

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BANGLADESH: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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## Abstract

*Freedom of religion is a common and significant phenomenon in Bangladesh. It is considered one of the key principles of the constitution of Bangladesh. The constitution authorizes Islam as the state religion but advocates the ideals of secularism, interdicts religious intolerance and discrimination. This paper explores that minor religious groups of different regions are facing challenges and becoming victims of persecution for decades because of political issues, economic and cultural crises, misunderstanding of pluralism, religious extremism, misconception about religious harmony etc. This paper finds the problems and possibilities of religious freedom in Bangladesh where the main obstacles in ensuring religious freedom are political instability, misuse of religion for political purposes, international conspiracies, lack of guidance, illiteracy and ignorance of other religions among the adherents of different faiths. The possibilities indicate that analyzing the historical background of religious freedom in Bangladesh can be a role model in establishing and maintaining religious freedom in its truest sense. Government should take some necessary steps and should be alert to national and international conspiracies. Along with the government and mass media, people of this country should be aware of the misuse of religion and the spreading of rumors in the name of religion.*

**Key-words:** Bangladesh, harmony, persecution, Religion, Religious freedom, religious intolerance, secularism

## Introduction

Religion is a vital and inevitable ingredient of society. To exercise the positive influence of religion, people need some special organizations, religious institutions as well as physical, social and legal support to practice their religions without any harassment. It includes public

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expressions on social and ethical issues. So, religious freedom is a must by being respectful to the religious ideologies of others and views of persons with no religion and by being civil in our dialogues and communications. The constitution and other laws and policies of Bangladesh declare Islam as the state religion but reaffirm the nation as a secular state that shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice, profess and propagation of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions. The Country was never known for being vulnerable to terrorism, or a dangerous place for religious minorities and foreign nationals. The original Constitution of 1972 holds secularism as one of four fundamental principles (nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism). Article 41 (2) of the Bangladeshi constitution has ensured the rights of minorities, restricts the power of the majority, and guarantees the free practice of religious rites and rituals without any interference, discrimination and persecution (Bangladesh Constitution, 2011).

Regretably in recent years, the peaceful nature and pluralistic co-existence of Bangladesh have become vulnerable due to the frequent attack on online activists (bloggers), religious minorities and Holey Artisan incident which shocked Bangladesh as well as the world. Terrorism and religious extremism have become serious threats to the people of all spheres. In this paper, by analyzing the respondents' responses and views on this problem, necessary suggestions are put forward intending to expose the real catalysts of religious intolerance alongside the precautions and measures that can be taken to ensue religious freedom.

## **Religion**

Religion is an old phenomenon in the world. Defining religion is not an easy task rather we can have definitions of religions but not the definition of religion. Human beings do not live only for material needs. In addition to material substance, there is a strong need for spiritual nourishment for every human being. The word 'Religion' is derived from the Latin words '*Religare*' where 'Re' means 'Again' and '*Ligare*' means 'Bond'. So, literally, *religare* or religion means 'Bond Again'. In another view, it comes from Latin word '*Religio*' which means fear, devotion, reverence, etc. There is an attempt to define religions according to some famous scholars, which are somewhat supportive, and, on the other hand, they are contradictory to one another. Religions, through positive

motivations, are involved in the psychological development of human beings. From this point of view, religion is a distinctive and powerful form of inspiration and dimension of personality (Pargament, Magyar-Russel, & Murray-Swank, 2005).

In 1871, Professor E.B. Tylor offered the broadest definition of religion in terms of the belief that “Religion is the belief in spiritual beings” (Howerth, 1903). Robert Bellah and Clifford Geertz represent the functional definitions of religion in different versions (Berger, 1974). Bellah (1964) defines religion as “A set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate condition of his existence” (p. 358). Geertz (1973) has a more complex definition of religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (p. 90). Religion is associated with the socio-economic, political, and cultural life of humans. It holds the individual accountable to his conscience. This current study defines religion as a set of beliefs and practices combining some rules, regulations and prohibitions through which a man can lead a moral life.

### **Religious Freedom**

Freedom of religion is considered as one of the most talked about human rights around of the globe. It was first guaranteed by the first amendment of the US constitution. This defines the right to choose a religion or no religion without any interference by the government of a state. So, religious freedom denotes that an individual or group of people can believe, worship and practice as they wish and want without any oppression.

### **Salient Features of Religious Freedom**

The respect for freedom of religion is the basis of justice, peace and freedom in a civilized society. This right is undeniable and cannot be weakened under any circumstances. Some features which are important to religious freedom are:

- It allows us to think, express and act upon what we deeply believe and fosters respect for other religions;
- Religious organizations, institutions and every individual of a society can preserve and strengthen religious freedom;
- It extends religious tolerance to the people of different faiths even though they probably disagree with some of their beliefs, practices, dogmas and doctrines;
- Refrains from comparing beliefs or doctrines as superior or inferior;
- Religious freedom avoids criticizing statements, policies and activities of religious groups when those actions hurt others and hamper the peace of amity;
- It ensures that people can exercise their moral and ethical agencies in matters of faith;
- It not only embraces the right to freely believe and worship but also to speak, wear, act and conduct life based on one's religious beliefs.

