

Religious Nationalism in Digitalscape: An Analysis of the Post-Shahbag Movement in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Social media can be seen as an emerging frontier where new forms of social relationships create collective consciousness or popularize new/old thoughts and ideas among Internet citizens, especially among the younger generation. Social media undoubtedly plays an important role in the emergence of nationalism in various countries, but has also contributed to religiously motivated communal violence around the world, especially in Bangladesh. These online platforms have also contributed to some powerful political movements, for example: the Arab Spring, Egyptian Revolution, Black Lives Matter (BLM), or the Shahbag movement in Bangladesh. These social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, are often used to share thoughts and perspectives, and often serve as tools to construct “truth.” In Bangladesh, Islam is the religion practiced by most citizens, while there is a strong dispute over the country’s nationalist base. One group of people wants to establish a religion-based nationalism, while the others want to hold on to their historical cultural practices beyond religious identity. Social media has become an important platform for this debate these days. This paper analyzes how social media contributes to religion-based nationalism in Bangladesh and how it tries to (re)shape nationalist ideas in the country. The paper observes a large number of social media sites to understand how social stigmatization of some discourses such as secular (*dhormiropakkho*), atheist (*nastik*), *shahbagi*, etc. can construct a form of “truth” against them to establish counter-religious thinking in the country. The paper reflects the logic and sentiments of the people who want to establish religious tradition as a common nationalist platform in the country through in-depth interviews. The research used the methods of online observation and offline interviews to explore the connection between online and offline and its impact on thoughts about nationalism in everyday life.

Keywords

Religious Nationalism, Social Media, Post-Shahbag Movement, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, religiously motivated violence has occurred repeatedly throughout the country in recent decades, with most victims being non-Muslim communities, particularly Hindus, and ethnic minorities. In the last decade, social media has proliferated among the young generation in Bangladesh, reaching a larger community with the help of smartphones. Today's world of internet has changed many social views in different ways. The discourse of social media in the digital world has already had a huge impact on online and offline citizens around the world. Many images and ideas circulating on the Internet about religion create a new sense of knowledge and understanding among ordinary Internet users, who accept and adopt these ideologies without confirmation or verification. However, nationalism is a complex and debatable issue in anthropological discussion, which has been discussed from different aspects over time. The core line of nationalist identity is very blurred in most cases, while it tries to create a collective consciousness through collective values, images or ideas, thus forming an "imagined community". On the other hand, religion itself is a wide field of discussion, and often it is associated with the nationalist idea or consciousness, where it acts as a force for nationalism.

This paper addresses all these issues from a different angle and focuses on the use of religious factors to create a new nationalism through the Internet, especially after the 2013 *Shahbag movement* in Bangladesh. The objective of this paper is to understand how social media contribute to the emergence of religion-based nationalism in Bangladesh. The paper analyzes online and offline ethnographic evidence and shows that nationalism in Bangladesh is taking a new form that is more connected to a religious perspective, especially Islamic religious traditions. In Bangladeshi society, there are some popular discourses such as secular (*dhormoniropekkho*), atheist (*Nastik*), *Shahbagi*, etc. which are often used to stigmatize a category of people in the country, and on the contrary, they also convey sensory ideas about them in the society. This paper analyzed how Bangladeshi people engage in social media, especially for religious purposes, and how religious traditions and practices replace or encourage to replace cultural traditions in Bangladesh to create a nationalist idea based on religion, more specifically "Islamic nationalism" in Bangladesh. Social media is becoming increasingly popular in Bangladesh, especially Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blogs. These online platforms connect people inside and outside the country through posts in Bengali, the mother tongue of most of the Bangladeshi citizens. However, the paper analyzed the historical development of nationalism and its complexities in a globalized world to reflect on the relationship between religion and

nationalism in history and how it has changed over the years, with a close connection to religion, especially in a country like Bangladesh. This paper was not about assessing any religious position or perspective, but rather about reflecting on the interconnectedness of religion, nationalism, and social media in the contemporary world.

2. Methodology

Our social worlds are going digital. Consequently, social scientists around the world are finding that to understand society, they need to track people's social activities and encounters on the Internet and through other technologically mediated communications (Kozinets, 2010). Participant observation is one of the most important tools in anthropological research, which involves participating in a situation and recording what is observed. This paper is influenced by the book *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research* (2019), by Robert V. Kozinets. The book describes a research method in which the online self is studied in a highly interactive manner using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The difference between these two approaches is that qualitative research is used to explore and understand meaning, while quantitative research is used to test theories by examining the relationship between measurable variables (ibid, Kozinets, 2010).

