

# Dynamics of Dichotomy and Conflict in Religion and Education: Historical and Current Context of Bangladesh

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## Abstract

*Along with the Indian subcontinent, Bangla can be called home to a diverse practice of religion. The people of the ancient Bangla had different beliefs and offered worship in various ways. This study aims to overview the spread of the major religions and their political and educational dynamics in this region. This paper covers five sections: Religious Demography in Bangladesh, Dynamics of Dichotomy and Conflict in Religion: Historical and Current Context, Islamic Discourses in Bangladesh, Education System and Religion in Bangladesh, Religious Education and Conflict in Bangladesh. Historically religious texts and customs, the sense of purity, and priests played a role in shaping the power structure for livelihoods. During the pre-Aryan period, social divisions were drawn along professional lines in this territory. After the Aryan infiltrated Bangla in the first millennium BCE, the caste system was introduced. There remains historical evidence of the dichotomy between language-based Bangali nationalism and religious practice in this territory from Pre-Aryan (before 1500 BCE) to the Pre-British Period (1757CE), in which conflicts remain elusive. It reflected the existence of class division and strategies to justify the oppression of people in Bangla. This paper stresses the issue of (non-) access to education for an oppressed class of population and its potential for conflict. Describing the conditions between religious identity and education, conflicting factors, manipulation of texts, denial of education, segregated education to ensure inequality and lowered esteem prevailed here.*

**Keywords** Conflict sensitivity · Nationalism · Untouchability · Caste system

## 1. Introduction

To understand the dynamic of Islam, education and religious conflict sensitivity in the Bangladeshi context, one needs to comprehend the long-inherited customs,

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traditions, rituals and nature of religious belief and practice in this territory from ancient Bangla<sup>1</sup> to the present day. The Indian religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, originated here and evolved in the ancient Indian subcontinent of which Bangla was a part. Two Semitic religions, Islam and Christianity, entered Bangla with the intervention of foreign powers and saints. Because of centuries of contact and cultural and socio-political interaction, the social and religious life of the Muslims profoundly influenced the life of the indigenous or Sanatan religion, which, in many cases, is identified as Hinduism. In that same manner, some Hindu practices seeped into the lives of the Muslims (Karim 2012, Mukherjee 2012). Again, in the name of religion or religious identity, this land has experienced events like riots, partition and other forms of hatred-fuelled conflict.

This paper discusses religion and education concerning conflict sensitivity in the Bangladeshi context. This paper covers five sections: Religious Demography in Bangladesh, Dynamics of Dichotomy and Conflict in Religion: Historical and Current Context, Islamic Discourses in Bangladesh, Education System and Religion in Bangladesh, Religious Education and Conflict in Bangladesh.

## **2. Dynamics of Dichotomy and Conflict in Religion: Historical and Current Context**

Here, I will not illustrate a detailed or chronological history of Bangladesh. I am highlighting the relevant incidence of the history for the arguments on the political dynamics of religious conflict.

### **2.1 Pre-Aryan (before 1500 BCE) to Pre-British Period (1757 CE)**

The ancient religious system in Bangla gravely presented the idea and image of ghosts, witches, gods, goddesses and demons. Such religious beliefs and practices reflected the livelihoods in a plain land with the deep forests, numerous rivers, and water bodies and their influence on daily life (Haque 2003, 23). During the period when Aryans spread in the west part of this territory, Narayan (Bishnu) and, in the eastern part (current Bangladesh), Shib were the main gods to be worshipped (Haque, 2003, 28). Here, it is noticeable that since the pre-Aryan and Aryan periods, there was a form of east-versus-west division in religious practice in this region (Khan 2012, Hossain 1992, Sharif 2010). Moreover, historical evidence remains on the dichotomy between language-based Bangali nationalism and religious practice in this territory. Surprisingly, these conflicts remain elusive.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I adapt the nouns/names as per the phonetics in Bangla language. For example, I use the words like Bangla, Bangali, Ballal Sen, Chattagram, Shib, Bedic, Dharmo, Bishnu, Rudro, Mahadeb instead of Bengal, Bengali, Vallal Sena, Chittagang, Shiva, Vedic, Dharma, Vishnu, Rudra, Mahadeva (as I think these sound reflect more Euro-hegemonic), unless I quote or refer from other's writing.

## 2.2 Aryan and Caste System in Bangla: Religion Texts and Hierarchy

Haque (2003) asserts that during the pre-Aryan period, in this territory, social divisions were drawn along professional lines, while, after the infiltration of the Aryans into Bangla from the first millennium BCE, the caste system was introduced. The early Vedic Aryans perceived this land as an unholy place where people were ‘sinful barbarians’ (Islam 2011). There remained a restriction to entering this territory, although, later, by the 500 BCE, Aryans took the then kings of Bangla seriously from the military point of view (Islam 2012). The Aryanisation of the subcontinent, including then-Bangla, led to a conversion of the division of labour-based *barna* system into a hierarchical *jati* order (Haque 2003, Basu 2012). So, the infiltration of the Aryan religion started an institutional process to form division based on religious identity from birth.

