous Victory Day of 16 December 1971. The prime minister also admitted that the victory reminded her of the victory of the freedom fighters in the Liberation War.<sup>22</sup> The historic win led

to what was then a novel kind of journalistic enterprise. The newspapers in and around Dhaka and even abroad gave an unprecedented importance to the news of Bangladesh's victory. The depiction of the event in different newspapers, albeit heterogeneous in nature, reflected the diverse contemporary meanings of the same – political, social, cultural and economic. For many including politicians, litterateurs and intellectuals, the victory, comparable to the victory in the War of Liberation, was deemed to be a revenge against the atrocities committed by the Pakistan army against Bangladeshi masses in 1971. As Arifur Rahman Babu, a journalist, using sport as an allegory for politics, wrote from Northampton:

Some inner feelings have made this victory against Pakistan more than a mere sporting victory. The painful memory of 71 cannot be forgotten so easily. If that memory comes to dominate our mind on this day of win, the onus should not be put on the mind, but on the brutal events of history. Great is the generation of our Liberation, great are our brave boys!<sup>23</sup>

Post-1999, there was a dramatic transformation in the status of cricket in the country. From office goers to school students the game became a fad with everybody in the cities. Cricket was fast challenging football's position as the number one sport in Bangladesh. The game, having shed its aristocratic restrictions, began to prosper at the grassroots of Bangladeshi society. From a beggar to a rich man, its popularity increased overnight.<sup>24</sup> As one writer aptly remarked, 'it has now become difficult to live life without cricket'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, cricket became an inescapable part of Bangladeshi life. The sale of cricket goods also increased by leaps and bounds. In the lanes and streets of Dhaka, young men could be found playing cricket with whatever they could gather.<sup>26</sup> Despite being a poor underdeveloped country, Bangladesh preferred to invest a lot to patronize and play international cricket to project a positive image at the global stage. The government, in that context, decided to hand over the Bangabandhu Stadium to the BCB for cricket's further promotion.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the demand for a separate cricket ground was also voiced.<sup>28</sup> Thus the impact of the victory on Bangladeshi society and culture was momentous and

long-term while the implications of the victory for Bangladesh cricket were historic and far-reaching.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever be the strength of allegations by the Western media about Bangladesh's victory against Pakistan, it did the trick for the dream to come true for the nation. Bangladesh acquired long-cherished Test status on 26 June 2000 amidst Western opposition and not too sober controversy. However, the accession of Bangladesh to Test status was the much-needed measure to open the flood gates of cricket enthusiasm for ever. Bangladesh again went wild with celebrations, probably a little out of proportion; yet the real cricket fan knew what it meant for the nation's cricket.<sup>30</sup> 'The passionate followers of cricket across the country and strong political support by the Government of Bangladesh' were considered to be two key domestic factors precipitating Bangladesh's Test status.<sup>31</sup> As the former South African cricketer Ali Bacher noted during his visit to Dhaka, 'the game of cricket has great prospects in a country like Bangladesh where there is cricket on the streets, cricket in the schools, in the villages, a competitive league, and Friday cricket – drawing crowds of spectators who love the game in all its forms'.<sup>32</sup>

Although the decision to accord Test status to Bangladesh was wrought with controversy with serious doubts being expressed as to the advisability of giving Bangladesh Test status, the Test playing experience with India was expected to propel 'the beginning of some tangible improvement in our cricketing infrastructure along with an impetus provided to competitive, longer version of cricket in the district, divisional and national levels across the country'.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, the Test proved to be of immense significance in terms of the nation's opportunity to project a passionate display of cricket culture. Bangladesh's entry into Test cricket and its decent show in the first Test against India heralded the birth of a cricketing nation which was always in the making during the preceding three decades. Cricket by this time began to reach every sphere of social life while the new generation had already taken up cricket as their national sport.

