

**A STUDY OF INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AMONG
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN CHITTAGONG,
BANGLADESH**

BY

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**A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for
the degree of Master of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and
Heritage in Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion**

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Knowledge and Human Sciences
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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, the interaction between the dominant Muslim community and other faiths in Bangladesh has become prevalent. In response to this scenario, this study investigates inter-religious relations among religious communities in Chittagong, Bangladesh, which is known for its religious diversity and historical significance. The research aims to examine the complexities of cooperation, collaboration, conflicts, and peaceful coexistence within inter-religious interactions. It also sheds light on the efforts to foster inter-community understanding and harmony. For the study, the researcher employs a qualitative method in which in-depth interviews are conducted with selected participants, such as representatives of religious scholars, cultural activists, and community leaders. The scripts are critically analyzed to extract the factors contributing to religious conflicts. The study on inter-religious interaction is significant for Bangladesh's peacebuilding and social cohesion efforts. By uncovering the dynamics of inter-religious relations, this study contributes to a more inclusive societal framework that transcends religious divisions, promoting mutual understanding and unity among diverse religious groups. Moreover, it identifies challenges that hinder development and, at the same time, offers strategies to overcome these challenges. Therefore, this study shows potential for cultivating harmonious interaction that exceeds boundaries and enriches the nation's social well-being. Focusing on Chittagong, the study provides context-specific perceptions into the multi-faceted circumstances that shape inter-religious relations. The findings contribute significantly to the concept of religious coexistence and inter-community relations. Consequently, the outcomes provide valuable insights for policymakers, religious institutes, and human rights organizations to develop context-specific strategies.

Keywords: Inter-religious relations, Religious diversity, Chittagong, Bangladesh, Religious coexistence

خلاصة البحث

أصبح التفاعل بين الجماعة المسلمة والديانات الأخرى السائدة في بنغلاديش شائعاً منذ التسعينات. تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقات بين الأديان بين الجماعات الدينية في تشيتاغونغ، بنغلاديش، المعروفة بتنوعها الديني وأهميتها التاريخية. تهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف تعقيدات التعاون، والتعاقد، والنزاعات، والتعايش السلمي ضمن التفاعلات بين الأديان. كما تلقي الضوء على الجهود المبذولة لتعزيز الفهم والانسجام بين المجتمعات. وخضوعاً للمنهجية العلمية، يستخدم الباحث منهجاً نوعياً، حيث سيتم إجراء مقابلات معمقة مع مشاركين مختارين، مثل، ممثلي العلماء الدينيين، والنشطاء الثقافيين، وقادة المجتمع. سيتم تحليل النصوص بعناية لاستخراج العوامل التي تسهم في النزاعات الدينية. تعتبر الدراسة حول التفاعل بين الأديان مهمة وذلك لبناء السلام والتماسك الاجتماعي في بنغلاديش. من خلال كشف ديناميكيات العلاقات بين الأديان، تسهم هذه الدراسة في إطار مجتمعي أكثر شمولية يتجاوز الانقسامات الدينية، مما يعزز التفاهم المتبادل والوحدة بين المجموعات الدينية المتنوعة. تتناول هذه الدراسة التحديات التي تعيق التطور، مع تقديم استراتيجيات للتغلب على هذه التحديات. تظهر هذه الدراسة إمكانية خلق التفاعل الوثامي الذي يتجاوز الحدود، وفي الوقت نفسه يثري الرفاه الاجتماعي للأمة. من خلال التركيز على تشيتاغونغ، توفر هذه الدراسة رؤى محددة حول العوامل المتعددة الأوجه التي تشكل العلاقة بين الأديان. تسهم نتائج هذه الدراسة بشكل كبير في مفهوم التعايش الديني والعلاقة بين المجتمعات. كما توفر رؤى قيمة لصانعي السياسات، والمعاهد الدينية، ومنظمات حقوق الإنسان لتطوير استراتيجيات محددة في هذا السياق.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage in Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion.

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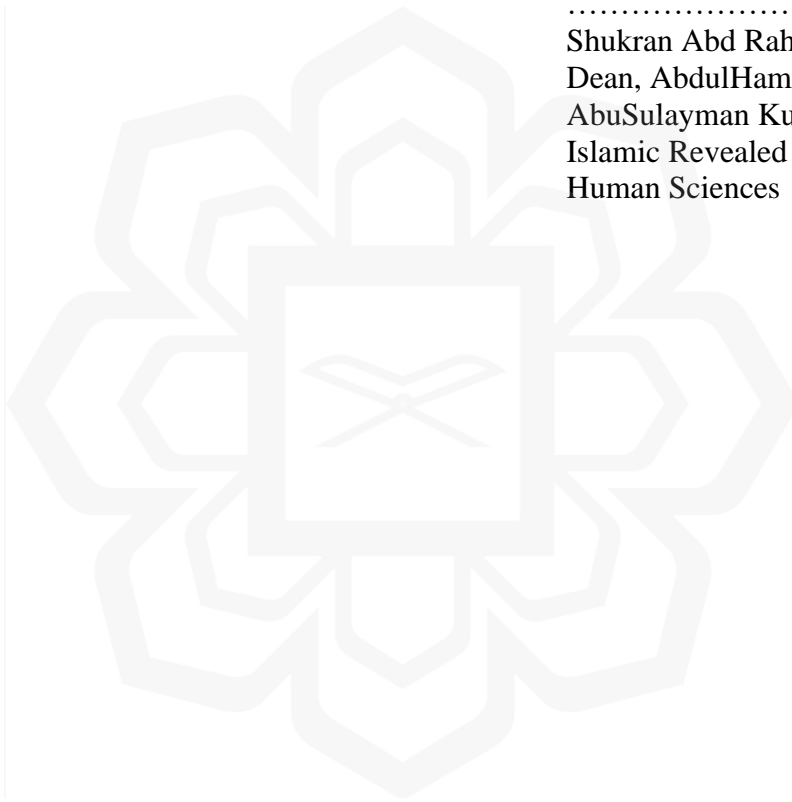
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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Firstly, it is my utmost pleasure to dedicate this work to my dear parents and my family, who granted me the gift of their unwavering belief in my ability to accomplish this goal: thank you for your support and patience.

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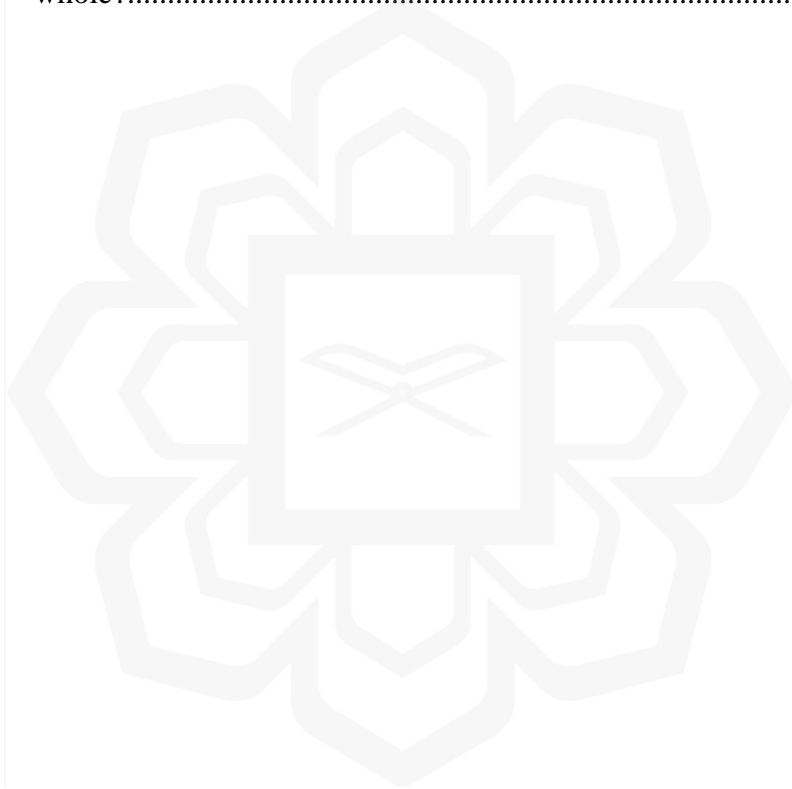
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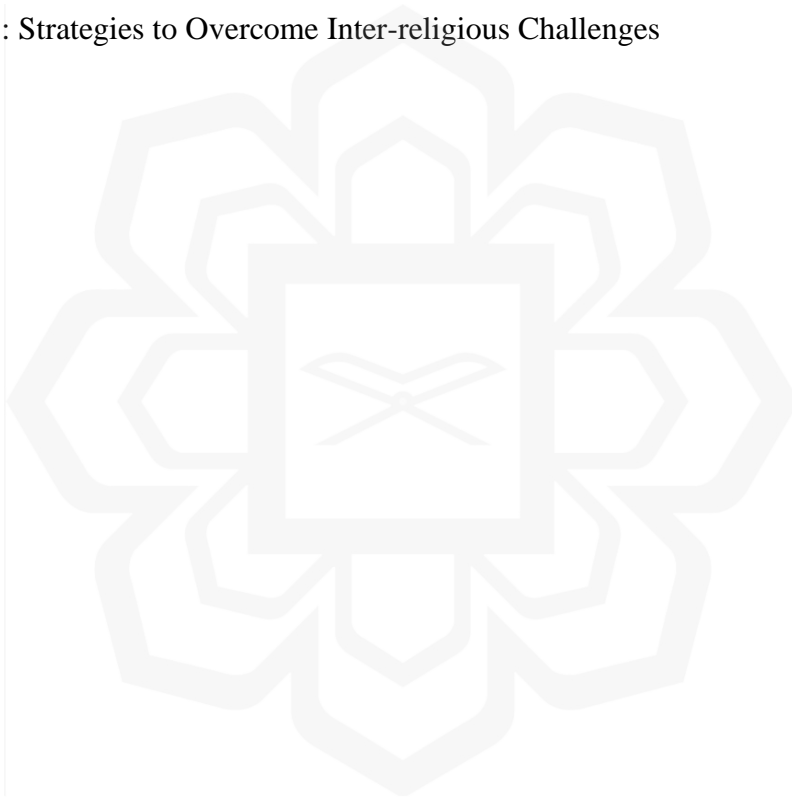
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Chittagong, located in southeastern Bangladesh, is a region known for its religious diversity and historical significance. It is home to various religious communities, including Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, among others. The interplay and dynamics of inter-religious relations within this context form the focal point of this study.

Bangladesh's sovereignty was initially based on secular ideals, with early discussions on religion, especially Islam, emphasizing its diverse and flexible qualities.¹ From the early 1990s onwards, the country experienced the emergence of a new theological worldview described as neo-orthodox, militant, and radical.² This change raises important inquiries about the notion of 'orthodox' Islam in Bangladesh and the idea of a 'Muslim democracy'. The interactions between the predominantly Muslim population and followers of different faiths in the country clearly reveal the persistent uncertainty on these topics.³ Approximately 87% of Bangladesh's people are Muslims, while the other 13% follow various other religions, with Hinduism being the largest minority faith.

Different religions and cultural traditions have influenced Chittagong's rich history. Over the centuries, various religious communities have coexisted, interacted, and shaped the social fabric of the region. While Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim-majority country, Chittagong offers a unique setting where multiple religious communities have a substantial presence and contribute to the local culture and society.

¹ Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation, Ch-5: The Contested Place of Nation in Umma and Globalizing Efforts* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2006).

² Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 2-5.

³ Mubashar Hasan, "Democracy and Political Islam in Bangladesh," *South Asia Research* 31 (August 5, 2011): 8–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272801103100201>.

This study aims to explore the inter-religious relations among religious communities in Chittagong, examining the nuances of cooperation, collaboration, conflicts, and peaceful coexistence that characterize their interactions. The study seeks to move beyond the narratives of enmity and conflict that often dominate discussions on religious encounters and explore everyday experiences and efforts towards inter-community understanding and harmony.

By focusing on Chittagong, the researcher aims to provide a thorough understanding of the specific factors, methods, and challenges that influence inter-religious relations in this region. The study recognizes the importance of peacebuilding and seeks to examine the processes and initiatives undertaken by different religious communities to maintain peaceful coexistence, particularly in contexts marked by tension and insecurity.

This study also draws inspiration from studies conducted elsewhere that explore the dynamics of peace and inter-community relations. The study aims to provide a perception of how diverse religious contexts can conceptualize and fostered peace by examining these approaches. It emphasizes that peace is not only the absence of hostility but also a dynamic process worthy of scrutiny and analysis.

This study seeks to elucidate the inter-religious relations among religious communities in Chittagong, highlighting their daily interactions, cooperation, and challenges that influence these interactions. It seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship on religious coexistence, peacebuilding, and the dynamics of inter-community relations, with a precise effort to the context of Chittagong, Bangladesh.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Historically, for centuries, the people of Bangladesh have lived peacefully and set an example of religious harmony. As a majority Muslim country, Bangladesh receives admiration and appreciation for peaceful religious coexistence and protecting minorities (Hindu, Christians, Buddhist, Ethnic) rights.⁴ However, recently, an alarming concern

⁴ “Bangladesh 2021 International Religious Freedom Report,” 2021, 4–8.

has been raised as a consequence of various religious conflicts.⁵ Recent incidents⁶ of religious violence may suggest that minorities are facing discrimination and feeling insecure from both people and government. Various human rights organizations have reported that public discussion of controversial religious topics is restricted due to fears of intimidation and violence from government officials and religious extremists. People who openly discuss topics such as LGBT rights, atheism, or criticize Islamist groups are targeted by religious groups.⁷

The impact of these incidents is perhaps hurtful and continuous throughout generations, as youths are often involved in hate crimes. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and persuasion across the country has been facilitated by globalization, particularly through social media platforms. As a result, local people from different places indulge in conflict and violence. Several questions arise in these circumstances: Is Bangladesh living in a harmonious religious coexistence? If not, what are the challenges behind this? And how to mitigate these challenges?

With regards to reality, this study attempts to explore the concept of inter-religious relations in everyday encounters, cooperation, and challenges for peacebuilding and maintaining peaceful coexistence. It also suggests ways to overcome these challenges.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the concept of inter-religious relations, and its significance in a multi-religious society?
2. How is the contemporary condition of inter-religious relations in Chittagong?

⁵ Minority Rights Group International, ed., *Under Threat: The Challenges Facing Religious Minorities in Bangladesh*, Report / Minority Rights Group International, 2016,[4] (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2016), 8–17.

⁶ Mostafa Yousuf and Khalid Bin Nazrul, “Cumilla Mayhem: A Chronicle of Hate Unleashed,” *The Daily Star*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/chronicle-hate-unleashed-2200801>.

⁷ “Bangladesh: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report,” Freedom House, Section: D2, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh/freedom-world/2023>.

3. What are the challenges for the development of inter-religious relations in Chittagong?
4. How to overcome these challenges related to inter-religious relations?

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims to clarify the following objectives:

1. To explore the concept of inter-religious relations and its significance in a multi-religious society.
2. To examine the contemporary condition of inter-religious relations in Chittagong.
3. To analyze the challenges for the development of inter-religious relations.
4. To find the ways to overcome these challenges for the development of inter-religious relations.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research methodology with a descriptive and analytical approach to explore the concept of inter-religious relations (IRR). This method was selected as it promoted a comprehensive knowledge of participants' perspectives, convictions, and practices, while allowing for the critical examination of pertinent literature and secondary data.

1.5.1 Research Design

The study followed a descriptive-analytical approach. The descriptive component focused on presenting the perspectives, experiences, and opinions of participants, while the analytical component critically evaluated the responses to identify themes and patterns.

1.5.2 Data Collection Methods

The data for this research was collected primarily through in-depth interviews conducted with carefully selected participants. A purposive sampling technique was

used to ensure the inclusion of individuals who are knowledgeable and actively involved in religious and cultural contexts.

