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Ekhankar vs. Okhankar: Dialect Hierarchies and Identity Rifts among Bengali Muslims

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the internal linguistic and cultural divisions within the Bengali Muslim community of West Bengal, focusing on the Ghoti–Banglai divide. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, Goffman's theory of stigma, and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, it analyzes how native inhabitants (Ghotis) and migrant populations (Bangals) negotiate a hierarchy of dialects and belonging. Using a constructivist ethnographic design, the study is based on 200 semi-structured interviews (100 Ghoti, 100 Bangal), approximately 150 hours of participant observation in West Bengal and Bangladesh, and textual analysis of literary and historical works. Findings show that "Calcutta Bangla" operates as prestigious linguistic capital. At the same time, eastern dialects are devalued through ridicule and "humourizing tension," producing symbolic violence and encouraging practices of "passing" and "covering" among Bangla speakers. The label "Bangal" is tightly bound to refugee stigma, prompting Ghoti Muslims to assert native ("ekhankar") status to avoid a "spoiled identity" associated with migration. The study argues that shared religious and linguistic affiliations do not produce ethnic homogeneity; instead, historical traumas such as stigma magna and the 1971 Liberation War continue to structure an enduring yet often concealed rift. By dismantling the monolithic category "Bengali Muslim," the article foregrounds intra-community borders of language, memory, and status that shape everyday life across generations.

Keywords: Bengali Muslim Identity, Ethnic Non-Homogeneity, Ghoti-Bangal Divide, Linguistic Hierarchy, Social Identity Theory, Stigma Management, Symbolic Violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is frequently mischaracterized as a monolithic, homogeneous construct, both in popular discourse and in early sociological theory. This perceived uniformity often masks deep-seated internal divisions that are periodically negotiated through the complex interplay of history, geography, and culture. As Stuart Hall (1996) argues, identity is not a static "essence" but a "positioning", a process of "becoming" rather than simply "being." This "positioning" is inherently relational, defined not just by what an individual is, but by what they are not. Central to this process is the construction of the "Self" and the "Other," a dichotomy that is particularly salient within ethnic groups where internal boundaries are drawn to distinguish between the "native" (the Self) and the "migrant" or "outsider" (the Other). The "Other" is not just an external entity but is often found within the group itself, as sub-groups attempt to define their own authenticity in opposition to those they perceive as "lesser" or "impure."

To understand these internal divisions, one must center the discussion on Social Identity Theory (SIT), as formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979). SIT posits that individuals do not have just a personal identity but also multiple "social identities" derived from their perceived membership in social groups. This identification process involves three critical stages: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. In the categorization stage, individuals organize people into groups based on salient characteristics. In the identification stage, they adopt the identity of the group they perceive themselves to belong to. Finally, in the comparison stage, they compare their "in-group" with "out-groups" to maintain their self-esteem through "positive distinctiveness." In the context of Bengal, a region historically and culturally rich yet politically fractured, this dynamic manifests through the enduring Ghoti-Bangal divide. While often discussed within the Hindu community, this internal cleavage remains a profound yet understudied reality within the Bengali Muslim community of West Bengal, India. The Bengali identity, despite its shared linguistic and cultural heritage, is far from unitary. Divisions based on class, religion, and geography have always existed, complicating the notion of a singular Bengali "race" (Bhaumik, 2022).

The partition of India in 1947, and later the 1971 Liberation War, transformed these latent cultural differences into rigid social and political boundaries. The physical demarcation of Bengal into West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (now Bangladesh) created a permanent state of "here" (*ekhankar*) and "there" (*okhankar*). For the inhabitants of West

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Bengal, the *Ghotis* represent the native "Self," the "insiders" who derive their positive social identity from their ancestral roots in the west. Conversely, the *Bangalis*, those who migrated from the east during or after the Partition, are frequently cast as the "outsiders," the "Other." This categorization is not a benign geographical fact but a strategy of Social Comparison, where the Ghoti "in-group" seeks to achieve "positive distinctiveness" by devaluing the Bangal "out-group." The "ekhankar" identity is rooted in the soil, in a sense of timeless belonging that the "okhankar" can never truly replicate, regardless of how long they reside in the West.