Bangladesh did not have a smooth run in the thorny road of international cricket against the best of the Test-playing nations in

the early years. It could not win a single match in the 2003 World Cup. Things, however, began to change from December 2004 when Bangladesh registered a memorable victory over India in its 100th one-day international match. It was followed by the nation's first Test match win at home against Zimbabwe in January 2005 after 34 Test matches. It was also Bangladesh's first Test series victory coupled with a one-day series victory against the same team in that series. Bangladesh's win against India in December 2004 was another occasion for widespread jubilation in the country. In June 2005 Bangladesh staged a major upset by beating World champions Australia in a Natwest Series one-day international match. The victory made a huge impact upon media representation of Bangladesh cricket in the West. There were a few other fighting performances by Bangladesh in Tests, thereby raising its standard as a growing Test power.<sup>34</sup> The ICC's Future Tour Program (FTP) released in 2006 tried to provide adequate exposure to Bangladesh cricket by allotting 41 Tests and 105-132 One-Day Internationals to the country on home and away basis.<sup>35</sup> It was also in 2006 that the organization of 2011 World Cup was jointly awarded to the four subcontinental powers – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka while Bangladesh was given the opportunity to host the inaugural ceremony and match of the Cup.<sup>36</sup>

With the turn of the century, cricket thus became an integral part of Bangladeshi national culture. Like literature, poetry and music, cricket came to be intertwined with the sense of Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism. Thus, the Bangladeshi nation in the new century was emerging through another secular cultural idiom, thereby breeding a new arena of cultural nationalism. The national cricketers were fast becoming the mass icons in Bangladesh at a time when the culture of intolerance amongst politicians was making the system of democracy virtually unsustainable in the confrontational environment of contemporary politics, 'where corruption, violence, mendacity, slander and incendiary rhetoric pollute the vocabulary of politics'.<sup>37</sup> Players like Aminul Islam, Habibul Bashar, Muhammad Rafique, Mohammad Ahsraf, Khaled Masud or Khaled Mahmud, who came to represent Bangladesh as a new Test-playing nation, became household names in the country. Interestingly, as Dasgupta rightly

points out, ‘along with the increasing popularity of the game in Bangladesh, as in India, the better cricketers have assumed the role of heroes, role models and icons.’<sup>38</sup> Mashrafi Mortaza, for example, became a national icon on the eve of the World Cup in 2007. Another major indicator of the increasing interest in cricket in Bangladesh since 1999 was the growth in publication of books on cricket. These books included cricket manuals, history of the game, journalistic writings, biographies and novellas. Compared to pre-1999 period, the period between 1999 and 2007 saw a phenomenal growth in cricket book publications.

With Bangladesh’s smart performance in their World Cup debut in 1999 and her consequent accession to Test status in 2000, the masses of Bangladesh, commonly who used to support either India or Pakistan and admire Indian or Pakistani cricketers as idols at the international stage in the context of their nation’s marginal presence and poor performance at that level, began to flex their *nationalist* muscle by supporting *their* national team and worshipping their *own* players as icons in the new century. The basis of this national support needed to be complemented by some standout and more consistent performances which Bangladesh targetted to achieve in the 2007 World Cup. The nationalist trend of cricket culture, which became well established after the experience of the 2007 World Cup in the everyday life of Bangladesh, may be said to have completed the process of *decolonization* of Bangladesh cricket, thereby transforming the game into the marker of its national identity.

### **Cricket, Nationalism and Culture in 21st Century Bangladesh**

Since Bangladesh gained its independence with Indian assistance in 1971, it raised questions concerning her identity. Hence, ‘after the smoke of combat cleared, the new country remained in search of itself.’<sup>39</sup> The break-up of Pakistan proved that nationalist forces were stronger than those promoting Islamic ideology. As Lawrence Ziring has aptly remarked: ‘Bangladesh postured a national identity, an exclusiveness which neither the Arabs, the Persians, the Pakistanis, the Indonesians, nor the Malaysians and Nigerians could parallel.’<sup>40</sup> Yet, as Ranabir Samaddar argued, ‘What is raising its head, is a gamut of regime problems in the post-colonial, post-

independent, post-nationalist era that indicate a failure of nationalist reconstruction of the polity, and the need for an alternative ethic and programme of reconstruction.<sup>41</sup> In post-1971 Bangladesh a search for a viable national identity has always been underway with religion and language confronting and complementing each as two strongest bases of identity.<sup>42</sup> As Rafiuddin Ahmed argues, ‘While Islam provided the *raison d’être* for the Muslim state of Pakistan in 1947, it was the linguistic-cultural identity of the Bengalis of former East Pakistan which provided the impetus for the freedom struggle in Bangladesh.’<sup>43</sup> While Bangladesh provides a classic case of quickly shifting patterns of community identity, what was most desired in the postcolonial context was ‘a synthesis of the religious-linguistic identity complex’<sup>44</sup> or ‘the evolution of a religious-linguistic-regional consciousness’.<sup>45</sup>