To observe online activities, the observation method was used on different social media platforms. Non-participatory (passive) approaches (Costello et al., 2017) are used to obtain naturalistic and unbiased data from the online community and social media spaces. Since the research topic is sensitive in the context of Bangladesh, the researcher intentionally avoided commenting on online posts on any platforms. Instead, the issues were raised during the online observation and used in the offline interviews. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted in Sylhet and Dhaka in Bangladesh to understand the relationship between subjects' online and offline activities, their social status and status quo, their religious views, their perceptions of nationalism, atheism, secularism, their feelings and emotional attachment to religion, and their perceptions of neighboring countries. In addition, content analysis and social network analysis were used as methods of analysis to examine the structure and patterns of relationships between or among social actors on various online platforms. Data from the field were analyzed using content analysis to determine the intentions of online participants. In addition, participants' attitudes and behaviors were analyzed to determine their emotional state and communication patterns related to religious nationalism and anti-atheist and anti-secular activism in Bangladesh. Social network analysis was used to draw the network of relationships among a group of online participants. Through this analysis, an attempt was made to draw a pattern among online activists who are religiously motivated pro-nationalists. However, ethical issues such as social media privacy were strictly followed, and any observed data or information was collected from the public profile. Some

sites required login for which the author used a personal account, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and some blogs.

3. Digitalscape, Social Media and Communal Violence

The Internet is a global network of computers or other electronic devices in which a person can reach any information/data around the world from any location that is widely visible and publicly accessible. It is a virtual world in which individuals can participate from any geographic location. Social media offer an online platform by using network technologies to interact with people in the same online platform. Social networking sites can be used to describe community-based websites, online discussion forums, chat rooms, blogs, and other social spaces on the Internet known as social media. It is also referred to as “digitalscape”, which is meant to illustrate the complex landscape of the Internet today. Moreover, social media has empowered online citizens to participate in conflicts and also, they can play a significant role in promoting the social movements (Yan, 2021).

Digitalscape can be related to the “real” world where it both enables and constrains the access of any state, institution, or individual to many geographical, social, economic or cultural spaces in digital format. More specifically, it is a virtual “place” on the Internet where people participate, access, express and share their knowledge and information, and have created a virtual community. El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009: p. 55) argue that “the virtual community is an extension of the real community, and the meaning and values of a virtual community are derived from the participants of that community. In other words, virtual communities do not function as isolated entities, but are the reflection of human cultural and social values.”

According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), there were 52.58 million Internet users in Bangladesh as of January 2022, and the number is increasing daily. The number of internet users accounts for nearly a quarter of the country’s total population. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Bangladesh, and Meta’s advertising resources claim that Facebook had 44.70 million users in Bangladesh at the beginning of 2022. There are numerous Facebook pages and groups in Bangladesh, including individual motivational speakers, religious speakers, and political leaders. There are pages dealing with different fields such as religion, politics, philosophy, regionalism, sexuality, nationalism, faith, fun, jokes, hobby, music, travel, education, climate, technology solutions, social awareness, economy and so on. Some Facebook pages have more than one million followers, which indicates the popularity of the pages. There are numerous Facebook pages that are not primarily concerned with religious content but share Islamic sentiment topics on various occasions. In one of the most recent incidents in October 2021, deadly communal violence had spread across the country after claims that a holy Islamic book had been desecrated, leading to attacks on dozens of Hindu temples. Police

opened fire on Muslim protesters, killing at least seven people at various locations. All of this unrest was sparked by videos and allegations that went viral on social media. Surveillance camera video footage showed that someone had placed the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, on the knee of a statue of the Hindu god Hanuman, in a makeshift temple built for the sacred Hindu festival of Durga Puja in the Cumilla district.