### **Historical Background**

A visiting US diplomat David N. Saperstein, a pioneer ambassador for International Religious Freedom said on 22 December, 2016 that there was effective religious freedom in Bangladesh in terms of freedom of worship and peaceful coexistence of different religious communities. Appreciating Bangladesh's long traditional religious tolerance and harmony, he said that considering whether the minority communities were being able to organize religious festivals freely according to their beliefs and ideals, whether they were able to build houses of worship, whether they were able to worship freely, there was substantial religious freedom in this country ("Bangladesh Has Substantial", 2016).

Bangladesh is a land of natural beauty where people are simple, peace-loving religious and democratic minded. After nine months of blood shedding great liberation war, Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign country on 16 December, 1971. In the newly independent country, new government presented a new constitution for the country where secularism was one of the four basic principles. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (17 March 1920- 15 August 1975), the father of the nation of

Bangladesh, the first president of Bangladesh put special emphasis on secularism for the peaceful coexistence and harmonious living of all people in Bangladesh. He was assassinated brutally on 15 August, 1975 with all of his family members except his two daughters Sheikh Hasina, the present prime Minister and Sheikh Rehana who were staying abroad with their family at that time. With the help of the armed forces, Ziaur Rahman (19 January 1936- 30 May 1981) came to power through martial law removed secularism from the constitution and added a new clause “Islamic Solidarity” which limits the spirit of religious pluralism in the country.

In 1982, Hussain Muhammad Ershad took over power as a military ruler who used religion for the sake of politics and personal gain more than ever before. After that, the religio political scenario changed beyond thinking. Fanaticism, religious extremism, persecution of religious minorities, religious intolerance etc., were also common during the rule of BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party). The Caretaker government took charge and the situation started to become smoother in contrast to the immediate past. In 2009, The Bangladesh Awami League took charge after an election where there was assurance for religious tolerance, religious harmony, and prohibition of religion-based politics which lit the light for religious brotherhood and harmonious co-existence.

It is a matter of great sorrow that in recent times the pluralistic nature in Bangladesh and peaceful co-existence among the people of different faiths has become more vulnerable. The increase of Islamic militant activities have been an alarming issue, particularly in 2015. It seems that militant groups have targeted Bangladesh as a safe haven. Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (IS) have claimed their existence in the country. The Ansar Al Islam which is also known as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) claimed to be the unit of the India-based militant group AQIS and has taken the responsibility of murdering atheist bloggers and a publisher of one of the atheist blogger’s books (Riaz, 2017).

### **Religious Freedom in Bangladesh: Problems and Possibilities**

Bangladesh is known as a country of racial and religious harmony from time immemorial. This country has witnessed religious tolerance and

freedom of religion and its positive impact on society, as the Pala rule was a great period of religious harmony and freedom. On the other hand, the Sena period was not the bearer of religious freedom and much communal hatred prevailed in that period. Hindu society was torn into many classes and the upper classes persecuted the lower classes with cruelty. Ultimately the Sena period had to suffer from the evil consequences of not maintaining the culture of religious freedom.

During the Pakistani period, Pakistan authorities were not promoting religious freedom and during the liberation war in 1971, millions of religious minorities comprising most of the Hindu minorities of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) were brutally killed by the Pakistani soldiers and their only fault was that they were Hindus. Bangladeshi people never support communal riots and religious hatred. There exists a very warm atmosphere among the different faiths. In Bangladesh, the birthdays of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Jesus Christ, Lord Shree Krishna etc., are celebrated with proper respect, and these days are public holidays. This is a unique symbol of religious freedom which is very rare elsewhere outside Bangladesh. Again, it is unprecedented that before every government programme, recitation from the holy texts of the four major religions of Bangladesh is obligatory.

In the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh, secularism was one of the guiding principles of Bangladesh along with democracy, nationalism and socialism. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a great advocate of religious freedom and he adopted secularism as one of the cardinal state principles. He banned the right-wing parties that had collaborated with the Pakistan Army during the liberation war and also brought some restrictions for ensuring freedom of speech and media and freedom of religion (Jahan, 1973). Sheikh Mujib clearly explains the notion of secularism in Bangladesh: Secularism does not mean an absence of religion. "Secularism" in the Bangladesh Constitution is offered as the equivalent of the Bengali word *dharma-nirapekshata*, which one would expect to see translated as "neutrality in religion," or simply "tolerance" (O'Connell, 1976, p. 65).

The secularism of Bangladesh was the recognition of religion rather than a rejection of religion what Maniruzzan (1990) called the adoption of 'multi-theocracy' (p. 70). Dr. Kamal Hossain, the principal author of the

Constitution of Bangladesh, in an interview, said that the abuse of religion in the politics of United Pakistan forced the newly independent Bangladesh to adopt secularism in the Constitution which was intended not for rejection of religions but for the elimination of communalism and abuse of religions in the political realm (Islam & Islam, 2018). In the present Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, it is categorically stated that: The idea of secularism shall be comprehended by the rejection of – “(a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favor of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practising a particular religion” (Bangladesh Constitution, 2011, p. 12).

