

IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF CIVILIZATION STUDIES

MASTER THESIS

**BEYOND THE BANALITY OF LABELS: EXAMINING THE
NARRATIVES AND REALITIES OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE
IN BANGLADESH**

MAHMUDUL HASAN NAEEM

THESIS SUPERVISOR

PROFESSOR DR. IRFAN AHMAD

ISTANBUL, 2024

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**A thesis submitted to the Alliance of Civilizations Institute in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Civilization Studies**

THESIS SUPERVISOR
PROFESSOR DR. IRFAN AHMAD

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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Civilization Studies.

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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ÖZ

HAZIR YAFTALARIN BANALLIĞININ ÖTESİNDE: BANGLADEŞ'TEKİ KOMÜNAL ŞİDDETİN ANLATILARI VE GERÇEKLERİNİ İNCELEMEK

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Bu çalışma, Hindu-Müslüman çatışmasını veya komünalizmi, seküler Bengal milliyetçi söylemi bağlamında incelemektedir. Çoğunluk-azınlık ve dini merceklerle çerçevelenen hakim anlatılar, bu çatışmayı genellikle dini gayret ve çoğunlukçu milliyetçilik tarafından yönlendirilen “komünal” ve “hoşgörüsüz” Müslümanların kendiliğinden gelişen Hindu karşıtı saldırganlığı olarak tasvir etmektedir. Bu çalışma, bu tür çerçevelere meydan okuyarak, toplumlar arası huzursuzluğu ulusal ve bölgesel siyasetle bağlantılı olarak analiz etmektedir ve basit çoğunluk-azınlık ve dini çerçevelerin ötesine geçmektedir.

Güney Asya komünalizm literatürüne eleştirel bir yaklaşım getiren çalışma, Müslümanların doğası gereği komünal olarak tasvir edilmesinin Hindu Oryantalizmi ve sömürgeci söylemle bağlantılı söylemler arası pratikler yoluyla üretildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, Bangladeş devlet yönetiminde Müslüman öznelliğini dışlayan Bengal milliyetçiliği ve Hindistan'ın bir Hindu ulus-devleti olarak etkisinin, çoğunlukçu Müslüman şiddeti söylemini yetersiz hale getirdiğini savunmaktadır.

Komünalizmi dinamik bir süreç olarak gören çalışma, çatışma olaylarını güç politikaları, devlet ve medyanın rolleri ve sosyo-hukuki sonuçları açısından inceliyor. Çalışma, 2021 yılındaki toplumsal şiddetin merkez üssü olan Nanua Dighir Par'da yapılan etnografik saha çalışmasıyla, iktidar partisi liderleri tarafından siyasi kazanç

için düzenlenen sistematik bir şiddet örüntüsü tespit ediyor. Bu, devletin şiddeti önlemedeki başarısızlığını ve sıradan Müslümanlara yönelik zulümdeki rolünü vurgulayan anlatısallaştırma, suçu yerinden etme ve ardından kriminalize etme politikalarını içeriyor.

Medya ve akademik söylemi analiz eden çalışma, Hindu-Müslüman çatışmasını dönemselleştirerek, yoğunlaşan çatışmayı İslami siyaset ve devlet dinine bağlayan anlatıya meydan okuyor. Çalışma, Bangladeş'teki toplumsal gerilimlerin, Müslüman karşıtı şiddet ve hegemonik müdahale de dahil olmak üzere Hindistan'daki sosyo-politik gelişmelerle uyumlu olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, azınlık yanlısı Awami League rejimi altında Hindu karşıtı şiddetin arttığının altını çizmekte ve Bangladeş'teki son dönemdeki Hindutva karşıtı duyguların, Müslümanlar arasındaki yabancılaşma hissi ve Hindistan'ın siyasi müdahalesinin yanı sıra devletin seküler politikaları ve Hint yanlısı duruşuyla bağlantılı olduğunu öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Komünalizm; Komünal şiddet; Hindular; Müslümanlar; Bangladeş; Anlatılaştırma Politikaları.

ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE BANALITY OF LABELS: EXAMINING THE NARRATIVES AND REALITIES OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

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This study examines Hindu-Muslim conflict, or communalism, within the context of secular Bengali nationalist discourse. Prevailing narratives often depict this conflict as spontaneous anti-Hindu aggression by “communal” and “intolerant” Muslims, driven by religious zeal and majoritarian nationalism. This study challenges such frameworks by analyzing inter-communal unrest in conjunction with national and regional politics, moving beyond simplistic majority-minority and religious lenses.

Engaging critically with South Asian literature on communalism, the study reveals that the portrayal of Muslims as inherently communal is shaped by interdiscursive practices rooted in Hindu Orientalism and colonial discourse. It argues that hegemonic Bengali nationalism, which marginalizes Muslim subjectivity, coupled with India’s influence as a Hindu nation-state in Bangladeshi statecraft, renders the discourse of majoritarian Muslim violence inadequate.

Viewing communalism as a dynamic process, the study examines communal conflict in terms of power politics, the roles of the state and media, and socio-legal consequences. Ethnographic fieldwork in Nanua Dighir Par, the epicenter of the 2021 communal violence, uncovers a systematic pattern of violence orchestrated by ruling party leaders for political gain. This includes the politics of narrativization, blame displacement, and subsequent criminalization, highlighting the state’s failure to

prevent violence and its role in the persecution of Islamists, political opponents, and ordinary Muslims.

By analyzing media and academic discourse, the study establishes a periodization of Hindu-Muslim conflict, challenging the narrative that intensified conflict is solely linked to Islamic politics and the state religion. It posits that communal tensions in Bangladesh align with socio-political developments in India, including anti-Muslim violence. The study also underscores a surge in anti-Hindu violence under the pro-minority Awami League regime, suggesting that recent anti-Hindutva sentiment in Bangladesh is exacerbated by Muslim alienation, India's political interference, and the state's secular policies and pro-Indian stance.

Keywords: Communalism; Communal violence; Hindus; Muslims; Bangladesh; Politics of narrativization.

DEDICATION

To Abu Sayed and the countless other martyrs who courageously took to the streets, resisting the unjust politics of labeling (*razakar*) and the brutal 16-year totalitarian mafia rule, only to be martyred by the necropolitical Awami League regime. This mass uprising unfolded during the defense of this dissertation and in the weeks that followed, as they fought to liberate the nation and its people.



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The idea of exploring the narratives of communal violence in Bangladesh took shape during regular discussions with Ahmad Sabbir, now a PhD researcher in anthropology at McGill University. These conversations occurred in the spring semester of the 2021–22 academic year while we were both residing in Fatih, Istanbul. We frequently discussed various topics related to Bangladesh, including politics, religion, and history. At that time, I was planning to work on Bengali nationalism for my MA thesis and found myself torn between history and anthropology as my future academic discipline. This indecision was further complicated by differing advice from senior Bangladeshi colleagues at Ibn Haldun University, some of whom encouraged me to pursue history, while others advocated for anthropology.

My inclination towards anthropology solidified thanks to Sabbir's insights and the timely arrival of Professor Irfan Ahmad at Ibn Haldun University as a professor of anthropology. Familiar with his work on Islam and Muslims in the South Asian context, I was thrilled at the prospect of working under his supervision. At that stage, already completing the required coursework, I enrolled in two additional courses: Anthropology of Islam and Anthropology of the State, the latter taught by Professor Ahmad. He graciously agreed to supervise my thesis. After presenting two thesis proposals to him at the end of our courses, he recommended that I pursue the one focused on communal violence, marking the beginning of my journey.

As both a supervisor and a teacher, Professor Ahmad's guidance was invaluable throughout this journey. Not only have I tremendously benefited from his distinguished scholarship and careful mentorship, but he also supported me during a necessary academic break I took for personal reasons. Words cannot fully express my gratitude; I feel truly blessed to have learned from and worked under him. Additionally, I benefited immensely from discussions with Sabbir bhai during this journey. I am grateful not only for his persuasive arguments that led me toward anthropology but also for his ongoing guidance throughout this journey.

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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

AL - Awami League

BCL - Bangladesh Chhatra League

BGB - Border Guard Bangladesh

BHBCUC - Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council

BSF- Border Security Forces

BNP - Bangladesh Nationalist Party

BJP - Bharatiya Janata Party

BJL -Bangladesh Jubo League

CID- Criminal Investigation Department

DB- Detective Branch

GOWT- Global War on Terror

HI - Hefazat-e-Islam

HRCBM - Human Rights Congress for Bangladeshi Minorities

HRFB- Human Rights Forum Bangladesh

ICS- Islami Chhatra Shibir

ISKCON- International Society for Krishna Consciousness

JI - Jamaat-e-Islami

JP - Jatiya Party

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

PBI- Police Bureau of Investigation

RSS - Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SIMI - Students' Islamic Movement of India

VHP - Vishwa Hindu Parishad

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Explanations of Hindu-Muslim conflict that deflect attention away from the state toward religion are suspicious precisely because they are so persuasive.

— David Ludden

April 18, 2024, Panchapalli, Faridpur: Two construction worker siblings, Ashadul aged 15, and Ashraful, aged 21, were fatally beaten to death by an angry mob after rumors spread that they had set a cloth covering an idol in a nearby temple on fire. Five other coworkers sustained severe injuries and were hospitalized, with two in critical condition, after police intervention calmed the situation. The workers had been constructing a toilet at a school building just 50 meters from the temple. The violence erupted when a local woman, who had previously lit the temple's evening lamp, returned to find the cloth aflame. The mob quickly gathered, confined the workers to a room in the school, tied them up, and brutally assaulted them with sticks, bricks, and rods. It took law enforcement, including the police and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), six hours to rescue the workers and disperse the mob, during which ten police officers sustained injuries from bricks and stones thrown by the crowd.

This tragic incident, wherein two Muslim workers were killed by local Hindu residents over a false accusation of desecrating a Hindu idol, received mixed media attention. While some major media outlets reported the event, others ignored it or downplayed it. Most that did cover it relegated the story to the “local news” section of their online editions, and many did not provide detailed specifics about the event. More importantly, none of these media sources disclosed the identity of or any information on the “locals” involved in the incident. The sole exception in the major media landscape was *BBC Bangla* (2024), which only provided additional context by noting that Panchapalli is predominantly a Hindu village with virtually no Muslim

households. *BBC* reported that it was the local Hindus who had gathered and attacked seven Muslim construction workers upon discovering that the cloth covering an idol in the temple was on fire, blaming them for the incident. Later, an investigative report by the local news portal *Ajker Patrika* confirmed that the workers had no connection with the fire (Basu 2024). This report further elaborated that Panchapalli comprises five Hindu-majority villages. Despite the clear dynamics of an organized anti-Muslim attack—Hindu villagers targeting Muslim workers based on a religiously sensitive false allegation—the incident was not labeled as “communal violence” in any headlines or articles by the mainstream media, as is often the case with anti-Hindu violence. While the headline in the *Daily Star* read “Two killed in Faridpur mob beating” (*Daily Star* 2024), *BD News* reported it as “Two dead, two critically injured as mob attacks school workers after Faridpur temple fire” (*BD News* 2024)—without identifying the victims or the perpetrators.

This politics of naming, where Muslim identities are emphasized when they are perpetrators and obscured when they are victims, is so widely practiced in the media that it has become a cliché. When Brenton Tarrant, a Christian white supremacist, carried out a terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people in 2019, no media identified him as a Christian or terrorist but as a “suspect” (*NBC News* 2019). New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern even refused to mention his name while addressing the parliament after the attack. “You will never hear me mention his name. ... He is a terrorist, he is a criminal, he is an extremist,” she stated (Dabashi 2019). Islam and Muslim identity, thus, are pushed to the forefront when a particular act is negative, while the religious identity of perpetrators is often downplayed or omitted when they are non-Muslims. Consequently, Muslim “suspects” are dubbed “Islamist terrorists,” while non-Muslim perpetrators are labeled only by their ethnic identities (Morris 2024).¹ This naming politics is more vividly exemplified in Western media narratives about the recent genocidal offensive in Gaza by the colonial occupiers of Palestine. Western media often label Palestinian resistance forces as terrorists, providing graphic and sometimes exaggerated details of every

¹ In this report, three men who were charged with and arrested for killing a Sikh “separatist” leader were dubbed as “Indians”, not Hindus.

action taken by Muslim groups, explicitly naming them. Conversely, when reporting on actions by the colonial apartheid state and its forces, these accounts frequently use passive language, omitting the perpetrators' names, if they report the incidents at all. In these narratives, the deaths of colonial settlers in Palestine are reported as killings by Muslim "terrorists," while the brutal murders of the Palestinians are rendered as simple deaths.

This politics of naming, however, is not solely a Western phenomenon; it also prevails throughout the Global South, where it is intensified by what Ahmad and Kanungo (2019, xii) term "narrative elimination." In South Asia, this narrative shaping is particularly pronounced in the discourse surrounding Hindu-Muslim conflicts, often labeled as communalism—a term almost exclusively linked to Muslims and Islam in the region's historical and political contexts. Conflicts where victims belong to religious communities other than Muslims are frequently branded as acts of communal violence. In contrast, incidents with Muslim victims at the hands of other religious groups are often downplayed, reported incorrectly, or ignored entirely. This trend was clearly observable in the reporting of the Faridpur incident, where media outlets, influenced by the politics of narrativization, downplayed the event's significance, with many omitting the religious identities of both victims and perpetrators. Some outlets failed to report the incident until it began trending on social media.

This paradox extends beyond media narratives into academic discourse, particularly in discussions of communalism in Bangladesh, which are often riddled with theoretical, methodological, and empirical flaws. This study aims to dissect these political and academic inadequacies through a genealogical exploration of both media representations and scholarly research on communalism among the Bangladeshi intelligentsia. Moreover, this research adopts an ethnographic approach to analyze episodes of Hindu-Muslim violence, striving to transcend the simplistic narrative that exclusively emphasizes religious (Islamic) dimensions and to shed light on the intricate socio-political dynamics involved. In this context, it is crucial to express my reservations about the terms "communalism" and "communal violence." These terms carry specific connotations and political implications that may not fully encompass the phenomena under discussion. As such, I encourage readers to remain cautious with

their interpretation and to interpret any further use of these terms with this caveat in mind.

Before proceeding to the subsequent section of this chapter, which provides an overview of prevailing views concerning communalism within media and literary sectors in Bangladesh, it is pertinent to offer a succinct description of Bangladesh. This includes its demographics, socio-economic conditions, and a brief overview of the socio-economic status of minority communities. Such context will assist readers unfamiliar with Bangladesh in better understanding the discussed topics.

Bangladesh, a south Asian country, was a part of colonial India before becoming a province of Pakistan in 1947 and later a new nation state in its current form following a civil war in 1971. The country, with a population of nearly 170 million and an area of 148,460 square kilometers, shares a 4,096-kilometer-long border with India to the north, west, and east, and a 271-kilometer-long border with Myanmar to the southeast. The Bay of Bengal surrounds it to the south. According to the 2022 census, Muslims comprise 91.08% of the population, Hindus 7.98%, and other religious groups constitute a small minority (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, henceforth BBS 2023). The economy is primarily agricultural, with 38% of the employed populace engaged in farming. The remainder are employed in the service and industrial sectors, with 18% in industry and the rest in services. The country is predominantly rural, with 68.34% of the population residing in rural areas, while 31.66% live in urban settings. Bengali is the primary language, with various local dialects, and English is recognized as a second official language. Politically, Bangladesh is dominated by two major parties: the centrist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the secularist Bangladesh Awami League (AL),² with the Jatiya Party (JP) and the Islamist Jamaat-e Islami Bangladesh (JI) also having a sizable voter base. From 1991 to 2006, the BNP and AL alternately

² I use the term “secularist” because secularism is one of the four fundamental guiding principles of the Awami League, as stated in its constitution. This principle also forms the basis of its “ideological prescription” derived from Bengali nationalism. However, the brand of secularism the AL practices is not merely about separating religion from the state. Instead, it represents the state’s exclusive authority to regulate—both endorsing and prohibiting—religion, particularly in the public sphere, and to define what constitutes public religion. This form of secularism is also distinctive because it often necessitates and resorts to religion (and violence) to derive its legitimacy and secure its identity. For more on this, see Chapter 4.

led the government until the AL assumed power in 2009, effectively transforming the country into a one-party state.

Regarding minority demographics, Hindus are the largest religious minority, with approximately 13.15 million residing in the country, alongside around 1 million Buddhists and some 488,000 Christians, according to the 2022 census (*BBS 2023*). Ethnic minorities, including various tribal groups, number about 1.6 million. Educational achievement is slightly higher among Hindus and Christians than among Muslims, with literacy rates of 73.55%, 72.55%, and 70.01%, respectively, among those aged 15 and over. The census report, however, did not provide specific and detailed economic data on religious minorities, merely noting that Hindus constitute 7.78% of the urban population and 8.04% of the rural population. Employment and economic opportunities for minorities are often subjects of speculation and debate, as official data are scarce, at least in the public domain. While some groups claim that religious minorities, particularly Hindus, face economic disadvantages and discrimination in both public and private job markets, others assert their overrepresentation in government services. In 2019, an absurd claim made to then-US President Trump by a Bangladeshi Hindu Iskcon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) activist, suggesting that 37 million religious minorities were unaccounted for in Bangladesh, led to widespread controversy both nationally and internationally (Devnath 2019; Rumi 2019; *Daily Star* 2019). The then-foreign minister countered that minorities held 25% of government jobs, despite making up only 12% of the population, though he did not substantiate this with concrete data (*Bangladesh Pratidin* 2019). It is widely believed, however, that under the current AL government, the representation of Hindus in government service sectors has significantly increased, possibly even to the point of over-representation (Umar 2022). Some news reports suggest that there have been a disproportionately high number of appointments of Hindu officers in key government roles under the current regime, particularly within the police, intelligence services, and judiciary (*Our Islam* 2019). However, a 2018 article by the Bangladesh Civil Service Admin Academy noted that 13.8% of first-class officers in the Bangladesh Civil Service were from minority communities, with Hindus constituting 12% of this group until 2017 (Khaton et al. 2018).



Figure 1.1 Map of South Asia and Bangladesh.³

1.1 Conventional Wisdom on Communalism

Communalism in South Asia is generally viewed in terms of colonial history since it was the British who first produced the communal discourse (Bates 2000; Chowdhury 2023). Although, as Brass (2003) notes, there have been two different perspectives on the root of communal tension in South Asia—the constructivist perspective, which maintains that communal tension is a colonial construct, and the continuity perspective, which seeks to trace it back to earlier Muslim periods. However, there is a general consensus among the constructivists that this introduction of communal

³ The image is taken (and slightly edited for clarity) from Reece Jones. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-map-of-political-divisions-in-South-Asia-From-1947-until-1971-East-Pakistan-was-part_fig1_267629390

discourse and policy as a political device was to establish and legitimize their colonial rule by maintaining antagonism between Hindus and Muslims (Pandey 1990; Jones 1968). This communal discourse subsequently ignited communal sensibility among Indians, leading to numerous incidents of communal violence during the British rule. Scholars who read communal discourse along religious lines hoped that the subcontinent's partition in 1947 would reduce communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims in post-colonial India and Pakistan (and Bangladesh)—a hope that clearly did not come true (Ahmad, A. 1975, 4; Das 1990, 1). Communal riots, especially anti-Muslim pogroms, have been recurrent in post-colonial India. Bangladesh has also recently become a focus of discussion regarding the rise in communal violence and attacks on religious minorities, primarily Hindus.

Communalism is considered as one of the biggest, if not the biggest, social problems that Bangladesh suffers from (Riaz 1995; Gosh 2023). Shawkat Osman, a prominent “progressive” Bangladeshi writer, describes communalism as a long-standing social conflagration burning the subcontinent (Osman 1995). As a result, it has been a topic of frequent debates and discussions in the political arena, as well as among the Bangladeshi intelligentsia, especially in its “secular” Bengali nationalist circle. The debate is so intense and urgent that it has crossed national boundaries and has been making the rounds in Indian media and political forums too in recent times. In all these debates, Bangladesh is dubbed a country full of communalist, anti-Hindu, radical Muslims.⁴ However, in creating such a “fake sense of urgency”—to borrow Žižek’s (2008; 6) term—these “intellectual” discourses and media narratives on communalism suffer from various theoretical inconsistencies and empirical penuries. This is mostly because, as Mohammad Azam (2017) aptly points out, there is still no systematic academic tradition for studying communalism in Bangladesh.

⁴ One such recent instance is the book “Being Hindu in Bangladesh” by Deep Halder and Avishek Biswas, published in 2023. This book has sparked significant debate, particularly among Indian intelligentsia. The book has been the subject of discussions in various forums, often with expressions of great concern regarding the fate of minority communities in Bangladesh, who are perceived as needing savings from “Barbaric Muslims”. See this discussion for further insights: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgfHAsiRf9s>

In dominant accounts, a singular narrative is put forward by the experts where the question of communalism is exclusively framed through majority-minority and religious lenses, and communal conflicts are often depicted as spontaneous anti-Hindu aggression by Muslims, driven by religious zeal and majoritarian nationalism. In so doing, these narratives grapple with several interlocking theoretical issues: the ambiguous definitions and categorizations of communalism; the tendency to frame communal violence primarily in religious (specifically Islamic) terms, which concurrently exonerates the state and secular political entities while disregarding anti-Muslim violence; and the oversight of legally persecuted victims in the aftermath. Empirically, the study of communal issues is challenged by a lack of comprehensive records, inconsistencies in available data, and a prevailing negligence towards systematic examination of the roots, nature, and complicated inner dynamics of communalism, including the comprehensive anthropological studies on communal violence.

The reification of communal violence as Muslim/Islamist violence is evident in the way incidents are reported or narrated in the media: for example, any incident in which Hindus or other religious minorities are attacked or become victims of aggression is readily labeled as communal violence, such as the attacks on various Hindu temples in Cumilla in 2021 (*Dhaka Tribune* 2021) over an incident of desecration of the *Qur'ān*.⁵ However, as noted above, the murder of two Muslim workers by Hindu mobs, based on false accusations of desecrating a Hindu idol, was not characterized as communal violence. This discourse seems to be profoundly influenced by the definition put forward by the notable Marxist intellectual Badraddin Umar. Umar defines communalism as “the use of religion in politics” (Umar 2015, 7). In other words, any political expression of and engagement with religion, in this context, Islam is considered an act of communalism. The boundary and definition of communalism are thus blurred and restricted to Islam, the idiom is reserved almost exclusively for Muslims, and communal violence is reified as Islamic violence.

⁵ A temporary pavilion for conducting Hindu worship ceremonies, especially during festivals.

In this definition, political Islam is often conflated with religious fundamentalism and sometimes with terrorism, without a clear and precise definition (Riaz 1995; Baldwin 2002; Kabir 2019; Sarker 2019). “In the election held at the beginning of 1990’s, Jamaat-e Islami, as the representative of communal and fundamentalist forces, was able to establish itself as the fourth largest party in Bangladesh due to opposition’s inactivity,” wrote Riaz, a top proponent of Bengali Nationalism and a frequent commentator on communalism, in 1995. Thus, the terms “Islamism” and “fundamentalism” are employed as broad, ambiguous categories or “sponge words” as Dabashi (2015) calls it, that serve as political tools to label any Islamic reference in actions or any Muslim subjectivity as communal. Movements like Hefazat-e Islam (HI), which was established to safeguard Islamic values and Muslim rights (Raquib 2020) are indiscriminately branded as communal and militant (Kabir 2019; Patwari 2018; Gosh 2024). Furthermore, the Pakistan movement and Muslim League politics are often portrayed as the primary champions of radical communalism and the sole cause of communal riots in colonial India (Umar 2016; Chowdhury 2016). Umar even argued that in the colonial political setting, “the progress of Hindus and the backwardness of Muslims were the economic roots of communalism” (2016). Some even maintain that the rise in religiosity and Islamic dawah activities such as *waz mahfils* (Islamic sermons) are to blame for the rise in communal hatred and intolerance (Mamun 2022). For some, even public displays of Islamic practices, such as hosting an Iftar during Ramadan, are interpreted as threatening acts of communalism (Haque 2019, 55).

Similarly, any affiliation with Islamic parties or the advocacy of Muslim interests and Islamic symbols in the socio-political sphere is also viewed as engaging in communal politics. Consequently, centrist political parties like the BNP and the Jatiya Party are often accused of introducing communalism into politics and promoting communal violence and religious militancy on the basis of the following “crimes”: forming coalitions with Islamists such as the JI; making Islam the state religion; or inserting “Bismillah” into the constitution (Patwari 2018; Kabir 2019). In this process, the dominant discourse exonerates secular actors or political parties (such as the Awami League) and the state from being associated with communal violence, portraying them instead as champions of religious harmony and saviors of religious minorities (Patwari 2018; Gosh 2024; Sarker 2019). “Awami League has always been a party against

communalism, fundamentalism, and terrorism since its inception,” reckons Gosh (2024). Thus, in secular political debates, the political landscape is dichotomized into two categories: the non-communal axis, which includes secular parties like the Awami League and leftists, and the communal axis, which comprises Islamic political parties and the centrist BNP, especially when aligned with Islamist groups.

Another line of argument in this discourse is majoritarian nationalism. Using this majoritarian framework, commentators claim that religious minorities in Bangladesh are victims of majoritarian Muslim nationalist violence and oppression because Muslims are the numerical majority (Guhathakurta 2012; Pattanaik 2013). Drawing on the historical political development during the Pakistan period and extending it to post-independence political developments, they argue that Bangladesh has experienced a prolonged period of Islamization and remains a nation-state based on Muslim majoritarian nationalism. Consequently, this majoritarian nationalism is seen as inherently oppressive towards Hindus and other religious minorities. Guhathakurta (2012, 290) attributes the alienation of minorities to the legacy of the Pakistan movement, stating that “subsequent political developments, which introduced Islamic ideals into the practice of statecraft, also helped to recreate notions of religious minorities that were already deeply entrenched in the makeup of the Pakistani state.” However, if we examine empirical studies on communalism in Bangladesh, it becomes evident that, despite extensive debates and discussions at political and intellectual levels, little emphasis has been placed on empirical examination of the conflict. To the best of my knowledge, no comprehensive anthropological study has yet been conducted that focuses on ethnographic research that goes beyond the structural-functionalist approach to analyze the socio-political dynamics of such conflicts, or that systematically focuses on the first-hand perspectives of both victims and perpetrators in Bangladesh. There seems to be a reluctance among experts in the field to conduct empirical research to validate or crosscheck the theoretical claims they put forward. One notable exception is a recently published book by two Indian authors, “Being Hindu in Bangladesh,” which, however, limits its scope to a few interviews with Hindu victims, neglecting other actors and completely overlooking the perpetrators, thereby reinforcing the dominant discourse. Moreover, by creating a sense of what Žižek (2008, 7) calls “fake urgency” surrounding only religious minorities, scholars have consistently overlooked the plight of ethnic minorities, the stranded Pakistani

community in Dhaka, and tribal communities by failing to recognize these incidents as communal violence.

1.2 Research Question

Given the hegemonic yet uncontested discourse on communalism that prevails in both the political and intellectual spheres, it is crucial to subject these narratives to rigorous scrutiny, both theoretically and empirically. As communalism is a concern not just in Bangladesh but across the entire Indian subcontinent, sharing a complex historical backdrop (Spencer 1992), it is imperative that any examination of it be situated within this broader context and literature, given the rich and long tradition of systematic studies of communalism in India compared to that of Bangladesh. The current hegemonic discourse should be positioned against the alternative, or rather, the revisionist, approach and framework developed by contemporary scholars of Indian communalism against the hegemonic traditional Indian nationalist narrative. Going beyond the conventional wisdom that typically adopts a singular and linear approach in discussing and categorizing communalism, (re)producing narratives, and using rather than examining the instances of apparent communal violence, this study aims to delve into various interlocking aspects that have always remained outside the purview of communal studies in Bangladesh—history, politics (local, national, and international), ideology, state, and media. This comprehensive perspective is essential for a proper understanding of communalism and communal violence in Bangladesh.

Questions should be asked about the socio-political, economic, and historical backdrops against which Hindu-Muslim antagonism is maintained. We should investigate why, despite after over fifty years of a state founded on secular, non-communal ideologies of Bengali nationalism, antagonism persists, particularly when the Awami League (AL), a proponent of secular Bengali nationalism and self-proclaimed champion of minority rights, has been in power for the last sixteen years. Why, then, does communal violence surge even as state and secular entities vow to combat and suppress communalism and fundamentalist forces? Who truly benefits from the perpetuation of these conflicts? What are the tangible socio-political and economic repercussions of such violence? How are regional or international politics

connected to the communal conflict? What systemic reluctance exists against prosecuting perpetrators? What roles do state mechanisms, administrative bodies, and political entities—particularly the ruling party—play during and after such episodes of communal violence? How do communities on both sides of the communal divide perceive and rationalize such violence? How are these narratives represented (and omitted) in media and academic discourses? Are these instances of violence spontaneous acts of hostility, or is there an organized mechanism? Why is there no comprehensive official record of communal violence? Are incidents involving ethnic minorities considered part of this communal violence? Who are the legal victims in the aftermath of such violence and so on?

Given the broad nature of these questions and the limited scope of this research, this study will initially focus on key areas through an anthropological examination of communal violence in Bangladesh. The primary question it seeks to address is: Do the incidents labeled as communal violence in media and intellectual discourses, often framed as purely religious anti-Hindu violence, accurately reflect the actual events? More simply, are the events of communal conflicts as they happened and the events as they are narrativized the same? These inquiries raise several other interlocking questions about the dynamics of violence and the role of the state, power, and local politics. Are these instances of communal violence spontaneous acts of communal hatred, or is there a mechanism of organized conflict (Brass 2003) for political or other gain? If the latter is true, what is the role of the state, the media, and local politicians during and after these organized conflicts? What do they gain from these conflicts, and who suffers the most? Furthermore, can we refine our classification of these violent acts—identifying them as riots, brawls, melees, or pogroms, following Brass’s (2003) typology—to achieve a more comprehensive understanding? Rather than relying on theoretical speculation or secondary analysis, this research aims to obtain firsthand accounts from participants and victims of communal violence. This approach facilitates a clearer view of communal dynamics and helps in understanding the fundamental causes of communal antagonism. Additionally, it allows for an anthropological study of political violence and terrorism (Ahmad 2022) by engaging directly with perpetrators or alleged “terrorists” to gain their perspectives and rationales. A final set of critical questions that must be addressed to understand the puzzle of communal violence is: Why do intercommunal tensions persist in society in

the first place, especially under the current AL regime, which portrays itself as secular, non-communal, and a champion of minority rights, and in what specific contexts do they intensify? To what extent, if any, do historical memories of antagonism between the two communities, current local and regional politics as well as state policies along religious lines influence this conflict? In other words, following Žižek's (2008) perspective on violence, is there any unrecognized objective violence—systemic and symbolic—that ignites the outbursts of more tangible subjective violence? These questions aim to explore the interplay of history, power, and politics in communal conflicts, providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issue. This refined focus will help dissect the complexities of communal violence, shedding light on the underlying mechanisms and implications of such conflicts.

1.3 The Argument

From a theoretical standpoint, the depiction of communalism as predominantly linked to Muslim actions, and the portrayal of Muslims as communalist, fundamentalist, and violent can be traced back to three epistemic traditions: British colonial discourse, Hindu nationalist epistemology (Ahmad 2022), and post-9/11 global war on terror (GOWT) narratives. In the wake of 9/11, the securitization of Islam, particularly its political manifestations—already deemed the necessary “other” for and an existential threat to Western civilization post-Cold War (Ahmad 2021a, 2023a; Doha 2018)—only deepened and every Muslim came to be seen as intolerant, radical, terrorist and violent until proven otherwise (Mamdani 2005; Ahmad 2009). Such narratives have not only justified military invasions, resulting in the deaths of millions of Muslims worldwide, but also supported the widespread securitization Muslim populations (Ahmad 2017) and persecution of Islamists. In Bangladesh, proponents of Bengali nationalism and scholars of communalism have not missed the opportunity to reproduce this security/war-on-terror discourse, reifying political Islam as inherently militant, violent, and communal, and thus legitimizing its persecution under the guise of counterterrorism (see, for example, Riaz 2004, 2008a, 2008b).

On the other hand, the traditional nationalist narrative in Indian studies of communalism often portrays Muslims as violent and communal, while Hindus are

portrayed as peaceful nationalists. This Hindu nationalist epistemology (Ahmad 2022, 252-3), in turn, is rooted in colonial discourse. It was the colonial discourse that first portrayed Muslims as “outsiders” and violent fundamentalists, and Hindus as “native Indians” who are “mild, subtle, frugal” (quoted in Ahmad 2022; Hasan 1996) in order to legitimize their colonial rule as well as to maintain communal antagonism between Hindus and Muslims necessary for their divide and rule policy. Islam is thus portrayed as alien to India, and the notion of communalism with Orientalist knowledge production is thus established in the colonial era (Ludden 1996; Pandey 1990). Such narratives persist, labeling any Islamic reference, Muslim subjectivity or politics based on Muslim interests as communal and fundamentalist. Despite the rise of revisionist scholarship in India challenging these views, the dominant discourse in Bangladesh remains an agent client of Hindu nationalist epistemology, reproducing the discourse and often interpreting communal conflicts solely in Islamic terms, thereby absolving both Hindutva and Hinduism of similar scrutiny and equating Islamism or Muslims with fundamentalism and terrorism (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion on this).

I find this discourse—entangled with colonial discourse, Hindutva epistemology, and war-on-terror narrative—problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the colonial narrative that shaped Hindu-Muslim relations was an arbitrary construct designed to legitimize British rule in South Asia, rather than a reflection of organic intercommunal dynamics (Ahmad 2023b). Secondly, the portrayal of communal violence as exclusively religious, specifically Islamic, and the depiction of Muslims as inherently violent have been critiqued as epistemic violence rooted in Hindu Orientalism.⁶

⁶ For Ahmad, Hindu Orientalism is an analytical category embedded within the power-knowledge matrix of India’s neo-colonial vision. This framework is central to sustaining the oppression of Muslims and other subalternated communities in India, not only through the production of discourse but also by reinforcing a hegemonic Hindutva power structure. Hence, Hindu Orientalism transcends being a mere epistemic category; it is an epistemic-political enterprise intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life, exerting control over both life and death. This power-knowledge matrix synthesizes Western and Indian anti-Islamic racism, producing two primary discourses: Muslims are outsiders to India, and Islam is synonymous with violence. Ahmad cautions that, under the guise of decolonization, this neo-colonial enterprise of Hindu Orientalism not only shapes India’s knowledge-power dynamics but also aspires to influence regional and global knowledge-power structure.

Moreover, scholars of South Asian political history such as Chatterji (1994) and Jalal (1998) challenge the scapegoating of the Muslim League and its policies as the primary cause of communal riots. Additionally, the reification of violence with religion, particularly Islam, and the consequent exoneration of secular institutions and the state have already been challenged and debunked by prominent scholars in the field (see Asad 2003; Cavanaugh 2009). In particular, when it comes to communal conflict, using the Egyptian case, Saba Mahmood (2016) has shown against the conventional wisdom how secular states structurally sustain these communal tensions. Another group of scholars (Mamdani 2005; Esposito 2015; Ahmad 2017) has succinctly exposed the limitations and political implications behind the war on terror discourse, as well as the problems with generalizing political Islam as terrorism. Finally, the vilification of Muslims through the politics of criminalization is a broader trend in the post-9/11 world order, where Muslims and Islam have become metaphors for extremism, terrorism, and, in the South Asian context, communalism. The term communalism has evolved into what Dabashi (2015) describes as a “sponge word,” absorbing a spectrum of socio-political crimes and malaise “with multiple causes and filing them under Islamic and Muslim acts only.” Applying these terms to anyone other than Muslims “dismantles the entire lexicography” of the Hindutva-Christian political axis. This denigration of Islam and Muslims, or the politics of criminalization through the reproduction of such narratives, constitutes what Žižek (2008) refers to as “symbolic violence.”

The reification of communal violence as anti-Hindu Islamic aggression also neglects broader socio-political and economic contexts as well as instrumentalist aspects of such conflict. Taj Hashmi (2016) highlights that local power struggles and economic motives are significant contributors to communal violence, thereby advising caution against solely blaming political Islam or Islamists. Furthermore, exoneration of secular institutions and political parties from the narrative of communalism continues despite evidence to the contrary. Numerous reports have documented instances where leaders from the ruling Awami League, along with their supporters, have instigated attacks on Hindus and other religious minorities (Chowdhury 2017; *BD News 24* 2023a). Other prime examples include the two cases of Cumilla in 2021 and 2023. Such cases—often underplayed by the media—question the prevalent narrative that portrays the Awami League as a protector of the Hindu community and a champion of minority interests.

Even the general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Mohajot (BHM) accused the grassroots Awami League leaders of such attacks (*Daily Star* 2023a).⁷ This challenges the narrative of the Awami League regime as the champion of minority rights, as highlighted by expert concerns about the state’s passive role in addressing communal violence (Hashmi, 2016).

Moreover, the dominant discourse often overlooks the religio-political contexts in which inter-communal clashes or conflicts occur. I use the term religio-political because, in modern political arrangements, nothing escapes the grasp of politics, including religion. Particularly in a secular nation-state, religion is not only intertwined with politics but is also predominantly regulated and redefined by actors such as secularism and the state (Asad 2003; Hallaq 2021). Therefore, seemingly religious aspects often entail a political dimension too and often cannot be separated. This oversight of religio-political aspects is particularly evident when incidents involve actions by religious minorities that are perceived by Muslims as provocative, defamatory, and blasphemous, thereby inflaming religious sensitivities. Pretexts for many communal attacks on religious minorities often stem from incidents of “moral injury” (Mahmood 2013, 72), where non-Muslim individuals or groups target Islam, the Prophet, or the Qur’ān—acts that can incite severe reactions among Muslims (*Business Standard* 2022; *BD News* 24 2020). In such contexts, Muslims can be manipulated and exploited by stakeholders who stand to benefit from these incidents. This is largely because, despite the current liberal world order’s tendency to downplay the significance of religious sanctity, particularly Islamic sanctity, as noted by scholars such as Asad (2013) and Mahmood (2013), Islam and its symbols hold the utmost respect and importance in the religio-cultural and emotional fabric of Muslim communities. However, certain media and academic discourses tend to downplay or disregard these incidents of “moral injury” altogether as “rumors” (Swapon 2021). Meanwhile, several arrests of individuals from minority communities for acts of defaming Islam have been made over the years, with some individuals convicted (*Kaler Kantho* 2022; *BBC Bangla* 2022). Although this in no way justifies violence against minorities, nor does this dissertation aim to do so, it underscores the need for

⁷ For more on this, see Chapter 4.

a more comprehensive understanding and the implementation of policies that address the roots of these conflicts. It also challenges the prevailing narrative that depicts Muslims as inherently anti-Hindu and Hindus as inherently non-communal.