Yet the political instability, social tension and economic crises that plague Bangladesh since 1971 have created a number of cycles, which began with enthusiasm, opportunity and hope, followed by broken promises, shattered dreams and widespread dejection, leading its people to look for alternatives with hope again. The failure of these cycles to provide basic social and economic security or ensure any better future for the Bangladeshi masses in the long run have made them restless, frustrated and somewhat escapist. Interestingly enough, as I have already mentioned, Bangladeshis have quite a few *secular* occasions and festivities in their national life,<sup>46</sup> which help them find relative escape and solace from the hard realities of material life – 21 February, the Language Day or Martyrs’ Day; 26 March, the Independence Day, and 16 December, the Victory Day; Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year celebrated in mid-April. These occasions, which illuminate the secular bond of Bangladeshi identity, reveal that common Bangladeshis always look for viable emotional refuge that can provide them with an alternative source of sustenance and an escape from the clutches of frustration suffered in everyday life.<sup>47</sup> This has necessitated the growth of more popular forms of cultural identity leading to the birth of a *Bangladeshi* identity, transcending the rigidities inherent in other bases of identity formation in Bangladesh. While for the competing political elites, religion and language still remain the two broad foci of identity complex for appropriation, mobilization and

manipulation, Bangladeshi masses seem increasingly to look for, and prefer more secular, global forms/bases of national identity in the new century. Here, it seems, Ranabir Samaddar's idea of 'an alternative ethic and programme of reconstruction' to revive 'the national idea' in Bangladesh becomes critically relevant as cricket in the new century, for example, provides a powerful alternative cultural means of national self-expression for the masses. Even while the second-generation Bangladeshi diaspora is said to be moving closer to 'a more Islamic identity',<sup>48</sup> they still tend to prefer cultural idioms like cricket as assertive markers of their secular identity.

In the 21st century, cricket started acting as a great leveller in Bangladeshi society ridden with political dissension and socio-communal tension. The state's huge investment in cricket, given the meagre economic resources Bangladesh possesses, clearly indicated that the government began to look upon the game as something more than a mere sport: a political instrument to generate electoral confidence, a cultural arena to flex nationalist muscle and heighten international image, and an emotional tool to mobilize public opinion. The experience of the 2007 World Cup in the everyday life of Bangladesh and the impact of the national team's success on public life pointed out how the World Cup constituted a critical juncture in the transformation of cricket from a cultural passion to a nationalist obsession in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's victory against India and her success to in reaching the Super Eight stage in the World Cup coincided with the nation's Independence Day on 26 March. As a result, there was a common tendency to situate the cricketing success in the context of the Liberation War and a hard-earned Independence. On the Independence Day, the president, chief advisor, politicians and representatives of the political establishment not only congratulated the players and staff of the national team, but also compared their feat with the achievement of freedom in 1971.<sup>49</sup> Just as millions of Bangladeshis spent a sleepless night on 25 March 1971 in the wake of brutal Pakistani attack, the night of 25 March 2007 gave them a different cause for being awake all through – to celebrate the victory of spirit of the nation and her independence.<sup>50</sup> The two events – one

from memory and the other in reality – coalesced to give birth to a new found sense of national identity asserted at the international stage. While Bangladesh’s stunningly successful run ended at the Super Eight stage with the singular victory against South Africa, it had already come to be regarded as a strong cricketing nation by other illustrious Test-playing countries. For the first time, Bangladeshis remained indifferent to the unexpected early exit of India and Pakistan from the World Cup as they became concerned with the performance of *their* country – Bangladesh. The decolonization of Bangladesh cricket was thus complete.

