

Forty Two Years of Bangladesh: Identity, Culture, Economy, and Politics



AIBS Preconference | October 17, 2013

AIBS Preconference

October 17, 2013

University Room AB
Madison Concourse Hotel
1 West Dayton Street
Madison, WI 53703

Sponsored by:

American Institute of Bangladesh Studies
B488 Medical Sciences Center
1300 University Avenue
Madison, WI 53706

Golam M. Mathbor, President

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Overview:

Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971. The country is small in size but the seventh largest in population. People of many ethnic groups, linguistic communities, major religious persuasions, and numerous economic and professional categories inhabit this country. It boasts the largest mangrove forest, the longest unbroken sea beach, the most fertile soil, and the hardest of peoples. Its songs and dances, its poetry and literature, its folklores and philosophies, its sages and saints draw on a tradition that is thousands of years old.

This land has been conquered many times for its riches but never completely defeated. The Pathans, the Mughals, and the British have all had their day but people have stood firm, fought back, and in the end prevailed. Bangladesh has lost much. The poverty, for which the country is often cited in the media, is the result. But the country has gained too. The language, the literature, the arts, the culture, and the people as a whole are richer because of those contacts. Among all the countries that are striving for development, Bangladesh has made great strides in its economic programs achieving 6 to 7% steady growth rates. It has made remarkable gains in market-oriented liberal economy, primary education especially for girls, and better health services for its people. The country notably improved both its economic performance and its human development indicators and reduced dependence on foreign aid significantly over the decades. It has been able to hold on to its democratic processes, in spite of the numerous obstacles thrown at it periodically. But, most importantly, it has achieved tremendous successes in its social development, and is very close to achieving the millennium development goals.

Aims and Objectives:

This preconference will look at the processes of social transformation occurring in Bangladesh over and beyond the timeline and landscape of Shahbagh 2013. There will be a number of events including paper and panel presentations as part of this preconference. The presentations will focus on identity of Bangladesh in the world map; its history, language and motion; and the socio-political and economic issues the country is trying to reconfigure.

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Thursday, October 17, 2013

Opening Ceremony

8:45 a.m.–9:15 a.m.

University AB Room, Concourse Hotel

Coffee and Pastries

9:15 a.m.–9:30 a.m.

University AB Room, Concourse Hotel

Opening Remarks

Conference Chair: Dr. Golam M. Mathbor, President, AIBS

Identity and Historical Trends in Bangladesh

9:30 a.m.–11:00 a.m.

University AB Room, Concourse Hotel

Chair: Mr. Naeem Mohaiemen, Columbia University

Topic 1: Such a Long Journey: Navigating Borders

Dr. Annu Jalais, National University of Singapore, Singapore

The twentieth century rocked Bengal with an unprecedented conundrum: what was it to be Bengali? It wasn't just a metaphorical question but one which had deep political implications. Political implications that would lead to partitions: geographic, social and cultural. Both Bangladesh and West Bengal, in India, are still grappling with what it might mean to be "Bengali" and whether that identity can be divested from religion altogether. On either sides of the border, and in very different ways, Bengalis are faced with what it means to be a "Bengali"; in this paper, the author will explore how this is shaping the political, social, and cultural canvas of Bengal, both that of the nation (Bangladesh) as well as the region West Bengal in India.

