

## **Cultural Imperialism: Bangladesh Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Cultural imperialism, in its pervasive form, is mostly a modern phenomenon. Though imperialism has been mostly used in the political sense and, by Marxists, in the economic sense, lately, it has also been conjoined with culture. This is mostly because of the close nexus among politics, economics, and culture and how culture has been a vehicle for regional and global superpowers to further their political and economic interests. Bangladesh, like many other third-world countries, is at the receiving end of the brunt of cultural imperialism. There exists a considerable confusion among the majority of Bangladeshi people, who happen to be Muslims, about their true identity, which often manifests in the form of debate on 'which identity comes first: Bengali or Muslim?' This confusion is engendered by multiple watershed moments in Bangladesh's political history. The fixation of national identity is necessary to understand and analyze the nature of cultural imperialism to which Bangladesh is being susceptible. However, It can be shown evidently that Muslim identity is the most rooted identity for Bangladeshi people, 90% of whom are Muslims, and which can provide the deepest anchorage for them. Bangladesh is hegemonized by two cultural strands: regionally Indian culture and globally Western culture. There is a dire need to address this issue if Bangladeshi people want to maintain cultural uniqueness.*

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Imperialism is as old as human civilization. From the very onset of civilization, mankind has been divided

into different nations and formed political entities. These political entities, mostly empires, have strived to expand and, in consequence, encroached on one another. That is why imperialism has been largely conjoined with empire. For most of the period of human history, imperialism has had political connotation. However, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many thinkers, especially under the Marxist influence, began to coin the term 'economic imperialism' to describe the economic exploitation of colonies or underdeveloped regions of the world by the colonial or superpowers. From around 1960s, the term 'cultural imperialism' has come to be coined in the academia, especially in the field of post-colonial studies. Although the precise definition of 'cultural imperialism' is as elusive as the definition of its ingredient terms, namely, culture and imperialism – especially that of the former – face the same difficulty however, the term gives a broad and general impression that is the cultural influence of hegemonic powers on others, which give the former political and economic leverages. Cultural imperialism is well manifested by a phenomenon called globalization, to be more precise, through the rapid spread of products and services of multinational corporations, western forms of arts of various sorts, and many other forms.

Bangladesh, as one of the third world countries, is not immune to the phenomenon of cultural imperialism. The dissemination of alien cultural components contravening the mores and values of the majority of people in Bangladesh has worried intelligentsia and common people alike. Interestingly, the dynamics of cultural aggression in Bangladesh is relatively more complex. It is not subjected to mere western cultural influence like most other countries of the world. Bangladesh is surrounded by India by three sides and shares 4096 km long border with India, which is 5<sup>th</sup> largest land border in the world. It shares its rest of the land border of 271km with Myanmar. India is almost 32 times of Bangladesh in size. Therefore, India's political, economic, and cultural influence on Bangladesh is not surprising. This influence was further strengthened by the fact that in 1971, Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan with India's political and military aid. The problem with India's influence on Bangladesh lies in the fact that the prevalent religion, way of life, and culture of India, both in its indigenous as well as west-influenced hybrid form, are largely alien to that of the mass majority of Bangladeshi people. Therefore, it can be said that Bangladesh is vulnerable to double tides of cultural imperialism – one is in the South Asian regional context, and another is in the global context. Which one of them weighs heavy on Bangladesh is difficult to tell.

## **2.0 Objectives**

The objective of this research paper is to explore the global phenomenon called cultural imperialism, its nature, its relation with political and economic imperialism and its impact on Bangladesh.

## **3.0 Methodology**

This paper adopts the qualitative research method. Data on relevant topics were collected from secondary sources, namely books, research articles, survey reports, and online encyclopedias. Then analysis of these data was done from various perspectives.

## **4.0 Cultural Imperialism in Theory**

Cultural imperialism, as may appear from the phrase, refers to some sort of imperialism whose main means are not political or economic but cultural. Yet, it is not as simple as it seems. Cultural imperialism cannot be easily untangled from politics or economy. One of the complaints against the term 'cultural imperialism' that can be heard in academia is that the term is too broad or general and imprecise as well. The reason may lie in the fact that the first ingredient of the said term, namely, culture, is very elusive to define. Another reason may be that the second ingredient of the term, i.e., imperialism, has been carrying political connotations for a very long time and economic connotations for almost the last 100 years. The cultural influence of a hegemonic nation on the dominated one was a mere spin-off of political and economic domination of the former on the latter. Another factor is that the very possibility of the absence of deliberation to dominate in the hegemonic cultural products from the side of supposedly cultural hegemon makes it difficult to define cultural imperialism in line with the aforementioned types of imperialism. Nevertheless, cultural imperialism, when used, is able to give a general impression. Before delving into the theoretical aspects of cultural imperialism, it is necessary to define and discuss its components, namely, culture and imperialism.