However, the caste system in Bangla was not a stereotypical practice; they have different dynamics on them. The *Purus Sukto* hymn of the Rig Beda grounded the religio-cultural justification of the hierarchical caste divisions based on the four-fold *barna* system (Basu 2012). The Aryans grouped themselves into Brahman, Ksatriya and Baishya. They assumed the responsibilities of performing different ‘important work’ types, whereas the non-Aryans and natives were made Shudra and allotted physical labour for the services of the higher castes (Bala 2012). At the top of the hierarchy, the Brahmans were considered the purest, believed to embody sacredness, and regarded as gods on earth. The Kshatriyas (military men) and the Baishyas (business class) enjoyed lesser purity. The Shudras mainly occupied the lowest rung of the social order. Generally, the Shudras were extremely poor and treated as untouchables. They have little access to sanitation, housing, healthcare, and education facilities (Bala 2012, Basu 2012).

## 2.3 Politics of (un-)touchability

Even within the Shudras, there was division. Shudras were divided into two broad categories: one, *Sat Shudras* (higher caste could accept food and drinks from them) and *Asat Shudras* (they were untouchables, and their touch was considered pollution) (Basu, 2012). Here, the critical question is, what are the reasons for this distinction?

History provides evidence of the politicisation and exploitation of the ‘title’ of the caste by the ruling class to gain their vested interests. During Ballal Sen’s (1159-1179AD) period, different transformations in the caste system, both for the lower and higher order, did occur for political, economic and social reasons. Ballal Sen introduced *kulinism* in Bangla (Basu 2012, Misra 2012, Bhattacharyya and Ray 2012, Haque 2003), though some historians might differ on this (Misra, 2012, Bhattacharyya and Ray 2012). The Brahmans who did not show obedience to his rule were ‘de-castified’ (*Obonoyon*), and those who did support him got the *kulin* class. For example, the Brahman sect *Subarnbanik* was ‘degraded’ to Shudra’s level, and *kaibart*, *Nalakar*, *Kumbhakar*, and *Karmakar* were ‘upgraded’

as *Sat Shurada* by the King Ballalsen (Basu 2012, Misra 2012, Talukdar 2011). The underlying story is that during the ruling period of Ballal Sen, Ballavando was a rich businessman or *banik*. The treasury of Ballal Sen faced a crisis due to maintaining the cost of a long-term war against the king of Udantapur. Ballal Sen sought loan to Ballavando. Ballavando agreed with one condition; he demanded the right to collect the tariff of the 'Harikal' state. Ballal Sen became angry and captured Ballavando's property and tortured him. Moreover, his caste status was degraded from Brahman to Shudra, and he forbade the priests to participate in any rituals offered by the *Subarnabanik*. Conversely, Baniks also started to provide a higher salary for employers to work for them to avenge this. Thus, the higher caste Hindus faced a crisis getting people to serve them. Thus, Ballal Sen was forced to upgrade *Kaibarta*, *Malakar*, *Kumvakar* and *Karmakar* to upper caste as Sat Shudra (Talukdar 2011).

Again, subalterns (here, the lower caste population) were not a homogenous group. The politics of exploitation of the subalterns remained in the Vedic age (likewise today) by the people of higher social and political order (today, we may call them power-hungry 'politicians') to serve their vested interests. One of the powerful instruments to do this is using the 'religious custom' and its application to weaken their antagonist or 'other' party. Here, a common phenomenon is identifying or defining them as antagonists and their activities as 'antireligious' (for instance, so-called 'Nastik', 'Murtad' etc.) and legitimising the oppression and exploitation against them. It indicates how the development and use of the caste system and marginalisation process occurred in Bangla using religion-based power politics.

Historically, religious texts and customs, the sense of purity, and priests shaped the power structure for livelihoods. It reflected the existence of class division and strategies to justify the oppression of people in Bangla. Moreover, I stress the issue of (non-) access to education for lower caste people. Therefore, the conditions between conflict and education, such as manipulation of texts, denial of education, segregated education to ensure inequality and lowered esteem prevailed here (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Even today, Islamic discourse, whose power dominates the production of the texts, remains relevant to analyse the role of texts and interpretations by readers to construct sensitivity towards religious conflict.

## 2.4 Conversion of Religious (Muslim) Identity and Class Position

Why is the number of Muslims in the eastern part of greater Bangla, currently Bangladesh, higher vis-a-vis most of the territory of the Indian subcontinent—even the western part of Bangla? Is there any link between marginalisation and conversion to Islam? These are the relevant questions for this section.