The Ghoti-Bangal divide is not a modern invention but has roots that predate the Partition. Historically, the people of western and eastern Bengal were distinguished by distinct cultural modes, including language, food habits, and social rituals. Before 1947, there was no clear demarcation between these two parts, and the division was more a construction based on cultural norms than on geographical reality (Bhaumik, 2022). The physical relocation of millions after 1947 merely solidified these existing cultural nuances into a concrete social boundary. In West Bengal, the native population (Ghotis) often viewed the incoming refugees (Bangals) with a mix of sympathy and resentment, seeing them as competitors for resources and a threat to the established social order. This "Othering" was reinforced through popular representations where the Bangal was depicted as a figure of "contemptuous curiosity" or even ridicule. The term "Bangal" itself often carried a derogatory connotation, implying a lack of urbanity, a "funny" or "uncivilized" dialect, and a general boisterousness that contrasted with the "refined" and "restrained" Ghoti.

Within the Bengali Muslim community, this divide takes on additional layers of complexity through the lens of Goffman's (1963) theory of Stigma. Goffman defines stigma as a "spoiled identity", an attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces the individual from a "whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." For many Bangladeshi Muslims, their identity is inextricably linked to the "refugee" status, which in the broader Indian social hierarchy is often stigmatized. This is compounded by the macro-level "fault line" where "Bengaliness" and "Muslimness" are seen to coexist uneasily (Chatterji, 1996). The common misconception that all Bengali-speaking Muslims in West Bengal are "Bangal" refugees or "Bangladeshis" ignores the significant and established "Ghoti" Muslim population (Murshid, 2016). For the Ghoti Muslim, being generalized as a "Bangal" or an "illegal foreigner" is perceived as a profound insult, a challenge to their authentic belonging to the

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Indian land (Murshid, 2016). This generalization forces the Ghoti "in-group" to engage in aggressive Identity Management, asserting their "Ghotiness" to avoid the "spoiled identity" of the "migrant Other." The Ghoti elite, in particular, utilize their "pure" language and urban lineage as a shield against the "refugee" stigma, creating a "concealed rift" that separates them from their co-religionists from the east.

Linguistic differentiation serves as the primary instrument for maintaining this internal hierarchy, a process best understood through Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of Symbolic Violence. Bourdieu argues that language is not merely a means of communication but also a site of power. While both Ghotis and Bangals speak Bengali, the dialects they employ are markers of Symbolic Capital. The "Calcutta Bangla," or the standard dialect spoken by the West Bengal urban elite, has acquired a status of "sophistication" and "civilization" due to its dominance in art, literature, and political power (Bhaumik, 2022). This dialect, associated with the *ekhankar* (those from here), is often contrasted with the *Bangal bhasha*, the regional dialects of East Bengal. These eastern dialects are frequently characterized by the Ghoti "Self" as "unsophisticated," "funny," or even "lazy" (*fakibaji*). This linguistic flexibility, which the Bangal might view as a form of creative freedom, is framed by the Ghoti as a failure to adhere to the "pure" and "precise" textbook Bengali. The prestige attached to the Calcutta dialect is not inherent but a product of extralinguistic and political factors that have stood in for the "Standard Bangla." The "Standard Language Ideology" (Milroy & Milroy, 2012) naturalizes this elite dialect, making regional variations seem like "distortions" of the "real" language.

By devaluing the Bangal dialect, the dominant Ghoti group reinforces its own cultural and social superiority, a classic manifestation of symbolic violence where the marginalized group may even come to view their own dialect as "inferior." This study aims to shed light on this "concealed rift" that has persisted for centuries but remains largely ignored in academic discourse. It seeks to understand how these two groups, despite sharing a common religious and linguistic identity, maintain distinct cultures and position each other in a hierarchical relationship. The research highlights that shared religious identity does not equate to ethnic homogeneity, as historical traumas like Partition continue to shape internal social stratification. The focus is not on the nation-state's external borders, but on the "internal borders" created by language, memory, and social status.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to dismantle the monolithic

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"Bengali Muslim" label that is frequently used by the state, media, and even academic researchers. By exploring the nuances of the Ghoti-Bangal divide, this paper offers a more fragmented and accurate understanding of West Bengal's social landscape. It examines how geographical differences and linguistic factors contribute to the construction of a new "Self" and "Other" within the community. Furthermore, the research delves into the lived experiences of individuals who navigate these identities daily, highlighting the persistence of these cultural boundaries even amid modernization and social mobility. The latent boundary is not just a relic of the past but a living reality that continues to influence social interactions, marriage choices, and professional identities. The "Othering" is not always a violent act, but can be a subtle, everyday practice of "humourizing tension" (Bhaumik, 2022) that reminds the Bangal of their "outsider" status.