Topic 2: Such a Long Journey: Beyond Polar Opposites

Dr. Samia Huq, BRAC Univesrity, Bangladesh

While being Bengali and Muslim has historically resulted from different workings of power, today, the Bangladeshi Muslim appears to have very little option other than define himself through one of two polar opposites consisting of: the ultra-secular liberals, or the anti-71 and thus anti-nationalist Islamists. As Islam presents itself through new adaptations to modern life, the polarization between the two camps widens as citizens who desire Islam as one of the key anchors of their identity, are left devoid of possibilities, turning to the Islamist or versions of the Islamist rhetoric. However, within this polarization, there are moments that represent the desire to go beyond the fixity of rhetoric. Some of those moments are articulated by women who congregate to read and discuss the Quran and ways to be a "good Muslim citizen." In thinking with these women on different permutations of thoughts that may help ease the moments of fissure, I look at the work of Allama Abul Hashim who, in his active years in and out of Muslim League politics, wrote extensively on what it means to be Bengali and Muslim through anti-colonial, national and cultural struggles. An exploration of Hashim's key doctrinal arguments and political positioning intends to illuminate the limits and possibilities of current Muslim maneuverings towards the removal of a bipolar Bangladesh, in its aspiration for pluralism and democracy.

Topic 3: Shahbag, Trance and the Magic of the Nation

Dr. Seuty Sabur, BRAC Univesrity, Bangladesh

Shahabag movement left multiple traces in all of us, activists, academics, and photographers - ordinary individuals. It is difficult to produce a convincing



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inventory of events while we are still embedded within the movement, partly because of its contingent nature and fast pace. It is, however, possible to provide snapshots from Shahabag- fragments rearticulating 'Bengali nationalism'. Hence, I am aiming to document the sentient experience individuals have been having over a month. Using various blogs, notes, status updates, I will argue that being in trance in a 'carnavalesque' space like 'Gono Jagoron Moncho', Shahabag, provided individuals the flexibility to consolidate their identity (gendered-classed-ethnic-religious) as 'Bengali'/'Bangladeshi' and means (resistance) to reclaim the 'nation'.

Topic 4: Prisoners of Shothik Itihash (correct history)

Mr. Naeem Mohaiemen, Columbia University, USA

The ghosts of 1971 keep returning to haunt the body politic, reflected, for example, in our troubled, unresolved, performative relationship with the much misunderstood, and misappropriated icon of secularism. Along with a corporate instrumentalisation of this history, the greatest damage to the process of recording history has been the involvement of politicians. They have repeatedly dabbled into the process of documentation and compilation – attempting to set up a reward-patronage system for loyal academics, and punishment system (or exile) for those who refuse to toe the party line. What to think of the recent unhinged polemics by octogenarian historians, deploying 'facts' in a facile manner (no footnotes, references, or context) in the service of political campaigns. Thus far, we have been prisoners of history, and for those wishing to break free of proscribed narratives, decoupling historical research from the political process is an essential evolution, to start capturing 1971 in all its complexities, its twinning of achievement and heartbreak.

42 Years of Bangladesh: Unexpected Perspectives

11:00 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

University AB Room, Concourse Hotel

Chair: Dr. Sanchita Saxena, University of California, Berkeley

Topic 1: Periodization and the Twentieth Century: Grappling with the Pre-Histories of Bangladesh

Dr. Neilesh Bose, University of North Texas, USA

This paper will discuss the first and second partitions as well as the history of Pakistan movement in Bengal within a larger twentieth century history of Bangladesh. As one of the nation-states formed partially, but not completely, out of the colonial structures of power embedded within the British Empire, it deserves a deep reflection about the nature of nineteenth century political change as well as comparisons with other regions of South Asia, namely Sri Lanka. The paper will begin with a review of the relevant historiography on both the first (1905-1911) and second (1947) partitions of Bengal. Second, the paper will offer thoughts on how the first and second partitions point not to the result of Bangladesh, but to multiple points in a broader regional history, including a history of connections with the Indian Ocean and a history of the trans-regional world of modern Islam; both of these histories demonstrate the search for political community outside the nation form. Finally, the paper will offer thoughts on how to situate the comparability of Bangladesh with other South Asian states like Sri Lanka and the fates of the Indian location of West Bengal.

Topic 2: A War Within a War: Mizos in East Pakistan and Bangladesh

Dr. Willem van Schendel, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Over the last four decades historians have narrated the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 in specific ways.