It is also important to note that the term communalism has long been deployed as a political tool of division and blame within both academic and political discourse. This practice, compounded by the ambiguity surrounding the definition of communal violence, leaves much of the scholarship on communalism wanting. Notably, there seems to be a reluctance to definitively characterize communal violence in the Bangladeshi context, often opting to describe such incidents as socio-religious phenomena without establishing clear parameters. This reluctance, whether strategic or inadvertent, facilitates selective interpretations, allowing communalism to be identified based on religious and political associations without addressing theoretical inadequacies or biases. This ambiguity aids opinion-manufacturers and secular politicians in equating Islamism with communalism, thereby delegitimizing political Islam and activities based on Muslim interests. Despite the lack of comprehensive empirical data on communal violence since 1971, neither scholars nor the government feel obliged to present empirical data on communal violence before superficially portraying it as a threat to social and national security. Some non-governmental organizations, like Odhikar, maintain reports focusing only on incidents from the last decade and a half. However, there is a significant discrepancy between these reports and the claims of communal incidents made by various other stakeholders.

The problems present in the study of communalism from an empirical perspective seem more puzzling and daunting. They involve similar patterns that are present in cases of communal conflict in India, such as organized attacks, the questionable role of law enforcement agencies, discourse manufacturing, legal scapegoating, and blame-shifting (Brass 2003, 2006). During my ethnographic fieldwork in Cumilla—the epicenter of the 2021 nationwide communal attacks that resulted in significant casualties—local Hindu and Muslim residents implicated both local and unidentified youths led by Awami League leaders in instigating the initial attack. Personal interviews with individuals from both communities, including victims and alleged perpetrators, disclosed that the violence was a pre-planned, organized attack aimed at scapegoating a political opposition leader from the BNP. In this scenario, the Hindu

community suffered collateral damage, and hundreds of Muslims also became victims of legal violence during the police's witch-hunt. Locals from both Muslim and Hindu communities expressed frustration with the police and administration, claiming their inaction allowed the situation to escalate, only to be proactive in their witch hunt later—a sentiment confirmed by investigative reports (Yusuf and Islam 2021).

Some of my interlocutors, who were arbitrarily detained without charge and spent months in jail, recounted their horrific experiences as victims of political scapegoating intended to exonerate the actual perpetrators. They not only suffered subjective physical violence due to their arrest but also became victims of narratives and the politics of narrative elimination, as the dominant discourse on communal violence is always reluctant to talk about them. This issue has become a taboo in studies on communalism in Bangladesh, with nearly every study or report on communal violence failing to address these silenced victims of state-sponsored violence. Although it is the state's response to and methods of suppressing communal incidents that have historically created more victims than the incidents themselves (Ludden 1996). A case in point could be the 8 casualties reported in the 2021 conflict across the country, of which at least 5 Muslims were killed by unprovoked police firing in Chandpur.⁸ Dominant narratives also fail to address these victims as victims of state-sponsored violence. This practice is indicative of how the state, through its silence, sometimes facilitates the persistence of these conflicts and leverages such incidents to target political adversaries, especially Islamists. By exploiting the discourse of communalism and radicalism, the state orchestrates a narrative that serves its political agenda. This manipulation extends to utilizing the narrative of the global war on terror (GWOT), enabling the government to garner international support for its actions, which include persecuting political opponents and maintaining its rule. This strategy has been pursued despite the government's continued hold on power, which has significantly undermined democratic processes in the country over the past fifteen years (Saleem 2023; Bergman 2022; Asian Age 2018; Stark 2015).

⁸ See this report prepared by Human Rights Forum Bangladesh: <https://www.askbd.org/ask/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Attack-on-the-Hindu-Community-28-Aug.pdf>

Furthermore, a significant double standard persists in the dominant discourse, which is reluctant to apply the label of communalism to Hindus despite clear evidence of their involvement in organized violence. This problem is evident in certain incidents, such as organized violence by Hindu communities against Muslims and pre-planned vandalization of Hindu religious sites to frame Muslims and incite communal hatred. Examples include the aforementioned Panchapalli incident, in which Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs for allegedly causing moral or physical harm to Hinduism. In addition, there have been several reports of police investigations where members of the Hindu community were found vandalizing or setting Hindu temples and idols on fire in an attempt to shift the blame to the Muslim community and incite religious animosity (*Daily Inqilab* 2023; *Bangla News* 2023; *Bangladesh Journal* 2021). Additionally, the dominant discourse of communal violence exhibits another significant double standard through the narrative elimination of ethnic minorities. While opinion-manufacturers are vocal about anti-Hindu violence, highlighting these incidents on international platforms and creating “a sense of fake urgency” —which, according to reports from the human rights organization Odhikar, resulted in approximately 20 deaths from 2007 to early 2021—they consistently remain silent about the repression ethnic minorities face due to state and political violence. According to Odhikar, around 149 people from ethnic minority groups were killed between 2012 and 2019.⁹ Despite the heavier toll from state and politically motivated violence on these groups, they receive significantly less attention from both media and scholarly discourses compared to cases involving violence against religious minorities.

An additional aspect that remains underexplored in the study of communalism is the role of national and regional politics in exacerbating the perceived antagonism between Hindu and Muslim communities. From a theoretical perspective, a comprehensive anthropological study of violence or terrorism requires a new holistic and interdisciplinary approach that considers local, regional, and international politics (Ahmad 2021a). This observation by Ahmad was further confirmed by my interviews with those implicated in the Cumilla incidents, as well as discussions with Muslim

⁹ The report can be accessed here: https://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Repression-Against-Ethnic-Minority_2012-2019.pdf

youths vocal about the persecution of Islamists and the rise of Hindutva in Bangladesh. These conversations revealed that anti-Hindu(tva) sentiments among Muslims can be traced to religious provocations by non-Muslim communities against their religion, as well as a deep sense of alienation among Muslims in their own homeland. This sense of alienation is exemplified by secular policies that criminalize religious practices, target certain bodies and symbols of Islam, ban religious books, and suppress Muslim subjectivity. This process of systematic criminalization and oppression has become so banal and normalized in the Bangladeshi political landscape that, following Žižek's typology (2008), it can be classified as objective violence, which includes both symbolic violence—such as the criminalization of Muslimness—and systemic violence, encompassing subsequent suppression. Recent examples of this objective violence include the ban on serving beef in some university canteens (*BBC Bangla* 2017; *Daily Campus* 2023; Moudud 2024), the prohibition on organizing public Iftar programs on university campuses (Shuvo 2024; Islam 2024), and the ban on Qur'ān recitation programs on the Dhaka University campus during Ramadan 2024 (*Daily Inqilab* 2024a).

This sense of alienation is further aggravated by the growing Hindutva cultural and political hegemony in the country. Two pertinent examples involve incidents where criticism of India's political interventions leads to severe repercussions. The first is the case of Abrar, who was killed by members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the ruling Awami League, for his critical view of Indian policies (*BBC News* 2019). The second is the mass anti-Modi protest against his visit to Bangladesh, where, according to conservative accounts, at least 17 people were killed by police and 500 others injured (*New Age* 2021). This tension is further exacerbated by instances of provocative threats against Muslims by Hindus, derogatory labeling of Muslims as fundamentalists, and threats against them for observing religious duties. Such provocations are often supported by Awami League leaders and their Hindu allies, further deepening the divide (*Daily Inqilab* 2024b; *Desh Rupantor* 2024; *Manab Zamin* 2024). Furthermore, the sense of alienation among Muslim youth is further deepened by some perceived pro-Hindu policies in government sectors, such as the preference given to Hindus in the civil service and top government positions, as well as the pro-Indian stance of the government.

Put briefly, my primary argument is twofold: a) any critical inquiry into communalism must be contextualized within the broader dynamics of narrative, power, politics, and the state, as well as the reactions (politics) of minority communities; b) the dominant portrayal of anti-Hindu violence as spontaneous Islamic violence is overly simplistic and problematic and stems from a broader anti-Islamic politics of narrativization. Rather, we should understand this conflict by undertaking a new holistic anthropological approach that locates not only socio-religious factors and local politics but also regional and international politics (Ahmad 2021a). In this way, anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh can be categorized as follows, rather than as purely religious (Islamic) violence:

The first category can be identified as organized riots or violence by the political elites, often guided by politico-economic motivations. This form of violence typically involves ruling elites, who are predominantly secular in their political orientation, exploiting communal tensions. In these scenarios, Hindus are often used as pawns, becoming collateral damage as part of broader strategies to persecute political Islamism or other political opponents by deflecting blame. Such incidents are often facilitated by the state's silence or passive response, allowing secular authorities to benefit doubly by legitimizing the persecution of political Islam and consolidating their own power under the guise of combating communal and violent ideologies.

The second category is characterized as reactive violence by Muslims against a bullying community, which is often religio-political in nature. This type of violence emerges from Muslim communities in response to specific acts perceived as violations of moral or religious codes, or as direct attacks against their religion. Such reactive violence is not an unprovoked or spontaneous manifestation of hostility but a contingent response to actions deemed offensive or aggressive by the reacting community. This reactive tendency among Muslims, who feel religiously aggrieved, is further intensified by several socio-political factors, including the growing Indian/Hindutva cultural and political aggression and the alienation of Muslims in their own country by the secular state.

1.4 Islam Amidst Bengali Nationalism and Indian Hegemony

One final question in the discourse of communalism in Bangladesh that needs to be addressed is the notion of majoritarian (Muslim) nationalism. The debate is puzzling and somewhat unsatisfactory given the line the core argument is framed through. Many commentators argue that minority communities, especially Hindus, are marginalized in Bangladesh due to majoritarian Muslim nationalism (Guhathakurta 2012; Pattanaik 2013). They attribute this marginalization to two main factors: Muslims constitute the numerical majority, and Islam is the state religion. Consequently, they claim that Hindus are often victims of religious violence perpetrated by Muslims. Although the first two arguments are factually (half) true, I find the framing of a majoritarian Muslim nationalism based on these two facts unsatisfactory and simplistic.

My argument is threefold: First, with the AL in power since 2009, championing Bengali nationalism and secularism (Guhathakurta 2012; Siddiqi 2018), the argument that Bangladesh is a Muslim nation-state is weak, if not completely false. With Bengali nationalism and secularism as the primary state ideologies, Bangladesh can no longer be seen as a Muslim nation-state where Islam enjoys a certain label of political primacy, as argued by these commentators. Second, although Islam remains the state religion in the constitution, the fifteenth amendment reinstated secularism in the preamble, which was also the case in the first constitution of 1972, and it functions as the guiding principle of the AL's policies. Although it seems an anomaly and a contradiction to be a secular state with an official state religion, which led to public debate (Siddiqi 2018), some analysts suggest that the decision not to remove Islam from the constitution was a strategic political move without any effect, just to not offend Muslim sensibilities. Finally, it seems unsatisfactory to me to ascribe political primacy to a community solely on the basis of a numerical majority without considering power dynamics and national as well as regional political arrangements. Given an ostensibly secular and anti-Islamic state with Bengali nationalism at its core and India as a malign regional hegemon wielding direct political power in Bangladesh, this framing of a dominant majoritarian Muslim nationalism doesn't fit. I will elaborate on the first and last arguments in the next part of this section.

Bengali Nationalism and the Place of Muslims

Nationalism has functioned as a tool of nation-building as well as a medium of exclusion and the construction of imagined difference around the world (Morse and Fraser 2005, 629). As nationalism invents the idea of imaginary nations—imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson (2006, 6) terms it—based on ethnicity, language, religion, territory, or some other factor (Kabir 1987, 474), the idea of a nation is manufactured (and constantly remanufactured) around “political love”—love for a land, for a language that is “ours” (Anderson 2006, 143). This manufactured and imagined love for a nation or home—domophilia, as Ahmad calls it—also imagines hostility and an inherent enmity toward “others,” the enemy (Ahmad 2013a). As Anthony Marx (2003) aptly observes, “supposedly inclusive nationalism was founded on the basis of violent exclusion, used to bind and forge nations to which rights would then be selectively granted.” As a tool of exclusion, nationalism has an inherent idea of us versus them. However, this “other” is not always the other outside the national territory. This other can sometimes be an internal other—the internal enemy. The ethnic, political, or religious minorities of a national territory, as well as immigrants, could be identified as the essential other of state-nationalism. Hostility towards Muslims, both in India and in Europe, is the prime example of this national othering—internal and external. This violent othering of an internal community is often practiced when nationalism fails to achieve cultural homogeneity among the people of a particular territory. Therefore, within the same territory, one man’s imagined community becomes another man’s political prison, as Appadurai notes (2005, 32).

Like many other countries, Bangladesh, after more than five decades of independence, could not resolve the question of national identity, and it has been debated since the 1950s (Khan 2000, 2). The state and political entities are divided between two identities: secular Bengali nationalism based on linguistic and cultural homogeneity, and Bangladeshi nationalism based on territoriality that promotes the notion of a Muslim cultural past (Khan 2014, 1). The latter emerged in opposition to the former’s understanding of a homogeneous cultural identity—popularly promoted as a “thousand-year culture” (*hajar bochorer songskriti*) (Murshid 2006), including that of the Bengali-speaking people across the border in West Bengal, India. However, due to the inherent contradiction in the formulation of secularism, as Siddiqi argues, the

question of Islam remained unresolved in the Bengali nationalist imagination (Siddiqi 2018, 11). Moreover, the emphasis on linguistic nationalism and the further ambiguity in addressing the question of identity through the constitution's use of the distinction between "people" and "citizens" excluded non-Bengali-speaking ethnic groups from the nationalist imagination. And in the process, as Siddiqi aptly observes, "non-Bengali-speaking populations—disruptive to an imagined ethnic Bengali polity—were excluded from cultural, if not legal, citizenship. Othering within Bengali nationalism, however, extends beyond linguistic and ethnic minorities.

Along with demonstrating a strong inclination to marginalize or even eradicate any present subjectivity that does not conform to its singular linguistic and cultural imagination (Siddiqi 2018), Bengali nationalism's founding principles of non-communalism (*oshamprodayikota*) and secularism in nation-building seek to completely divorce religion from the state and fail to accommodate (Siddiqi 2011, 21; Siddiqi 2018, 251). Furthermore, this secular Bengali nationalism, Ferodus notes, denounces "all other political positions," (Ferdous 2022, 2). This is the reason that justified the need for an alternative national identity and that incorporated the Muslim culture (*tamaddun or tomoddun*) of this land, language and values for which progressive secular politicians and intellectuals like Abul Mansur Ahmad (1897-1979) and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin (1897-1978) advocated during Pakistan period (See Ahmad 1975; 1966). This process of negotiation, and the search for an alternative nationalist imagination appropriate to the people of this land, would later lead to the emergence of Bangladeshi nationalism in the 1970s (Rahman, M. 2019). Building on these observations, coupled with its indifference to accommodate Muslim subjectivity in its imagination, I aim to extend the argument of Rabeya and Hossain (2017) that Bengali nationalism also positions Islam and Muslims as the "other." My intervention seeks to reexamine not only the current political development but also the genealogical roots of Bengali nationalism.

As a concrete political movement, Bengali nationalism first emerged during the partition of Bengal in 1905 (McLane 1965) and resurfaced strongly during the Pakistan period, but there is a consensus among scholars that it was the intellectual brainchild of the Bengal Renaissance (Kopf 2023; Mannan 2015). The Bengal Renaissance began as a movement to protect the interests of Hindu zamindars and *bhadralooks*, then

transformed into a socio-cultural and religious reform movement, before becoming the basis of the Hindu nationalist movement in the twentieth century (Mannan 2015), which historically exhibited an inherently antagonistic and otherizing tendency toward Islam (Ludden 1996, 5). Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy brought Western ideas to the Hindu elite in Calcutta, but created a sense of separation from the lower classes, other religions, and traditional Indian culture (Kopf 2023). Many argue that the Bengali renaissance was in fact a Hindu renaissance influenced by British modernity and Hindu revivalist thought (Wahid 1983, 31; Rahman, F. 2022). It was a movement that synthesized Western modernity and Enlightenment values with Hindu nationalist thought (Chaudhuri 1961; Sartori 2009; Naeem 2023). And the unified Bengali culture that the proponents of Bengali nationalism advocated is nothing but a Hindu culture, as Ahmad aptly observes, “So when any Hindu poet and writer arrogantly called anything ‘Bengali culture’ and many did, they meant it to be, and it really was, Hindu culture. In fact, at that time only the Hindus were known as Bengalees and the Muslims as non-Bengalees” (Ahmad 1975, 525-6).

The founding fathers and most prominent leaders of this renaissance were known for their dislike, if not contempt, for Islam and Muslims, so much so that the dominant discourse of Muslims as communal can be traced back to them (Umar 2015). Enchanted by Western colonial rule, Ram Mohan Roy saw Muslim rule as barbaric (Dhar 1987). Another key figure and prominent writer, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, was known for his Hindu nationalist thought (Choudhury 2015) and anti-Islamic stance. He not only portrayed Muslims as barbaric outsiders, but also compared Muslims to dogs (Chattopadhyay 1954). Later figures, such as Sharatchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore—who was a Nobel laureate and the most celebrated literary icon among Bengali nationalists—often excluded Islam and Muslims from their cultural and nationalistic narratives, occasionally displaying hostility towards Muslims. Ahmad’s observation succinctly affirms this reality, “All that we know is that Rabindranath like all other great Masters of Bengali language and literature like Michael Madhusudhan, Bankim and Sarat Chandra ably served Hindu culture” (Ahmad, A. 1975, 526). Tagore, enchanted with British values, in many cases portrayed Muslims as outsiders, inferior, and bellicose (see Tagore 1944; 1955). Let’s consider a single quote from Tagore’s review article published in *Itihas*:

The Muslims waged war, and the Hindus committed mass suicide. In the wars of the Muslims, on one side there was religious fervor, on the other side the greed for territory or wealth. Such terrifying competition, bloodshed, and great sin are not seen anywhere else in the world. ... In the history of Muslims, we see that in the face of rampant passion and the excitement of power acquisition, all natural affection, mercy, and religion become trivial; among brothers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, masters and servants, there arise rebellion, betrayal, deceit, bloodshed, and the outbreak of unspeakable and unnatural cruelty. (Tagore 1955, 149-52)

Tensions with Islam and Muslims, which began with the Bengali Renaissance, persisted in Bengali nationalist thought throughout subsequent political developments, from the partition of Bengal in 1905 to the Pakistan period. These tensions were particularly pronounced between political elites from two camps—Hindu Bhadrals and Muslim Ashrafs—and eventually led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947 as a homeland for Muslims (Ahmed, R. 1981; Rabeya and Hossain 2017). Although the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims brought “joy and jubilation to millions of East Bengali peasants who considered the pre-Partition era of India as one of oppression” (Ferdous 2022, 3), there were soon some economic and political tensions between East and West Pakistan, which led to the resurgence of Bengali nationalism and exacerbated these tensions (Ahmad, A. 1975; Rabeya and Hossain 2017). This ongoing friction, coupled with other political developments and regional dynamics, eventually led to the partition of Pakistan and the creation of an independent Bangladesh through a civil war in 1971 based on Bengali nationalism.

However, as discussed earlier, the new state and its secular policies failed to mitigate the tension between Islam and Bengali nationalism in this new state (Ahmad, A. 1975; Mohsin 2004; Maniruzzaman 1990). As a result, Bangladesh has witnessed an ongoing debate and positioning between Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism in the ensuing years, and Islam has remained outside the imagination of Bengali nationalist thought, and in the post-9/11 world order, where Islam is the new global enemy, this otherization has only been exacerbated. Using literary analysis, Rabeya and Hossain (2017) showed how Bengali nationalist intellectuals were able to cast Islam and Muslims as the “other” through selective interpretations of terms like “political Islam” and “Islamism” in this global political context. However, this othering of Muslimness goes beyond political discourse and dominates academic discourse as well. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) has observed, the role of Bengali Muslims is limited in South Asian historiography. This absence of Muslimness in Bengali nationalist discourse has

reached the point where Bose notes that it appears “buried to the point of erasure from the Bengali cultural and historical archive” (Bose 2013, 2).

Having seen the genealogical roots of this othering of Islam in Bengali nationalism, I would now like to turn to the role of secularism and India as a malevolent regional hegemon and “political bully” (Siddiqi 2011) in this process, extending Rabeya and Hasan’s argument. My argument is that the tension between Islam and Bengali nationalism has deepened and the alienation of Muslims has increased under the current Awami League (AL) regime, along with other political developments during this period. With the AL championing secularism and Bengali nationalism, which has long been perceived as pro-Hindu and anti-Islamic in the public imagination (Siddiqi 2011), the space for Islam in the public sphere has shrunk and Muslim lives have become “securitized” (Ahmad 2009). And this is where my final argument, that the idea of majority Muslim nationalism in Bangladesh is problematic, becomes relevant.

Although India has been portrayed as the great savior of Bangladesh, and the India-Bangladesh relationship is interpreted as “friendship” and “fraternity” in Bengali nationalist thought (Ferdous 2022, 2), the public perception of India is quite the opposite. This perception is fueled by several factors, most notably the ongoing border killings by the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF), as highlighted in Figure 1.1 below. Additional factors contributing to the growing tensions include disputes over water-sharing policies, the AL government’s increasingly pro-India stance, the 2011 BDR (Bangladesh Rifles, now known as BGB) mutiny—believed by many to be orchestrated by Indian intelligence to weaken the Bangladeshi military and strengthen the AL’s power—and the persecution of Islamists under the pretext of combating “extremism” (Rahman, M. 2019). These developments, which had already exacerbated tensions and led to a pronounced religious-secular polarization in the country, were further exacerbated by the Shahbag movement and its counterpart, the Shapla movement, in 2013. The Shahbag movement, which demanded the execution of JI leaders for alleged “war crimes,” emerged in the political imagination as a defender of Bengali nationalism and a secular anti-Islamic ethos. It sought to protect and reinterpret Bengali nationalism by purging anti-Bengali nationalists and their descendants (Chowdhury 2018). The movement also called for the establishment of a secular nation-state based on secular Bengali nationalism (Raquib 2020, 4). In doing

so, it popularized slogans that denigrated Islam and Muslims (as well as Pakistan), thereby antagonizing the Muslim populace.

In response to the anti-Islamic narratives of the Shahbag movement, the Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) movement emerged within two and a half months, driven mainly by Qaumi madrasa *‘ulema* and students. This Islamist movement gained considerable support from the masses, especially during the protests against the Shahbag movement and the “blasphemous” activities of some of its leaders. However, like other Islamist groups, HI eventually faced political repression from the government. The government’s crackdown, dubbed “Operation Flushout,” on the rallies of nearly a million Muslims and madrasa students to disperse them on the night of May 5 killed an unknown number of protesters in what became known as the Shapla Massacre (Doha 2022).¹⁰ Conversely, the Shahbag movement, supported by the government and international actors such as India, has remained influential in the political sphere. This movement has significantly changed the political culture of Bangladesh, intensified the ideological struggle between secularists and Islamists, played a crucial role in the othering of Islam, and helped the AL intensify its anti-Islamic and pro-Indian policies.

Subsequently, as India tightened its hegemonic grip on Bangladesh during this period through its alliance with the Awami League (AL) government, this intervention was also accompanied by a rise in anti-Muslim politics (Rahman, M. 2019). The extent of Indian hegemony can be illustrated by the tragic incident of the murder of Abrar Fahad, a student at Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology, who was beaten to death by Chhatra League activists (the student wing of the AL) over a Facebook post critical of Indian hegemony. He was accused of being an Islamist or a Shibir (student wing of JI) activist simply because he was a practicing Muslim and had a beard (BBC 2019). Although this incident sparked nationwide protests, it did little to mitigate India’s hegemony and the alienation of Muslims. Moreover, it has also become common to hear leaders and parliament members of the AL openly proclaim their

¹⁰ The exact number of people killed and gone missing in the Shapla massacre remains uncertain due to the administration’s crackdown on local media and legal actions against reporters, although Al Jazeera and other international organizations reported that hundreds were killed.

allegiance to both Prime Minister Hasina and India (*Desh Rupantor* 2023; *BBC Bangla* 2023). There have been instances of Indian nationals holding high-level government positions in Bangladesh, which also create the sense of alienation among Muslims (*Jugantor* 2019). India's cultural hegemony, promotion of Hindutva ideology and the subsequent othering of Muslims are further evident in the rising influence of the Iskcon, which enjoys the backing of the Indian government (*Bangla News* 2018), and in the Hindutva elements embedded within Bangladesh's newly revised national school curriculum (Mohammad 2024).¹¹

The alienation of Muslims is further exacerbated by the inherent contradictions within secularism and the global transnational order based on the nation-state, which often clashes with Islam (Mahmood 2015). While secularism seeks to keep religion private, it also seeks to regulate religion itself (Asad 2003). Secular nation-states, coupled with nationalist aspirations, are rather always keen to intervene, regulate, and prohibit certain religious practices (Ahmad and van der Veer 2022), while promoting others along with their nationalist vision. This regulation and prohibition often require exclusion and cleansing, as Doha aptly notes in her commentary on the Shahbag movement's Bengali nationalist drive to purify Islamism:

National secularism, unlike national socialism, does not have a 'racial hygiene,' but it has a cleansing structure: a purifying project in which citizens must routinely demonstrate their fidelity to the nation by subordinating Islam to the grammar of a secular identity formation. In order to maintain its own metanarrative, secularism constantly re-founds and reproduces itself on a new historical plane (Doha and Jamil 2017).

In the project of cleansing and purifying Bengali nationalism, Muslim and Islamic symbols frequently become targets in the name of preserving Bengali culture. For example, advocates of Bengali nationalism consistently call for the banning of *hijābs* and *niqābs* to maintain the purity of Bengali cultural identity (Rahman, A. 2024; Hossain, S. 2018). This issue has been a recurring subject of debate within Bengali nationalist circles. Instances of individuals being attacked and criminalized for wearing *hijāb* and *niqāb*, particularly on university campuses, or being denied

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion on India's cultural and political hegemony over Bangladesh, see chapter 4.

permission to attend classes or exams have become increasingly common in Bangladesh (*Daily Inqilab* 2016). A recent study conducted at the University of Dhaka revealed that one-third of female respondents reported experiencing harassment for wearing a *hijāb* on the university campus (*Barta24* 2022; *Prothom Alo* 2022).

In this regard, given India's direct political intervention as a Hindu nation-state, the continued alienation of Islam, and the securitization of Muslim lives under the AL regime, I argue that the idea of Bangladesh as a nation based on Muslim majoritarianism is far from given and self-evident. The concept of majoritarian nationalism should not only be seen in terms of numerical majority without political understanding, but rather in terms of power dynamics. Historically, there have been many nations where minority elites have held power, such as South Africa, Syria, Iraq, or Bahrain (see Hassan, Mi. 2020). In South Africa's apartheid regime, the white minority held power, and there was no majoritarian nationalism, despite the numerical superiority of indigenous South Africans. Similarly, while Muslims in Bangladesh can still be considered a socio-cultural majority with the power to regulate the normative landscape, in terms of power dynamics, I argue that they are only a subaltern majority in the current political context.

Human Rights Violation by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) against Bangladeshi Citizens: 2000 - 2021									
Years (s)	Killed	Injured	Abducted	Missing	Rape	Snatching/ Looting	Push in	Other	Grand Total
2021	17	12	0	0	1	0	0	1	31
2020	51	27	7	0	0	0	0	0	85
2019	41	40	34	0	0	0	0	0	115
2018	11	24	16	0	0	0	0	0	51
2017	25	39	28	0	0	0	0	0	92
2016	29	36	22	0	0	0	0	0	87
2015	44	60	27	1	0	0	0	0	132
2014	35	68	99	2	0	0	0	5	209
2013	29	79	127	0	1	77	41	0	354
2012	38	100	74	1	0	9	0	16	238
2011	31	62	23	0	0	0	0	9	125
2010	74	72	43	2	0	1	5	0	197
2009	98	77	25	13	1	1	90	3	308
2008	61	46	81	0	0	3	20	0	211
2007	118	82	92	9	3	5	198	0	507
2006	155	121	160	32	2	9	0	0	479
2005	88	53	78	14	3	4	0	0	240
2004	72	30	73	0	0	5	0	0	180
2003	27	41	120	7	2	8	0	0	205
2002	94	42	118	30	0	12	0	0	296
2001	84	29	55	0	1	10	0	0	179
2000	31	17	106	0	2	13	0	0	169
Grand Total	1253	1157	1408	111	16	157	354	34	4490

Figure 1.2 Border Killings and Other Human Rights Violations against Bangladeshi Citizens by BSF (2000-2021).¹²

1.5 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured to provide an in-depth anthropological analysis of communal violence in Bangladesh. By challenging the hegemonic discourse that frames communal violence predominantly as Islamic violence and examining the politics of narrativization, the study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. It scrutinizes dominant narratives, the role of the state, power dynamics, and political influences while foregrounding the experiences of victims.

The introductory chapter sets the stage for the discussion on communal violence. It begins with a compelling vignette relevant to the narrative of communalism in Bangladesh, highlighting the politics of narrativization that presents a singular narrative. It then briefly reexamines the fragmented state of conventional wisdom on the subject. The chapter also outlines the research questions guiding the study and introduces the core argument, which challenges the dominant discourse and

¹² Photo of the report taken from: https://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Border_2000-2021.pdf

conventional wisdom. It advocates for a refined approach to understanding communal conflict in Bangladesh by integrating diverse theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. The chapter finally discusses the question of Islam, identity, and Bengali nationalism in the studies of communalism and provides an overview of the thesis structure to orient the reader.

The second chapter outlines the research methodologies and field experiences. It discusses the methods employed in the study, namely the extended case method developed by Max Glucman, and provides a rationale for employing this method. The chapter also sheds light on the difficulties and complexities encountered during fieldwork, stemming from the sensitivity of the topic and the oppressive political culture and fearful state mechanisms in Bangladesh. This culture of fear is exacerbated by post-9/11 security discourses, the criminalization of Muslimness, and the state's function as a police state. The rationale behind choosing particular sites, interlocutors, and timelines is also discussed.

The third chapter critically engages with the literature on communal violence in Bangladesh, juxtaposing this literature with other academic approaches and broader studies on the subject. The chapter examines the interdiscursivity and entanglement of communal discourse with colonial discourse, Hindu Orientalism, and Bengali nationalism. It critiques how these traditions collude to propagate a singular narrative that portrays Muslims as perpetual bad actors and contributes to the politics of criminalization of Muslim subjectivity, sensibility, and imagery.

Based on ethnographic evidence gathered through interviews with local residents from both Hindu and Muslim communities, victims, and accused perpetrators of the 2021 communal attacks in Cumilla, the fourth chapter critically assesses the portrayal of Hindus as non-communal and the Awami League as the protector of Hindus, juxtaposed with their actual roles in political oppression. It also discusses the state's role in such incidents in light of the war on terror discourse and how communal violence serves the state's interests by being mischaracterized as purely socio-political violence. The chapter focuses on the unexplored and often-voiceless victims, including political opponents—particularly Islamists—as well ordinary Muslims who have been victimized in the context of communal violence. It describes the criminalization of

certain Muslim symbols and appearances, highlights discrepancies in the legal system and media portrayals, and addresses the conspicuous silence of academic scholarship on these issues. Broader geopolitical dynamics, including Hindutva oppression, Indian hegemony, and the resultant anti-Indian sentiment, are also explored.

The dissertation concludes by synthesizing the findings from each chapter, offering a comprehensive understanding of communal violence in Bangladesh. It reflects on the implications of this study for policy, societal peace, and future research, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and contextually informed approach to addressing communal tensions and violence in the region.



CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FIELD EXPERIENCE

As a discipline deeply rooted in immersive and experiential research methods, anthropology considers fieldwork as its cornerstone. Howell (1990, 4) aptly notes, “fieldwork is the central activity” of anthropology. It serves as the primary method of cultural anthropology (Robben and Sluka 2007, 4), enabling anthropologists to engage intimately with their subjects. Following Malinowski’s recommendation that all ethnographic studies should include an account of the research methods and conditions (Malinowski 2002, 3), this chapter outlines the research methodology and techniques I employed during my ethnographic research from February 2023 to February 2024—in four phases for a total of 12 days—in Nanua Dighir Par, Cumilla, Bangladesh.

The first section details my fieldwork experiences, highlighting the challenges and obstacles encountered in a highly securitized environment. The heightened state of securitization in Bangladesh, particularly the “securitization of Islam” (Ahmad 2009, 2013), created an atmosphere of apprehension and reluctance among the locals, complicating data collection efforts. This section reflects on the insider-outsider dynamics, the ethical dilemmas faced, and the strategies employed to navigate these complexities. Additionally, it explores the social and psychological impacts of communal violence on the affected communities, drawing on firsthand accounts from victims and survivors.

The second section discusses the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided my methodological approaches, including the extended case method, and the rationale behind choosing these specific methods. This section also covers the importance of a new holistic approach (with politics in) advocated by Ahmad (2021a), the issue of reflexivity, and ethical considerations in anthropological research. The extended case method, with its emphasis on situating everyday life within broader social and historical contexts, was particularly suited for this study. It allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the specific incident of violence while considering the

overarching political and social dynamics. This methodological approach facilitated an exploration of power politics, state interventions, and their impacts on communal relations. By employing this method, I aim to provide a fresh understanding of the complex interplay between micro-level interactions and macro-level structures that shape communal violence in Bangladesh.

2.1 Fieldwork in a “Police State” and in Times of Securitization

Upon my arrival in Nanua Dighir Par, Cumilla, the epicenter of the 2021 country-wide communal conflict, to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in February 2023, I initially found the atmosphere welcoming. However, when I began to discuss the events of the conflict, I was immediately met with apprehension and reluctance. The sensitivity of the topic and the locals’ distrust of “journalists” made it challenging to engage anyone in conversation about the incidents. Despite explaining that I was a graduate student conducting my first ethnographic research, many residents still took me as a journalist. This misunderstanding stemmed from the community’s unfamiliarity with academic research practices and their general wariness of outsiders. Accompanied by a friend who hosted me at his in-laws’ house during that visit, we arrived at Nanua Dighi pond in the afternoon. Seeking to establish some initial connections, we decided to have a late lunch at a nearby restaurant, which was nearly empty after rush hour. The middle-aged server welcomed us warmly and, upon hearing we were from a different district, served us extra dishes. We engaged in casual conversation with him, trying to build rapport in this unfamiliar setting. Our conversation began with comments on the food and eventually touched on his life experiences before we left.

We then visited the pond where the temporary puja mandap, attacked in 2021 after a copy of the Qur’ān was found there, had been staged. Seeking a better understanding of the neighborhood, we approached the nearby temple. I introduced myself to a man sitting in the courtyard and explained the reason for my visit, asking if he would be willing to talk. He refused to discuss the incident and referred me to someone “responsible” to talk to. That person, named Akash (pseudonym), was also reluctant, said nothing significant happened in this temple, and suggested I talk to others. He

directed me to another temple 700 meters away, mentioning that it had been significantly affected.

At the Kali temple in the Chawkbazar area, the temple was locked, and we didn't find anyone there. We asked nearby shopkeepers about the priest or responsible person to talk to. After asking many questions about who we were and why we were there, they directed me to the priest's house behind the temple with a boy. When the boy called the man, he and his wife reluctantly came out. We explained who we were and the reason for our visit. Hearing about the 2021 incident, they seemed disinterested and skeptical. His first response was, "We are living a happy and peaceful life. Please don't disturb us." I tried to explain my objective, indicating that this was not a journalistic inquiry but an academic quest. Despite his continuous reluctance, our conversation lasted around 30 minutes, mostly him questioning my research's objective and advising me to find another career. He finally indicated his reluctance was due to security issues, stating "there are eyes", and requested not to disturb them again.

Attempts to talk with other locals from the Muslim community were similarly unproductive. Most refused to discuss the matter, citing fears of getting into trouble, especially concerning those arrested. Finally, we returned to the restaurant, hoping to get some information from the person who had served us food. He was happy to see us again, and offered us coffee. However, when I explained my objective and brought up the topic, he said, "I am sorry! But I am a simple person! I don't want to talk to journalists about it. I would get into trouble. Please don't ask me anything about this." With little progress, I, with my friend, returned to the house of the latter's in-law where I stayed for my fieldwork during that visit.

The next day, to gather information and avoid further unnecessary trouble, I visited the nearby Kotowali police station. When I inquired about the officer in charge (OC), a sergeant informed me, after a series of questions, that the OC was unavailable that day. Insisting on waiting, I finally got a chance to meet the OC after about an hour. Our conversation lasted around 10–15 minutes. I explained who I was, the purpose of my visit, and the aims of my research. After this initial interrogation, he dismissed the need for further research, stating that all information had been published in the media and that court cases were either finished or ongoing. When I elaborated on the

necessity of an anthropological case study, he suggested I bring a letter from my university to access information on the case files and the people who were charged and arrested. My university ID card did not suffice. He suddenly questioned why, as a former madrasah student, I was interested in Hindu communities and their experiences. He further interrogated me about any political affiliations, particularly with Islamist groups, before indicating that the case was closed and justice had already been served. Our meeting ended with his somewhat threatening advice to abandon my interest in this topic and find another subject for my research.

Although intimidating and disturbing, this experience was not entirely surprising given the current state of law enforcement in Bangladesh. The police have become one of the most powerful entities in the country, often acting as the primary enforcers of government political suppression. They have gained notoriety for abusing their authority through various coercive means, including extortion, intimidation, torture, abduction, and extrajudicial killings. This practice of torture and killings by police is not new and has a long history in Bangladesh (Ramakrishnan 2013; Mia 2020). Due to the corrupt nature of the Bangladeshi political ethos, they enjoy blanket impunity for their heinous crimes, as they often help political elites, especially the government, in their political agendas (Rafiqul and Solaiman 2003). The reputation of the police is so tarnished that only 14.2 percent of people in the capital, Dhaka, and 13.2 percent in rural areas, trust the Bangladesh police (Rashid and Johara 2018, 138). The situation has deteriorated under the current AL regime, with the police becoming its primary agent in political repression. Many argue that, with the help of the police and other government agencies, Bangladesh has effectively become a police state (Rahman, Md. 2020). This sentiment was echoed in a 2021 *suo moto* ruling by a High Court bench, which stated, “A police state has been established, and the general public does also have such a perception. But that should not be the case. The nation is anxious (*Financial Express* 2021).” The UN Committee against Torture in 2019 described the Bangladesh police as a “state within a state” (Ganguly 2023). And the distrust and disdain for police among the masses is so high that there is a popular phrase among the people, “*apni manush na police* [Are you a human being or a policeman]?”