The divide also manifests in mundane daily rituals, such as food habits and even support for football teams. Ghotis traditionally support the Mohun Bagan Football Club, while Bangals support East Bengal (Shamshad, 2016). These seemingly minor preferences are utilized to reinforce the boundaries between the two groups, turning every aspect of social life into a site of identity performance. The Ghotis take pride in their "local" fish and recipes, such as chingri (prawn) malai curry, while the Bangals maintain their distinct culinary traditions, like ilish (hilsa), to preserve their roots. This constant criticism and "good-natured teasing" about food and language are the outer layers of a deeper internal division that has been present for generations. For the Ghoti "Self," the "refugee" label remains a stigma they seek to distance themselves from, asserting their "pride" in being an inhabitant of the land since birth. The "concealed rift" is thus built on a foundation of historical trauma, linguistic hierarchy, and cultural distinctiveness.

The historical trajectory of Bengal, from the Partition of 1947 to the 1971 Liberation War, has continuously redefined what it means to be "Bengali" and "Muslim." For those who migrated, the trauma of displacement was compounded by the struggle for assimilation in a society that often viewed them as "outsiders." For those who stayed, the challenge was to maintain their identity in a changing political landscape while distancing themselves from the stigma associated with migration. This study explores how these historical events have entrenched the division, making it increasingly challenging to distinguish between the two groups in contemporary times, yet the "invisible rift" remains potent in the minds of the people. The study argues that ethnic identity is a "process" (Hall, 1996) that is never complete, and

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that the construction of "Self" and "Other" is a central part of this ongoing negotiation.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader sociological understanding of ethnic non-homogeneity. It challenges the assumption that shared religion or language leads to a unified community, instead showcasing how internal divisions can be just as potent and enduring as external ones. By centering the discussion on the "Self and Other" dynamic and the hierarchy of dialects, this paper seeks to offer a nuanced perspective on the complex identities of Bengali Muslims in West Bengal, paving the way for further research into the "concealed rifts" that define ethnic communities. The "Self" and "Other" are orchestrated not just by external forces but also by the everyday practices of community members, who navigate a world of shifting borders and static stigmas. The "ekhankar" and "okhankar" distinction is a powerful lens through which to view these complex identities, as it captures the interplay of time, place, and power in the construction of social identity.

This study is significant because it challenges the dominant assumption of religious community homogeneity by foregrounding internal divisions shaped by language, geography, and historical experience. By focusing on intra-group dynamics, the research contributes to broader sociological debates on identity formation, symbolic power, and everyday boundary-making practices. It also provides a nuanced understanding of how marginalized distinctions persist within communities that are externally categorized as uniform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptualization of ethnic identity has undergone a significant transformation, moving from primordialist views of fixed essences to constructivist models that emphasize fluidity, "positioning," and boundary-making. This literature review centers on the convergence of three major sociological traditions: Social Identity Theory, Stigma Management, and Linguistic Capital, to explain the Ghoti-Bangal divide within the Bengali Muslim community. It explores how these frameworks help to unpack the "concealed rift" and the hierarchy of dialects that define the "Self/Other" dynamic.

Social Identity and the Relational Self

Stuart Hall’s (1996) seminal work on identity as a "positioning" provides the foundational theoretical framework for this study. Hall argues that identity is not a final destination but a continuous process of "becoming," shaped by the interplay of history,

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culture, and power. This perspective challenges the notion of ethnic homogeneity, suggesting that groups are internally fragmented and defined by their relational positioning to "Others." The construction of identity is thus strategic and positional, never a fixed entity. Hall's work emphasizes that identities are "produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive practices" (Hall, 1996). For the Bengali Muslim, this site is the fractured landscape of post-partition Bengal.

Central to this "positioning" is the construction of the "Self" and the "Other." Social Identity Theory (SIT), as discussed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), emphasizes that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from their group memberships. To maintain a positive social identity, groups engage in Social Comparison, where the "in-group" (Ghoti) enhances its status by highlighting the deficiencies of the "out-group" (Bangal). Desrochers, Andreassi, and Thompson (2004) further emphasize that individuals navigate multiple roles and group memberships, which are maintained through symbolic boundaries. These boundaries are not merely geographical or political but are deeply embedded in a group's cultural and social practices. When individuals or sub-groups within a larger ethnic category deviate from the established norms of the "native" group, they are frequently cast as "Other" to preserve the dominant group's cultural capital and status. SIT provides a tool to understand how the Ghoti-Bangal divide is maintained through the quest for "positive distinctiveness" and the devaluation of the "Other."