### **4.1 Culture**

Culture is said to be one of the two or three most complicated English words. Two anthropologists named A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled more than 150 definitions of culture from British and American sources alone (Tomlinson, 1991). This implies that culture is large enough to accommodate all these meanings or that culture is a very ambiguous concept. The first of these two implications has been reflected in the definition of culture given by 19<sup>th</sup>-century British anthropologist E.B. Tylor, which is:

*"Culture . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."* (Tylor, 1871)

This definition is understandable when we think that life is lived as a 'totality' and culture acts as the organizing concept of this totality. However, an analytical difficulty arises from this definition, which esteemed American anthropologist Clifford Geertz described as 'pot-au-feu' (Geertz, 1973). That is, for analytical purposes, culture is quite often demarcated from politics, economy, and other important spheres of life, which clearly becomes impossible if Tylor's definition is taken into account. On the other hand, Roland Robertson, considering the complexity of the term 'culture' and the history of the development of its conception, proposed the indefinability of the term 'culture', following Nietzsche's dictum: 'which has a history cannot usefully be defined' (Robertson, 1988). From this perspective, what is important is not to define culture but the way this term is used in contemporary discourse. Raymond Williams, following Robertson's footsteps, found three active usages for culture: (i) a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development, (ii) a general or specific indication of a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general and (iii) the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (Williams, 2014). The (iii) appears to be in the most widespread use today. Culture is used to refer to the aggregation of music, literature, painting, sculpture, theatre, and film nowadays. John Tomlinson defines culture as a context within which people give meaning to their actions and experiences and make sense of their lives. This is how Tomlinson tries to evade Tylor's definitional morass. This aspect of 'how life is lived' is in a certain way distinguishable from those practices and activities by which people satisfy their material needs, i.e., economic activities, and also from those aspects of life that involve the distribution of power that occurs within and between collectivities, i.e., political activities. Tomlinson believes this general understanding of culture is enough to discuss the phenomenon of cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 2001).

## **4.2 Imperialism**

Imperialism denotes the exercise of power either through direct conquest or through political and economic influence that effectively amounts to a similar form of domination: both involve the practice of power through facilitating institutions and ideologies. Typically, it is the deliberate product of a political machine that rules from the center and extends its control to the furthest reaches of the peripheries (Young, 2016).

Imperialism is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses a wide range of relationships of domination and dependence that can be defined according to historical and theoretical or organizational differences. The word has been used mainly in two meanings. It originally denoted a political system of military conquest and occupation, but increasingly, from the beginning of the twentieth century, its meaning gradually evolved to give a Marxist sense of a general system of economic domination, with direct political domination, as an aid to it, being a possibility but not a necessity (Williams, 2014). The French imperialism in the nineteenth century and American in the twentieth century are good examples of the old and new imperialism, respectively. Since the end of the Second World War, 'imperialism' signified an ideology and a system of economic domination identified with the USA. Interestingly, the term 'imperialism' was also labelled later with the Soviet Union, the upholder of Marxism, albeit in the political sense, considering its expansionist policy in the eastern bloc of Europe (Tomlinson, 1991).

It is necessary to discuss the relation, similarities, and differences between imperialism and colonialism as these two terms are often used interchangeably nowadays. Moreover, colonialism had a far-reaching effect in shaping the present world with all of its socio-economic-political configurations, which – it will not be an exaggeration to say - facilitated cultural imperialism and made it possible. Imperialism, in its political sense, is almost as ancient as the inception of human civilization. There have been great empires throughout the world over the ages. Empires have traditionally attempted to expand their territories within the contiguous land mass, of which the Chinese Empire, Muslim Empire, and Roman Empire are some significant examples. The development in the technology of sea-faring ships, especially the fast-paced Caravels and navigational instruments, added a revolutionary aspect to imperialism. Imperial expansion no longer needed to be confined to land contiguity. The European Empires started to stretch their control in an intercontinental fashion in lands far from their power centers. They established their colonies in the continents of Asia, Africa, America, and Australia. The faster sea travel also enabled the colonial settlers to remain connected to their mother countries and receive enough supplies to subdue the native indigenous people of the colonies (Young, 2016). Therefore, Colonialism is, evidently, a form of imperialism. However, imperialism is not necessarily limited to this form. There are other differences between imperialism and colonialism as well. Imperialism may sometimes take ideological form and be defended by theories and moral justification to such an extent that it can prove to be economically unprofitable for the imperial powers. On the contrary, Colonization stood on political subjugation and economic exploitation of native people by settlers of European colonial powers.

Exploitation and settler colonies fulfilled pragmatic needs and usually operated according to the interests of businesses or settlers (Young, 2016).

### **4.3 Cultural Imperialism**

After discussing the definitions of culture and imperialism to a certain extent in the previous sections, we can attempt to define cultural imperialism in a way that will be relevant to this discussion of ours. Cultural imperialism is the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture (Tomlinson,1991). Cultural imperialism proposes that society is brought into the modern world system when its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system. The cultural imperialism thesis claims that authentic, traditional, and local culture in many parts of the world is battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, especially from the United States (Tomlinson,1991).

These abovementioned definitions, though broad and imprecise, are enough for our discussions. A benefit of a broad definition is that it can accommodate multiple dimensions of the concept.

### **4.4 Cultural Hegemony**

Before delving into the discussion of cultural imperialism, it is necessary to understand the concept of cultural hegemony, as the main goal of cultural imperialism is to establish cultural hegemony on the dominant people. The term 'cultural hegemony' was coined and theorized by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. He provided nuance to the idea of ideology in the Marxist framework. Originally used in the context of class antagonism within the Marxist framework, this theory emphasizes the importance of ideology.

Karl Marx inverted Hegel's dialectical method and posited that all the concepts at the level of idea are the reflection of the material condition. However, his conception of ideology suffered from two weaknesses: epiphenomenalism and class reductionism.

Ideological epiphenomenalism is the thesis that the economic infrastructure shapes the ideological superstructure and that ideology is an illusion that contributes nothing to the economic life of society. The class reductionism is the thesis that capitalist and proletariat classes have their own ideologies, which are fixed, antagonistic to each other, and mutually exclusive in their totality. This entailed that the class difference at the economic level was also replicated at the ideological level. Class reductionism and epiphenomenalism together

engendered the class-specific concept of ideology, which was thought to have no major role in social and revolutionary dynamics.