The situation of policing in Bangladesh has further worsened with what Ahmad (2009, 6; 2013b, 325) describes as the “securitization of Islam.” While the global scrutiny of

political Islam is not new, particularly in the post-9/11 era, Islam itself has increasingly become a target for practices of othering, profiling, and policing. This trend, initially prominent in the West and non-Muslim-majority countries like India, has notably shifted to Bangladesh, despite its status as a Muslim-majority country. Under the secular necropolitical Awami League regime, the securitization of Islam has intensified, with Islam and the lives of ordinary Muslims coming under increased scrutiny. With the regime's explicit necropolitical tendency to “subjugate life to the power of death,” the politically conscious Muslim population has been reduced to “the status of the living dead” (Mbembe 2019, 92). This securitization, coupled with direct intervention in the lives of Muslims, has forced them into a state of what Agamben (1998) calls “bare life”—stripped of political and legal rights, and reduced to mere biological existence. Consequently, the country has witnessed frequent instances such as the banning of Islamic books labeled as sources of terrorism, the criminalization of public Islamic events, the harassment of Muslim women for wearing *hijāb* or *niqāb*, and the denial of employment opportunities to individuals with beards.

Over the past decade and a half, these attacks and the criminalization of Muslim identities have become normalized. Even male Muslim bodies have become securitized and targetable. This extreme level of securitization can be exemplified by a disturbing incident that took place following the country-wide anti-Modi protests in March 2021. A university student in Dhaka, dressed in traditional *panjabi-pajama*, attire often associated with devout Muslims, was stopped by the police. He was accused by the police of being a member of Hefazat-e-Islam for having beards and wearing such a dress. Despite his explanation that he was a Hindu and not affiliated with Hefazat-e-Islam, the police demanded to check his private body parts to verify his claim, as Hindus are generally not circumcised (*Bangladesh Darpan* 2021). This invasive demand was meant to prove that he was not Muslim and a member of Hefazat-e-Islam, highlighting the extreme measures of religious profiling and criminalization.

As a former madrasah student, I have faced numerous bitter experiences in Bangladesh, particularly during my high school and university years. Wearing a

*panjabi-pajama*¹³ was common for me before my admission to the University of Dhaka, and on multiple occasions, the police in Dhaka and Gazipur stopped and searched me, checking my bags or packets. Even as a university student, when I began wearing shirts and pants, I continued to face harassment simply because I wore a beard and my trousers were above the ankle—a practice observed by many Muslims, especially Islamists. This appearance, combined with my history as a madrasah student, often made me a target in Bangladesh, easily accused of being a member of “terrorist” or radical Islamist parties.

This was precisely the case during my visit to the police station. The police officer’s questions about my political affiliations were not just attempts to discomfort me; they were also implicit threats to derail my inquiries. Arresting people for alleged affiliations with Islamist movements, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), has become a common practice among the police under the current regime, despite these parties are legally recognized and not outlawed as organizations, except they are banned from participating in elections (Hasan, Mu. 2023). Given my appearance, with a beard and pants above the ankle, I was easily perceived as a suspect or a targetable body.

Because of the sensitivity of the topic of Hindu-Muslim conflict, particularly when intertwined with politics, inquiries about such cases—especially concerning those arrested—carry certain risks. This was why many locals from both communities were reluctant to speak, particularly when asked about those who had been arrested and tried. One elderly person, who worked as a security guard in a building beside the pond where the 2021 *puja mandop* was located, told me, “No one talks about the people who were arrested and still in jail because no one can.” None of the alleged perpetrators, whom I would rather call legal (Muslim) victims, agreed to talk to me initially; they only did so when referred to by others. My interview with Basit (pseudonym), who had first called the police to report the discovery of the Qur’ān in the *puja mandap* and subsequently endured severe torture in jail, was particularly

¹³ A traditional South Asian dress consisting of a loose, knee-length shirt called a *panjabi* and a pair of lightweight trousers known as *pajama*, generally considered “Islamic” dress in Bangladesh.

poignant. He was introduced to me by another interlocutor, who had also served jail time without due process. Assured that our interview would be discreet and would not cause any potential harm, Basit finally agreed to speak on the condition that my research would not be published in Bangladesh or in Bengali.

We sat on the portico of the mosque, where we had prayed the Isha prayer together. He was still confused and afraid, requiring several reassurances. He began by saying, “I am a poor man. I am on bail now. The money for my bail and all the costs of running the case were paid by someone else. I don’t want to get into any further trouble. I don’t want to go to jail again. I am also not allowed to talk to anyone about this matter. I will be in trouble again if they know I talked to someone about the case.” Hearing his sufferings and the brutality he experienced in jail was painful. He cried and sobbed, his body and hands shaking at times as he narrated his story. On top of being arrested and jailed merely for notifying the police of the incident, he was now afraid to even share his experience. The securitization of life and the politicization of communal violence not only caused immense suffering but also enforced silence on these individuals.

Choice of Site

Cumilla, one of the eleven cities in Bangladesh with city corporation status, is among the oldest towns in the subcontinent. Located on the south bank of the Gomti River along the Dhaka-Chittagong highway in the eastern part of Bangladesh, it has a population of approximately 440,000 according to the 2022 census (BBS 2023). The primary site for the fieldwork of this study was the city’s Digumbaritola ward, also known as Nanua Dighi Par, which has around 40% Hindu population along with Muslims (Anwar and Haque 2021). This site was the epicenter of the 2021 country-wide Hindu-Muslim conflict, a significant episode of communal violence in recent Bangladeshi history. The conflict claimed at least eight lives across the country, the highest number of fatalities in such conflicts in recent years.

The 2021 conflict was significant not only for its immediate impact but also for its broader implications for communal relations in Bangladesh. The violence, which

resulted in at least eight deaths, including five Muslims killed by police firing, underscored the critical nature of the conflict. The violence began at Nanua Dighir Par and quickly spread across the country on the same day, lasting for several days in episodic outbreaks. The government's deployment of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) in 22 districts and the arrest of approximately 450 people nationwide within two days reflect the extensive measures taken to address the violence. Specifically, in Cumilla, 43 people were arrested within the first two days, with the number eventually increasing to approximately 250-300 (*Prothom Alo* 2021a).

Employing the extended case method developed by Max Gluckman (Burawoy 1998), this study aims to offer a comprehensive picture of the communal conflict in Nanua Dighir Par. This approach captures the intricate and interconnected nature of the events, allowing for an in-depth analysis of specific cases while situating them within broader social and political contexts. It facilitates an exploration of the role of power politics and state interventions in shaping the conflict. This includes examining the actions and rhetoric of political leaders, the involvement of local political factions, and the impacts of state policies. By scrutinizing these factors, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how power and politics shape communal relations and contribute to the escalation of violence.

Another crucial aspect of the study is the exploration of legal consequences and state responses to the communal conflict. The aftermath of the 2021 attacks saw numerous legal proceedings and state interventions aimed at manipulating public perception and targeting specific groups. By focusing on Nanua Dighir Par, the research investigates the effectiveness and implications of these legal actions, including the processes of arrest, prosecution, and punishment of those involved in the violence, as well as broader legal and policy measures implemented to prevent future conflicts.

The media and political narrative surrounding the 2021 communal conflict further complicates the analysis. Many were quick to attribute the Cumilla incidents to "fundamentalist" religious groups, speculating that it was a provocative and organized crime by these groups to pressure the government. This narrative shaped public perception and influenced the state's response, further complicating the communal landscape. Understanding these narratives is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of

the conflict and its broader implications for communal relations in Bangladesh. In brief, as the epicenter of the 2021 attacks, this site offered a pertinent and complex case for study, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the underlying causes, power politics, state responses, and social impacts of the conflict.

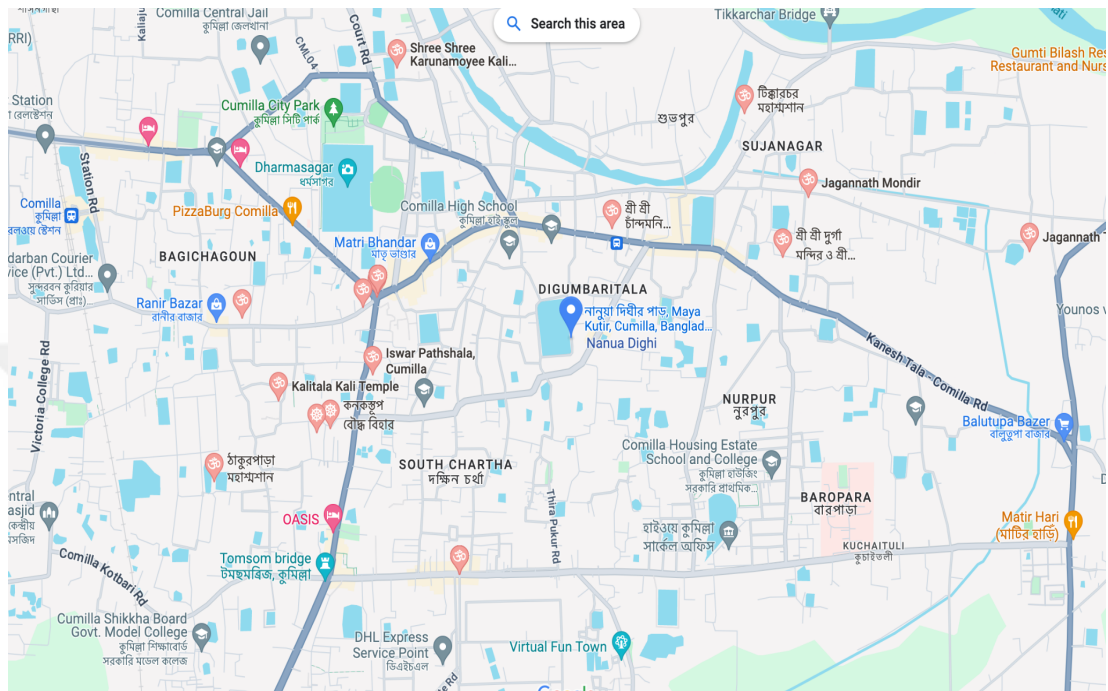


Figure 2.1 Partial map of Cumilla city, with Nanua Dighi (Digumbaritala) at the center, highlighting the Hindu temples.¹⁴

2.2 Ethnographic Fieldwork and Methodology

As a “child of Western imperialism” (Gough 1968, 12), anthropology has historically served as a primary epistemological mode of colonial rule (Dirks 2001). It not only produced legitimizing discourses for colonial rulers but also helped establish the ideological frameworks of colonial racism through the study of “other cultures” (Lewis 1973, 583). In colonial India, this led to the ignition of communal tensions and the vilification of Muslims. However, post-World War II, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, the trend of Victorian Anthropology began to change as non-Western

¹⁴ The photo is taken from Google maps.

anthropologists started studying their own societies, rethinking, revising, and reassessing fieldwork processes and techniques (Fahim and Helmer 1980). This shift gave rise to “Indigenous Anthropology,” a movement that questions the traditional Western anthropological practice of portraying non-Western cultures as the “Other” (Memmi 1969).

Inspired by the principles of Indigenous Anthropology, I formulated my fieldwork plan in the Nanua Dighir Par area of Cumilla to reexamine the discourse of communalism, which has been significantly informed by colonial epistemological narratives. This site, marked by significant communal unrest resulting in at least eight deaths, provided a critical context for understanding the lived experiences of both Hindu victims and Muslim participants. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the growing state securitization policies, the prospect of extended field presence, as ethnographic research often demands, was uncertain during my pre-fieldwork planning. Gathering first-hand data from a chosen field is central to anthropological research. Being present in the field is so crucial that Margaret Mead noted, “We still have no way to make an anthropologist except by sending him into the field: this contact with living material is our distinguishing mark” (Mead 1961, 476). Despite the uncertainty, the journey involved episodes of doubt, risk, promise, and success. This fieldwork was conducted in four phases from February 2023 to February 2024, each involving two to three days of intensive interaction with various interlocutors in Nanua Dighir Par. Along with participant observation, the study engaged with 17 interlocutors, 13 of whom were from the local Hindu and Muslim communities.

Given that ethnography has become a buzzword and an overused term in qualitative research across various social sciences, not only in anthropology, as Ingold (2014) notes, it is imperative to define what ethnography and fieldwork entail, discuss their rationale and boundaries within the context of this study, and acknowledge their limitations. Historically, fieldwork in cultural anthropology was considered “the study of people and of their culture in their natural habitat,” as defined by Powdermaker in 1966 (Sluka and Robben 2007, 7). For Keesing and Strathern, fieldwork involves intimate participation in a community and observation of social behaviors and the organization of social life, whether the community is in a city, town, village, or jungle

hamlet (Keesing and Strathern 1998, 7-9). Charlotte Seymour-Smith (1986, 117) provides the following definition for fieldwork:

Research undertaken by the anthropologist or ethnologist in a given ethno-graphic area or community. Such an ethnographic area in modern anthropology is not necessarily limited to the traditional tribal or peasant community, and may embrace studies of urban, industrial or other settings which the anthropologist selects for the purposes of intensive research.

While fieldwork refers to the presence in a site for ethnographic research, ethnography itself is a case-study approach employed during fieldwork (Sluka and Robben 2007, 4). It is the process of recording and interpreting how other people live (Keesing and Strathern 1998, 9). Dick Hobbs (2006) describes ethnography as a research method employed by both sociologists and anthropologists. He emphasizes that it should be considered the outcome of various methodologies united by the belief that direct personal interaction with the subject is crucial for gaining a deep understanding of a specific culture or social environment (Hobbs 2006, 101). Watson-Gegeo (1998, 576) defines ethnography as the observation of human behavior within its natural and continuous settings, emphasizing the cultural interpretation of such behaviors. John David Brewer defines ethnography as the study of people in their natural settings, using methods to capture their social meanings and activities. It involves researchers participating directly in the setting to systematically collect data without imposing external meanings (Brewer 2003).

However, given the particularizing and microanalytical nature of traditional ethnography (Sluka and Robben 2007, 4), coupled with the sensitive topics of violence, politics and state involved in this research, it was crucial to employ a methodology that could transcend these challenges and provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political context. To tackle this, the study employs the extended case method, developed by Max Gluckman and pioneered by the Manchester School of Anthropology. This approach played a pivotal role in shaping my study on Hindu-Muslim communal violence in Bangladesh. The extended case method emphasizes detailed ethnographic engagement, allowing researchers to embed themselves within the daily lives of their subjects and situate everyday experiences within broader social, historical, and political contexts (Burawoy 1998).

The extended case method's capacity to link micro-level social interactions with macro-level social structures makes it particularly apt for this study. Unlike structural-functionalism, which views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability, the extended case method focuses on detailed ethnographic observations and broader social structures, providing a holistic understanding of social dynamics (Burawoy 1998). This immersion is not a one-time event but a continuous process, requiring researchers to constantly move between their observations and existing theoretical frameworks. This iterative cycle of observation and analysis refines both empirical data and theoretical understanding, creating a dynamic interplay that enhances the depth and breadth of the research (Kempny 2005). In the context of Nanua Dighir Par, this meant examining the immediate, personal experiences of individuals affected by the communal violence and connecting these experiences to larger socio-political dynamics in Bangladesh and the broader South Asian region. The method's iterative nature facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how local events and individual actions were influenced by, and in turn influenced, national and regional political movements and ideologies (Mills 2005). This approach also inspired detailed participant observation of the town, including the environment, people, their culture, and everyday interactions. I spent considerable time during all my visits observing the locality, the whole neighborhood of Digumbaritola, and the streets of the town from Kandirpar to Chawkbazar. I frequented restaurants owned by both Hindus and Muslims, shopped in different stores, and interacted with the owners, which helped in understanding the everyday interactions between people from both communities.

The extended case method's emphasis on recognizing the role of individual and collective agency in shaping social realities and encouraging researchers to reflect on their own influence on the research process (Werle 2014) was integral to my study. By situating micro-level interactions within macro-level contexts, this approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the communal violence at Nanua Dighir Par, contributing to broader efforts to address and mitigate such conflicts in Bangladesh and beyond.

Fieldwork, sometimes viewed as an act of domination and control (Berger 1993, 176), has evolved to advocate for multivocality, capturing multiple perspectives to provide

a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Sluka and Robben 2007). This approach aims to give voice to entities representing multiple interests or “realities” (Sluka and Robben 2007, 19). Following this principle, my research included not only the victims of communal conflict but also those categorized as alleged “perpetrators.” Among the 17 interlocutors I interviewed, six were from the local Hindu community, and seven were local Muslims, including four alleged “perpetrators” and one imam of nearby mosques. The interviews with the four individuals who served jail time for the alleged crime of vandalism, although two were not involved in any capacity, were particularly revealing. They exposed the deeply politicized nature of communal conflict, the presence of a systematic riot system, the state’s complicity in political repression and securitization, and the corrupt legal system.

Furthermore, as anthropology has historically been indifferent to politics, the extended case method allows researchers to practice a new holism with a priority on politics, both locally and globally, as advocated by Ahmad (2021, 113-4). The new holistic approach of this study, integrating politics, history, and sociology, reflects a new paradigm in anthropology that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries (Ahmad 2021a). Addressing complex and politicized issues like communalism, which are intertwined with state mechanisms, regional politics, and historical experiences, necessitates an interdisciplinary perspective. These phenomena cannot be fully understood within the silo of a single discipline. This holism allows researchers to transcend not only geographic but also disciplinary boundaries, adopting an interdisciplinary approach (Ahmad 2021a).

Inspired by these principles, I extended my research beyond Cumilla to include a couple of convert Muslims and two other young Muslim activists who are vocal against Indian hegemony and anti-Islamic policies (see Chapter 4 for more on this). By incorporating their perspectives, the research aimed to capture the diverse and multifaceted nature of communal tensions. Converts provided unique insights into the dynamics of identity politics and inter-communal distrust based on political discourse, while the activists highlighted the broader political and ideological struggles impacting communal relations. Youth activists were interviewed online to gain a broader understanding of the national and regional political landscape. Their insights into the

growing Hindutva aggression in Bangladesh and its implications for communal violence were particularly illuminating.

Malinowski's assertion that ethnographic studies must detail research methods and conditions to gauge the authenticity and context of the findings (Malinowski 2002) guided the transparency of my methodological narrative. This principle was particularly pertinent given the sensitive nature of the topic, which precluded the recording of interviews due to the interlocutors' reluctance. To ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness, detailed notes were meticulously taken during each interaction. The ethical aspect of protecting the identity of the community and its members was also a significant consideration. As Keesing and Strathern ponder, "should one try to protect the identity of the community and its people by disguising names and places?" (1998, 8-9). To avoid putting the interlocutors at unnecessary and potential risk, pseudonyms have been used for all the interlocutors in this study, as requested by some. This approach not only respected the interlocutors' desire for confidentiality but also acknowledged the securitized environment, ensuring their anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. Such measures were critical in maintaining ethical standards and fostering trust with the participants (Sluka and Robben 2007).

Ethnography as a method is inherently reflective and iterative as it combines various methodologies, emphasizing personal engagement to understand cultural settings (Hobbs 2006). This approach was vividly demonstrated during my interactions with the Hindu victims and Muslim communities in Nanua Dighir Par. The iterative nature of ethnographic fieldwork means that initial observations often lead to new theoretical questions, which in turn guide further data collection and analysis. This process was evident in my fieldwork, where early interactions informed subsequent interviews and helped refine my understanding of the complex social dynamics at play. By continuously engaging with the field data, I was able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the communal violence in Nanua Dighir Par. This reflective approach ensured that the findings were grounded in the lived experiences of the participants, enhancing the validity and reliability of the research (Burawoy 1998).

Maintaining the distinction between subject and object due to the power dynamics between ethnographers and interlocutors is another concern in anthropological

research methods. To address this power imbalance, a trend called “narrative ethnography” emerged in the 1970s. It allows the researcher to engage in an ethnographic dialogue with his interlocutors “to create a world of shared intersubjectivity” (Tedlock 1991, 70). The use of unstructured and semi-structured interviews helped create an environment of intersubjectivity. Stern (2005, 78) defines intersubjectivity as the ability to engage with and immerse oneself in another’s subjective experience, encompassing shared understanding, empathy, participation, and emotional resonance. This intersubjectivity was crucial in navigating the sensitive and volatile context of the fieldwork. Unstructured interviews allowed participants to express themselves freely, while semi-structured interviews ensured that key topics were covered. This combination enabled a balance between depth and breadth, capturing detailed personal narratives and broader social patterns. The organic evolution of conversations often revealed unexpected insights, highlighting the importance of adaptability in ethnographic research (Sluka and Robben 2007).

The question of positionality, the outsider-insider distinction, was another dilemma to tackle. As a Bangladeshi studying my own society, we spoke the same language, but my positionality was complex. Although I was an insider by nationality to both communities, as a Muslim, I was an outsider to the Hindu community. This complex positionality influenced how interlocutors interacted with me and what information they were willing to share. My outsider identity created doubt and distrust among some interlocutors. As both an outsider and an insider, I experienced mixed receptions. Reflexivity helped me remain aware of these dynamics, allowing me to account for potential biases and influences in my analysis (Salzman 2002). The flexibility of ethnographic methods allowed conversations to evolve organically, providing a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives. By allowing interlocutors to share their stories freely, the research captured the comprehensive realities of communal violence. My role was to subtly guide these conversations, ensuring clarity and depth without imposing my own biases, as suggested by Keesing and Strathern (1998).

Overall, the comprehensive approach of this study not only illuminates the immediate context of the 2021 violence but also situates it within the broader socio-political landscape of the region. This integration of multiple perspectives and disciplines provides a robust framework for understanding the complexities of communal

violence in Bangladesh. The findings contribute to the broader field of anthropology by demonstrating the value of a new holistic and interdisciplinary approach in addressing contemporary social issues (Ahmad 2021a; Sluka and Robben 2007; Burawoy 1998).



CHAPTER III

EXPLORING THE NARRATIVES OF COMMUNALISM: INTERDISCURSIVITY AND ANTI-ISLAMISM¹⁵ IN LITERATURE

Given the dominant singular narrative across South Asia that associates communalism predominantly with Islam, this chapter delves into the task of unpacking the politico-historical roots of this discourse. It aims to examine the intricate narratives surrounding communalism in South Asia, particularly focusing on the intersection of literature, historiography, and political discourse. By examining the ambiguity in definitions and categorizations of communal violence, we uncover how these ambiguities are strategically exploited to frame Muslims and their religious expressions as inherently communal and violent. The chapter also explores the role of colonial orientalism in shaping these narratives, highlighting how British colonial historiography and subsequent Indian nationalist discourses have perpetuated anti-Muslim sentiments. Through a critical analysis of key literary and historical texts, this chapter aims to reveal the underlying biases and interdiscursive practices that continue to influence contemporary understandings of communalism in Bangladesh.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section briefly examines the penurious state of communalism studies in Bangladesh, particularly the gaps in defining and documenting communal violence despite extensive discourse on the subject. The second section scrutinizes the prevailing narratives within the intellectual circle about communalism and communal violence in Bangladesh, pointing out how these narratives predominantly blame Islam and Muslims for inter-communal tensions

¹⁵ I borrowed the term “anti-Islamism” from Tanzeen Doha. Moving beyond the conventional views of Islamophobia, which see it either as a behavioral-psychological response to misinformation or as a structural form of racial bigotry, the Doha describes anti-Islamism as a framework characterized by a continuous effort to undermine and negate the world-making aspirations of Islam. See Doha, Tanzeen Rashed. 2018. “Specters of Islam: Anti-Islamist (Re)Presentations in Secular Media and Feminism (1979-2011).” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 35 (2). <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v35i2.95>.

without adequately considering other influential factors such as the state, secularism, and both local and regional politics. The third section argues that this dominant discourse is not isolated in political history but is rather a product of a discursive practice deeply intertwined with other epistemic traditions, including Hindu Orientalism, colonial discourse, and the contemporary global war on terror (GWOT).

3.1 Ambiguity in Definition and Records: A Strategic Negligence?

Ambiguity in Definition and Categorization

A pressing question in the study of communal violence is what precisely qualifies as an incidence of communal violence. Opinion-manufacturers are often swift in labeling specific societal groups or political entities as communal and in categorizing certain events as communal violence. However, a clear and consistent definition to support these categorizations frequently remains absent. This lack of clarity is prevalent even among seasoned experts in the field like Ali Riaz, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Mofidul Haque, to name a few, who, despite their extensive discussions on the topic, have not provided a precise definition for understanding communalism. Ali Riaz, for instance, often speaks of communalism in terms of Islamic fundamentalism but does not offer a clear, definable context for these references (Riaz 1995, 2011). Similarly, Kankar Singho, a civil engineer by profession, has authored multiple books on the subject without adequately defining communalism, generally equating it with Islamic fundamentalism (Singho 1999, 2015). More interestingly, the Bangladesh constitution, adopted in 1972, outlines the elimination of communalism from the state as one of the fundamental state policies without defining what communalism is in the first place.¹⁶

This general reluctance to delineate communalism, especially in the context of violence, whether strategic or not, fits into broader narratives that facilitate selective interpretations, both in media and political discourse. Such interpretations allow communalism to be identified on the basis of religious and political associations without confronting theoretical inadequacies or biases. Prominent leftist intellectual

¹⁶ The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, amend 15, art. 12, sec. A.

Badruddin Umar, who pioneered the study of communalism in East Pakistan, offers an unconventional definition of communalism as “the use of religion in politics” (Umar 2015, 7) or employing religion as a means to achieve political or other objectives (Umar, 1960). This definition, while unconventional, has become the main functional definition within the Bengali discourse, effectively reducing communalism to any political engagement involving Islam. This constrained perspective not only muddles the definition but also repurposes it as an analytical framework to frame communal violence predominantly as Islamic violence, often absolving non-Muslim actors, secular or otherwise, of their roles in fostering communal violence. Paul Brass (2003) cautions readers and scholars against such oversimplifications, urging a more comprehensive understanding and approach to studying communal violence.

Furthermore, due to this ambiguity and the lack of clarity in definition, virtually any activity can be mislabeled as an act of communalism by opinion-manufacturers. Islamic religious activities such as *waz mahfils*, iftar parties, and other religious gatherings or ceremonies are sometimes inaccurately described as communal and blamed for inciting communal hatred. This broad and imprecise application of the term ‘communal’ further complicates the discourse, allowing for stigmatization of normal religious practices and creating unnecessary social tension.

Data Mismatch and Lack of Records

While communal violence is often cited as a major stain on the political history of the subcontinent (Gosh 2024, 1) and widely discussed in academic and political debates, there is also a striking scarcity of data and official records documenting incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh. This absence of concrete data is not merely an academic oversight but a significant impediment that enables the manipulation and exaggeration of facts by various stakeholders. No comprehensive government records of communal violence incidents are available, at least in the public domain, with only a few human rights organizations like Odhikar and Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) attempting to fill the gap. Odhikar’s reports cover incidents from 2007 to 2021, while ASK provides annual reports on minority violence starting from 2013.

My personal attempt to search for comprehensive data also didn't yield any results. Emails to the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Religion, and various organizations and academic experts asking for available data went unanswered, except for one professor who kindly replied that he is not aware of any such data. This lack of comprehensive, reliable data and the reluctance to fill the gaps enable the manipulation and exaggeration of facts by various stakeholders, influencing public perception and political rhetoric. While the data presented in these reports by Odhikar and ASK suggests a relatively low frequency of fatalities due to communal violence, with an average of approximately 1.4 (Odhikar) and 1.3 (ASK) deaths per year among minority communities in recent years, these figures starkly contrast with more sensational claims from minority leaders. In a 2020 press conference, the general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Mohajot said that 108 Hindus were killed and 42 Hindu women were raped in 2022 without providing credible evidence (*Samakal* 2023). However, such discrepancies also exist in academic discourse. In a more sensational claim, Halder and Biswas concluded, without providing any data or references, that “the anti-Hindu violence in 2001 was so alarming that many Bangladeshi civil rights activists believe it surpassed the 1971 genocide” (2023). Such discrepancies, or rather ridiculous narratives, are not only alarming but also undermine the credibility of the discourse on communal violence.

The generic term “violence” itself also contributes to this ambiguity. It not only muddles the understanding of violence and its nature by failing to adequately distinguish between the severity and type of acts committed but also equates minor acts of vandalism with far more severe acts of violence, such as killings, thereby distorting the perceived frequency and intensity of communal violence. The reluctance to properly categorize violence or make distinctions among riots, pogroms, or acts of vandalism, as suggested by Brass (2003), obscures the nature of violence. This lack of specificity blurs the lines between victims and aggressors and may lead to the exoneration of the true instigators of such incidents.

3.2 Communalism in Bangladeshi Literature: An Anti-Islam(ic) Discourse?

Following Umar's blueprint, any political expression or awareness of Islam, or any identity shaped by Islamic principles, is often categorized as communal within the dominant discourse. This label is typically reserved for Islam and Muslims, particularly in contexts involving political activities or subjective assertions. The terms "fundamentalism," "radicalism," "militancy," and "terrorism"—with fundamentalism being the most frequently used—are employed by commentators to denote the religious consciousness of Muslims as indicative of communalism. While some commentators directly equate fundamentalism with political Islam and communalism, using these terms interchangeably, others seek to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between them. The selection of terms and the nature of the analysis heavily depend on the ideological orientation of the commentators, whether they are leftists, pro-Hindutva, or supporters of the war-on-terror narrative. It is important to note that these categories are not rigid; individuals often subscribe to more than one ideological spectrum, with Bengali nationalism commonly present across them. Consequently, a wide array of entities, ranging from Islamist parties or movements like Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Hefazat-e-Islam (HI), to Islamic institutions such as madrasas, practices like *waz mahfils* or iftars, and even everyday Islamic expressions like "salam" or "masha Allah" are labeled as communal by many commentators. This labeling also extends to political phenomena that are linked to or utilize some sort of Islamic reference, such as the BNP or the Pakistan movement, demonstrating that the label of communalism is applied based on the ideological utility of the commentators, rather than a strict adherence to a specific definition.

The terms "fundamentalism" and "communalism" are often used interchangeably in the discourse on communalism in Bangladesh, where discussions on the subject rarely occur without reference to fundamentalism. Jatin Sarker, a leftist and pro-Hindutva activist, views religion, fundamentalism, and communalism as coterminous and obstacles to civilization (Sarker 2019, 47-8). The literature on communalism is replete with works whose titles explicitly incorporate the term "fundamentalism." This raises the question: What exactly constitutes fundamentalism? Within the Bengali nationalist discourse, fundamentalism is a broad term that encompasses everything from Islamic politics to religious rituals. It refers to any effort to integrate religion (Islam) into the

public sphere, any political consciousness rooted in religious identity, or any actions that employ religious references or vocabulary. Even the mere act of holding one's religion as superior or strictly adhering to its fundamental beliefs and practices is labeled as fundamentalism. Akbar Haider Rono, a notable leftist politician, offers a more radical and expansive interpretation of fundamentalism, identifying its four main tenets as anti-Indianism, anti-Hinduism, anti-Bengali culture, and misogyny (Hasan and De 2024).

Shahriar Kabir, perhaps the most vocal commentator on communalism in Bangladesh, views fundamentalism and communalism as synonymous, with political Islam serving as the embodiment of fundamentalism (Kabir 2019). Throughout his extensive writings, Kabir consistently identifies Jamaat-e-Islami and "Maududism" as the primary drivers of these ideologies (Kabir, 2019; 2009; 2003; 2015). Similarly, Ali Riaz, a prominent advocate of secular Bengali nationalism, views JI and other Islamist parties as central figures in communal and fundamentalist politics. He notes, "In the election held at the beginning of the 1990s, Jamaat-e-Islami, as the representative of communal and fundamentalist forces, was able to establish itself as the fourth largest party in Bangladesh due to the opposition's inactivity" (Riaz, 1995, 8). He further accuses all Islamist parties of being communal:

The Jamaat-e-Islami is the local organization that represents fundamentalist and communal forces in the political arena. It is important to remember that this is not the only organization. There are many other organizations of this type, including the Islamic Shasan Tantrik Andolon (Islamic Governance Movement), founded by a person known as 'Hafizji Huzoor,' the Jaker Party, and the Islamic Ekatya Jote. These organizations not only represent religiously inspired backward thinking, but they also believe in and seek to conduct politics on the basis of communalism (Riaz 1995, 42).

Umar (2015, 8) posits that Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) is a fundamentalist political party that exploited the Babri Masjid demolition to incite communalism in Bangladesh, with participation from other Islamist groups. Similarly, Shawkat Osman argues that any aspiration to establish an Islamic state is inherently communal, leading to severe oppression and displacement of religious minorities (Osman 1995). This perspective is reinforced by Gosh, who labels JI and its ally, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), as fundamentalist political forces engaged in communal politics (Gosh 2015, 143). The concern that Bangladesh has devolved into a state dominated by fundamentalist politics and religious extremism is shared by Mofidul Haque, who

laments the shift from the country's founding principles of secularism and non-communalism (Haque 2012, 118). He suggests that the primary conflict in Bangladesh is between religious fanaticism and non-communalism (Haque 2012, 136). Biswas and Halder (2023) also argue that JI poses a significant threat to the minority community due to its fundamentalist and communal tendencies.

This stigmatization, however, extends beyond JI. Any kind of religious articulation or manifestation in the public sphere is also bound to bear the label of communalism. Hefazat-e Islam, a movement launched in 2010 to safeguard Islamic rights and protect the honor of the Prophet (Raquib 2020), is often labeled as communal and fundamentalist, especially by the pro-Hindutva and pro-war-on-terror spectrum within the secularist circle. After the Shapla massacre on May 5–6, 2013, where hundreds of people, including a large number of young madrasa students, were killed by law enforcement agencies during a protest against anti-Islamic policies and defamatory comments against the Prophet (Doha and Jamil, 2017; Doha 2022, 2n6), the Bengali nationalist narrative aimed to vilify them irrationally at every opportunity. In Bengali nationalist discourse, Hefazat-e Islam is depicted as fanatical, militant, and communalist. Gosh reckons that “all the activists of fundamentalist Islamic parties, except JI, are members of Hefazat-e Islam” (Gosh 2024, 151). Kabir also identifies Hefazat-e Islam as a major fundamentalist movement in Bangladesh (Kabir 2019). Biswas and Halder went even further, claiming that all Islamic conservative parties like Hefazat-e Islam become Frankensteins over time (Biswas & Halder 2023).

Some commentators go on to argue that the predominantly Muslim society in Bangladesh is inherently radical and communal. Kankar Singho shares this view, criticizing leftist intellectuals for attributing communal politics solely to Muslim elites. He argues that the rural Muslim peasant class, whom he refers to as “Musolman sudras,” have also become extreme communalists. Singho attributes this to the influence of fundamentalist ideas propagated through *waz mahfils* and Islamic preaching, which have fostered a sense of Islamic identity among these peasants, transforming them into “puritan Muslims” (*saccha Musoloman*). According to Singho, these individuals now view Hindus as *kafirs*, believe in the hereafter, and prefer Islamic culture over local Bengali traditions (Singho 2015, 88). He further laments that

this pervasive sense of communalism has become so threatening that Hindu villages are becoming depopulated as Hindus leave Bangladesh for India (Singho 2015, 89). Sadia, in her recent study, while acknowledging that the cases of communal attacks are intertwined with local politics and power relations, asserts that “the entrenchment of extremist elements and growing intolerance at the mass level have a formidable impact on the gradual alienation of non-Muslim communities” (Sadia 2023). For them, any Islamic expression in the public sphere is seen as a sign of communalism, and Islam is perceived as backwardness and a threat. Halder and Biswas echo this view, suggesting that “Bangladeshi society as a whole has been infected by fundamentalism,” implying that madrasahs have become the hubs of communalism and militancy, emphasizing the significant increase in their numbers in the country (Halder and Biswas 2023). Umar expresses regret over the state’s turn to communal politics shortly after independence, criticizing policies such as organizing milads at national events, maintaining madrasah (Islamic seminary) education, and allocating a budget for it (Umar 2015, 8).

Secular vs Communal: Anything Islamic is Communal

In the nationalist discourse, there seems to be a binary categorization between secularism and communalism. Anything that is not secular, in other words, that has a distinct connection with Islam or Muslimness, is considered communal. Therefore, any association with any Islamic party or any presence of Islam in public is rendered communal. Because of its alliance with JI, the BNP has long been categorized as a communal party. Patwari proclaims that the BNP is based on the communal two-nation theory and rose to prominence by making an alliance with fundamentalist and communalist Islamist parties (Patwari 2019, 58). He further states that “the rise of communalism in the country happened with the support of the BNP. Can the BNP deny the ‘credit’ for promoting, supporting, and even sharing power with radicals, anti-nationalists, and terrorists?” (Patwari 2019, 195). “An evil party like BNP is established on the idea of two-nation theory, and their political manifesto is completely communal,” suggests Bashar (2020, 157). “The BNP-led fundamentalist coalition” always resorts to communal politics to manipulate elections and thus won the 2001 election, reckons Gosh (2024, 143).

For many commentators, it was Ziaur Rahman (henceforth Zia) who imported communalism into Bangladeshi politics. The reasons cited include his removal of “secularism” from the constitution and the reinstatement of the Islamic dua “*Bismillāhir Raḥmānir Raḥīm*” to the constitution after he came to power (Gosh 2024, 131-2). Ziaur Rahman came into power in 1975, after former prime minister Sheikh Mujib was killed along with his family in a coup. Mujib’s three-year long one-party authoritarian rule from 1972 to 1975 strictly enforced secularism on the public and promoted the secular ideology of Bengali nationalism. In the nationalist discourse, any presence of Islam in the public domain is also considered an act of religious fundamentalism and communalism. Zia’s somewhat desecularizing process didn’t sit well with the nationalists. In nationalist historical narratives, the late 1970s is considered the era of the rise of communalism (Patwari 2019, 80; Gosh 2024). Riaz traces the origins of communal and fundamentalist politics in Bangladesh to the administrations of Zia and Ershad, noting a significant intensification with the rise of Jamaat in 1993 (Riaz 1995, 8). Riaz accuses Zia of promoting communal and anti-Hindu sentiments by enabling Islamic politics, which had previously been prohibited. Halder and Biswas reinforce this perspective, stating, “Whether under Ziaur Rahman’s rule starting in 1978 or during Lt Gen. Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s regime, Hindus have not been able to breathe easy in Bangladesh” (Halder & Biswas 2023).