1.5.2.1 Participants

Four participants were chosen to provide diverse perspectives: one Muslim Imam, one Hindu activist and member of ISKCON Bangladesh, one Buddhist community leader, and one Christian church member. These participants were selected to represent the major religious communities in Bangladesh and to provide insights into inter-religious relations from multiple viewpoints.

1.5.2.2 Interview process

The researcher developed a questionnaire with 10 questions according to the research objectives. Due to distance constraints, the researcher conducted the interview process remotely. Interviews were carried out via Zoom and Google Meet, ensuring convenience for both the researcher and participants. Each interview session lasted approximately 17 to 22 minutes, allowing sufficient time to explore participants' perspectives while maintaining focus on the research objectives. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, which allowed for flexibility in the discussions and encouraged participants to elaborate on their views.

1.5.2.3 Ethical consideration

To ensure accuracy and ethical compliance, data recording and privacy protocols were strictly maintained. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' prior consent. The recorded interviews were transcribed into scripts, and a copy of each transcript was sent back to the respective participant for verification and validation. This process ensured the authenticity of the responses while providing participants with an opportunity to review and confirm their statements.

1.5.3 Material Sources

In addition to primary data collected through interviews, an extensive literature review was conducted to provide a theoretical and contextual foundation for the study. Secondary data were gathered from a wide range of sources, including books, academic journals, scholarly articles, and credible online materials. Library resources and reputable databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate were utilized to identify relevant literature on inter-religious relations, religious diversity, and cultural

harmony. This review provided critical insights into existing research, helping to contextualize the primary findings and bridge gaps in the understanding of inter-religious relations in Bangladesh.

1.5.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a combination of sentiment analysis and thematic analysis with the assistance of Atlas.Ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The analysis process followed a structured approach. First, the researcher engaged in familiarization with the transcribed data by reading and re-reading the scripts to gain an in-depth understanding. Following this, the data were systematically coded to identify key phrases, ideas, and insights. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to form themes and sub-themes.

For Chapter 3, both sentiment analysis and thematic analysis were applied to explore the emotional tone and recurring themes within participants' responses. This dual approach provided a nuanced understanding of the data, highlighting not only the themes but also the underlying sentiments expressed by the participants. For Chapter 5, the analysis focused solely on thematic analysis to interpret and synthesize the data in line with the research objectives. This rigorous analytical process allowed for the identification of meaningful patterns and relationships within the qualitative data.

1.5.5 Visualization and Presentation of Findings

The findings of the study were presented using a combination of narrative descriptions and visual representations to ensure clarity and coherence. Key themes and insights derived from the interviews and literature review were described in detail, providing a comprehensive account of participants' perspectives. Visual tools such as tables, thematic charts, and conceptual maps were used to enhance the presentation of the findings, making the data more accessible and understandable. This approach ensured that the research objectives were fulfilled while offering a structured and visually engaging representation of the results.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the current context of Bangladesh, inter-religious relations are one of the most sensitive issues. Religious and secular academicians deal with the classical dimension

of inter-religious relations and development. Most of the classical intellects of Bengali literature demonstrate the relationship between religious communities as harmonious.⁸ On the other hand, modern writers illustrate their relation as hostile.⁹ This research is required for an in-depth exploration of inter-religious relations in Chittagong and to analyze the contemporary issues: religious conflicts, religious conversion, minority rights, celebrating religious festivals, and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, this study aims to examine the current relationships between various religious communities.

A significant finding on the background of inter-religious relations is mandatory to mitigate religious conflicts in Bangladesh. Peniel Rajkumar's article, *Inter-religious Relations*, offers some fundamental ideas for peaceful religious coexistence. This article is included as a chapter in the book entitled *Christianity in South and Central Asia*.¹⁰ The author introduces inter-religious relations in Bangladesh as embarrassed with secularism constitutionally and yet having an official state religion, Islam, that led to the religious conflicts.¹¹ Therefore, it needs serious handling to create harmony between individuals and society. Inter-religious relations is a concept of the ways in which religious communities interact with one another to deal with the issues of inter-religious engagement, inclusive of dialogues and relations. This study is based on focus group people and mainly focuses on political agendas and government involvement for inter-religious development. However, the current study focuses on inter-religious relations from a religious perspective, the influence of religious belief and practice.

From recent studies, one of the significant research articles is entitled *Religious Coexistence in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Muslim-Hindu Relationships in Satkhira*,¹² an article written by Mohammad Obaidullah. This study adapts qualitative and quantitative methods and investigate the contemporary condition of religious coexistence in Bangladesh from a Muslim perspective. The researcher conducted a survey of 681 people in Satkhira, one district of Bangladesh. This study found that the

⁸ Dr. Muhammad Obaidullah, "Religious Coexistence in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Muslim-Hindu Relationship in Satkhira." (2014), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4855.5046>.

⁹ Hiranmay Karlekar, *Bangladesh, the next Afghanistan?* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).

¹⁰ Kenneth Ross, Daniel Jeyaraj, and Todd Johnson, *Christianity in South and Central Asia* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474439848>.

¹¹ Peniel Rajkumar, "Inter-Religious Relations," in *Christianity in South and Central Asia*, by Kenneth Ross, Daniel Jeyaraj, and Todd Johnson (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 384–95, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474439848-037>.

¹² Obaidullah, "Religious Coexistence in Bangladesh."

allegation of Hindu-Muslim relationships not being peaceful is proven wrong. The study proves that 85.8% of Muslims and 83% of Hindus agreed there is peaceful religious coexistence and they are living in tolerance, mutual understanding, equality, mutual benefits, and willingness to work for the common good in a non-violence and peaceful society. The study also discusses the reasons for the violation: the lack of knowledge of national and international politics and politicians using religion for political gain. However, this study is limited to place and people and focuses only on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. On the other hand, the current study focuses on every religious community and their daily interaction in religious practice.

Another recent study is entitled *Hindu-Muslim Religious Encounter in Bangladesh: a Case Study of Dhaka*,¹³ by MD Asadur Rahman. This study examines the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The researcher interviewed 18 Muslim and 18 Hindu respondents who are religious intellectuals, representatives of cultural advocacy, and community delegates. The research focuses on the declining ratio of Hindus in Bangladesh who are migrating to other countries. The findings of the research suggest that persecution of Hindus is a fundamental catalyst for large-scale migration. In contrast to the prevailing notion of a Hindu population decline, the research underscores the substantial contribution of speakers of the Bangla language, irrespective of their ethnic heritage, to the Islamization process. Both Hindus and Muslims use Bengali as their everyday language. According to the stories told by the participants, religion is essential in Bangladesh for two reasons: first, it helps to create a peaceful and stable society, and second, it has a major impact on molding people into decent citizens. This is considered essential for fostering harmony and coexistence among diverse religious communities. This study also confines itself to specific locations and methods. Furthermore, this study focuses on discussing inter-religious relations in the context of Hindu-Muslim encounters and the lack of discussion of the minorities in general. The conceptual framework of this study primarily focuses on socio-politics and ethics without providing any strategic plan to develop inter-religious relations.

¹³ Md Asadur Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Religious Encounter in Bangladesh: A Case Study in Dhaka* (IIUM Press, 2017).

One of the studies about violence against the minority community is written by Amena A. Mohsin *Religion, Politics and Security: The Case of Bangladesh*.¹⁴ The author indicates that the origins of violence against minority groups are deeply ingrained in the methods and structures of the modern state system, leading to the dehumanization of individuals and political procedures. Discriminatory laws and regulations have classified individuals into groups that are either privileged or marginalized. The practice of dominant democracy, behind the cover of political activity, has diminished personal freedom by recognizing citizens as only political assets and voting constituencies. Amena's study specifically mentions that government states and politicians are responsible for religious conflicts who use religion as a weapon for their vote bank. Though the study gives information about the reason for conflicts in Bangladesh, this article does not provide conflict management and strategic plans to develop inter-religious relations. In contrast, the current thesis addresses this gap by proposing conflict management strategies and fostering inter-religious harmony through actionable frameworks and initiatives.

From the western scholarship, one of the significant scholarly literatures entitled *Bangladesh: Biography of a Muslim Nation* by Charles Peter O'Donnell is a further example of Bangladesh's post-liberal socio-political and religious condition where politicians rather than Muslim preachers empower religious conflicts.¹⁵ One of the common perspectives of both national and western writers is that they only discuss social and cultural conditions. The study provides explanations to develop inter-religious relations from a geo-political point of view. The author does not focus on religious practice and rituals and lacks in demonstrating the necessity of understanding religion as a strategic plan to develop inter-religious relations.

The first quantitative study on peaceful coexistence and religious harmony in *Islam in Bangladesh* has been conducted by Razia Akter Banu, a distinguished study on Muslim life specifying Islam in Bangladesh. According to her statement, it was likely the first socio-political research of religions in Bangladesh.¹⁶ She seeks to present the transformations in the country's religion and society concerning the living conditions of

¹⁴ Amena A Mohsin, *Religion, Politics and Security: The Case of Bangladesh*.

¹⁵ Charles Peter O'Donnell, *Bangladesh: Biography of a Muslim Nation* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1984).

¹⁶ U. A. B. Razia Akter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, *International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology* 58 (Leiden New York Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992).

the individuals. She also explains the situation of Muslims in religious and socio-political life and highlights spiritual encounters between Muslims and Hindus from a socio-political perspective. In 1983, Banu conducted surveys in 20 villages in Dhaka city and three urban areas, demonstrating the religious status of Bangladeshi Muslims in their beliefs and practices. However, this study primarily focuses on the Hindu and Muslim community rather than minorities overall. Her study provides a general identification of inter-religious conflicts based on ethics and beliefs. However, at that time, the concept of inter-religious dialogues had not yet fully developed.

Another study from the western scholar, Ali Riaz comes up with the experience of a BBC journalist and writes about the rights of minorities that are discriminated against, neglected, and persecuted. According to the study of Riaz, the book entitled *God Willing the Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* claims that during the time of different political rules in Bangladesh, after independence, the condition of minorities (Hindus, Buddhists, Christians) was altered.¹⁷ Riaz's claim becomes further vulnerable with the study entitled *Islamist militancy in Bangladesh*,¹⁸ where he claims for injustice from Islamic political parties in Khulna, Barisal, Dinajpur, Pabna and Netra Kona of Bangladesh in 2001. Riaz also discusses religious conflicts from social and cultural perspectives. Furthermore, his work appears to prevent Muslims and Islamic worldviews because it primarily focuses on Hindus as a minority in Bangladesh. As a result, it leaves the scope of further studies on Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians in terms of their relationship with other communities.

The *Songkhaloghu Rajniti* (Minority Politics) description of religious minorities in Bangladesh was written by Mehdi Hasan Palash. His significant contributions refute the misconceptions concerning the forceful removal of non-Muslims (minorities) that are commonly found in different narratives and writings about Bangladesh. His thorough investigation shows that, in several instances, allegations of minority oppression are overstated and fabricated. Palash views Bangladesh as a possible exemplar of a communist nation in today's world, in contrast to Ali Riaz's viewpoint.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham (Md.): Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

¹⁸ Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web*, 1. publ, Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series 7 (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁹ Mehdi Hasan Palash, *Songkhaloghu Rajniti (Minorities Politics)* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Research Centre, 2001), 6. (Dhaka: Bangladesh Research Centre, n.d.).

The analysis focuses on the root causes of minority difficulties as documented in daily newspapers from 1991 to 1996. He claims that people associated with the Indian RAW and groups such as the Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council are mostly responsible for provoking conflict over religion and discriminating against minorities for their personal agenda. His research illuminates the challenges faced by non-Muslims in Bangladesh by highlighting the primary elements that create animosity among various religious communities. This work is useful to understand the rights of minority groups in Bangladesh in terms of rights and coexistence. However, this study lacks promoting a conceptual framework in the context of religious practice, understanding religion or inter religious dialogue.

Another significant study entitled *Bangladesh: From a Nation to a State* by Craig Baxter. He points out that inter-religious relations in Bangladesh have largely been compatible since independence in 1971. A concise discussion of the condition of the people of Bangladesh before and after independence has been commendably incorporated into his work. Chronicling events from 1947 to 1996, he refers to the situation of minorities in general, Hindus, and sees harmonious encounters among communities in Bangladesh.²⁰ The author's method in this study is primarily descriptive, emphasizing documentation over thorough analysis, and lacks accuracy in depicting the realities of Muslims and minority groups. However, this study did not offer any solutions or strategic plans for fostering inter-religious relations.

Like Ali Riaz, an article by Karlekar shows the extreme situation of minorities in Bangladesh in . His work entitled *Bangladesh: Next Afghanistan*²¹ shows the position of extremism and violence in Bangladesh, which is a symptom of enhancing a comparable country Afghanistan. The study explicitly denounces Bangladesh's religious schools (madrasas) as training camps for Islamic extremists, and students in these schools are also Islamic armed forces. The views expressed in this work failed to demonstrate promoting peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding in society. Instead, the author underrated religious beliefs and failed to positively appraise the role of religion in promoting passionate interreligious relations.

²⁰ Craig Baxter, *Bangladesh: From a Nation to a State*, Nations of the Modern World Asia (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).

²¹ Karlekar, *Bangladesh, the next Afghanistan?*

An excellent book about religious conflicts in Bangladesh entitled *Hindus betrayed: religious clashing in Bangladesh* is written by Dr. Saradindu Mukherjee. He described Bangladeshi Muslims as an Islamic radical state and the *Jihadi* elements in Bangladesh have been equally remorseless in the assault on the lives and properties of a threat to the minority Hindu community. According to his experience, 5 million Hindus have left the country after the liberation war, and Muslims also boycott Hindu lawyers', medical practitioners, shopkeepers, traders, and merchants and force them to migrate to the neighboring country India.²² However, his study focuses on the rights of Hindus in Bangladesh and describe Hindus as a sufferer. It does not provide a clear concept of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bangladesh, and it also lags in describing the relationship between other religious communities.

An article entitled *Faith and Education in Bangladesh: Approaches to Religion and Social Cohesion in School Textbook Curricula* is written by Aisha Binte Abdur Rob, Sudipta Roy, Samia Huq, and Katherine Marshall. They discuss the concept of education to develop inter-religious relations. The authors mention that the national curriculum mandates religious education, allowing adherents of the four main religions to study their sacred books, demonstrating Bangladesh's commitment to promoting secularism and diversity in educational environments. The textbooks provide limited opportunities for interfaith and intrafaith discussion inside and outside of the classroom. The educational materials tend to use a prescriptive approach to convey religious principles, with each text supporting its faith by creating a wide, cross-religious identity. The author describes children are being so receptive to the knowledge conveyed in textbooks that religious textbooks can maintain a sense of superiority that leads to social discrimination and exclusion.²³ Although the study is significant for the current context of Bangladesh, this study specifically focuses on educational relations and briefly discusses religious practice and understanding for peaceful coexistence. The conceptual framework for this study is based on education and curricular development.

²² Saradindu Mukherji, *Hindus Betrayed: Religious Cleansing in Bangladesh*, Edition: First, Intervention Paper (New Delhi: India Policy Foundation, 2013).

²³ Aisha Binte Abdur Rob et al., *Faith and Education in Bangladesh: Approaches to Religion and Social Cohesion in School Textbook Curricula*,

Bertil Linter has written another significant study entitled *Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh*.²⁴ The author describes the rise of culture of violence, especially among young people, and the armed status of many young Islamic extremists. The author argues that the impact of madrasas on shaping the future generations of Bangladesh is substantial and should be taken into consideration. Bangladesh depends extensively on international aid; consequently, it is essential not to outrage significant contributors such as Japan and Western countries. The government must concentrate on preventing the growing trend of Islamic militancy. However, this study failed to examine the current relationship of religious communities, and it only focuses on religious terrorism and extremism from a socio-political perspective. Certainly, there is another major concern that has risen in the perspective of religious coexistence in Bangladesh because of fundamental beliefs and practices. This study solely concentrates on the causes of religious conflicts, without offering any strategies to address these issues.

