

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE TO COUNTER RADICALIZATION IN BANGLADESH: AN APPROACH TO MOVE FROM EXTREMISM TO PLURALISM

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Abstract

The fundamental objective of this research paper is to examine how interfaith dialogue can be an effective mechanism to combat the forces of radicalization and extremism in Bangladesh. To unveil the answer to this question, this study has explored the nature of the politicization of Islam and the scope of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Reviewing the existing pieces of literature, this research paper has identified that there has been a rise in Islamic extremism since the beginning of the 21st century, which evolved throughout the last two decades changing in its nature and intensity. It has illustrated that after the military coup of 1975, the military rulers and the following democratic governments of Bangladesh carried on the tendency of politicizing religion and have used state mechanisms to Islamize Bangladeshi society. However, to address this recent trend of rising militancy, interfaith dialogue can be an effective approach that will shrink the potential of radicalization and extremism in Bangladesh. This study proposes incorporating an interreligious curriculum in the education system of Bangladesh and the engagement of religious preachers as well as mass people of different faiths including various sects of each religion in such interfaith dialogue initiatives to improve understanding and compassion.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Radicalization, Religious Extremism, Religious Harmony

Introduction

Religion, which left the domain of politics in early modern history has reappeared to reclaim its place in the political realm in the 21st century. In 1648, when the Treaty of Westphalia was signed and the modern nation-states were developed, the political significance of religion was largely decreased; first in Western Europe and the European colonies, and then around the rest of the world, both in intrastate and

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interstate levels (Haynes, 2009). When the 21st century started, many parts of the world experienced the revitalization of states where religion played a significantly eminent role. Since then, religious actors restarted playing a crucial part in political issues, both in the domestic and international arenas (Popovska et al., 2017).

Bangladesh has also experienced the changing waves of the role of religion in its socio-political life, which has been heightened in the recent past. Bangladesh is a country known for its multi-pluralist character, where people of different races, religions, and ethnicities have been living alongside each other, in a harmonious and respectful environment, for hundreds of years (Noor & Siregar, 2013). Throughout the history of this nation, religious tolerance and pluralism have prevailed despite some accidental occurrences of conflict and violence. For the persistence of religious harmony in Bangladesh, education can play an increasingly key role since education can impact anyone at any level. However, the existing educational system of Bangladesh has not played its role in establishing religious peace and harmony among the masses. In fact, in many cases, religious education has instigated fundamentalist, conflicting, and violent attitudes among the students. This religious fundamentalism threatens the pluralist socio-political structure of Bangladesh.

The fundamental objective of this research paper is to explore the potential scope of inter-faith dialogue to counter radicalization and religious extremism in Bangladesh. Therefore, the primary research question of this paper is: How can interfaith dialogue be an effective mechanism to combat the forces of radicalization and religious extremism in Bangladesh? The following order of this research paper is designed accordingly to unveil the answer to this question. To conduct this elaborate study, this research paper has followed the qualitative research approach and used secondary sources of data to extract findings. It has reviewed journal articles, books, news features, research reports and other related works of literature. This careful investigation is expected to add both scholarly and developmental value in the concerned field of research. Especially the government as well as the non-government agencies including civil society organizations of Bangladesh might benefit from the findings to enrich their future programs on social harmony, counter-radicalization, and peace.

Literature Review

There is a profusion of literature regarding religious extremism in Bangladesh. Most of these works are focused mainly on the factors behind Islamic militancy