Since the World Cup in 2007, Bangladesh has matured more as a cricketing nation, and cricket has become its de facto national obsession. While the country has not registered any noticeable progress in sports in general, its performance in international cricket has improved much. The hosting of the 2011 World Cup provided an opportunity to the nation to showcase both its maturity and potential as a cultural destination as well as a cricketing nation in terms of performance and culture. And Bangladesh rose up to the occasion to assert its identity at the international stage despite the critically uneven impact of the event on its polity, society and economy. Bangladesh as a host nation of the World Cup has also showed that its citizens preferred the Indian/Pakistani brand of aggressive fandom to its Sri Lankan counterpart of a mature sense of sportsmanship.

With the 2011 World Cup, cricket craze has become an integral part of the everyday life of the nation. According to Muntassir Mamoon, ‘this craze would continue in the long run as cricket has become a long-term factor in public life in every nook and corner of the country. For him, in a poverty-stricken hopeless state of affairs, common Bangladeshis look forward to escaping from their daily ailments in life and find solace in the success of cricket.’<sup>51</sup> While there were many voices before and during the Cup to create the awareness among the cricket-crazy Bangladeshis about the importance of the spirit of sportsmanship, urging the acceptance of success and failure in the same spirit,<sup>52</sup> Bangladeshi fans tended to become prey to the ‘Indian syndrome’ of over-the-top behaviour. Thus, Bangladesh’s progress as a cricketing nation, which has been

phenomenal in the last one decade or so, implies its rising status not only in the realm of cricketing prowess or performance but more so in terms of cricket culture and fandom. The transition of cricket spectatorship and fanfare which began in 2007 reached culmination in 2011.

Post 2011, Bangladesh has consolidated its position in global cricket. It has successfully organized international tournaments and instituted the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). Its performance on the cricket field has become more consistent in all versions of cricket. Although ultimate success still eludes Bangladesh in major international tournaments from Asia Cup to World Cup, the steady and consistent performance of the national team at the international level has wiped out the earlier sense of inferiority and given birth to a confident nation, creating a cricket culture that has become an integral part of the everyday life of the nation. In fact, the passion and euphoria of Bangladeshi people over cricket have overtaken that of its more illustrious neighbours – India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. While cricket has added a unique dimension to Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage, it has shaped diverse fields of culture including literature, music, film, media, television, advertisement, social media, and so on. It provides the space where all Bangladeshis can coalesce in the iconic slogan of *Aamar Bangladesh, Sabash Bangladesh* (My Bangladesh, Well Done Bangladesh). Whether Bangladesh succeeds or fails on the field, cricket in the new century has become an emblem of national unity and identity, transcending all divisions in Bangladesh. If there is one 'uncontested sense of nation' in Bangladesh, it resides in her cricket. Since Bangladesh is a multicultural society, there are other voices/mediums speaking for/representing the nation. Cricket is probably the strongest *other* voice/medium which helps the nation to assert its identity in a fast-changing world shaped by globalization and transnational movements. It creates a transnational space where Bangladeshi self-images are rebuilt and redefined beyond the conventional contours of nationalist or Islamic discourses.

The experience of cricket culture in 21st century Bangladesh has established the importance of cricket as a great leveller in society as

the Bangladeshi cricketing identity cuts across variegated political, social, economic, religious and professional affiliations. Cricket has now the power to mobilize all sections of the people – from the subaltern to the elite. Mahfuz Anam, the editor of *The Daily Star*'s special 2011 World Cup edition, put the matter in right perspective: 'There are few things with a greater capacity to unite than sport as a leveller that truly transcends all boundaries and commands unanimity across supporters irrespective of age, sex, race and religion. In sport, political boundaries are irrelevant, we are all united for the common good, which in this case is the success of the Bangladesh national cricket team.'<sup>53</sup> For Rezanur Rahman, cricket does no longer remain only a game, but an emblem of self-confidence, honour and pride of the nation. Despite all sorts of differences and hurdles, it has unified the country in a singular bond. That's why all Bangladeshis start praying whenever their national team plays a match.<sup>54</sup>