Antonio Gramsci tried to address the problem of both epiphenomenalism and class reductionism. According to him, ideology is the collection of practices, principles, and dogmas, possessing a material and institutional nature. When individuals in society enter this terrain of ideology, they become subjects and social agents who also happen to play important roles in the realm of production. This function of the individual as a social agent and economic player is important in the dynamics of the mode of production in both the time of equilibrium and organic crisis. Hence, in the latter case, ideology comes to wield an influence in the time of class struggle. Gramsci also posited that ideology didn't have a specific class nature, i.e., different classes didn't have mutually exclusive ideologies. There can be an overlap of classes in the ideological plane through social institutions such as civil society, church, school, etc. Ideological systems are constituted of ideological discourses, and ideological discourses, in turn, are constituted of ideological elements. Ideological elements don't have any specific class nature and hence can be used to form different ideological discourses belonging to different classes struggling for supremacy.

Gramsci defined ideology as a system of class rule, i.e., hegemony. All ideological elements are organically arranged into a coherent complex system, which is also called 'organic ideology' and which is adopted by the whole society. In this hegemonic system, a class held state power using its economic superiority and its ability to successfully articulate in a coherent manner the most crucial element of the ideological discourses of the hegemonized classes in civil society. An organic ideology is formulated very dynamically by social agents, whom Gramsci called 'organic intellectuals', of hegemonic or potentially hegemonic class through an 'articulating principle,' in which ideological elements from discourses of different subaltern groups are unified into an ideological system. That is how the formation of a solid class alliance is conceivable, in which classes other than the hegemonic one are absorbed ideologically, economically, and politically (Ramos, 1982).

In a nutshell, what Gramsci said is that the bourgeoisie class uses ideology - one of the powerful manifestations of which is culture - to reduce and pacify class antagonism and creates an impression of the normativity of the existing system in the minds of people from all strata of the society. That is how capitalism is able to keep the working class satisfied and hence increase its own durability. This is the reason, according to Gramsci, for the failure of Marx's prediction of the collapse of capitalism in Western Europe.

Now this theory of cultural hegemony is not necessarily limited to the atmosphere of class antagonism or Marxian framework and can be equally applied to colonial and neocolonial situations. The first thing colonial powers did after vanquishing the native political authorities and establishing their complete military and political control is to change the education system. The main purpose of the colonial education system was to mould colonial subjects according to their moral image. However, there was another important objective: producing clerks from the colonial subjects to run the colonial administration, who would also act as mediators between colonial masters and subjugated common people. All these objectives were reflected in Maccaulay's speech in the British parliament on the Indian education system:

"We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class, we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population (Cutts, 1953)."

Colonial education systems disconnected the natives, educated them from their history and tradition, and infused in them a new worldview and philosophy of life. They began to perceive their native civilization as backward and inferior, the new colonial age as the bringer of progress and civilization, and colonial masters as their liberators. Western intellectuals then justified this action of their compatriots and called it 'white men's burden' and a 'civilizing mission.' The notion of civilization in that period in the West needs to be delved into to understand the implication of the so-called 'civilizing mission.'

In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, civilization, in contrast to Barbarism, indicated an achieved state of development, which needed a secular, rational process of development, implying historical progress that culminated in the station reached by the metropolitan civilization of England and France (as the true inheritors of the Greco-Roman civilization). This was the historical rationality of the Enlightenment.

French and English social theorists perceived human society to develop its organization and function progressively throughout history from simple to more complex forms. They postulated that the origin of human society was from the "primal horde," which is a prehistoric homogenous collectivity bereft of the division of labor, gender roles, and social institutions, such as the family. Beginning



from this simple collectivity, human society gradually and progressively increased in complexity and differentiation, forming, for instance, the division of labor, religious belief systems, technological development, and the appearance of the state. Human society took more complex and heterogeneous forms with the passage of time. The urban, bourgeois, and technological Western European society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, administered by centralized states, became the sole standard with respect to which all other societies were to be measured and evaluated. Societies, not on a par with European civilization were considered as backward, late starters, sluggish, or incapable of this organic development, this natural social evolution toward the European ideal.

The projection of Charles Darwin's biological theories into the history of society gave rise to and reinforced two crucial ideas, namely, social Darwinism and the aristocratic notion of culture. Social Darwinism referred to various attempts to project biological laws into the socioeconomic sphere and to show parallelisms between biological and social evolution. Social Darwinism reinforced the popular political doctrine of the racial and, hence, civilizational superiority of the Europeans as the European society was a reflection of the European superior biological status as compared to Third World societies. In short, if social behavior and organization is an expression of our biology, the fact that Europeans were thought to have the most complex organization proved their civilizational superiority.

All of these theorizations of knowledge were happening when European powers were extending their dominance in the non-European world and establishing colonies. The spread of colonialism led Europeans to discover new territories and cultures and compare their own state and social systems with non-European ones. The notion of 'civilizing mission' among Europeans have to be understood within this context (Seremetakis, 2017).

Most of the native graduates of these colonial education systems were culturally imitative of colonizers, as they considered them civilizational superior. What they learned in these institutions played a decisive role in shaping their new outlook. However, there is perhaps a latent tendency within the dominated to praise and follow their vanquishers. Ibn Khaldun indicated it almost 600 years ago in his magnum opus 'Al-Muqaddimah':

"The vanquished always wants to imitate the victor in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and all his other conditions and customs. The reason for this is that the soul always sees perfection in the person who is superior to it and to whom it is subservient. It considers him perfect, either because it is impressed by the respect it has for him

or because it erroneously assumes that its own subservience to him is not due to the nature of defeat but to the perfection of the victor (Khalidun, 1978)."