in this country. Hasan (2011) connected the Islamic militancy of Bangladesh with the fundamentalist religious doctrines of Islamic political parties whose 'Political Islam' became an open rebel to globalization and global democratization. They have the desire to replace the present parliamentary system of governance with the Caliphate and establish *sharia* as the legal framework of the country (Hasan, 2011). Besides, Hasan (2012) identifies a long-standing secular-Islamist conflict in Bangladesh that is intricately connected to geopolitical events such as the Cold War and the Yom Kippur War when military rulers of the state systematically promoted Islamic culture and values in the public discourse to legitimize their own regimes. Datta (2007) strengthened this argument by identifying the existence of a section of people with a deep-rooted dislike of the prevailing system and who are persistently aspiring for bringing change in the country through extra-constitutional means. The contributing factors identified by the author include the Islamisation of politics, the growth of the Madrassas, an upsurge of religious parties, and the presence of Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Some other authors connected religious extremism with the development and governance issues of the country. Hossain and Curtis (2010) argue that radicalization and terrorism are directly linked to the corruption of the government and a lack of trust in the representative political process in Bangladesh. Fink (2010) argues that the combination of development challenges, weak governance, violent politics, and regional tensions offer a combustible mix for terrorism and militancy to evolve in Bangladesh. Hasan (2017) also mentions the democratic deficit as a key reason behind the rise of extremism in this country. Besides, extending his earlier arguments, Hasan (2017), in his article identifies other phenomena that are triggering young individuals to join the ranks of violent extremists: Bangladesh's demographic youth bulge and the country's changing social landscape through rapid urbanization and digitalization. Riaz (2008) introduces a comprehensive framework in this kind of study identifying diverse factors such as favourable domestic political environment, weakness of some Bangladeshi state institutions in certain geographic areas, popular glorification of militancy, and support to militant organizations by other kindred organizations outside Bangladesh as the factors that contribute towards rising Islamic militancy in Bangladesh.

Many academic pieces of literature, on the other hand, have emphasized the push and pull components while analysing the radicalization process. In this case, the push components are weak social, political, economic, and cultural structures that often provide an incentive for individuals to become associated with violent, extremist groups. Whereas pull components are described as the beneficial,

practically useful features and aspects of violent, extremist organizations that 'pull' accessible, susceptible individuals to become affiliated with such entities (Mazarr, 2004). These contain a particular group's beliefs and principles, strong, effective connections amongst the members, a sense of affinity and loyalty towards the group, increasing honour and prestige, strengthening position in the society, likelihood of achieving fame and glory along with other additional advantages (Farrall, 2015). The major causes of radicalization in moderate Muslim developing states are political and religious. A research study on extremism in moderate Muslim states has identified that Muslim states have failed to perform their fundamental obligations in the post-colonial period which created outrages and disappointments amongst the young Muslim population and induced them to become engaged in extremist activities. Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Pakistani researcher, identified the influences of the *Mullas* (religious leaders) as a strong component for accelerating the radicalization process in moderate Muslim countries. The other components include anticipated denial, absence of justice, inequality and discrimination, biased social structure, weak law and order, unfair policies, unfair use of power, financial concerns, poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance- these are strong, effective components that can inspire an individual in moderate Muslim developing states to engage in violent, extremist activities (Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 2009).

In Jordan, two quantitative research studies, particularly focused on university students, identified that social components can play a fundamental role as stimulators of radicalism. This factor contains broken families, degradation of moral values, persuasion of companions, weak national status, household coercion and disorder (Al-Rawashdeh, 2013, p.29). Besides, Hegghammer and Al-Harby have asserted that religious components are as significant as political factors (according to Hegghammer's analysis) and more significant than all other components (according to Al-Harby's analysis) for stimulating radical attitudes after conducting their research amongst Saudi university students (The Soufan Group, 2015; Al-Harby, 2013, p.64). However, other researchers have deemphasized the significance of religious factors in this regard, e.g., Wilson contends that violent, extremist individuals are not, in general, very religiously devoted and perhaps, know little about Islam than usually anticipated (Wilson, 2015). Besides, the function of religious components has been reiterated by other academics such as Russell & Rafiq (2016, p.57). Whereas religious factors certainly have a function to execute under some specific contexts of the radicalization process, still it is an ambiguous matter whether their relevance is a prime concern or not. Probably it functions as a stimulating factor by familiarizing targeted individuals with

extremist doctrines, thus legitimizing extremism with religious provisions as a superior moral structure (Rumman, 2015). Albeit religious narratives do not derive from nothingness. A predominant educational and cultural background usually expedites their embracement (Rubin, 2001).