A popular assertion within Bengali nationalist circles is that society became more radical and militant following the designation of Islam as the state religion (Patwari 2018, 29). Another notable figure, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, argues that the communalization of civil and military administrations began with the removal of secularism and the introduction of Islam as the state religion in the constitution during the regimes of Zia and Ershad (Chowdhury 2020, 22). In his critique, Chowdhury contrasts this with the situation in India, suggesting an idealized portrayal of religious harmony. He questions the occurrence of post-election “anti-minority attacks” in Bangladesh by asking, “In India or West Bengal, do political parties like the BJP, *Shiv Sena*, or Congress engage in acts such as burning Muslim households, gang raping Muslim women, or demolishing mosques after elections?” (Chowdhury 2020, 20). However, any well-informed reader or politically aware individual in South Asia would recognize that Muslims often live bare lives in India, amidst recurrent anti-

Muslim pogroms (Sharma 2024; Ahmad 2022; Ahmad and van der Veer 2022). Notably, these acts of persecution have become a hallmark of the BJP's political strategy and vocabulary.

A Tentative Timeline of Communal Violences in Bangladesh

A critical examination of communal violence in Bangladesh reveals a narrative that diverges from the dominant discourse. However, the lack of comprehensive and detailed data complicates this analysis. In an attempt to construct an approximate and tentative timeline of major incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh post-1971, it must be noted that, due to the incomplete nature of the available data, this timeline may not be comprehensive or entirely precise but is derived from the best available sources and accounts. According to those accounts, the earliest notable incidents in post-independence Bangladesh occurred in 1989. This period marked the first instance of significant communal conflict in the country. The background to this unrest was the laying of the foundation stone (*shilanyas*) for the Ram temple on November 9, 1989, at the site of the Babri Masjid (Wire 2021). This event triggered severe anti-Muslim pogroms in Bihar, India, resulting in the deaths of at least 896 Muslims and the displacement of fifty to sixty thousand Muslims (Engineer 1990; 1995). Reports by the pro-Hindutva NGO, Human Rights Congress for Bangladeshi Minorities (HRCBM), also mention attacks related to this period but do not provide further details.

Following these events, several incidents of attacks, vandalism, and riots occurred in Bangladesh in October and November 1990. These incidents were a reaction to the Kar Sevaks' attack on the Babri Masjid and subsequent anti-Muslim pogroms in various parts of India. Reports and accounts of these conflicts, available in the public domain, do not provide credible statistics on deaths but document attacks and vandalism of Hindu temples and homes. Barbara Crossette of the New York Times, in her November 1, 1990 report, noted the attacks on Hindu temples and shops by angry Muslim mobs and the subsequent state-imposed curfew, but no deaths were reported (Crossette 1990).

The subsequent significant incidents followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, when approximately 15,000 Hindu mobs, led by the BJP, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), attacked and demolished the Masjid (Kumar 2008; Wire 2021). This act was followed by nationwide riots and anti-Muslim pogroms in India, claiming at least 600 lives in Bombay (now Mumbai) alone (Kumar 2008). This destruction and anti-Muslim violence in India incited unrest in Bangladesh. A 2019 BBC Bangla report details attacks and vandalism on Hindu temples and homes across the country, clashes between police and mobs, and a total of 10 deaths (Akter 2019). Contrary to conventional narratives that blame only Islamist parties, all political parties in Bangladesh condemned the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Both Islamist parties, like Jamaat-e Islami, and secular anti-Islamist groups called for political protests. This challenges the prevailing narrative that attributes the rise of Muslim communalism or the deterioration of minority lives to the introduction of Islam into the public sphere under the regimes of Zia and Ershad (Siddiqi 2018, 252). The timeline suggests no major communal unrest under Zia or Ershad's regimes until the Babri Masjid incident in India, which also claimed thousands of Muslim lives there. A report by Crossette in 1990 in the NYT titled "Official Islam Proving Gentler in Bangladesh" supports this argument, noting that fears of minority groups over the adoption of Islam as the state religion "have so far proved to be unfounded," and "a continuing religious harmony" existed countrywide (Crossette 1990). She further comments that only the Buddhists in the hill-tracts area suffered economic exploitation, which she notes was "more political than religious, since the Shanti Bahini guerrilla movement supported by India is sabotaging government forces there."

This situation reveals that communal riots in Bangladesh are not merely a matter of majoritarian (Muslim) nationalism (Guhathakurta 2012; Siddiqi 2018) or purely spontaneous anti-Hindu hatred (Riaz 1995; Kabir 2006; Sarker 2019; Halder and Biswas 2023). They are often reactions to local and regional political developments, as well as Hindutva influence from India. While this does not justify such riots or violence, it highlights the need to consider the political context. In the Muslim imagination, all Muslims are seen as part of a single ummah, feeling spiritually connected to each other. Therefore, the suffering of Muslims in one part of the world affects Muslims worldwide. This common sensibility, ummatic brotherhood, is

evident in the global Muslim reaction to blasphemy or attacks on Islamic symbols, which Mahmood calls “moral injury” (Mahmood 2015).

Further incidents of communal tension also challenge the dominant narrative. Existing academic discourse does not mention significant communal or anti-Hindu violence from 1993 to 2000, except some scholars talk about the presence of “communal politics” in this period (Gosh 2024). The next major reported incident is the 2001 post-election violence, often referred to as “post-election anti-Hindu violence” (Gosh 2024; Halder and Biswas 2023), with many accounts claiming that Hindus were targeted by BNP-JI members. Conventional narratives highlight claims of around a hundred Hindu women being raped (Datta 2002), although there are no reports of Hindu deaths in these accounts. I find the labeling of the 2001 conflict as religious or communal unsatisfactory because the conflict was primarily political, related to vote banks. Electoral violence is a common occurrence in Bangladesh; Noorana notes that every election since 1973 has seen at least dozens of people killed in pre-election, post-election, and election day violence (Noorana 2015). She cites sources indicating that at least 163 people were killed in pre-election political violence in 2021, from July to September. The Sachetan Nagorik Samaj (Public Awareness Society), vocal against these incidents, stated that the affected people do not think that ordinary Muslims are involved in the anarchic acts, but rather terrorists patronized by the victorious party (Datta 2002, 318).

This was another period without major incidents until 2012, when attacks on minorities occurred in various places like Chirirbandar, Ramu, and Hathazari. A resurgence and increase in Hindu-Muslim conflicts and attacks on minorities have been observed in the following years, with the most recent being the Thakurgaon attacks in 2023 (*Dhaka Tribune* 2023). From 2001 onwards, there was a largely peaceful period in terms of inter-communal conflict until 2012, when attacks on minorities occurred in locations such as Chirirbandar, Ramu, and Hathazari. In subsequent years, there was a resurgence and escalation of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and attacks on minorities, culminating in the recent Thakurgaon incidents in 2023 (*Dhaka Tribune* 2023). This resurgence challenges the narrative that the Awami League (AL) is the protector and champion of Hindu and other minority communities, as also reflected in the words of a Hindu woman interviewed by Halder and Biswas: “I call her [Hasina] Mamoni. She

did for me what my relatives didn't. She cared for me as if I was her own. She is who she is but she helped a village girl like me" (Halder and Biswas 2023). However, the history of communal conflict in Bangladesh tells a different story; as there was a relatively peaceful period from 1992, with the exception of the 2001 post-election violence, communal conflicts have resurfaced under the AL regime since 2012. Almost every year since then has witnessed such incidents, as outlined in the table below, with the 2016 Nasirnagar and the 2021 Cumilla incidents being particularly notable ones. This complex scenario will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4.

Table 3.1 A tentative timeline of major incidents of inter-communal conflict in Bangladesh since 1971.
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Year	Description	Fatalities	Background/Comments
1990	First major instance of Hindu-Muslim conflict post-1971. Attacks on Hindu temples and households.	No reported	Triggered by the laying of the foundation stone for the Ram temple on the Babri Masjid and following anti-Muslim violence in India.
1992	Countrywide protests. Attacks on Hindu temples and households. Triangular clashes involving Hindus, Muslims, and police.	10	Provoked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu activists in India, followed by widespread anti-Muslim violence in India.
2001*	Attacks on communities, temples, and households. Claims of rapes of Hindu women. *Should best be described as post-election political violence.	Not clear	After the 2001 national election in Bangladesh. The BNP and its coalition partners were blamed for inciting violence.
2012	Vandalization and attacks on Hindu and Buddhist communities in Ramu. Claims of rapes of Hindu women.	No reported	Sparked by the desecration of the Qur'ān on social media. Ruling Awami League (AL) leaders were involved and led the mobs.
2016	Vandalization of Hindu households and temples across Nasirnagar Upazila.	5	Triggered by a social media post defaming Islam. Mobs, led by some ruling AL leaders, carried out the attacks.

¹⁷ This tentative timeline is derived from the best available sources and accounts. While it strives for accuracy, it may not be comprehensive or entirely precise, aiming to include only major incidents. Fatality numbers for events between 2012 and 2023 are sourced from reports by Odhikar and Ain O Salish Kendra, as well as news reports from Prothom Alo, Dhaka Tribune, Daily Star, and other newspapers. Fatalities from the 1990 incidents were reported by the New York Times (see Crossette 1990). Other sources consulted include Ghosh (2024), Haque (2012), Datta (2002), and Siddiqi (2018).

2021	Conflict started with the desecration of a Qur'ān in a temple in Cumilla, then spread countrywide. Police fire killed 5 Muslims.	8 Muslims, 3 Hindus) (5)	Sparked by the desecration of the Qur'ān at a Hindu temple in Cumilla. Locals accused the AL leaders of orchestrating the incident.
2012-2023	Several other instances of inter communal conflict, attacks and vandalization on Hindu households and temples.	Approx. 10 additional fatalities	Various instances triggered by defamation of Islam or the Prophet Muhammad on social media and other platforms by people from Hindu communities.

3.3 Interdiscursivity and Historical Entanglement

Muslim League and Pakistan: Two Perennial Bad Actors

All the naming and labeling politics as well as criminalization of Muslim subjectivity or political expression of Islam is not a recent phenomenon. It has been a discursive practice starting in the colonial period sustained until today through the Pakistan period. The Muslim League (ML), one of the two major political parties in colonial India that was established in 1906 as a counter political movement against the communal politics of Indian Congress (Chatterji 1994; Waheed 1983) to safeguard Muslim interest (Jalal 1998) and played a major role in the independence of India and Pakistan, too was labeled as communal during its inception. Soon after the independence, a conspicuous tension between Bengali nationalism and the ML in East Pakistan came to be seen. Standing against the popular support for the idea of Pakistan (Dhulipala 2015), Bengali nationalists started opposing and vilifying Pakistan as an idea and ML as its political embodiment due to Pakistan's seemingly religious vocabularies and identity politics, which go against the secular ideology of Bengali nationalism. ML and Pakistan became its prime enemies and started to be labeled as communal in their discourse. And the stakeholders of the Pakistan movement—Muslims in general—also got their share of the blame. Even today, Bengali nationalists cannot get past the notion of Pakistan in their political debate as a significant enemy, and it is hugely discussed both in the political and intellectual spheres, albeit in a negative manner.

Badraddin Umar's book *Samprodayikota*, originally published in 1966, was an attempt to vilify Muslim elites in colonial India and their politics, including the ML as

communal. “With communal interpretation, the religious community turned into a nation, and the Muslims were the prime interpreters of this theory,” he wrote (2015, 21). For him, the ML was communal due to its two-nation theory, and the Congress was non-communal because it called for undivided (“*akhand*”) Indian nationalism (47-9). Throughout the book, he defended the Congress as inclusive and non-communal, arguing that the Congress’s later resort to communal bias, albeit in a limited way, was in response to the ML’s policies that occurred after the 1930s (Umar 2015, 11–15). The call for separate elections by Muslims for Muslims and Hindus in 1906 was the starting point of communal politics in India, he argues, and the subsequent policies of the ML were inherently communal, unlike the Congress’ that later resorted to communal biases, however in a limited manner, as a reaction to the ML’s policies (Umar 2015, 11–15). He later acknowledges that the spreading of communal sensibility started with the writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, only to conclude that, however, Muslim elites’ policies under the leadership of Sayyed Ahmad to safeguard Muslim interests were much more “vehement” (19).

For Umar, Muslims were never able to consider India as their own homeland and always looked back to Arab, Persia, and Turkey, and therefore, while Hindus progressed with colonial rule, Muslims remained backward and regressive (20). The Lahore Resolution, two-nation theory, and the overall Pakistan movement were a communal attempt to achieve the interests of Muslim elites exploiting religion (38–40). Abul Hashim’s call for an East Pakistan based on religious identity was communal, but the call for a united Bangladesh based on Bengali nationalism was not communal at all as it was based on language (50). He contends that the Pakistan movement was a vehement communal project because, through it, “the Muslim community made efforts to displace and eliminate the Hindu middle class from societal life” (36). Furthermore, he labels Muslim leaders like Syed Ahmad Khan as communal and Muslim political projects like the *Wahabi* movement, which by most historical accounts was an anti-colonial movement, as extremely reactionary (20). However, it’s important to note here that Umar’s recent position on the issue is that the demise of the Muslim League and the subsequent establishment of an independent Bangladesh have eliminated the conditions of communal politics, and therefore, there is neither any communal political force in Bangladesh nor is there any communal conflict. He is

more interested in reading about all inter-group conflicts, including Hindu-Muslim ones along the Marxist class-conflict line.

This blame game and vilifying Muslim politics, the idea of Pakistan, and two-nation theory have been recurring themes in the post-1971 intellectual and literary writings, which still continue today. Many other Bengali nationalists or leftist intellectuals similarly hold ML, Jinnah's two-nation theory and Muslim politics primarily responsible for communal conflicts and riots because of their religion-based (read Islamic) politics. (Haque 2012, 121-3; Haque 2019, 55; Lenin 2019, 30; Gosh 2024). "The name of the so-called state born out of two-nation theory is congenitally-crippled Pakistan," comments Pankaj Bhattachaya (Bhattacharjee & De 2020, 146). Another prominent Marxist intellectual and an important architect of Bengali nationalist discourse since the East Pakistan era, Serajul Islam Choudhury has extensively commented on history, nationalism, and the question of communalism. Although he has attempted to take a more balanced and critical view on communalism and the history of colonial India and holds both Hindu and Muslim nationalism as well as Congress and Muslim League politics for being communal in his book *Jatiyatabad Samprodayikota O Jonogoner Mukti: 1095–1947* (2015), his attempt at particularly vilifying Jinnah as an opportunistic greedy man who was involved in communal politics, unlike Gandhi, who was a non-communal patriotic leader, is eye-catching. He argues that with his opportunistic politics, Jinnah was able to establish himself as the leader of the "partitioned, rotten" Pakistan (2015, 200). For Choudhury, the two-nation theory was a flawed, erroneous idea. Jatin Sarker's portrayal of Pakistan is more vilifying:

In 1947, the subcontinent was partitioned, creating a degenerate state called Pakistan. This state, which identifies itself with the symbol of religion, especially by associating its name with Islam, continues to engage in all kinds of impure, inhuman, and anti-humane misconduct; it perpetuates oppression, exploitation, communal oppression, economic disparity, and regional inequality, causing immense suffering to its citizens. (Sarker 2019, 45).

For the Bengali nationalists, Pakistan has been a curse widely used as a vilifying or othering tool in the political sphere. JI has long been accused of being pro-Pakistani for their support for Pakistan in the 1971 war. A common phrase in Bangladesh directed towards Islamists, particularly JI, is "Go back to Pakistan." Along with this, several other phrases connecting Pakistan and Islamism (e.g., JI is often referred to as

the offspring or embodiment of the spirit of Pakistan) have been regularly deployed to vilify Islamists, especially after the Shahbag protest. A pertinent point should be made clear here that this anti-Pakistanism in the Bengali nationalist discourse stems from the fact that Pakistan is imagined here not as a mere modern nation state but rather as an entity that either incorporates Islam in its vision one way or another or uses Islamic reference in its nationalistic imagination. And this has not only been implied in their intellectual and political discussions, rather some were very explicit in their expression as mentioned earlier. For instance, Sarker expresses regrets that Bangladesh too embraced Islam again as the state religion, becoming communal and retreating to the dark-age (45), followed by his similar comment quoted earlier. The following statement from Abul Barakat bears this out further:

But this liberal-humanistic Islam has turned into “Political Islam” mainly due to three major regressive transformations associated with the emergence of the “religious doctrine-based Pakistan State” (in 1947), failure to punish the ‘war criminals’ (in the 1971 War of Independence), and legitimisation of communalism by replacing ‘secularism’ with “Islam as state religion” in the Constitution (Eighth Amendment 1988) (Barakat 2013).

Furthermore, this anti-Pakistanism (read anti-Islamism) is so intense in this circle that any distant resemblance to Pakistan is enough for something to be considered communal and problematic for them. For instance, Ziaur Rahman’s decision to change the state radio name from “Bangladesh Betar” (Radio in English) to “Radio Bangladesh” in 1975 was labeled as an act of communalism because it, for them, resembles the name of Radio Pakistan and hence has an “Islamic connotation” (Gosh 2024, 132; Haque 2019, 56). This otherization of Islam or Muslims, however, doesn’t stop with anti-Pakistanism, some commentators go even further to portray the earlier Muslim rulers of India, like Mughals, Turks, and Pathans, as invaders, communal oppressors. Umar calls Mughals and Turks invaders (Umar 2015, 44). Mughals and Pathans forced people to convert to Islam and imposed their own culture, thus sowing the seeds of communalism, contends Dasgupta (2019, 62). In an attempt to draw a comparison with the “barbarity” of the Afghan Taliban, Barua goes on to list the invasion, destruction, and conversion forced upon the Buddhists by Muslim “invaders” such as Bakhtiyar Khilji and the Muslim rulers of the Bengal Sultanate (Barua 2020, 102).

Disentangling Interdiscursivity: Hindu Orientalism and Colonial Discourse

Interdiscursivity refers to the intersection and mutual influence of different discourses, forming a dynamic web of meanings. Developed by Fairclough (1992), this concept underscores how diverse forms of discourse—political, cultural, and social—borrow from and blend with one another to create new discursive formations. In this section, we examine the interdiscursivity within Bengali nationalist discourse on communalism as they intersect with various other discursive traditions. Mainly, we explore how these narratives of communalism within Bengali nationalism, as discussed earlier, are shaped by and work as client agents of the Hindu nationalist epistemology¹⁸ and colonial orientalism.

Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Sentiment

Reading communalism in association with Muslims is not a practice unique to Bengali nationalist narratives. There has been a long tradition within Hindu nationalist epistemology that views Muslims as inherently communal. In this epistemology, Muslims are often considered communalists, while Hindus are seen solely through the lens of nationalism. Pandey highlights that while Hindus were automatically considered nationalists, Muslims had to prove their nationalism, evident in the term “nationalist Muslims” and the absence of “nationalist Hindus” (Pandey 1999). Ahmad explains further that “by virtue of merely being Hindu, every Hindu was naturally deemed to be a nationalist, whereas Muslims were taken, again naturally, as communal, unless they proved that they were loyal and obedient nationalists” (Ahmad 2022, 260). This practice is further supported by casting Muslims as aliens to this land. Hindutva nationalism has long portrayed Muslims as the perpetual “other” to the Hindu self. Ahmad notes that Hindutva nationalism views Muslims as outsiders and colonial invaders, claiming that colonialism began with “Muslim rule” (Ahmad

¹⁸ To avoid any misunderstandings, I would like to clarify my use of the terms “Hindu Orientalism” and “*Hindu nationalist epistemology*.” While Hindu Orientalism functions as a paradigm within the power-knowledge matrix of India’s neo-colonial vision, Hindu nationalist epistemology serves as a foundational epistemic enterprise central to this paradigm.

2023b). Hindu nationalism often excludes Muslims from its national imagination, or “national mainstream” (Hasan 1996, 185).

“Indian nationalism is about Muslims as violent,” rightly notes Ahmad (2023b, 11). This depiction of Muslims as violent, radical, and fundamentalist greatly helps create a national imaginary without space for Muslims. As Hasan aptly observes, “Muslims were depicted as aggressive fundamentalists and demonized as descendants of depraved and tyrannical medieval rulers who demolished temples and forcibly converted Hindus to Islam” (Hasan 1996, 185). Eaton also highlights this otherizing nature of Hindutva, showing how Indian historiography depicts Muslims as invaders and conquerors, with Sanskrit literature often stigmatizing Muslims as “barbarians” (*mlechhas*) and “demon-men” (*nararakshasam*) (Eaton 2019, 5). This narrative frames Muslims not only as foreign oppressors but also as cultural and religious threats to Hindu identity. Jadunath Sarkar’s writings, particularly his five-volume work “Aurangzeb,” reflect the sentiment that Mughal rule was oppressive, with Aurangzeb’s reign marked by the peak of Islamic fundamentalism in the Mughal court, leading to religious extremism and policies against Hindus, which contributed to the empire’s decline (Nandu 2019). Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, another prominent figure of the Bengali Renaissance, was also a fierce critic of Muslim rule in India, dubbing it “autocratic, subjugating, and despotic” (Chattopadhyay 1954). He even vilified Muslims, comparing them to dogs and cows, stating that “these days three things are common in the streets of Dhaka: crow, dog, and Muslim” (Chattopadhyay 1954).

The criminalization of Islamic political subjectivity is also not unique to the discourse of Bengali nationalism. It has roots in Hindu nationalist epistemology, and therefore Hindu Orientalism as well. Islamist parties in India, like the Students’ Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), have been considered fundamentalist and terrorist organizations that produce national enemies (Ahmad 2022, 11). Ahmad further notes that in the wake of 9/11, Indian nationalist discourse started to produce narratives on Islamist organizations in Bangladesh, linking them to “terrorism.” In these narratives, particularly JI and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), are often portrayed as terrorists and anti-nationalists (Ahmad 2013b). The terms communal, militant, and radical are other labels often directed at JI (Ahmad 2013b; 2015).

When it comes to Pakistan, both Indian and Bengali nationalist imaginations share the same sentiments: Pakistan and everything related to it are perceived as existential and perennial threats and enemies of nationalist imagination. Anti-Pakistanism has deep roots in Hindu nationalist discourse. In this discourse, Pakistan is seen as the primary and perennial external other, similar to the perception in Bangladesh. The Hindu nationalist epistemology has consistently cast Pakistan as an enemy and a threat, framing Indian Muslims as inherently communal and suspect. The right-wing rhetoric intensifies this division by labeling any perceived pro-Pakistan sentiment as anti-national, a term predominantly targeting Indian Muslims rather than addressing socio-economic policies that harm the general populace. During periods of communal violence, slogans like “Throw out the bastards, the traitors from the country” or “*Muslims have only two places: Pakistan or the graveyard*” (Ahmad 2015) or “Babar’s offspring [Muslims]: go to Pakistan or to the graveyard!” (van der Veer 1996, 251) resonated, further entrenching the notion of Muslims as the perpetual ‘other’. This rhetoric is echoed in the Bengali nationalist circle, where dissenting views are labeled as pro-Pakistani, and dissenters are often told to “go back to Pakistan.”

Conventional Indian historiography blames the Muslim League and the two-nation theory as the instigators of communalism. The Congress party was perceived as advocating for a unified India and only begrudgingly agreeing to the partition (Ferdous 2022, 1). However, many historians have since debunked these simplistic narratives, contending that the Congress became increasingly influenced by communal sentiments as the partition process unfolded (Jalal 1994; Chatterji 1994). They assert that the demand for Pakistan was not merely an act of secession but was strategically aimed at bolstering their negotiating power. This perspective highlights the complex political dynamics and negotiations during the period leading up to India’s independence and the eventual creation of Pakistan. Jalal (1994) contends that the call for a separate Muslim state by the ML was thus seen as a tactical move to secure better terms and representation for Muslims within the new political landscape of the subcontinent. The vilifying perspective on Muslim leaders is evident in the way influential figures and policies are discussed too. For instance, Nehru perceived Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and by extension ordinary Muslims and religious scholars (*‘ulema*), as detached from modern political thought and development, emphasizing his foreignness and lack of connection to Indian culture (Ahmad 2022).

Colonial Orientalism and Historical Narratives

Anti-Muslim narratives date back to British colonial historiography, and even further to Europe's age of discovery and enlightenment. Scholars of decolonial studies note that Eurocentric racism is connected with Islamophobia that started in Andalusian Spain (Rana 2014; Maldonado-Torres 2014), and European enlightenment and colonialism have heightened this sentiment (Katz 2018). Said's seminal work "Orientalism" (1978) is widely celebrated for demystifying the Western Orientalists' whimsical depiction of Muslims. These colonial orientalist narratives influenced Indian nationalist historiography and imagination. Wolfe notes that European orientalism and Indian nationalism came together to cast Muslims as the Other (Wolfe 2002, 374). The violent depiction of Muslims can be found in colonial orientalists like William Watts, who described Muslims as "fierce, oppressive, and rapacious," while Hindus were portrayed as "mild, subtle, and frugal," characterizing Muslims as foreigners and Hindus as native Indians (Ahmad 2023b). Orientalist historian Henry M. Elliot, in his *Bibliographical Index to the Historians of Muhammedan India*, provided a graphic narration of Muslim "violence" in 1850:

The few glimpses . . . we have of Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against processions, worship, and ablutions, and of other intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them, show us that this picture is not overcharged. (Elliot 1976, quoted in Eaton 2019)

James Mill's *The History of British India* depicted Muslim rule as tyranny in contrast with ancient Hindu or modern British rule (Eaton 2019, 7-8). The orientalist narrative justified their rule with the logic that "they had liberated India from eight centuries of 'Muhammadan' stagnation" (Eaton 2019, 8). The portrayal of Mughal rulers, particularly Aurangzeb, as religiously fanatic and oppressive is a prime example of this colonial legacy. Jadunath Sarkar's sentiments on Muslim rule can be found in William Irvine's *The Later Mughals*, which was later edited by Sarkar (1971). It notably states that after Akbar, during the reign of Jahangir, Islamic fundamentalists began to dominate the Mughal court. During Aurangzeb's reign, the peak of Islamic fundamentalism in the Mughal court led to religious extremism and policies against Hindus, contributing to the empire's decline.

The above examples are just a few of the myriad of Orientalist discourses that denigrate Islam and Muslims. This orientalist and colonial depiction of Muslims as inherently violent and tyrannical was a strategic narrative to justify colonial rule and create a divide between Hindus and Muslims. This narrative laid the groundwork for communal tensions and conflicts that have persisted into the post-colonial period. The portrayal of Muslims as the violent “other” and Hindus as the benign natives reinforced colonial power structures and justified the British “civilizing mission.” This narrative left a lasting impact on South Asian historiography and inter-communal relations by not only influencing Indian nationalism but also contributing to the communal discord that continues to affect the region today.

In conclusion, this chapter has been an exploration of communalism in South Asian literature and historiography, revealing a deeply entrenched bias shaped by the interdiscursivity of Hindu nationalism, colonial orientalism, and Bengali nationalist discourse. These intertwined narratives have collectively portrayed Muslims and their religious expressions as inherently communal and violent. From the strategic ambiguity in defining communalism to the reproduction of interdiscursive narratives, they allow for selective interpretations that stigmatize Islamic political expressions and religious practices. It has also attempted to demonstrate how colonial orientalism provided the foundational stereotypes, which were then perpetuated and amplified by Hindu Orientalism. Bengali nationalist discourse further compounded these biases by integrating elements from both colonial and Hindu nationalist narratives, thereby serving as an agent client of Hindu Orientalism: portraying Islam as innately violent and recasting Muslims as the perpetual “other.”

CHAPTER IV

REVISITING THE MYTH: COMMUNAL MUSLIMS, THE SAVIOR AWAMI LEAGUE AND THE SINCERE STATE

But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible “subjective” violence, violence performed by a dearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance.

—Slavoj Žižek 2008

Our main job, however, should be ... to expose to view the dynamics of violence ... because of the very fact that its producers know very well what it is that they do, what has happened before, how to displace blame from themselves to others.

—Paul R Brass 2006

Writing about violence is inherently challenging. Unpacking its dynamics and realities is even more complex. As Peter van der Veer (1996, 269) highlights, there isn't a single, true side to the story of violence. This complexity is further compounded by Sherry Ortner's (1997, 9) argument that understanding the meaning-making processes is crucial to interpreting the voices of the victims. Without exploring these processes, what remains is rage, dissociation, and madness. Furthermore, scholars suggest that violence is a “total” social phenomenon (der Veer 1996, 268), encompassing legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, and morphological dimensions (Mauss 1974, 76). However, these arguments primarily concern themselves with tangible physical or ideological violence, what Žižek calls “subjective violence” (Žižek 2008, 1). To unpack the more complex nature of violence, one must go beyond this tangibility and explore the underlying shades of violence that cause subjective violence in the first place, including both “symbolic” and “systemic” violence (Žižek 2008). The difficulty lies, however, in integrating these diverse dimensions into a cohesive narrative that can shed light on the complicated nature of a particular violence. Therefore, before

producing a singular, urgent narrative, Žižek suggests, one should “learn, learn, and learn what causes this violence” (Žižek 2008, 8).

Keeping these limitations and suggestions in mind, this chapter does not attempt to provide a comprehensive and objective account of the 2021 Cumilla incident and its aftermath. Instead, it seeks to ask questions that delve into the complexities beyond linear narratives, offering a fresh and multi-layered perspective by giving voice to all parties involved, putting their accounts into context, and questioning the singular narrative dominant in the intelligentsia. This chapter aims to explore various aspects of the incident and the inter-communal dynamics of the city, including socio-political and religious dimensions that conventional narratives often emphasize. It also examines the politics surrounding the narratives of communal violence, the questions of moral injury, and the role of the state and politics that are entangled in this conflict. Moreover, this chapter is not solely about the Cumilla incident. By employing extended case methods, along with analyzing media narratives and integrating broader socio-political contexts and theoretical underpinnings, it seeks to provide fresh insights into communal tensions and the factors that must be considered in studies of communalism in general.

4.1 The Event as Narrativized vs. The Event as Happened

On October 13, 2021, during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, a significant incident of communal violence occurred at a makeshift *puja mondop* in Nanua Dighir Par in the city of Cumilla, Bangladesh. The disturbance began early in the morning when a copy of the Qur’ān was discovered on the lap of a Hanuman idol at the *mondop*. The news spread quickly, and around 7:00 am, someone called 999 to report the incident. The officer-in-charge of the Kotwali police station arrived at the scene to retrieve the Qur’ān.

The situation escalated when live-streaming of the incident went viral on Facebook. Pictures, “rumors” of Qur’ān desecration, and “communal messages” quickly circulated on social media, raising tensions. Between 9:00 and 10:00 am, the atmosphere in Cumilla was filled with fear and anxiety. Groups of agitated Muslims

began to gather at the *mondop*, demanding an end to the Durga Puja celebrations. The unrest peaked around 11:30 a.m. when the mob attacked the idols at the Nanua Dighi *mondop*, resulting in widespread vandalism. Police attempted to control the situation with tear gas and rubber bullets but were unable to prevent the violence from spreading.

Throughout the day, several temples and *mondops* in Cumilla, including Shree Shree Rokkha Kali Temple and Chanmoni Kali Temple, were attacked and vandalized. Statues of deities were destroyed, and fires were set, causing considerable damage. The news spread across the country through social media, leading to several more incidents of attacks on Hindu communities and vandalism of Hindu temples by angry Muslim mobs in more than a dozen districts in the following days. Dozens of makeshift temples, religious places, shops, and homes of Hindu people were attacked and vandalized, resulting in at least 8 deaths and hundreds of injuries.

The above was the standard narrative on the incidents in mainstream print and electronic media outlets in Bangladesh, with slight differences in numbers, details, intensity, and style in the reports. Although these reports were factually true, more or less, the immediate and follow-up reports greatly resorted to the politics of narrativization. This was the period of interpretation of communal violence, which Brass (2003) identifies as the third and last phase of a communal riot or attack, when the interpretation of the incidents, attempts to control the meaning, and blame displacement by social scientists and politicians take place.

My argument is that this is the phase when, along with interpretation and blame displacement, there is an aspect of what Žižek (2008) calls “symbolic” violence that follows the earlier phase. This symbolic violence includes two phases: first, the politics of narrativization—a systematic framing of incidents, selective reporting of some facts while leaving out or staying silent about other aspects—what Ahmad and Kanungo (2019) call “narrative elimination” to produce a unified singular narrative. This narrative follows the logic of the “discourse of communalism” (Brass 2003) that is informed by nationalist historiography (which in turn is shaped by colonial discourse) and politicians. This process is then accompanied by a phase of criminalization, which includes the shifting of blame by politicians and the media, followed by targeted

actions and persecution of the groups blamed by the state. This can be considered, in Žižek's term, "systemic violence" (Žižek 2008). We will break down this politics throughout this chapter.

In Žižek's (2008, 1) view, symbolic violence is embedded in language and forms of representation, imposing certain meanings and norms through discourse. In the case of the Cumilla incident, despite slight differences in media reports and opinions, a common thread was the framing or reification of these incidents as communal (read Islamic) violence. This pattern mirrors almost every case of Hindu-Muslim or anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh, where communal violence translates to "Muslim" violence. Once the events are framed, interpreted, and narrated as communal violence, the logic entails the blame for it being placed on a specific group. Politicians, media, and law enforcement converged to direct the blame towards "communal fundamentalists," a dog whistle term for Islamists, as discussed in chapter two, where Islamists, particularly JI, are labeled as fundamentalist and communal.

BBC Bangla, along with other mainstream media, published a follow-up report based on a statement by AL leader Obaidul Quader where he said "Placing Qur'ān on *puja mondog* was Act by the Communal Evil Force" the following day (*BBC Bangla* 2021a). The AL and its coalition partners arranged a press conference on October 17, where leaders from different parties directed the blame towards JI and BNP (*Bangladesh Awami League* 2021). Law enforcement agencies joined this process; BBC Bangla, quoting a local police officer, reported that "the mob that gathered and demanded punishment for the act of defaming the Qur'ān and then attacked the temple, many of them were students from various local madrasas (*BBC Bangla* 2021b)."

Based on this narrative, numerous "communal fundamentalists" were arrested in the days following, which will be discussed later in this chapter. A week later, media reports citing police officers and the state minister "revealed" that activists from JI and BNP were involved in the violence in Cumilla and other cities where attacks followed. Police claimed that many arrested suspects acknowledged being BNP or JI activists (*Desh Rupantor* 2021). However, this mainstream narrative from political leaders, police officers, and the mass media differed greatly from the accounts of eyewitnesses and local communities. Local people and eyewitnesses of the Cumilla incidents stated

that the mobs who instigated the attacks in Cumilla were outsiders predominantly aged 20 to 30, as reported by a few news sites (*BD News 24* 2021). Nevertheless, this narrative didn't gain much traction, and the mainstream narratives that placed the blame on BNP-JI's "communalist and fundamentalist" allies continued unabated.

In this process, however, there was notable narrative elimination in some mainstream media. In the following days, Govinda Pramanik, the general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Mohajot (BHM), accused ruling local AL leaders of inciting violence in Cumilla, citing the incident as a "planned attack" due to the political conflict between the local AL member of parliament (MP) AKM Bahauddin Nasim and the city mayor Moniruzzaman Sakku, who is from the BNP. Although this talk gained some momentum on Facebook, no mainstream news media showed interest in the accusation except a few local ones (*Somoy Ekhon* 2021). However, it was enough to incite anger in the said MP and local Hindu AL leaders and activists, as the MP demanded Pramanik's arrest, stating that like Muslim fundamentalists, Hindu fundamentalists are also spreading conflict (*Dhaka Times* 2024).

Another instance of narrative elimination occurred regarding the identity of the attackers in the Cumilla incidents. While some facts and narratives were buried, and others were emphasized, this selective reporting created a false sense of urgency without an attempt to understand the full picture. These contradictions in narration and the incidents of narrative elimination made me particularly interested in the in-depth study of the Cumilla incidents. Now it's time to turn our attention to our case study and see what our interlocutors, both victims and suspects, as well as locals, have to say about the people involved in that attack. Most of my interlocutors from both Hindu and Muslim communities in Cumilla affirmed, explicitly or implicitly, that there was political involvement and that members of the ruling AL were involved in the incidents and subsequent disturbances. Only three of them opted to make no explicit comment on it, and one denied such a possibility outright.

During my first visit to Cumilla in February 2023, in my somewhat unconventional interview with the priest of the Kali temple in the Chawkbazar area, another site attacked in Cumilla in 2021, I first got some indication that the incidents of attacks and vandalization in Cumilla were more socio-political than religious. During our 30-

minute “conversation,” held with the priest inside the collapsible gate of his house while I stood outside, he was reluctant to share anything about the incidents. He repeatedly stated that there was no point in asking such questions or conducting such research, advised me to find another career, and mentioned that they were happy now and didn’t want to discuss the past. However, before we parted ways, he surprisingly remarked, “I can’t talk about it. There are eyes watching us. Think about what is happening to the opposition party [BNP] in Dhaka. It was like that.” He was referring to the harassment and crackdown on BNP gatherings and protests by the police and AL activists, particularly in December 2022 (Rahman, S. 2023). He didn’t want to elaborate on his comment further.

Following this encounter, I found myself particularly interested in the instrumentalist aspect of that incident. Following Brass’ theory of instrumentalism (1991) that ethnic violence is often the result of elite manipulation for political ends rather than spontaneous inter-communal hatred, I aimed to explore this framework in the context of what appeared to be communal violence. This led me to investigate whether political elites might be exploiting the religious sensitivities of the people for political or personal gain. Consequently, all of my interviews with the interlocutors in Cumilla included questions about the political dimensions of the incident and the involvement of political parties, particularly the AL.

While no Hindu interviewee except one explicitly affirmed it, three implicitly alluded to the role of political leaders in aggravating the incidents, one denied it, and another refused to comment. On the other hand, respondents from local Muslim communities were more explicit on this issue. However, my interview with Rafiq—an attendant of a nearby mosque who was arrested as a suspect and served jail time for seven months—was quite eye-opening and revealing. He was present at the scene after the news broke that a copy of the Qur’ān was found in the makeshift temple, witnessing every event from growing tensions, the gathering of people, law enforcement agencies, and political leaders, to the eventual attacks. The imam of the mosque introduced me to him and explained the reason for my interest in interviewing him. Although fearful and confused at the beginning, despite the imam’s recommendation, Rafiq became reassured and interested when I explained to him that, like him, I too studied at a madrasah until high school and am currently studying in Turkey. Apparently, he was

a great fan of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He was also a member of the Islamic Movement Bangladesh, an Islamist party that had enjoyed good relations with the government and AL for almost a decade until 2023.