The colonial administration might not have imposed their designed education system forcefully on natives everywhere. However, they reconfigured the politico-economic structure of the colonies in such a way that natives were somewhat compelled to enroll in this system to lead a financially well-off life. As mentioned before, these native graduates were employed in various colonial administrative posts and helped run colonial administration, which helped continue colonial political domination and economic exploitation of colonies. One of the strategies of colonial powers was to deindustrialize colonies and destroy their manufacturing industries. In many cases, the colonial powers treated their colonies as cheap markets from which they bought cheap raw materials for the industries in their mother countries and then sold the surplus products produced in the same industries in the markets of colonies. The new natives, remoulded by the cultural values of colonizers, also preferred the alien products to their native ones, as they perceived using them as a matter of social prestige and civility.

It is a fact that when the natives trained by the colonial system came to be familiar with the Western post-renaissance intellectual traditions, especially with the notion of nationalism, they gradually became self-conscious as a nation. They felt that they needed freedom from foreign rule. That was how the independence movement in different colonies commenced, which took both violent and non-violent forms. Nevertheless, leaders of most of these independence movements were educated in the colonial education system. On the other hand, the European colonial powers became economically exhausted after two world wars, and it became increasingly difficult for them to maintain their grip on colonies in the face of political and military resistance from the natives. Furthermore, there was pressure from the United States on colonial powers to give freedom to their colonies because the US perceived colonial trade blocs as an impediment to its own economic expansion (Young, 2016).

Although colonial powers abdicated their control over their colonies, they succeeded in creating an elite class of people from natives, who were, in Maccaulay's words, mimics of their colonizer in terms of thought and culture, to whom colonial powers transferred political power when they left their colonies. This is what ushered in neo-colonialism.

Neo-colonialism is very much pertinent to the discussion on cultural imperialism. It's neo-colonialism that, in most cases, has created the condition to facilitate

cultural imperialism, and it can be shown that cultural imperialism, reversely, is aiding in the perpetuation of neo-colonialism. According to Ghana's first prime minister and president, Kwame Nkrumah: "The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside (Nkrumah,1969)." Therefore, whatever is seen as the sovereignty of third-world countries is basically fictitious. There have been many ways of theorizing neo-colonialism. A theory on 'informal imperialism' states that neo-colonial powers wield influences on dominated countries and compel them to concede to unequal treaties, mostly economic but also political and military ones (Benjamin & Macmillan, 2007). As per Dependency theory, neo-colonial powers, similar to the colonial age, treat the periphery or dominated countries as sources of cheap raw materials and labour force and market for goods manufactured in neo-colonial metropolises. Even if these neo-colonial countries invest in third-world countries, these investments only contribute to increase the gap between haves and have-nots in these countries and don't really lead to development in the true sense, which keeps the third-world countries in a state of perpetual dependency on neo-colonial powers (Young, 2016). However, what all these theories state in common is that ex-colonial powers or new imperial powers subdue the ex-colonies.

Ex-colonial powers wanted to continue their domination of their colonies even after granting them their freedom. As mentioned before, the end of colonialism implied only the end of direct military and political control. However, the administration and civil society of newly freed nations were filled with natives who graduated from the colonial education system. Even in the post-colonial period, they continued to act as mediators between neo-colonial powers and the masses of people in third-world countries. Consequently, the ideological domination of Western neo-colonial powers remained intact in the post-colonial period. In ex-colonies, western theories and methodologies kept on being taught in educational institutes; the intelligentsia and members of civil society justified them, and those in political power implemented them; the elites continued to imitate Western cultures as before. They are the ones who actively promoted the Western cultures of their ex-colonial masters and acted as a bridge for the further dissemination of this culture among common people.

There is a profound relation between Cultural imperialism and politico-economic imperialism. Each of them strengthens the other. A product does not have only utilitarian aspects. It also reflects aspects of the culture in which it is produced. This fact may not be evident in the case of individual products, but an aggregate of products from a certain culture definitely gives a clearer picture of it. A product is

not only consumed by a consumer; it also gradually influences the overall pattern of consumption of the consumer. Hollywood and Bollywood movies are probably the best examples of how foreign products impact consumers' lifestyles. As political and economic imperialism pave the way for the flooding of products manufactured in neo-colonial countries, these products are consumed and hence influence and gradually change the thought pattern of consumers. The same consumers, the citizens of third-world countries, support, or at least show apathy towards, the Western political and economic dictation given to their political elites. That is how cultural imperialism and political-economic imperialism reinforce each other.

### **5.0 Cultural Imperialism in Reality**

Culture is not something static; it changes and evolves from inside and outside. Whenever people of different nations interact, they are likely to influence each other culturally. There can be asymmetry in the cultural exchange, especially if one of the parties is politically and economically stronger. Cultural imperialism, in the meaning of cultural hegemony, has always existed throughout human history. However, because of the advances in technology and increasing political and economic complexity, the process of cultural imperialism has sped up and taken a more clandestine form than it did in any other past era.

### **6.0 Pre-modern imperial era**

One of the earliest examples of cultural imperialism is found in the history of the Roman Empire. In the process of conquering the whole of Italy, it imposed the Latin language on the people of Etruria and, thus, caused the extinction of the Etruscan language and many other features of Etruscan civilization (Cartwright, 2017). The Roman Empire later was able to secure a huge stretch of land and a long durability of peace and security. Forced acculturation of the culturally diverse population of the empire played a big role in it (Tobin, 2023).

In the Middle Ages, successive monarchs of the British Empire tried to suppress Scottish and Welsh cultures. In addition, the Russian Empire implemented policies that resulted in the suppression of non-Russian cultures in the periphery of the empire (Benjamin & Macmillan, 2007).

