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Inter-Religious Harmony: Promoting Unity and Tolerance an Investigation into Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh: Examination of Initiatives, Challenges, and Implications

Moammad Shajan Siraj

Student Department of Peace, Conflict and Human Rights Studies.

Bangladesh University of Professional

Email: shajancu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

The cultural heritage of Bangladesh encompasses a notable presence of religious diversity, with inter-religious harmony serving as a pivotal factor in upholding peace, fostering social cohesion, and facilitating ongoing development within the nation. This study utilizes secondary data analysis to explore the state of Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh, drawing upon reliable data sources. Descriptive data analysis is applied to derive the study's findings. This article delves into the notion of inter-religious harmony, emphasizing its significance, and examining the initiatives undertaken by the government and civil society to foster its promotion within the context of Bangladesh. This paper examines the historical backdrop of religious pluralism in Bangladesh and underscores the obstacles encountered in the pursuit of social cohesion. The article also highlights the importance of promoting inter-religious harmony as a means of enhancing social cohesion, fostering acceptance and tolerance, and positively influencing the economic and political stability of the nation. The text delves deeper into different governmental initiatives, such as legislative measures and national educational policies, that are designed to safeguard religious freedom and cultivate a society characterized by tolerance. Furthermore, this paper examines the significance of civil society organizations, religious leaders, and interfaith dialogue in fostering societal cohesion. The article ultimately recognizes occurrences of religious violence in Bangladesh, while simultaneously emphasizing instances of religious harmony as exemplars of unity and collaboration among diverse religious communities.

Key words: Inter-religious Harmony; Bangladesh; Civil Society; Interfaith Dialogue; social cohesion

Introduction:

The concept of "religion" encompasses a compendium of institutionalized ideologies, traditions, and establishments that often revolve around the conviction and veneration of an omnipotent authority. ^[1] According to the esteemed scholar Edward Burnett Tylor, religion is "the belief in spiritual beings." ^[2] Religion frequently encompasses cultural ideas, worldviews, scriptures, predictions, revelations, and values that have spiritual significance to adherents of the specific faith, and it can include a variety of behaviors such as prayer, sermons, rituals, meditation, holy locations, feasts, symbols, and trances. ^[1]

In the global population, a majority of the people are religious. Religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of many people, and over 84% of the global population considers themselves to be members of a religious community^[3,5], and they are living with inter-religious harmony. Because the vast majority of people hold religious beliefs, it was impossible to maintain peace and harmony between different religions everywhere in the world.

Inter-religious harmony means that different religious groups in a country can live together peacefully, respect each other, and work together.

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) defines inter-religious harmony as "the ability of different religious groups to live together peacefully, respecting each other's beliefs and practices and promoting mutual understanding and cooperation." ^[5]

Interreligious unity is very important for peace, social cohesion, and continued development in a society with many different religions.

Despite certain countervailing forces, religious harmony across the globe is on the rise. There has been a horrible shift in religiously motivated conflict in South Asia. There are difficulties for minority religions all over South Asia. For decades, they've been persecuted due to political tensions, economic downturns, cultural upheavals, a failure to grasp the concept of secularism, a bias toward religious fanaticism, and an inaccurate view of the potential for peace across faiths. ^[6]

To ensure religious harmony In the Global Forum (UN) adopted Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to religious freedom. "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance"^[7]

In addition to being a member of international organizations and a signatory to the UN statement, Bangladesh is also a model of religious tolerance at home and around the world.

Bangladesh's religious diversity and harmony stem from its rich cultural heritage, not just its international prominence.

Bangladesh, a country with a diverse religious and cultural history, has made noteworthy strides toward fostering religious tolerance.

According to the 2022 census, In Bangladesh, 91.04% population is followed by Islam, 7.95 percent Hinduism, Buddhism by 0.61 percent, and Christianity by 0.3 percent, and other religious by 0.12%.^[8]

The study will examine the significance of religious peace in Bangladesh, the efforts made by the government and community groups including Civil Society to promote it, and the obstacles that remain.