When I asked if there was any political aspect to the incident or any involvement of political leaders, he shared a shocking story. He affirmed that there was indeed tension among the locals from both religious communities, and many people were angry, demanding proper action from the administration to find and punish the criminals. However, he explained that it was not local Muslims who started the attacks but an organized crowd, mostly youths in their early 20s, who were not from the locality. They attacked as part of a protest, and a few young mid-level AL leaders were among them. Later, a few locals joined the attack, but the main attackers were outsiders, as he confirmed. According to him, it was a pre-planned “organized riot” due to the political clash between the AL MP and the BNP-supported mayor, in an attempt to frame the latter. His account is worth quoting at length here:

Actually, it was a pre-planned, staged incident to blame the mayor [of the city]. We found out about it in jail. It was about three weeks after my arrest. We heard that the councilor of No. 17 ward was killed in his office in broad daylight along with his assistant. He was the panel mayor [acting mayor in the absence of the mayor] and an Awami League leader. Everyone was talking about it in the jail. They said that he was the man who planned this whole incident in Nanua Dighir on the orders of the MP to frame the BNP-affiliated mayor. ... So, the MP had him killed to silence him so that no more information about the whole plan would get out. ... He hired Iqbal [the person who placed a copy of the Qur’ān at the *mondop*] to do it and then had outside rioters execute the attack. ... It was interesting because the makeshift temple where the incident took place was in front of the mayor’s house. So, the plan was to pin the blame on him because it [would look like it] happened on his watch. But now that Iqbal had been arrested, and there was a danger that the plan would be exposed, the panel mayor was also killed in his office. And a few days later, three of the main suspects in his murder were also killed in a crossfire. So, the whole incident was deflected, and only Basit is in jail. But he is being portrayed as mentally ill (*pagol*). But you will not see the media talking much about the murder.

Rafiq’s account was as shocking as it was a strong accusation. To corroborate his story, I asked other interlocutors about it. Rafiq also wanted reassurance that I would not write something in Bengali newspapers that could get him into trouble, although I had assured him of that at the beginning. I later asked Basit, the man who first called 999 to report the placement of the Qur’ān close to the idol, about this political linkage. He also affirmed that it was the story everyone talked about in jail. But he said, regardless of whether the accusation was true or not, he was convinced that the whole situation was planned to frame the mayor. “After Iqbal, I was tortured the most in jail. I was in

a condemned cell for 21 days. ... Police officers just wanted one answer from me: the name of the mayor [that he planned this incident].” My interlocutor, Mushfiq, who was arrested as a suspect from Cumilla Railway Station along with his friend Hasan, also acknowledged hearing the story in jail but said he was certain that there was political involvement and couldn’t say definitively who was responsible. Another local Muslim, an elderly security guard of a building near the pond, confirmed that there had been many discussions about the incident being staged by ruling party members, especially after the murder of the councilor.

One of my Hindu interlocutors, let’s call him Ramesh, a shopkeeper in the area, implicitly affirmed the political dimension: “There are always politics and bad guys everywhere. We both communities have been living in this area for centuries peacefully, without any major tensions. There might be tensions in other areas, but the 2021 event was the first such incident [here].” However, none of my interlocutors, neither from Muslim nor Hindu communities, accused JI, HI, or any other Islamist party of playing any role in the incident. Responding to the question of any involvement of Islamists in the incidents, a local Hindu pharmacist, Ram Prashad, denied any political motives behind the incident, saying, “I would not say any Islamic party was involved there. I have many friends from Jamaat. Ninety percent of them are good people. And there are good and bad people in every group.” Elaborating on the political motives of the event, Basit also added later, “I have been seeing this temporary puja for many years. Every year there is CCTV, but there wasn’t any this year. Why? The lighting in the area was also poor.” The mayor’s personal secretary, Babu, was also arrested after the incidents as one of the prime suspects, and most of the people arrested were from the political opposition and other random suspects with Muslim identity markers. Among the five prime defendants in this case filed by the police, four were connected to BNP politics and the mayor.

All these are the accounts of my interlocutors, and it was not possible for me, or anyone else except the law enforcement agencies, to find the actual truth. But one thing is certain: it was not simple anti-Hindu violence as portrayed in mainstream narratives. It should also be noted here that during my four field trips to Cumilla, I did not notice any visible communal tensions in everyday life between the two communities, as pointed out by some of my interviewees and also evident in Ramesh’s comment above.

In Digumbaritola and surrounding areas of the city that I observed during my trips, I visited restaurants run by Hindus and saw Muslims with beards eating there. During interviews with Ramesh and Ram Prashad in their respective shops, I saw people from both communities, including women in hijāb and older Muslim men with beards and tupi, coming into their shops and buying things. During my trip in December 2023, I found a group of Hindu women performing some rituals on the bank of the pond, accompanied by a group of drummers playing their instruments on a Friday afternoon. I asked one of the drummers what the occasion was, and he said it was a wedding. So, the 2021 incident was certainly an out-of-the-ordinary event, an aberration of the normal inter-communal harmony there.¹⁹

It is most likely that there were other elements and dimensions to the incident other than religious, including political. This was confirmed by most of my interlocutors, including Rafiq, who articulated that the attackers were mostly outsiders and came in an organized manner. I later found a news report that quoted local Hindus, revealing that the attackers were outsiders and that local young people, both Hindus and Muslims, worked together to prevent them (*BD News 24* 2021). Another report suggested that a ward councilor affiliated with the AL was seen among the mobs attacking the temple, and he was initially on the police charge sheet but was not arrested (Ontu 2021). These accounts make a strong case for the incident being an organized attack planned and orchestrated by political leaders rather than a spontaneous hostility toward the Hindu community. The statements of the locals, the attackers being outsiders, subsequent processes of blame displacement, selective arrests, and the timing of the murder of the councilor— all point to this strong plausibility. Furthermore, the administration’s failure (or reluctance?) to conclude the trial or judicial proceedings of the 12 cases filed against the incident in Cumilla, and the absence of formal police charge sheets against the criminals in almost four years, or bringing the culprits to justice, only give this accusation more merit. According to

¹⁹ This is not to say that there are no communal differences between the two communities, as they maintain their socio-cultural and religious distinctions as well as communal boundaries. Given recent political developments, as previously argued, there may often be a sense of inter-communal tension and discomfort, paralleling the inter-political tensions (mainly the public’s anger against the current AL regime). However, these sensitivities are typically dormant and not inherently religious, and they do not lead to spontaneous religious conflict unless other factors are at play.

news reports, apart from Iqbal, everyone arrested is out on bail (as they mostly arrested random people as suspects), and the cases are in limbo as no formal charge sheets have been submitted by the three investigation branches: PBI (Police Bureau of Investigation), CID (Criminal Investigation Department), and Kotowali police station (*Bd News 24 2023b; Dhaka Tribune 2024*).

One thing, nevertheless, was evident: no Islamist parties were involved in this particular incident, contrary to the popular narratives that implied so using dog-whistle terms. However, the important point in this regard is the media's silence and narrative elimination regarding politics and state involvement, focusing solely on reifying the incident as communal (Muslim) violence. And this was further coupled with blame displacement, and another incident is worth mentioning in this regard. When the Hindu Mohajot general secretary accused the political leaders, especially the MP of being behind the attack (*Dhaka Times 2024*). In turn, not only the MP but also some local Hindu leaders affiliated with the AL accused him of being a JI agent and Hindu fundamentalist. And it is not an uncommon practice within the current Bangladeshi political establishment. The labels of Jamat, Shibir, or extremism are deployed as "sponge words" (Dabashi 2015) or "combat-concepts" (Ahmad 2021b), to criminalize and delegitimize anything and everything. We will analyze this pattern of criminalization and delegitimization, that reinforces Hindu Orientalist narrative, in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

If we take a brief look at other major incidents of attacks on Hindu communities, they also greatly challenge the dominant narratives. These incidents, initially dubbed acts of communal violence, often turn out to be instrumentalist in nature, orchestrated by the ruling AL leaders and activists, following a systematic pattern where the blame is displaced onto others. In the Nasirnagar incidents of vandalization of Hindu temples and houses in 2016, several AL leaders, including a UP (Union Parishad)²⁰ chairman, were later found guilty in court, although the initial blame was placed on pious Muslims (*touhidi jonota*) and Islamists. However, it didn't end there, three convicted

²⁰ A Union Parishad is the smallest rural administrative and local government unit in Bangladesh. It functions as a council responsible for various local administrative and developmental activities.

AL leaders listed in the charge sheet were later given nominations for the UP election by the AL (Islam 2021; *New Age* 2023). In 2021, another such attack on Hindu temples in Bandarban was instigated from a protest rally against the defamation of the Qur’ān organized by local AL leaders and affiliated parties (Islam 2021; *Prothom Alo* 2021). For another case of vandalization of Hindu households in 2021 in Sunamganj, initially dubbed by all the media as communal violence unleashed by “Hefazat-e Islam (Nafiu 2024),” a PBI investigation later revealed that the person who organized and led the attack was a UP member and a Jubo League (youth wing of the AL) leader (*Daily Star* 2021). Although many news sites reported it, they still maintained it was an attack organized by HI. A year earlier, in another similar incident in Muradnagar, Cumilla, an attack was unleashed on a local UP chairman’s house who was Hindu. Again, it was dubbed as a communal act. However, according to a news report citing locals and eyewitnesses, the attack was pre-planned, and the reason was the prior conflict between two local Hindu AL leaders (*Bhorer Kagoj* 2021). It also followed the same pattern, starting from a protest rally against defamation of Islam attended by AL leaders and police officers. The tentative timeline of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in Bangladesh, as outlined in the second chapter, also speaks for itself, showing significant numbers of such attacks during the current AL government’s reign compared to a few incidents before.

Let’s now look at the attacks on Hindu communities directly unleashed under the banner of the AL. How do the media categorize and name such incidents? Take, for example, the incident in Cumilla on October 13, 2023. The HBCUC organized a rally and procession in the city to protest the “communally instigating” comments of Cumilla MP AKM Bahauddin Bahar and Munshiganj Mayor Faisal Biplob, both members of the ruling party, and to demand a three-day Durga Puja holiday. On the same day, in a contrasting event, the Bangladesh Jubo League (BJL) and Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL)—the youth and student wings of the ruling party, respectively—held a “peace procession” in another part of the city. This procession aimed to counter what they termed the “anarchies” and “communal hatred” promoted by the BNP-Jamaat and to show support for MP Bahauddin. As the HBCUC procession neared the Kandir Par area, about 500 BJL and BCL members from their procession attacked the HBCUC protesters, injuring two individuals (*Daily Star* 2023b).

Despite widespread media coverage and continuous updates on incidents of communal violence, a notable silence persisted among area experts and advocates of communal harmony regarding this incident. Although mainstream media covered the story, they were careful not to call it a “communal” attack. No “communal violence specialists” penned special analyses or columns specifically labeling the ruling party or its political wings as “communal” or “anti-Hindu” for their role in disrupting communal harmony. Yet, these same commentators are generally quick to interpret other incidents as “communal violence” and attribute blame to political opponents or label Muslim groups as “violently communal” after virtually every incident where the attackers are not directly linked to the ruling party. The same goes when Hindus or other minority communities incite violence against Muslims. In the recent Faridpur incident, where two Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs over a false accusation of setting fire to a Hindu idol’s cloth, no media dubbed it communal violence. The terms communalism and communal violence are always reserved for Muslims, and any violence involving the Hindu community on the receiving end is always reified as Islamic violence. Thus, Muslims and Islam become the subjects of symbolic violence through narratives.

An additional aspect of nearly all these attacks is the presence of a pretext for the violence, and none of the attacks are spontaneous or random. In most cases, that pretext involves incidents of defamation of Islam or moral injuries against Islam, either pre-planned or random. And here Brass’s theory of instrumentalism, although in a politico-religious context rather than an ethnic one, becomes relevant. Oftentimes, after such instances of “moral injury,” ruling political leaders, despite their secular or not-so-religious orientation, use this pretext and exploit religious sensitivity to organize people and unleash violence against the Hindu community, and then displace the blame towards Islamists or fundamentalists. As Islamists, particularly JI, are the eternal demons within the political establishment, shifting blame toward them not only grants impunity but also creates grounds for the state to target them. In this sense, the ruling AL, not the Islamists, can be regarded as the actual religion profiteer (*dhormo bebshayi*)—a phrase popularly used for Islamists in political debate—exploiting and using religion and religious sentiment for material gain. It is evident that a systematic pattern of anti-Hindu violence is followed by political (not religious) leaders in Bangladesh. Using the pretext of defamation of Islam, they first organize protests, then

orchestrate violence, and put the blame on Islamists or fundamentalists. Then, the politics of narrativization come into play, where the media narrativize these incidents as communal violence, linking Muslims or Islamists and eliminating the questions of politics and state involvement. As Ludden (1996) aptly observes, “explanations of Hindu-Muslim conflict that deflect attention away from the state toward religion are suspicious.” At this point, we turn to our next problem—the politics of criminalization and the role of the state, which collude together to unleash systemic violence against the opponents— political, ideological, and beyond.



Figure 4.1 Nanua Dighi in Cumilla. Photo is the author's, December 2023.

4.2 Multiple Victims and Situating the State

It was 2 am on October 14, 2021, at Cumilla Railway Station, the night following the Cumilla incident. A group of 8 students from the mathematics department of Cumilla University were waiting for a Chittagong-bound train. They had just finished their third-year final exams and planned a group trip to celebrate it. Mushfiq and Hasan were among these students. It was a spontaneous plan that evening. They arrived at the railway station around 12:20 am, only to find that they had just missed a train and would have to wait until 4 am for the next one. They decided to wait at the station and enjoy their time together. Around 2 am, Mushfiq and Hasan were talking while walking on the platform and became separated from the group. Both were bearded and

wore trousers above the ankles—a sign of many practicing Muslims, especially those involved in Islamic politics.

A middle-aged, well-dressed man watched them for some time before stopping them for questioning. “Who are you?” the man asked. Not satisfied with their answers that they were students of Cumilla University, he continued to interrogate them about what they were doing at the station at that hour. He asked numerous questions before calling the police. Baffled by the man’s questions and his call to the police, Mushfiq asked who he was and why he was calling the police. The man replied, “Don’t you recognize me?” “No,” said Mushfiq. Frustrated, the man replied, “Really? Haven’t you seen me on TV and social media videos today?” Again, hearing a negative answer, he sneered, “You will get to know soon.” A few minutes later, a couple of police constables arrived and arrested them. When confronted by their friends about the matter, the man suggested they not involve themselves.

Mushfiq and Hasan were taken to Kotowali police station and placed in a cell full of randomly arrested people without any explanation. They learned that they were arrested as suspects for the incident that had occurred the previous day in Nanua Dighir Par. When they met the officer in charge (OC) early in the morning and asked why they were arrested, explaining they had been in their student house all day before going to the station, they were told it was procedure and that they had nothing to worry about if they were not involved. They also learned that the man who had interrogated them and ordered their arrest at the station was the District Commissioner (DC) of Cumilla. They were told to contact their families, causing them great concern, especially about their families’ reactions.

Mushfiq came from a middle-class family and used to earn his living by giving private tuition. Hasan came from a lower-middle-class family and not only supported his own living and education but also helped his family financially. They were worried not only about their reputations and careers, but also about the financial and emotional burden on their families. They were aware of the notoriety of the Bangladeshi police and judicial system—where only money talks and can get you anything, although it wouldn’t waive the initial harassment and torture by the police. They knew how hard

it would be for their families to manage the financial cost to get them out of jail, if they were lucky.

It took seven months and a large amount of money for their families to bail them out, even though the police couldn't prove their involvement in court. Hasan's family suffered greatly, losing one of their financial supporters and having to allocate money to cover the court expenses. After two months in prison, during a court hearing, Mushfiq asked the judge why she didn't order their release since she knew they were innocent. The judge later replied to him personally, "I know you are innocent. But my hands are tied. I am ordered not to release you." So, they had to stay in prison for five more months before they were bailed out. They had to take their semester final exams in prison, which the university initially refused to allow. During their imprisonment, they faced constant physical and psychological harassment, as Mushfiq described in our interview: "every day in the jail could be a whole different story of poignancy."

This is a brief tale Mushfiq recalled and told me two years later, in December 2023, at the same train station where he was arrested. Now, as he tries to start a small business along with private tuition after graduating last year, he sometimes wonders why Allah made him go through that trial. He knows he will never get a government job due to his imprisonment history, which had been his dream since he began his university education. Even private firms withdrew their job offers after a background check. He still feels sorry and embarrassed for what his family had to go through, both financially and psychologically. Hasan's situation is worse; he is struggling to pay his family's debt taken to cover the costs of his case while doing private tuition. He still couldn't escape the mental trauma he suffered during that period. He expressed his grievance in the following manner:

When I got the chance to study at Cumilla University, my family was very happy. They had a dream that I would get a government job after my graduation and alleviate the financial struggle. My father had to work as a laborer at someone else's farm to get the money for my admission. Now everything is gone. I got them into more financial trouble. ... And what was my crime? Being at the rail station sporting a beard! Is practicing Islam, being Muslim a crime in this country? ... We were not at that site. I had never been to Nanua Dighir Par before my arrest, and the police and court couldn't also prove our involvement. Still, the case against us has not dropped. We are out on bail, and we need to appear in court every month. ... My career is gone, life has changed. But who cares? You have nothing if you don't have political power.

But the vignette of these two young men is far from unique. Rafiq and Basit were arbitrarily detained—picked up from their homes a week after the violent incident on October 13— as suspects with no direct connection to the incident, as they claimed, except that they were present at the scene. While Rafiq was arrested for being present at the scene, Basit’s “crime” was calling and informing the authorities about the incident. “If I am a criminal for calling 999, so is the prime minister because it’s she who introduced the 999 emergency service,” Basit lamented, adding that he was arrested for making a call to police, but the security guard assigned to the *puja mondop*, who admitted he was not present during the incident because he “was high on drugs,” was not.

Like Mushfiq and Hasan, Rafiq and Basit were also held for seven months without legal due process. All of them came from lower economic backgrounds, and their arrest changed everything for them and their families. They are now out of jail, but only on bail. Their stories carry particular importance for they reveal three violent practices the state, law enforcement agencies and media resort to: first, the politics of criminalization practiced by politicians and opinion-manufacturers in the post-violence period, thus unleashing symbolic violence against ordinary Muslims; second, the role of law enforcement agencies in such violence, which includes systemic violence against the victims of symbolic violence; and lastly, the elimination of these “legal” victims from the discourse and silence about them in the media.

Let’s first analyze the politics of criminalization and the witch-hunt counter-terrorism operations prevailing among police and other public security forces in the post-communal conflict period. According to one news report, like Mushfiq, Hasan, and Rafiq, around 150 people were arrested as suspects in the Cumilla case (*Dhaka Tribune* 2022). But how law enforcement picks up their suspects is an important question no one seems to ask. Since these attacks are dubbed communal violence orchestrated by angry “Muslim fundamentalist” mobs, for law enforcement agencies, it’s Muslim fundamentalists or people from opposition parties who maintain ties with those fundamentalists who should be arrested. And how are these fundamentalists or terrorists mapped? Like Mushfiq or Hasan, any sign of a distinct Muslim identity, such as having beards, wearing *panjabi-pajama*, *tupi* (Islamic caps), or pants above the ankle, or being a madrasah student, bears the risk of being labeled a potential

“terrorist” when there is a “terrorist” hunt or counter-terrorism operation. Any connection with any Islamic political party, or even any opposition one, just adds to this potentiality. Although Islam is still practiced widely in the country, due to securitization policies, anyone practicing Islam can be regarded as a “fundamentalist” or “terrorist” if the state and law enforcement agencies want.

As discussed in the previous chapter, “identifiable” Muslims, particularly Islamists and political opponents, live a bare life in contemporary Bangladesh. There is a politics of criminalization of Muslim bodies and identity markers; even random Islamic books are often tagged as “terrorist” books. The rise of some fringe extremist or terrorist groups and subsequent security discourse heightened the situation and gave the security agencies and the state the opportunity to use this ground to criminalize and persecute anyone they deem necessary, or when they need some “criminals” in the name of counterterrorism. It’s been common knowledge among the people that police often stage evidence, such as books and arms, to frame and arrest individuals as terrorists. A 2023 news report suggests that Rajshahi Metropolitan Police arbitrarily arrested 33 ordinary practicing Muslims, many of whom later claimed that police staged evidence to falsely accuse them of being terrorists (*Bangla Tribune* 2023). The enforced disappearance of Muslim preachers, Islamists, and political opponents by law enforcement agencies has been another grave political crisis in Bangladesh. An Odhikar report recorded at least 613 cases of enforced disappearance by different security forces from 2009 to early 2022 in Bangladesh. According to a 2023 New York Times article, approximately two and a half million members of the opposition party BNP are currently undergoing trials in politically motivated cases (Mashal 2023). Further, a report citing official statistics indicates that about 80% of prisoners in Bangladesh are either pre-trial detainees or held on remand in politically motivated cases (*Daily Observer* 2023). Official records also show that as of December 2023, the total prison population reached 84,851, nearly doubling the facilities’ maximum capacity of 42,866 (Salekin 2024).



Figure 4.2 Group photo of 33 falsely accused “terrorists,” taken from a Bangla Tribune report.

The cases of Mushfiq, Hasan, and Rafiq were in fact cases of systemic violence unleashed by the state based on Muslim body profiling and the politics of criminalization of Muslim identities. Mushfiq and Hasan were potential suspects only due to their Muslim body marks—beards and wearing pants above the ankle. Rafiq, being “more Muslim” or a *hujur*—a term used for practicing Muslims who regularly wear attire considered Islamic and have some basic religious training—was another easy target of this body profiling and criminalization, as he was arrested a week later from his house. Furthermore, the arrest of Basit had another motive: political. Like many others, it was because he was close to the (BNP-aligned) Mayor’s PS Babu, he claimed. These people were arrested as part of the manipulation of public perception and giving impunity to the real culprits, which has been the case in many other similar instances. This is evident in a statement published by BBC Bangla by a Hindu community leader on a 2013 incident in Pabna: “Senior party leaders who saved their own people contacted the administration and falsely implicated ordinary individuals in normal cases (*BBC Bangla* 2016).”

Was this the case in Cumilla too? Apart from local Muslims, most of my interlocutors from Hindu communities think so too. Pharmacist Prashad indicated that although he was not present during the incident, he heard everyone saying that to give impunity to

the real perpetrators, the police arrested ordinary Muslims, and “it’s been two years and no real justice has been served,” he lamented. A local jewelry shop owner, Deepak, 53, said that most of the people arrested in this case were arrested for political reasons. “Many of them I know personally, and I don’t believe they are behind the attacks. They are arrested because they do BNP politics,” he commented. Ramesh, who was most friendly and candid about his opinion during our conversation, held the same view:

The reality is that weaker people become the subject of oppression (*maar khay*) everywhere. Hindus are in Bangladesh; Muslims are in India. This has been the norm in the world. ... This was also the case during the trial (*bichar*). The people who are politically weak get arrested, and nothing happens to the people who are politically powerful.

Given the political culture—the widespread banality of political hooliganism at the local level and systematic repression at the state level—in Bangladesh, I find Ramesh’s comment pertinent. If we look at the decayed political culture in Bangladesh, it will be clear that the issue of power, oppression, and victimhood has much more to do with power dynamics and political identity than religious ones. According to Odhikar, there have been at least 2,369 documented extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh between 2009 and 2023.²¹ And when it comes to political violence, Odhikar reports that there have been at least 5,256 documented killings along with 218,977 injuries due to political hooliganism from 2001 to 2021.²² The lives of the people other than the beneficiaries of power have always been very cheap. And in this culture, attacks and violence unleashed against minorities—not only ethnic or religious, but more importantly, political ones—by the political elites and goons have become, unfortunately, very common and banal. Moreover, orchestrating such violence against religious minorities, unlike political minorities, I would like to argue, works a double-edged sword for the ruling political leaders and the state, as they can use these incidents to displace blame on political opponents and Islamists, and then

²¹ This is the number I have combined from Annual reports published by Odhikar. All the links to original report files can be found here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1u1blNn0AHtRyuWfoRJPUZKUpwIo6aVdVELXsT5EXZqo/edit?usp=drive_link

²² The report can be accessed here: https://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Political_2001-2021.pdf

the state can legitimize its political repression using this excuse. In this sense, in politically motivated anti-Hindu violence, people from both Hindu and Muslim communities become victims. As one group becomes collateral damage, the other becomes the legal victims of the state, and in this process, the state and political elites become the ultimate beneficiaries of such incidents.²³ And political elites exploit both security agencies and existing laws to their benefit and get impunity in most cases. And here another question becomes relevant: as the public security forces become hyperactive in targeting and arresting people in the post-violence period, what role do the state, administration, and security forces themselves play during such incidents?

There have always been questions, although not dominantly, regarding the role of law enforcement agencies during communal conflict in Bangladesh. There are occasional news reports on the passive role of police during such attacks, citing local victims. However, how was the situation in Cumilla that day? They were very hyper-active when it came to arresting suspects and torturing them. But what was their response when the incidents were unfolding? Let's hear from eyewitnesses and locals. Rafiq explained the situation in great detail:

After the fajr [pre-dawn Islamic prayer], I came out a bit late from the masjid and heard people saying [a copy of] the Qur'ān was found at the Dighir par puja mondog. So, I went there and saw a crowd already there. All of them were local people from both communities. The police had not arrived at that point. Also, no politicians were there except Babu bhai (PS of the mayor). There was tension among the people. The police came around half an hour later, around 8 am. Some people were asking for a proper investigation and punishment of the person who put the Qur'ān there and demanding the puja be stopped. The Qur'ān was still there, so Babu bhai and we were asking the police to remove the Qur'ān and assure the crowd that it didn't get out of control. More crowds were gathering there. However, the police were waiting for the mayor, the DC, and other [government] officers to come and didn't remove the Qur'ān until 10 am. When they arrived, a Hindu police inspector removed the Qur'ān from the lap of the idol. And he didn't hand it over with proper respect, as he kind of tossed it to another officer. And it made the people very angry and agitated there. To frighten the crowd, another inspector from DB [Detective Branch] fired an empty shot, and it made people more agitated. Then they left. ... And around 11 am, a group of young people came and attacked the makeshift temple. Some angry people already there also joined them. However, the police arrived late and didn't intervene. But later, they only arrested some people, as if they were waiting for the attack to finish so that they could arrest some people.

²³ This is not to deny that there are religious dimensions to these conflicts. We will discuss this aspect in the next section of this chapter.

Ramesh also confirmed that the police and administration were greatly responsible for the incident getting out of control. “Had they been sincere, they could have controlled the crowd and handled the situation quite peacefully. They didn’t intervene when young people were attacking. ... The police were also not willing to control the situation,” he explained. Saha (48), a member of the puja organizing committee that year, also blamed the police and administration for playing a passive role. Some media outlets reported, citing locals and various temple committee members, that the police did not arrive at the scenes on time despite repeated calls for help, and when they did arrive, they failed to intervene to stop the attacking mobs (Ontu 2021).

The police play a passive role when an incident unfolds but go wild while “witch hunting.” As seen in most cases, the police or other investigation units are not very active in closing those trails, and many cases go for years without a final verdict. Why is this the case? As Brass (2006, 5) notes, in cases of communal conflict, “when successful, as it most often is, the principal beneficiaries of this process of blame displacement are the government and its political leaders, under whose watch such violence occurs.” But how do the police and the state benefit from such incidents in Bangladesh? First of all, delaying the cases in most instances gives impunity to the real criminals. The longer a case drags on without a proper trial, the more likely the true perpetrators are to escape accountability. This delay creates a smokescreen that benefits those in power, as the prolonged investigation process diverts attention from their involvement and gradually diminishes public interest and outrage. Additionally, anyone familiar with the Bangladesh police knows that an arrest often means an opportunity for a handsome amount of money for them. By arresting random people as suspects, they benefit financially through various means, including bribes and other forms of financial extortion. Arresting people is a revenue-generating exercise for the police rather than a pursuit of justice. This corrupt practice undermines the integrity of law enforcement and perpetuates a cycle of injustice for the falsely accused individuals. Moreover, arresting some “communal terrorists” also works as a PR boost for the state as a force against extremism and terror, both regionally and internationally, especially in the post-9/11 context. These counter-offensive measures provide the government with additional opportunities, as the AL regime garners support from the India- and US-led axis on the grounds of combating terrorism and religious extremism (Rahman, M. 2019).

This counter-terrorism narrative is also used strategically to suppress dissent and eliminate political threats under the guise of maintaining national security. As a result, they can exercise systemic violence on opponents, further consolidating their power. This process also strengthens the ruling party's status as champions of minorities, painting their opponents and Islamists as communal and terrorist. Positioning themselves as protectors of minority rights also helps them garner further support from international audiences concerned with human rights and religious freedom. This dichotomy between the "protectors" and the "threats" is carefully constructed and maintained through media narratives and public discourse.

The politics of criminalization, the role of law enforcement during incidents, and the systemic violence unleashed by the state all point to a broader strategy of maintaining power and control. The victims, both Hindu and Muslim, become pawns in this game, suffering the consequences of a decayed political culture where power dynamics, rather than justice or truth, dictate the outcomes. This complex interplay of political maneuvering, corruption, and strategic narrative-building underscores the deeply rooted problems within Bangladesh's state apparatus and reflects a model of governance that prioritizes the retention of power over genuine democratic principles, justice, and human lives. Asaduz Zaman, a young intellectual and political commentator on social media who writes about religion, politics, and history, eloquently articulated the connection between the persistence of communal tensions and the presence of a kleptocratic regime in the following manner:

The Awami League has successfully identified Bangladeshi people's feeble willpower generated by long years of colonial rule, starvation and powerlessness. They have both mobilized conservative and leftist campaigns whenever they saw the tide of the voter bases flow into either direction. We can identify this anti-ideology from their kleptocratic activities. Despite their PR posters, more Hindus got harmed in their rule and inter-religious tensions grew during their rule than the conservative Nationalist-Islamist alliance rule. Famous religious orator now blissfully deceased, Allama Sayeedi, won elections in a Hindu-majority province and still invoke support from them despite being portrayed by Awami League as an anti-Bangladesh Islamist terrorist. These factual observations indicate that, current government is more interested in consolidating the kleptocracy than actually solving the communal disorganization that exists in Bangladesh as a result of corruption and lack of a civil life.

4.3 Moral Injury and Hindutva Politics

“I can’t imagine anyone putting the Qur’ān in a temple. I am not a practicing Muslim (*namaz kalam niyomito porte parina*). But the Qur’ān is a red line for us. I can sacrifice my life for the Qur’ān,” Shahid, a local van driver, explained how sensitive the issue of Islam and Islamic symbols such as the Qur’ān is for him and admitted that he participated in the attack but didn’t harm anyone. He also expressed that he doesn’t have any issues with Hindus per se or with them observing their religious rituals, but defamation of the Qur’ān or Islam can’t be tolerated. When I pointed out that there are laws and law enforcement agencies to investigate and punish criminals, he shot back, “That’s the problem. The police are the main problem. They don’t do anything. There have been so many such incidents over the years that they never catch the real criminals.” He also pointed out that a policeman didn’t show proper respect to the Qur’ān and threatened the people, which further inflamed their anger. Basit shared a similar sentiment, saying that although he was not religious and used to take drugs, he would do anything for the Qur’ān. “It’s not a Hindu-Muslim issue. I didn’t do anything that day. But if I knew that Iqbal had put the Qur’ān up for money, I would beat him to death,” he said. This sentiment is, however, not unique; probably millions of other Muslims would express the same anger when there is a case of blasphemy or defamation of Islamic symbols, regardless of the religious identity of the person who commits it.

This is an issue that is not adequately addressed in the discourse of communalism in Bangladesh. Almost all cases of Hindu-Muslim conflict in Bangladesh involve some kind of provocation or “moral injury” against Islam, as Mahmood (2013) defines it. While it never justifies attacks on any community, it is important to analyze these contexts, especially how they are narrated in the media, because the media has its share in the persistence of communal conflict too. There is a tendency in dominant media narratives, as well as in academic discourse, to water down these moral injuries or deny them altogether. Many news reports, columns, or articles often deny these acts of defamation as “rumors” or “false accusations.” And this denial becomes problematic. Because all anti-religious provocations, real and rumored, have the power to inflame religious sensibilities, it’s not enough to just water them down; they need

to be addressed, and an environment must be created where they don't prevail. Just simple denial or belittling of its impact doesn't solve the problem.

So, what do religious leaders say and think about this anti-Islamic provocation? I had a detailed conversation with the imam of the local masjid in Digumbaritola, Kutub Uddin, who is also affiliated with Hefazat-e-Islam, about the communal conflicts in Bangladesh in general and the incident in Cumilla in particular. We talked about politics, anti-Islamic provocations, the role of states, and *'ulema*. When I asked the imam how he views people's reactions after any incident of anti-Islamic moral injury, he explained:

Look! No one attacks Hindu communities for observing their puja and religious beliefs. It never happens in Bangladesh. If you look at the incident that happened here [Cumilla], a Qur'an was put in a temple. It made me angry too. And in other incidents, they [Hindus] were insulting our beloved Prophet, Kaaba Sharif, or Islam. ... Islam is the most sensitive and valuable issue in Muslims' lives. So, when someone attacks or insults our Prophet or the Qur'an, it's natural that Muslims will get angry.

When asked if retaliating and attacking Hindu places of worship would solve the problem, he replied, "We know that attacking Hindus is not a solution. We, as an Islamic party [HI] and as imams, never call people to attack Hindus. ... But sometimes it's not easy to control them, especially when the administration is not sincere." He also emphasized the importance of community and religious leaders from other religions in preventing such provocative actions. He then questioned why such Hindu-Muslim conflicts were not common even 10–12 years ago, asking why they are prevalent now. He suggested I consult experts and noted that Muslims are frustrated with both the government and the overall situation due to its close ties with India. He referenced the government's crackdown on Hefazat in 2013, subsequent arrests of *'ulema* and ordinary Muslims, and the deaths of dozens who protested Modi's visit in 2021 (*New Age* 2021). These actions, combined with the persecution of Muslims in India, have fostered anti-India sentiment among Bangladeshi Muslims. Therefore, when Islam is perceived to be under attack by Hindus, this anger intensifies. This argument aligns with Žižek's (2008) theory that objective violence—subtle, implicit, and unrecognized within the system's normative state— can lead to an eruption of overt, recognizable subjective violence sometimes.

This led me to ask what Hindus think about it. I asked Prashad what he thought about the defamation. “People should have some common sense that no one, no Hindu, would put the Qur’ān there,” he replied. When I raised the issue of Muslim sensitivity and inquired about numerous instances of direct defamation of Islam or Islamic symbols by Hindus, he responded that there are bad people in every community. Then, when I asked if India’s hegemonic role and anti-Muslim policies had anything to do with supposed fears and dormant anger, he responded, “I think people are unnecessarily critical of the AL and India. Except for a few incidents, India has always been a friend and savior of the people of this country since the Liberation War. We should always be grateful to India and remain friends.”

This is the view that probably a very small number of people in Bangladesh would agree with in the current political scenario. At this point, I became interested in hearing some voices that could combine the perspectives of both communities, and Muslim converts (from Hinduism) seemed like a good option. I contacted two such people through a Dawah center in Dhaka and interviewed them. Abdullah, a marketing executive in a private company, had the following to say about the complex interplay of religious sensitivity, defamation, and current political culture:

Every religion has a sense of superiority. As a Hindu, I used to feel that Hinduism was better, and now as a Muslim, I think the opposite. And any attack on my religion would not only hurt me but also make me angry, which is normal. ... It is alarming that we now see many incidents of insulting the Prophet or our religion by Hindus and subsequent retaliation by the people in some cases. ... I think during the present AL rule, Hindus now feel much more politically superior than before. ... And there is also lawlessness in the political culture. As a result, no one with political backing is punished, but others, especially *‘ulema* and politically active Muslims, are persecuted. So, many take advantage of these loopholes. I think this political culture needs to change so that everyone can live in peace and security.

To gain a different perspective, from people who are vocal against growing Hindutva and Islamophobia in Bangladesh, I asked Zaman about how the politics of provoking Muslims contribute to the complexity of communal tensions in Bangladesh and why he thinks the media often dismisses these issues as rumors. He explained how the cases of defamation of Islam and the media’s role in watering them down to get away with their singular narrative are related to broader historical developments:

While many, if not all, anti-Hindu agitations can be reduced to such socio-cultural complexities, many atrocities are committed against the Muslims in Bangladesh simply because of their Muslimness — case in point is your issue of defamation against the Prophet SAWS. Such unprovoked insults and crimes against Muslims are interpreted in the media as freedom of speech and quest for enlightenment whereas

the Casteist Hindu (a colonial neologism) cannot be contested for any of their separatist and anti-national sentiments. Any sovereign nation and country would not tolerate any separatist ideologies which advocate for uniting with a foreign country against its members or citizens. Media constantly brings up this “Muslim = foreigner” narrative since it desensitizes the cultural landscape against any anti-Muslim violence which helps establish the neocolonial aspirations of India and other interests.

Zaman further elaborated on the religio-political dynamics of communal tensions, providing a deeper and more critical insight into how these complex factors interweave to shape the current landscape. His observations highlight the intricate connections between national identity, historical narratives, and contemporary political maneuvers:

For any organized observer, the issue of communal violence in Bangladesh, and the broader Bengal, cannot be reduced to just 'anti-Hindu' anxieties. In fact, the birth of Bangladesh as a nation-state clearly involved a detachment from the Pan-Muslim Pakistanism to a broader Nehruvian Nationalism. Muslim-identifying people who fought for Sheikh Mujib and Indira Gandhi to break away from Pakistan formed the new Bangladesh administration and its cultural ethnogenesis. ... If we have to reduce the whole thing into religious intolerance, for argument's sake, with a deeper look we observe that they emerge from border clashes, economic abuse, and bad diplomacy from neighboring countries. Most Bangladeshis would be at peace if they had a benevolent neighbor who doesn't kill innocent teenage girls, or prevent water from a dam, and a government who ensures basic amenities for its citizens with care and devotion. These deeper resentments are highly susceptible to political manipulation and media brainwashing from hostile nation-states who have an axe to grind with a powerful Bangladesh with Muslims (the majority of the country) supervising the affairs for its people.

Mohammad Zubair, another convert now working with a Dawah center, provided further insight into why some Hindus and political commentators fail to acknowledge India's role. In response to my question, he said:

It's normal for Hindu communities to be reluctant to see any indirect connection with India's political influence. As a Hindu, I always perceived India not only as a friend but as a true home. This perception led me to overlook Indian oppression until I attended university, where I became closer to the views of my Muslim friends and eventually converted to Islam.