A young interlocutor, a 26-year-old Muslim working in a shopping mall in Cumilla district, participated in social media activism against Hindus during this incident and shared his thoughts about the entire incident. He said the following, “In the afternoon of that day, I was scrolling through Facebook and saw the video of the holy Quran being placed on the knee of a Hindu sculpture. This made me angry because it is a complete disrespect to our religion. Immediately, I shared this video on several sites and called for a gathering to protest such an incident. As a Muslim, I felt it was my moral duty to protest such humiliation of our holy religion. The following night, we organized a rally to protest such activities, but the police opened fire on us.” This statement is an example of the violence unleashed by social media. This digital landscape is no longer just a platform removed from offline reality but has already blurred the line between offline and online spheres. The other interlocutors who are devoted to religion share almost similar views on humiliation in their sacred religious book. Such anti-Hindu sentiment is a form of expression of religious devotion in Bangladesh, while in Sri Lanka or India, anti-Muslim sentiments have been subjected to the same agony against Muslims in recent history (e.g., [Ivarsson, 2019](#); [Annava-rapu, 2015](#)). Social media has become an open platform for the exchange of thoughts and ideas among internet citizens and is often used for political purposes or religious views to create new dimensions of consciousness. Religion-based nationalism is one of the parts that create such awareness among people who have similar motivation or intention to be motivated. However, religion-based nationalism does not necessarily have to be radical or violent. Instead, it offers to become part of this broader “imagined community” based on a particular religion. Social media offers the opportunity to spread various religious thoughts and sentiments of a particular religion among Internet citizens. This is welcomed by people with a similar perspective and motivates people to cultivate their religiosity in a similar way.

4. Social Media and Religion in Bangladesh

The world has recently witnessed many social movements and backlash via social media in various places around the world, including the Arab Spring, Iran, Egypt ([Yan, 2021](#); [El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012](#)) or the Shahbag movement, etc. Social media has enabled people to get information and move quickly. In the case of rumors or sentimental issues, they have mobilized people to move very quickly without clarifying the authenticity of the news or information. The recent social media-based movements have mobilized faster compared to the ear-

lier movements in the world. Response time is the key difference between the two eras—online social media and the pre-social media era. Movements in the pre-social media era, such as the Eastern Bloc movement or other movements in Europe in the 1960-80s, took a long time to organize and were controlled by specific leaders or contributors. In today's world, social media has the ability to mobilize activists or create an activist for a social/political agenda. The social media revolution is not only limited to socio-political goals, but also has a great impact on religious ideologies and religiosity in many parts of the world, especially in South Asian countries.

Previous studies on Internet-based religious practices argued that the use of an online platform for religion could bring revolutionary changes in the practices and traditions of religious acts around the world, contradicting traditional practice and significantly altering the connection and practice of religion (Dawson and Cowan, 2004 cited in [Campbell, 2012: p. 65](#)). Religious practice and knowledge sharing on the online platform have belied earlier expectations. Instead, social media has become one of the most important platforms for gathering information about religion and religious sentiments. A college student from Bangladesh shared her thoughts about getting information about religion online, "I have been using Facebook for more than six years and I just like this platform because it helps me to get a lot of religious information. I watch videos of waaz (Islamic sermon) and follow different religious sites where I get many important religious messages. I insist that my friends also follow some religious sites." Social media provides the opportunity to connect with religion on the online platform, and they have a large number of followers on different religious sites, regardless of religion. Religious posts on social media include pictures with descriptions, written narratives, short or long videos on religious topics, sermons or events, and live broadcasts of religious events. Importantly, most participants who post various religious items on Facebook pages believe that they are "doing good" for both people and religion and will be rewarded by God in the afterlife. On the other hand, followers enjoy such posts and consider them as a source of religious knowledge.

Sharing religious knowledge on social media has become a common practice for many religions around the world. Social media sites, especially Facebook, have become a massive platform to gather and share religious information through various posts. In most cases, these posts are written in the local language to allow for extensive communication with followers. The posts that are disseminated contain various types of religious information, which is often not questioned by the followers. In many cases, followers are afraid to question the authenticity of the posts because most believers have confidence in the religious posts and assume that the religious posts do not convey false messages or information. Like other religions, Muslim believers have confidence in the religious posts and speeches that are shared on social media. A 35-year-old man, owner of a tea stall, shared his thoughts about the authenticity of religious posts on Facebook. He said, "I constantly listen to waaz (Islamic sermons) on the Internet

while working at my stall. Sometimes I scroll on my phone for new religious posts. These religious videos help me get a reward from Allah by following the instructions in the videos. Sometimes I recite the verses of the Quran while listening to the videos. I do not believe that anyone will post false information about Islam on an Islamic site. I believe in the religious posts on the internet and try my best to follow them and practice accordingly... why would I question the authenticity of such a post? A pure Muslim will not spread false information... If I do not believe these posts, I would be a traitor to Allah. I do not want to be a disbeliever and it is haram (forbidden) in my religion.” The believers do not want to question the religious posts in general but believe that a religious person cannot spread false or questionable information on the Internet. The innocence of believers is one of the greatest strengths of their faith. On the other hand, if someone intentionally aims to spread hatred about other religions or believers, he uses this innocence as capital to achieve his goal. In this way, the content of hate speech reaches the innocent believers, who often do not verify the authenticity and start believing and behaving accordingly, without knowing that the person has become an object of this particular hate intention or other political motives.