Bangladeshi society is often shown to be divided between the secularists on the one hand and the religious Right and fundamentalists on the other, leading to what one scholar has called 'competing imaginings of nationhood'.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, she sees 'in an examination of invented traditions, commemorations, interpretations of particular events, and the intentionality behind the commemoration of a specific combination of events' 'the struggle between religious nationalists and secularists'.<sup>56</sup> A further challenge to this apparent binary of nationhood comes from the marginalized voices of the *non-Bengali* Bangladeshis, who represent another competing vision of cultural pluralism, urging the state to recognize their identities and expressions.<sup>57</sup> However, despite this so-called 'fragility of nationalism', strengthening the fact that 'a community can be imagined in a number of ways by the very nature of being imagined',<sup>58</sup> such very ways can contradictorily reinforce the homogeneity of nationalism. In 21st century Bangladesh, particularly in the aftermath of the hosting of the ICC World Cup in 2011, cricket has asserted its status as one such way of imagining a secular homogeneous nationalist identity. It also challenges the notion that the multiple imaginings of the nation in Bangladesh are 'constrained by the dominant cultures within which they are created and communicated; one is the universal (Islam), and the other is the

local (Bengal).<sup>59</sup> Cricket as a nationalist obsession transcends everything in Bangladesh, binding all in one knot from a rickshaw puller to the prime minister, from a fundamentalist mullah to a westernized IT professional, from a poor farmer's wife to a high society lady, or from a Hindu priest to a disgruntled Chakma. More importantly, cricket educates the Bangladeshi youth about nationalist ideology and instills in them a deep emotional attachment toward the nation thus imagined. Performing well or not, nationalism around cricket is not fragile as the other 'invented traditions' are argued to be, since it cuts across affiliations of race, religion, community, or ethnicity. The religious fundamentalists and their lay followers, who do not agree with the idea of nationalist ideology, too, seem to have succumbed to the all-pervasive wave of cricketing nationalism in the wake of the World Cup. The impact of globalization and transnational bonds makes this cricketing nationalism more stable and viable. Cricket thus redefines and rekindles Bangladeshi nationalism. Beyond the political rhetoric of struggle over the question of religious versus ethno-linguistic identity, cricket now provides a space where Bangladesh as a *homogeneous* nation makes its presence felt globally.

### **Final Note**

While the standard binary of nationalism in Bangladesh in terms of juxtaposition between secular nationalism based on Bengali identity and religious nationalism based on religious identity is slowly being challenged by a third movement of fundamentalist Islam, the dichotomies and dissensions in Bangladeshi polity and society get submerged under the rubric of one national cultural idiom – cricket. The passion with which Bangladeshis now play, watch, read and write about cricket, of which I have been an ardent follower for the last two decades, too, points to the game's universal popularity and mediatization in the country. The game's rising importance as an emblem of nationalism within the state and as a marker of national identity at the international arena is therefore a point that requires careful consideration.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in one of his speeches to the Constituent Assembly in 1972, underlined the importance of feelings in the formation of a Bangladeshi nation. He maintained:

I just want to say that we, the people of Bangladesh, are a nation ... language, education, civilisation and culture, whatever you say, there is an additional factor, that is feelings ... Nationalism thrives on feelings. Today the Bengali nation achieved its independence through a bloody struggle. This struggle was based on a feeling that made us Bengalis, that provided the basis of Bengali nationalism.<sup>60</sup>

In another speech, Mujib held, ‘... I am a Bengali, Bengali is my language. The culture, civilization, history, soil, sky and weather of Bangladesh – all these constitute Bangladesh nationalism.’<sup>61</sup> Cricket has become the ideal template of this Bangladeshi nationalism that expresses the *feeling* of the nation most eloquently. Cricket has also become the ideal inheritor and effective emblem of the sense of unity the Liberation War left to posterity.

## Notes and References

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\* This paper has drawn liberally and reproduces much from my two earlier books on the subject: *Bangladesh Playing: Sport, Culture, Nation* (Dhaka: Subarna, 2012) and *Sabash Bangladesh! Kriket, Jatiyatabad, Sanskriti* (Dhaka: Somoy Prokashon, 2017).

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2. Rounaq Jahan, ‘Bangladesh: Promise and Performance’, in Rounaq Jahan, ed. *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, Dhaka: UPL, 2000, p. 6-7.

3. Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 218.
4. Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, Chappel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, p. 8.
5. Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 14-15, cited in *ibid*.
6. M. Anisuzzaman, 'The Identity Question and Politics', in Rounaq Jahan, *Bangladesh*, p. 63.
7. Willem van Schendel, 'Bengalis, Bangladeshis and Others: Chakma Visions of a Pluralist Bangladesh', in Jahan, *Bangladesh*, p. 71.
8. Rehman Sobhan, 'Building a Responsible Civil Society: Challenges and Prospects', in Jahan, *Bangladesh*, p. 367.
9. For an interesting personalized account of Bangladesh's progress in cricket, see Yousuf Rezaur. Rahman, *Sentimental Journey: It's more than just a game*, New York: Yousuf & Parveen, 2002. Another useful work in the same genre is: Omar Khaled Rumi, *Orthat* (That is), Dhaka: Omar Khaled Rumi, 1990.
10. Shamyia Dasgupta, 'Bangladesh Cricket: Scoring on Passion, but little Else ...', *Sport in Society*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January 2007), p. 166.
11. Jahangir Chowdhury's comment, cited *ibid*.
12. Dilu Khandakar, 'Flashback Kualalampur', *Ananda Alo*, vol.1, no. 25 (1 April 2006), p. 10.
13. Rejanur Rahman, 'Cricketer Ananda, Cricketer Alo' (Joy of cricket, light of cricket), *Ananda Alo*, vol.1, no. 25 (1 April 2006), p. 5.
14. Akram Khan, 'Cricket Jati Hoye Uthlam' (We became a cricketing nation), *Somokal*, ICC World Cup special issue, 2011, p. 32; Author's translation.
15. Dulal Mahmud, 'Durer Biswacup, Kachher Biswacup' (World Cup afar, World Cup nearer), *Saptahik Bichitra*, 30 April 1999, in Dulal Mahmud, *Stadium Er Sei Addata Aaj Aar Nei* (Adda at the stadium no longer exists), Dhaka: Akhhorbritta, 2005, pp. 26-7.

16. *The Daily Janakantha*, 1 June 1999, p. 1.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 2; Author's translation.
18. Partha Tanvir Naved, *Bangalir Prothom Biswacup* (Bengalis' first World Cup), Dhaka; Prajapati Prokashon, 2000, p. 59; Author's translation.
19. 'The World Cup's Greatest Moments', p. 8.
20. Dulal Mahmud, 'Cricket Safari', in *Krirajagat*, 16 February 2003, in Mahmud, *Stadium Er Sei Addata Aaj Aar Nei*, p. 49.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *The Daily Janakantha*, 2 June 1999, p. 1.
23. *Ibid.* Author's translation.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
25. Dulal Mahmud, 'Crickete Je Proshner Uttar Sahaje Mele Na' (The question which is difficult to answer in cricket), in Mahmud, *Stadium Er Sei Addata Aaj Aar Nei*, p. 33.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *The Daily Janakantha*, 2 June 1999, p. 6.
29. On the eve of the Bangladesh-Scotland match in the 1999 World cup, Mostafa Mamoon noted that international football generates mass passion while cricket became a fashion in Bangladesh. See Mostafa Mamoon, 'Fashion Bonam Passion' (Fashion versus passion), *Prothom Alo*, 23 May 1999, in Mostafa Mamoon, *Bouncer er Mukhe* (In the face of bouncer). Dhaka: Shikor, 2003, pp. 11-14. With Bangladesh's victory over Scotland and Pakistan, it could be argued, cricket was transformed into a national passion.
30. Omar Kureishi, 'Bangladesh move to the centre-stage', *The Dawn*, 5 July 2000, available at [www.banglacricket.com](http://www.banglacricket.com).
31. Khondaker Mirazur Rahman, '10 Years of Test Status: Where Do We Stand Now?', *A Journey ... Test Cricket: 10 Years of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Cricket Board, 2011, p. 7.
32. Cited in 'The History of Bangladesh Cricket'.