The Muslim people in Bangla inherited class differences. Historically, Muslim people in this territory can be differentiated into two major social classes, Nobles (Ashraf) and commoners (*Atraf*). The so-called nobles (*Ashraf*) are migrants from

northern India (mainly from nearby Bihar), and their tongue is Urdu, which is one different factor in setting themselves apart. The commoners (*Atraf*) are the indigenous Bengali population. Before Islam came into this territory, like in other parts of India, Bangali people were identified as Hindus (Eaton, 2001). A caste system prevailed there at that time. The upper class of Hindus was oppressing the scheduled caste people. History shows that when Islam entered, a group of the Hindus affiliated with the scheduled castes, formerly called untouchables or *Harijans* (Gandhi called them children of God), were converted to Islam (Eaton 2001). It must be noted that conversion of the Bangali populations to Islam did not only occur by the sword, as has been alleged sometime (Khan 2012, Hossain, 1992, Karim 2012). Historian Richard Eaton (2001) identified that several economic factors played an important role in widespread Islam in Bangla in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Ganges River's gradual eastward shift opened up forest lands to the outside world, supporting agricultural development. The Sufi saints built mosques and shrines that formed the nuclei of hundreds of new agricultural communities. This helps spread a liberal version of Islam to the inhabitants. At the same time, economic prosperity under Muslim rule was brought by the region's integration into the world economy through the export of textiles. These socio-economic forces influenced the indigenous people to convert to Islam (Eaton 2001).

Hence, several things need to be noted here. The elite Muslims (the *Asraf*) kept a social and cultural distance from the indigenous people. The immigrant Muslims from middle Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Arab and north India identified themselves as Ashraf (Sharif or 'gentleman'). Mostly there were four elite groups: Syed, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan. Sharif (2010) noted a tendency that when Brahmans converted to Islam, they received the title Syed and the converted Kayasthay received the Sheikh title. So, in addition to immigrant Muslims, there remain 'elite' groups within the converted Muslims.

Another significant factor is that the indigenous people accepted Hindu gods and scriptures entirely. Instead, they adapted with Islamic understandings of God, its prophets and holy books. At the same time, Sufi Islamic doctrines and practices were recast with the traditional Hindu forms of culture. For example, the divine name Allah has interchangeably been used in Bangla Islamic literature with the Sanskrit terms for Hindu gods, like Great Person (*Pradhanpurush*) and the One without Colour (*Niranjana*) and God (*Iswar*). The prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was called 'Avatar' as a different manifestation of Sanskrit designation for the Hindu god Bishnu (Bangladesh 2009, 86-88). It is evident that the Bangla literature syncretises Islam with Hindu beliefs and practices, overcame the communal boundaries and introduced new devotional movements of *Satya Pir* or *Satya Narayan* (Bangladesh 2009, 86-88, Stewart 1995, 578-597). As argued by Barkat, Islam in Bengal is considerably different from the 'orthodox' or Sharia law based on Islam originated in Arabs (Barkat, 2019, 31-34).

Thus, the occurrences of oppression due to the social caste system and scope of economic opportunities and interests were vital causes for the conversion of Bangali Muslim (lower caste Hindus to Muslims) people. However, this conversion does not mean that people rejected all the rituals of their Hindu forefathers (Eaton 2001, 25-51, Bangladesh, 2009, 86-88). So, I believe that the conversion of Hindus to Islam did not create a tremendous theological conflict. Still, it reflects that class difference remained a prominent cause behind this conflict during the pre-colonial period. At the same time, we have found that the liberal attitudes and tolerance existed in a society where the state provided the scope of freedom to express and practice in a culture of harmony, allowing different names for Allah or the Prophet (PBUH). This made for subjective and syncretistic interpretations of Islam. It gave Bangali Islam a distinct stamp.

### **2.5 Islam in Bangladesh (British Period- Now)**

In the continuum of this history, this class difference was politically converted to communalism during the colonial period (1757-1947) and its aftermath. From 1203 CE to 1757 CE, most rulers were Muslims in this territory. During this period, the rulers in Bangla generally were quite respectful towards the people of other faiths. Several examples of religious pluralism remain in culture and literature (Roy 1983, Islam 2011). However, after the British had conquered Bangla, they adopted the 'divide and rule' policy and on many occasions, inter-religious (Hindu- Muslim-Shikh) and intra-religious (within Islam) conflict appeared in this land (Islam 2011). This policy, in turn, gave birth to two states, India and Pakistan.

The Muslims might have a feeling of deprivation of losing power. The last and most potent of the Muslim conquerors were the Mughal dynasty (1526–1857), which eventually spread its authority over virtually the entire subcontinent. British superiority coincided with Mughal decline, and, following a period of European successes and Mughal failures on the battlefield, the British ended Mughal power. The last Mughal emperor was exiled following the failed Indian Mutiny of 1857–58 (Burki 2014). So, the shifting power of Muslim rulers to the British Raj created tension among the Muslim elite or previous ruler class.