Study Design: Materials and Methods:

The study design utilized for this research investigation is presented in the following outline. This research employs a secondary data analysis approach to examine the current status of Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh, utilizing credible and trustworthy data sources. Descriptive data analysis is utilized in order to derive the findings of the study.

Data Source:

The research paper identifies and employs distinct secondary data sources acquired from academic databases, government surveys, or reputable research repositories, with a specific focus on the topic of Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh. The rationale for choosing data sources is grounded in their pertinence, dependability, and accessibility.

Criteria for Inclusion:

- The process of selecting studies or datasets takes into account their relevance to the subject of Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh while adhering to specific criteria for inclusion.

Data Extraction:

- The extraction of pertinent information pertaining to Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh is conducted from the chosen studies or datasets, serving as the foundation for the analysis.

Historical Context of Bangladesh in relation to Religious Harmony

Bangladesh has been a place where people of all faiths could live and work together freely and peacefully. Since ancient times, Bangladesh has been home to people of many different races, ethnicities, and religions.

The time of the Mauryan Empire (3rd century BCE to 2nd century CE) was a pivotal one in the development of religious pluralism in Bangladesh. Buddhist culture flourished there, leaving behind significant relics like Paharpur's old monastic university, Somapura Mahavihara. There was also a sizable Hindu population at this time. Bengal was converted to Islam in the Middle Ages due to the influx of Muslim traders, Sufi saints, and conquerors. Bangladesh's religious landscape was also influenced by the Mughal Empire (from the 16th to the 18th century).

The religious makeup of Bangladesh shifted much further during the time the country was under British rule (the nineteenth and early twentieth century). schools, Churches, and hospitals were all set up by the time the Christian missionaries came. Muslims and Hindus had been living in relative peace in Bengal prior to its separation in 1905 along religious lines, but this led to demonstrations and finally the reunification of Bengal in 1911.

Inter-religious interactions changed after India was partitioned in 1947 and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) was established. Language and culture shaped political movements, including the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Bangladesh became independent with a secular constitution guaranteeing religious freedom after the conflict.^[9]

There are several different names for the country of Bangladesh. People in Bangladesh are mostly Muslims, and the country has a high population density. The area previously formed the eastern half of the British Indian province of Bengal, which included what is now the Indian state of West Bengal. After India's division in 1947, the region became a province of Pakistan called East Bengal (later renamed East Pakistan), and then in 1971 it gained its independence as the nation of Bangladesh^[10].

In 1972, Bangladesh adopted a constitution with the goal of establishing a secular state that protects the religious freedom of all its citizens, regardless of whether they identify with the dominant or minority religions [10]. Secularism was eventually outlawed and ratified as the Fifteenth Amendment (2A). While Islam is the official religion of the Republic, other faiths will be given equal protection under the law to practice their own beliefs.^[11]

Importance of Inter-religious Harmony:

In a multi-religious culture like Bangladesh, inter-religious harmony is crucial since it has a favorable effect on the country's economy, government, and society.

Promoting social cohesion and unity: Together, people of all faiths can work toward the common good of society in a climate of mutual respect and understanding fostered by interfaith peace. It helps people from different backgrounds learn from one another and work together to solve problems. For instance, Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, established the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh to serve people of all faiths, with the goal of promoting social harmony and giving voice to the voiceless.

During religious festivals in Bangladesh, such as the Islamic holiday of Eid-ul-Fitr and the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, people of all faiths and backgrounds come together to celebrate and enjoy one another's company. ^[12]

Fostering acceptance and tolerance: In order to encourage tolerance and acceptance of various religious practices and beliefs, interreligious concord is essential. It inspires people to uphold the values of tolerance and respect for people of all religions. The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b), a prominent research organization with an emphasis on healthcare, is an example of this. It offers medical care and carries out research while being inclusive and tolerant of persons from all various religious backgrounds. ^[13]

Keeping the Peace and Stability: The security and tranquility of a multi-religious community depend on the degree of inter-religious harmony within it. Conflicts and violence stemming from religious differences can be avoided if people take the time to better understand one another. One such example is the Shanti Bahini movement in Bangladesh. It was a militant organisation that included people of all faiths working together to protect vulnerable populations and secure justice for all.