33. *The Daily Star*, 10 November 2000, p. 6. In fact, BCB launched a new first class format National League from 1999/2000 season. The home and away tournament had divisional teams from Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Khulna, Barisal and Rajshahi.
34. These performances include the Test against Pakistan from 3-6 September 2003 in Multan, St Lucia Test against the West Indies from 28 May to 1 June 2004 and Fatullah Test against Australia from 9-13 April 2006.
35. *Krirajagat*, vol. 30, no. 3 (16 August 2006), pp. 48-9.
36. *Krirajagat*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1 August 2006), p. 18.
37. Zarina Rahman Khan, 'Decentralized Governance: Trials and Triumphs', in Rounaq Jahan, ed. *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, Dhaka: UPL, 2000, p. 344.
38. Dasgupta, 'Bangladesh Cricket', p. 179.
39. Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 1.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
41. Ranabir Samaddar, 'Many Histories and Few Silences – the Nationalist History of Nationalism in Bangladesh', in Barun De and Ranabir Samddar, eds. *State, Development and Political Culture: Bangladesh and India*, New Delhi: Har Anand, 1997, p. 73.
42. Sreeradha Datta offers a useful discussion on this dual basis of national identity. See Datta, *Bangladesh*, pp. 17-29.
43. Rafiuddin Ahmed, 'Introduction', in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed. *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990, p. 2.
44. This was first suggested by Muhammad Ghulam Kabir. For details, see Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1994, p. 211. Also see M.G. Kabir, 'Religion, Language and Nationalism in Bangladesh', in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed. *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990, pp. 35-49, where he writes: 'The creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation in 1971 inaugurated a new era of nationalist development, characterized by a search for a new

identity, not entirely based on language. In this new phase, there is a perceptible decline on the exclusive emphasis earlier given to language. Instead, this is being replaced by a newer ideology with a curious mixture of religion and language as its basis. In effect, religion and language have appeared as the two most important elements in the identity compound of the Bengali Muslims in recent times. Changing currents of nationalist development in the region manifest the shifts in the salience of these two identities.’ (p. 35)

45. Rafiuddin Ahmed, ‘Introduction’, in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed. *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990, p. 31.

46. A brief but excellent discussion on some of these secular traditions/occasions and their impact on popular life is offered in Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, Chappel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, pp. 124-36.

47. While its has been argued that ‘depending on who is in power, national holidays are celebrated differently – so differently that the festivities clearly indicate how the competing nationalisms are articulated’ (Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, p. 139), one needs to remember that the Bangladeshi masses attach a secular sense of national pride, a collective memory of fight against internal colonialism, and an emotional bond with their homeland, to these ‘invented traditions’. I would argue that the political challenges to the secular nationalist identity represented through these events are yet to create any serious confusion or reaction in the mass psyche about the significance of the same.

48. Pritam Banerjee, ‘Bangladeshi Diaspora: Existence of Multiple Identities of Bengalis Abroad’, in Dipankar Sengupta and Sudhir Kumar Singh, eds. *Minorities and Human Rights in Bangladesh*, Delhi: Authorspress, 2003, p. 266.

49. *Dainik Janokantho*, 27 March 2007, p. 2.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

51. Interview with Muntassir Mamoon, Dhaka: 19 February 2011.

52. Dibakar Acharya, ‘Jitte Sikhi, Harte Sikhi’ (Let’s learn to win and to be beaten), *Saptahik Kagoj*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (20 February 2011), p. 37. The author described the aggressive reaction after

defeat in a match as typically *Indian* and urged the Bangladeshis not to emulate this culture, which only affects the reputation of the nation.

53. Mahfuz Anam, 'Editor's Note', *Star Roar: World Cup Special*, February 2011, p. 1.

54. Rezanur Rahman, 'Cup Kintu Ektai, Seta Jitte Hobe' (There is only one cup, we have to win it), *Anando Alo*, Vol. 6, No. 9 (16 February 2011), p. 15.

55. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, p. 142.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

57. For details on this, see Willem van Schendel, 'Bengalis, Bangladeshis and Others: Chakma Visions of a Pluralist Bangladesh', in Rounaq Jahan, ed. *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, Dhaka: UPL, 2000.

58. For details on this, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

59. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, p. 151.

60. *Dainik Ittefaq*, 4 November 1972, Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism*, p. 191.

61. *Dainik Ittefaq*, 20 August 1972, Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism*, p. 190.