Precht (2007), in his qualitative study, which was authorized by the Danish Ministry of Justice, found and determined the components that accelerated the violent religious radicalization process in Europe (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). His research illustrates three types of driving components behind radicalization. The first one is cultural components which contain an individual's conflict with religious status, encountering hatred and injustice, and lack of societal bonding. Precht (2007) defines the second type as provoking components that refer to an individual who functions as an adviser or a magnetic personality and issues such as unjust policy formulations might stimulate antagonism or in fact, militant activities within an individual (House of Common Home Affairs Committee, 2012). The third type of factor refers to accessibility and convenience which elucidate a person's extent of connection and exposure to radical ideologies. These consist of practical and virtual platforms, e.g., the Internet, places of worship, punitive institutions and social factions or communities (Ibid.). Therefore, Precht (2007) summarized the outcomes of his research study as such: on a broader spectrum, domestic extremism should be perceived as a sociocultural occurrence where factors such as a sense of affinity and loyalty, strengthening status and reputation, group directions, beliefs and principles play fundamental roles during the transition process. Religious actors play a significant part in this phenomenon, but for many scholars of this field religion rather functions as an instrument for realizing other objectives. A typical feature, in this case, appears to be that the engaged actors are at an intersecting period of their life and therefore, looking for some meaning and purpose (Ibid.). In 2008, a research organization located in Washington DC, known as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), called for a meeting and asked the specialists and professionals in this field to discuss the issue of violent religious extremism. Drawing on the suggestions conveyed at the meeting, this outcome document establishes a conceptual model for comprehending violent religious extremism based on three coinciding but different components that inspire individuals to become engaged in violent, extremist activities, which is illustrated below:

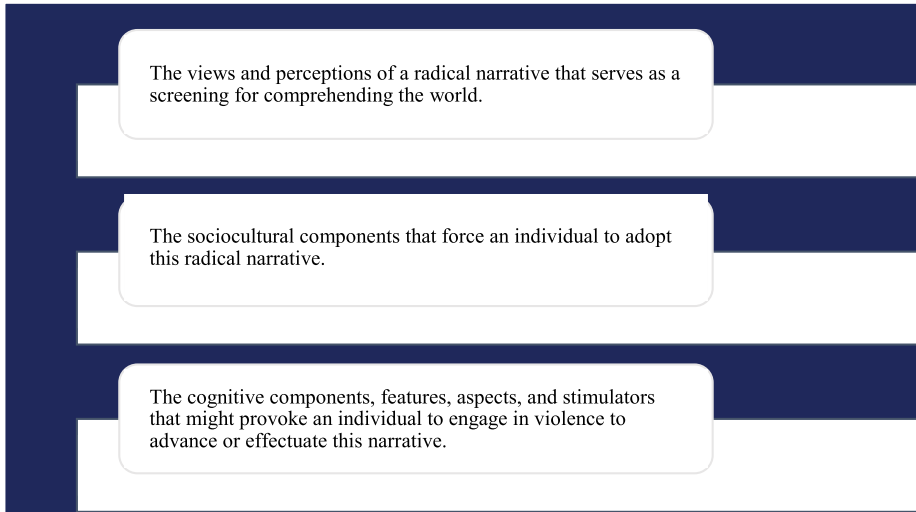


Figure 1: The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conceptual model for comprehending violent religious extremism.

In addition, this CSIS outcome document contends that none of the geographic or socio-economic components appears as strong, powerful instruments of the radicalization process (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007). Notions of indignity and disgrace often provide the forming of an affiliation between an exposed individual and a magnetic leader that accelerates the adoption of this radical narrative along with its corresponding views and approaches.