On many occasions, spreading religious hatred against other religions has been used as a means to be associated with a group of like-minded believers. In Bangladesh’s recent history, a significant amount of hate speech spread through social media, leading to communal violence in different parts of the country (see [Al-Zaman, 2019](#)). There are controversies and debates about the use of social media in spreading hate speech and violence in the country and around the world. It is evident that some religiously motivated sites/groups post on social media aimed at spreading hate about other religions or believers (see [Ellis-Petersen, 2021](#)). In the Bangladeshi context, they target not only other religious believers but also atheists or non-believers. The following section explores how social media contributed to the stigmatization or categorization of people by some of the local discourses in Bangladesh such as *Nastik* (atheist), *Dhormaniropekkho* (secular), *Shahbagi* (who called for the death penalty for the 1971 war criminals), *Hefazoti* (Islamic activists) using netnographic evidence.

5. Post-Shahbag Movement: Hatred against Seculars and Atheists in Social Media

5.1. Context of Hatred

The International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh is a domestic war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh established in 2009 to investigate and prosecute suspects for genocide committed by the Pakistani army and its local collaborators during the 1971 Liberation War. In the initial phase, 12 war criminals were charged with rape, murder, mutilation, and collaborating with the Pakistan Army. Most of the convicted war criminals were leaders of the Islamic party Jamaat-e-Islam, three of whom have already been sentenced to death. The *Shahbag* protests, which began on February 5, 2013, and later spread to other parts of Bangladesh, be-

came known as the *Gonojagaran* Mancha. They began with a demand for the death penalty for Abdul Quader Mollah, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment by the International Criminal Court of Bangladesh. The protesters also demanded the death penalty for all war criminals in the country. In addition to the mass protests, there were also some bloggers who actively participated and supported the movement. Some of them wrote against Islam and the Prophet of the religion in their blogs and criticized Islamic law. However, in the beginning, the movement was based on the participation of people from different social classes, religions, age groups and genders. The movement was non-violent and lasted for a few weeks with thousands of people participating. A large number of seculars actively participated in the movement, and during this period the counterpart of this movement also became active. The *anti-Shahbag* group, or more precisely the Islamic activists, exposed the blogs of some atheist bloggers who wrote against Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. This became an emotional issue for the mass of Muslims in the country, and most of them sharply criticized the content of the blogs. This issue triggered the *anti-Shahbag* movement on another level. Islamist groups stigmatized the entire *Shahbag movement* as part of *Natikatabad* (atheism). During this period, only a few national Bengali newspapers published these controversial blogs that reached the masses in print. So, social media activism did not stay online but came on the ground (offline).

Later, during the *Shahbag movement*, atheist blogger Rajib Haider, also known as *Thaba Baba*, who wrote against Islam from his point of view, was stabbed to death outside his house in Dhaka. His work was heavily criticized by Islamic scholars and the country's Muslim masses. His blogs ignited hatred for atheists across the country, and the issue of atheism and secularism took on a new dimension in the country. Discussions and controversies about atheism and secularism are not new in the context of Bangladesh. There is a history of violence revolving around this issue. The *Shahbag movement* was an important event in Bangladesh's history in which social media played an important role. During this time, *Natikotabad* (atheism) was heavily criticized on social media by many Muslims and some Islamists expressed their anger against atheist bloggers, both on online and offline platforms.

5.2. Online and Offline Activism against Secular and Atheist

Hefazat-e-Islam, a non-political but activist group of Qawmi educational philosophy, has actively protested various issues that they find controversial in their Islamic religious sentiments. The organization organized a large rally with more than a hundred thousand participants from all over Bangladesh, mainly Qawmi madrasa students and teachers, in Dhaka in 2013, demanding punitive measures against the *Shahbag* protesters as well as the atheist bloggers (*Nastik* bloggers) who demeaned Islam and the Prophet. Meanwhile, the *Shahbag* protesters (called *Shahbagi*) were stigmatized by Hefazat-e-Islam as atheist activists, as atheism has a negative connotation for many Muslims in Bangladesh. The picture shows

a rally of Islamist groups protesting against the Shahbag movement, holding a placard reading (Figure 1).