Moreover, Khan (2012) explained that British rule in Bangla accentuated the fundamentalist and extra-territorial loyalties among the Muslims (both *Ashraf* and *Atraf*) in three ways. First, the disappearance of Muslim rulers in Bangla pitted the Muslim peasants against Hindu (the Zamindar) and Christians (in this case, the British) exploiters and thereby catalysed communalism. Secondly, due to the revolutionary development of transportation systems, the Muslims of Bangla got closer to the broader world of Islam. Thus, different fundamentalist elements entered the fray of Islam in Bangla. Finally, revivalist and fundamentalist Islam benefited from an upsurge during the nineteenth century. During this period, Islamic revivalist movements like Tariqa-i-Mauiyahidun (popularly known as the Wahabi movement) arose. These fundamentalist creeds of Islam more easily

entered Bangla through Hajj's institution (pilgrimage to Mecca). As a result, the Farayeji movement led by Haji Shariatullah and his son Dudu Mian, the Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya led by Mir Nisar Ali Titumir, the Ahli Hadith movement led by Maulana Bilayat Ali, the Tayuni movement led by Maulana Keramat Ali disseminated fundamentalist versions of Islam in the nineteenth century. These movements were organised as a political resistance against the exploitation of Hindu Zamindar and the British rulers. All these movements boost fundamentalist Islam and communalism in the politics of Bangla.

Consequently, during the colonial era, different dynamics of Islam entered politics, continuing. Alam (2008) mentions four overlapping traditions that emerged more rigorously from the colonial period:

- a. Sufi-centric: This tradition is tolerant and accommodative to different faiths that influence one another on a religio-cultural basis.
- b. Scripturally literalist: This tradition advocates for a socially active Islam. It was derived from the influence of the revivalist movements (e.g. Khelafat, Farayeji) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries against the British rulers. Here, Islam must strictly follow the scripture and provide little or no room for critical or different thoughts.
- c. Radical and militant: This tradition derives mainly from radical and militant Islamist political (e.g., Maududi, Jamaat-e-Islami) parties. They seek political power and support Sharia laws to rule the state.
- d. Secular: A secularised and modernist tradition of Islam by a group of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and Bangla (e.g. Shikhagoshtthi) emerged during the British period. This tradition is influenced by the Euro-centric enlightenment education system introduced by the British. They are, to some extent, tolerant of critical thoughts and different views about religion.

Thus, since the British period, in the Indian subcontinent and Bangladesh, tolerance, harmony, and the contradictory intolerant and discriminatory traditions of Islam have remained. Indeed, the dominance of traditions influences the construction of views and attitudes towards 'other beliefs'.

## **2.6 Islam in Bangladesh (Pakistan Period- Now)**

In the Indian subcontinent, the British rulers transformed their power with the birth of two states: India and Pakistan. The Hindu-Muslim conflict might prompt some to come forward with the 'Two-Nation Theory', which holds that though Hindus and Muslims live in the same land, they are different nations – their religion is different. Their cultural heritage is diverse (Islam 2011). To make a long story short, the British started their colony in this region in 1757. In 1947 the colonial rule was over, but this region was divided into two states, a Hindu majority in India and a Muslim majority in Pakistan. Within Pakistan, there were two parts, West and East (now Bangladesh).

The independence day for Pakistan is 14 August 1947. The initial instances might show that Pakistan was born in the name of Islam. Mr Jinnah is called Pakistan's "Father of the Nation" and initially wanted to establish a state without much influence from Islamic laws and customs. For example, the 14 August 1947 was the 26<sup>th</sup> Ramajan 1366 Hijri, a day in the Muslim lunar calendar, and according to Islamic principle, Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk. However, the birthday of Pakistan was celebrated, and Mr Jinnah, along with the last viceroy of the Indian subcontinent, Lord Mountbatten, celebrated that occasion with a grand lunch in Islamabad (Zaman 2012, 10). Hossain (1992, 12) asserts that though Mr Jinnah left Congress for its communal tendency and became the leader of the Muslim League, he did not want Pakistan to be a fanatic Islamic state after its establishment. For not establishing an Islamic state, Jinnah was severely criticised by the Islamists in Pakistan, especially by the Jamaat-e-Islami under the leadership of Maududi (Hossain 1992). Here, I stress that in 1964 Pakistan was declared an Islamic state under the autocratic rule of Ayub Khan (Hossain 1992). This was the beginning of establishing the linkages between military rules and the use of Islam in politics in Pakistan and later in Bangladesh.

Another noticeable thing is that there remained a difference in the views on Islam between West and East Pakistan. The Islam in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) was influenced by a Sufi-humanistic spirit, whereas in West Pakistan, Islam was more orthodox and Sharia law based (Hossain 1992). Islam had entered the regions of West Pakistan with the sword, and the political victories achieved there started the establishment of Islam. Still, in the Bangla territories, Islam was first spread by the Sufis, followed by politics. This difference is reflected in the literature and culture of these two territories. In Bangla, we have evidence of the liberal interpretations of Islam, but in Urdu, we find less evidence of liberal and critical literature about religion (Hossain 1992).

In short, based on this 'Two-Nation Theory', Jinnah claimed that the Muslims in India deserved a separate homeland. Hence, it should be mentioned here that this same Jinnah was an advocate of the unity of these two communities. He was called the 'Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity' by some prominent Hindu leaders of that time (Hossain 1992). However, the British rulers did not sincerely want the unity of the Hindus and the Muslims, and their policy created certain situations in which Jinnah, a believer in the secular philosophy of life, was virtually compelled to demand a separate state for the Muslims of India (Islam 2011). Here, the historical narration tells that the West and then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) became one state based on religion (in this case, Islam) despite geographical and cultural differences. Even Islam in West Pakistan and Bangla territory was not the same. In addition, a dangerous precedent was set, that of military rulers exploiting religion to legitimise their power. It started during the Pakistan period and has repeated itself in independent Bangladesh.