Though radicalization and religious extremism are well-discussed topics in existing literature, interfaith dialogue is not explored in the same manner in the context of Bangladesh. But, in the global context, interfaith dialogue has received much intellectual attention. Most of this literature has explored the aspects of interfaith dialogue from different theological perspectives. Chia (2016) has done extensive work in his book named *Interfaith Dialogue: Global Perspectives* by explaining interfaith dialogue in Judeo-Christian perspectives, the experiences of Muslim countries as well as the context of interfaith dialogue with indigenous communities. It compiles almost all available perspectives and attempts so far made in this regard. Besides, Kayaoglu (2015) exclusively discusses the experience of interfaith dialogue in Muslim countries. Examining three Muslim interfaith initiatives: The Gulen Movement in Turkey, Jordan's A Common World initiative, and Saudi Arabia's interfaith efforts. This article argues that Islamic actors initiate interfaith dialogue to signal their moderate stance to powerful

others who are concerned with Islamic radicalization and violence (Kayaoglu, 2015). This study has identified that interfaith dialogue, in essence, intends to establish confidence and understanding and to avoid any collision or violence. It also intends to break the conventional practices down as they can often lead to violence, hatred, and discrimination. It consists of respect towards the right of others to observe their religious practices in peace and harmony, while each party stays faithful to their own religious convictions. It asserts the virtues and principles of one's own religious beliefs, while also preserving the uniqueness of others (Popovska et al., 2017). During any interreligious dialogue maintaining trust would be a fundamental factor while addressing controversial and disputed issues (Ibid.). The present study defines interfaith dialogue as all those interactions among people of different religious faiths, which create opportunities for them to enrich their understanding and compassion for others and reduce hatred and misperceptions. Such interactions can be both formal and informal and can serve the aforementioned purpose either intentionally or unintentionally.

However, Bangladesh, despite being one of the countries already exposed to fatal inter-religious intolerance, has not yet got proper attention from scholars in this regard. This research paper is an attempt to fill up this vacuum. It is anticipated that this study will inspire more research works in this field which will add value to the integrated development of Bangladeshi society.

Conceptual Framework

Interfaith Dialogue

According to Jacques Dupuis, interfaith dialogue can be defined as all effective and conclusive interreligious connections amongst individuals and communities of different religious backgrounds, to establish mutual understanding, obedience, and respect for each other. It also comprises observing and exploring others' religious beliefs and their principles (Popovska et al., 2017). Gerard Forde, in his book *A Resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue*, illustrated that any interreligious dialogue intends to improve understanding and affinity amongst people of different religious convictions; it also examines the reasons behind the conflict between Muslims and Christians that are, in most of the cases, social, political, or economic rather than religious in character (Ibid.). According to David Smock (2002, p.6), a dialogue is not necessarily a dispute. A dispute signifies a motive of domination during the course of an argument, to affirm that one party is right, thus changing the perspectives of the opposition. On the contrary, dialogue does not intend to

dispose of the distinctness of beliefs, principles, and perspectives of others, but to gain an awareness and provide an appreciation for that distinctness (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2007). The inter-faith dialogue contains an ongoing practice of acquiring knowledge and wisdom both on one's own and others' religious beliefs and principles (Braybrooke, 1993, p.108) through genuine, straightforward, and effective conversations. Inter-faith dialogue does not intend to disrupt others' faiths and practices either. Instead, an inter-faith dialogue becomes more functioning when people who take part in it are thoroughly educated and familiarized with their own religious faiths, empowering them to consider critically the beliefs and traditions of others (Cilliers, 2002, p.49). Occasionally, the dialogue mechanism can intensify and reinforce one's own religious convictions. Boys et al. (1995, p.265) asserted that the potentials of confronting strong convictions of an individual from another religion have the power to unfold an exploration of one's own religious origin and aspirations (See also Kozlovic, 2003). Inter-faith dialogue touches upon the divine origins and authorities of each religious faith, thus creating spaces for uniting attendants in an intense religious environment. Considering divineness as the fundamental source of one's pledge to social transformation is what differentiates an inter-faith dialogue from other types of discourse or discussion (Abu-Nimer, 2002, p.16).