The Gonojagoron Mancha movement in Bangladesh is another illustration of this phenomenon; members of many different faiths came together to fight extremism and promote secularism and peaceful coexistence, all of which helped to keep the country stable. ^[14]

Boosting Economic Development: The promotion of social cohesion and collaboration by maintaining religious peace is beneficial to economic growth. When people of different faiths are able to put aside their differences and work together, a fertile environment is created for economic development. Trust is built, collaboration is encouraged, and opportunities for commercial collaboration between different faiths are made easier. These sorts of partnerships could lead to economic growth, job creation, and a boost to the country as a whole. ^[15]

Government Initiatives:

The government of Bangladesh has taken a number of steps in recent years to advance religious tolerance and prevent discrimination of any kind within the country's many faith communities. Significant efforts and regulations are exemplified here.

- The Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes secularism as one of the country's guiding principles. Although Islam is designated as the official religion under Article 2A of the Constitution, all faiths are protected and citizens are allowed to practice their own. ^[16]
- Government legislation exists to safeguard religious liberty and against religiously motivated bigotry. In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Religious Affairs strives to protect the rights of religious minorities and resolve problems arising from discrimination based on faith. Discrimination based on a person's religious beliefs is outlawed by the Anti-Discrimination Act of 2001. ^[17]
- The government of Bangladesh has formed the National Religious Harmony Committee, which is comprised of religious leaders from all throughout the country. The committee's mission is to encourage people of different faiths to talk to one another and work together for the common good of society. ^[18]
- Bangladesh's national education policy prioritizes teaching students to respect the beliefs of others. It promotes tolerance and acceptance by exposing kids to a variety of worldviews and philosophies. ^[19]
- The government has passed laws to safeguard the rights of religious minorities and protect them from discrimination. Both religious discrimination and the profanation of religious symbols are expressly forbidden by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 2001. It also makes it illegal to encourage religious violence or spread hatred.
- In an effort to promote tolerance and harmony among its citizens, the government regularly observes holidays celebrating the traditions of a wide range of faiths. Muslim holidays such as Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha are recognized as national holidays in Bangladesh, alongside other holidays such as Durga Puja, Buddha Purnima and Christmas.
- The government of Bangladesh has set up the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs to look out for the interests of the indigenous peoples who have always called the country's hilly interior home. It's also been made easier for victims of religious violence to get the help they need and be held accountable for their attackers' actions.

Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue:

- ✘ Civil society organizations (CSOs): When it comes to fostering religious tolerance, civil society organizations (CSOs) are among the most instrumental actors. They promote open forums, fight for equal rights and religious tolerance, and help people connect with one another. One such organization working to foster understanding and unity among Bangladesh's many faiths is the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC).^[20]
- ✘ Religious Leaders: Leaders of the world's religions can make a big difference in promoting peace and understanding amongst different faiths. They are extremely important in spreading harmony and mutual respect within their various communities. When it comes to condemning violence and emphasizing common values, religious leaders frequently engage in cross-faith discussions. The All Religious unity council is one such forum in Bangladesh, bringing together religious leaders of many faiths to address shared concerns and advance interfaith understanding and cooperation.^[21]
- ✘ Interfaith Dialogue: Interfaith discussion is an effective method of fostering mutual respect and collaboration between adherents of many faiths. It's the practice of bringing people of different faiths together for open and civil talks in forums like conferences and workshops. In order to overcome prejudice, cultivate compassion, and forge cooperative bonds, interfaith discourse is essential. To foster discussion, cooperation, and understanding, groups like the Bangladesh Inter-Religious Council have planned events like Interfaith Harmony Week.^[22]

The Violence of a religious nature in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh has a reputation for religious tolerance and calm, but recent acts of violence perpetrated by religious extremists have shaken that foundation. Here is some example,