The "insider/outsider" perspective, as articulated by Kersen (2016), provides a critical lens for understanding how groups define their membership and exclude others. In the context of the Ghoti-Bangal divide, the Ghotis (insiders) use their native status and cultural heritage to distinguish themselves from the Bangals (outsiders). This dynamic is further complicated in the Bengali Muslim community, where the "insider" status of the Ghoti Muslim is often challenged by broader societal perceptions that associate all Bengali Muslims with the "migrant" or "refugee" label. The unique nature of the sociological perspective allows us to observe how these identities are positioned hierarchically, often favoring the urban elite over rural or migrant populations. The "insider" is not just someone who lives "here," but someone who "belongs" here by virtue of their lineage and culture.

Stigma and the Management of Spoiled Identities

Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of Stigma is crucial for understanding the Bangal

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experience in West Bengal. Goffman defines stigma as a "spoiled identity", an attribute that is deeply discrediting. For the Bangladeshi Muslim, the "refugee" status is a primary stigmatizing attribute. This forces individuals to engage in various forms of Identity Management, such as "passing" (hiding one's dialect) or "covering" (minimizing the salience of one's origin). Goffman notes that "the stigmatized person is asked to be a member of the group he is not allowed to join" (Goffman, 1963). In the case of the Bangal, they are "Bengali" but not "Ghoti Bengali," and this distinction carries a high social cost.

Murshid (2016) explores how the perception of the "illegal foreigner" has been weaponized against the Bengali Muslim community, making the distinction between the "native" and the "migrant" a matter of survival. For the Ghoti Muslim, asserting their native status is a defensive reaction, a form of "distancing" from the stigmatized "Other." By emphasizing their "Ghotiness," they seek to protect their identity from being "spoiled" by the broader societal gaze that views all Bengali-speaking Muslims as potential infiltrators. External political pressures thus reinforce this internal divide, as groups seek to distance themselves from the precarious "refugee" label. The "concealed rift" is a way for the Ghoti elite to maintain their status while "Othering" those they perceive as a threat to their social standing. The management of stigma becomes a central part of the Bengali Muslim experience, as they navigate a world where their very existence is often questioned.

Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Violence

Linguistic differentiation is perhaps the most visible and potent marker of the Ghoti-Bangal divide. This process is best understood through Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) concepts of Symbolic Capital and Symbolic Violence. Bourdieu argues that the "official" or "standard" language of a society is not naturally superior but is a product of political and social dominance. In West Bengal, "Calcutta Bangla" functions as Linguistic Capital, granting its speakers access to prestige, professional opportunities, and social elite status. Bourdieu’s concept of the "linguistic market" suggests that different dialects have different "values" depending on the social context.

Regional dialects, particularly those associated with East Bengal (Bangal), are frequently relegated to the margins and stigmatized as "unsophisticated" or "uncivilized." Bhaumik (2022) describes this as "humorizing tension," in which the Bangal dialect becomes a source of ridicule and a target of "contemptuous curiosity." Behind this seemingly

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innocuous humor lies a rigid hierarchy that reinforces the Ghoti "Self." superiority. This can be understood as symbolic violence, where the dominant group's linguistic norms are naturalized as the "standard," thereby marginalizing those who speak differently. The devaluing of the Bangal dialect is not just a cultural preference but a mechanism of social exclusion that reminds the "Other" of their perceived cultural deficit. The prestige attached to the Calcutta dialect is an extra-linguistic product of political and social elitism.

Chakraborty, Castillo, and Panjabi (2022) argue that borders are not just physical demarcations but are "centered" in the aesthetics and politics of cultural production. The hierarchy of dialects in Bengal is a prime example of how internal borders are maintained through language. The "Standard Language Ideology" (Milroy & Milroy, 2012) naturalizes the elite dialect, making regional variations seem like "distortions" of the "real" language. This ideology creates a situation in which the Bangla dialect is seen not as a legitimate regional variation but as a "failed" attempt to speak "proper" Bengali. The symbolic violence lies in the fact that the marginalized group may come to accept this hierarchy, viewing their own dialect as "inferior" and striving to adopt the "standard" to gain social acceptance.