## **2.7 Islam in Bangladesh (Since Independence)**

History shows that the conceptual basis that Muslims would be vulnerable in undivided Bangla or the Indian sub-continent and therefore be liberated through the partition of India in 1947 has proved to be an absolute fallacy. Instead, the population of Bangladesh did experience that Bangali Muslims and other religious communities were far more vulnerable and oppressed in Muslim-majority Pakistan than they ever had been (Khan 2014). During the liberation war, the people of Bangladesh experienced how cultural, political and brutal military oppression occurred in the name of Islam. Again, the question is, what is happening in Bangladesh after independence regarding the use of religion, particularly Islam, in the dominant political structure?

## **3. Immediately after Independence**

After independence, Bangladesh adopted secularism as one of the four fundamental principles of the constitution on 4 November 1972. The objective of this constitution was to abolish communalism and the use of religion in politics. Since Islam-based political parties, such as Maududi's political philosophy, led Jamaat-e-Islami, Muslim leagues, Nizam-e-Islam played an anti-liberation stance and were a defeated force, was easier at that time to prohibit the use of religion (mainly, Islam) in politics. However, right after release from Pakistan prison, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first President of the Bangladesh government, articulated that Bangladesh was a new addition to the Islamic world. Later on, Bangabandhu joined the OIC (Organization for Islamic Countries) conference in February 1974 (Hossain 1992, 13). He attempted to clarify this stance on several different occasions, stating that secularism does not necessarily mean the denial of religion. Nevertheless, it does not mean that Bangabandhu talked about a future Islamic state. Instead, considering the importance of recognition from the Islamic world (and notably the demand for fuel energy from the Oil-rich middle countries), it was an essential political and economic strategy (Hossain 1992).

## **Military Regimes**

After 1975 the regime was changed with the bloody killing of Bangabandhu and his family (15 August 1975), and four foremost national leaders (3 November 1975) started military rule in Bangladesh. Alam (2008) and Hossain (1992) assert that both military regimes Zia (1975-81, Lt. General Ziaur Rahman became President on 21 April 1977) and Ershad (1982-90, Lt. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad became President on 11 December 1983) tried to overcome their legitimacy crises by manipulating the political issue of Islamic identity. During the regime of Zia, the principle of 'secularism' was replaced by 'Faith in Almighty Allah' (Hossain, 1992; Alam, 2008). This initiative was supported by the Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islamic Democratic League, Nezam-e-Islam and Khelafat-e-Rabbani (Hossain, 1992, 14). The reader should note that these parties were banned

in the immediate aftermath of independence because of their anti-liberation activities (Hossain, 1992,14). However, during the Zia regime, these parties were rehabilitated into politics. The use of Islam in politics was extended during the Ershad regime. In 1988, Islam was declared the state religion by amending the constitution (Alam 2008). The underlying cause behind this is to create an aura of political legitimacy and win support from the oil-rich Middle Eastern Muslim countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, to get aid and export labour (Alam, 2008, Hossain 1992).

Thus, in the history of Bangladesh, we have observed a phenomenal practice between the capture of power by the military and the use of Islam in politics.

### **Democratic Regimes**

In the 1990s, the so-called democratic era started in Bangladesh. There remains a regular five-year election process to change the government in power. From the 1990s to now, the subsequent democratic government could not overcome the tactical use of Islam in politics. Still, instead of two major political parties: The Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), to attract voters and maintain a strategic relationship with Islamist political organisations, they compete to show “Who is more Islamic?” (Alam 2008, 10). This so-called tactical relationships and coalitions have its effect on vote banks, public policy and in the daily lives of the average citizen (Alam 2008, 10-11). In the general election of 1991, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Awami League (AL), the fundamentalist Islamic party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jatiya Party (JP) won 140, 88, 18 and 35 seats, respectively. Since no party secured enough of an absolute majority to form a government (at least 151 out of 300 seats), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) played a kingmaker’s role by extending support to the BNP and forming a coalition. So, JI got the chance to demonstrate its strength for voting politics and create a support base for militant fundamentalists and anti-liberation forces in politics (Alam 2008). In the general election of 1996, the seats for AL, BNP, JI and JP were 146, 116, 3 and 32, respectively, and AL formed the government with the support of JP. Later on, JP withdrew its support and BNP, JP, JI and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ, an umbrella front of different smaller Islamic organisations) and formed a four-party alliance. This alliance won a landslide victory in the subsequent election in 2001, in which AL won only 62 seats, whereas the BNP-led four-party coalition won 230 seats, out of which BNP, JI and a fragment of JP won 193, 17 and 18 seats, respectively. During this period (2001-06), the two leaders (both of them would later be convicted for a crime against humanity and patronising religious fanaticism) of Jamaat-e-Islami became full ministers in the cabinet. During this period, Bangladesh experienced a prolific rise of militant fundamentalist Islamic organisations (e.g. Harkatul Jihad al- Islami Bangladesh (HUJI), Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB) and so on) (Alam 2008, Barkat 2018). Moreover, the transnational Islamic organisation

Hizb-ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB) has become more visible (Khan 2011, 192-215).