Figure 1. During the protest in Dhaka in 2013, few activists of Hefazat-e-Islam showed a placard with a text—“Spare dogs and cats, but kill the atheists”. Source: Facebook, 2020.

“Spare dogs and cats
But kill the atheists.”

Muslims in Bangladesh harbor a deep-rooted resentment against atheists. This is not necessarily a statement made by Islamic activists, but a sentiment shared by people from different economic and educational backgrounds. Social media has recently helped fuel anger against atheists and seculars. The text on the poster explicitly expresses hatred for atheists by saying that stray animals deserve better treatment than atheists. In the Bangladeshi context, stray animals such as cats and dogs are mistreated on the streets on many occasions, such as with stones, sticks, and hot water without compassion. The poster’s statement reflects those atheists are among the stray animals and their killing is justified from their point of view. The poster also states that atheism is undesirable in the country and the atheists should be exiled because they believe the country is a Muslim majority nation. A 29-year-old interviewee, Maruf, who works in a jewelry store in Dhaka and has completed 8th grade, shared his feelings and emotions about Facebook and atheism in Bangladesh in a detailed interview. He said, “These people (atheists) should be hanged to death because they are enemies of the country and religion. This is a country of Muslims, and they always talk against

Muslims. They hate Islam and want to destroy Islam in this country... and I have seen many posts on Facebook that betray their intentions. These atheists are vile people and are trying to make this country a part of India. As a Muslim, I cannot let this happen, it is our duty to save this country... Bangladesh is a country for Muslims and Islam should be the only religion.” This statement argues several contemporary issues, including atheism and anti-Indian sentiments, with the intention of developing an Islamic sentiment in conjunction with nationalism. This young Muslim is extremely faithful to his religion even though he never attended a religious school. In Bangladesh, religious sentiments do not originate in religious schools (such as madrasas); rather, these sentiments are prevalent in society and are practiced in the daily lives of many working-class Bangladeshi Muslims.

The interlocutor Maruf believes that Islam in Bangladesh is threatened by the atheists, and he has no interest in religious diversity in his country. His statement clearly expresses that social media is the main source of his motivation and knowledge about religion and anti-Islamic activism in Bangladesh. He has been using Facebook since 2013 to read and share posts about religion and nationalism. For him, religion and nation are two important issues that should be protected from all other forces that could threaten the integrity and purity of state and religion. Thus, social media contributes to developing a form of religious perception and a nationalistic image among the many participants of social media in Bangladesh. In this specific religious perception, the motivated group of people considers atheism (*nastikota*) and secularism (*dhormoniropekkhota*) to be against the Islamic way of life. This religious perception also suggests that we live in a nation ruled by religious leaders and religious philosophies. Moreover, social media posts containing hate speech against atheists and seculars are spreading a masse in the online sphere, contributing to growing anger and hatred against atheists and seculars.

5.3. Perception towards Secular and Atheist

Secularism and atheism are two different discourses. Atheism is considered a belief system, while secularism is a political doctrine. Secularism as a doctrine tries to ensure the opinions of people with different beliefs in a society. It allows people to express their opinions freely and publicly. During the field research, it was found that most interlocutors viewed atheists and secularists with a similar connotation. However, in a conversation with a 55-year-old informant, Abdul Hannan, a madrasa teacher, he was able to clearly explain why he placed atheists and secularists in the same category. He said, “As I understand it, atheists (*nastik*) do not believe in any religion or God. Secularists (*dhormoniropekkho*), on the other hand, demand freedom for all religions and have sympathy for all religions. They also want to give equal priority to all religious people, including atheists. But this is exactly the problem for me. Secularism is the first step of atheism. If you allow people to talk about other religions, the innocent people in our country might defect to other religions or misunderstand Islam. The secu-

larists are always behind Islam and always want to give priority to religions other than Islam. If we allow secularism in Bangladesh, our religion (Islam) will not survive in the long run, and we cannot allow that. I think Islam is not comparable to any other religion and secularism or atheism should not be practiced in Bangladesh. Therefore, both atheists and secularists are harmful to Islam, and we do not want people who believe in them.” This statement clarifies the attitude towards atheists and secularists in Bangladesh. For them, seculars are no different from atheists; rather, seculars welcome atheists to practice their faith, and this motivates others in society. In their eyes, the practice of secularism is similar to atheism, and both are a threat to Islam in Bangladesh.