### **7.0 Modern Colonial Period**

The modern colonial age is dominated by different European powers vying for wealth and dominance. Colonization provided a new thrust to this competition. Europeans first justified establishing colonies through the 'first discovery' principle, which is the government, whose subjects or under whose name an uninhabited territory was discovered, Lays claim to that territory. However, when the lands

came out not to be uninhabited, the Europeans began to justify their colonization by spreading the Bible's teachings and civilizing the so-called Barbarian inhabitants of newly found territories, thus making them more productive (Benjamin, T., & Macmillan, 2007).

The Early Portuguese colonies in Africa aimed to extract resources and establish trading posts. These posts were mostly situated at the boundary of colonies and, hence, caused very little penetration of European culture into Africa. However, this changed during the Spanish colonization of America. Spain brutally defeated two indigenous Mesoamerican civilizations, namely, Aztec and Inca. After Spain secured its military domination in Latin America, it banned the transmission of local indigenous cultures by banning reading and writing in Mesoamerican languages and made it compulsory for natives to learn the Spanish language and the Bible (Tobin, 2023). The Powhatan Confederacy, situated in the present tidewater of Virginia, the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, and possibly southern Maryland, was subjected to almost the same fate because of their conflict with English colonial settlers. The present Powhatan population is estimated to be only 2000 (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2018, November 19).

A way of suppressing native culture was to spread Christianity. The Papal Bull decreed by Pope Alexander VI in 1493 and the consecutive treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 divided the land colonized in the New World between Spain and Portugal. These two entities colonized the new world in the name of spreading Christianity. The Reformation led to competition between Catholics and Protestants for spreading their corresponding denomination in the conquered lands. This competition led the Dutch Empire, which was almost exclusively based on trade, to dispatch Protestant missionaries to the Dutch Colonies to offset Catholic evangelism.

The colonial powers took different approaches to deal with those regions, which had long-standing and powerful traditions and cultures. Instead of taking the military risk of full-fledged conquest, they attempted to gain trade permits and other concessions through treaties. India is a good example of such a region, where the British combined this technique with the gradual military conquest of most of India, exploiting the political divisions in India.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as the colonial powers achieved significant advances in science and technology and introduced them in real life, many natives in the regions under direct control, protection, or cultural influence of colonial powers were impressed and spontaneously started to believe in the superiority of the West. When the colonial powers established schools and universities in these

regions, the native elites sent their children to these institutions, where they absorbed European values and learned to denigrate their own cultures. Different branches of American University, which was founded by American protestant Missions in different Arab regions before the disintegration of the Ottoman empire, is a good example of such institutions.

### **7.1 Post-colonial period**

Despite the independence given to the colonies, the colonial powers attempted to retain their influence on their ex-colonies. Great Britain and France established the Commonwealth of Nations and Francophone Association, respectively, for this purpose. The ex-colonial European powers still wield a significant amount of influence on their ex-colonies in terms of education, legal systems, language, etc. Yet, the USA emerged as the most powerful country in terms of military and economic might, thus wielding the most cultural impact around the world. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 made the domination of the USA almost unchallenged.

Looking at the strong global influence of American culture, many have dubbed this phenomenon as 'Americanization,' 'MacDonaldization' etc. Considering its main role in international finance capital and effective global political domination, Kwame Nkrumah described neocolonialism as an American phase of colonization, colonialism without colonies (Young, 2016).

American brands like McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, General Motors, Levi's Jeans, etc., can be found in almost all capitals of the world. Hollywood movies and the American online media platform Netflix can be accessed from almost everywhere in the world. Consumers, in many instances, especially in third-world countries, associate prestige and social status with using products of various American brands. Film industries throughout the world want to attain Hollywood's standards. People around the world follow the news of American celebrities and want to be like them.

### **8.0 Bangladesh in Focus**

Bangladesh is a country with almost 90% of its population being Muslim. It is classified as a third-world country. Concerned citizens and members of the intelligentsia have been expressing their concern for a long time about Bangladesh's exposure to cultural aggression. Before delving into this topic, it is necessary to define the parameters of this discussion and put things into their proper perspectives.

## **8.1 Defining Bangladeshi Mainstream Culture**

When it is said that a certain country or nation is a victim of cultural imperialism or cultural aggression, it implies a negative occurrence with respect to that country. The cultural transformation due to cultural imperialism is perceived as sinister. To speak of cultural aggression presupposes an existent reference to culture against which the violation of aggression is taking place. It can be argued very strongly that Bangladesh's reference culture is defined and shaped by Islam. However, it is, by no means being argued that Islam and Bangladeshi culture are equivalent, nor that whatever goes by the name of mainstream Bangladeshi culture is compatible with Islam. What is being argued here is that for the vast majority of people of Bangladesh, Islam is the reference point, and hence, they want their culture to be consistent with Islamic mores and values.

Many may argue against it, saying that religion is a part of culture rather than informing culture. This view of culture is a modern anthropological one and is not at all surprising, considering how the same tradition confines religion to personal life. This view has been argued against by many, such as Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, etc., who stated that religion in the pre-modern period used to pervade every sphere of life. This is truer for those religions that have their own elaborate legal traditions, such as Judaism and Islam. These traditions generally provide principles and boundaries relevant to different sectors of life.