Here, I want to note several points about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism during the so-called democratic regimes of the last two decades.

1. Islamic organisations came to the public sphere more prominently after the 9/11 incidents
2. The transnational Islamic political culture has become evident
3. Incidences of political violence in the name of Islam have become a serious concern with the manifesto of less tolerance towards differing beliefs and critical views- especially towards Sufi shrines and the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam
4. For the vote banks: Islamic parties are now considered essential players by the major political parties.

#### **4. Islamic Discourses in Bangladesh**

In the history of the Indian subcontinent and Bangladesh, tolerance, harmony, and the contradictory intolerant and discriminatory traditions of Islam (Haque 2003, Chakraborty 2009, Eaton 2001, Hossain 1992, Karim 2012, Khan 2012). There is evidence of religious tolerance, pluralism and co-existence, and proof of conflict. To explain the cause and remedy of religious conflict in Bangla, I have found mainly three types of interpretations. The contemporary post-modernist thinkers like Mazhar (2008) and Sharif (2012) glorify the tradition of Sufism and Baishnavism and define them as Bhavandolon, ‘a liberal religious discourse’ of and for Bangla. There remains a long tradition of Sufi-centric Islam. This tradition is tolerant and accommodative to different faiths that influence one another on a religio-cultural basis. Mazhar (2008) and Arif (2012) espouse this discourse as an example of communal harmony in pre-colonial Bangla. They also discard ‘secular’ and ‘enlightenment’ discourses and criticise them as a weapon of oppression and hegemony. This discourse had also been used as a tool to fight against oppression during the colonial period (Mazhar 2008, Khan 2012). Again, a secularised and modernist tradition of Islam by a group of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and Bangla (e.g. Shikhagoshtthi) emerged during the British period. The ‘secular discourse’ emerged due to the influence of the European enlightenment and modernisation philosophy (Alam 2008). Umar (2000), Zaman (1999), Momen (1998) and other modernist scholars (from the Muslim community) assert that religion should be considered a personal matter. They strongly support the separation of religion from state affairs and allege that state patronisation of religious education is the cause of religious conflict in Bangla.

On the contrary, ‘fundamentalist discourse’ claims superiority of Islam and maintains that the exclusion of Islam is the root of all conflict in Bangla. They adamantly believe Islam is the only complete code of life, and there is no alternative to this. According to them, Islam must be strictly followed by the scripture. They allow little or no room for any critical or different thoughts. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the revivalist movements (e.g. Khelafat, Farayeji) strengthen

this script or literalist sect of Islam (Alam 2008). This school of thought provide a strong premise for the radical and militant Islamist political (e.g., Maududi, Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh) parties. They seek political power and support Sharia laws to rule the state. They express less tolerance towards liberal, secular, or other discourses about Islam (Chowdhury 1995). Thus, the Sufi-based liberal, secular and militant discourses of Islam remain to analyse the cause and remedy for religious conflict in Bangladesh. These three schools of thought philosophically and politically advocate substantially different world views.

Islam in Bangla was not a monolithic tradition. Over time and especially during the colonial period, several overlapping traditions of Islam emerged. As I have mentioned, each tradition embeds a particular school of thoughts or discourse, and each carries different world-views about the purpose of human life, God or higher power and evil. This led them to show tolerance and respect towards other beliefs.

Hence, Islam in Bangla, to some extent, has a distinct stamp. In some cases, it shows a unique synchronisation of indigenous (Sanatan, Hindu, Buddha) tradition with Islamic thoughts and practice (Roy 1983, Eaton 2001, Khan 2012). Again, a more orthodox and rigorous version of Islam emerged and, in many cases, was imported into this territory (Khan 2012). Thus, the history of Bangladesh shows a paradoxical existence of a more tolerant syncretistic (both liberal and secular) and bigoted fundamentalist tradition of Islam. Therefore, in a broader sense, Islam in Bangla can be divided into three discourses: syncretistic, secular and fundamentalist (Khan 2012, Alam 2008, Roy 1983, Eaton 2001, Sharif 2012, Haque 2003, Hossain 1992, Islam 2011, Karim 2012, Mazhar 2008). Within each discourse, there remains a different school of Islamic thoughts. I briefly present them in table 1.

*Table 1: The taxonomy on conflict sensitivity in the Islamic discourses in Bangladesh*

Discourse	Islamic philosophical underpinnings	Sensitivity towards other religions, including other Islamic thoughts	Political participation
Syncretistic	Sufism Bahai (it is also considered a separate religion)	Beliefs in love for all. Liberal and respectful.	Mainuddin Chishti, Shah Jalal, and Dudu Mia actively participated in politics Do not participate.
Fundamentalist	Maududism Salafism Wahabism	The three branches are reluctant toward other branches of Islam, let alone other faiths.	Maududi-based JI is very active in power politics.
Secular	Enlightenment and modernist development paradigm	Consider religion as a personal subject.	Do not support the use of religion in politics.