During the interviews and online observation, many Bangladeshis expressed almost similar views about atheism and secularism. Some of them think that a person who comes from a Muslim family or has a Muslim name should not question Islam and its philosophy. They believe that people who bear a Muslim name in Bangladesh should not be atheists. Abdul Hannan, the Madrasa teacher, shared his thoughts about atheists and secular people from Muslim families, “A person born in a Muslim family is already a privileged person in terms of religion. The person should not violate Islamic law and philosophy. If a person becomes an atheist in Bangladesh, it is an example for many other Muslims and there is a chance that the number of atheists and seculars in the country will grow. If their number increases day by day, our religion will be in danger. Therefore, we must prevent people from becoming secular and atheist”. He added, “Bangladesh is a holy land for Muslims as a large number of *Pir* and *Awliya* (Sufi spiritual leaders) came to our country to spread Islam. They changed the religion of our ancestors and led us to the most meaningful religion. We want all people in our country to follow the rules and regulations of Islam. If we succeed in establishing our religion properly, all the crises plaguing the country, such as corruption, crime and other diseases, will be eradicated immediately.” The teacher’s statement reflects similar perceptions to posts on social media that believe the country should be free of atheists and secularists. One of the main reasons to avoid atheism and secularism is that these philosophies could confuse the younger generation and eventually destabilize the harmony of Islam in Bangladesh and people may not be as religious in the future as they are today.

Atheism and secularism are considered a social stigma for many people in Bangladesh. The madrasa teacher believes that non-believers are abominable and oppose Islam. Their number should be limited by stopping them. Social stigma is one of the mechanisms that prevent people in Bangladesh from being atheists and seculars. In the country, many atheists cannot publicly acknowledge their position. In most cases, atheists are stereotyped by the extreme believers of Islam and considered anti-Islamic propagandists. In Bangladesh, a number of atheist bloggers have been killed in recent years, especially during and after the *Shahbag movement* (see Parvez, 2021; Zaman, 2018; De, 2018). The social stigma against atheists and seculars restricts them to live within their small social circle in the

country and not share their inclinations as believers or non-believers in public. A college student who calls herself an atheist shared her thoughts about the social stigma: “I cannot disclose my position as an atheist in Bangladesh, even in my family. Only my closest friends know about it. Once I shared my views with some of my classmates who took it negatively and tried to convince me to become a believer. Now I carefully choose who I share my thoughts with. On social media, we see a lot of cyberbullying against non-believers in our country. I do not want to be a victim of that bullying anymore.” The social stigma demotivates people in Bangladesh to call themselves atheists or seculars. It leads to a multi-layered social crisis that needs to be explored. However, social media is helping to spread knowledge about the social stigma against atheists and seculars, which is often reproduced on online platforms.

6. Religion and Nationalism in the Digitalscape

Nationalism is one of the most important discussions in anthropology, and many theorists have defined this concept with its multiple characteristics. Nationalism is celebrated in many parts of the world, which shows the persistence of national ideas. It has been used in many forms that point to the creation and preservation of a nation. In this context, [Anthony Smith \(1998\)](#) has pointed out five ways in which nationalism is used. The overall process of building and maintaining a nation involves 1) a consciousness of belonging to the nation; 2) a language or symbolism of the nation; 3) an ideology (including the cultural doctrine of nations); 4) a social and political movement to achieve the nation’s goals and realize the national will; and 5) nationalism can usually be either an ideology or a form of behavior or both (*ibid.*).

Nationalism could be symbolized as a social glue that can arise from various sources such as ethnicity, socio-cultural, or even state-imposed nationalism. The shared history, language, territory, or other cultural characteristics of an ethnic community may be the center of a sense of belonging to that particular community. This sense of belonging could be perceived as a nation, which is a variant of nationalism. There would be some form of thought, custom, value, religion, language, etc. The original sense of belonging is what people take as “given” for their identity—another basis of nationalism according to [Clifford Geertz \(1963\)](#). The nationalism of the state has an official version of nationalism in which the state encompasses all the attributes that legally entitle people to be citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, national identity, and culture ([Kellas, 1998: p. 67](#)).