The Politicization of Islam and the Scope of Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh

As a matter of fact, the magnificent early history of religious peace, harmony and tolerance that prevailed in Bengal cannot be overemphasized; the reflections of which can be found through the accommodationist approach of Sufism, the liberal rule of Bengal Sultanate and interreligious tolerance found during social interactions in Bengal (Hasan 2012, pp. 29-50). However, when Bangladesh became independent in 1971 and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who is regarded as the "hero of the struggle for independence" and "Father of the Nation" became the first president of the country, (*The New York Times*, August 15, 1975) a new secular constitution confirmed secularism as one of its four fundamental principles. Secularism here basically referred to religious non-interference and was regarded as one of the fundamental principles that separated religion and the state constitutionally. But, on August 15, 1975, Sheikh Mujib was overthrown and killed in a military coup d'état (*The New York Times*, August 15, 1975). After the military coup of 1975, the words "Faith in Almighty Allah" were included in the amended constitution, hence, secularism was dismissed by it (Riaz, 2005). During this military rule, relationships with the Middle Eastern Muslim countries became

strengthened. For Bangladeshi labourers in the Middle Eastern countries, these strategic relationships created further prospects of being recruited, specifically in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. These labourers returned to their homes being educated in Wahhabi ideology and propagated Wahhabism in their surroundings, (Ibid.) which established a social basis for the future of violent extremism in the country. In 1988, the affirmation of Islam as the state religion was confirmed through the revised constitution. To establish an atmosphere of political legitimacy and to gain unwavering backing from Middle Eastern Muslim countries, enriched with oil reserves, military rulers rebuilt and over time, colluded with Islamic political entities, many of which were extremist and violent in character (Alam, 2008). According to Tazeen Murshid (1995), religion and politics do become associated with each other not only when the political institutions are fragile but also when predominant, authoritarian rulers are in an endangered position.

The following democratic governments further carried on the tendency of politicizing religion which was introduced by the military rulers. During the 1980s, when the anti-military movement was at its peak, the two dominant political parties, Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) retained their strategic relationships with many extremist political entities. The contest over “Who is more Islamic?”, which was initiated by the military rulers, is still being continued today amongst the major political parties in Bangladesh (Riaz, 2005). The party that was elected to form government in 1991 and 2001, allied with some of the major extremist political entities. These strategic relationships and alliances had an adverse effect on public policy formulations and the lives of common people. By allying with the Islamists, to gain their support, the two dominant political parties of Bangladesh have used state mechanisms to Islamize Bangladeshi society (Riaz, 2008).

Rise of Intolerance and Radicalization

Different terrorist attacks and incidents of mob violence that took place recently have exposed the notion of interreligious intolerance in Bangladesh. Shuvo (2018) measured different forms of tolerance in this country and found religious tolerance at an alarming level (57.6%). The lowest level (20.20%) of tolerance is regarding sexual orientation, (Ibid.) which can also be connected to the influence of the religious doctrine of sexuality. While these statistics give an abstract idea of the level of intolerance in this country, a fact analysis can illustrate the realistic image of what intolerance makes of it.

The presence of Islamist terrorist outfits and groups in Bangladesh can be traced back to the 1990s. In the years between 1999 and 2005, there was an increase in the number of occurrences that involved religious extremism. In 2005, when a nationwide bomb blast occurred, since then the rise of religious radicalization became a significantly distressing issue for the government and the people of Bangladesh (Riaz, 2008). The inpouring of war veterans from Afghanistan and other expatriates from overseas, who were already influenced by violent, extremist ideology, had an impact on their surroundings. The US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the suppression of the Palestinians have stimulated violent extremism and an anti-western position amongst most of the Islamic political parties, whether radical or not, in Bangladesh (Ibid.). The rise of fundamentalism can also be connected to the spread of Wahhabism in this country. Migrant workers who went to the Middle East were exposed to this doctrine. These added elements of fundamentalism ignited religious terrorism in Bangladesh in the post-9/11 political context.