Another useful study entitled *Happiness In Bangladesh: The Rule Of Religion And Connectedness* is conducted by Joe Devine, Timothy Hinks, and Arif Naveed. The authors analyze primary data from Bangladesh to explore the role of religion in influencing individuals' well-being and opportunities in life. The researchers examined the levels of happiness within the two major religious communities in Bangladesh, Muslims and Hindus, arguing that understanding the influence of religion on well-being requires considering social, economic, and political factors. The primary findings of the research indicate that religious affiliation significantly influences happiness in Bangladesh, even after considering variables including age, health, location, occupation, wealth, and economic status. Leaders of Muslim households consistently express higher levels of happiness in comparison to their Hindu neighbors. Moreover, Muslims exhibit significantly greater levels of happiness in regions where the Muslim population is more predominant.²⁵ However this study is limited in its analysis of two religious' communities, and it analyzed the concept of happiness from religious perspectives. By mentioning two groups, the author limited the scope for other

²⁴ Lintner, Bertil. "Religious extremism and nationalism in Bangladesh." *Religious radicalism and security in South Asia* 421 (2004).

²⁵ Joe Devine, Timothy Hinks, and Arif Naveed, "Happiness in Bangladesh: The Role of Religion and Connectedness," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20, no. 2 (February 2019): 351–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9939-x>.

communities, and it is problematic because religious harmony cannot be achieved without the participation of all religious communities.

Finally, existing works associated with the concept of inter-religious relations in Bangladesh are limited in number, scope, and method. The literature review suggests that various studies were conducted over this long period on the socio-religious, cultural, political, and economic factors. Part of this work was done based on political views, and others were conducted on historical or sociological perspectives of Bangladesh. Therefore, there are still areas that require further exploration. The current study aims at exploring inter-religious relations in Chittagong, Bangladesh, in the context of religious belief and practice. This study will adopt the concept of inter-religious dialogue as the most useful strategy to develop inter-religious relations.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Inter-religious relations hold enormous importance in the peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts of Bangladesh. The country has experienced instances of inter-religious tensions and conflicts in the past, underscoring the need to foster understanding and cooperation among religious communities. Positive inter-religious interactions, rooted in empathy, respect, and dialogue, can contribute to preventing and addressing potential conflicts, thus promoting overall social stability and peace. By nurturing an environment of interfaith dialogue and cooperation, Bangladesh can cultivate a society where diverse religious groups coexist peacefully and contribute collectively to the nation's socio-economic development, education, and other sectors.

Bangladesh is characterized by religious diversity, with Islam as the predominant religion, alongside sizable populations of Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and other faiths. Promoting positive inter-religious relations becomes imperative for fostering harmony, understanding, and peaceful coexistence among these diverse religious communities within the country. By encouraging dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation among religious groups, Bangladesh can create an inclusive social fabric that transcends religious differences and promotes social cohesion and unity.

Chittagong is known for its religious diversity and historical significance, making it an ideal location to study inter-religious relations. By focusing on Chittagong,

the researcher contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering specific insights into the interplay, cooperation, and challenges faced by religious communities in this region. When the previous studies indicate the presence of conflicts, misunderstandings, and stereotypes regarding religious coexistence and encounters, this study seeks to fill a knowledge gap by exploring the daily experiences of inter-community relations, cooperation, and peaceful encounters in Chittagong. It aims to challenge prevailing negative perceptions and shed light on the often-overlooked aspects of harmony and collaboration among religious communities.

In a world where religious tensions and conflicts are prevalent, understanding the mechanics of peace-building and inter-religious coexistence is crucial. By examining the active maintenance of peace and the everyday encounters between religious communities in Chittagong, the research contributes to developing conceptual and practical approaches to fostering harmony, understanding, and collaboration.

The study focuses on Chittagong and acknowledges the need for a comprehensive understanding of the unique factors, mechanisms, and challenges that shape inter-religious relations in that region. It is hoped that findings can provide valuable insights for policymakers, community leaders, and religious institutions to develop context-specific strategies and initiatives aimed at strengthening inter-community understanding, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONCEPT OF INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

Inter-religious relations (IRR) is a topic that has received significant attention from scholars, activists, philosophers, policymakers, and thinkers from various fields of study. However, the depth of this concept can differ depending on an individual's viewpoint and areas of interest. To conduct a broad and informed exploration of inter-religious relations, it is significant to establish a transparent understanding of the term itself.

2.1 INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATION: DEFINITION, MEANING AND OBJECTIVES

2.1.1 Meaning and Definition of Inter-religious Relation

The term "inter-religious relation" is a compound expression that includes two words, "inter-religious" and "relation". The term 'inter-religious' is the combination of the words 'inter' and 'religious'. The term 'inter' is a prefix, and 'religious' is an adjective that originates from the noun 'religion'. The term 'inter' can be used as a prefix before a noun or an adjective that interacts between different subjects.²⁶ 'Religious' is connected with a particular or variety of religion within belief and practice.²⁷ Combined with, the term 'inter-religious' refers to the interaction of different religions. For example, 'inter-racial' means involving people of different races.²⁸ Meanwhile, 'relation' refers to the way in which two people, groups, or countries behaved towards each other or deal with each other.²⁹ Therefore, 'inter-religious relation' refers to the interaction between two or multiple religious communities in a society.

²⁶ "Inter - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.Com, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/inter_2?q=inter-.

²⁷ Albert Sydney Hornby and Sally Wehmeier, eds., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 7. ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1279.

²⁸ Hornby and Wehmeier, 813.

²⁹ Hornby and Wehmeier, 1277.

According to the Archdiocese of Brisbane, a Catholic church in southeast Queensland, Australia, inter-religious relations refer to a meeting of people of different religions in an atmosphere of mutual respect, freedom, and openness in order to listen to the other to try to understand that person's religion and hopefully to speak of the responsibilities of collaboration.³⁰

The raising of strong and meaningful bonds between various religious groups falls within the scope of inter-religious relations. This includes acquiring an understanding of the convictions and practices of others, appreciating the favorable aspects of their traditions, and acknowledging the valuable contributions made by individuals of different faiths to advancing peace, unity, justice, and the rights of people. Moreover, it entails collaborative endeavors to improve the well-being and equality of all members of society.³¹

According to the national encyclopedia of Bangladesh, inter-religious relations refer to the complex and dynamic interplay and exchanges that take place among different religious groups in a particular region or society. These connections are deeply rooted in the historical fabric where religion has played a crucial role in shaping the cultural, political, and moral aspects of communities.³²

To conclude, inter-religious relations, is a comprehensive field that covers a wide range of subjects related to the variety of religions. It explores different aspects such as the dynamics of social unity in various religious environments, the adjustment of religious beliefs and practices within specific societal frameworks, the complex interactions between religion and non-religious settings, and efforts aimed at promoting comprehension and collaboration among different beliefs. In addition, inter-religious relations also include the intricacies of conflicts based on religious motivations, and the crucial role of establishing peace in religiously diverse communities.

³⁰ "Inter-Religious Relations," Archdiocese of Brisbane, accessed September 16, 2023, <https://brisbanecatholic.org.au/life/inter-religious-relations/>.

³¹ Jesudason Baskar Jeyaraj, *Inter -Faith Relations for Transformation and Higher Education* (Delhi: Lady Coak College, 2007), 1.

³² "Inter-Religious Relations - Banglapedia," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Communal_Relations.

2.1.2 Objectives of Inter-religious Relations

For a better understanding of inter-religious relations, its objectives are crucial to discuss and analyze. Religious communities have to adopt and recognize the goals of developing inter-religious relations to find the challenges related to it and the ways to overcome them. The fundamental objectives of inter-religious relations are:

i. Promoting Religious Tolerance

The primary objective of inter-religious relations (IRR) is to promote the respect of diverse religious beliefs, which is significant for several reasons. IRR aims to serve as a basis for promoting harmonious coexistence in societies engaged in religious diversity. Religious differences have been an important reason for conflict, tension, and violence in various regions across the world. IRR aims to reduce these conflicts and create an environment where individuals from various religious backgrounds can coexist peacefully.

In addition, fighting for religious respect is connected to protecting essential human rights, particularly the liberty to practice religion without fear of prejudice or violence.³³ Every individual should have the right to express what they believe in. IRR recognizes the necessity of promoting tolerance to uphold these rights and enable individuals to practice their religion without limitation.

IRR enables the remembrance of these varied cultural components through its advocacy for mutual respect. This fosters cultural diversity by promoting comprehension and admiration for various lifestyles. Today, religious tensions are rising on an international scale and result in international conflicts and threats to security. So, advocating religious tolerance is a proactive step towards achieving worldwide harmony and stability. It mitigates the possibility of conflicts fueled by religious motivations that can have extensive consequences.³⁴

Inter-religious relations foster diversity and inclusivity. It also contributes to harmonious relationships, defending human rights, preserving cultural diversity, and ensuring global peace. The statement emphasizes the importance of understanding,

³³ Jürgen Habermas, "Religious Tolerance—The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights," *Philosophy* 79, no. 1 (January 2004): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819104000026>.

³⁴ Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (Yale University Press, 2008), 7.

valuing, and embracing diverse religions. There is a need for the welfare of individuals and societies in a diverse religious landscape.

ii. Preventing Religious Discrimination

The prevention of religious discrimination is another important aspect of inter-religious relations (IRR). At this point, IRR aims to create an equal and neutral society for the people who have been discriminated against unjustly for their beliefs. The significance of IRR is to prevent religious discrimination can be understood from various circumstances.

Religious discrimination clearly violates the principles of equality and social justice. IRR recognizes the value and significance of every individual, regardless of their religious background. Discrimination based on religion not only violates these fundamental human rights but also disrupts the social framework of diverse communities.³⁵ By attempting to prevent religious discrimination, IRR aims to create a social framework where individuals are treated equitably. Furthermore, religious discrimination often leads to social segregation, causing divisions within communities. These exclusive practices can hamper the potential for social unity and cooperation among different religious groups.³⁶ Therefore, preventing religious discrimination is essential for promoting correlations among communities, promoting mutual understanding, and nurturing a sense of solidarity among people from diverse religious backgrounds.

Very often, religious discrimination has wider implications for social stability and security. When societies abandon religious conflicts, they can erupt in conflicts and violence, posing significant challenges to peace and harmony. IRR acknowledges that promoting an environment free from religious discrimination is a matter of individual proactive measures to mitigate the potential for conflicts driven by religious differences.

³⁵ Jonathan Fox, "Religious Discrimination: A World Survey," *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (2007): 1–2.

³⁶ Yasemin Akbaba and Zeynep Taydas, "Does Religious Discrimination Promote Dissent? A Quantitative Analysis," *Ethnopolitics* 10, no. 3–4 (November 2011): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2011.561988>.

iii. Building Social Integration

Social integration appears to be a vital objective of IRR due to its profound implications for the harmony and welfare of diverse communities. The objective highlights the significance of establishing an inclusive social structure where individuals from different religious backgrounds can peacefully and collaboratively coexist. Social integration is crucial for the overall stability of a community. In environments where diverse religious groups interact with mutual value and comprehension, there is a greater likelihood of social harmony. However, religious conflicts often exacerbate social integration deficiencies, which can ultimately lead to societal collapse.³⁷ IRR strives to mitigate potential conflicts and promote an environment of coexistence by prioritizing the development of social integration.

Furthermore, social integration promotes a sense of belonging and unity among individuals from various religions. It helps bridge gaps and promotes a shared sense of identity as members of a larger community. In societies characterized by religious diversity, nurturing such a feeling of appreciation in society is essential to prevent isolation and relegation among religious minorities. Social integration enhances opportunities for collaboration and cooperation among diverse religious communities.

When people feel that there is an opportunity for harmony, they are more willing to collaborate toward common objectives. This includes overcoming social problems, promoting cultural exchange, or participating in interfaith initiatives.³⁸ Individual's collaboration enhances the social framework and contributes to the overall well-being. Promoting social integration mitigates the risk of conflicts and violence influenced by religion. In societies where people interact with understanding and respect, they can prevent religious conflicts before they escalate into crises.

³⁷ Robert Wuthnow and Conrad Hackett, "The Social Integration of Practitioners of Non-Western Religions in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 652–55, <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1468-5906.2003.00209.x>.

³⁸ Jason Schnittker, "Religion, Social Integration, and Depression in Europe: Evidence from the European Social Survey," *Social Science & Medicine*, Health Inequalities: The Emerging Field of Comparative Cross-National Research on Social Inequalities in Health, 267 (December 1, 2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112376>.

iv. Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is significant in promoting peace, tolerance, and understanding among different religious communities. Religious conflicts could increase significant societal problems and destroy our peace and harmony.³⁹ IRR aims to prevent the conflicts and violence related to religious differences, and conflict resolution works as a mechanism. This approach contributes to long-term stability and promotes religious diversity. Furthermore, conflict resolution is an integral part of establishing and maintaining social unity. When conflicts arise among religious communities, unresolved clashes can lead to fragmentation and division. Conflict resolution mechanisms in IRR aim to heal these divisions by facilitating dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation, ultimately restoring trust and cooperation.⁴⁰

Conflict resolution develops a ground of open dialogue and mutual understanding among diverse religious communities. It provides a structured framework for addressing differences, allowing individuals and communities to openly express their concerns and viewpoints. By developing a mutual ground, this also promotes empathy, respect, and a willingness to find mutual similarities. Conflict resolution also plays a crucial role in preventing cycles of violence. In societies where religious differences have resulted in conflicts, efforts toward compromise and resolution can help break the cycle of revenge and neutralization.⁴¹ Moreover, conflict resolution mechanisms in IRR also involve academics who possess expertise in directing religiously sensitive issues. Their involvement can lead to innovative solutions and dialogues that not only resolve conflicts but also prevent future possibilities of violence.

v. Ensuring Religious Freedom

Religious freedom holds a central and essential position in the aims of IRR for compelling reasons. It emphasizes the importance of preserving an individual's ability to practice their religion without the fear of discrimination or persecution. Religious

³⁹ Jacob Bercovitch, Viktor Aleksandrovich Kremeniuk, and I. William Zartman, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 264.

⁴⁰ Bercovitch, Kremeniuk, and Zartman, 281.

⁴¹ "Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding," 686, accessed September 18, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038006003>.

freedom is inherently connected to the principles of human rights and personal freedom.⁴² IRR acknowledges that each person should possess the undeniable right to select, practice, or alter their religion or belief as a fundamental element of their independence. By advocating for and safeguarding religious freedom, IRR protects these fundamental rights, establishing an environment where individuals can openly demonstrate their religious devotion.

Besides, religious freedom encourages an all-encompassing and fair society. In a diverse world where people embrace different faiths, ensuring religious rights develops an atmosphere of tolerance and reverence. It discourages prejudice and intolerance based on religious disparities, fostering a sense of appreciation among religious minorities. Religious freedom acts as a catalyst for interfaith conversation and collaboration. When individuals have the freedom to worship without apprehension, it opens avenues for meaningful interaction and comprehension among diverse religious communities.⁴³

IRR acknowledges that religious freedom is vital for constructing connections, fostering empathy, and developing shared principles that surpass religious boundaries. Religious freedom directly impacts social unity and peace. The potential for religiously motivated conflicts and tensions greatly diminishes in societies where individuals can freely exercise their faith.⁴⁴ IRR comprehends that upholding religious freedom contributes to the broader objective of harmonious coexistence among religiously diverse communities.

vi. Educational Initiatives

Educational initiatives are significant in the field of IRR because they have an impact on the development of understanding, and respect among individuals who come from a variety of religious backgrounds. IRR often includes educational efforts aimed at increasing awareness and knowledge about different religions. The spread of knowledge

⁴² Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, Issa Khan, and Mohammad Elius, "Analysing the Conceptual Framework of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relationship in Islam," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (December 2, 2018): 310, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v8i2.309-334>.

⁴³ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 25.