The Historiography and "Fault Lines" of Bengali Identity

The Bengali identity has historically been characterized by internal pluralism and conflict. Chatterji (1996) explores the "fault lines" of Bengali Muslim identity, arguing that the community is caught between the competing pulls of religious (Muslim) and linguistic/regional (Bengali) affiliations. This "contradiction in terms" suggests that the identity is inherently fragmented, with different sub-groups prioritizing different aspects of their heritage depending on the social and political context. Chatterji's work highlights that the "Bengali Muslim" identity is a "product of a complex set of historical processes" (Chatterji, 1996). The "fault line" is not just a theoretical construct but a lived reality that manifests in the community's social stratification.

Madan (1972) further elaborates on this tension, describing the "two faces" of Bengali ethnicity where individuals must constantly negotiate between being "Muslim Bengalis" or "Bengali Muslims." This internal negotiation is not just a personal struggle but is reflected in the broader social stratification of the community. The Ghoti-Bangal divide is a manifestation of these "two faces," in which an individual's geographical origins determine their "authentic" belonging to the land. Khan (1985) adds that the emergence of Bengali nationalism was

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deeply intertwined with Islamic identity. However, the regional disparities within Bengal created distinct political and cultural trajectories for the western and eastern populations. The "Self" and "Other" are thus historically rooted in the region's geographical and political shifts. The Partition of 1947 was not just a political event but a "cultural trauma" that created a permanent divide in the Bengali psyche.

Literary Representations and Cultural Performance

Literature often provides a more nuanced and visceral understanding of these identity shifts. Hasan Azizul Huq's (2006) novel *Agunpakhi* illustrates the visceral experience of the Partition and the subsequent alienation felt by those who remained in their ancestral lands. The novel follows the life of a character whose identity is constantly defined and redefined by shifting borders and the community's social expectations. Huq's work highlights how geographical displacement changes not just the physical location but the very nature of one's identity. The characters are forced to navigate the "Self/Other" dynamic as they are labeled as "refugees" or "outsiders" in their own land. The author highlights how identity is often "associated with others" rather than having an identity of one's own, reflecting the broader struggle within the community.

Similarly, gastronomic differences and football preferences serve as powerful indicators of identity and internal "Othering." Pain (2019) traces how the Bangal-Ghoti divide extends to gastronomic differences, where the choice of fish (*chingri* vs *ilish*) becomes a marker of

belonging. Shamshad (2016) discusses how support for football teams (Mohun Bagan vs East Bengal) reinforces the community's internal boundaries. These cultural markers are utilized to create "positive distinctiveness" for the in-group and to devalue the out-group. The internal division is thus maintained through the everyday performance of identity, turning even the most mundane activities into a site of social stratification. The literature review highlights that the Ghoti-Bangal divide is a multifaceted phenomenon, rooted in history, geography, language, and culture.

While existing scholarship has explored Bengali identity through the lenses of nationalism, religion, and migration, it has paid limited attention to intra-community hierarchies within the Bengali Muslim population of West Bengal. In particular, the role of linguistic differentiation as a mechanism of internal stratification remains underexplored.

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This study addresses this gap by examining how dialect operates as symbolic capital and a tool of boundary-making within a seemingly homogeneous religious community.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative dissertation study adopts a constructivist ethnographic framework to unpack the concealed rift (ekhankar-okhankar divide) within West Bengal's Bengali Muslim community, emphasizing lived narratives as the core data source. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), stigma management, and Symbolic Violence, the multi-method design, comprising semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis, captures subjective experiences of linguistic hierarchies, cultural performances, and stigma that quantitative approaches often overlook.

The study addresses the master research question: "Does the Ghoti-Bangal rift persist in the Bengali Muslim community despite shared ethnicity?" along with sub-questions concerning its evidence in modern times and whether shared ethnicity amplifies external threats (e.g., "outsider" labels) from dominant power structures.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 200 participants (n=200; 100 Ghoti, 100 Bangal) were recruited via purposive snowball sampling from North 24 Parganas (West Bengal, India) and Bangladesh, enabling a cross-border comparison of pre- and post-Partition identities. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 80, representing diverse genders and socioeconomic classes, including teachers, students, laborers, and descendants of elite zamindars.

The sampling process leveraged the researcher’s personal networks, specifically her grandfather's decades-long prominence as a respected "friend of the area", to build the necessary trust. This relational entry was crucial in mitigating the initial reticence often encountered when discussing sensitive topics such as internal "Othering."

Data Collection

Data collection occurred iteratively in naturalistic settings (homes, markets, and family gatherings) to observe unscripted identity performances.