There was a grave uneasiness over the notion of Islamist religious extremism in Bangladesh when in 2013 Bangladesh started experiencing an increasing number of attacks on bloggers, writers, academics, foreign nationals and on members of the minority groups. In fact, the Global Terrorism Index, in its early 2015 evaluation, has included Bangladesh as a country that is vulnerable to high terrorism risk (Riaz, 2016). Since 2015, the number of incidents that involved religious extremism has increased to a great extent marked by the assassination of online bloggers and foreigners. It was identified in 2015 that the present generation of Islamist religious extremists is a group of well-educated young people, following their aims of founding an Islamic State based on Shariah law in Bangladesh (Riaz & Parvez, 2018). In 2016, they launched the most vicious onslaught during the holy month of Ramadan. This brutal aggression occurred in a café of Dhaka city by seven young Islamist religious extremists that killed 29 people, including 18 foreign nationals. It was later identified that each of those extremists was well-educated and belonged to upper-middle-class families (*BBC News*, July 4, 2016).

Evidence of Intolerance and Radicalization

Intolerance of minority sects of Islam

Some minority sects of Islam have experienced such extremist attacks in Bangladesh. Shia and Ahmadiyya are two of those communities that have experienced several lethal attacks. Specific targets were their establishments and religious ceremonies.

In the year 2019, some hardliner Islamist groups attacked minority Ahmadiyyas in Panchagarh over the issue of holding *jalsa* (the annual gathering of Ahmadiyya people). Around 50 people were injured in that attack (Sazzad, 2019). In the year 2015, at least one person was killed and nearly 80 got wounded in a bomb attack outside of Hossaini Dalan, the main Shia establishment in Dhaka, as thousands gathered for the annual *Ashura* procession. It was believed to be the first time when Bangladesh's tiny Shia Muslim community was targeted. A 14-year-old boy died on the spot, where some 20,000 people were preparing to hold this annual Muharram mourning procession (*The Guardian*, October 24, 2015).

Intolerance towards minority religious groups

Hindus and Buddhists are the two prominent minority religious groups in Bangladesh. Besides, there are some other religious minority groups that are too insignificant in number. Hindus are considered a religious minority subject to various discriminations for a long time in Bangladesh. This is connected to the demographic change evident in the reduction of the Hindu population from 13.5% in 1974 to 8.5% in 2011 (Minority Rights Group International, 2016). After the general election of October 2001, offensive attacks against the Hindu minorities of Bangladesh fiercely increased as the allied groups of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its followers carried out a substantial amount of violence against them that continued for approximately 150 days. During this course of time, it is believed that at least 10,000 incidents that involved gross violations of human rights took place against the minority population. Hindu residences were raided, demolished, and burnt. Hindu places of worship were plundered and demolished as well. Large numbers of Hindu women and girls were assaulted. They were abused in their houses, on the roads and at their workstations (Rozario, 2017).

The situation did not improve much since the attack on the minorities in 2001. Post-poll violence also broke out in early 2014, when armed gangs attacked minority communities, mostly in the southwestern and northern districts of Bangladesh, including Jashore, Satkhira, Thakurgaon, Panchagarh, Chattogram, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha and Dinajpur. International aid agencies estimated that as many as 5,000 families were affected by these attacks (Rozario, 2017). This wave of violence against the Hindu community was unprecedented and had tremendous negative effects on the conscious, civilized citizens of Bangladesh of all religions. The Buddhist community has also been the target of deadly attacks. Targeted attacks against Buddhists in Bangladesh have increased since 2012. More than 20 Buddhist temples and 40 homes were reportedly looted,

torched, and destroyed in a mob attack that took place on September 29, 2012, over an issue of defamation on social media (Ibid.).

Interfaith Dialogue to Counter Radicalization in Bangladesh

This section will specifically address the primary research question of this paper: How can interfaith dialogue be an effective mechanism to combat the forces of radicalization and extremism in Bangladesh? It will, therefore, discuss the existing practices of interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh along with what initiatives should be taken in this regard.