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As scholarly contributions are moving beyond the main themes that dominate public discussions, it is clear that it is impossible to reduce the war to a single master narrative of violence, heroism, betrayal and victimhood. This paper takes up a small thread in the vast tapestry of the war to challenge a number of conventions in the historiography, notably the national context, the apportioning of blame, and the ethnic perception. I do so by using mainly visual sources that reveal the story of guerrilla fighters from India who had sought refuge in East Pakistan and how they became embroiled in the war and its aftermath. This subplot to a much greater upheaval highlights the complexities of grasping what war is and how to present it as a nexus of multi-layered processes and events.

Topic 3: 'Where Do They All Come From? Social Transformation in Bangladesh

Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Research Initiatives Bangladesh

The appearance of thousands of people in the streets of Dhaka chanting slogans and demanding justice is not unheard of in the history of Bangladesh. So what was/ is it in the Shahbagh movement of 2013 that caught everyone unaware and made people all over the world draw comparisons left and right (white crow event, Bangla spring, kerbside history) in an attempt to understand the phenomena that occurred in the Dhaka streets from 5th February onwards? What made millions of city-dwellers and later small-town habitants throng together behind a bunch of bloggers and online activists in the demand for justice to war crimes that took place a whole generation ago? Why were people looking back and not forward, or WERE they looking back. To seek answers to these questions this paper looks at processes of social transformation occurring in Bangladesh over and beyond the timeline and landscape of Shahbagh 2013.

Topic 4: Bangladesh Studies: A Backwater in Burmese Academia

Dr. Tharaphi Than, Northern Illinois University, USA

When the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea delivered a verdict on 14 March 2012 regarding the dispute between Bangladesh and Burma on St. Martin's Island, Burmese, both laymen and experts alike, were caught by surprise. Bangladeshi newspapers reported the verdict as 'a big win' and only from those headlines did Burmese know they 'lost'. Little is known about Bangladesh and Bangladeshi-Burmese relations in Burma and one could ask why Bangladesh attracts little attention among Burmese scholars. Recent debates on Rohingya, and stigmas attached to Rohingya seem to have compounded the problem. Absence of serious studies on this neighbour of Burma, Bangladesh, contributes to the lack of clear understanding of the problems thereby inevitably prolonging conflicts concerning both countries. This paper will look at why Bangladesh remains an unpopular subject in Burma. Some of the research questions include what the popular narratives about Bangladesh and Bangladeshi society inside Burma are; if and how Bengali literature and culture are decoupled or dissociated from their connections with Bangladesh; if relations between Arakanese and Burmans influence Burmese academia regarding their views towards Arakan's neighbour, Bangladesh; and how the interactions between scholars and the state as well as the society affect the intellectual freedom inside Burma. Using oral history, recent news reports and archives, this paper hopes to provide some answers to why there exists such prolonged historical lacuna.

Lunch Break
University AB Room
(all participants are invited)

12:30–2:00 p.m.

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Economic Opportunities and Challenges

2:00 p.m.–3:30 p.m.

University AB Room, Concourse Hotel

Chair: Dr. Michael Bowler, Winona State University

PANELISTS:

Dr. Munir Quddus, Prairie View A&M University, Texas

Dr. Rahim Quazi, Prairie View A&M University, Texas

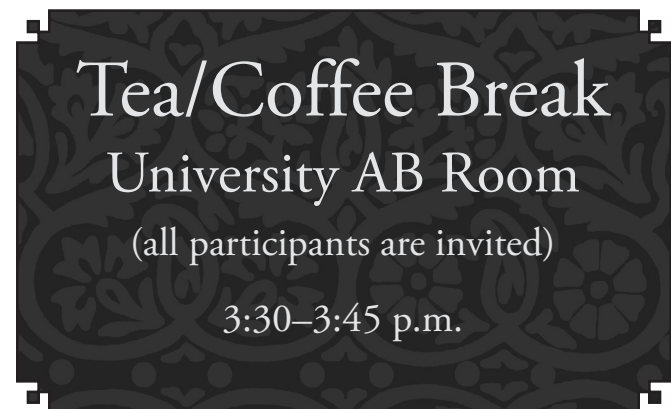
Dr. Saad Andaleeb, Pennsylvania State University, Erie