Semi-Structured Interviews: 200 audio-recorded interviews (average 45–60 minutes)

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were conducted primarily in Bengali to maintain authenticity. Verbatim transcripts were translated into English for analysis. Questions probed linguistic self-identification, family arrival histories, perceptions of the "Bangal" label as an insult, and cultural markers (food, football, and marriage views).

Participant Observation: Approximately 150 hours of immersive fieldwork captured spontaneous dialect teasing and ritualized debates (e.g., *ilish* vs. *chingri*), triangulating self-reported data with behavioral evidence.

Textual Analysis: Critical reading of literary works, such as Hasan Azizul Huq's *Agunpakhi* (2006), and sociological texts (Bhaumik, 2022; Chatterji, 1996) provided the historical context of Partition and the 1971 War.

Data Analysis

Transcripts underwent reflexive thematic analysis per Braun and Clarke (2006), using NVivo software to facilitate the iterative phases of familiarization, generating initial codes (e.g., "fakibaji," "geographical elitism"), and clustering themes such as "Linguistic Symbolic Violence" and "Stigma Passing." Constant comparison across generational and locational subsets ensured saturation of patterns. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation and member checking with 20 participants to validate the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant institutional committee. Informed verbal consent was secured from all participants, ensuring anonymity through pseudonyms (e.g., S.A., Kajol). Data was stored securely to protect privacy amid sensitive discussions regarding refugee stigma and internal community divides.

This study acknowledges certain limitations. The use of purposive snowball sampling, while effective in accessing participants, may introduce network bias, particularly given the researcher’s reliance on personal social connections. Additionally, the cross-regional comparison between West Bengal and Bangladesh is not intended to be statistically representative but rather illustrative of broader patterns of identity formation. The findings should therefore be interpreted as context-specific. Furthermore, the researcher’s positionality within the community may have influenced both access to participants and interpretation of

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narratives, necessitating reflexive awareness throughout the research process.

Given the sensitive nature of discussions surrounding identity, stigma, and community divisions, particular care was taken to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. All identifying details have been anonymized to protect privacy.

Analytical Framework

This study integrates Social Identity Theory, Goffman's concept of stigma, and Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence to analyze how internal distinctions are constructed and maintained. These frameworks collectively enable an understanding of how identity is negotiated through processes of comparison, exclusion, and the unequal valuation of cultural practices.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research reveal that the Ghoti-Bangal divide remains a significant and often painful axis of social stratification within the Bengali Muslim community. The "concealed rift" manifests through several deeply entrenched themes, each contributing to a complex hierarchy of belonging.

Linguistic Hierarchies and Symbolic Violence

The primary finding of this study is the persistence of a rigid linguistic hierarchy where "Calcutta Bangla" functions as the supreme form of Symbolic Capital. This hierarchy is not merely about communication but is a mechanism of Symbolic Violence that devalues regional identities and enforces a "Standard Language Ideology."

The Elite Standard vs. The Regional "Funny": Respondents consistently identified the "Ghoti" dialect of Kolkata as the standard of "sophistication," "civilization," and "culture." One respondent, S.A. (a schoolteacher), whose father was a wealthy zamindar in Kolkata, expressed great pride in his lineage. He noted that his family "does not like being called a Bangal" and finds the assumption "very annoying" and "offensive." For Ghotis like S.A., their language is the "real Bangla," while any deviation is seen as an incomplete or inferior version. He described the Bangal dialect as "loud" and "unrefined," contrasting it with the "refined" and "musical" quality of his own speech. This linguistic policing is a clear example

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of how the Ghoti elite maintain their social status by devaluing the "Other."

The Stigma of the Bangal Dialect: Kajol (S.A.'s eldest sister), who married into a Bangal family in 1979, shared a revealing account of her first encounter with her husband's East Bengali relatives. She described their language as "very different," "funny," and "unsophisticated." She noted that her husband explicitly told her that their "*Bhasha* is superior to the latter," a statement she found both amusing and revealing. Kajol admitted that she "couldn't stop herself from correcting her Bangla in my head," showcasing how the Ghoti "Self" internalizes the role of the linguistic police. This internal correction is a form of symbolic violence, as it naturalizes the Ghoti dialect as the only "correct" way to speak.