Nationalism and religion are discussed in various disciplines with different approaches, including social science anthropology and religious studies. Most social scientists, anthropologists, and historians define the rise of nationalism as part of modernization and thus secularization ([Anderson, 1991](#); [Gellner, 1983](#); [Liah, 1996](#)). According to [Smith \(1998\)](#), nationalism could replace religion, which could be a political religion, a substitute religion ([Seton-Watson, 1977](#) cited in [Gorski & Türkmen-Derviřođlu, 2013](#)) or simply a religion ([Hayes, 1960](#)). Ac-

According to Western thought, nationalism and religion hardly stand side by side, but have combined with modernity and serve each other. Nationalism often acts as a common thread that connects and separates people in the modern world (Smith, 1995; Smith, 1998). On the other hand, religion, which forms the core of cultural practices or underlies a culture—and often emerges as one of the most important factors in the formation of a nationalist “imagined community” can be interpreted as religious nationalism.

It is argued that nationalism contributed to modernity, or vice versa, bringing a secular approach to the state by displacing religion from the core of the nationalist idea. In this respect, religious nationalism is for many scholars a kind of oxymoron of modern nationalism (Juergensmeyer, 1996). Nationalism developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and was primarily based on ethnicity and/or language (Van der Veer, 1994). It is argued that nationalism slowly gained strength and the power of religion became concentrated over time, eventually linking nationalism to religion in many countries (Van der Veer & Lehmann, 1999). It is believed that language as a component of nationalism is more logical, secular and democratic compared to religion (Chowdhury, 2007).

Nationalism was the new religion with similar myths and symbols and expected similar loyalty to the country. It is more political than patriotism, which is associated with some collective hopes, dreams, and memories; and the people of a nation want to live on the basis of these hopes and dreams (Chowdhury, 2007). In many states, a furious relationship between religion and nationalism occurred, and nationalism and religion became competitors. Religious leaders criticized nationalism as a liberal or Western imposition, as intolerant of religion, and as promoting differences among religions. In many states, however, nation and religion became intertwined, and nations became so tied to a faith that it became difficult to imagine their nationalism without their faith. As Safran (2003) argues in his book *The Secular and the Sacred: Nation, Religion, and Politics*, the “state was in most cases a secular manifestation of the dominant faith.” Therefore, religious nationalism cannot be ignored if religion plays a significant or perhaps even greater role in the emergence of the non-Western nationalist movement (Gorski & Türkmen-Derivoğlu, 2013: p. 194). Friedland contends that the national identities of Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Palestine are all steeped in religious narratives and myths, symbols and rituals (Friedland, 2001). Van der Veer (1994) argues that nation-building in India has depended on religious antagonisms between Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Unlike the Christian New Testament, the Torah and Qur’an are not only about the individual’s relationship with God, but also about a politically organized community of believers (Gorski & Türkmen-Derivoğlu, 2013). Thus, religious attachment to nationalism is not necessarily a non-Western pattern, but in many countries religious motivation is intertwined with nationalist ideas. It is often considered one of the most important foundations for the existence of a nation.

In Bangladesh, there are anti-secular and anti-atheist sentiments in society

that people associate with the same nationalist philosophy. As in other countries, such as India and Sri Lanka, religious-based nationalist movements have been on the rise in social media for years (Srivastava, 2020). Populist statements against “other” religions and philosophies are prevalent on social media and are seen as an initiative to unite the people of Bangladesh under the same umbrella of religious nationalism. In their dream of a Muslim nation, many Bangladeshis have expressed the hope of uniting under the umbrella of religious nationalism by driving out atheists and seculars, who are often labeled as Islamophobic groups. The digital landscape or social media plays an important role in spreading such ideas and ideologies on social media platforms in Bangladesh. These platforms shape Bangladeshi identity, which is associated with religious nationalism, and a significant number of online participants agree with this approach.