Dr. Farida Khan, University of Wisconsin-Parkside

Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI), a USA-based policy advocacy and research organization comprised of independent scholars, will organize a panel discussion on the history and the future economic opportunities and challenges facing Bangladesh today. Since the nation embraced economic liberalization in the 1980s, the country has achieved considerable success in attaining a steady annual GDP growth rates exceeding 5%. It has made great strides in promoting trade liberalization, credit expansion, export promotion, financial deepening, improvement in primary education, life expectancy, and health services, etc. It is remarkable that Bangladesh has improved in both economic and human development indicators (HDI) while reducing its dependence on foreign assistance. The nation has been a world leader in NGO based development activities such as micro-finance powered by dynamic NGOs such as the Grameen Bank and BRAC. Another bright spot has been the Readymade Garment industry that has made Bangladesh the second largest exporter of RMG products in the world. Since the 1990s, the country has been able to sustain a fledgling democracy, despite periodical bouts of turmoil. However, the current spate of political confrontation does not bode well for the socio-economic outlook of Bangladesh and if unchecked, the country may very well revert back to the chronically unstable political frontier of the pre-1990s era.

Topics to be covered in the session include:

- Economic liberalization in the post-1980s era
- Foreign capital (foreign aid and foreign investment) and economic growth
- Impact of political gridlock on economic progress
- The role of women in economic development
- The Role of NGOs
- The RMG export industry
- Progress in education and health sectors
- Overall outlook of Bangladesh economy



Governance, Politics, and Development

3:45 p.m.–5:15 p.m.

University AB Room, Concourse Hotel

Chair: Dr. Rebecca Manring, Indiana University-Bloomington

Topic 1: Locating Islam in Contemporary Bangladesh

Dr. Ali Riaz, Illinois State University, Normal, USA

Islam is variously understood and expressed by the people of Bangladesh. There are various meanings of Islam and its role in individuals' lives in Bangladesh. This paper maps the various dimensions of lived Islam (i.e., Islam as practiced by various strata of society) in the country

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including the political arena. This paper examines the relationships between 'social' and 'political' Islam, and interactions between transnational interpretations of Islam and local practices. The paper notes that in recent years some organizations have blurred the boundaries between social Islam and political Islam. The paper traces the historical antecedents of the interactions between local and transnational Islamic thought in Bangladesh to demonstrate that such interactions are not new to the country, but there have been significant changes in the nature of the interactions in recent decades. The impact of the interactions and the responses of the society and the state will also be explored. The paper addresses two questions: Which transnational Islamic/Islamist groups and movements have a significant presence in Bangladesh? What are the primary conduits through which transnational Islamic influences are spread in Bangladesh?

Topic 2: Disintegration: the Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh and Pakistan

Dr. Sayeed Iftekhar Ahmed, School of Security and Global Studies, American Public University System

This paper traces the genesis of Islamism in Bangladesh and Pakistan and compares the development of Islamism in these two postcolonial states. The idea of Pakistan and the formation of the Jamaat-i-Islam played a significant role in transforming the religiosity of Islam to a modern political ideology—Islamism. Pakistan gradually transmuted into a quasi-theocratic, Islamic state and Islamism bred Islamist militancy. Nevertheless, the idea of Pakistan and Islamism were challenged in the political domain of Bengal which ultimately led to the disintegration of the state and the birth of Bangladesh. However, in Bangladesh, the failure of the secular elites to establish their hegemony over civil society revived Islamism and like Pakistan, the military-civil bureaucrats and the Jamaat played the pioneer role. The paper argues that the current contestation between the 'sacred' and the secular would determine the future direction of Islamism in Bangladesh; whether, in Pakistan Islamism would continue to play a central role in the national politics.