The state provides rights to establish religious institutions, the right to profess, practise and propagate all religions. Under the Bangladesh penal code, “statements or acts made with a deliberate and malicious intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison” (United States Department of State, 2016, p. 3). The law of Bangladesh allows the prisoners to observe religious commemorations providing special food at festivals. Before the execution of the prisoners facing the death penalty, prison authorities are required to provide religious service from a religion of their choice (United States Department of State, 2019).

In this research work, a sample survey has been conducted to know the opinions regarding the present scenario of religious freedom in Bangladesh by asking open-ended questions to the respondents. Respondent ‘A’ views that though Bangladesh is not a fertile land of communalism and religious extremism, in this globalized era many foreign terrorist groups who have affiliations with many international conspiracies are trying to shake the peaceful co-existence of different faiths of Bangladesh. As a result, minority religious groups along with the majority are facing serious threats of terrorism. According to respondent ‘A’, recent incidents in Nasir Nagar, Ramu and Shia mosque attacks in Bangladesh are the red signals. Government should take immediate measures to preserve minority rights and religious freedom to avoid any further calamity.

According to respondent ‘B’, political abuse of religions are threats to religious freedom. He views that a state should not have any state religion,

and that government should re-establish the Constitution of 1972 to avoid any religion-based politics and communalism. Respondent 'C' opines, when a state holds a certain religion as a state religion, the other religious groups are bound to feel and experience inferiority which is completely opposite to the notion of freedom of religion. States should not have religion, it is individuals who will have religion, when there is a state religion, there is bound to be religious discrimination, respondent 'C' added. Respondent 'D' observes that, giving equal importance and recognition to all religions by the government is mandatory; festivals and mourning days of all religions must be observed as public holidays, if not, at least when the government job holders apply for getting leave on their religious festivals etc., these must be granted. According to respondent 'E', illiteracy is a huge impediment in the way of religious freedom and tolerance. Because uneducated people are prone to be misguided by biased and criminal groups. When the government supports some groups for its own political game, it becomes an impediment to the path of religious freedom. Again when religion is used to gain power, freedom of religion gets hampered.

Respondent 'F' believes that political instability is one of the major obstacles in the way of preserving religious freedom in Bangladesh. In the absence of a stable government, terrorism and extremism rise at an alarming rate. As a result, international terrorist groups find fertile soil to create a new hub of terrorism where religious freedom rarely can survive. Again, political instability gives birth to frustrations especially among the youths which provokes them to take part in terrorist activities by misinterpreting the religious texts and brainwashing process. Respondent 'F' suggests that government should maintain a peaceful and stable political atmosphere to preserve religious freedom and at the same time government should remain alert against any kind of national and foreign conspiracies which can destroy the foundation of religious freedom. On the other hand, government and its security forces should take immediate steps against the terrorists to prevent further damage to any religious group. The spreading of false news or rumors through social media should be stopped with a strong hand and common people should be more conscious and aware of the heinous activities of some misguided groups.



Government can take the help of the media to make people aware of this and can arrange workshops, making video clips etc., to make people aware of the negative sides of rumors specially in remote areas.

## **Conclusion**

Freedom of religion is a fundamental right of every man. Without ensuring the basic rights of a human being, a country cannot be depicted as a successful and civilized one. Religion is for peace; many religious dogmas and philosophies can exist in this world and it is unfair to think that only one particular religion will persist in this world. The world should understand the meaning of pluralism and the co-existence of different faiths and beliefs. We cannot impose any restriction on any particular faith. This is the monolithic view which has proved as a danger for today's world. This kind of monolithic view results in fanaticism and extremism. Bangladesh has a long-standing reputation for religious harmony and peaceful co-existence among the people of different religious traditions. Sadly, during the last few years, violent terrorist activities have gone up. It is not the case with Bangladesh alone; terrorism and religious extremism have become a global problem and millions of innocent people have lost their lives due to these heinous practices. Such works as this one are very much relevant to this world phenomenon.

Bangladesh is facing some challenges in terms of ensuring religious freedom. This paper indicates how the situation changed from the ancient to the modern age, and how religion was abused. This paper may help to show that Bangladesh is not a safe haven for religious extremism, and that the people of Bangladesh are a peace-loving nation which cherishes freedom of religion for all. It is explored through this paper that political abuse of religion is the main obstacle to religious freedom and there is a massive danger of misinterpretation and misguidance of common people in the name of religion. Government should take proper steps to stop this misguidance and academic study of religions is mandatory for making people aware of the misinterpretations of religion. Government and common people should come forward to establish the practice of freedom of religion. This paper has briefly explored the position of religious freedom in Bangladesh. The political use of religions, democracy and its

relation to freedom of religion, international politics and religious freedom, terrorism and religious freedom may be the themes for further studies.

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