The basis of Bangladeshi nationalism has a long history and debate. The debate around Bangladeshi and Bengali nationalism has taken a political turn during the year as the country accommodates various ethnic and religious groups. In most cases, political parties assume that the populations of other religious and ethnic communities claim the majority of Muslims and Bengali-speaking populations, which ultimately marginalizes people of other faiths, religions, languages, and philosophies. However, Bangladeshi national tradition and culture is another topic that is widely discussed in the digital scene. There is often criticism that cultural practices have been adopted from Indian culture, especially Hindu culture. However, it is difficult to define something like Indian or Hindu culture. Moreover, the question of what Bangladeshi culture is—a burning issue that surfaces in social media, especially at the time when the nation celebrates some Bangladeshi traditions. It is often confused with Islamic and Hindu religious practices. The celebration of *Pohela Boishakh*, the Bangladeshi New Year, is heavily criticized by Islamists who claim that this custom is linked to the Hindu religion and should be avoided in Bangladesh. Similarly, the celebration of the thirty-first night is considered a Christian culture. There are numerous videos and written posts on social media explaining from an Islamic perspective why celebrating *Pohela Boishakh* is forbidden (haram) in Islam. These posts are popular among many people across the country and spread the message to the mass of the population to shun this tradition and follow the Islamic way of life in daily practice. In this way, some cultural practices are stigmatized as bad culture and Islamic culture and tradition are essentialized as an antagonist in the country.

Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) offers a close look at the everyday lived emotions that are part of larger material and discursive structures of the nation-state. In particular, it examines the work that emotions do and what they produce in the contemporary formation of the capitalist nation-state. For Ahmed, emotions operate on the surface of bodies, connecting them to communities or placing them outside of communities, and creating social relations that define the rhetorical terrain of the nation. In the post-Shahbag digital landscape, atheism has a very negative image among internet citizens and

also in the real life of the country. In today's Bangladesh, a feeling has emerged that makes many people dream of a country without atheists and seculars. In the current situation, the emotional proposal of an atheist-free Bangladesh is not a pipe dream, but there are some examples of the murder of atheist bloggers since the 1990s. Emotions related to religious sentiments, often accompanied by atrocities, have led to the loss of many innocent people in this country in recent years (Ellis-Petersen, 2021). All recent incidents related to religious identity and religiosity have been spread through social media. While it is argued that the country has developed a religious culture in different political eras (cf. Schulz, 2020), the recent violence has a historical background of political activity in the country. However, diverse opinions are welcome on social media, and they often encourage the spread of stereotypical, generalized, and simplified ideas about anti-Islamic sentiments. This propaganda contributes to the emergence of neo-nationalism via social media, which seems to contradict the early philosophy of nationalism and inspires a religious-based nationalism in Bangladesh.

7. Conclusion

Often the word *nastik* (atheist) is used to refer to a non-Muslim. There are major ontological differences between atheists and seculars, and all religions are fundamentally different from each other. On many occasions, especially on social media, the distinction between seculars, atheists, and non-Muslims is blurred. On various social media sites, non-Muslims or seculars are often also referred to as atheists, and the many active participants blindly adopt these stereotypes in their daily lives. As a result, this leads to religiously motivated violence across the country. Emotions regarding the views and practices of Islam are very sophisticated and are used as a tool or weapon to create a collective consciousness. On many occasions, the hardships and struggles of Muslims around the world are posted on social media, which reaches the emotions of Muslims in Bangladesh. Along with these emotional posts, a group of Muslims stigmatize or stereotype a group of people and their followers in the country. In some cases, fake posts about religion have also triggered violence in the country. Previous ethnographic research has shown that many Internet users do not search for the authenticity of posts or check the validity from a religious point of view. Instead, they believe the posts and immediately react with anger, leading to religious violence in the country. On the other hand, some religiously motivated political parties in the country assign some traditional practices in Bangladesh to the "other" culture and traditions and consequently stereotype them as "bad" practices from a religious perspective. Such cultural practices are often labeled as "Hindu culture" or "Western culture" and it is prescribed to avoid such traditional practices. In this way, the posts also motivate people to follow Islamic traditions in their daily lives to create a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, as they always claim that the majority of the country's population is Muslim and they should follow Muslim culture and tradition, not the one that

has been practiced in that region for many years. By portraying secular Muslims and atheists as anti-Islamic agents, the Islamists spread this discourse in the country. In this context, social media plays the most important role in spreading this discourse because, on the one hand, they inspire Bangladeshi internet citizens to join a religious nationalist platform. They encourage many Bengali Muslims to practice Bangladeshi Islamic traditions as their cultural practices in everyday life. Thus, an “imagined community” based on Islamic traditions and practices has developed in Bangladesh over the years.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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