(Adopted and adapted from Roy 1983, Eaton 2001, Khan 2012, Roy 1983, Eaton 2001, Arif 2012, Haque 2003, Hossain 1992, Islam 2011, Karim 2012, Mazhar 2008).

However, I have briefly shown how religion and politics- from pre-Aryan to contemporary history- have evolved as potential factors for conflict in this region. The following section discusses how religion, particularly Islam, plays a vital role in education.

## **5. Education System and Religion in Bangladesh**

Historically, in Bangla, religion has been considered an important subject to be taught in schools. Here, religious identity has played a deterministic role (meaning that religious identity determines who can get the right or opportunity to education and who cannot) regarding access to education. The institutionalisation of education can be traced back to the composition of the 'Rig Beda', one of the four earliest Bedas. This was central to the Brahminical tradition of religious texts in Hinduism for about 3000 years (Chowdhury, 2012; Rig Veda, 2007; Khatun, 2012; Biswas and Rubaiya, 2012). During the early days, i.e. 2000-1000 BC and the later Vedic period (1000 to 500 BC), the primary objective of education was spiritual development. However, other subjects such as grammar, logic, ethics, and astronomy were taught along with vocational trades. Access to education, particularly religious education, was restricted according to the caste identity. Only Brahmins and, to some extent, Ksatriya pupils (at the elementary level) were allowed to learn about religion. Later in this cycle, only the Brahmins could learn about the Bedas and other higher subjects. These subjects were related to the vocation of the priesthood (Chowdhury, 2012, Biswas and Rubaiya, 2012). During the 6th to 7th century AD, Buddhist education flourished in Bangla. This Buddhist education was Biharis or temple centric, and unlike the Brahmanic tradition, it educated children irrespective of their caste identity and social class. They were allowed to learn about Buddhism's religion, grammar, philology, dialectic, medicine, astronomy and the arts (Biswas and Rubaiya, 2012). Through the Muslim saints, the Sufi sects of Islam entered Bangla during the eighth century, and Khankah and Maktab-based education were established. This Khanka was a spiritual institution based on human understanding and feeling. People of all religions and races visited the Khanka to learn about the Sufi spirit of Islam, in which love, peace, liberal thoughts and communal harmony were taught (Biswas and Rubaiya 2012, Waiz 2012). So, Bangla has the example of practising the syncretistic tradition of Islamic education.

The Muslim rulers established their reign in Bangla during the thirteenth century. The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and Mughals ruled over the Bangla. Throughout the Mughal period, various reformation initiatives were taken concerning Madrasa education. As different political regimes ascended the throne, these varied in terms of verse and scope. These reformations, to some extent, were believed to contribute to sectarian rifts among people. During the Akbar (1556-1605) regime, the state attempted to design Madrasa education to establish a tolerant and co-existent atmosphere between Hindus and Muslims. The courses comprised medicine, agriculture, geography, and understanding texts from other languages and religions

(Riaz 2010; Bangladesh Enterprise Institute 2011). This reform also shifted the focus from rote memorisation to learning by practice (Riaz 2010).

In contrast with his predecessors, Aurangzeb (1658-1707) showed less tolerance and seemed more conservative. Riaz (2010) remarked that Aurangzeb showed little care about Hindu education and tried to foster the education of Muslim youth and extended state patronage for Madrasa education. So, during the Mughal period, Madrasa education was transformed from a liberal to a more intolerant approach, and the relaxed maqul (rational) school was substituted by the manqul (revealed) education (Bangladesh Enterprise Institute 2011). Thus, a fundamentalist Islamic education began in Bangla.

The Christian Missionaries spearheaded by European imperial powers- the Portuguese, French, Dutch and British- entered the region and expanded their education program from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Haque 2003; Laird 2012). Although the Catholics had started to preach initially, the Protestant groups began to dominate, and their Catholic counterparts subsided in influence over time (Chaudhuri 2012). Having encountered Muslims in the subcontinent, the Missionaries had become more cautious about preaching to the followers of Islam and focused on spreading their education among Hindus and some other indigenous communities such as the Santal (Chaudhuri 2012, Laird 2012). Along with preaching Christianity, the education system developed by the British colonial power also brought the notion of modern science and rational thinking. This helped create a new intellectual class in Bangla, influenced by the idea of enlightenment and secularism. It brought to the fore new perceptions about religion (Chaudhuri 2012). As time progressed, some young Muslims joined their ranks and rationally thinking groups were developed among the Muslims who expressed liberal and secular views on politics, economy, education, fine arts and religion, literature, culture and humanism (Huq 2012a and 2012b). Conversely, as a reaction to the colonial power and ‘modern education’, different Madrasas grew up and preached a Wahabi- or extremist form of Islam- and inculcated a more orthodox, radical and ultimately militant form of Islam (Siddiqi 2012, Alam 2008).