⁴⁴ Rex J. Ahdar and I. Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–2.

is a powerful instrument that can be applied to eliminate ignorance and misconceptions from different religious traditions. IRR acknowledges that knowledge is a fundamental mechanism for promoting empathy. By prioritizing educational ventures, IRR aims to provide individuals with precise and balanced information regarding different religions, their doctrines, and their contributions to society. This knowledge adopts comprehension and demolishes prejudices.⁴⁵

Furthermore, educational initiatives possess the capacity to influence the attitudes and actions of upcoming generations with regards to religious diversity. Academic establishments, including schools, universities, and community programs, which provide religious studies and interfaith dialogue courses and workshops, equip young individuals with the essential means to understand and honor religious differences. These initiatives promote the values of tolerance and open-mindedness, which promote a harmonious and inclusive society.⁴⁶ Moreover, educational initiatives promote critical thinking and analytical skills. Encouraging individuals to explore different religious perspectives and engage in constructive discussions not only enhances their comprehension of religious diversity but also equips them with the ability to navigate elaborate issues concerning religion and culture.⁴⁷ This skill set is precious in promoting respectful interactions among various religious communities.

Establishment of educational initiatives, however, is mandatory to prevent conflicts motivated by religion.⁴⁸ When people gain an in-depth knowledge of their religion and search for similarities between various religions, it may reduce the possibility of misunderstandings and misconceptions. This helps to prevent hostilities and conflicts that arise from religious differences.

vii. Supporting Humanitarian and Social Initiatives

⁴⁵ Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renáta Katalin Smith, “Interreligious and Intercultural Education for Dialogue, Peace and Social Cohesion,” *International Review of Education* 62, no. 4 (August 2016): 395, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-016-9583-4>.

⁴⁶ Kath Engebretson, *International Handbook of Inter-Religious Education*, International Handbooks of Religion and Education, volume 4 (Dordrecht New York: Springer, 2010), 249, 1137.

⁴⁷ Engebretson, v–vi.

⁴⁸ Duncan R. Wielzen and Ina ter Avest, *Interfaith Education for All: Theoretical Perspectives and Best Practices for Transformative Action* (Rotterdam Boston: Sense Publishers, 2017), 4.

In the field of IRR, it is essential to support social and humanitarian projects. It gives us a different point of view on how to close gaps, encourage collaboration, and deal with urgent problems in society. Humanitarian and social projects that bring people of different religions together make it easier for them to work together and understand each other.⁴⁹ It is known by IRR that when religious groups work together to solve problems like poverty, inequality, or emergency assistance, they break down barriers and build a sense of community. People who think in a collaborative way support the idea that, despite religious differences, everyone has a duty to ease suffering and improve health.

It also demonstrates how religious groups can positively impact society by endorsing such initiatives. Many religious communities possess extensive networks, substantial financial resources, and a strong desire for public service. IRR uses the strengths of religious communities working on social and humanitarian initiatives to provide beneficial assistance to people. These initiatives provide strong evidence for the impacts that religions have on society. IRR fosters cooperation and respect for shared values, thereby supporting various faith traditions.

Humanitarian support and social initiatives help to develop a diverse society where both individuals and communities will move beyond their personal beliefs and place a higher value on the welfare of others. This shift in focus from differences to shared objectives is instrumental in reducing tensions and conflicts related to religious diversity.

viii. Promoting Cultural Exchange

Cultural exchange is an important part of IRR because it helps people from different faith backgrounds understand each other better, respect differences, and feel like they have a shared history. In general, cultural exchange programs give people a chance to learn about the habits, customs, and ways of doing things in other religious groups.⁵⁰ IRR recognizes that these interactions give people the chance to learn about the cultural

⁴⁹ “A Faith-Sensitive Approach in Humanitarian Response: Guidance on Mental Health and Psychosocial Programming,” The Lutheran World Federation, 2018, 7, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-faith-sensitive-approach-humanitarian-response>.

⁵⁰ Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation,” *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (November 2006): 478, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x>.

parts of different faith traditions, which helps them understand and respect religious diversity more.

Also, cultural exchange makes people from different religious backgrounds more open and curious. By taking part in events that celebrate different cultures, such as art shows, food festivals, or cultural exchange programs, IRR encourages people to find and enjoy the variety of differences that exist.⁵¹ As a result, this helps make inequality seem more connected. Cultural exchange also helps people from different faiths interact with each other and work together. Through these initiatives, individuals have the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations, scatter misconceptions, and establish connections of understanding. This dialogue transcends religious boundaries, fostering connections that go beyond faith traditions.

In IRR, cultural exchange contributes to the safeguarding and promotion of cultural heritage. These initiatives play a crucial role in preserving and sharing the traditions, art, and practices that hold significance for various religious communities in a world where cultural and religious identities intertwine.

ix. Research and Documentation

Academic research on IRR is critical for understanding the dynamics of religious diversity and developing effective strategies for promoting harmony and cooperation. This objective holds significance for crucial functions in advancing understanding, promoting informed decision-making, and laying the groundwork for further exploration.⁵² Research and documentation-keeping activities in IRR facilitate the organized examination and analysis of religious variety, its implications, and its influence on societies. IRR acknowledges that a well-informed comprehension of religious dynamics is necessary for addressing challenges, dispelling misunderstandings, and promoting peaceful coexistence.⁵³ Through research, IRR aims

⁵¹ James Burkhart Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science*, 1st pr (Chicago, Ill. London: University of Chicago Press, 04), 14–15.

⁵² “The Importance Of Proper Documentation Of History: [Essay Example], 504 Words,” GradesFixer, <https://gradesfixer.com/free-essay-examples/the-importance-of-proper-documentation-of-history/>.

⁵³ John R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2010), 6.

to uncover the intricacies of religious interactions, contributing further to a comprehensive and nuanced viewpoint.

Research and record-keeping can also preserve the history and experiences of religious communities. In religiously diverse communities, it is crucial to record the history, practices, and achievements of different faiths in order to acknowledge the influence they have had on society. By doing so, we not only show respect for communities' religious and cultural traditions, but also ensure that those objects will be available to future generations. Researchers and historians also foster cooperation among politicians, religious leaders, and intellectuals. Tolerance, inclusivity, and religious cooperation can be better discussed with the help of factual knowledge and academic viewpoints. The ability to make well-informed decisions and develop fruitful strategies to foster interfaith understanding is made possible by research and record-keeping, which goes beyond religious bounds.

Conflicts sparked by religious differences can also be minimized via research and documentation. When religious tensions are present in a society, having an authoritative source of information can help identify possible incidents and prepare the way for preventive measures.

x. Developing Policy Advocacy

IRR influences policy advocacy by applying support over legislation, promoting fair practices, and defending rights and freedoms. Policy advocacy within IRR serves as a positive approach to challenging issues concerning religious discrimination and inequality. It acknowledges that legal frameworks and government policies have a significant impact on the experiences of religious communities. The mission of the inter-religious relations is to promote tolerance, eliminate discrimination, and protect religious freedom so that every individual can freely practice their religion without discrimination. Policy advocacy also has significant impacts on how the public feels and acts in relation to religious pluralism. Tolerance, respect, and equal treatment principles serve as a model for the IRR's awareness and understanding of religious diversity. This method can foster an atmosphere that values diversity and tolerance.

Additionally, policy advocacy initiatives recognize and consider the perspectives of religious communities in decision-making. The International Religious Rights organization recognized the necessity of allowing people of different faiths to participate in decision-making processes that affect them personally. Organizations bear the responsibility for policies that directly impact on these communities as they strive for their integration. Additionally, in order to avoid or resolve problems, it is essential to actively engage in policy advocacy. The successful adoption of comprehensive policies that address the root causes of conflicts has the potential to significantly assist religious communities. In other words, it is important to develop policies that dealing with persistent religious tensions in reducing conflict and promoting peaceful coexistence.⁵⁴

xi. Community Building

IRR encourages an atmosphere suitable for collaboration among members of the community, irrespective of their religious interactions, through the implementation of community development initiatives. It recognizes that individuals can establish connections through shared commitments to the betterment of their communities, such as participation in cultural activities or community service initiatives. Furthermore, these initiatives aimed at building community and promoting cooperation among diverse religious groups.⁵⁵ Through engaging in communal activities and discussions, individuals have the chance to gain knowledge about the beliefs, customs, and rituals of others. This interaction fosters understanding, dispels misconceptions, and constructs bridges of compassion.⁵⁶

Besides this, community building nurtures a sense of being part of the society and inclusiveness. In societies characterized by religious diversity, individuals from different faith traditions may occasionally experience feelings of isolation or marginalization. Community building initiatives actively strive to create spaces where

⁵⁴ Fabio Petito, "From Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Advocacy to Interreligious Engagement in Foreign Policy," *Global Affairs* 6, no. 3 (May 26, 2020): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2020.1845098>.

⁵⁵ R. Feener and Philip Fountain, "Religion in the Age of Development," *Religions* 9, no. 12 (November 23, 2018): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9120382>.

⁵⁶ Pamela Ebstyn King, "Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts," *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 198, https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_11.

everyone feels respected and appreciated, regardless of their religious background. Additionally, community building contributes to the prevention of conflicts motivated by religion.⁵⁷ When individuals from varying religious backgrounds come together to collaborate on shared projects, it diminishes the potential for misunderstandings and hostilities. This collaborative mindset cultivates an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.

2.2 INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN BANGLADESH

2.2.1 History and Background

Bangladesh today necessitates a comprehensive comprehension of its historical context, which involves delving into the intricate details of beliefs, practices, and cohabitation. The historical background has played a crucial role in shaping the current religious dynamics in this South Asian country. Bangladesh, characterized by its diverse religious practice and extensive historical background, provides a significant subject for examining the development and interplay of various religious traditions throughout history. The analysis of historical events not only underlines the persistent nature of living together harmoniously but also provides insight into the difficulties and transformations that have occurred throughout the years. By examining this historical context, this study can promote a profound understanding of the complexities and nuances of inter-religious interactions in contemporary Bangladesh.

The progression of Bangladesh's Constitution in relation to secularism and the state's religious position presents an elaborate view of the changing ideologies and political considerations. Initially, the 1972 Constitution emphasized secularism as a fundamental principle, prioritizing religious freedom for all individuals while discouraging the exploitation of religion in politics or for other purposes. However, subsequent amendments brought about significant changes. The Fifth Amendment in 1979 eliminated secularism and formally acknowledged Islam as the state's religion.⁵⁸ The Eighth Amendment, which was passed in 1988, made this change even stronger.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ "Living Together in Peace: The Importance of Interreligious Harmony for Religious Freedom," September 21, 2016, U.S. Department of State, //2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/rm/2016/263725.htm.

⁵⁸ Shah Alam, "The State-Religion Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh: A Critique," *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 24, no. 2 (1991): 210.

⁵⁹ Alam, 211.

It was made in part for political reasons and with the goal of getting support from religious Muslims and Middle Eastern countries.

To understand the religious complexities in Bangladesh today, it is essential to consider its historical origins. The spread of Islam in the Bengal region began as early as the eighth century, laying the foundations for its enduring influence. A pivotal moment came in 1204 when Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered the region, marking the first step toward Islamic rule in this part of the subcontinent.⁶⁰ On the other hand, Arab merchants brought parts of Islam to the coastal areas as early as the eighth century CE. The influence of Islam in the region expanded notably when Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah united different parts of Bengal in 1353, renaming it Bangla.⁶¹ Throughout its history, Bengal witnessed the presence of numerous Sufi saints and mystics who played a fundamental role in spreading Islam. These spiritual leaders not only preached the faith but also assimilated it into local traditions and customs. The formation and establishment of Bengali Islam is a result of this combination of Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

During the medieval period, a collection of lyrical poems known as "*Gitikas*" gained popularity, representing the joys and sorrows of rural life in East Bengal. These *Gitikas* were diligently collected and published by Dinesh Chandra Sen⁶² under titles like *Purba Banga Gitika* and *Mymansingh Gitika*.⁶³ While specific dates are often uncertain, these *Gitikas* serve as invaluable historical sources, offering insights into the social fabric of medieval Bengal under Mughal and Nawab rule. The verses within *Purba Banga Gitika* and *Mymansingh Gitika* represent the peaceful coexistence between Hindus and Muslims during the Mughal era, emphasizing mutual respect and understanding. A Muslim poet, in a poem called *Nurnneha O Kabarlar Katha* (The tragedy of Karbala), eloquently celebrated the shared aspects between Allah and Sri Bishnu, emphasizing that differences were merely in names. His verses aimed to unite Hindus and Muslims on a common spiritual ground.⁶⁴ Though linguistically, in

⁶⁰ Mohammad Elius et al., "Muslim Treatment of Other Religions in Medieval Bengal," *SAGE Open* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020970546>.

⁶¹ K. M. Mohsin, "Muslim Conquest: Bengal Sultanate," *Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage: An Introductory Reader*, 2004, 95–107.

⁶² Dinesh Chandra Sen was a Bengali writer, educator, and academic specializing in Bengali folklore of the Indian subcontinent. He held the position of a leading faculty member and the Ramtanu Lahiri Research Fellow at the Department of Bengali Language and Literature at the University of Calcutta.

⁶³ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Maimansingha Gitika* (Common Books, 2023).

⁶⁴ Noorur Rahman, "Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal," 69.

Sanskrit, Sri Bishnu cannot be equivalent to the Arabic word Allah which attribute a unique identity and characteristics of Almighty God. Muslim literatures deny this claims over time.

A cultural and societal transformation resulted in Bengal in the thirteenth century as a result of the significant impact of Sufism. The Sufis, who are spiritual adherents of Islam, significantly influenced the customs, beliefs, and practices of the Bengali tradition. Their impact and rituals extended beyond their *Khanqahs* (religious retreats) to encompass the establishment of their communities in several villages and municipalities across Bengal. The spiritual leaders' extraordinary devotion and divine guidance contributed to the successful rise of Sufism in Bengal. They devoted themselves to the advancement of Islam and the betterment of humanity, leading simple lifestyles. Their dedication fostered a sense of unity within a huge population.⁶⁵ The Sufis in Bengal were able to carry out their mission due to the generous support and the establishment of Muslim rule by the Sultans. The teachings of Sufism fostered the social and religious conditions in Bengal during that period. Buddhism and Hinduism were the prevalent religions during that period, exhibiting a decline in moral and ethical standards. The Sufis offered an alternative approach by advocating for social equality, affection, and harmonious relationships among individuals, which acquired a significant following. The influence of Sufism in Bengal can be categorized into various dimensions. The principle of social justice, a prominent aspect of the teachings, resonated with Buddhists and lower-caste Hindus seeking liberation from the hierarchical structure based on caste. The Sufis influence in the conversion of individuals to Islam is by virtue of their religious morals, excellent guidance, and humanitarian accomplishments. *Khanqahs*, which were established throughout Bengal, became centers of intellectual and humanitarian activities, spreading education and knowledge.⁶⁶

Furthermore, the Sufis provided assistance to the Muslim sultans, thereby aiding in the formation and consolidation of Muslim power in Bengal. Their *Khanqahs*,

⁶⁵ Abdullah Al Masud, Md. Faruk Abdullah, and Md. Ruhul Amin, "The Contributions of Sufism in Promoting Religious Harmony in Bangladesh," *Journal of Usuluddin* 45, no. 2 (December 31, 2017): 110–11, <https://doi.org/10.22452/usuluddin.vol45no2.5>.

⁶⁶ Sarwar Alam, "Sufism Without Boundaries: Pluralism, Coexistence, and Interfaith Dialogue in Bangladesh," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 9 (May 2, 2015): 70–77, <https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.v9i1.26765>.

schools, mosques, and other places of learning were essential in educating both Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam and its doctrines. People acknowledged these establishments as centers of education. One of the main principles of Bengali Sufism was charity work. By sharing food with the homeless, beggars, and the needy, they helped bring people of all backgrounds together. The Sufis' emphasis on the shared humanity all religions enabled them to advocate for tolerance and harmony.⁶⁷ The influence of Sufism in Bengal played a role in reducing the influence of Brahminical practices in Hindu society. Islam's principles of equality challenged the social dominance of Brahmins, offering greater social mobility for non-Brahmin Hindus.