Linguistic Flexibility as "Fakibaji": The linguistic flexibility, or code-switching, often practiced by Bangals, who might use different dialects depending on the social context, is perceived by the Ghoti elite as "fakibaji" (shirking or shortcutting). This reflects a broader ideological stance where the "textbook" Bengali is the only legitimate form of the language, and any regional variation is a sign of "laziness" or "lack of education." One Ghoti respondent noted that Bangals "can't even speak their own language properly," highlighting the deep-seated prejudice against regional variations. This devaluing of regional dialects is a mechanism of social exclusion that reminds the Bangal of their perceived cultural deficit.

Internalized Inferiority and "Passing": Interestingly, Kamal (a student from Bangladesh) living in Kolkata, echoed these sentiments, describing Ghoti Bengali as "more purely precise textbook Bangla" and "more sophisticated and civilized" than the dialect spoken in his home country. He admitted that he often tries to "mask" his original accent when speaking with Ghotis to avoid being labeled as an "outsider." This can be perceived as a form of Stigma Management and "passing," where the marginalized group seeks to adopt the markers of the dominant group to gain social acceptance. The fact that Kamal views his own dialect as "lesser" highlights the power of symbolic violence in shaping internal perceptions of identity.

Identity Management and the Stigma of the "Refugee"

The findings highlight how the "Bangal" identity is inextricably linked to the stigma of being a "refugee" or an "outsider," forcing individuals to engage in complex Identity Management to navigate a world of shifting borders and static stigmas.

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The "Illegal Infiltrator" Narrative: For many Bengali Muslims, the broader Indian sociopolitical environment associates their religious identity with "illegal migration" from Bangladesh. This makes the distinction between "native" and "migrant" an existential matter. N.H. (a student) shared that whenever people get to know their mother tongue is Bengali, they "immediately associate it with Bangladesh and the war." He noted that while a Bangladeshi might take pride in being recognized as "Bangal," for the native Ghotis, it is seen as a "huge insult." The "refugee" label is thus a "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 1963) that the Ghoti Muslim seeks to distance themselves from at all costs.

Distancing from the Stigma: Ghotis like S.A. actively engage in "distancing" strategies to protect their identity. S.A. emphasized his family's roots as "rich zamindars" born in Kolkata to assert his "authenticity" and distance himself from the "refugee" label. He noted, "We have been here for generations, we are the real locals." This assertion of "Ghotiness" is a defensive reaction against being lumped into a stigmatized category. It illustrates the Social Identity Theory's concept of "positive distinctiveness," where the in-group asserts its superior status to avoid being tainted by the out-group's stigma. The Ghoti "Self" is thus constructed in opposition to the Bangal "Other" to secure social status and a sense of belonging.

The Invisibility of the Rift: Many respondents noted that this "rift" is "concealed" and "hardly discussed" in public, but it remains a visceral reality in the private sphere. It influences marriage choices, family gatherings, and internal community hierarchies. One respondent noted that "in my family, we don't marry Bangals," highlighting the persistence of these cultural boundaries even in the face of shared religious identity. The "Ghoti" Muslim elite often view themselves as the "gatekeepers" of Bengali Muslim culture, looking down upon the "Bangal" newcomers. This internal hierarchy is often invisible to outsiders, who see a monolithic "Bengali Muslim" community, but for the members themselves, the latent boundary is a constant presence.

Geographical Hierarchy: Ekhankar vs. Okhankar

The distinction between "here" (*ekhankar*) and "there" (*okhankar*) continues to define land belonging and ownership, reflecting a deep-seated geographical hierarchy that mirrors the linguistic one.

The "Ownership" of Kolkata: The Ghotis of Kolkata view themselves as the rightful

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"owners" of the city's culture and heritage. The "ekhankar" identity is associated with elitism, authenticity, and historical presence. In contrast, "okhankar" (those from there) are seen as "guests" who have overstayed their welcome or "intruders" who lack the cultural sophistication of the natives. This sense of ownership extends to the language, the food, and even the city's social rituals. One Ghoti respondent noted that "Kolkata belongs to us, the Bangals are just here for the opportunities." This geographical elitism is a powerful tool for maintaining social boundaries.

Geographic Determinism and Class: The hierarchy is also tied to specific locations. The "Calcutta Bangla" is elevated because of its association with the seat of power and art, while the dialects of the eastern districts are viewed as "rural" or "unrefined." This geographic determinism reinforces the class divide within the community, as the urban Ghoti elite seeks to distinguish itself from the rural or refugee Bangal population. The "okhankar" is not just someone from a different place, but someone from a "lesser" place. This hierarchy is maintained through the constant "Othering" of those who do not share the "ekhankar" lineage.