Topic 3: Development-induced Displacement in CHT: From IDPs to Refugees where History May Revisit

Mr. Mohd. Amirul Islam, American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Dhaka

This research paper will focus on displacements due to development projects, which is a development-induced displacement. It will specifically focus on the Kaptai dam project which is the only hydropower electricity source in Bangladesh that submerged 22,000 ha of cultivable land in Chittagong Hill Tracts (40% of all such land in CHT) and displaced 100,000 people without proper compensation and rehabilitation. It was constructed without adequate consultations with the local indigenous communities. The social and economic costs of the project were remarkable. The geo-political importance of this project was and is immense. A number of events after the construction of this dam made more than 40,000 people to move to the sparsely populated states of Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, and Arunachal in India as "environmental refugees." More or less 20,000 displaced persons had gone to Myanmar as well. Here we will see how IDPs became Refugees. Most important recent development is that the Government of Bangladesh has proposed an extension plan to install two new hydropower units, 50 MW each, in the existing dam. As a result, approximately 7,500 ha of the cultivable land may result in inundated. This proposed plan has raised the same old debate that whether or not the Government and the dam authority have taken proper measures to accommodate the views of the local indigenous communities and whether or not the consequences of the proposed plan will be the same with the previous one. The answers of this debate made it to assume that history may revisit.

Topic 4: Female Street Children in Dhaka: Violence and Survival

Dr. Fariyal Ross-Sheriff and **Ms. Elma Kaiser**, Howard University, USA

The US Department of State reports that there are about 400,000 street children in Bangladesh. The majority of them are living in the capital city, Dhaka, and the number of street children continues to increase every

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day. Children run away from their families due to acute poverty and also from the violence that they experience while living in their homes. Researchers in various nations in Africa, Asia (India, Bangladesh), South America (Peru) and Europe have articulated violence as part of these children's lives on the street. Needless to say, the female children are at a higher risk of sexual and physical violence in the given circumstances. Despite the challenges many street children develop coping strategies to survive and researchers have found that with the support of various programs these children develop resiliency even though they are on their own.

This presentation is based on a qualitative research study with female street children who are experiencing violence in various ways and leading a shattered life. The female street children described their life experiences of violence at home and while being homeless girls and women. Furthermore, they also shared their survival strategies and expectations from the government and NGOs to help gain their identity as citizens.

AIBS Reception and Social Hour

5:30–6:30 p.m.