To explore the role of Hindutva politics and its impact on communal tensions further, I also reached out to Rahman, another political commentator on social media who writes about power, politics, and Hindutva hegemony in Bangladesh. Rahman highlighted the influence of politics and hegemony in escalating communal tensions, noting that despite the present government's secular and pro-India stance, it has failed to prevent such conflicts. He pointed out that political aspects play a significant role, with certain parties benefiting from these conflicts. And his opinion on the issues of defamation, public anger, and politics is worth quoting at length:

To comprehensively understand public reactions to cases of defamation or blasphemy, it is imperative to examine the underlying sources of the resulting anger, which clearly embodies a religio-political dimension. Based on my observations, this anger stems from two main sources: First, the government's quasi-secular policies, ostensibly favoring India, are perceived as a proxy endorsement of Hindutva ideologies that are antagonistic to Muslim interests. India is seen as an overbearing force, manipulating its influence through what is seen as a puppet government. This sentiment is exacerbated by contentious issues such as border killings and the systematic persecution of Muslims, culminating in a deep-seated resentment of India. This growing antipathy was manifested in the widespread anti-Modi protests in 2021 and the recent "India out" movement. Second, the rise of Hindutva poses a palpable threat to Muslim identity within the Bangladeshi political landscape. Particularly in academic settings, such as university campuses, there has been a notable trend where Hindus aligned with the Awami League or its affiliates, along with certain secular factions, have actively discriminated against Muslim students. These students are often stigmatized for practicing Islamic rituals or organizing religious activities, pejoratively branded as "fundamentalist" or associated with "shibir". This has fostered a simmering resentment against these secular and Hindu groups that, while often latent, is prone to activation. Consequently, when incidents of defamation of Islam by Hindus or other groups occur, this previously dormant anger is likely to become reactive, illustrating the complex interplay of identity politics and religious tensions in the region.

Rahman's argument would be relatable to most people who follow the current political developments in Bangladesh closely. There have been numerous cases of criminalization, violence, physical attacks, legal harassment, and even murders using tags like fundamentalist (*moulobadi*) and Shibir. During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan 2024, a group of Dhaka University students were attacked for organizing an Islamic seminar on Ramadan by Chhatra League (BCL) goons. Immediately after those attacks, a BCL leader justified these attacks, claiming they were fundamentalists and Shibirs. Although this was another incident of regular political repression, there was a particular dimension that created further public anger on social media. On the Facebook post of that BCL leader justifying the attacks, hundreds of other goons supported him, commenting, "*Moulobader astana, ei Banglay hobena*" (Fundamentalism has no place in this Bengal)—a popular slogan used to criminalize Islamists (see figure 4.3 below). Most of these commenters were from the Hindu community, which caused significant public anger. Interestingly, these slogans resemble popular Islamophobic slurs in most non-Muslim countries in the West as well as in India. In another event, after the murder of two Muslim construction workers by Hindu mobs in Faridpur, a leader of Hindu Shecchashebok Mohajot threatened Muslims on Facebook, writing, "Four mullahs have been eliminated in Faridpur, and much more is going to happen soon. Sanatanis, get ready. Preparation started with Faridpur. Jai Shri Ram." He was later arrested by the police (*Daily Inqilab* 2024c).

Public anger towards India and the current AL regime also arises from India's extensive influence and intervention in Bangladesh's political, cultural, and economic spheres, with the AL regime perceived as facilitating these interventions. Economically, despite approximately 2.6 million unemployed individuals in Bangladesh, it is reported that around 400 thousand Indians are working illegally in the country, annually remitting approximately 5 billion dollars back to India (*Kaler Kantho* 2020; *Deutsche Welle* 2024). The employment of Indian nationals in high government positions has also sparked significant debate and concern within the ruling party (*Jugantor* 2019). Culturally, the integration of Hindutva elements and narratives into the national school curriculum has ignited considerable outrage. For instance, high school history books now promote the concept of "Akhand Bharat" (Undivided India) (Rahman, Md. 2024), and the class six Studies of Islam textbook includes descriptions and images of Hindu deities (Noor 2024). On a socio-political level, the proliferation and influence of Hindu organizations such as Iskcon have been increasing, with these groups promoting Hindutva values under the guise of charity. There have been multiple instances where Iskcon members have attacked local mosques and disrupted prayers (Ahmed, M. 2016).

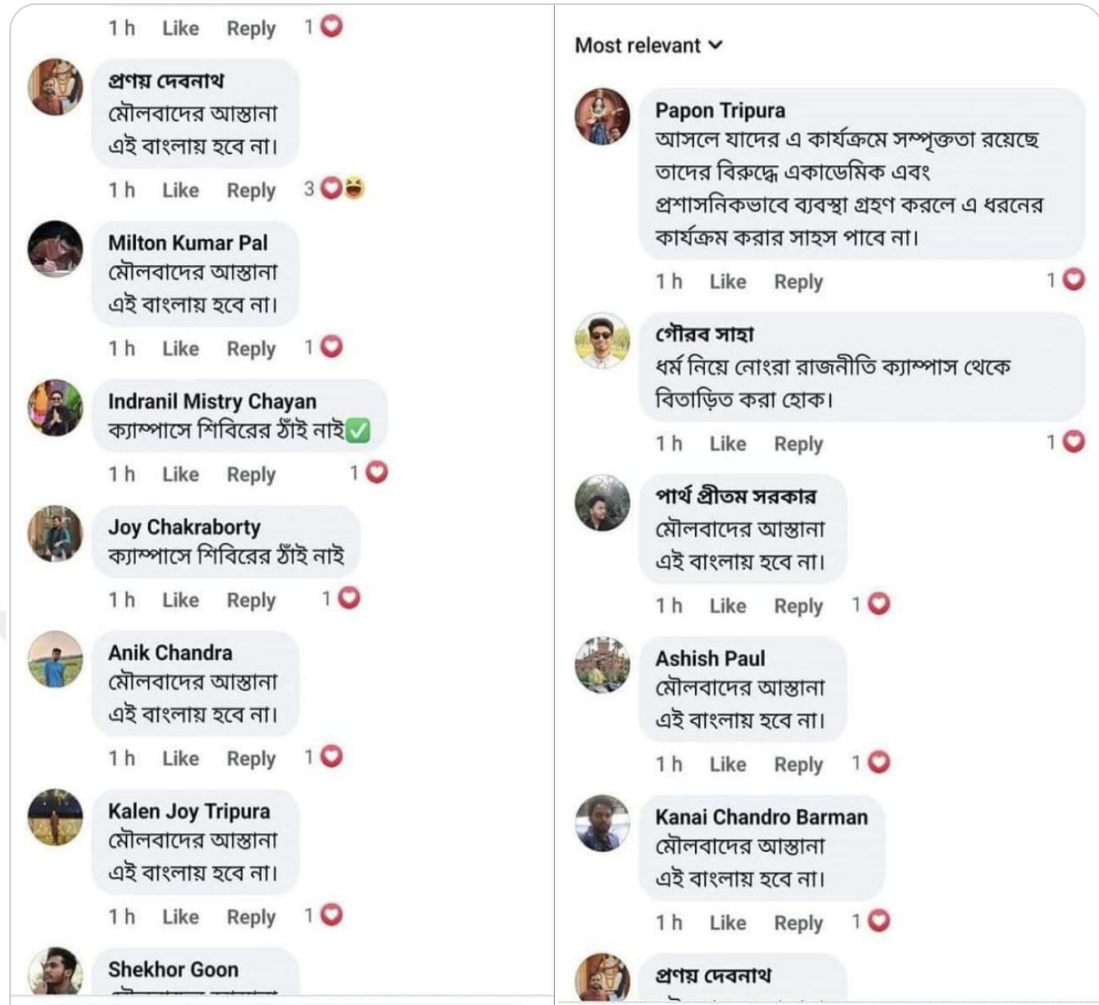


Figure 4.3 A screenshot of the comments made by Hindu BCL members on a facebook post that caused much anger on Facebook.²⁴

These scenarios challenge the prevailing narrative that portrays Muslims solely as communalists and highlight the hypocritical nature of media politics. The incidents reveal the double standards that media outlets often employ when reporting on communal violence and political repression. When Muslims engage in any form of resistance or reaction, they are swiftly labeled as fundamentalists, extremists, and communalists. In contrast, similar or even more severe actions by individuals from other communities, particularly the Hindu community, are frequently downplayed or

²⁴ The photo was taken from https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid026xvGDn46EkbgWRJMJo1X9yqoNkNGSQc94ba89s9e7Nwkw5mqhapFbXPhDihbQKGl&id=100006102767668

rationalized under the pretense of preserving secularism and combating fundamentalism. Moreover, the media and prevailing narratives often overlook the criminalization of Muslim identity and the rising threat posed by Hindutva political expressions, thus misrepresenting the complex dynamics of inter-communal tensions. Paul Brass emphasizes the importance of exposing these dynamics, advising researchers to “expose to view the dynamics of violence” (Brass 2006, 2) and be cognizant of the politics of blame displacement. Additionally, these political developments underscore a growing public discontent with both India and the AL, fostering a sense of alienation among Muslims. This mounting frustration and alienation can sometimes escalate into communal tensions and conflicts.

In conclusion, this analysis of the Cumilla incident and its aftermath aimed to challenge the reifying narrative that often characterizes such events as mere communal violence. This analysis shows that the dynamics are multilayered and extend beyond simple religious conflicts; they are religio-political, transcending local and international boundaries. It also revealed a complex interplay of moral injury, religious sensitivities, and political dynamics in such conflicts. The deep-seated emotional responses to perceived defamation of Islamic symbols, as highlighted by individuals like Shahid and Basit, underscore the significant role that moral injury plays in escalating communal tensions. The politics of narrativization, which often involve the denial or minimization of these provocations in media narratives, further exacerbates the problem by failing to address the genuine grievances of the affected community. This leads to a cycle of anger and retaliation, which is often exploited by political actors for their own gain. The narratives from religious leaders like Kutub Uddin and the perspectives of individuals from both Muslim and Hindu communities reveal a need for a more comprehensive and respectful approach to handling such incidents.

Moreover, the broader political context, particularly the influence of Hindutva politics and India’s role, cannot also be overlooked. The anti-Muslim rhetoric and persecution of Muslims in India contribute to a heightened sense of alienation among Bangladeshi Muslims, fueling tensions, often dormant if not explicit, among religious communities. The perception of the Bangladeshi government’s close ties with India further complicates the situation, as it is seen as complicit in broader anti-Muslim agendas. The discussions with converts like Abdullah and commentators like Zaman and

Rahman illustrate how these dynamics lead to both communal violence and state repression. All these multi-layered dynamics often help create a fertile ground for inter-communal tensions, which can then be exploited by various stakeholders through mechanisms such as the politics of narrativization, criminalization, and blame displacement, and together produces reifying narratives of communal violence shaped by Hindu Orientalist discourse. Then, in the following phases, systemic and symbolic violence are employed to control the narrative and target specific groups. To address these issues effectively, there must be a concerted effort to recognize and respect religious sensitivities, produce balanced and more objective media narratives, and address the political factors that contribute to inter-communal conflict. Only through such a comprehensive approach with socio-political as well as religious understanding, rather than creating a mere “false sense of urgency” (Žižek 2008, 6), can one contribute to reducing the likelihood of future incidents of communal violence.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

I began this dissertation entitled “Beyond the Banality of Labels: Examining the Narratives and Realities of Communal Violence in Bangladesh”²⁵ with three interlocking foundational questions: First, do the incidents labeled as communal violence in media and intellectual discourses, often framed as purely religious anti-Hindu violence, accurately reflect the actual events? Second, why is there a surge in inter-communal conflict recently in Bangladesh, especially under the current Awami League (AL) regime, which self-fashions itself as secular, non-communal, and a champion of minority rights? And third, what role does the state—which is secular in nature and hence duty bound to protect all minorities—play during and after incidents of communal violence, a question largely unexplored in the context of Bangladesh?

The introductory chapter was opened with a vignette from a recent case of communal violence in Bangladesh, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of the narrative of communalism in Bangladesh as well as the global politics of narrativization surrounding Islam and Muslims. In this politics of narrativization, a singular, reductionist narrative is advanced, simplifying the complex issues of communalism through a solely religious lens. I then briefly delineated the impoverished state of conventional wisdom on this topic within the Bangladeshi intelligentsia, highlighting the theoretical and empirical gaps and biases that pervade current understanding.

²⁵ I use the term “banality” from Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil,” which argues that ordinary individuals can commit atrocities by conforming to societal norms without critical reflection, thus normalizing such actions (Arendt, 1964). In Bangladeshi media and intellectual discourse, Muslims are frequently labeled as communalists, fundamentalists, and radicals to the point that it no longer seems evil. This repetitive labeling, often reproducing Hindu Orientalist discourse, reflects a lack of critical thinking and understanding of different perspectives, aligning with Arendt’s idea that thoughtlessness can perpetuate evil (Fry, 2015). Extending Fry’s interpretation, my argument is that the current totalitarian political culture also facilitates this banality of thoughtlessness, producing anti-Muslim/Islamist narratives that allow those in power to justify their continued repressive practices against Muslims through these unexamined labels.

Following these opening arguments, I methodically outlined the research questions that guided the study. Along with the three primary questions mentioned above, I posed several supplementary inquiries that not only paved the way for a thorough reevaluation of the dominant discourse surrounding communal conflicts in Bangladesh but also promoted a new, holistic anthropological understanding of the topic that contextualizes socio-religious aspects along with local, national, and transnational political dynamics.

The core argument of the introductory chapter challenges the prevailing narratives and conventional wisdom—from both theoretical and empirical perspectives—that often oversimplify the causes and nature of communal conflicts. It discussed the historical background of intercommunal tensions as a legacy of the colonial era, when British rulers strategically fomented divisions between Hindu and Muslim communities. This policy of divide and rule not only facilitated British control but also left a lasting impact on the region's socio-political fabric, a tension that has resurfaced in Bangladesh in recent times, often perpetuated and exploited by politicians to serve their interests.

I critiqued the methodological and theoretical problems present in the dominant narrative of communalism and demonstrated how the dominant singular narrative is deeply intertwined with three epistemic traditions: British colonial discourse, Hindu Orientalism, and post-9/11 global war on terror narratives. Theoretically, I argued how this reifying narrative, which associates communalism exclusively with Islam, is produced in a broader politics of narrativization that aims to grant impunity to actors like secularism and the state. I also discussed how the term “communalism” itself is deployed as a political tool by the political elite for power struggles. Briefly pointing to empirical reality, I highlighted how communal conflict is often supra-religious and is politically exploited (and sometimes engineered) as a tool for blame games and political persecution.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I revisited the issue of majority Muslim nationalism, which is often blamed for anti-minority repression in Bangladesh. By engaging with the debate surrounding nationalism, identity, and religion, I explained

how the notion of majoritarian Muslim nationalism in Bangladesh is far from straightforward and is unsatisfactory in the current political setting. Through a genealogical examination of Bengali nationalism—the guiding ideology of the current political setting—I demonstrated how Islam has consistently been marginalized from its nationalistic imagination, leading to the alienation of Muslims in this political setting. Therefore, the question of majority Muslim violence, which focuses solely on the numerical majority while ignoring the political arrangements, is inherently contradictory.

In the second chapter titled “Methodology and Field Experience”, I provided a comprehensive description of the research methodologies and field experiences that formed the foundation of my study. I specifically focused on the extended case method developed by Max Gluckman, elucidating the rationale and instrumentality of selecting this approach for studying communal violence. The extended case method goes beyond the structural-functionalism and the micro-level focus of traditional ethnography, allowing for the integration of theoretical insights and broader social, political, and economic contexts to form a more holistic understanding. This method also facilitated textual analysis, through which I examined the portrayal of communal violence in the media and its significant impact on public perception and discourse.

During my discussion of ethnographic fieldwork, I elaborated on my immersive experiences, emphasizing direct community engagement and the comprehensive observations this approach enabled. I also confronted the substantial challenges and complexities encountered during fieldwork, primarily due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the oppressive political culture in Bangladesh. In this context, where Islam and Muslim lives are heavily securitized, state mechanisms frequently instill fear among the population. I discussed how this culture of fear, exacerbated by post-9/11 global security discourses, has contributed to the criminalization of Muslim identity and portrayed the state as a police state, making the fieldwork especially challenging. Additionally, I provided a detailed rationale for my choice of specific field sites, interlocutors, and timelines, ensuring that the study encompassed a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

I critically engaged with the existing literature on communal violence in Bangladesh, juxtaposing it with various academic approaches and broader studies on the subject, in the third chapter titled “Exploring the Narratives of Communalism: Interdiscursivity and Anti-Islamism in Literature.” This chapter served as a comprehensive examination of the literature and prevailing wisdom on communalism in Bangladesh. My goal was to uncover the complex and interlocking theoretical issues that narratives grapple with, including the vague definitions and classifications of communalism; the tendency to interpret communal violence primarily through a religious lens, especially focusing on Islam, which absolves the state and secular political groups while ignoring violence against Muslims; and the neglect of legally persecuted victims following such incidents. Engaging with other literature and theoretical underpinnings, I explored how communal discourse is intertwined with colonial discourse, Hindu Orientalism, and the Bengali Renaissance. I critiqued how these traditions collectively propagate a singular narrative that portrays Muslims as perpetual antagonists and contributes to the politics of criminalizing Muslim subjectivity, sensibility, and imagery.

I also detailed how the study of communalism often champions a reductionist narrative that frames communal violence primarily in religious, specifically Islamic, terms. This oversimplification neglects the complex socio-political dynamics that contribute to such conflicts. I further unpacked how the politics of narrativization, which involves selective presentation and interpretation of events, plays a critical role in perpetuating this distorted perspective. This reductionist approach fails to capture the multifaceted nature of communal conflicts, thereby hampering efforts to understand and address the underlying issues. The ambiguity in defining communal violence and the lack of comprehensive empirical data further complicate the discourse. Studies of communalism in Bangladesh often lack a comprehensive approach, with historical entanglements with colonial narratives, Hindu Orientalism, and the influence of the global war on terror also contributing to the reification of communal violence as inherently linked to Islam. This reification serves political purposes, allowing the state and other secular entities to escape scrutiny for their role in perpetuating violence and discrimination.

In the fourth chapter, “Revisiting the Myth: Communal Muslims, The Savior Awami League and The Sincere State,” which served as the foundation for this study’s

ethnographic findings, I critically examined the evidence gathered through interviews with local residents from both Hindu and Muslim communities, victims, and alleged perpetrators of the 2021 communal attacks in Cumilla. This analysis challenged the commonly held portrayals of Hindus as non-communal and the Awami League as protectors of Hindu communities, juxtaposing these portrayals with their actual roles in political oppression. I also examined the role of the state in these incidents, particularly within the context of the global war on terror discourse, and discussed how communal violence is often misrepresented as merely socio-political violence to serve state interests.

In the first section of this chapter, I critically examined the media narratives surrounding the 2021 Cumilla incident against firsthand accounts from local Hindus and Muslims. This comparison revealed a pattern of organized systems of communal conflict, the politics of blame displacement, narrative control, and criminalization. Contrary to conventional wisdom, local interlocutors suggested that the incident was a pre-planned, engineered event by local political elites to shift blame onto political opponents. Further analysis of media narratives and news reports on other incidents revealed that, despite evidence and eyewitness accounts, the media often produce narratives that blame Islamists and ordinary Muslims, exonerating the political dynamics of the event and granting impunity to political elites.

The second section investigated the role of administration and law enforcement agencies during and after the incidents of communal violence. Through accounts from eyewitnesses, I explored how these actors played passive roles during the actual violence but subsequently engaged in a witch-hunt, arbitrarily arresting ordinary people, predominantly Islamists and political opponents. This section also revealed how the politics of narrativization and criminalization facilitated this witch-hunt process and exonerated the actual perpetrators. Additionally, it focused on the often-overlooked victims of communal violence, including political opponents, particularly Islamists, and ordinary Muslims who have been unfairly victimized, often due to their Muslim symbols.

In the final section, I attempted to unearth the underlying causes and background behind inter-communal tensions that sometimes lead to violence. Anti-Islamic hate

speech, or moral injuries against Islam, often play a crucial role in exacerbating such tensions among Muslims, which are later exploited by political elites for personal and political gain. I also explored broader geopolitical dynamics that influence communal violence, such as Hindutva oppression, Indian hegemony, and the resultant anti-Indian sentiment and sense of alienation among Muslims, which can often lead to dormant inter-communal tensions. These factors were critical to understanding the complex interplay of local and international politics and hegemonic epistemic traditions that play a crucial role in exacerbating communal tensions in Bangladesh. I also demonstrated how the political culture, including the state, often exacerbates conflicts rather than sincerely trying to contain them.

In conclusion, this study argues that in studying communal violence, it is important to recognize that the state, secular political actors, and the broader political culture share responsibility for perpetuating communal tensions. Yet these elements are often underexplored in academic studies, which tend to focus on religious dimensions to the exclusion of political and structural factors. This selective focus not only distorts the understanding of communal violence but also perpetuates colonial practices that denigrate Islam. A comprehensive approach to the study of communalism must address these biases and limitations. It requires a new holistic anthropological examination that integrates socio-religious, political, and historical perspectives, as suggested by Ahmad (2022). It should also examine further mechanisms of instrumentalism by political elites (Brass 1991), blame shifting, control of meaning (Brass 2006), the role of the state, and the criminalization of Muslim communities in the post-conflict period, as suggested by scholars like Ludden (1996) and Mahmood (2013). This approach is consistent with the theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani, who argue for understanding political violence within its broader historical and socio-political contexts.

The politics of narrativization, reinforced by a broader epistemic-political framework led by Hindu Orientalism, alongside blame-shifting mechanisms, the role of the state, inter-communal tensions resulting from anti-Islam hate speech, and the criminalization of Muslims, are central themes that emerged from this dissertation. The research highlighted how these factors contribute to the perpetuation of communal tensions and the marginalization of Muslim communities. The role of the state in facilitating or

exacerbating violence through passive or active involvement, as well as its manipulation of communal narratives for political gain, is particularly important. The study also underscored the importance of understanding the socio-political context in which communal violence occurs, including the historical legacies of colonialism and the contemporary influence of global political dynamics. By providing a tentative timeline of major incidents of communal conflict in Bangladesh, the study also offered food for thought and challenged dominant narratives that have often portrayed secular entities as the protectors and saviors of minority groups. Contrary to this narrative, the timeline suggested a significant increase in such incidents in the last twelve years, despite the fact that a secular party with an ideology promising non-communalism was in power during this period.

The role of civil society in mitigating communal tensions, as suggested by scholars like Ashutosh Varshney (2002), is crucial but insufficient on its own, especially when it is part of a political settlement. The effectiveness of civil society interventions is limited by the broader epistemological, political structural issues and biases that underpin communal violence. For example, human rights organizations often shift blame to Islamists and recommend banning religion-based politics to curb communal violence, but this overlooks the fact that secular political actors often orchestrate such violence for their own gain. This limitation is evident in the recommendations of organizations such as the Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB), which in its report on the Cumilla incident recommended a total ban on all religion-based politics along with strict enforcement of secularism, even though the violence was orchestrated by secular political actors.²⁶

Blaming Islam for the plight of minorities without addressing the underlying issues does not help the situation. Instead, a sincere and new holistic approach is needed that takes into account the socio-political and historical contexts of communal conflicts. This includes acknowledging the role of political elites in instigating and perpetuating

²⁶ The report later published by Ain O Salish Kendra can be accessed here: <https://www.askbd.org/ask/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Attack-on-the-Hindu-Community-28-Aug.pdf>

violence, the impact of state policies on marginalized communities, and the broader regional dynamics that influence local conflicts. Utilizing Cumilla as a focal case study, this dissertation aimed to provide new insights into the complex dynamics of communalism. However, it is important to recognize that this study had inherent limitations in its scope and nature. While the extended case method facilitated the integration of both empirical and theoretical insights, offering a generalized understanding of the dynamics of communal violence, the research was predominantly based on a single site and primarily focused on analyzing contemporary media narratives. This approach was further constrained by a scarcity of empirical data on the topic. Additionally, the study did not extend into a historical and genealogical exploration of other cases of communal violence in Bangladesh, which could have provided a more robust context.

Recognizing these limitations, the study underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive approach to understanding communalism in Bangladesh. Future research should expand to include multiple sites and embrace a broader spectrum of perspectives to construct a more detailed and encompassing picture of communal violence in the country. In light of these findings, this dissertation advocates for a deeper exploration of communalism that challenges prevailing narratives and critically examines the interplay of power, politics, and religious sensitivities. By acknowledging the complexity of communal violence and the need for a holistic approach, this research highlights the importance of addressing these issues in a manner that fully considers the intricate socio-political fabric of Bangladesh. This approach not only deepens our understanding but also aids in formulating more effective strategies to mitigate and resolve communal tensions. The findings call for a re-evaluation of how communal violence is narrated, interpreted, and addressed, and advocate for policies and interventions that take into account the broader socio-political context and aim to mitigate the underlying causes of conflict. Only through such an approach can we move towards a more inclusive and just society in which communal tensions are effectively addressed and resolved.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ TÜRKÇE ÖZETİ

Bu çalışma, özellikle Bangladeş'teki Hindu-Müslüman şiddeti ile ilgili olarak, medyada ve akademideki adlandırma siyasetini eleştirel bir şekilde inceleyerek başlar. Çalışma, 18 Nisan 2024'te Panchapalli, Faridpur'da meydana gelen bir olayı tanımlayarak başlar. Bu olayda, iki Müslüman inşaat işçisi, Ashadul ve Ashraful, bir grup yerel Hindu tarafından bir tapınak idolünü ateşe vermekle haksız yere suçlanarak öldürülmüştür. Saldırının komünal niteliğine rağmen, ana akım medya bu durumu hafife almış ve çoğu zaman kurbanların ve faillerin dini kimliklerini göz ardı etmiştir. Birçok medya kuruluşu şiddeti "kalabalık linç" olarak adlandırmış ve komünal şiddet olarak tanımlamamıştır. Metin, bunu daha geniş bir seçici raporlama ve anlatı eleme modeline atıfla açıklamaktadır.

Müslüman kimliklerinin fail olduklarında vurgulandığı, mağdur olduklarında ise gizlendiği bu seçici çerçeveleme, hem Batı hem de Güney Asya medyasındaki daha geniş bir eğilimi yansıtıyor. Çalışma, Christchurch cami saldırıları gibi olayların Batı medyasında ele alınma şeklini, beyaz Hristiyan failin "terörist" olarak tanımlanmadığını ve Müslüman şüphelilerin sıklıkla "İslamcı terörist" olarak nitelendirildiğini örnek vermektedir. Benzer şekilde, Gazze çatışması bağlamında medya, Filistinli direnişçileri terörist olarak yaftalarken, İsrail güçlerinin eylemlerini önemsizleştirme eğilimindedir.

Bu önyargı, Güney Asya medyasındaki Hindu-Müslüman çatışmalarına dair anlatılara da yansır; Müslüman mağdurları içeren şiddet olayları hafife alınır veya göz ardı edilir ve "komünal şiddet" terimi ağırlıklı olarak İslam'la ilişkilendirilir. Faridpur olayı, medyanın, Müslüman mağdurları içeren olayları önemsizleştirmek için nasıl anlatılar oluşturduğunu ve siyaset tarafından nasıl etkilendiğini örneklemektedir. Metin, bu önyargıları eleştirir ve Bangladeş'teki komünalizm tartışmalarındaki akademik ve siyasi eksiklikleri vurgular. Çalışma, bu çatışmaları daha nüanslı bir şekilde anlamayı amaçlayarak medya temsillerini, akademik araştırmaları ve komünal şiddetin sosyo-politik dinamiklerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu araştırma ayrıca "komünalizm"

ve "komünel şiddet" gibi terimlerin kullanımını sorgular ve bu terimlerin siyasi sonuçları nedeniyle dikkatle yorumlanması gerektiğini belirtir.

Ardından Bangladeş'in demografik yapısı, sosyo-ekonomik durumu ve azınlıkların statüsüne dair kısa bir genel bakış sunulmaktadır. 2022 nüfus sayımına göre, Bangladeş'te yaklaşık 13.15 milyon Hindu, 1 milyon Budist ve 488.000 Hristiyan yaşamaktadır. Etnik azınlıklar ise yaklaşık 1,6 milyon kişiyi kapsamaktadır. 15 yaş ve üzeri nüfusta okuryazarlık oranı Hindu, Hristiyan ve Müslümanlar arasında sırasıyla %73,55, %72,55 ve %70,01'dir. Azınlıkların ekonomik durumu hakkında ayrıntılı resmi veri bulunmamaktadır, ancak bazı iddialar, Hinduların kamu kurumlarında fazladan temsil edildiğini öne sürmektedir. Awami League (AL) hükümeti döneminde kilit görevlere orantısız sayıda Hindu yetkilinin atandığı iddia edilmektedir.

Yaygın bir kanaate göre, Güney Asya'da komünalizm, Hindular ile Müslümanlar arasında düşmanlık yaratarak kontrolü sürdürmek amacıyla İngiliz sömürge yönetimi sırasında ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu sömürge politikası, birçok komünel şiddet olayına yol açmış ve 1947'de Hindistan'ın bölünmesi komünel gerilimleri hafifletememiştir. Özellikle Müslümanlara karşı olan komünel şiddet, Hindistan'ın bağımsızlığından sonra devam etmiş ve benzer eğilimler Bangladeş'te de ortaya çıkmıştır. Dini azınlıklar, özellikle Hindular, Bangladeş'te periyodik olarak şiddete maruz kalmaktadır. Buna rağmen, Bangladeş'te komünalizm üzerine sistematik akademik çalışma eksikliği vardır ve kamuoyu tartışmaları sıklıkla basitleştirilmiş, önyargılı anlatılara dayanır.

Hakim anlatılar, komünel çatışmaları, dini şevk ve milliyetçilik tarafından yönlendirilen Müslümanlar tarafından spontane bir Hindu karşıtı saldırganlık olarak tasvir etme eğilimindedir. Bu çerçeveleme, komünel şiddetin karmaşık dinamiklerini, devletin katılımını ve seküler siyasi aktörlerin rolünü göz ardı eder. Bangladeş'teki komünalizm kapsamlı kayıtların eksikliği ve verilerdeki tutarsızlıklar nedeniyle yeterince incelenememektedir ve bu da bu tür çatışmaların temel nedenlerinin ve iç işleyişlerinin daha derin bir şekilde anlaşılmasını engellemektedir.

Komünel şiddet tartışmalarındaki en büyük sorunlardan biri, bu terimin somutlaştırılmasıdır ve bu genellikle İslam ile sınırlandırılmaktadır. Siyasi hareketler

veya İslami uygulamaların kamusal görünümü gibi İslam'ın herhangi bir siyasi ifadesi komünalizm olarak etiketlenirken, diğer dini grupların benzer eylemleri etiketlenmez. Komünalizmin bu dar tanımı, siyasi İslam'ı dini köktencilik ve bazen terörizmle bir tutarak, Müslümanların komünel çatışmalara katılımını tartışmak için belirsiz ve politize edilmiş bir çerçeve yaratır.

Hefazat-e İslam (HI) gibi İslami siyasi hareketler, amaçları tam olarak anlaşılmadan sıklıkla militan ve komünal olarak damgalanır. Pakistan hareketi ve Müslüman Birliği siyaseti de benzer şekilde, sömürge Hindistan'daki komünalizmin başlıca nedenleri olarak tasvir edilir. Bangladeş'te Ramazan sırasında iftar düzenlemek gibi İslami uygulamaların kamusal görünümü bazen komünalizm eylemleri olarak yorumlanır ve bu da komünalizmin ağırlıklı olarak bir Müslüman sorunu olduğu fikrini pekiştirir.

Bangladeş'teki merkezci siyasi partiler, örneğin BNP ve Jatiya Parti, İslamcı gruplarla olan koalisyonları ve anayasaya İslami referansların dahil edilmesi nedeniyle sık sık komünalizmi teşvik etmekle suçlanır. AL gibi seküler partiler ise, komünal şiddete karışmış olmalarına rağmen, dini uyumun savunucuları olarak tasvir edilir. Komünalizm üzerine yapılan tartışmalar, seküler ve komünal siyasi güçler arasında bir ikilem yaratır ve seküler aktörleri şiddetten sorumlu tutmaktan muaf tutar.

Bir diğer önemli argüman, Bangladeş'in Müslüman çoğunluğunun, ülkenin İslami tarihiyle bağlantılı olan çoğunlukçu milliyetçilik aracılığıyla dini azınlıkları doğrudan baskı altına aldığıdır. Ancak, Bangladeş'te komünalizm üzerine yapılan ampirik çalışmalar nadirdir ve mevcut araştırmalar sıklıkla Hindu mağdurlara odaklanmakta, diğer azınlık grupları ve şiddetin faillerini göz ardı etmektedir. Bu seçici odaklanma, Bangladeş'teki komünalizmin çarpık bir şekilde anlaşılmasına yol açmakta ve etnik azınlıklar ile diğer marjinal toplulukların deneyimlerini gözden kaçırmaktadır.

Çalışmanın temel soruları açısından, araştırma Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddetin etrafındaki karmaşıklıklara odaklanmaktadır; bu konu genellikle baskın siyasi ve entelektüel anlatılar tarafından basitleştirilmektedir. Çalışma, komünal şiddeti sıklıkla yalnızca din temelli anti-Hindu şiddet olarak çerçeveleyen mevcut hegemonik söylemi hem teorik hem de ampirik perspektiflerle ele alarak sorgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Merkezi araştırma sorusu, komünal şiddet olarak adlandırılan olayların gerçekten yaşanan olayları yansıtır yansıtmadığı ya da bu olaylar ile medyada ve entelektüel söylemlerdeki tasvirleri arasında bir tutarsızlık olup olmadığıdır. Bu soruyu ele almak için çalışma, birkaç temel meseleyi inceleyecektir. Araştırma, elli yılı aşkın bir süredir seküler bir devlet ideolojisi ve kendini azınlık haklarının savunucusu ilan eden Awami League (AL) rejiminin uzun süren iktidarına rağmen, komünal şiddetin neden devam ettiğini araştıracaktır. Bu şiddetten kimlerin fayda sağladığını, sosyo-politik ve ekonomik sonuçları ile bölgesel ya da uluslararası siyasetin bu çatışmaları nasıl etkilediğini inceleyecektir.

Diğer önemli bir odak noktası, bu şiddet olaylarında devlet mekanizmalarının, idari organların ve özellikle iktidar partisinin rolüdür. Çalışma, bu olayların düşmanlığın kendiliğinden patlak vermesi mi yoksa siyasi ya da başka çıkarlar için organize edilen mekanizmaları mı içerdiğini sorgulayacaktır. Devletin, medyanın ve yerel politikacıların bu olaylardaki katılımını ve etkisini değerlendirecek ve bu çatışmaların çeşitli anlatılarda nasıl rasyonalize edildiğini ve temsil edildiğini inceleyecektir.

Araştırma, komünal şiddete dair kapsamlı resmi kayıtların eksikliğini, şiddet olaylarının (örneğin, isyanlar, kavgalar, pogromlar) kategorize edilmesini ve mağdurlar ile failerin bakış açılarını da inceleyecektir. Antropolojik bir yaklaşım benimseyerek, çalışma, komünal şiddetin temel nedenlerine ve dinamiklerine dair birinci elden bilgiler ve içgörüler elde etmeyi hedeflemektedir.

Ayrıca, araştırma özellikle AL rejimi altında komünal gerilimlerin devamlılığını ve tarihsel düşmanlıkların, mevcut siyasetin ya da devlet politikalarının bu çatışmaların yoğunlaşmasına katkıda bulunup bulunmadığını araştıracaktır. Žižek'in şiddet hakkındaki perspektifini de ele alarak, fark edilmeyen sistemik ve sembolik şiddetin daha belirgin, öznel şiddet patlaklarına yol açıp açmadığını inceleyecektir.

Çalışmanın Argüman bölümünde, Güney Asya'daki komünal şiddetin epistemik kökenleri ve bu şiddetin problematik doğası incelenmektedir; özellikle Bangladeş'te Müslümanların bu tür çatışmalarda sıklıkla birincil saldırganlar olarak tasvir edilmesi ele alınmaktadır. Analiz, bu önyargılı tasviri oluşturan üç temel epistemik geleneği

tanımlar: Britanya sömürge söylemi, Hindu milliyetçi epistemolojisi ve 11 Eylül sonrası küresel terörle mücadele (GOWT) anlatıları.

Britanya sömürge söylemi, Müslümanları ‘yabancı’ ve ‘şiddet yanlısı köktenciler’ olarak çerçeveleyip Hinduları ‘yerli’ ve ‘barışçıl’ olarak tasvir etmiştir. Bu karakterizasyon, sömürge yönetimini meşrulaştırmak ve komünal düşmanlıkları böl-yönet stratejisinin bir parçası olarak sürdürmek amacıyla kullanılmıştır. Sömürge anlatısı, İslam’ı Hindistan’a yabancı olarak konumlandırmış ve oryantalist bilgi üretimiyle komünalizmi kökleştirmiştir. Bu tarihsel önyargı, İslami referansların ve Müslüman öznelliklerinin sıklıkla komünal ve köktenci olarak etiklendiği, buna karşın Hinduizme benzer bir eleştirinin nadiren uygulandığı çağdaş söylemlerde devam etmektedir.

Sömürge sonrası Güney Asya’da, özellikle Bangladeş’te, bu sömürge mirası, Hindu milliyetçi epistemolojisi tarafından daha da pekiştirilmiştir. Burada Müslümanlar doğası gereği şiddet yanlısı ve komünal olarak tasvir edilirken, Hindular barışçıl milliyetçiler olarak betimlenmiştir. Bu tasvir, bu görüşleri sorgulayan revizyonist akademik çalışmaların ortaya çıkışına rağmen devam etmektedir. Bu anlatı, Bangladeş’te siyasal İslam’ı doğası gereği militan ve şiddet yanlısı olarak gösterecek şekilde uyarlanmış ve böylece terörle mücadele adı altında bu hareketlerin bastırılması meşrulaştırılmıştır.

11 Eylül sonrası küresel terörle mücadele, bu önyargıyı daha da güçlendirmiştir. İslam’ın güvenlik tehdidi olarak sunulması, tüm Müslümanların hoşgörüsüz, radikal ve şiddet yanlısı olarak genelleştirilmesine yol açmıştır. Bu anlatı, yalnızca milyonlarca Müslümanın ölümüyle sonuçlanan askeri müdahaleleri ve işgalleri meşrulaştırmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda Müslüman toplulukların güvenlikçi ve baskıcı bir şekilde ele alınmasını da pekiştirmiştir. Bangladeş’te bu küresel anlatı, Bengal milliyetçiliği savunucuları ve komünalizm araştırmacıları tarafından benimsenmiş ve siyasal İslam’ın doğası gereği şiddet yanlısı olduğu görüşü pekiştirilmiştir.