For more than five centuries, Bengal has experienced an extraordinary coexistence of Hindu and Muslim cultures. Their interactions have shaped a distinct fusion of religious and cultural practices. Scholars have observed that this prolonged contact has resulted in shared customs, even in matters of worship. However, the worship was subjected to saints and religious leaders.⁶⁸ In times of necessity, individuals from one community have received support from the saints of the other, transcending religious boundaries. In regions such as Rangpur and Gorakhpur, high-ranking Muslims, influenced by Hindu traditions through their relatives and neighbors, have spread mutual worship, exemplifying this cultural fusion. However, in the religion of Islam, *Shirk* (worshipping other than Allah SWT) is prohibited and considered as unforgiveable and the greatest sin.⁶⁹

By examining the historical background of Bangladesh, the researcher aims to uncover the intricate interplay between different faith traditions and a diverse cultural heritage that has shaped the nation. This analysis highlights the transformation of the country's constitution, which initially emphasized secularism and religious freedom but later incorporated amendments recognizing Islam as the official religion, reflecting evolving ideologies and political considerations. The rise of Sufism had a significant influence on the development of religious beliefs, practices, and social standards in Bengal. The Sufis' advocacy for social justice, equality, and harmony was crucial in the spread of Islam. The enduring influence of Hindu and Muslim civilizations in Bengal

⁶⁷ Atis Dasgupta, "Islam in Bengal: Formative Period," *Social Scientist* 32, no. 3/4 (March 2004): 38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3518022>.

⁶⁸ Dr. Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, "Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal," *The NEHU Journal* Vol XVI, No. 1 (2018): 56.

⁶⁹ Al-Qur'an 31:13

underscores their shared customs, specifically regarding celebrations of religious festivals. There is a saying popular that time ‘religions are individuals, but celebration is universal’. However, Islam specifies that both religion and celebration are specific to individuals’ belief and practices. Participating in others festival is considered as the biggest sin, ‘Shirk’, in Islam. Furthermore, the establishment of mutual respect between religious communities is fostered through this coexistence. This historical expedition provides valuable insights into contemporary inter-religious relations, underscoring the enduring significance of harmonious coexistence and the necessity of tolerance. IRR promotes humanity within a diverse universal framework.

2.2.2 Significance of Inter-religious Relations

Analyzing the inter-religious relations is crucial for building harmony among cultural and religious communities in Bangladesh. This section examines the significance of positive relationships between religious communities and their impact on the socio-cultural environment. IRR focuses on addressing the issues that result from religious diversity. It fosters social integration, cultural enhancement, national solidarity, and peaceful coexistence. In this section, the researcher will examine the significance of cultivating relationships among religious communities that establish connections between individuals, develop inclusiveness, and contribute to a harmonious and peaceful Bangladesh as a multi-religious nation. We recognize that studying inter-religious relations goes beyond academia; it has real-world implications. By examining definitions, objectives, historical context, and contemporary practices, we aim to uncover the threads that bind communities and shape Bangladesh's future trajectory.

2.2.2.1 Promoting Social Harmony

IRR shows us the way that unites diverse communities, facilitating a deeper understanding of individuals’ convictions, rituals, and principles. Through discussion and shared values, people from varying religious backgrounds participate in the cultural and spiritual activities that influence the relationship of their neighbors. This comprehension establishes the groundwork for mutual esteem and recognition. Social concordance flourishes when assorted religious customs are not only acknowledged but celebrated. Inter-religious relations offer opportunities for collective observance of

festivities, religious ceremonies, and cultural affairs. The mutual involvement promotes a sense of belonging among individuals from different religious communities, highlighting that diversity brings social harmony.⁷⁰ In every multi-cultural society like Bangladesh, predetermined concepts and biases often arise due to insufficient knowledge and understanding of other religions and communities. Predetermined concepts refer to pre-existing beliefs, stereotypes, or assumptions that individuals or groups hold about others, often shaped by social conditioning, historical narratives, or a lack of direct interaction. These concepts may include misconceptions about religious practices, cultural values, or societal roles, which can foster distrust and division among diverse communities.

For instance, stereotypes about certain religious groups being rigid or exclusive may prevent meaningful interaction and mutual appreciation. Similarly, historical conflicts or media portrayals can perpetuate generalized views that fail to account for the complexities of diverse traditions and beliefs. These biases hinder social harmony by promoting misunderstanding and discouraging open communication.

Inter-religious relations (IRR) challenge these predetermined concepts by creating spaces for open and sincere discussions. Through dialogue, individuals can address and confront these misconceptions, share authentic experiences, and develop a more nuanced understanding of one another's beliefs and practices. For example, when people of different faiths engage in cultural or spiritual activities together, they often find common ground that transcends their differences. This process not only dismantles barriers but also fosters trust, respect, and empathy among diverse groups. By actively addressing these predetermined concepts and biases, inter-religious relations pave the way for deeper mutual understanding and social harmony. They encourage individuals to look beyond stereotypes, embrace diversity, and recognize the shared values that bind communities together.

Social harmony is not solely about evading conflicts, but also about actively working together towards shared objectives. Inter-religious relations provide a platform for collaborative endeavors, whether they are community service initiatives, educational

⁷⁰ Zia Niazi, *Role of Inter-Religious Harmony in Peaceful Society*, 2023, 2,5, <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202311.0473.v1>.

programs, or cultural exchanges.⁷¹ When people build bonds of trust and cooperation from these involvements, it assist in contributing to a unified society with more diversity. In any diverse society, disagreements and disputes are very common issues. However, Inter-religious relations provide the opportunity for mitigating conflicts through dialogue, common grounds, and cooperation. By promoting open communication and negotiation, these connections contribute to the establishment of conflict resolution mechanisms rooted in comprehension and compromise.

2.2.2.2 Mitigating Religious Tensions

Creating opportunities for transparent and productive dialogue is a way by which inter-religious relations help to reduce conflicts because it provides a platform where different religious communities can openly express their issues, share views, and participate in meaningful debates. It is a well-established way to reduce misunderstandings and to establish the foundation for conflict resolution. Tensions often arise due to a lack of trust and understanding between religious communities.⁷² Inter-religious relations prioritize the cultivation of trust through consistent and positive interactions. As individuals interact in different contexts, trust is nurtured, and mutual respect is fostered. This bedrock of trust plays a pivotal role in reducing tensions as communities are more inclined to seek dialogue rather than confrontations when issues arise.

Misunderstandings and biases are common sources of religious conflicts. Through opportunities for direct interaction and common ground, inter-religious relations refute such assumptions. Having a better understanding of an individual's perspectives can help reduce misunderstandings. By offering a window for understanding various faiths, interfaith relationships promote and facilitate interfaith education. People get the self-awareness and informational tools they need to challenge false assumptions, learn the facts, and establish an accepting society. Building effective problem-solving mechanisms requires interactions between different faiths. Formal

⁷¹ Leonidas Makris, "Learning to Live Together: Linking European and Local Initiatives," in *Learning To Live Together: Promoting Social Harmony*, ed. J. A. Scott Kelso (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 185, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90659-1_4.

⁷² Hans Gustafson, ed., *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020), 102.

conversations, mediation efforts, or community-based projects all foster these ties, paving the way for cooperative problem-solving. To reduce the intensity and severity of conflicts and work toward permanent solutions, religious communities must take steps to reduce hostilities. People can unite around shared objectives in collaborative community activities such as humanitarian initiatives, ecological projects, or disaster response efforts. Reducing the possibility of religious conflicts through prioritizing social well-being, these programs foster a sense of community and collective accountability.

2.2.2.3 Cultural Enrichment

The interaction among diverse religions provides opportunities for the exchange of customs, rituals, and cultural practices. Various occasions, such as festivals, ceremonies, and cultural events, serve as moments for individuals to share and appreciate the unique elements that characterize each religious tradition. This mutual exchange not only serves to preserve cultural heritage but also adds depth and complexity to the collective cultural identity. Joint celebrations and festivities become a representation of the diverse cultural tapestry in a society comprising multiple religions. Inter-religious relations promote collective participation in religious and cultural festivals, enabling individuals to encounter and value the distinct customs and rituals of their neighbors. This shared celebration fosters a sense of unity and belonging among diverse communities. Interactions in arts and literature serve as a medium for creative expression that surpasses religious limitations. Collaborative artistic activities not only display the skills of individuals from different backgrounds but also create cultural artifacts that represent the common history of the community. Inter-religious relations play a role in safeguarding cultural heritage by creating an environment that appreciates and respects diverse traditions. This mutual appreciation contributes to the preservation of cultural practices that are integral to specific religious communities. The active recognition of these traditions helps prevent cultural erosion and promotes a collective commitment to preserving the richness of Bangladesh's cultural heritage. Positive interactions among different religions enhance cultural awareness and

sensitivity among individuals.⁷³ By actively participating in the cultural customs, individuals acquire a profound understanding of the historical, religious, and social importance associated with these traditions. This perception promotes a society characterized by respect and recognition for diversity within the wider cultural background. Inter-religious relations naturally extend into intercultural dialogue, encouraging conversations that surpass religious boundaries. These dialogues provide a platform for individuals to share narratives, values, and stories that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of each other's cultures. Through this exchange, a sense of shared cultural identity emerges, strengthening the bonds between religious communities.

2.2.2.4 National Unity and Integration

Inter-religious relations promote the establishment of an overall understanding of national identity that transcends religious differences. When individuals with different views interact and collaborate, they experience a feeling of unity. The basis for this unity and the entire structure of the country relies profoundly on this understanding. When individuals of different beliefs come together, it promotes an environment where everyone feels safe and comfortable. These bonds reduce feelings of isolation and discrimination caused by religious inequality. Volunteering or founding a nonprofit are two examples of how IRR motivates individuals to participate in activities that benefit everyone in society. Working together for the common well-being unites people of different faiths into society and strengthens their sense of social responsibility. The establishment of constructive interpersonal connections among its components establishes a unified society. A unified society is established via the cultivation of constructive interpersonal connections among its components. As individuals interact positively across religious boundaries, social bonds grow stronger, resulting in a resilient and harmonious society that can collectively tackle challenges and celebrate accomplishments. Instead of perceiving religious diversity as a divisive factor, Inter-religious relations encourage society to recognize and appreciate this diversity as a valuable national asset. By acknowledging that the strength of the nation lies in its

⁷³ “Paul-Poupard-Journal-Nov-2009-Necessity-of-Inter-Religious-and-Inter-Culture.Pdf,” 139–40, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://standrewscollege.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Paul-Poupard-Journal-Nov-2009-Necessity-of-Inter-religious-and-inter-culture.pdf>.

multifaceted cultural and religious tapestry, individuals are more inclined to value and respect the contributions of each religious community to the broader national identity.⁷⁴ National stability is closely intertwined with the harmonious coexistence of its diverse population. Positive Inter-religious relations contribute to stability by addressing potential sources of tension and conflict, creating an environment where the nation can focus on collective goals and progress without being burdened by internal strife arising from religious disparities.

2.2.2.5 Peaceful Coexistence

Tolerance and respect among people of different religious backgrounds are essential for harmonious cohabitation. Interreligious relationships actively promote these characteristics by fostering conversation and understanding. As people engage in conversations that highlight commonality while also celebrating differences, a culture of tolerance and mutual respect grows, creating the framework for peaceful coexistence. Inter-religious relations are frequently characterized by endeavors to establish common venues for worship and discourse. These venues serve as symbols of inclusivity, bringing people from different religious communities together to pray, meditate, and hold open debates. Such shared places foster a sense of community and illustrate that different religious practices may coexist happily in the same physical space. Proactive involvement in interreligious relations aids in the building of efficient dispute resolution mechanisms.

⁷⁴ De. John Romus, “‘Interreligious Dialogue Concern for National Integration,’ *Indian Journal of Theology* 40.1 & 2 (1998): 71-83.,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 40, no. 1 (1998): 72–73.

CHAPTER THREE

CONTEMPORARY CONDITION OF INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN CHITTAGONG

3.1 RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Chittagong is known for its diverse demographic structure, a dynamic and culturally rich city in Bangladesh. The dominant religion in Bangladesh is Islam, with the majority of the people (around 90%) following the Sunni sect, which aligns with the country's overall religious composition. In Chittagong, the demographic composition includes a significant presence of Hindus (about 8-10%), Buddhists (approximately 1-2%), and Christians (less than 1%). The Hindu community constitutes the second-largest religious group and significantly enriches the city's cultural and social landscape. Buddhists, primarily located within the indigenous tribes in the Chittagong Mountain areas, have preserved their customs and rituals for centuries. The Christian community, while smaller in numbers, has a notable establishment in the region, with most followers adhering to Catholicism.⁷⁵



Figure 1: Chittagong in the Map of Bangladesh

⁷⁵ *Population and Housing Census 2022: Preliminary Report* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022), 16.

In addition, Chittagong is the home for a variety of ethnic minorities who contribute to the city's diversified demographic structure. The many religious and ethnic backgrounds in Chittagong have influenced its social structure and it results in a diversity of cultural and religious customs.

The present religious dynamics in Chittagong are established in its diverse and rich history. Being a marine city, it has always served as the center for several cultures and religions. Chittagong was formed by different foreign merchants and settlers, particularly the British. The colonial era brought about a variety of cultural and religious influences that played a role in shaping Chittagong's mixed identity. The division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the subsequent establishment of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971 had significant effects on the religious composition of the region and the dynamics between different communities. Moreover, the Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict has highlighted concerns regarding ethnic and religious identity. In addition, ownership of land, and political participation, significantly influenced the dynamics between various religious communities.⁷⁶ The Rohingya refugee crisis has introduced a complex dimension to the religious composition. These individuals are primarily a Muslim population seeking shelter from neighboring Myanmar.⁷⁷ The inter-religious interaction in Chittagong has been influenced by these events, which have alternated between periods of peace and conflict. These historical and social events still have an impact on the current status of religious relations in this region.

3.2 CONTEMPORARY CASES OF INTER-RELIGIOUS INTERACTION

During the Religion for Peace (RFP) 10th World Assembly, religious leaders from Bangladesh instituted a dialogue program with religious leaders from Myanmar that spanned several decades. This event was expressed during the Inter-religious and Ecumenical Peace Conference in Dhaka. The result represented a cooperative strategy towards addressing the Rohingya issues. The assembly includes religious, secular,

⁷⁶ Mohammad Shahabuddin, "The Myth of Colonial 'Protection' of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts under British Rule," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 25, no. 2 (2018): 211–12.

⁷⁷ Taufiq-E.- Faruque, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh: The Case of UNHCR's Response," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 9, no. 1 (September 8, 2020): 28–29, <https://doi.org/10.18196/hi.91160>.

Hindu, and Muslim authorities and was organized in response to the increasing hostilities and political disputes between Rohingya refugees and local communities.⁷⁸

A one-day interfaith dialog workshop took place at the Mymensingh⁷⁹ on May 20, 2023. The session aimed to enhance the skills of religious leaders. The program is hosted by the governmental Christian Religion Welfare Trust. The workshop was attended by 50 nuns and 170 religious leaders from various religions, including Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. The main subjects of the program were the functions and obligations of religious leaders in promoting peace and providing spiritual support. The program highlighted the significance of fostering interreligious harmony, particularly in the fields of education and healthcare, since the majority of recipients belong to non-Christian faiths. It symbolized a deliberate effort by religious and governmental authorities to promote tolerance and harmony among diverse religious beliefs.⁸⁰

Pope Francis took part in an Inter-religious and ecumenical meeting for peace in the Archbishop's garden in Dhaka. He was on his journey to Bangladesh and the summit was characterized by the Pope's engagement with Rohingya Muslim refugees. He emphasized the need for interfaith collaboration to overcome crises and to foster peace. Participants from diverse religious backgrounds joined and observed the significance of religious integrity in fostering a harmonious society. The Pope addressed the need for having an open heart as a channel for discussion. He characterizes it as a method for achieving a higher level of understanding, and a route to unity and equality. His remarks highlighted the importance of countering evil with kindness and helping those who are in difficulties. He believes it will serve as a convincing message for religious collaboration and unity.⁸¹

⁷⁸ “Buddhist and Muslim Leaders Summit in Solidarity with Rohingya Refugees Reaffirms Yogyakarta Statement of Shared Values - Religions for Peace,” October 11, 2020, <https://www.rfp.org/buddhist-and-muslim-leaders-summit-in-solidarity-with-rohingya-refugees-reaffirms-yogyakarta-statement-of-shared-values/>, <https://www.rfp.org/buddhist-and-muslim-leaders-summit-in-solidarity-with-rohingya-refugees-reaffirms-yogyakarta-statement-of-shared-values/>.