Existing practices of interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country recognized for its magnificent history of cultural diversity amongst its population. This multiculturalism can be observed from the aspects of religion, race, ethnicity, language and so forth. In a society that is inherently multiculturalist in character, government and non-government entities should take action to enhance peace, harmony, and cooperation amongst the people of this country. Interfaith dialogue can be an initiative that authorities involved should undertake in this regard. Many religious intellectuals have suggested some ideas and theories of inter-faith dialogue that should be implemented in Bangladesh. Due to the multi-religious and multiculturalist nature of Bangladeshi society, matters of peace, harmony and cooperation are important issues that government and non-government organizations should address and one of the ways to address this is through interfaith dialogues.

Interfaith dialogue is already in practice here in Bangladesh in the forms of day celebrations, sharing festivals, meetings etc. The Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh celebrates ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’ every year, where leaders from different religious backgrounds meet and have constructive interfaith dialogues with each other. This week-long program where religiously diversified relationships are celebrated consists of arranging inter-religious harmony rallies, seminar discussions, debate festivals and inter-religious harmony concerts, where students and devotees of different religions take part. The purpose of such events is to increase knowledge and recognition of others among people of different religious backgrounds in Bangladesh (*New Straits Times*, 2012). Besides, non-governmental agencies also hold several forms of inter-religious dialogues in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Inter-Religious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ) was established in 1983 as a religious non-profit NGO, by a group of Muslims and Christians, to promote inter-religious harmony and

peaceful coexistence amongst different religious communities. BICPAJ organizes discussion meetings and conducts training programs for youth, women, children and ethnic tribal people of Bangladesh to inspire them to think critically about peace and harmony (BICPAZ, 2023). Besides, the Universal Peace Federation-Bangladesh (UPF), which is a part of UPF International, has organized interfaith dialogues to strengthen religious harmony amongst the youth in Bangladesh (UPF, 2023). Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) has also arranged interfaith dialogues to reinforce social and religious harmony amongst the youth of different faith backgrounds in Bangladesh (BIPSS, 2023).

Interfaith dialogues can be carried out in the form of religious lectures and conversations amongst followers of different religions, and they can be carried out at any function where interfaith relations are being celebrated, e.g., some can be carried out when any interfaith conflicting issue arises which requires an agreed resolution. There are various challenges in these types of dialogues. First of all, we should consider the importance of participation by all concerned authorities, e.g., the government and non-government organizations involved. Academics, philosophers, researchers, and think tanks can also play significant roles while facilitating dialogues between two or many different religious groups. They can also educate people on issues of religious pluralism and multiculturalism with their knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless, dialogue can be carried out in different forms; it depends on the suitability of its participants.

Introducing interreligious education

Radicalization, in Bangladesh, is not an injection of a completely new doctrine, rather it is a process of watering already sown seeds of extremism which begins in childhood by not only informal religious teaching but also formal schooling. Therefore, religious education is a key phenomenon that should be addressed. Religious education, as the schools of Bangladesh teach it, in part instigates violent attitudes amongst followers of major religions (e.g., Islam) because of some of the primary errors in our education system. First, it indoctrinates students with dogmatic ideas of religion and avoids critical thinking. Second, it only puts concern on a one-sided perspective because religious teachers are equipped with the knowledge of their own religious background only. Thirdly, the religious education system in Bangladesh emphasizes subjective issues only where a student's evaluation is done based on his memorizing ability. Fourth, the strategies followed by the Bangladesh government also contributed to the failure of religious education (Zain et al., 2014). As a consequence, the religious education system in

Bangladesh has failed to further strengthen the principles of religious pluralism amongst its people (Baidhaw, 2007).

Hermans (2003) while conducting education research, outlined three methods of providing religious education in a pluralist backdrop. Firstly, mono-religious education only emphasizes one single religion, and it is recognized as ‘the transmission model’. Multi-religious education emphasizes the plurality of religions in a specific society. The main principle of this model is diversity and multiculturalism which recognizes equality amongst people of different religious backgrounds. The main objective of this model is to educate students on the diversity of religions so that it can effectively instil a curiosity to further study other religions and develop a respectful approach towards followers of other religions (Hermans, 2003). On the contrary, the inter-religious education model includes both mono-religious and multi-religious education. It precisely acknowledges the importance of religious diversity in society and in the school education system along with the importance of conducting interfaith dialogues (Ibid.).