Men create culture naturally as the spider spins its web. Culture encompasses man's instinctual and unlearned aspects as well as the values which shape and direct them. This is where religion comes as the guiding principle of culture. Islam has created a world civilization and maintained it for 1400 years. In this process, it assimilated people from many nations and ethnicities. Though Islam began in Arabia, it didn't impose Arabian culture on other conquered nations. Islam's values were spacious enough to accommodate different cultures, accepting what was good within them and removing what went against its values. Hence, a famous American Scholar, Dr. Umar Faruq Abdallah, said, "For centuries, Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural expression with the universal norms of its sacred law. It struck a balance between temporal beauty and ageless truth and fanned a brilliant peacock's tail of unity in diversity from the heart of China to the shores of the Atlantic. Islamic jurisprudence helped facilitate this creative genius. In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African. Sustained cultural

relevance to distinct peoples, diverse places, and different times underlay Islam's long success as a global civilization." (Abd-Allah, 2009)

Bangladesh, as a Muslim country, has a long Muslim tradition. It was conquered by Ikhtiyar Uddin Bakhtiar Khilji in 1208 AD. From then on, Islam has had a progressive presence in this region. The mass Muslim people of Bangladesh showed their Islamic commitment repeatedly throughout history, which was manifested in the Titumir and Faraizi movements, Bengali Muslim peasants' participation in the Balakot Jihad movement, the Muslim League's massive victory in the 1946 election in Bengal by which Bengali Muslims showed exuberant support for a Muslim state of Pakistan, etc.

It is to be noted that East Bengal's Muslims' support for the Muslim League was also a support for its two-nation theory thesis, which is the worldview and the culture of Muslims and those of Hindus are opposite, and hence Muslims cannot form a single country together with Hindus maintaining cultural autonomy. The Pakistan period (1947-1971) proved to be a debacle for this thesis. The leaders of Pakistan, who were graduates of the colonial education system, failed to prove their commitments to the ideological foundation of Pakistan, i.e., Islam, which Dr. Salman Sayyid beautifully summarized in his words: "The tragedy of Pakistan remains that those who rule, do not believe in it and those who believe in it, so far, have not been able to rule it (Sayyid, 14 August 2017)." As a result, there was a rise in regionalism, and East Bengal seceded from Pakistan. No matter how much it is repeated by some Bengali secular intellectuals that Bangladeshi people negated the two-nation theory, or the primacy of their Muslim identity to be more precise, the reality on the ground belies that. If 1952-1971 was the blooming period for Bengali secular nationalism, then the 1970's election, in which the Awami League won an absolute majority in the Eastern Wing of Pakistan, can be regarded as one of the apex points of Bengali secular nationalism. Firstly, Awami League's manifesto in that election was based on 6-point demand, which was composed in 1966. The first point of the 6 points demand was the implementation of the original Lahore resolution, which, it is to be noted, called for the creation of more than one Muslim states in the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, it was clearly stated in the 1970's Awami League manifesto that Awami League would pass no law that contravened Qur'an and Sunnah. This point totally contradicts secularism, and it was one of the points on which the people of the then East Pakistan voted for Awami League. Moreover, there was no mention of secularism in the proclamation of independence of Bangladesh, which was announced by Bangladesh's in-exile government in 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1971.



Unfortunately, after Bangladesh gained its freedom, the ruling party, without consulting the Bangladeshi population through election or any other means, incorporated secularism in the constitution. Since then, a significant portion of civil society and intelligentsia of Bangladesh, with the frequent support of governments, has been actively inventing and promoting cultures that clearly contravene Islam and labeling these cultures as 'thousand years of Bengali traditions.' However, they could not make the Bangladeshi mass people forget their roots. According to a survey conducted by a think tank named Pew Research Center in 2013, 82% of Bangladeshi Muslims want Bangladesh to embrace Islamic law (Lugo et al., 2013). It is evident from this survey that the majority of the Bangladeshi population regard Islam as their reference point.

## **8.2 Bangladesh subjected to two different strands of cultural imperialism**

Bangladesh, like any other third-world country, is exposed to Western, especially American, cultural imperialism. It has been under British colonial rule for almost 200 years. Not surprisingly, it has inherited the British colonial administrative structure as well as the education system and retained them to a great extent. That is only one façade of Western cultural imperialism in Bangladesh. Another side of Westernization is Americanization. Americanization denotes the spreading of American products and cultural values by the merit of American political, military, and economic domination around the globe. Americanization occurs mainly through media and global capitalist ventures. The first is sometimes referred to as media imperialism. This phenomenon is more visible than the second one, which is the proliferation of the use of American products and services.

However, Bangladesh is facing another strand of cultural imperialism, which is rooted more in the regional politics of South Asia. The source of this strand is India. India, as the biggest country in South Asia, has a tendency to wield a politico-economic hegemony on South Asia, which has been reflected in the Nehru doctrine. The wide influence of Indian culture definitely comes to aid for this political project. Indian cultural aggression in Bangladesh occurs through two sub-strands, namely, the Hindi language-based strand and the west-Bengal-based Hindu religious-cultural dominated Bengali strand. The most visible mediums of the first sub-strand are Bollywood, Indian TV series, songs & music videos. This again can be imputed to globalization and open-air culture, also known as dish-culture. The second sub-strand has a history rooted in a phenomenon called Bengali Renaissance, which began in the British colonial period in the present West Bengal. The British colonization of the Indian sub-continent commenced with the East India Company defeating Nawab of Bengal, Assam and Orissa, Siraj ad-Dawlah. After East India Company consolidated its control on Bengal, it founded its capital in a backwater