⁷⁹ Recently established eighth administrative division of Bangladesh

⁸⁰ “Nuns Join Workshop to Boost Interreligious Harmony in Bangladesh,” Global Sisters Report, accessed December 31, 2023, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/nuns-join-workshop-boost-interreligious-harmony-bangladesh>.

⁸¹ “Pope Francis Addresses Interreligious Meeting for Peace - Vatican News,” December 1, 2017, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2017-12/bangladesh-journey-interreligious-and-ecumenical-meeting-for-pea.html>.

On October 20, 2016, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), in partnership with the U.S. Department of State, organized a conference on interfaith discussion in Dhaka. The conference aimed to promote interreligious tolerance among the youth of Bangladesh. A significant occasion took place at the Edward M. Kennedy (EMK) Centre. The discussion successfully drew in more than 70 students, representing a remarkable advancement in involving young individuals in the discussion of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.⁸² The Director of the EMK Centre, M.K. Arif praised the program for its innovative approach and indicated a keen interest in establishing deeper and regular interfaith conversations. The conference started with a lecture delivered by UPF founder Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon. He emphasized kindness as a fundamental principle shared among many religions, which is a prominent notion in the philosophy of UPF. The audience were deeply affected by this theme, which demonstrated the unity among many religious beliefs. Dr. Chung-sik Yong, the Chairman of UPF-Asia, highlighted the significance of the family in overcoming religious discrimination and promoting unity. He also provides significance that family is deeply connected to religious traditions. The notion of micro-peace derived from Muhammad Yunus's⁸³ "microfinance" model was proposed with the aim of extending ethical and moral family values to wider societal and global contexts. The event showcased UPF-Nepal's contribution to the peace process in Nepal, as articulated by Hon. Ek Nath Dhakal⁸⁴, illustrating the tangible implementation of interfaith ideals in political events. The program coordinator of UPF-Bangladesh, Mr. Imran Ahsan analyzed the effectiveness of the event and saw a greater interest among students for future interfaith activities. This serves as evidence of the conference's influential and captivating approach. The conference was a necessary attempt to foster interreligious tolerance and comprehension among the youth of Bangladesh and to establish the foundation for a more inclusive and tranquil future.

The first International Conference on Inter-religious and Inter-cultural discussion took place on October 9, 2009, at the Senate Building of the University of Dhaka. This event showed a significant milestone in interfaith discussion. President M.

⁸² "Building Religious Harmony Among Youth in Bangladesh - Universal Peace Federation," <https://archive.upf.org/interfaith-programs/7245-building-religious-harmony-among-youth-in-bangladesh>.

⁸³ The first Bangladeshi Nobel prize winner for his "Micro finance model" in 2006.

⁸⁴ A parliament member for the Ministry of peace and reconstruction of the government of Nepal.

Zillur Rahman directed the conference, and it also highlighted the crucial necessity of interfaith cooperation in the face of worldwide religious and cultural problems.⁸⁵ 400 local participants and international representatives from eight nations attended the conference. This provided a platform for detailed discussions on promoting worldwide harmony. Dr. Kazi Narul Islam was the organizer of the event who addressed the significance of interreligious discourse in fostering peace. Dr. Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, acknowledged the importance of promoting dialogue, which is a mandatory method of fighting extremism and fundamentalism. His statement aligns with the conference's topic of fostering religious unity by moving beyond exclusivity.

The event lasted for three days and included seminars that explored the fundamental principles of prominent global religions. Symbolic acts of interfaith solidarity were present through the exchange of presents, including Adi Granth CDs and display panels that showcased the Golden Rule across several religions. These contributions were made by foreign guests. The seminar emphasized the importance of self-reflection and acknowledging the divine presence in others as crucial for fostering interfaith comprehension. The discussion was completed with remarks from the Honorable Minister of Information and Cultural Affairs, Abul Kalam Azad, who highlighted mutual respect and embracing variety as essential elements for harmonious coexistence. Dr. Islam expressed gratitude to the attendees and staff, emphasizing that the conference was not only a standalone event, but rather a crucial step towards fostering continuous interreligious and intercultural discussion in Bangladesh. The ultimate objective is to cultivate a harmonious and peaceful global community.

The leaders of famous religious communities in Bangladesh gathered in Dhaka for the inter-faith peace conference with the aim of countering religious extremism and protecting minority groups. The Krishibid (Agronomist) Institution auditorium hosted the gathering in response to a concerning increase in machete murders.⁸⁶ All participants aimed at different factions, such as the rights of secular writers and religious minorities. During the conference, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal addressed the absence of violence in Islam and supported the government's dedication

⁸⁵ "Interfaith Scholars Share Work at Dhaka University Conference," <https://www.uri.org/uri-story/20101207-interfaith-scholars-share-work-dhaka-university-conference>.

⁸⁶ "Religious Leaders Inspiring Greater Peace in Bangladesh," <https://www.saferworld-global.org/en-stories-of-change/religious-leaders-inspiring-communities-for-greater-peace-in-bangladesh>.

to protecting all citizens. The conference attempted to promote discussion and strengthen the country's practice of religious harmony.

Police Inspector-General A.K.M. Shahidul Haque highlighted the substantial advancements made in recognizing and treating militants. He underscored the dangers associated with radicalization. Maulana Farid Uddin Masud, an Islamic scholar, emphasized the duty of religious leaders in countering extremism. He initiated a campaign to collect endorsements from Muslim intellectuals in opposition to extremism. Other religious figures, such as Satya Ranjan Baroi and Catholic Archbishop Patrick D'Rozario, expressed similar views on lasting religious unity in Bangladesh. They highlighted the need for proactive actions to prevent violence against minority groups and advocated for increased public awareness of the country's prevailing peaceful character. Archbishop D'Rozario presented personal experiences of collaboration with different religions, emphasizing the importance of discourse at the community level. Both Sanghanayaka Suddhananda Mahathero and Shiite leader Syed Ibrahim Khalil Razavi acknowledged the importance of maintaining religious harmony and addressing anti-Islamic acts.⁸⁷ The conference was a crucial turning point in bringing together various religious perspectives to address extremism. In general, each participant expressed a collective desire to preserve Bangladesh's long-standing history of interfaith cooperation and fostering understanding within distinct religious communities.

The Asia Foundation organized a significant international dialogue session at the Westin International Hotel in Dhaka. The program specifically aimed to promote harmony and peace. The purpose of this gathering was to provide a forum for religious leaders from various regions of Bangladesh. Participants reflect on the impact of the Asia Foundation's programs, including interreligious dialogue. The primary issues discussed were initiatives that address extremism, foster peace, and enhance the empowerment of women. The conference was illustrated by the attendance of approximately 50 activists from Indonesia, Vietnam, and the USA who work for the development of inter-religious harmony.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ "Bangladesh: From Many Religions, One Call to Eliminate Violence," Benar News, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/harmony-conference-04282016140653.html>.

⁸⁸ RVA News | January 25 and 2023, "Asia Foundation Holds Interreligious Summit for Harmony, Peace in Bangladesh," RVA, January 25, 2023, <https://www.rvasia.org/asian-news/asia-foundation-holds-interreligious-summit-harmony-peace-bangladesh>.

The organizer and administrator of the Rajshahi Dialogue Commission Father Patrick Gomes emphasized the efforts of the organization in promoting human rights and fostering interreligious initiatives, particularly in engaging with local communities, tribes, and indigenous groups. He underscored the significance of interreligious discussion, particularly around major religious celebrations such as Eid and Christmas. Some participants highlighted the difficulties in promoting interreligious harmony in a country where most of the population is Muslim. That highlights the intricate nature of such efforts in religiously diverse environments. Kolpona Vowmik, a Hindu participant from Rajshahi, expressed gratitude for the Foundation's Early Response Unit Project, which plays a crucial role in preserving the rights, culture, and liberties of minorities.

Senior program coordinator of the organization Snigdha Zaman emphasized the institution's dedication to positive themes that highlight the development of interreligious peace and protecting human rights in Bangladesh. The Foundation's strategic partnership model, which involves the private sector, government, community and religious leaders, and civil society, is crucial for resolving social issues and promoting an environment of inclusive development participation. Therefore, this Asia Foundation summit indicates a substantial advancement towards fostering interreligious discourse and comprehension in Bangladesh. It also contributes towards the ultimate goal of peace and religious harmony.

During a speech in Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury auditorium at the University of Dhaka, the speakers emphasized the significance of fostering interfaith tolerance. They also admire the diverse religious communities to develop a society that promotes equality. The event entitled 'Banglar Rumi Syed Ahmadul Huq in the Recent Development of Inter-religious Harmony in Bangladesh,'. The session was organized in partnership with the Ispahani Group.⁸⁹ Md Mashiur Rahman, VC of Bangladesh National University, was the chief guest of the program and he talked about the concerns related to the youth's gradual separation from interfaith traditions. Dr. Amit Dey, a history professor at Calcutta University, highlighted the scarcity of Bengali literature on Rumi and Sufism. This disparity is significant, especially given the large population of Bengali speakers across the subcontinent. The seminar's objectives were

⁸⁹ "Practise Interfaith Harmony, Respect Other Religions," The Financial Express <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/practise-interfaith-harmony-respect-other-religions>.

delivered by Prof Dr. Mohammad Bahauddin from Dhaka University. He examined the unexpected cases of religious and communal conflict, specifically during national elections. He provides the efforts to experiment with the behavior of communal harmony and inter-faith cohabitation. President of the Allama Rumi Society Bangladesh, Md Abdul Karim and other religious scholars focus on the ways to improve inter-religious understanding and resolve communal violence in Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, in partnership with the Canadian High Commission, organized a significant inter-faith youth dialogue called "Building Social Harmony" on March 10, 2014. The event took place at Hotel Lake Castle in Gulshan, Dhaka. This significant event was launched to address the urgent need for interfaith understanding and peace in Bangladesh.⁹⁰ President ANM Muniruzzaman, Retired Major General, started the discussion, highlighting the importance of such dialogues in relation to the community and constitutional environment of Bangladesh. He mentioned the assault on Buddhist minorities in Ramu is a clear indication that such actions are necessary for the contemporary situation.

Mr. Daniel Loutfi, the Canadian High Commissioner, delivered a speech emphasizing the significance of secularism in promoting a diverse society. He discussed various international approaches to secularism and the protection of religious freedom. The conversation included a range of important subjects, such as the essence of belief, conflicts between different religions, the rights of minority groups, and misinterpretation of religious texts. Representatives from Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity shared perspectives from their individual religions, emphasizing the universal principles of peace and empathy. They engaged in dialogues regarding the complexities of religiously motivated violence, the misrepresentation of religious doctrines, and the significance of inclusive policies in protecting the rights of minority groups. The conversation addressed the need for positive appreciation and understanding among religious communities in Bangladesh. The conversation demonstrated progress in promoting mutual respect and peaceful coexistence within a society characterized by religious diversity. This event laid the foundation for

⁹⁰ "Building Social Harmony An Inter Faith Youth Dialogue," https://www.bipss.org.bd/images/c_report/BUILDING%20SOCIAL%20HARMONY%20AN%20INT%20FAITH%20YOUTH%20DIALOGUE.pdf.

subsequent deliberations and initiatives focused on fostering a unified and reverential interfaith atmosphere in Bangladesh.

3.3 CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

Though there are some positive scenarios of religious harmony, we cannot deny the opposite at all. Bangladesh's communal image was threatened by recent violent attacks on religious minorities. The riots began in the Comilla area after a fake Facebook post claimed a Hindu festival insulted the holy Quran. The misinformation spread swiftly, initiating violence against over 100 Hindu temples, houses, and shops. The conflict killed seven and burned a Buddhist monastery.⁹¹ A man who admitted to purposely planting the Quran at the celebration was arrested. This incident garnered international attention, particularly in India, a country that supported the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act. The Bangladeshi government arrested over 400 persons and filed many lawsuits to underline its minority rights commitment.

This concerning trend may stem from three main causes. First of all, according to some academics, Bangladesh is becoming more Islamic, and blasphemy and atheism are punished. Atheist bloggers have been attacked, and numerous writers and artists have fled abroad because of this trend. Radical Muslims have criticized non-Muslim cultural traditions, fostering intolerance.⁹² Second, Hindutva in India has increased Muslim identity in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's perceived pro-India stance has compounded this, causing a misguided backlash against the Hindu minority. The third reason for many religious attacks is perhaps due to the intention of land acquisition. These attacks target wealthy Hindu residences, underlining the economic aspect of religious violence.⁹³

The Buddhists in Ramu, who have been living in Chittagong for centuries, were victims of horrific public assaults in 2012. The incident began with a fabricated Facebook post that disparaged the Quran. The residents of that specific area reacted

⁹¹ Mokammel Shuvo and Alam Palash, "Hajiganj Mayhem Began with Facebook Post like Previous Incidents of Communal Violence," *The Daily Star*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/pattern-always-the-same-2202321>.

⁹² Mubashar Hasan, "The Language of Youth Politics in Bangladesh: Beyond the Secular-Religious Binary" (RESOLVE Network, September 25, 2017), 6, <https://doi.org/10.37805/bgd2017.5>.

⁹³ "Minorities under Attack in Bangladesh | Lowy Institute," accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/minorities-under-attack-bangladesh>.

violently, leading to a devastating attack. Extremists invaded a Buddhist crematorium, Hindu temples, and twelve pagodas were demolished and over fifty residences were robbed in two days. Until today, there has been no decision from the High Court of Bangladesh regarding this issue.⁹⁴

Three independent inquiries were initiated after the violence by writ petitions filed by two Supreme Court lawyers, Advocate Eunos Ali and Akond Jyotirmoy Barua. The goal of these investigations was to find out who is responsible and why the local government did nothing. The judicial inquiry identified 298 individuals at fault and proposed solutions to improve administrative competency and social media control. The local police department led another investigation, but did not recommend the dismissal of senior officers. The assaults, according to a third report by the Home Ministry, were planned and included more than 200 people.

On May 31, two Bengali construction workers viciously attacked 47-year-old Buddhist monk Agrojyoti Bhante in Khagrachari, Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Two Bengali construction workers stole 60,000 takas (\$600) from the monastery using machetes. Bhante's attack, which left him for dead, underscores regional tensions and violence. The CHT conflict began in the 1980s when landless Bengali families migrated in significant numbers. This migration led to Bengali settlers outnumbering Indigenous southerners over time.⁹⁵ In 2002, Zobaida Nasreen and Masahiko Togawa found that Bengali settlers reduced CHT's Indigenous population from 91% in 1959 to 51% in 1991.⁹⁶ According to Devasish Roy who is the chief of the Chakmas, Bangladesh's largest Indigenous group, 200,000 to 450,000 Bengali people were resettled from 1979 until 1985, forcing over a hundred thousand Native people to migrate to India. As Bengali settlers move into Indigenous regions, land disputes and violent conflicts have spread across Bangladesh. The Bhante attack is a result of these long-standing disagreements, which many feel are part of a larger push to steal Indigenous land.

⁹⁴ Ashutosh Sarkar, "Eight Years of Ramu Attack: Buddhists Still Wait for Justice," *The Daily Star*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/eight-years-ramu-attack-buddhists-still-wait-justice-1969173>.

⁹⁵ Zarif Faiaz, "Attacks, Land Grabs Leave Bangladesh's Indigenous Groups on Edge," *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/30/bangladesh-indigenous-groups-chakma-khasi-santal-land-grab>.