Room TBA

All participants and the general public
are invited to attend

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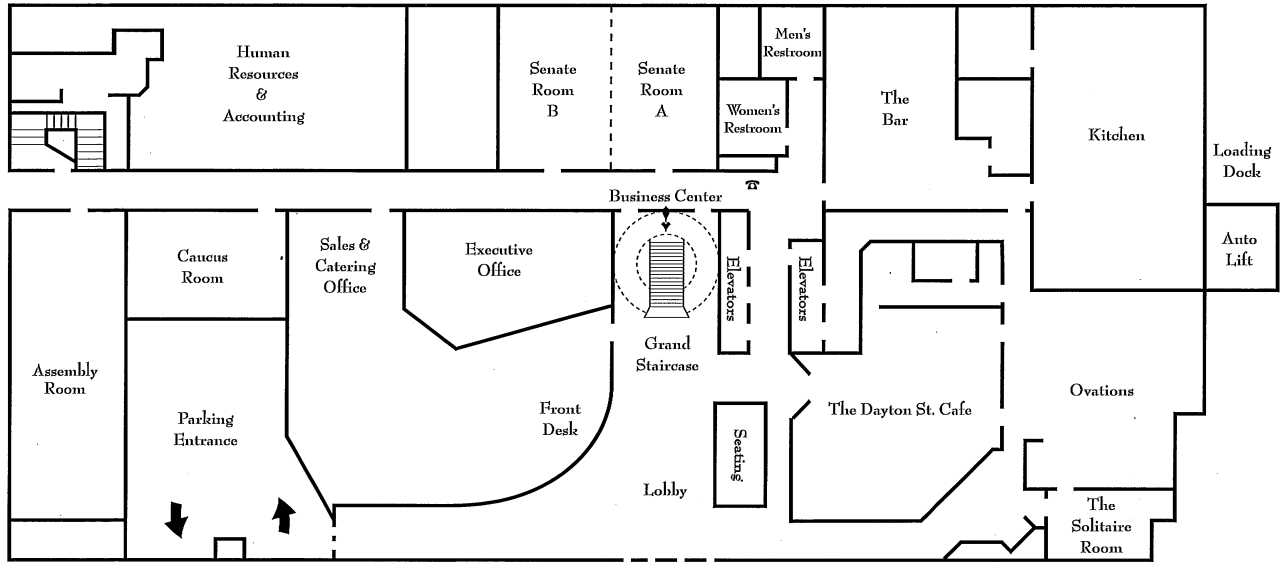
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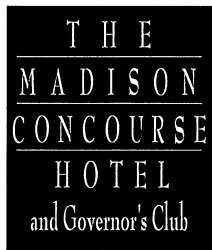
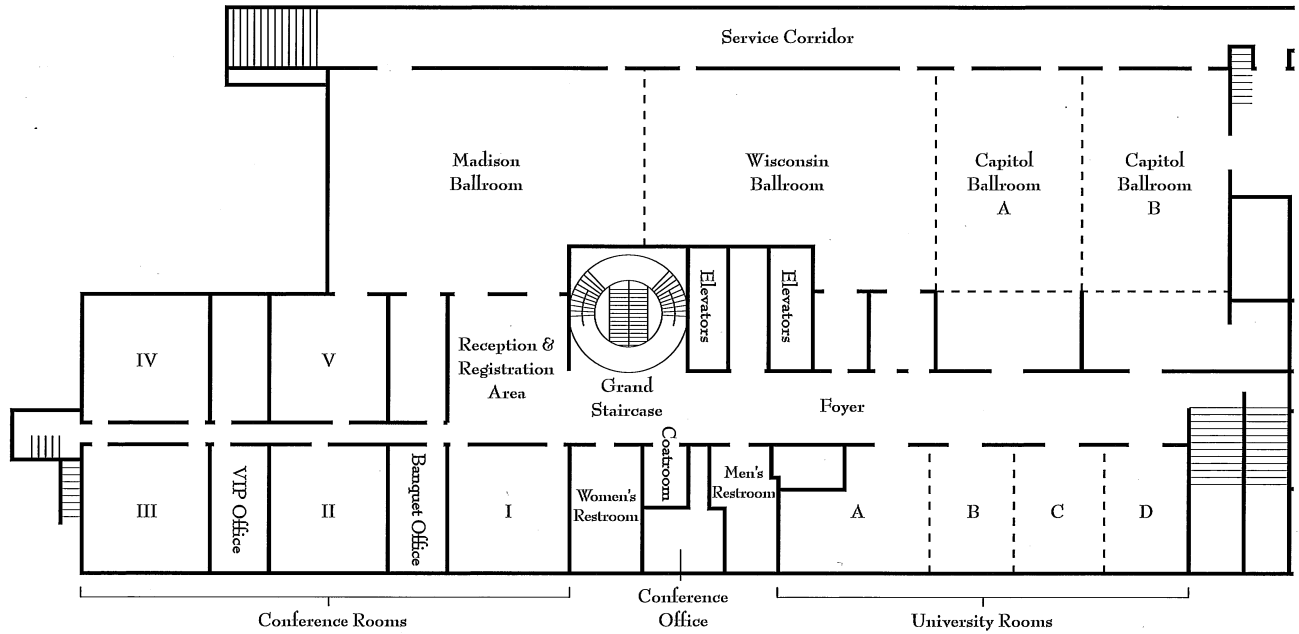
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Meeting Space

1st Floor



2nd Floor



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