The education system in Bangladesh still follows a mono-religious model in terms of imparting knowledge on religion. This system should be changed and either the inter-religious education model or multi-religious education model should be followed while transmitting religious education. Enforcing the inter-religious education model in public schools, at first, would be more appropriate as the students there generally come from distinct religious backgrounds. First of all, the government should formulate a syllabus for the inter-religious educational programme, and it should not be a challenging task since several researchers, academicians and think tanks in Bangladesh who possess expertise on interfaith dialogue can facilitate this. However, enforcing an inter-religious education model in religious schools would be quite a difficult task as students there rarely come from distinct religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, it would be more appropriate to implement a multi-religious education model in these types of schools at first. Besides, these schools must create opportunities for their students to engage in dialogues with fellows of other religious backgrounds.

Engaging religious leaders/preachers in interfaith dialogue

Besides, there are informal as well as semi-institutional ways of religious preaching, e.g., *Waz-Mahfil*, *Islamic Jalsa*, *Weekly Khutba* etc. All these are totally monolithic and often enriched with extreme doctrines of religion that preach about the superiority of a single religion and the prophecy of a golden religious era to come.

Sometimes, these are full of hate speeches. Even the famous TV preacher, Jakir Naik, and his TV channel were banned in Bangladesh after being accused of hate speech and instigating radicalization (*UCA news*, July 12, 2016). These preachers are very influential amongst the mass people. Religious leaders of all the major religions in Bangladesh enjoy strong influence over their subjects. Therefore, these religious leaders or preachers need to be engaged in the interfaith dialogue process to broaden their outlook and understanding and build empathy, compassion, and respect in their minds for the followers of other faiths. Even, the leaders of different sects of the same religion, e.g., Shi'a and Ahmadiyya communities, known as sects of the greater Muslim community, need to be engaged in the interfaith dialogue process because these minority groups are also subject to militant attacks.

Engaging mass in interfaith dialogue

Mass engagement in interfaith dialogue is also necessary since they are the source of terrorist recruitment. Development agencies or civil society organizations or citizen groups can take the initiative to let the mass people have interactions across religions or sects of a particular religion not only to make them acquainted with others but also to understand how others think and feel and how important their values and beliefs are in their life. NGOs working on different themes can consider interfaith dialogue to be a part of their program. They can engage people from different religions in such programs and purposefully make them exposed to interreligious issues so that they can confront their dogmatic ideas and dare to create space for others in their collective life.

Conclusion

This research paper has examined how interfaith dialogue can be an effective mechanism to combat the forces of radicalization and religious extremism in Bangladesh. Reviewing the existing literature, it has identified that there has been a rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh since the beginning of the 21st century, which evolved throughout the last two decades changing in its nature and intensity. It has illustrated that after the military coup of 1975, the military rulers and the following democratic governments of Bangladesh carried on the tendency of politicizing religion and have used state mechanisms to Islamize Bangladeshi society as the domestic political competition gradually expanded the space of religion in politics. In this haven of fundamentalist ideas, radicalization and religious extremism gained strength and started posing threats to the peaceful coexistence and democratic institutions of Bangladesh since the beginning of the

21st century. This research paper has identified interfaith dialogue as an effective approach to counter the forces of radicalization and religious extremism and to promote interreligious peace, harmony, and tolerance in Bangladesh. To make interfaith dialogue an efficient mechanism to combat radicalization, it suggests incorporating interreligious education in the formal curriculum and conducting dialogues amongst religious leaders as well as mass believers of different faiths including various sects of different religions in Bangladesh. In the end, it should be stated that there are many scopes of conducting further research on the notion of inter-faith dialogue in Bangladesh and the international sphere.

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