- ✓ Buddhists have faced persecution and abuse at the hands of the majority religion. Buddhist temples, homes, and possessions were viciously demolished on September 29 and 30, 2012, by some religious terrorists in the upazilas of Ramu and Ukhiya in the Cox's Bazar District of southern Bangladesh. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, it has been remembered as one of the country's worst atrocities on minority communities.^[23]
- ✓ 1992 Babri Mosque Riots: As a result of the 1992 Babri Mosque Demolition in Ayodhya, India, sectarian violence broke out throughout Bangladesh. Loss of life and property were the results of violence between Hindus and Muslims following the occurrence^[24].
- ✓ 2001 Chittagong Hill Tracts Unrest: In 2001, communal violence and confrontations between the local Buddhist population and Bengali newcomers broke out in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh. Human Rights Watch's World Report 2002: Bangladesh explains that land disputes, ethnic and religious tensions were major factors in these wars.^[25]
- ✓ 2013 Laxmipur Communal Violence: Tensions between Hindus and Muslims exploded in 2013 as communal violence broke out in Laxmipur district. People were injured and forced to flee their homes after several Hindu temples and homes were vandalized^[26].
- ✓ 2016 Nasirnagar Communal Attacks: Communal violence broke out in 2016 in the Brahmanbaria district city of Nasirnagar. Temples worshipped by Hindus were desecrated, and Hindu homes were attacked. Protests and unrest within the Hindu community followed the attacks^[27].
- ✓ The attacks on Hindu temples and homes in Brahmanbaria district in 2020 resulted in significant damage to property and heightened tensions^[28]
- ✓ 2001 Ramna Kali Temple Attack: In 2001, the Ramna Kali Temple, a Hindu place of worship in Dhaka, was attacked during the annual Hindu festival of Durga Puja. The attack resulted in multiple casualties and widespread outrage among the Hindu community
- ✓ Online Hate Speech and Incitement: The rise of social media platforms has also seen instances of hate speech and incitement to violence against religious communities. Online platforms have been misused to spread derogatory and inflammatory content targeting religious minorities, which can contribute to religious tensions.^[29]
- ✓ 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam Protests: In 2013, clashes occurred between the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam and law enforcement agencies in Dhaka. The protests led to violent confrontations and widespread disruption, resulting in casualties and damage to property. The protests were fueled by religious and political tensions.

Some examples of Religious Harmony:

- ✘ Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh Work to Improve Community Relations by Giving Land to Build a Crematorium and a Mosque:

In the Khulna region of Bangladesh, two men of different religions, a Hindu and a Muslim, have been teaching a lesson in communal unity via their deeds of kindness towards the religions of one another.

In an effort to foster communal harmony in their neighborhood, Bangladesh's Pranab Kumar Ghosh, an assistant professor at Fakirhat Azhar Ali Degree College in Bagerhat district, and Sheikh Mizanur Rahman, a local Awami League leader, each gave a parcel of land for the construction of a mosque, and Sheikh Mizanur Rahman gave a portion of his land to be used as a cremation ground for Hindus. Both of these acts were carried out in Bagerhat.^[30]

- ✦ In addition, Bangladesh is in the process of building a Buddhist pilgrimage center at Lumbini, which is located in Nepal. This center will serve Buddhist pilgrims coming from all over the world. A Muslim country has taken the initiative to build a Buddhist pilgrimage center in a Hindu religious majority country. This is a good example for Bangladesh to try to ensure religious harmony.^[31]
- ❖ Jumma-Bengali Interfaith Harmony:
 - ✓ Case Study: The Jumma-Bengali interfaith harmony in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region showcases the positive collaboration between the indigenous Jumma community and Bengali settlers.
 - ✓ Positive Outcomes: Through mutual respect, dialogue, and joint efforts, both communities have been able to bridge cultural and religious gaps, fostering harmony and cooperation.
 - ✓ Lesson Learned: The Jumma-Bengali interfaith harmony case highlights the importance of dialogue and mutual understanding in overcoming historical tensions and building peaceful coexistence.^[32]
- ❖ Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC):
 - ✓ Case Study: The BHBCUC is a civil society organization that promotes interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and cooperation among different religious communities in Bangladesh.
 - ✓ Positive Outcomes: The BHBCUC has been instrumental in organizing events and initiatives that encourage interaction, understanding, and harmony among religious groups.
 - ✓ Lesson Learned: The BHBCUC exemplifies the role of civil society organizations in fostering inter-religious harmony, highlighting the importance of collaborative efforts beyond governmental initiatives.^[33]
- ❖ Pathshala-Media Academy: Pathshala-Media Academy is a school in Bangladesh that teaches students about media and journalism in an effort to foster religious tolerance. Respect for religious diversity, objectivity in reporting, and ethical practices are emphasized. Pathshala South Asian Media Academy, a UNESCO-affiliated institution, instructs budding journalists on the value of reporting fairly on issues of religious diversity.
 - ✓ Experience Gained: Promoting religious unity can be greatly aided by educational and training programs that emphasize responsible journalism and media ethics. Pathshala-Media Academy exemplifies the power of media to foster understanding and unity by equipping journalists with the skills they need to report on religious subjects with sensitivity and accuracy.^[34]