region of West Bengal named Calcutta. The British colonial authority introduced a centralized western curriculum based education system and disseminated Western post-renaissance literatures in Bengal. It sparked a renaissance within the Bengali Hindu community, who were most eager to be beneficiaries of the colonial system. They enthusiastically enrolled in the colonial education system. When Bengali Hindus came in touch with Western literatures, they were inspired then to reform and revive their own religious community. The Bengali Renaissance witnessed a series of philosophers, religious reformers, novelists, scientists, poets, etc. It was during this period that the Bengali Hindu community began to imagine the history of pre-Muslim Hindu-ruled India as their golden period and revive it in the coming period. The colonial authority appointed scholars like William Kerry, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, and Henry Pitts Forster, who, with the help of Brahman Scholars like Mrityunjay Vidyalkar, Ramnath Vidyavachaspati, and Ramram Basu, played a vital role in Sangskritization of Bengali language. In this process, they attempted to get the Bengali language rid of words having Arabic and Farsi roots and replace them with Sangskrit words. This reform of the Bengali language gave rise to a new style of Bengali prose, which was alien to Bengali Muslims and Hindus of lower castes. Naturally, Bengali Muslims were late participants in this new form and style of Bengali language. The Muslim authors grew a sense of appreciation, which sometimes devolved into slavish awe, towards the great Bengali Hindu authors.

Nevertheless, because of an obvious little to no place given to Muslims in the literatures of Hindu authors of the Bengali Renaissance and the existence of an oppressive politico-economic hegemony of the Bengali Hindu Bhodrolok community, mostly settled in the West-Bengal, on the Muslim peasant community of East Bengal, Bengali Muslim authors were quick to grow a sense of self-consciousness as a community. A good example of this consciousness is reflected in the book 'East Pakistaner Culture' (The Culture of East Pakistan) [later renamed 'Bangladesher Culture' (The Culture of Bangladesh) in the Bangladeshi period] authored by celebrated East Bengali politician and intellectual Abul Mansur Ahmed. In this book, he argued that East Bengal's linguistic style must be different from that of West Bengal, considering the fact that the people of the two regions possess two different ways of life.

However, during the Pakistani period, in the aftermath of the Language movement and in the process of political antagonization of West Pakistani establishment, East Pakistani Bengali secular intellectuals thought of developing a Bengali culture for East Pakistani Bengali population, which will be used to otherize Non-Bengali, especially Urdu-speaking, Pakistanis and aid to foster a secular Bengali

nationalism, which will be rooted in Bengali language rather than in Muslim identity, the basis of united Pakistan. To realize it, they borrowed lavishly from West Bengali literatures and were able to gradually turn the literary figures of West Bengal, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, and Bankim Chandra, as well as figures from other fields, the cultural icons of Bengali nationalism. Some of these figures clearly expressed their anti-Muslim sentiment in their literatures, and some of them completely ignored Muslims in their writings. There is no doubt that the Bengali Renaissance was able to give birth to a strong culture in West Bengal, albeit in its Hindu-influenced form. Through borrowing generously from the West Bengal cultural ingredients, East Pakistani Bengali secular intellectuals hoped to dilute the Muslim consciousness of East Pakistan/Bangladesh's mass population, which will aid to foster a secular Bengali identity, the future basis of a secular Bangladesh. Many of the present cultural symbols hailed nationally by secular governments and intelligentsia of Bangladesh have their roots in this borrowing.

## **9.0 Cultural Imperialism in Different Arenas**

Different arenas of Bangladeshi culture are under the onslaught of foreign cultures mentioned above.

### **9.1 Language**

The aspect of Bangladeshi culture that is probably most visibly affected by cultural imperialism is the Bangla language. Nowadays, many from the young generation of Bangladeshis don't speak in pure Bengali. They speak rather in a strange accent called Banglish, which is a dialect consisting of English words within the overall structure of the Bengali language despite the existence of Bengali synonyms of those words. It is not that a language cannot contain foreign words, the assimilation of foreign words within a language has to occur naturally. But the Banglish accent is very artificial. It also sounds very odd to hear. Another aspect of cultural imperialism is the spread of the Hindi language because of the telecast of Bollywood films, Hindi songs, and Indian TV serials through dish culture. Many children in Bangladesh who are exposed to these Hindi television programs are able to speak Hindi, sometimes better than they speak Bengali. It should be mentioned that there is nothing wrong with learning multiple languages. The problem lies when a foreign language becomes a vehicle of negative cultural influence. This is what is happening in the above mentioned cases.

## **9.2 Festivals**

Many national festivals and related rituals and cultural symbols in Bangladesh have foreign roots, which is alien to the belief of the majority of the Bangladeshi population. Some examples of these festivals are the Mangal Shovajatra procession performed in the first day of the Bengali New Year, the rituals performed in the Shaheed Minar on 21<sup>st</sup> February and in the National Memorial on 26<sup>th</sup> March every year, kindling of a kind of lamp called 'Mangal pradeep' in various cultural programs, etc. The list is not confined to those mentioned above.

The procession on the first day of Bengali New Year is called 'Mangal Shovajatra' (Procession for blessing), which is filled with idol like sculptures and paintings. As obvious from the name, it is believed that the idols and paintings, which look like various deities of Hinduism, will bring blessings for the rest of the year. This pseudo-religious festival has a clear similarity with pagan religions and contravenes the monotheistic belief of the majority of the Bangladeshi population. Ascribing sacredness to the structures of Shaheed Minar and National Memorial and paying tributes on their premises with flower wreaths on Language Day and Independence Day have similarities with pagan worship rituals, in which the altar is thought to be pure and flowers are kept as tribute before the altar. The so-called 'shikha chironton' in Suhrawardy Park, which is a platform holding an always kindling fire and thought to memorialize the surrender of Pakistani force in 1971, has a clear similarity with the Zoroastrian pagan symbol of eternal fire. 'Mangal Pradeep' is a kind of lamp kindled in a small container, generally made of clay, which is kindled as a ceremonious ritual in various cultural programs. This ritual has been adopted from the Hindu religious festival of Deepavali.