⁹⁶ Zobaida Nasreen and Masahiko Togawa, "Politics of Development: 'Pahari-Bengali' Discourse in the Chittagong Hill Tracts," n.d., 99.

In a terrible attack, 50-year-old Tripura man Omar Faruk was killed in Rowangchhari, Chittagong. Faruk, formerly Purnendu Tripura, converted to Islam during a Tablig-Jamaat session. His conversion and preaching Islam in his village drew hatred from Parbotto Chattogram Jono Songhoti Somiti (PCJSS), a Christian ethnic minority insurgent group in Chittagong. The PCJSS, which controlled the area, threatened Faruk for constructing a small mosque and converting five families to Islam. Faruk was repeatedly warned to quit promoting religion, according to Parbotto News editor Mehedi Hasan Palash. Faruk continued his actions despite threats, leading to the fatal attack by a PCJSS-linked armed gang.⁹⁷

Concerns surrounded, Faruk's murder, who was pious and not politically active. Bengali Muslim settlers and local ethnic minorities, mostly Buddhists and Hindus, have fought in this region since the late 1970s, with the PCJSS leading the conflict. Despite a 1997 peace deal, tensions persist. The PCJSS believes Islam is a danger to their cultural identity in this largely Buddhist and Hindu area. Social media has hailed Faruk as a martyr, and Muslim religious leaders and Islamist groups have protested the murder.

3.4 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE INTERVIEW RESPONSES

In this section, a combined content analysis and thematic analysis is used to assess how participants perceive the current state of inter-religious relations in Chittagong, focusing on whether they view the environment as peaceful or conflicted. The integration of content analysis and thematic analysis allows for both an objective measurement of recurring themes and a deeper interpretation of the nuances within participants' responses. This dual approach is significant for understanding the complexities of inter-religious interactions in Chittagong. Figure 2 maps out the interconnections between positive and negative themes, while Figure 3 visually represents the frequency of key themes identified in the content analysis. The researcher discusses the detailed

⁹⁷ Faisal Mahmud, "A Muslim Convert's Killing Exposes Bangladesh's Ethnic Fault Lines," A Muslim convert's killing exposes Bangladesh's ethnic fault lines, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/a-muslim-convert-s-killing-exposes-bangladesh-s-ethnic-fault-lines-47838>.

information about the participants and the analysis process in the methodology section (pages: 4-6).

3.4.1 Content Analysis

The content analysis focused on identifying the frequency of key themes—both positive and negative—across the interview responses. This analysis measured how often participants mentioned themes related to peaceful coexistence, cooperation, and conflict, providing a quantitative perspective on inter-religious relations in the region.

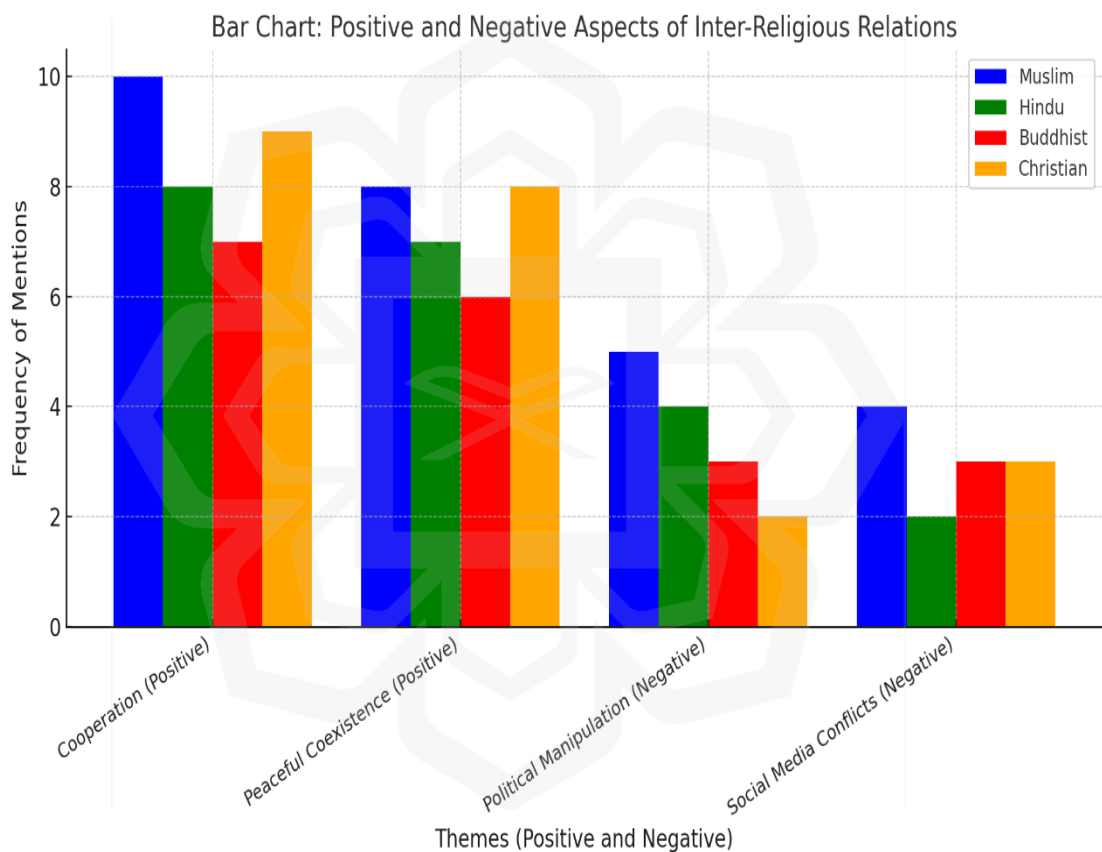


Figure 2: Perceptions of Peaceful Coexistence and Conflict in Inter-Religious Relations

The bar chart in Figure 2 presents the frequency with which participants from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities mentioned four key themes. The analysis revealed two prominent positive themes: cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

- Cooperation was the most frequently mentioned positive theme across all four religious groups. Participants, including the Muslim Imam and the Christian

Activist, provided numerous examples of interfaith cooperation during religious events and community service projects. For instance, the Muslim Imam highlighted iftars during Ramadan as significant moments of collaboration between religious groups, while the Christian Activist described joint celebrations during Christmas as moments that foster interfaith unity.

- Peaceful Coexistence was another dominant theme, with participants emphasizing the general sense of harmony between religious communities. The Hindu Guru and Buddhist Activist highlighted the tradition of mutual respect and peaceful interactions during shared religious and cultural events. The Hindu Guru, for example, spoke about how Muslim neighbours frequently participate in Durga Puja celebrations, which promotes a strong sense of unity and interfaith engagement.

The frequent mentions of these positive themes suggest that cooperation and peaceful coexistence are defining characteristics of inter-religious relations in Chittagong. These shared religious events and daily interactions contribute significantly to maintaining harmony between different religious groups.

However, the content analysis also revealed some negative aspects, specifically related to political manipulation and social media conflicts.

- Political Manipulation was frequently cited as a challenge by participants across religious groups. Members of the Buddhist and Muslim communities described how political figures sometimes exploit religious differences to serve political agendas, which can strain inter-religious relations. However, participants emphasized that that external actors often drive these tensions, which do not reflect the everyday reality of peaceful coexistence.
- Social Media Conflicts were another recurring theme, particularly among Muslim and Christian participants. They expressed concerns about the role of social media in spreading misinformation and fueling conflicts between religious groups. The Muslim Imam noted that online disputes sometimes escalate into real-world tensions, making this an important issue to address.

Although the data mentions these negative themes less frequently than the positive ones, their presence suggests underlying vulnerabilities in inter-religious

relations that could disrupt the otherwise peaceful environment. Addressing these challenges is crucial for sustaining long-term harmony. However, positive themes such as cooperation and peaceful coexistence dominate the narrative, the presence of challenges like political manipulation and social media conflicts highlights vulnerabilities that require attention. This comparison underscores the need for proactive measures to sustain the existing harmony while addressing underlying tensions. Addressing misinformation on social media through education campaigns or fostering interfaith dialogue platforms could mitigate the impact of online conflicts. Similarly, depoliticizing religious issues may reduce the exploitation of religious differences for political gain.

3.4.2 Thematic Analysis

Secondly, thematic analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between the identified themes more deeply, allowing for a nuanced understanding of inter-religious relations in Chittagong. Three primary themes emerged: Peaceful Coexistence, Interfaith Celebrations and Cooperation, and Conflict and Manipulation.

- Peaceful Coexistence was the most prominent theme, with participants highlighting the long-standing tradition of mutual respect and peaceful living among different religious groups. The Christian activist noted that while challenges exist, the spirit of cooperation between communities remains strong. The Muslim Imam echoed this sentiment throughout the interviews, emphasizing that different faiths have coexisted peacefully for generations.
- Interfaith celebrations and cooperation were linked to the theme of peaceful coexistence. Religious celebrations, such as Ramadan iftars, Durga Puja, and Christmas, were frequently mentioned as key opportunities for different communities to come together and reinforce bonds of respect and understanding. The Hindu Guru described how Muslim neighbours participate in Durga Puja celebrations, while the Christian activist highlighted the involvement of various religious groups in Christmas festivities. These events serve as platforms for fostering interfaith cooperation, transcending religious differences.
- Conflict and Manipulation, though less prominent than the positive themes, reflected the challenges participants face in maintaining peaceful relations. Misinformation and hate speech on social media, as well as the political

manipulation of religion, were cited as significant concerns. The Buddhist activist noted that false beliefs and stereotypes perpetuated online often lead to misunderstandings, while the Muslim imam mentioned how social media conflicts can exacerbate tensions between communities. Although these challenges are not as dominant as the positive aspects of inter-religious relations, they represent critical areas for improvement.

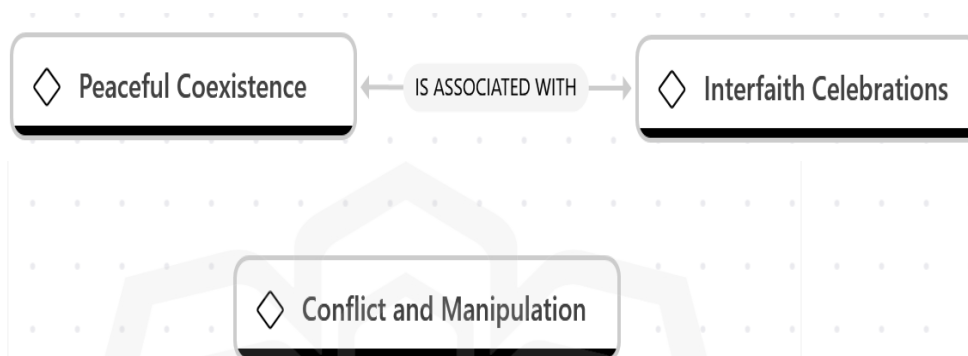


Figure 3: Key Themes in the contemporary condition of Inter-Religious Relations

The network map in Figure 3 visualizes the relationships between the key themes. A strong connection between interfaith celebrations and peaceful coexistence is evident, reinforcing the idea that shared religious events play a vital role in maintaining harmony. These events, such as Ramadan iftars and Christmas celebrations, serve as moments for fostering cooperation and strengthening bonds between communities.

In contrast, the theme of Conflict and Manipulation is visually represented as separate from the positive aspects of inter-religious relations. This reflects the nature of these challenges: while social media conflicts and political manipulation can disrupt peace, they do not appear to undermine the central role of interfaith celebrations in fostering cooperation. The network map visually highlights this balance, showing that while positive interactions are prevalent, the negative aspects remain isolated but significant. The use of network visualizations helps to clarify the dual nature of inter-religious relations, where cooperation and tension coexist but do not necessarily overlap.

The frequency with which each theme appeared in the interview data provides valuable insight into the dominance of aspects of inter-religious relations. Interfaith

celebrations emerged as the most frequently mentioned theme, indicating their significant role in fostering positive relations among different religious communities. People consistently referenced shared religious events like Ramadan iftars, Durga Puja, and Christmas as key moments of interfaith cooperation, where people from different backgrounds come together in a show of mutual respect. For example, the Muslim Imam highlighted the importance of iftars during Ramadan, while the Hindu Guru emphasized the participation of Muslim neighbors during Durga Puja. However, in Islam, celebrating non-Islamic festivals are prohibited and take the person out of the shadow of Islam. While certain Islamic interpretations discourage celebrating non-Islamic festivals, many participants view interfaith participation as a cultural practice that fosters understanding and respect rather than religious observance.

While interfaith celebrations often serve as platforms for fostering cooperation, respect, and unity among religious communities, they can sometimes present challenges. These challenges primarily arise due to religious interpretations, cultural sensitivities, and underlying social tensions that influence how individuals and communities perceive participation in festivals and celebrations.

One significant issue stems from religious prohibitions or interpretations that discourage participation in the religious events of other faiths. For instance, Islamic teachings view, celebrating or participating in non-Islamic festivals as a deviation from core religious principles. This creates a dilemma for some individuals who, despite their desire to maintain harmony and participate in community activities, feel restricted by their religious convictions.

Similarly, members of other religious communities may also experience discomfort when participating in celebrations perceived as being outside their own religious or cultural framework. For example, some Hindus or Christians might refrain from attending events that conflict with their doctrinal teachings or traditions. These sensitivities can inadvertently create feelings of exclusion, misunderstanding, or resentment among communities that aim to foster mutual respect.

Another challenge is the risk of cultural appropriation or misrepresentation during interfaith celebrations. While shared events aim to promote understanding, there can be instances where religious or cultural practices are misunderstood, simplified, or taken out of context. Such occurrences can lead to unintended disrespect or offense,

further complicating inter-religious dynamics. For instance, misinterpretation of symbolic rituals, prayers, or customs central to a particular faith in a shared setting, causing discomfort for those who hold these traditions sacred.

Moreover, political manipulation and social tensions can exacerbate the challenges surrounding interfaith celebrations. Political actors may exploit these events to promote their agendas, emphasizing religious differences rather than shared values. For example, a participant noted that certain political groups tend to frame interfaith participation as a “betrayal” of religious identity, thereby fueling mistrust and division within communities. This manipulation can overshadow the intended purpose of interfaith celebrations, turning them into points of conflict rather than harmony.

The second most frequent theme, Peaceful Coexistence, further underscores the generally harmonious relations in Chittagong. Participants from all religious backgrounds echoed the sentiment that, despite differences, there is a strong foundation of mutual respect that has allowed communities to live peacefully side by side. However, the theme of Conflict and Manipulation appeared less frequently but remains important. Participants observed sporadic conflicts on social media and isolated instances of political manipulation, which continue to pose challenges to inter-religious harmony. The code frequency analysis thus provides a clear picture of how positive themes dominate the narrative, but challenges remain.

In conclusion, the analysis highlights that inter-religious relations in Chittagong are primarily characterized by cooperation and peaceful coexistence, with shared celebrations playing a significant role in fostering harmony. However, challenges such as political manipulation and social media conflicts remain areas of concern that require targeted interventions to sustain long-term peace.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHALLENGES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN CHITTAGONG

4.1 CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

This chapter examines the obstacles to peaceful inter-religious relations in Chittagong, Bangladesh. It explores the complex origins of religious conflict and investigates the root causes of religious conflict, based on the historical context and current state of inter-religious relations as discussed in previous chapters.

A systematic analysis of religious, political, educational, and media/social media challenges is presented in this chapter. Each section covers a different set of obstacles, providing a comprehensive analysis of interfaith understanding. Beginning with religion, the researcher will examine theological differences that often cause conflict and the effects of exclusive beliefs and practices that divide religious communities. The issues of religious extremism will be examined in Chittagong, and sectarianism within religious groups, often overlooked, will also be examined.