Çalışma, bu yerleşik söylemi birkaç nedenden dolayı eleştirmektedir. İlk olarak, sömürge anlatısının, organik komünal dinamikleri yansıtmak yerine, Britanya

yönetimini meşrulaştırmayı amaçlayan keyfi bir yapı olduğunu öne sürmektedir. İkinci olarak, komünal şiddetin yalnızca dini ve İslami olarak tasvir edilmesine karşı çıkararak, bunu Hindu oryantalizminden kaynaklanan bir epistemik şiddet olarak değerlendirir. Chatterji ve Jalal gibi akademisyenler, komünal ayaklanmaların sorumluluğunu Müslüman Birliği'ne yükleyen anlatıları eleştirmiş, diğerleri ise Mısır gibi seküler devletlerin nasıl yapısal olarak komünal gerilimleri sürdürdüğünü vurgulamıştır.

Ayrıca, komünal şiddetin anti-Hindu İslami saldırganlık olarak yeniden somutlaştırılması, daha geniş sosyo-politik ve ekonomik bağlamları göz ardı eder. Yerel güç mücadeleleri ve ekonomik saikler, komünal şiddete önemli katkılarda bulunur ve seküler kurumlar ile siyasi partiler, saldırıları kışkırtıklarına dair kanıtlar olmasına rağmen sıklıkla sorumluluktan muaf tutulur. Örneğin, Awami League'in Hindular ve diğer azınlıklara yönelik saldırıları kışkırttığına dair belgelenmiş vakalar bulunmaktadır; bu da azınlık haklarının koruyucusu olduğu iddiasına meydan okumaktadır.

Çalışma, komünal çatışmaların dini-politik bağlamlarını göz ardı eden hakim anlatıları da eleştirmektedir. Özellikle İslam, sıklıkla siyasetle iç içe geçmekte ve dini azınlıkları içeren olaylar, çeşitli aktörler tarafından siyasi kazanç sağlamak amacıyla manipüle edilebilmektedir. Bu manipülasyon, Müslümanların şiddetli tepkiler vermesine yol açan 'ahlaki yaralanmalar' olaylarını hafife alan veya görmezden gelen medya ve akademik söylemlerle daha da derinleşmektedir.

Çalışma, ayrıca 'komünalizm' teriminin siyasi bir silah olarak kullanıldığını ve net bir tanıma sahip olmadığını savunmaktadır. Bu belirsizlik, İslamcılığı komünalizm ile eş tutan seçici yorumlara yol açmaktadır. Bu belirsizlik, seküler politikacıların ve kanaat önderlerinin, Müslüman çıkarlarına dayanan siyasi İslam'ı gayrimeşru ilan etmelerine olanak tanımaktadır. Komünal şiddete dair kapsamlı ampirik verilerin eksikliği, tartışmaları daha da karmaşılaştırmakta ve raporlar genellikle sadece son olaylara odaklanmakta, tarihsel ve bağlamsal faktörler göz ardı edilmektedir.

Güney Asya'da, özellikle Bangladeş'teki komünalizmin incelenmesi, Hindistan'da gözlemlenenlere benzer bir dizi karmaşık meseleyi ortaya koymaktadır. Bu sorunlar

arasında organize saldırılar, kolluk kuvvetlerinin sorgulanabilir rolü, anlatı manipülasyonu, hukuki günah keçisi ilan etme ve suç yükleme yer almaktadır.

2021’de büyük komünal şiddetin yaşandığı Cumilla’da yapılan saha çalışması sırasında, hem Hindu hem de Müslüman sakinler, yerel Awami League liderlerinin ve onların işbirlikçilerinin şiddeti kışkırttığını iddia etmişlerdir. Mağdurlar ve iddia edilen faillele yapılan görüşmeler, saldırıların planlı olduğunu ve BNP’den bir siyasi muhalefet liderini hedef almak amacıyla yapıldığını ortaya koymuştur. Şiddet, Hindu topluluğuna zarar vermiş ve yüzlerce Müslümanın yargılanmasına neden olmuştur. Yerel halk, polisin zamanında harekete geçmemesi ve ardından cadı avına katılması nedeniyle öfke duymuştur. Bu duygu, soruşturma raporlarıyla doğrulanmıştır.

Görüşmeler, suçlamalarla gözaltına alınan bazı kişilerin fiziksel şiddet ve anlatsal marjinalizasyona maruz kaldığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Komünal şiddet üzerine baskın söylem, bu mağdurları genellikle görmezden gelir ve onların deneyimlerini tabu haline getirir. Tarihsel olarak, devletin komünal olaylara verdiği yanıtlar, olayların kendisinden daha fazla mağdur yaratmıştır. 2021’deki çatışmada polisin ateş açması, çoğunluğu Müslüman olan birçok ölümlle sonuçlanmıştır. Devletin sessizliği ve komünal şiddet anlatılarını manipüle etmesi, siyasi muhalifleri, özellikle İslamcılarını hedef almasına ve terörle mücadele söylemini kullanarak uluslararası destek kazanmasına olanak sağlamıştır.

Komünal şiddetle ilgili söylemlerde önemli bir çifte standart da gözlemlenmektedir. Hinduların organize şiddete katılımına ve Müslümanları suçlamak için kendi dini mekanlarını tahrip etmelerine dair kanıtlar olmasına rağmen, bu tür olaylar sıklıkla eksik raporlanmakta ya da göz ardı edilmektedir. Panchapalli olayı ve Hinduların Müslümanları suçlamak için kendi dini mekanlarını tahrip etmeleri buna örnektir. Baskın söylem, anti-Hindu şiddeti vurgularken, etnik azınlıkların karşılaştığı baskıyı ve siyasi şiddeti göz ardı etmektedir. Bu gruplar, devlet ve siyasi şiddetten daha fazla zarar görmekte, ancak medya ve akademik tartışmalarda daha az yer bulmaktadır.

Komünal gerilimlerin artmasında ulusal ve bölgesel siyasetin rolü yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Şiddetin antropolojik bir çalışması, yerel, bölgesel ve uluslararası siyaseti dikkate almalıdır. Cumilla olaylarına karışanlarla yapılan görüşmeler,

Müslümanlar arasında anti-Hindu duyguların, dini provokasyonlardan ve İslami uygulamaları ve sembolleri suç sayan seküler politikalardan kaynaklandığını ortaya koymuştur. Bu sistematik suç sayma ve bastırma, sembolik ve sistemik biçimleri de içeren nesnel şiddet olarak sınıflandırılabilir.

Hindutva kültürel ve siyasi hegemonyasının artması durumu daha da kötüleştirmektedir. Bangladeş Chhatra League tarafından Abrar'ın, Hindistan politikalarını eleştiren bir Facebook gönderisi nedeniyle öldürülmesi ve Modi karşıtı protestolara verilen şiddetli tepki, bu gerilimi daha da pekiştirmektedir. Ayrıca, hükümet pozisyonlarındaki Hindu yanlısı politikalar ve kayırmacılık algısı, Müslümanların dışlanmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Bu argüman iki ana noktayı vurgular: 1) Komünalizme dair eleştirel bir inceleme, anlatılar, iktidar, siyaset ve devlet tepkileri bağlamındaki daha geniş dinamiklerle ele alınmalıdır, azınlık topluluklarının siyaseti de dahil olmak üzere; 2) Anti-Hindu şiddetinin kendiliğinden gelişen İslami şiddet olarak tasviri basitleştirici olup, daha geniş bir anti-İslami anlatılaştırma siyasetinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Bunun yerine, sosyo-dini, yerel, bölgesel ve uluslararası faktörleri dikkate alarak bu çatışmayı anlamak için bütüncül bir antropolojik yaklaşım benimsenmelidir.

Çalışma, anti-Hindu şiddeti iki türe ayırır: 1) Siyasal elitlerin, siyasal İslam'ı veya muhalifleri hedef almak amacıyla, Hinduların tali zarar olarak ortaya çıktığı siyasi-ekonomik motivasyonlarla organize ettiği şiddet; 2) Müslümanların, algılanan ihlallere veya provokasyonlara tepki olarak gerçekleştirdiği ve sosyo-politik faktörlerle, özellikle Hindutva saldırganlığı ve seküler devlet politikaları ile daha da şiddetlenen reaksiyoner şiddet.

Giriş bölümünün bir sonraki kısmı, Bangladeş'teki komünalizm söyleminde yaygın olarak kullanılan 'çoğunlukçu Müslüman milliyetçiliği' kavramını ele alır. Bangladeş'teki çoğunlukçu Müslüman milliyetçiliği kavramı karmaşık ve tartışmalı bir konudur. Bazı yorumcular, Bangladeş'teki Hinduların marjinalleştirilmesinin, Müslümanların sayısal çoğunluğu ve İslam'ın devlet dini olmasından kaynaklandığını savunmaktadır. Bu faktörlerin, Hindulara yönelik dini şiddete katkıda bulunduğunu öne sürmektedirler. Ancak, bu yorum basit ve yetersiz olarak görülmektedir.

Bu görüşe karşı olan argüman üç yönlüdür. Birincisi, 2009'dan beri iktidarda olan Awami League (AL), Bengal milliyetçiliğini ve sekülerizmi teşvik ettiği için, Bangladeş'in bir Müslüman ulus-devlet olarak karakterizasyonu zayıflamıştır. Devletin Bengal milliyetçiliğine ve sekülerizme vurgu yapması, İslam'ın siyasi olarak baskın bir konuma sahip olmadığını göstermektedir. İkincisi, İslam hala anayasada devlet dini olarak kalmasına rağmen, 15. değişiklik 1972 anayasasında da yer alan sekülerizmi tekrar önsözüne yerleştirmiştir. Bu sekülerizm, AL'nin politikalarını yönlendirmektedir. Anayasada İslam'ın korunmasına devam edilmesi kararı, bazıları tarafından Müslüman hassasiyetleri incitmemek için stratejik bir hamle olarak görülmekte olup, İslam'ın siyasi önceliğine bir işaret olarak görülmemektedir. Üçüncüsü, bir topluluğa siyasi hakimiyet atfetmek, sadece sayısal çoğunluğa dayandırılarak, güç dinamikleri ve siyasi düzenlemeler dikkate alınmadan yetersizdir. Bengal milliyetçiliği üzerine kurulu ve Hindistan'ın hegemonik etkisi altındaki görünürde seküler bir devlet olan Bangladeş'te, çoğunlukçu Müslüman milliyetçiliği fikri sorunludur.

Ulus devlet inşası için bir araç olan Bengal milliyetçiliği, tarihsel olarak hem kapsayıcı hem de dışlayıcı bir işlev görmüştür. Milliyetçilik, etnisite, dil ve din gibi faktörlere dayalı hayali topluluklar oluştururken, genellikle 'ötekileri' dışlama sürecini de içerir. Bu dışlama, ulus içindeki etnik veya dini grupları hedef alabilir. Bangladeş'te, ulusal kimlik sorunu hala çözülememiş olup, seküler Bengal milliyetçiliği ile Müslüman kültürel geçmişi içeren Bangladeş milliyetçiliği arasında tartışmalar sürmektedir. Birincisi, dilsel ve kültürel homojenliğe vurgu yaparken, Bengalce konuşmayan etnik grupları dışlamaktadır ve İslami kimliği marjinalleştirmektedir.

Dinden devleti tamamen ayırmaya çalışan seküler Bengal milliyetçiliği, İslami önelliği barındıramamış ve tarihsel olarak Müslüman kültürel unsurları dışlamıştır. Bengal Rönesansı, Bengal milliyetçiliğini büyük ölçüde etkileyen bir hareket olarak, Hindu canlanışçılığına dayanmış ve İslam'ı marjinalleştirme eğilimi göstermiştir. Raja Ram Mohan Roy gibi reformcular ve Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay gibi önde gelen figürler, İslam karşıtı görüşler sergilemişlerdir. Bu İslam'a karşıtlık, Bengal Rönesansı'ndan Bengal'in 1905'teki bölünmesine kadar devam etmiş ve Pakistan döneminde de sürmüştür. Hindular ve Müslümanlar arasındaki bu gerilimler, sonunda

Pakistan'ın kurulmasına ve daha sonra Bangladeş'in 1971'de bağımsız olmasına yol açmıştır.

Yeni Bangladeş devleti, seküler ve İslam karşıtı ilkelere dayansa da, İslam ile Bengal milliyetçiliği arasındaki gerilimler devam etmiştir. Bengal ve Bangladeş milliyetçiliği arasındaki süregelen tartışma, İslam'ın Bengal milliyetçi düşünceden dışlanmasına yol açmıştır. Bu dışlanma, İslam'ın küresel bir düşman olarak tasvir edildiği 11 Eylül sonrası bağlam da dahil olmak üzere, küresel dinamiklerle daha da şiddetlenmiştir. Edebiyat analizleri, Bengal milliyetçi entelektüellerin 'siyasal İslam' ve 'İslamcılık' gibi terimleri seçici bir şekilde yorumlayarak İslam'ı ötekileştirdiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bu ötekileştirme, akademik söyleme de uzanmış ve Bengal Müslümanlarının rolü genellikle minimize edilmiş veya yok sayılmıştır.

Bu dinamikte sekülerizm ve Hindistan'ın hegemonik etkisi de önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Awami League'in sekülerlik ve Bengal milliyetçiliğini teşvik etmesi, Müslümanların artan bir şekilde dışlanmasına neden olmuştur. Bangladeş bağlamında dost olarak görülen Hindistan, sınırda Hindistan güçleri tarafından öldürülme olayları, su paylaşımı anlaşmazlıkları ve siyasi gerilimler gibi konular nedeniyle olumsuz algılanmıştır. İslamcı liderlerin idamını talep eden Shahbag hareketi ve ardından Hefazat-e-İslam hareketinin yükselişi gibi olaylar, sekülerizm ile İslamcılık arasındaki ideolojik mücadeleyi ortaya koymaktadır. Şapla Katliamı, İslamcı protestolara hükümetin müdahalesi, bu gerilimi daha da vurgulamaktadır.

Hindistan'ın müdahalesi ve AL'nin politikaları, anti-Müslüman siyaseti ve dışlanmayı daha da yoğunlaştırmıştır. Hindistan hegemonyasına yönelik eleştirilerde bulunduğu bir Facebook gönderisi nedeniyle öldürülen öğrenci Abrar Fahad olayı, bu gerilimi örneklemektedir. Hindutva unsurlarının yükselişi ve Müslüman kültürel sembollerin marjinalleştirilmesi de Hindistan'ın etkisini yansıtmaktadır. Seküler devletin çelişkileri ve küresel düzen, İslami uygulamalarla çatışmaya girmekte ve Bangladeş'te Müslüman uygulamalarının daha fazla dışlanmasına ve düzenlenmesine yol açmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, Bangladeş'teki çoğunlukçu Müslüman milliyetçiliği kavramı, mevcut siyasi ve bölgesel dinamikler göz önüne alındığında sorunludur. Müslümanlar sayısal

olarak çoğunlukta olabilir, ancak siyasi olarak marjinalleşmekte ve sekülerizm ile dış hegemonik etkiler bağlamında önemli zorluklarla karşı karşıya kalmaktadırlar. Çoğunlukçu milliyetçilik kavramı, yalnızca sayısal çoğunlukla değil, güç dinamikleri ve siyasi bağlamla birlikte anlaşılmalıdır.

İkinci bölüm, araştırma metodolojisi ve saha deneyimlerini ele almakta ve Şubat 2023 ile Şubat 2024 arasında Bangladeş'in Cumilla bölgesindeki Nanua Dighir Par'da gerçekleştirilen etnografik çalışmaya odaklanmaktadır. Bu bölüm iki kısma ayrılmıştır: İlk kısım, saha çalışmasının yürütülmesinde karşılaşılan zorlukları ve kullanılan araştırma yöntemlerini yansıtırken, ikinci kısım araştırmayı yönlendiren teorik çerçeveleri incelemektedir.

Antropolojik saha çalışması, araştırmacının çalışılan toplulukla etkileşimine dayanan kapsayıcı araştırma yöntemlerine derinden bağlıdır. Bu bölüm, Malinowski'nin tavsiye ettiği gibi araştırma yöntemleri ve koşullarının bir anlatımına yer vermenin önemini vurgulamaktadır. Yazar, saha çalışmasını 12 günlük bir süre zarfında dört aşamada gerçekleştirmiş ve 'İslam'ın güvenlik konusu haline getirilmesi' nedeniyle veri toplamada önemli engellerin olduğu gergin bir ortamda çalışmıştır. Bangladeş'teki atmosfer, özellikle 2021'de Cumilla'da yaşanan komünal şiddetten sonra giderek daha fazla güvenlik kaygılarıyla şekillenmiş olup, yerel halk arasında gazetecilere ve dışarıdan gelenlere karşı yoğun bir kaygı oluşmuştur. Bu bölüm ayrıca komünal şiddetin etkilenen topluluklar üzerindeki sosyal ve psikolojik etkilerini ele almakta ve araştırmacının karşılaştığı etik ikilemleri yansıtmaktadır.

Bu son derece güvenli ortamda, yerel halk araştırmacıya genellikle bir gazeteci gözüyle bakarak endişe ve güvensizlik sergilemiştir. Araştırmacı kendisini yüksek lisans öğrencisi olarak tanıtmış olmasına rağmen, halk, akademik araştırmalara aşına olmaması ve hassas konularla ilişkilendirilme korkusu nedeniyle direniş göstermiştir. Bu korkular, gözdağı ve işkence gibi baskıcı taktikleriyle kötü bir üne sahip olan devlet baskısının daha geniş bağlamına bağlıdır. Bölüm, araştırmacıyı genellikle zor durumda bırakan içerden-dışardan dinamiğinin nasıl gezildiğine dair zorlukları vurgulamaktadır. Yerel halk, 2021'deki şiddet olaylarını tartışmakta isteksizdi, özellikle bu olaylarla ilgili olarak tutuklanan kişilerin daha fazla misillemeye maruz kalma korkusunu dile getirmiştir.

Bu saha çalışmasının dikkate değer bir yönü, polis ve devlet otoritelerinin yarattığı zorluklardır. Yazar, yerel polis karakolunun sorumlu memuru ile rahatsız edici bir etkileşimi anlatmaktadır. Yazar, araştırmanın akademik doğasını netleştirme çabalarına rağmen, memur daha fazla soruşturma yapılmasına gerek olmadığını belirterek, gerekli tüm bilgilerin zaten medyada yayınlandığını ve adaletin sağlandığını iddia etmiştir. Memurun yazarın dini geçmişi ve siyasi bağlantılarıyla ilgili soruları, Bangladeş'teki daha geniş bir güvenlikleşme eğilimini yansıtmaktadır; İslamcı hareketlerle bağlantısı olduğu düşünülen kişiler sıklıkla hedef alınmaktadır. Bu sorgulama, sakallı bir eski medrese öğrencisi olarak araştırmacının görünüşü nedeniyle otomatik olarak şüpheli olarak görülmesini vurgulamaktadır. Bölüm, Bangladeş'te kolluk kuvvetlerinin önemli bir güce sahip olduğu ve genellikle siyasi baskıların uygulayıcısı olarak işlev gördüğü gergin atmosferin altını çizmektedir.

Bu bölüm ayrıca, araştırma metodolojisini yönlendiren teorik çerçevelere de derinlemesine girmektedir. Çalışma, günlük deneyimleri daha geniş sosyal ve tarihsel bağlamlara yerleştiren bir teknik olan genişletilmiş vaka yöntemini kullanmıştır. Bu yöntem, araştırmacıya yalnızca 2021'deki şiddet olaylarının belirli olaylarını değil, aynı zamanda bu olayları şekillendiren daha geniş siyasi ve sosyal dinamikleri de keşfetme imkanı tanımıştır. Genişletilmiş vaka yöntemi, Bangladeş'teki komünal ilişkiler üzerinde güç siyaseti, devlet müdahaleleri ve bunların etkileri üzerine kapsamlı bir analiz sunmuştur. Bu yöntemin kullanılmasıyla, çalışma, mikro düzeydeki etkileşimler ile makro düzeydeki yapılar arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesini sağlayarak, ülkedeki komünal şiddetin kökenleri hakkında yeni bakış açıları sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Çalışmanın başlıca araştırma alanı olarak Cumilla'nın seçilmesi, 2021'deki komünal şiddetin merkezi olmasından kaynaklanmaktadır ve ülke çapında en az sekiz kişinin ölümüne yol açmıştır. Cumilla, Bangladeş'in en eski kasabalarından biridir ve önemli bir Hindu nüfusuna sahiptir, bu da onu Hindu-Müslüman ilişkilerini incelemek için kritik bir yer haline getirmektedir. Hızla ülke geneline yayılan bu çatışma, birkaç gün boyunca devam eden şiddet olaylarıyla işaretlenmiş, geniş çaplı tutuklamalara ve güvenlik güçlerinin konuşlandırılmasına yol açmıştır. Hükümetin, Bangladeş Sınır Muhafızları'nın konuşlandırılması ve yüzlerce insanın tutuklanması da dahil olmak

üzere şiddete verdiği yanıt, olayın yakın Bangladeş tarihindeki önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Araştırma, çatışmanın nedenleri ve sonuçlarına dair kapsamlı bir anlayış sağlamayı hedeflemiş ve genişletilmiş vaka yöntemi kullanılarak yerel siyaset, devlet müdahalesi ve komünal ilişkilerin etkileşimi keşfedilmiştir. Şiddetten etkilenen bireylerin spesifik vakalarına odaklanarak çalışma, bu olayların meydana geldiği daha geniş sosyal ve politik bağlamı aydınlatmıştır. Ayrıca bölüm, çatışmaya ilişkin yasal ve devlet yanıtlarını ele almakta, hukuki süreçlerin, kovuşturmaların ve devlet politikalarının etkinliğini ve sonuçlarını incelemektedir. Bu analiz, genellikle çatışmayı köktenci dini gruplara atfeden medya ve siyasi anlatıları da eleştirerek, kamuoyundaki algıların ve devletin eylemlerinin karmaşık hale getirildiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Bölüm ayrıca, böylesine politik açıdan yüklü ve hassas bir ortamda araştırma yürütmenin zorluklarını da tartışmaktadır. Araştırmacı, hem Hindu hem de Müslüman topluluklarının çatışma hakkında tartışmalara katılmakta isteksiz olması nedeniyle güvenilir veri toplamada birçok engelle karşılaşmıştır. Birçok sakin, konuşmak için misilleme yapılmasından korkmuş ve özellikle tutuklanan ya da yasal sonuçlarla karşı karşıya kalan kilit bilgi sağlayıcılar araştırmaya katılmak istememiştir. Bir Müslüman adamla yapılan anlamlı bir röportajda, adam, puja mandapında bulunan Kur'an-ı Kerim'i rapor ettikten sonra hapisanede ağır işkence gördüğünü ancak araştırmanın Bangladeş'te veya Bengalce yayınlanmaması şartıyla deneyimlerini paylaşacağını ifade etmiştir.

Bu bölüm, komünal şiddet, devlet baskısı ve siyasi iktidarın kesişiminde, yüksek güvenli bir ortamda saha çalışması yürütmenin zorluklarını ele alır. Bu zorluklar, araştırmacının yansıtıcılık, etik kaygılar ve dikkatli metodolojik seçimler yoluyla aşıldı ve Bangladeş'teki komünal çatışmanın dinamiklerini daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde anlamasını sağladı.

İkinci bölümün son kısmı, Nanua Dighir Par, Cumilla'da komünal şiddeti incelemek amacıyla gerçekleştirilen etnografik saha çalışmasını ve metodolojiyi ele alır. Bölüm, antropolojinin sömürgecilik döneminde bir baskı aracı olarak oynadığı tarihsel rolü yansıtarak, sömürgeciliğin ırkçılığı meşrulaştırdığı ve özellikle sömürge Hindistan'da

komünal gerilimleri körüklediği etkisini vurgular. Ancak, II. Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemde, özellikle 1980'ler ve 1990'larda, Batılı olmayan antropologlar geleneksel saha çalışması uygulamalarını yeniden düşünmeye başlamışlardır. Bu hareket, Batılı olmayan kültürlerin 'öteki' olarak tasvir edilmesine meydan okumayı hedeflemiştir.

Yerli Antropoloji'den ilham alan yazar, önemli komünal huzursuzlukların yaşandığı Nanua Dighir Par'da saha çalışması yapmıştır. Çalışma, sömürge epistemolojik anlatılar tarafından derinden şekillendirilmiş olan komünalizm söylemini yeniden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, Şubat 2023 ile Şubat 2024 tarihleri arasında dört aşamada gerçekleştirilmiş ve Hindu mağdurlar ile Müslüman katılımcılar da dahil olmak üzere 17 bilgi sağlayıcı ile yoğun etkileşimler içermiştir. Çalışma, komünal şiddetin karmaşık dinamiklerini yakalamayı hedeflemiştir.

Bölüm, saha çalışmasının bağlamında etnografi ve saha çalışmasının tanımlanmasının önemini vurgular, özellikle sosyal bilimlerin çeşitli dallarında aşırı kullanıldıkları dikkate alındığında. Etnografi, saha çalışması sırasında kullanılan bir vaka çalışması yaklaşımı olarak tanımlanır ve insanların doğal ortamlarında nasıl yaşadıklarının kaydedilmesi ve yorumlanmasına odaklanır. Bununla birlikte, araştırma konusunun hassasiyeti nedeniyle, çalışma Manchester Antropoloji Okulu tarafından geliştirilen genişletilmiş vaka yöntemini kullanmıştır. Bu yöntem, mikro düzeyde sosyal etkileşimleri makro düzeydeki sosyal yapılarla ilişkilendirir ve Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddetin sosyo-politik bağlamını anlamak için kapsamlı bir yaklaşım sağlar.

Genişletilmiş vaka yönteminin yinelemeli doğası, yerel olayların ve bireysel eylemlerin daha geniş ulusal ve bölgesel siyasi hareketler ve ideolojiler tarafından nasıl şekillendirildiğini daha derinlemesine anlamayı sağlamıştır. Bu yaklaşım, hem Hindu hem de Müslüman topluluklardan insanlarla detaylı katılımcı gözlemler yapmayı içermiştir. Yöntemin, bireysel ve kolektif ajansın sosyal gerçeklikleri şekillendirmedeki rolünü tanıma ve araştırmacıların araştırma süreci üzerindeki kendi etkilerini yansıtma teşvikine vurgu yapması çalışmanın önemli bir parçası olmuştur.

Bölüm ayrıca, saha çalışmasının etik hususlarını, özellikle mülakat yapılan kişilerin kimliklerinin sahte isimler kullanılarak gizli tutulmasının önemini tartışır. Araştırmanın hassas ve politik açıdan yüklü doğası göz önüne alındığında, bu, onların

güvenliğini sağlamada hayati önem taşımıştır. Çalışmanın metodolojisi ayrıca yapılandırılmamış ve yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatları da içermiştir; bu sayede, katılımcılarla karşılıklı anlayış ortamı yaratılmış ve onların öznel deneyimlerine daha derinlemesine angajman sağlanmıştır.

Pozisyon alma meselesi, özellikle içerden-dışardan ayrımı da ele alınmaktadır. Kendi toplumunu inceleyen bir Bangladeşli Müslüman olarak, yazar karmaşık dinamikler arasında gezinmek zorunda kalmıştır; millet olarak içeriden olsa da, Hindu topluluğuna karşı dışardan biri olarak görülmüştür. Bu karmaşık pozisyon alma durumu, yazarın bilgi sağlayıcılarla olan etkileşimlerini ve onların paylaşmak istedikleri bilgileri etkilemiştir. Refleksivite, yazarın bu dinamiklerin farkında olmasına yardımcı olmuş ve daha nüanslı bir analiz sunmasına olanak sağlamıştır.

Sonuç olarak, bu çalışmanın kapsamlı yaklaşımı, yalnızca Nanua Dighir Par'daki 2021 şiddet olaylarının doğrudan bağlamını aydınlatmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda bunu Bangladeş ve Güney Asya'nın daha geniş sosyo-politik bağlamına yerleştirmiştir. Çalışma, birden fazla bakış açısını ve disiplini bir araya getirerek komünal şiddetin karmaşıklığını anlamak için sağlam bir çerçeve sunmuştur. Bulgular, çağdaş sosyal meseleleri ele alırken bütüncül ve disiplinler arası yeni bir yaklaşımın değerini göstererek antropoloji alanına katkıda bulunmuştur.

Tezin üçüncü bölümü, Güney Asya'daki komünalizm etrafındaki karmaşık anlatıları incelemekte ve özellikle İslam'ın genellikle komünal şiddetle ilişkilendirilmesine odaklanmaktadır. Bölüm, bu söylemin siyasi ve tarihsel kökenlerini araştırarak edebiyat, tarih yazımı ve siyasi anlatıların kesişim noktalarının, komünalizm hakkındaki çağdaş anlayışları nasıl şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir. Komünal şiddetin tanımlanmasındaki stratejik belirsizlikleri vurgulamakta ve bu belirsizliklerin Müslümanlar ve dini uygulamalarının doğası gereği komünal ve şiddet yanlısı olarak çerçevelenmesi için nasıl kullanıldığını ele almaktadır. Bölüm ayrıca sömürgeci oryantalizmin etkisini de incelemekte, İngiliz sömürge ve Hint milliyetçi söylemlerinin anti-Müslüman duyguları nasıl devam ettirdiğini göstermektedir.

Bölüm üç ana kısma ayrılmıştır. İlk kısım, Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddetin tanımlanması ve belgelenmesindeki yetersizlikleri ele alır. Konu üzerine geniş

kapsamlı tartışmalara rağmen, Ali Riaz ve Kankar Singho gibi uzmanlar, komünalizmi kesin bir şekilde tanımlamakta genellikle başarısız olmakta ve onu İslami köktencilikle eşitlemektedir. Bu belirsizlik, komünal şiddet olarak yanlış etiketlenen çeşitli faaliyetlerin seçici yorumlanmasına olanak tanımaktadır. Örneğin, İslami dini uygulamalar, waz mahfilleri ve iftar partileri gibi etkinlikler bazen komünal nefreti körüklemekle yanlış bir şekilde tanımlanmaktadır. ‘Komünal’ teriminin bu geniş ve belirsiz kullanımı gereksiz toplumsal gerilim yaratmakta ve normal dini uygulamaları damgalamaktadır.

Ayrıca, Bangladeş’teki komünal şiddetle ilgili kapsamlı veri eksikliği dikkat çekicidir. Resmi kayıtlar sınırlıdır ve Odhikar ve Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) gibi kuruluşların mevcut raporları, siyasi liderler ve akademik kaynaklar tarafından yapılan daha sansasyonel iddialarla çelişmektedir. Bu tutarsızlık, gerçeklerin manipüle edilmesine katkıda bulunmakta ve kamuoyu algısını ve siyasi söylemi etkilemektedir. ‘Şiddet’ terimi de olayı daha da karmaşık hale getirmekte ve şiddet olaylarının farklı şiddet derecelerini ayırt edememektedir, bu da olayların doğasını ve farklı aktörlerin rollerini gizlemektedir.

İkinci kısım, Bangladeş edebiyatında ve siyasi yorumlarında komünalizmin tasvirine odaklanır. İslam ile ilişkili siyasi ifadeler ve kimliklerin genellikle komünal olarak etiketlendiğini incelemektedir. Bu etiketleme, ideolojik perspektiflerden etkilenmektedir; ‘köktencilik’, ‘radikalizm’ ve ‘militanlık’ gibi terimler komünalizmle değiştirilebilir bir şekilde kullanılmaktadır. Bölüm, bu yaklaşımın tutarsız olduğunu vurgular; solcu, pro-Hindutva veya küresel terörle savaş (GWOT) ile uyumlu olsun, farklı ideolojik yönelimlere sahip yorumcular bu terimleri kendi önyargılarına dayalı olarak uygulamaktadır.

Bölüm, Bengali milliyetçi söyleminde köktencilüğün nasıl geniş bir şekilde tanımlandığını eleştirmektedir. Bu perspektif, Jamaat-e-İslami (JI) ve Hefazat-e-İslam gibi siyasi hareketlerden gündelik dini ifadeler kadar İslami uygulamaları damgalamaktadır. Şahriar Kabir ve Ali Riaz gibi etkili figürler, bu hareketleri eleştirerek onları köktenci ve komünal olarak nitelendirmektedir. Bu damgalama, kamu alanında herhangi bir İslami faaliyete kadar uzanmakta ve bu faaliyetler sıklıkla milliyetçi ve seküler çevrelerde aşağılanmaktadır.

Bazı yorumcular, Bangladeş'teki çoğunluğu Müslüman olan toplumun doğası gereği radikal ve komünal olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Örneğin Kankar Singho, İslami öğretilerin kırsal Müslüman toplulukları 'puritan Müslümanlara' dönüştürdüğünü ve bunların gayrimüslimlere karşı düşmanca bir tavır sergilediğini öne sürmektedir. Sadia'nın yakın tarihli çalışması, komünal şiddette yerel siyasetin rolünü kabul ederken, aynı zamanda gayrimüslim topluluklara karşı artan hoşgörüsüzlüğü de vurgulamaktadır. Bölüm, bu tür perspektiflerin İslami ifadeleri komünal ve sorunlu olarak çerçeveleyen daha geniş bir anlatıya katkıda bulunduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Bölüm ayrıca, milliyetçi söylemde sekülerizm ile komünalizm arasındaki ikili karşıtlığı araştırmaktadır. İslam veya Müslüman kimliği ile ilişkilendirilen her şey komünal olarak kabul edilirken, sekülerizm ideal olarak görülmektedir. Bu ikili kategorizasyon, siyasi partilerin ve hareketlerin tasvirine yansımaktadır. Örneğin, BNP genellikle Jamaat-e-İslami ile olan ilişkisi nedeniyle komünal bir parti olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bölüm ayrıca Ziaur Rahman'ın sekülerizmi anayasadan kaldırmasını, Bangladeş siyasetine komünalizmin sokulması olarak tasvir eden söylemi eleştirmektedir. Bu bakış açısı, komünalizmin yükselişinin 1970'lerin sonlarında Zia'nın rejimi ile başladığını ve halefleri döneminde devam ettiğini iddia eden iddialarla pekiştirilmektedir.

Bölüm, daha sonra komşu Hindistan'daki gerçeklerle bu anlatıları karşılaştırmaktadır, burada anti-Müslüman şiddet ve zulüm tekrarlanan bir durumdur. Bu karşılaştırma, komünalizm üzerine yapılan tartışmaların seçici doğasını vurgulayarak, İslami ifadelerin nasıl şeytanlaştırıldığını, oysa başka yerlerde benzer sorunların göz ardı edildiğini göstermektedir. Genel olarak, üçüncü bölüm, Bangladeş'teki komünalizm söyleminin, ideolojik önyargılar, sömürge mirasları ve stratejik belirsizliklerin karmaşık bir etkileşimiyle nasıl şekillendiğini ortaya koymakta ve komünal şiddetin ve kökenlerinin çarpık bir şekilde anlaşılmasına yol açmaktadır.

Bölüm, daha sonra 1971 sonrası Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddetin taslak bir zaman çizelgesini sunmakta ve mevcut verilerin eksik olduğunu vurgulamakta ve zaman çizelgesinin mevcut en iyi kaynaklara dayandığını belirtmektedir. Anlatı, önemli

komünal şiddet olaylarının genellikle yalnızca dini veya kendiliğinden değil, karmaşık ve çok yönlü nedenleri olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

İlk büyük olay, 1989'da Hindistan'daki Babri Mescidi sahasında Ram tapınağının temel atma töreniyle tetiklenmiştir. Bu olay, Hindistan'ın Bihar eyaletinde ciddi anti-Müslüman pogromlara yol açmış, birçok insanın hayatını kaybetmesine ve Müslümanların yerinden edilmesine neden olmuştur. Buna karşılık olarak, Bangladeş'te Ekim ve Kasım 1990'da Hindu tapınaklarına ve evlerine yönelik saldırılar düzenlenmiş, ancak ölüm bildirilmemiştir.

En önemli erken olay, 6 Aralık 1992'de Babri Mescidi'nin yıkılmasıdır, bu olay Hindistan'da anti-Müslüman isyanlara ve şiddete yol açmıştır. Bu şiddet Bangladeş'e de sıçramış, Hindu tapınaklarına ve evlerine saldırılar yapılmış ve bazı ölümler bildirilmiştir. İslamcı partilerin şiddetten yalnızca sorumlu tutulduğu fikrinin aksine, Bangladeş'teki tüm siyasi partiler Babri Mescidi'nin yıkılmasını kınamış ve bu durumun yalnızca dini aşırılıklardan ziyade daha geniş bir siyasi bağlama işaret ettiğini ortaya koymuştur.

Göreceli bir barış döneminden sonra, 2001 yılında başka bir önemli olay meydana gelmiştir. Genellikle 'seçim sonrası anti-Hindu şiddeti' olarak tanımlanan bu dönem, Hindu topluluklarına yönelik saldırılar ve tecavüz iddiaları ile karakterize edilmiştir. Bu dönem esasen dini değil, siyasi nedenlerle, özellikle de seçimle ilgili şiddetle ilişkilendirilmiştir.

Zaman çizelgesi, 2012'den itibaren şiddetin önemli ölçüde yeniden arttığını göstermektedir. Hindu ve Budist topluluklara yönelik saldırılar, vandalizm ve gerginlikler Ramu ve Nasirnagar gibi çeşitli bölgelerde meydana gelmiştir. Dikkate değer olaylar arasında, İslam'a hakaret eden bir sosyal medya gönderisiyle kışkırtılan 2016 Nasirnagar saldırıları ve benzer bir gönderiyle alevlenen 2021 Cumilla çatışması yer almaktadır. Bu çatışma, iktidardaki Awami League (AL) liderlerinin de dahil olduğu iddialarıyla daha da karmaşık hale gelmiştir. Genel olarak, zaman çizelgesi, Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddetin genellikle bölgesel siyasi dinamikler ve dış faktörlerden etkilendiğini, yalnızca dini düşmanlıklardan kaynaklanmadığını göstermektedir.

Bölümün bir sonraki kısmı, Güney Asya'da Müslüman siyaseti ve kimliğinin tarihsel tasvirleriyle ilgili söylemler arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimleri araştırmakta ve özellikle Bengal milliyetçiliğine odaklanmaktadır. Müslüman Birliği'ne (ML) ve Pakistan'a yönelik kalıcı olumsuz algıları vurgulamakta, bu tutumları sömürge dönemine kadar izlemekte ve günümüze kadar nasıl devam ettiğini incelemektedir.