## **9.3 Dress**

Western and Indian cultural imperialism also are influencing the pattern of attires of Bangladeshi people. Because of Western influence, many Bengali women, especially those from urban areas and economically well-off families, wear male dresses such as tight-fit jeans and T-shirts. Both men and women are seen to wear revealing dresses. Women are seen wearing saree and other sub-continental dresses, revealing various parts of their bodies to look attractive to men. All of these go against the prevalent moral codes of Bangladesh.

## **9.4 Art**

Art is an expression of human creativity and imagination in visual forms such as painting, sculpture, movies, etc. Bangladeshi art is a victim of cultural imperialism. Dhaka and other Bangladeshi cities, mostly the former, have become dotted with

sculptures of different humanoid forms and animals. Some of these sculptures have been made to memorialize 1971's national struggle, and some of them have been erected to depict various aspects of Bangladeshi culture. These sculptures plainly contravene the Islamic prohibition on making sculptures of any animal form. The sculpture culture is more consistent with pagan culture. Bangladeshi movies, which mainly attract young audiences, contain obscene songs. Bangladeshi dramas are generally more popular with middle-class, educated audiences than Bangla movies. Nowadays, the directors of these dramas don't hesitate to include obscene dialogues and words in their productions. They are also contributing to normalize pre and extra-marital relations by depicting them in their dramas in a non-negative sense.

### **9.5 Law and Administration**

Bangladesh, by and large, still follows the British colonial legal and administrative system. The laws and bureaucratic system introduced by British colonial authority are still in place. For instance, Bangladesh still uses the Police Act 1861, Bangladesh Penal Code 1860, Code of Criminal Procedure 1898, and Evidence Act 1872 as laws of the land. To maintain etiquettes inherited from British colonial authority, the bureaucrats still had to maintain Victorian table manners by eating with knives in the right hand and forks in the left.

### **9.6 Ways to Resist Cultural Imperialism**

Culture is not something insular from politics and economics, no matter how many attempts are made to confine it to the creative and imaginative productions of humankind and to garb it with universalistic characteristics. Hence, cultural imperialism forms a strong nexus with political and economic imperialism. Cultural imperialism eases the way to political and economic imperialism. Conversely, political and economic imperialism pave the way for cultural imperialism.

To resist cultural imperialism, it is imperative to become conscious about one's own culture. Culture is not simply an aggregation of artistic productions of a society or nation. It is intricately related to the integrity of life. Culture is about one's past and the future. Becoming conscious of one's culture is to become conscious about one's history, tradition, and identity, which is definitely a political act as there is a desire for autonomy hidden beneath it.

It seems that there exists a collective confusion within the collective consciousness of Bangladeshi people about their identity, on whether they are Muslims or Bengali first. The way seculars want to solve this issue is far from clear. They don't want to undermine Islam overtly in fear of popular wrath as they know Bangladeshi Muslims, who are 90% of the population, love their deen, Islam. This is why they

repeatedly state the necessity of confining Islam to private life so that Islam cannot have any say about the un-Islamic aspects in the public sphere of Bangladesh. However, they are failing in it miserably. The world is witnessing a global Islamic resurgence. Bangladesh is not out of touch with it.

Bangladeshi people are gradually becoming aware of their roots, which is evident from the Pew survey result mentioned before. As said before, the first step to resist cultural imperialism is to become aware of one's root and thus feel indignation about this cultural violation. The second step is to make the best use of the space available within the dominant political and cultural structure. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's dominant political and cultural structure actively promote the foreign culture and try its best to suppress the culture that is respected by and close to the heart of the mass people. Making the best use of space given by the administration of Bangladesh, there should arise cultural organizations who are committed to revive the real culture of people. They have to nurture creativity and imagination within themselves. There is nothing wrong with learning from other cultures, accepting their positive aspects, and remoulding them in one's own cultural framework. If the national and prevalent media are not ready to give access to these organizations, then they can always have recourse to alternative media, which have become so easy to access because of the wide use of social networks. YouTube, Facebook, and other social networking sites can always be used as alternative media, as they are being used. Some existing Islamic cultural organizations are already producing various visual arts such as movies, dramas, calligraphy, etc. Many are writing novels and poems inspired by Islamic themes as well. Although calligraphy has gained worldwide fame, the quality of dramas and movies based on Islamic themes produced in Bangladesh has far to go. One of the problems of existing Islamic cultural organizations is that they don't take their task professionally, that is, they don't dedicate their whole life to cultural activities. After going into job-life, most of them become irregular in their cultural activities. Even those who cling to cultural activities, especially in songs and drama, don't have a professional team to work with. They also face the problem of financial backup. Most of these cultural activists don't work from profit-centered thinking. They also need to make many experiments in their endeavor of creativity, which needs a lot of finance. Some of them should be sent abroad to study on various disciplines of art. For all of these reasons, strong financial backups should be managed for these cultural movements to flourish.

However, without the political hegemony of those who hold the same cultural values, cultural imperialism cannot be resisted to a full extent. The flourishing of the true Bengali Muslim culture doesn't need any forceful imposition from the

government. The advantage of cultural productions based on Islamic themes is that they are capable of reaching pure hearts as they are supposed to be consistent with the pure innate nature of Human beings (Fitrah). Only if all the obstacles to the spreading of Islamic culture can be removed, it has the capacity to attract mass people. That is only possible when Islam-friendly political hegemony will be established in Bangladesh.

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