Cultural Performance: Food and Football as Battlegrounds

The findings reveal that the divide is not just about language but is performed through everyday cultural practices, turning mundane activities into a site of identity performance and internal "Othering."

Gastronomic Rivalry: The preference for specific fish remains a potent marker of identity. Ghotis traditionally prefer chingri (prawn) and its complex recipes, while Bangals take pride in ilish (hilsa), often viewing it as a symbol of their East Bengali roots. One respondent noted that "we can tell someone is a Bangal by the way they cook their fish," showcasing how gastronomy is utilized to reinforce boundaries. The "good-natured teasing" about food is often a cover for deeper prejudices about cultural "sophistication."

Football Support: Support for the Mohun Bagan and East Bengal football clubs remains a primary marker of the Ghoti-Bangal divide. Ghotis overwhelmingly support Mohun Bagan, while Bangals support East Bengal. These clubs serve as "symbolic vehicles" for the two groups to express their identity and their rivalry in a socially acceptable way. One respondent noted that "if a Bangal supports Mohun Bagan, it's like they're trying to hide their identity," highlighting the role of sports in maintaining internal boundaries.

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Generational Shifts and the Persistence of Prejudice

A notable finding is the changing perception of the divide among the younger generation, reflecting both its fading and the emergence of new forms of "Othering."

Modernity and Social Mobility: Younger respondents, often educated in English-medium schools and living a "modern" lifestyle, found the Ghoti-Bangal division to be "something which only exists in the minds of the old generation." They are more focused on social mobility, global identities, and professional success than on Partition-era divisions. For them, the "Self/Other" dynamic is increasingly defined by class and education rather than geographical origin.

The Persistence of Private Prejudices: However, despite this public "fading," the prejudices often persist in the private sphere, particularly regarding marriage and socialization. The older generation continues to pass down these "invisible rifts" to their offspring through socialization. One young respondent admitted that while they don't care about the divide, their parents would "never allow them to marry a Bangal." This highlights that the latent boundary remains a potent force in the community's private lives.

New Forms of "Othering": The research also suggests that as the internal Ghoti-Banglai divide fades, new forms of "Othering" are emerging. Broader political forces are identifying the entire Bengali Muslim community as "Other," "illegal refugees," and "infiltrators." This external threat is forcing the community to bridge its internal divides to survive, yet historical prejudices remain a latent force that could be reactivated at any time.

The findings collectively indicate that the Ghoti–Banglai divide operates not as an overt conflict but as a subtle, normalized system of differentiation embedded in everyday interactions. Linguistic practices, cultural preferences, and historical narratives function together to reproduce these distinctions, often in ways that appear mundane yet carry significant social meaning. This suggests that internal hierarchies are sustained not only through explicit exclusion but also through routine acts of classification and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The Ghoti-Banglai dialect hierarchy is a profound manifestation of ethnic heterogeneity within the Bengali Muslim community. Centering this study on Social

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Identity Theory, Goffman's Stigma, and Bourdieu's Symbolic Violence reveals that shared religious and linguistic identities are insufficient to bridge Bengal's historical and geographical divide. Through the hierarchy of dialects, the "Standard" vs "Regional" distinction, and the stigma of the "refugee," sub-groups within the community continue to construct their "Self" in opposition to an internal "Other" to secure social status and manage "spoiled identities."

The findings demonstrate that this "concealed rift" is not just a relic of the past but is actively maintained through daily linguistic policing, cultural ridicule, and geographical elitism. While the younger generation seeks to move beyond these divisions, the historical trauma of Partition and the modern politics of belonging continue to cast a long shadow. This study highlights the need for a more fragmented and nuanced understanding of ethnic identity, emphasizing that internal divisions are dynamic, enduring, and deeply tied to the exercise of power. By dismantling the monolithic "Bengali Muslim" label, we can better appreciate the complex social landscape of West Bengal and the diverse, often contradictory, lived experiences of its people. The "ekhankar" and "okhankar" distinction remains a potent lens through which to view the ongoing negotiation of identity in a world of shifting borders and static stigmas.

This study contributes to sociological understandings of identity by demonstrating how internal divisions within a community are actively produced and maintained through language, cultural practices, and everyday forms of social interaction.

Future research could extend this analysis by exploring similar intra-community divisions in other regional or linguistic contexts, as well as examining how digital spaces and contemporary media may be reshaping these identity dynamics. A comparative study across different religious communities in Bengal may also provide deeper insight into how internal hierarchies are constructed and maintained.

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