1906 yılında sömürge Hindistan'daki Müslüman çıkarlarını korumak amacıyla kurulan Müslüman Birliği başlangıçta komünal olarak etiketlenmiştir. Pakistan'ın kurulmasından sonra bu etiket, Pakistan'ın dini temelleri nedeniyle Bengal milliyetçileri tarafından daha da güçlendirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak, Müslüman Birliği ve Pakistan, Bengal milliyetçi söyleminde komünalizmin sembolleri haline gelmiştir. Pakistan'a ve onun siyasi ideolojilerine yönelik bu düşmanlık, Bangladeş'in bağımsızlığından sonra da devam etmiş ve hem siyasi hem de entelektüel tartışmaları etkilemiştir.

Badraddin Umar'ın 1966 yılında yayımlanan 'Samprodayikota' kitabı, bu kötülemenin erken bir örneğini temsil etmektedir. Umar, Müslüman Birliği'ni ve iki millet teorisini doğası gereği komünal olarak eleştirmiş ve Kongre Partisi'ni, kendi komünal önyargılarına rağmen daha kapsayıcı olarak görmüştür. Syed Ahmad Khan gibi liderlerin yönetimindeki Müslüman seçkinlerin Hint toplumuna entegre olamadığını ve bunun yerine ayrı kimliklerini sürdürmeye çalıştığını, bunun da komünalizme yol açtığını savunmuştur. Bu eleştiri, tarihsel figürler ve hareketlere de uzanmış, onları gerici ve gerileyen olarak nitelendirmiştir.

Umar'ın, Müslüman Birliği'nin çöküşünün ve Bangladeş'in yükselişinin komünal siyasetin sonunu işaret ettiği görüşü, çağdaş Bengal milliyetçileri ve solcu entelektüeller tarafından tartışılmaktadır. Birçok kişi, hala Müslüman Birliği'ni, Cinnah'ın iki millet teorisini ve Müslüman siyasetini devam eden komünal çatışmaların sorumlusu olarak görmektedir. Örneğin, Pankaj Bhattacharya ve Serajul Islam Choudhury, Pakistan ve onun kökenlerini sert bir şekilde eleştirir; Choudhury, Cinnah'ı fırsatçı olarak görürken, Sarker Pakistan'ı kalıcı toplumsal sorunların kaynağı olarak eleştirmektedir.

Bu kalıcı anti-Pakistan hissiyatı, genellikle Pakistan ile ilişkili görülen herhangi bir dilsel veya sembolik referansa da uzanmaktadır. Örneğin, Ziaur Rahman'ın 1975'te devlet radyosunun adını değiştirme kararı, Radyo Pakistan'a benzerliği nedeniyle komünalizm olarak eleştirilmiştir. Ayrıca, Mugal hükümdarları gibi tarihsel Müslüman liderler, genellikle istilacı ve baskıcı olarak tasvir edilmekte ve bu Müslümanlara yönelik olumsuz stereotipleri pekiştirmektedir.

Bölüm, ayrıca, çeşitli söylemlerin etkileşim ve harmanlanması yoluyla yeni anlamların nasıl yaratıldığını ifade eden interdiskürsivite kavramını incelemektedir. Bengal milliyetçi anlatılarının komünalizm üzerine, Hindu milliyetçi epistemolojisi ve sömürgeci oryantalizmden etkilendiğini savunmaktadır. Hindu milliyetçiliği tarihsel olarak Müslümanları doğası gereği komünal ve şiddet yanlısı olarak tasvir etmiş, onları 'yabancı' ve Hindu kimliğine tehdit olarak göstermiştir. Hindutva milliyetçiliğinin Müslümanları ve Pakistan'ı, sürekli bir düşman olarak algılaması bu duyguyu açıkça ortaya koymaktadır.

Sömürgeci oryantalizm de bu önyargılara katkıda bulunmaktadır. Müslümanları despot ve baskıcı olarak tasvir eden Avrupa sömürgeci anlatıları, Hindistan tarih yazımını ve milliyetçi tahayyülü etkilemiştir. Bu tasvir, sömürge yönetimini meşrulaştırmış ve Hindular ile Müslümanlar arasında bir bölünme yaratmıştır. James Mill ve Henry M. Elliot gibi önde gelen sömürgeci tarihçiler, bu olumsuz tasvirleri pekiştirmiş ve bunlar, sömürge sonrası döneme kadar devam etmiş, komünalizm üzerine çağdaş görüşleri şekillendirmiştir.

Kısacası, bölüm, Güney Asya edebiyatı ve tarih yazımında komünalizmin Hindu milliyetçiliği, sömürgeci oryantalizm ve Bengal milliyetçi söyleminin interdiskürsif etkisiyle nasıl şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu iç içe geçmiş anlatılar, Müslümanları ve onların siyasi ifadelerini doğası gereği komünal ve şiddet yanlısı olarak tasvir etmiştir. Bölüm, sömürgeci ve Hindu milliyetçi stereotiplerin, Bengal milliyetçiliği tarafından nasıl sürdürüldüğünü ve pekiştirildiğini göstermekte ve İslam'ın doğası gereği şiddet yanlısı ve Müslümanların sürekli dışlanmış olarak tasvir edilmesine yol açmaktadır.

Dördüncü bölüm, Cumilla, Bangladeş'te 2021'de Durga Puja sırasında yaşanan komünal şiddetin etrafındaki karmaşıklıkları ele almakta ve geleneksel medya anlatılarının sınırlamalarını vurgulamaktadır. Slavoj Žižek ve Paul R. Brass gibi teorisyenlere dayanarak, şiddeti anlamının, yalnızca görünür, doğrudan eylemlerin ötesine geçip sembolik ve sistemik boyutlarına bakmayı gerektirdiğini savunmaktadır.

Olay, 13 Ekim 2021'de Cumilla'da bir Durga Puja pandalında bir Hanuman idolü üzerine Kur'an-ı Kerim'in yerleştirilmiş halde bulunmasıyla başlamıştır. Bu keşif ilk olarak polise bildirildiğinde, sosyal medyada görüntülerin ve söylentilerin hızla yayılması sonucu geniş çapta huzursuzluğa yol açmıştır. Sabahın ilerleyen saatlerinde, gerginlik artmış ve Hindu tapınaklarına ve mülklerine saldırılar gerçekleşmiş, önemli hasarlar ve kayıplar meydana gelmiştir.

Ana akım medya ve siyasi anlatılar, şiddeti İslami saldırganlık olarak çerçevelemiş ve bunu Jamaat-e-İslami (JI) ve Bangladeş Milliyetçi Partisi'ne (BNP) atfetmiştir. Bu anlatı, siyasi liderlerin ve kolluk kuvvetlerinin, şiddetin bu gruplar tarafından organize edildiğini iddia eden açıklamalarıyla pekiştirilmiştir. Raporlarda, birçok saldırganın yerel medreselerden öğrenci olduğu iddia edilmiştir, bu da İslamcı katılım anlatısını daha da güçlendirmiştir.

Ancak, yerel anlatılar, saldırganların çoğunlukla organize aşırılık yanlılarından ziyade genç dışardan kişiler olduğunu tasvir etmiştir. Bu çelişkili raporlara rağmen, ana akım anlatı devam etmiş ve suçlama İslamcı ve muhalif gruplara yönelmiştir. Bu seçici habercilik ve anlatı oluşturma, Žižek'in 'sembolik şiddet' kavramının bir örneğini oluşturmaktadır; dil ve temsil, belirli anlamları ve önyargıları dayatarak durumun tam karmaşıklığını gizlemektedir.

Bölüm, Brass'ın komünal şiddetin ana aşamalarından biri olarak tanımladığı anlatılaştırma sürecinin, yalnızca yorumlama ve suç kaydırma değil, aynı zamanda sistemik şiddeti de içerdiğini savunmaktadır. Bu süreç, belirli grupların kriminalize edilmesini ve suçun başka taraflara yüklenmesini içerir, mevcut siyasi ve sosyal önyargıları pekiştirir. Cumilla'daki komünal şiddet olaylarında görüldüğü gibi, bu anlatılar genellikle "Müslüman" şiddetine dönüştürülmekte ve daha geniş siyasi gündemler ve tarihsel önyargılarla uyumlu hale getirilmektedir.

Bangladeş Hindu Mohajot lideri Govinda Pramanik tarafından sunulan alternatif bir anlatı, yerel Awami League liderlerinin siyasi rekabetler nedeniyle şiddeti kışkırttığını öne sürmektedir. Bu suçlama, sosyal medyada bazı ilgi görmesine rağmen, ana akım medya tarafından büyük ölçüde görmezden gelinmiş ve bu, anlatı kontrolü politikalarını ve muhalif seslerin marjinalleştirilmesini vurgulamaktadır.

Bölüm, ardından seçici habercilik ve anlatı silme süreçlerinin, olayların gerçek doğasını nasıl gizlediğini incelemekte ve siyasi dinamiklerin bu olaylarda önemli bir rol oynadığını öne sürmektedir. Cumilla olayları sırasında, bazı anlatılar gömülmüş, bazıları ise vurgulanmış ve bu durum, yanıltıcı bir aciliyet hissi yaratmış ve olayın kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasını engellemiştir. Bu seçici anlatı oluşturma, mağdurlar, şüpheliler ve saldırganların kimlikleri hakkında daha derinlemesine inceleme yapma isteğini körüklemiştir.

Cumilla'daki hem Hindu hem de Müslüman topluluklardan birçok görüşmeci, olaylar ve ardından yaşanan huzursuzluklarda siyasi katılımın, özellikle iktidardaki Awami League (AL) üyelerinin önemli bir rol oynadığını belirtmiştir. Yalnızca birkaç kişi siyasi katılım hakkında yorum yapmamış veya bunu reddetmiştir. Cumilla'daki Kali tapınağının bir rahibi ile yapılan bir görüşmede, saldırıların daha çok sosyo-politik nitelikte olduğu öne sürülmüş, ancak rahip, BNP gibi muhalefet partilerine karşı siyasi baskı nedeniyle bu konuyu temkinli bir şekilde tartışmıştır.

Bu durum, beni Brass'ın enstrümantalizm teorisini uygulamaya yönlendirdi; bu teori, etnik şiddetin genellikle topluluklar arası düşmanlıktan ziyade elit manipülasyonundan kaynaklandığını öne sürer. Siyasi elitlerin, siyasi kazanç elde etmek için dini hassasiyetleri sömürüp sömürmediklerini araştırdım. Cumilla'daki görüşmelerin çoğu, olayların siyasi boyutları, özellikle AL'nin rolü hakkında sorular içeriyordu.

Yerel halkın yanıtları farklılık gösterdi. Hindu görüşmeciler, siyasi boyutları dolaylı olarak kabul etseler de, daha az doğrudan konuşmuşlardı. Müslüman katılımcılar ise siyasi katılım hakkında daha doğrudan konuştular. Özellikle dikkat çekici bir görüşme, tutuklanmış ve hapsedilmiş bir cami görevlisi olan Rafiq ile yapıldı. Rafiq, saldırıların, BNP'ye bağlı belediye başkanını suçlamak için siyasi elitler tarafından önceden

planlandığını iddia etti. Rafiq'e göre saldırganlar çoğunlukla dışardan gelmiş ve genç AL liderleri tarafından organize edilmişti; amaç, bir ayaklanma çıkararak belediye başkanını hedef göstermekti. Rafiq'in anlattıkları, hapishanedeyken benzer hikayeler duyan diğer tutuklular tarafından da doğrulandı. Tutuklular, tüm planın, bir meclis üyesini öldürerek olası ihbarcılarını susturmayı ve ardından medya ile yasal dikkatleri asıl faillerden uzaklaştırmayı içerdiğini ifade ettiler.

Bu içgörülere rağmen, İslamcı partilerin olaylara karıştığına dair herhangi bir kanıt bulunamadı; bu durum, olaylara İslamcılarının dahil olduğunu ima eden baskın anlatılara ters düşmektedir. Aksine, kanıtlar siyasi manipülasyonu işaret ediyordu; iktidar partisi üyeleri saldırıları organize etmiş ve ardından dışardan gelenleri veya İslamcılarını suçlamıştır. Bu durum, Bangladeş'te Hindu topluluklarına yönelik diğer saldırılarda görülen kalıplarla tutarlıdır. Örneğin, Nasirnagar (2016), Bandarban (2021), Sunamganj (2021) ve Muradnagar (2021) olaylarında, başlangıçta İslamcı grupların suçlandığı saldırılar daha sonra yerel AL liderleri veya işbirlikçileri ile bağlantılı hale gelmiştir. Yasal işlemler ve bazı mahkumiyetler olmasına rağmen, suç yükleme modeli devam etmiş ve iktidardaki AL, bu organize saldırılardan sıklıkla fayda sağlamıştır.

Ekim 2023'teki bir örnek bunu daha da netleştirir. Cumilla'daki bir mitingde, HBCUC (Bangladeş Hindu Buddha Christian Unity Council), iktidar partisinin yorumlarına karşı protesto etmiş ve Durga Puja tatili talep etmiştir. Buna yanıt olarak, BJL ve BCL üyeleri HBCUC protestocularına saldırmıştır. Medyada geniş çapta yer almasına rağmen, olay komünal şiddet olarak tanımlanmamıştır. Bu durum, AL dışındaki aktörlerin yer aldığı benzer olayların nasıl çerçevelendiğiyle çelişmektedir; Müslümanlar veya Hindu çetelerinin karıştığı olaylar genellikle komünal şiddet olarak etiketlenmektedir.

Medyanın, iktidar partisinin şiddetine sessiz kalması ve muhalefet veya İslamcı grupların yer aldığı olayları komünal şiddet olarak çerçeveleme eğilimi, sistematik bir modeli ortaya koymaktadır. Brass'ın enstrümantalizm teorisi burada önemlidir; bu teori, şiddetin genellikle İslam'a karşı hakaret veya ahlaki yaralanma gibi bir bahane üzerine inşa edildiğini ve siyasi liderler tarafından stratejik amaçlarla kışkırtıldığını öne sürer.

Genel olarak Cumilla olayları, siyasi liderlerin dini hassasiyetleri istismar ederek şiddeti nasıl sahnelediğini ve ardından suçu muhaliflere veya marjinal gruplara kaydırıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu stratejik manipülasyon ve anlatı oluşturma, Bangladeş'teki daha geniş siyasi şiddet modelleriyle tutarlıdır; burada iktidar partisi, siyasi kazanç sağlamak için dini bir araç olarak kullanırken, medya ve yasal anlatılarla rollerini gizlemektedir. Bu durum, siyasetin, dinin ve medyanın kamuoyu algısını şekillendirmedeki kesişimini ve muhalefetin kriminalize edilmesini gündeme getirmektedir.

Bir sonraki bölüm, komünal şiddet sonrasında uygulanan kriminalizasyon politikalarının kurbanı olan iki kişinin hikayesiyle başlar. 14 Ekim 2021'de Cumilla Tren İstasyonu'nda, Cumilla Üniversitesi'nden Mushfiq ve Hasan, altı öğrenciyle birlikte keyfi tutuklama ve sistematik adaletsizlik ağında sıkışıp kalmışlardı. Final sınavlarının ardından Chittagong'a giden treni beklerken, önceki gün Nanua Dighir Par'daki şiddet olaylarının şüphelisi olarak yanlış tanımlandılar. Tutuklanmaları, öğrencilerin varlığı ve dış görünüşleri hakkında soru sorduktan sonra polisi çağırmaya karar veren Cumilla İlçe Komiseri (DC) tarafından başlatıldı. Suçsuz olmalarına rağmen, Mushfiq ve Hasan tutuklandı ve nihayetinde yedi ay hapse atıldılar.

Bu keyfi tutuklama, Müslüman kimliklerinin devlet ve kolluk kuvvetleri tarafından sistematik olarak kriminalize edilmesinin daha geniş bir örneğini ortaya koydu. Öğrencilerin tutuklanması, sakal ve kıyafet gibi İslami uygulamalarla ilişkilendirilen Müslüman kimlik göstergeleri tarafından yönlendirildi. Bu olay, bireylerin delile dayalı değil, algılanan dini ve siyasi aidiyetlerine göre hedef alındığı endişe verici bir eğilimi yansıtmaktadır.

Mushfiq ve Hasan'ın tutuklanmaları ve hapse atılmaları, ailelerine büyük mali ve duygusal yükler getirdi. Orta sınıf bir aileden gelen ve özel ders vererek kendini geçindiren Mushfiq, kariyer beklentilerinin ve finansal istikrarının kaybıyla karşı karşıya kaldı. Alt-orta sınıf bir aileden gelen Hasan, ailesinin mali yükünü daha da ağırlaştıran hukuki sürecin getirdiği mali sıkıntılarla mücadele etti. Her iki genç de hapisteyken fiziksel ve psikolojik tacize maruz kaldı ve bu, zihinsel sağlıklarını ve gelecekteki beklentilerini etkiledi.

Bu hikayeler yalnız değildi. Rafiq ve Basit de şiddetle bağlantılı olarak tutuklanan diğer kişilerdi ve benzer keyfi tutuklama örneklerini ortaya koyuyorlardı. Rafiq, olay yerinde bulunduğu için, Basit ise olayı yetkililere bildirdiği için gözaltına alındı. Şiddetle doğrudan bir bağlantıları olmamasına rağmen, her iki kişi de yedi ay boyunca yasal süreç olmaksızın gözaltında tutuldu. Bireylerin somut deliller yerine dini ya da siyasi kimliklerine dayanarak tutuklanması, devletin komünal şiddet yaklaşımının bir göstergesidir.

Mesele daha geniş anlamda kriminalizasyon siyaseti ve kolluk kuvvetlerinin sistematik şiddeti devam ettirme rolüdür. Devlet ve kurumları, özellikle İslami uygulamaların belirtilerini ya da siyasi muhalefeti sergileyen bireyleri hedef alarak Müslüman kimlikleri ve siyasi aidiyetleri kriminalize etme stratejisi uygulamaktadır. Bu strateji, gerçek faillerden suçu uzaklaştırmayı, şiddetin gerçek doğasını gizlemeyi ve iktidardaki kişilere mali ve siyasi kazanç sağlamayı amaçlar.

Bangladeş'teki kolluk kuvvetleri, keyfi ve çoğu zaman acımasız taktikleriyle tanınmaktadır. Yasal süreçlerdeki gecikmeler ve komünal şiddet olaylarına yönelik gerçek bir soruşturmanın yapılmaması, gerçek faillerin sorumluluktan kaçmasına olanak tanır. Bu gecikmeler, kamuoyunun dikkatini dağıtarak gerçek faillerin hesap vermesini zorlaştırır. Ayrıca, bireylerin kimliklerine dayanarak tutuklanması, genellikle rüşvet ve diğer sömürü yollarıyla mali kazanç elde edilmesine yol açar. Bu yolsuzluk, yasal sistemin bütünlüğünü zedeler ve haksız yere suçlananlar için adaletsizlik döngüsünü sürdürür.

Polisin Cumilla olayları sırasındaki rolü, bu sorunu daha da vurgulamaktadır. Görgü tanıkları ve yerel halk, polisin şiddet olayları sırasında pasif ve etkisiz olduğunu bildirmiştir. Polis, olay yerine geç gelmiş, şiddeti önlemek ya da durdurmak konusunda etkili olamamış ve olaylar yaşandıktan sonra bireyleri tutuklamaya daha çok odaklanmış gibi görünmüştür. Bu pasiflik, kolluk kuvvetlerinin komünal çatışmaları yönetmede reaktif olmaktan ziyade proaktif olmama eğilimini yansıtmaktadır.

Devletin bu tür olaylara verdiği yanıt, genellikle kamuoyunu ve siyasi anlatıları stratejik olarak manipüle etmeyi içerir. Bazı bireyleri ‘terörist’ ya da ‘köktenci’ olarak tanımlayarak, devlet uluslararası terörle mücadele çabalarına destek kazanırken, aynı zamanda muhalefeti bastırır ve siyasi tehditleri ortadan kaldırır. Bu strateji, yalnızca iktidar partisinin gücünü pekiştirmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda aşırılık ve terörizme karşı bir savunucu olarak konumunu güçlendirir, bu eylemlerin ardındaki siyasi motivasyonlara rağmen.

Cumilla olaylarına ilişkin yerel görüşler, tutuklamaların siyasi nedenlerle yapıldığına dair yaygın bir inanç ortaya koymaktadır. Hindu topluluğundan ve diğer yerel halktan birçok kişi, gözaltıların gerçek faileri koruma ve siyasi muhalifleri hedef alma amacı taşıdığına inanmaktadır. Bu algı, siyasi elitlerin ve kolluk kuvvetlerinin, komünal gerilimleri kendi çıkarlarına nasıl kullandığını geniş bir anlayışla uyum içindedir ve sıradan bireylerin devlet şiddeti ve yolsuzluğun sonuçlarına maruz kalmasına neden olmaktadır.

Bangladeş’teki siyasi kültür, yaygın şiddet, yolsuzluk ve baskı ile karakterize olup bu dinamiklerin şekillenmesinde önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. İktidardaki Awami League, komünal çatışmaları kontrolünü pekiştirmek, muhaliflerini itibarsızlaştırmak ve uluslararası müttefiklerinden destek kazanmak için kullanmakta, kendisini azınlık haklarının savunucusu olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Bu strateji, yalnızca dinler arası gerilimleri artırmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda iktidardaki elitlerin gerçek demokratik ilkeler ve insan hakları pahasına gücünü pekiştirmesine neden olur.

Siyasi yorumcu Asaduz Zaman, komünal gerilimlerin devam etmesi ile iktidardaki rejimin kleptokratik doğası arasındaki bağlantıya dair bir içgörü sunmaktadır. Zaman, Awami League’in eylemlerinin dinler arası gerilimleri daha da artırdığını ve önceki yönetimlerden daha fazla insanın zarar görmesine neden olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu perspektif, iktidar partisinin kontrolü sürdürmeye ve yolsuzluktan fayda sağlamaya odaklandığını, komünal düzen bozukluğunu çözmek yerine bu yolu izlediğini vurgulamaktadır.

Kısaca, Mushfiq, Hasan, Rafiq ve Basit’in vakaları, Bangladeş’teki daha geniş bir sistematik şiddet ve siyasi manipülasyon modelini gözler önüne sermektedir. Devletin

komünal şiddeti ele alma yaklaşımı, Müslüman kimliklerinin kriminalize edilmesi ve yasal süreçlerin istismar edilmesi ile karakterize olup, adalet ve insan hakları yerine iktidarı ve kontrolü önceleyen bir yönetim modelini yansıtmaktadır. Bu bireylerin deneyimleri, Bangladeş'in devlet aygıtındaki derin köklü sorunları ortaya koymakta ve yolsuzluk, baskı ve adaletsizliğe yönelik sistemik sorunların ele alınması için gerçek demokratik reformlara duyulan ihtiyacı vurgulamaktadır.

Bir sonraki bölüm, İslami sembollerin küçümsemesine verilen duygusal tepkilerin derinliğini gösteren bir örnekle başlar. Yerel bir minibüs şoförü olan Shahid, özellikle Kur'an-ı Kerim'e karşı aşırı hassasiyet göstermiştir. Bir saldırıya katıldığını itiraf etmesine rağmen, Kur'an'a olan saygısını vurgulamış ve polisin bu tür olaylarla başa çıkmadaki yetersizliğine duyduğu hayal kırıklığını dile getirmiştir. Başka bir kişi olan Basit de, Kur'an'a yapılan herhangi bir saygısızlığın ağır sonuçlar doğurması gerektiğine inandığını belirtmiş, ancak şiddete doğrudan katılmamıştır. Bu artan hassasiyet, Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddet söyleminde İslami sembollerle ilgili ahlaki yaralanmaların genellikle yoğun tepkilere yol açtığını yansıtmaktadır.

Bu olaylarla ilgili söylemler, sıklıkla bu tür ahlaki yaralanmaların önemini küçümsemekte ya da reddetmektedir. Medya anlatıları ve akademik söylem, bu tür iftira eylemlerini sadece söylenti veya yanlış suçlamalar olarak görmezden gelme eğilimindedir. Bu inkar, bu tür provokasyonların dini hassasiyetler üzerindeki gerçek etkisini göz ardı etmekte ve gerilimleri körükleyerek komünal şiddete yol açabilmektedir. Bu meselelerin ele alınması, provokasyonların hafife alınması yerine kabul edilmesini ve hafifletilmesini gerektirir.

Hefazat-e İslam'a bağlı yerel bir caminin imamı olan Kutub Uddin, Müslümanların Hinduların dinlerini uygulamaları nedeniyle saldırıya geçmediğini, ancak İslami sembollere, özellikle Kur'an'a yönelik hakaretlerin doğal olarak öfkeye yol açtığını açıklamıştır. Bununla birlikte, Uddin, Hindulara yönelik misilleme şiddetinin bir çözüm olmadığını vurgulamış ve topluluk liderlerinin bu tür provokasyonları önlemek için birlikte çalışması gerektiğini belirtmiştir. Uddin, komünal çatışmaların artmasını, hükümete ve özellikle Hindistan ile olan algılanan uyumuna duyulan daha geniş hayal kırıklığına bağlamıştır. Özellikle 2013 Hefazat baskısı ve 2021 Modi karşıtı protestolar sonrasında bu hayal kırıklığı daha da derinleşmiştir. Bu hayal kırıklığı, Bangladeşli

Müslümanlar üzerindeki Hindistan'ın etkisine ve Žižek'in sistematik adaletsizliklerin açık şiddete yol açabileceği teorisi ile örtüşen bir derin hoşnutsuzluğa işaret etmektedir.

Bir Hindu görüşmeci olan Prashad, Hinduların kasıtlı olarak İslami sembollere hakaret edeceği fikrini reddetmiş ve münferit olayların genelleştirilmemesi gerektiğini belirtmiştir. Hindistan'ın politikaları ile komünal gerilimler arasındaki bağlantıyı küçümsemiş ve Hindistan'ın Kurtuluş Savaşı sırasındaki tarihsel desteğinin devam eden olumlu ilişkileri haklı çıkardığını savunmuştur. Ancak bu perspektif, özellikle mevcut siyasi ortamda Bangladeşliler arasında yaygın bir görüş değildir.

Hinduizm'den Müslümanlığa geçen Abdullah, dini hassasiyetler ve siyasi dinamikler arasındaki etkileşime dair bazı içgörüler sunmuştur. Tüm dinlerin bir üstünlük duygusu taşıdığını ve dinine yapılan saldırıların doğal olarak öfke uyandırdığını belirtmiştir. Abdullah, mevcut Awami League (AL) hükümeti altında Hindu siyasi üstünlüğü ve hukuksuzluk algısının arttığını, bunun da komünal gerilimleri şiddetlendirdiğini gözlemlemiştir. Abdullah, barış ve güvenliği teşvik etmek için siyasi kültürün değiştirilmesinin gerekli olduğunu ileri sürmüştür.

Siyasi yorumcu Zaman, medyanın İslam karşıtı provokasyonları küçümsemesinin devam eden komünal gerilimlere nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu eleştirmiştir. Zaman, medyanın Müslümanlara yönelik hakaretleri ifade özgürlüğü olarak çerçevelediğini, ancak Müslümanlara yönelik gerçek şikayetleri ve sistematik şiddeti göz ardı ettiğini savunmuştur. Bu tasvir, Müslüman deneyimlerini marjinalleştiren ve ulusal kimlik, tarihsel şikayetler ve güncel siyasi dinamiklerin karmaşık etkileşimlerini görmezden gelen daha geniş bir anlatı ile uyumludur.

Zaman, Bangladeş'teki komünal gerilimlerin basit dini çatışmalara indirgenemeyeceğini vurgulamıştır. Bangladeş'in Pakistan'dan ayrılması ve Nehru milliyetçiliğinin etkisi gibi tarihsel faktörler, mevcut gerilimlere katkıda bulunmaktadır. Ekonomik istismarlar, sınır çatışmaları ve Hindistan gibi komşu ülkelerle yaşanan olumsuz diplomatik ilişkilerin bu gerilimleri daha da artırdığına dikkat çekmiştir. Zaman, Hindistan'ın Bangladeşlilere yönelik düşmanca

eylemlerinin, sınırda yaşanan ölümler ve ekonomik sömürü gibi, komünal şiddeti körüklediğini ifade etmiştir.

Bir diğer dönme olan Mohammad Zubair, bazı Hinduların ve yorumcuların Hindistan'ın etkisini göz ardı etme nedenlerine dair ek bağlam sağlamıştır. Hindistan'a duyulan güçlü duygusal bağın, bölgesel gerilimlerdeki rolünü kabul etmeye karşı isteksizlik doğurduğunu belirtmiştir. Dönüşümden sonra kişisel bakış açısındaki değişim, Hindistan politikalarının Bangladeş üzerindeki etkilerine dair bazı bireyler arasında artan farkındalığı yansıtan daha geniş bir eğilimi göstermektedir.

Hindutva siyaseti üzerine bir yorumcu olan Rahman, siyasi ve hegemonik faktörlerin komünal gerilimleri nasıl etkilediğini vurgulamıştır. AL hükümetinin algılanan Hindistan yanlısı duruşu ve seküler politikalarının, Müslüman çıkarlarına tehdit olarak görülen Hindutva ideolojilerini desteklediği düşünülmektedir. Bu duyguyu, sınır ölümleri ve Hindistan'daki anti-Müslüman politikalar gibi konular daha da şiddetlendirmektedir. Hindutva'nın yükselişi ve Müslüman kimliği üzerindeki etkisi, özellikle akademik ve sosyal ortamlarda komünal gerilimlere katkıda bulunmaktadır. Rahman, ayrıca, medyanın Müslümanları olumsuz tasvir ederken diğer topluluklar tarafından yapılan benzer eylemleri küçümsemesinin öfke ve misilleme döngüsünü nasıl şiddetlendirdiğini de not etmiştir.

Cumilla olaylarının ve sonuçlarının analizi, komünal şiddetin basitleştirici anlatılarını zorlayarak, ahlaki yaralanma, dini hassasiyetler ve siyasi dinamikler arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimleri ortaya koymaktadır. Shahid ve Basit gibi kişilerin dile getirdiği İslami sembollere yapılan hakaretlere verilen duygusal tepkiler, ahlaki yaralanmaların gerilimleri artırmadaki önemli rolünü vurgulamaktadır. Medyanın bu provokasyonları reddetme ya da küçümseme eğilimi, sorunu yalnızca daha da kötüleştirerek öfke ve şiddet döngülerine yol açmaktadır.

Daha geniş siyasi bağlam, Hindutva siyaseti ve Hindistan'ın etkisi, durumu daha da karmaşık hale getirmektedir. Bangladeş hükümetinin Hindistan ile olan algılanan uyumu, komünal gerilimleri daha da artırırken, siyasi dinamikler ve medya anlatıları kamu algısını şekillendirmektedir. Bu çok katmanlı dinamikleri anlamak, dini hassasiyetlere saygı duyan, dengeli medya anlatıları üreten ve dinler arası çatışmalara

katkıda bulunan temel siyasi faktörleri ele alan kapsamlı bir yaklaşım gerektirmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, gelecekteki şiddet olaylarını azaltmaya ve Bangladeş'teki komünal gerilimleri daha nüanslı bir şekilde anlamaya yardımcı olabilir.

Sonuç olarak, bu tez Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddetle ilgili üç temel soruyu ele almıştır: Medya ve entelektüel söylemlerin bu tür olayları doğru bir şekilde yansıtmayı yansıtmadığı, Awami League rejimi altında neden son zamanlarda komünal çatışmalarda bir artış olduğu ve seküler devletin bu tür şiddet sırasında ve sonrasında ne tür bir rol oynadığı. Çalışma, komünal şiddetle ilgili yakın tarihli bir vakayı inceleyerek başlamış ve anlatıların bu konuları yalnızca dini bir mercekten nasıl basitleştirdiğini eleştirmiş, mevcut anlayıştaki boşlukları ve önyargıları vurgulamıştır.

Giriş bölümü, komünal çatışmaların nedenlerini ve doğasını büyük ölçüde dini faktörlere, özellikle de İslam'a atfeden hakim anlatılara meydan okumuştur. Hindu ve Müslümanlar arasındaki bölünmeleri körükleyen sömürge dönemi politikalarının tarihsel mirasını tartışmış ve modern Bangladeş'te hala var olan bu gerilimlerin politikacılar tarafından nasıl sömürüldüğünü vurgulamıştır. Bölüm ayrıca, mevcut söylemin metodolojik ve teorik eksikliklerini eleştirmiş, bunun sömürgeci ve Oryantalist perspektiflerden ve ayrıca 11 Eylül sonrası dönemde seküler aktörleri ve devleti aklayan anlatılardan nasıl etkilendiğini göstermiştir. 'Komünalizm' kavramının, suçlama yönlendirmek ve alguları manipüle etmek amacıyla nasıl siyasi olarak kullanıldığı gösterilmiştir.

İkinci bölümde, Max Gluckman tarafından geliştirilen genişletilmiş vaka yöntemine odaklanarak metodoloji ve saha deneyimleri detaylandırılmıştır. Bu yaklaşım, teorik içgörülerini daha geniş sosyal ve politik bağlamlarla birleştirerek komünal şiddeti kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamaya olanak sağlamaktadır. Bölüm, özellikle Bangladeş'teki İslam'ın güvenlik konusu haline getirilmesi ve korku kültürü nedeniyle siyasi açıdan hassas bir ortamda saha çalışması yapmanın zorluklarını açıklamıştır.

Özellikle saha çalışması için seçilen alanların ve görüşmecilerin seçilme gerekçesi de tartışılmış ve çeşitli bakış açılarını sağlamak amacıyla bu seçimlerin yapıldığı vurgulanmıştır.

Üçüncü bölüm, Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddet üzerine mevcut literatürü eleştirel bir şekilde incelemiş ve bu tür çatışmaların çoğunlukla dini terimlerle, özellikle de İslam'a odaklanarak çerçevesini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu indirgemeci yaklaşım, karmaşık sosyo-politik dinamikleri göz ardı etmekte ve Müslüman kimliğini kriminalize eden bir anlatıyı sürdürmektedir. Bölüm, sömürgeci ve Oryantalist söylemlerin bu anlatıya nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu ve anlatı oluşturma siyaseti nedeniyle komünal şiddetin nasıl yanlış anlaşıldığını incelemiştir.

Dördüncü bölüm, 2021 Cumilla komünal saldırılarından elde edilen etnografik bulgulara dayanmaktadır ve Hinduların komünal olmayan ve Awami League'in Hindu topluluklarını koruyan bir parti olarak tasvir edilmesine meydan okumuştur. Bu bölüm, medya anlatıları ve devlet yanıtlarının, komünal şiddetin nedenlerini ve dinamiklerini sıklıkla yanlış tanımladığını, suçlamayı İslamcılara ve sıradan Müslümanlara kaydırıldığını ve siyasi elitleri sorumluluktan muaf tuttuğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bölüm ayrıca, keyfi tutuklamalar yoluyla şiddeti sürdürmede kolluk kuvvetlerinin rolünü incelemiş ve göz ardı edilen mağdurlar, özellikle siyasi muhalifler ve sıradan Müslümanlar üzerinde durmuştur.

Sonuç bölümü, komünal şiddetin, devlet, seküler siyasi aktörler ve daha geniş siyasi kültürün oynadığı rollerin anlaşılmasıyla incelenmesi gerektiğini savunmuştur. Mevcut akademik çalışmalar, genellikle dini boyutlara odaklanmakta ve komünal gerilimlere katkıda bulunan siyasi ve yapısal faktörleri göz ardı etmektedir. Tez, sosyo-dini, siyasi ve tarihsel perspektifleri birleştiren bütüncül bir antropolojik yaklaşımı savunmuştur. Mevcut araştırmalardaki önyargıların ve sınırlamaların ele alınması, hakim anlatıların sorgulanması ve daha geniş sosyo-politik bağlamın dikkate alınması gerektiği vurgulanmıştır.

Çalışma ayrıca kapsamının sınırlamalarına da dikkat çekmiş ve birden fazla saha ve perspektifi içeren gelecek araştırmaların, Bangladeş'teki komünal şiddet hakkında daha ayrıntılı bir resim sağlayacağını belirtmiştir. Bulgular, komünal şiddetin nasıl anlatıldığı ve ele alındığı konusunda yeniden değerlendirme yapılması gerektiğini, Bangladeş'in karmaşık sosyo-politik yapısını dikkate alan politikalar ve müdahaleler savunulmuştur.

CURRICULUM VITAE

MAHMUDUL HASAN NAEEM

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Nationality:

EMPLOYMENT

- Sep 2021- Jun 2024 **Ibn Haldun University**
Graduate Teaching Fellow
Courses taught: Humanity and Society; Comparative Theories and Methods;
History of Modern Turkey
- Feb 2023- Sep 2023 **Dorik Bangladesh Ltd.**
Junior Software Engineer

HIGHER EDUCATION

- Sep 2020 - Jun 2024 **Ibn Haldun University**, Istanbul, Turkiye
M.A. in Civilization Studies (with Outstanding Achievement Scholarship)
Thesis title: *Beyond the Banality of Labels: Examining the Narratives vs Realities of Communal Violence in Bangladesh*
Thesis Advisor: Prof. Dr. Irfan Ahmad
- Sep 2016 - Jun 2020 **Ege University**, Izmir, Turkiye
BSS in Journalism with High Honors (with Turkish Government Scholarship)
- Sep 2019 - Feb 2020 **University of Split**, Croatia
Erasmus+ Exchange student (with Erasmus+ scholarship)

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2020- 2024 Ibn Haldun Outstanding Achievement Scholarship (Ibn Haldun University, Turkey)
- 2019-2020 Erasmus Exchange Scholarship (University of Split, Croatia)
- 2017-2018 Erasmus Exchange Scholarship (Hanze University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands) (Declined due to scholarship policy)
- 2015-2020 Turkish Government Scholarship (Ege University, Turkey)

CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

- 2022- 2023 Banglanama (a semi-academic journal on Bengal based in DU)
Editor

CONFERENCE & NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

“Unlearning Communal Violence: State, Politics and Narratives of Victimhood in Bangladesh” in *Ibn Haldun University Graduate Conference 2024*.

“Keşmir Meselesi: Tarihi Arka Planı ve Hindistancılık Projesi” [The Kashmir Dispute: Historical Backdrop and the Hindutva Project] in Turkish Daily *Yeni Şafak* in 2019.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

English: Advanced proficiency (YÖKDİL score: 90/100; year 2024)

Turkish: Advanced proficiency (C1 certificate from Ege University, Turkey)

Arabic: Lower Intermediate proficiency

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Creative writing; proofreading and editing; report writing; teaching and proctoring; organizational and academic research; translation (English-Turkish-Bengali); web design and development; project and research design; budget drafting; project management.