Challenges and Solutions:

- ❖ Religious Extremism:
 - ✓ Challenge: The threat of religious extremism is a major obstacle to peace between faiths. A radicalized person or group could encourage intolerance of other faiths and the spread of hate speech and violence.
 - ✓ Solution: Countering religious extremism can be achieved by increased education on religious tolerance and the promotion of moderate interpretations of religious teachings. To foster conversation, mutual understanding, and peace, organizations like Bangladesh's Interfaith Youth Network host workshops, seminars, and conferences for young people of many faiths.^[35]
- ❖ Communal Tensions:
 - ✓ Challenge: Communal tensions arise from incidents that exploit religious differences, leading to mistrust, fear, and conflict between communities.
 - ✓ Solution: Community engagement programs that foster interaction, cooperation, and joint initiatives between religious communities can help mitigate communal tensions. An example is the Community Peacebuilding Network (CPN) in Bangladesh, which brings together religious leaders, local authorities, and community members to address conflicts, promote peace, and strengthen social cohesion.^[30]
- ❖ Socio-economic Disparities:
 - ✓ Challenge: Socio-economic disparities among different religious communities can contribute to tension and inequality, hindering inter-religious harmony.
 - ✓ Solution: Addressing socio-economic disparities through inclusive policies and programs can help bridge gaps. Initiatives like the Chars Livelihoods Programme in Bangladesh focus on providing livelihood support, education, and healthcare to marginalized communities, including religious minorities, promoting socio-economic equality and fostering harmony.^[37]

❖ Political Factors:

- ✓ Challenge: Political factors, such as identity politics and polarizing narratives, can impact inter-religious relations and hinder efforts towards harmony.
- ✓ Solution: Promoting inclusive governance, secularism, and pluralism can help address political challenges. Strong institutions and policies that protect the rights of religious minorities and ensure equal representation in decision-making processes contribute to a more harmonious society. The secular principles enshrined in the Bangladeshi Constitution serve as a foundation for promoting inter-religious harmony. ^[38]

CONCLUSION:

Bangladesh has taken steps since gaining independence to foster religious tolerance and defend the rights of religious minorities. Unfortunately, there have been isolated incidents of religiously motivated violence. Despite this, Bangladesh has maintained its emphasis on religious pluralism and achieved progress in promoting tolerance and acceptance.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a well-known Bengali song, "Age ki sundor din kataitam(What a beautiful day we used to spend)" which is a mesmerizing Bengali song composed by the legendary Baul musician, Shah Abdul Karim. This popular tune speaks about the once-thriving unity that existed between Hindus and Muslims in the rural districts of Bangladesh. গ্রামের নওজোয়ান হিন্দু মুসলমান মিলিয়া বাউলা গান আর মুর্শিদি গাইতাম, আগে কি সুন্দর দিন কাটাইতাম, আমরা আগে কি সুন্দর দিন কাটাইতাম। হিন্দুগো বাড়িতে যাত্রা গান হইত নিমন্ত্রণ দিত আমরা যাইতাম,(In the village, young people from both the Hindu and Muslim communities would come together to sing Baul songs and Murshidi songs. We would experience such beautiful days in the past. Jatra songs would be sung in Hindu households, they would graciously invite us to join them, and we would eagerly accept the invitation.)

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