So, Bangladesh has inherited different dynamics of education from the pre-colonial and colonial eras, in which, in many cases, religion plays a deterministic role in accessing the education system or constructing the mindset. Now, as an independent country, Bangladesh has its own education system. How friendly is this system in promoting tolerance for liberal thinking or respecting ‘other beliefs’?

## **6. Religious Education and Conflict in Bangladesh**

There are three distinct education streams in Bangladesh: general medium, Madrasa and International (popularly known as English medium). Again, since the 1990s, the study of one’s respective religion as a subject has been compulsory (before that, it was optional) according to the national curriculum under the general stream for the secondary school certificate examination. However, religious studies have

the potential to impart a lesson in sensitivity to conflict. Here, a significant concern is that in the general stream of schools in Bangladesh, each student studies one's religion and is not getting access to learn about other religions. As a result, during the session on the religious study, students are divided according to their 'religious identity. They study different textbooks. Here the inevitable question appears- can this division (physical, spiritual and content-wise differences of the texts) pave the way to generate conflict among different religious groups? Can this system provide any room for critical thinking, especially regarding the issues of religion?

In Bangla, religion, particularly Islam, has evolved and synchronised over time, and this has also been reflected in the education system. Historically, we found evidence that the approaches of religious education toward religious sensitivity to others have been varied at various times; sometimes, liberal and non-divisive strategies triumph over conservative ones and vice versa. The Bihar religious education system, which allows everyone, regardless of their religious identity, emerged due to the restrictive and divisive Brahmanic education system during the Pala dynasty between the 6th to 8th centuries (Chakma 2012, Biswas and Rubaiya 2012). Again, the influence of this liberal and non-discriminatory Bihar education system declined gradually, and the Brahmanic divisive education system again started to dominate during the era of the Sena dynasty (c.1097- 1225) (Biswas and Rubaiya 2012). The pluralist Akbari Madrasa education system (rational) was changed by the rise of the orthodox and aggressive Aurangazeebi Madrasa education system (revealed) (Bangladesh Enterprise Institute 2011). The Khanka system of education provided space to people of all religious beliefs and castes to enshrine healing, satisfaction and spiritual support (Waiz 2012). Though the Khankah system of Sufi education ensured access to all, irrespective of any religious creed, its land was confiscated through colonial rule. Later, colonial powers introduced missionaries and the secular system of education (Chaudhuri 2012, Waiz 2012).

Nonetheless, the liberal and tolerant, inclusive and non-divisive approaches to religious education that emerged in Bangla were discontinued. In many instances, the attempt for liberal and inclusive approaches to religious education has been thwarted or stepped down by conservative and discriminative policies. It is still a valid reality at the secondary level of education in Bangladesh as the teachers and students of one religious identity are not getting the opportunity to learn about other religious beliefs and textbooks of other religions- unless, of course, one was to read it out of their interest. Therefore, I desire to study more about the potential implications of such a system regarding religious conflict sensitivity.

For the last decades, the incidents of 'religious violence' have increased alarmingly in volume and nature (Mohan 2013, Barkat 2018). 'Religious studies' on respective religions have been introduced as compulsory secondary education subjects since 1990. I admit that there is no apparent correlation between religious education and religious violence in Bangladesh. Religious conflict is a global

concern, which is also a concern for Bangladesh. So, critical research should be pursued on religious education in school towards resolving or contributing to religious conflict.

Critical analyses of the relationship between Bangladesh's religious education and religious conflict are missing in academic literature. Hoque (2012) did a survey-based report on the current education policy of Bangladesh and religious tolerance. However, this report did not reflect any more profound understanding of the issue. Though Rahman (2012) attempted to analyse the state of peace education in secondary education, the paper did not critically address the issue of religious textbooks or education. Notwithstanding Rahman and Rahman (2013) discussed the issue of Islam, the language and the content of the paper show a defensive tone favouring Islam, and this did not address any critical issue per se. So, in Bangladesh, I have not yet found any critical academic literature regarding this issue, particularly the school's potential and consequences of teaching and learning from an Islamic lens to endorse religious harmony or conflict.

Again, within the same school, students are divided because of their respective 'religious identities during religious studies sessions. There is a chance that the consequence is the prevalent conflict we see and experience. In Bangladesh, more than 90% of students take Islamic studies as a compulsory subject in their secondary schools (BANBEIS 2012). Therefore, this thesis seeks to analyse secondary school Islamic studies through a religious conflict sensitivity framework to investigate how Islamic studies textbooks promote social cohesion, tolerance, communal harmony, and positive relationships with the people of different religious groups in Bangladesh.

It appears paradoxical that religion is one of the vital political factors in considering conflict and the study of peace. The different religious texts sarcastically refer to numerous ways and benefits of peaceful existence. History shows that various conflicts or wars have occurred due to religion or in the name of religion (Harris 2008). From this, rationally, it can be hypothesised that there might be a potential gap between the texts from the scriptures and their preaching or interpretation dynamics of the followers.



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