In terms of social aspects, this chapter will discuss biases, discrimination, and cultural differences that impacted the region. It also highlights social integration's role in interfaith harmony. In addition, the chapter will examine the political use of religion, religious inequality in politics, and how religion affects power and law. Furthermore, the chapter underscores the importance of comprehensive curricula, highlights the negative effects of religious segregation in schools, and explores how the educational system either reinforces existing biases or fosters interfaith understanding. Finally, this chapter will discuss how media and social media shape public perceptions, spread misinformation, and divide religious communities.

4.1.1 Religious Aspects

4.1.1.1 Theological Differences

The people of the Chittagong region practice various religious beliefs including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and experiences a wide range of theological viewpoints. Each of these religions inherently includes distinct features, such as different texts, rituals, and views of the divinity, which can sometimes contradict each other. As an Abrahamic religion, the concept of God in Islam and Christianity, which holds significance in their respective beliefs where Islam stands for pure monotheism and the majority of the Christians, Catholics and Protestants,⁹⁸ believe in Trinity. On the other hand, in Hinduism and Buddhism, people believe in multiple gods with different attributes. The presence of fundamental differences in the interpretation of divinity and the means of achieving salvation can result in obstacles to the establishment of mutual comprehension and respect.⁹⁹

Furthermore, these theological differences are not primarily theoretical concepts, but rather have a significant impact on the everyday existence and perspectives of followers. Religions have the ability to influence community standards, moral ideals, and life goals, which can differ significantly between different religious beliefs. For example, religious observances, and special celebrations associated with every religion may cause apparent inequalities among communities, perhaps resulting in misunderstandings and the formation of prejudices. In Chittagong, these disparities have periodically caused misinterpretation and hostility among religious communities. The absence of a universal theological foundation (Monotheism) can result in a dual mindset, where each group perceives its own ideas and behaviors as higher or more virtuous than those of others. This may occur in diverse manifestations.

The term "universal theological foundation (Monotheism)" refers to the idea of a single, shared belief in one supreme deity that could theoretically provide common ground for all religious communities. Monotheism, as seen in religions like Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, centers on the worship of a single divine being. However, not all religions universally share this concept, particularly in polytheistic traditions like

⁹⁸ Dr. Father Tapan De Rozario, "Christian Mission and Evangelization in Bangladesh," *Bangladesh E-Journal of Sociology* 8, no. 1 (2011): 77, <http://www.bangladeshsociology.org>.

⁹⁹ Emaj Uddin, *Religious Expression and Conflict between Majority and Minority Groups in Bangladesh* (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2022), 9.

Hinduism or belief systems that prioritize spiritual philosophies over the worship of a single deity (like Buddhism).

The absence of a universal theological foundation creates a dual mindset where one community might view its religious beliefs, practices, and behaviors as superior or more virtuous compared to others. This perception can stem from theological differences, as each religion interprets concepts of divinity, morality, and salvation differently. For example: Monotheistic religions emphasize exclusive devotion to one deity, which can lead to misunderstandings when encountering polytheistic or non-theistic traditions. Polytheistic or pluralistic traditions may perceive monotheistic exclusivity as intolerant or rigid, further deepening theological divisions.

These differences can escalate into social and cultural challenges. In Chittagong, for instance, the disparity in religious observances, rituals, and celebrations has occasionally led to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and even hostility between communities. When one group sees its practices as "superior," it can unintentionally marginalize or devalue the traditions of others. Such a mindset creates barriers to inter-religious harmony, as it fosters prejudice, stereotypes, and competition rather than cooperation.

The situation is further complicated by sects and divisions within individual religions, where different groups may interpret scriptures and religious teachings in varying ways. For instance, disagreements within a monotheistic religion regarding theological interpretations can lead to internal divisions, making it even more challenging to build a unified understanding across religious lines. The lack of a shared theological foundation means that efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and unity must account for these deeply rooted differences.

4.1.1.2 Lack of Inter-religious Understanding

A fundamental obstacle to promoting a healthy inter-religious interaction in Chittagong is the absence of understanding across various religious groups. The lack of understanding and compassion towards the beliefs, rituals, and principles of different religions contributes significantly to misunderstandings, and misconceptions. The lack of understanding is related not only to theological complexities but also includes daily

living interactions. Insufficient knowledge of the religious motives (Maqasid) and social contexts can result in misinterpretation of actions and words, which may lead to disengagement or hatred. This lack of interreligious understanding has many implications. It creates ignorance at its core, which has the potential to cause fear and hostility. It can, in more extreme circumstances, provoke religious violence and hatred. The misinterpretation of religious actions or symbols, ignorance about religious festivals and rituals, and misconceptions about religious doctrines can all contribute to ethnic conflict.¹⁰⁰ In this context, Muslim imam respond:

Of course. From what I've seen, there are a few main problems. One big reason is that people don't know enough about their religion and spread false information about them. Hate speech and lies are also responsible for religious conflict. If this kind of speech spread in social media, it can turn into crazy fights very quickly.

Religious preachers have a crucial influence on the beliefs and attitudes of their followers towards other religions. When preachers emphasize controversial points in theology and interpret religious scriptures in ways that insult or disrespect other points of view, it builds an environment of intolerance and ignorance among their followers. In contemporary circumstances people are acquiring knowledge from individuals who lack in-depth understanding of religious diversity.¹⁰¹ The fundamental principles of most religions -love, compassion, and understanding- are often neglected by these preachers, who instead fuel hostile attitudes by focusing on differences.

4.1.1.3 Religious Extremism and Fundamentalism

In Chittagong, religious extremism and fundamentalism are evident in the acceptance of strict and literal interpretations of religious scriptures and doctrines, together with an uncompromising commitment to religious practices and beliefs. Extremists in different religious groups often deny the contemporary interpretations of religious scriptures. Some extremists want to establish their ideologies and social identity.¹⁰² This

¹⁰⁰ Peter Suwarno, "Resolving Religious Conflicts Through Expanding Inter-Religious Communication: Issues and Challenges," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 43, no. 2 (November 30, 2005): 310, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2005.432.209-325>.

¹⁰¹ Sk Badiruddin, "2021 Video Of Hate Speech By Bangladesh Preacher Peddled As Uttar Pradesh | BOOM," May 10, 2023, <https://www.boomlive.in/fact-check/world/cropped-video-bangladesh-cleric-dinajpur-yati-yati-narsinghanand-ghaziabad-dasna-old-video-21907>.

¹⁰² Ndc Brigadier General Md Mefta Ul Karim, "Socio-Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh and its Impact on Religious Extremism," *NDC E-JOURNAL* 15, no. 2 (December 30, 2016): 89.

uncompromising attitude often results in the hatred of other religions and even moderate interpretations within their own belief system. The consequences of religious extremism in Chittagong are numerous and rather alarming. First and foremost, it develops an atmosphere of intolerance and animosity towards other religious beliefs or alters the core doctrine of the same religion. This intolerance has the potential to escalate into hate speech, social exclusion, and physical aggression towards individuals or communities. In particular cases, they often labeled each other as 'terrorist' or 'extremist.'

Furthermore, religious extremism affects the social structure of Chittagong, which is characterized by varied customs and diverse religious beliefs. Extremist ideologies provide a significant challenge to the fundamental nature of diversity,¹⁰³ as they create divisions and undermine the crucial mutual respect necessary for peaceful coexistence.

4.1.2 Political Aspects

4.1.2.1 Political Instrumentalization of Religion

Chittagong, like the rest of Bangladesh, witnesses various manifestations of political exploitation of religion. Political parties and leaders frequently manipulate religious ideas and sentiments to obtain support, organize supporters, and validate their authority.¹⁰⁴ This approach could include getting support from the major religious group by linking political objectives with religious principles or exploiting concerns around religious minority groups. These strategies not only create religious divisions but also divert focus away from crucial governance matters, such as corruption, economic progress, and social equity. An important consequence of this manipulation is the division of society based on belief systems. When political narratives are mixed with religious language, it becomes difficult to distinguish religious beliefs from political views. This overlap might result in a situation where religious identification determines

¹⁰³ “Discussion Paper - Preventing Violent Extremism by Promoting Inclusive Development” 4, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Discussion%20Paper%20-%20Preventing%20Violent%20Extremism%20by%20Promoting%20Inclusive%20%20Development.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ Rakibul Hasan, “Rising Extremism in Bangladesh: A Voyage Towards Uncertainty,” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (August 1, 2015): 147.

political allegiance, therefore increasing conflicts and hampering inter-faith communication.

Another outcome of instrumentalization is the exclusion and marginalization of religious minority groups. In Chittagong, minorities frequently encounter marginalization of their rights because the majority of political discourse is run by the dominant religion.¹⁰⁵ This marginalization can be observed through limited access to resources, inadequate representation in political institutions, and specific discrimination.

4.1.2.2 Conflict of Interests and Power

Interests and power in Chittagong are not just affected by differences in religion; they are also affected by historical, sociopolitical, and economic issues. The complex dynamics of power and interest in Chittagong are influenced not only by religious differences but also by socio-political, economic, and historical circumstances. Religious organizations or political leaders frequently compete for power. This includes respective communities, and a wider political and social landscape. The battle for power may take on diverse forms, including advocating for beneficial policies, getting positions in governing bodies, managing resources, and having influence over members of the community.

An essential element of this encounter involves the competition for resources, including both tangible assets like property and money, as well as intangible assets like social and political power.¹⁰⁶ In Chittagong, where many religious groups coexist, the competition frequently takes on a communal dimension. Control over resources can lead to significant power imbalances, contributing to the marginalization of less dominant religious groups and escalating communal tensions. In this regard, the Muslim Imam mentions,

I've also seen political manipulation. Here politicians fight for wealth and land. There are some politicians who broke minority rights and unjustly

¹⁰⁵ Afsana Amin, Zakir Hossain, and Muhammad Al Amin, *Bangladesh State of Minorities Report-2016: Paving the Way to Liberation* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Nagorik Uddyog, 2016), iv.

¹⁰⁶ Pranab Kumar Panday, "Politics of Land Grabbing: The Vested Property Act and the Exploitation of Hindu Communities in Bangladesh," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 23, no. 3 (July 19, 2016): 394, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02303006>.

captured their land. I have seen local MP's grab the land of minorities from the mountain side.

The political aspirations of religious leaders or organizations are another aspect of the current conflict. Religious institutions occasionally serve to advance personal or political objectives.¹⁰⁷ This can result in a scenario where religious doctrines and communal problems are replaced by the political agenda. These situations not only undermine the reliability of religious organizations but also intensify the divisions between various religious communities.

4.1.3 Educational Aspects

4.1.3.1 Lack of Inter-religious Curricula

Religious education at Chittagong's educational institutions often centers around the doctrines and practices of a particular faith, usually Islam, that holds the most influence in the local society or government. Although this exclusive strategy enhances understanding of one's own religion, it falls inadequate in comprehending other belief systems that exist within the same societal framework.¹⁰⁸ As a result, students develop a narrow or inaccurate understanding of different religious traditions, often relying on secondary sources, biases, or misinterpretation. The result of this inequality in education is the absence of understanding and compassion among believers of diverse religions.

Insufficient understanding of the principles, convictions, and traditions of other religions prevents individuals from effectively participating in significant inter-religious exchanges or acknowledging the wide range of religious diversity in their surroundings. Furthermore, the lack of educational programs that promote understanding and cooperation across different religions maintains the ongoing pattern of religious isolation and separation.¹⁰⁹ It restricts the establishment of a diverse and open-minded perspective among young individuals, who are the future promoters of social harmony. A deficient educational system that abandons sufficiently dealing with

¹⁰⁷ Birleşmiş Milletler, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief on His Mission to Bangladesh," 2016, 8,19.

¹⁰⁸ Aisha Rob et al., *Faith and Education in Bangladesh: Approaches to Religion and Social Cohesion in School Textbook Curricula*, 2020, 21,23, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.19108.71045>.

¹⁰⁹ Mobarak Hossain, "Faith Based Education in Bangladesh," 71, accessed February 3, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/56809126/Faith_Based_Education_in_Bangladesh.

religious differences destroys the opportunity to establish a culture of mutual admiration and comprehension from a young age.

4.1.3.2 Limited Access to Quality Education

The availability of high-quality education plays a crucial role in influencing individuals' perspectives, particularly their understanding of other religious communities. In Chittagong, it is possible to observe inequality in educational opportunities, where certain categories of people, particularly religious minorities, encounter more difficulties achieving an adequate education.¹¹⁰ This limitation can be linked to a variety of factors such as poverty, and geographical barriers. Restricted access to standard-quality education has a profound effect on interreligious relations. It begins by perpetuating ignorance regarding other religions. Those without formal education are more susceptible to prejudices and misunderstandings regarding other religious communities. When there is a lack of comprehension, people easily fall for misconceptions and generalizations, creating a mindset that upholds false beliefs about different religions.

Furthermore, the lack of adequate opportunities for high-quality education restricts the opportunities of interreligious encounters. A quality education often involves the integration of a wide range of concepts and views. Insufficient exposure to diverse religious perspectives and experiences limits the students' ability to learn about the core principles of similarities between other religions. Education is the most effective instrument for improving socialization. The limited availability of quality education within religious communities not only hampers overall social progress but also contributes to communal differences. Moreover, individuals who have restricted access to inter-religious education may be vulnerable to radicalization. Extremist groups often manipulate the lack of education and awareness to propagate their ideologies.¹¹¹ In recent cases, they fuel hatred and enmity towards

¹¹⁰ Sudipta Roy, Samia Huq, and Aisha Binte Abdur Rob, "Faith and Education in Bangladesh: A Review of the Contemporary Landscape and Challenges," *International Journal of Educational Development* 79 (November 1, 2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102290>.

¹¹¹ Mrinal Debnath, "A Community under Siege: Exclusionary Education Policies and Indigenous Santals* in the Bangladeshi Context," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (March 3, 2020): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1660634>.

ideologies that are opposed to their personal interests. As a result, multiple terrorist attempts¹¹² have been witnessed in recent days.

4.1.3.3 Religious Segregation in Institutions

Religious segregation in institutions, whether deliberate or a consequence of societal frameworks, creates situations that include inadequate or insufficient interactions among diverse religious communities. In Chittagong, it is common to observe the practice of separating students based on their religious identities at schools, colleges, and other educational institutions, either as a result of law or societal standards.¹¹³ Similar segregation can be observed in various social establishments, such as places of worship, community centers, and neighborhoods. The implications of religious segregation in institutions have various forms. Firstly, it hinders the development of mutual understanding and respect. Lack of interaction among individuals of diverse religions in educational institutions could encourage preconceptions and misconceptions.¹¹⁴ These misunderstandings, resulting from limited experience and engagement, can become hateful attitudes that are difficult to eradicate in adulthood.

Moreover, religious segregation can result in an isolated society, where individuals exclusively encounter and support their own religious viewpoints. The absence of exposure to a variety of opinions could result in a feeling of superiority or exclusiveness, which undermines the values of tolerance and coexistence. Moreover, it heightens the susceptibility of individuals to radical beliefs that exploit these segregated conditions. Furthermore, the separation of religion in educational establishments can have a direct influence on the overall standard of education. Imparting education within strict religious boundaries may restrict critical thinking,

¹¹² “Holey Artisan Cafe: Bangladesh Islamists Sentenced to Death for 2016 Attack,” *BBC News*, November 27, 2019, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50570243>; “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Bangladesh,” *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed February 4, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/bangladesh/>.

¹¹³ Journal of ELT and Education (JEE), “Role of Religious Actors in Educational Provision: A Case Study in Bangladesh Context,” *Journal of ELT and Education*, 22, accessed February 4, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/42671974/Role_of_Religious_Actors_in_Educational_Provision_A_Case_Study_in_Bangladesh_Context.

¹¹⁴ “The Intersection of Nationalism and Communal Violence in Bangladesh,” *Global History Dialogues* (blog), August 4, 2023, <https://globalhistorydialogues.org/projects/the-intersection-of-nationalism-and-communal-violence-in-bangladesh/>.

creativity, and the capacity to comprehend a pluralistic worldview.¹¹⁵ This restriction not only hampers individual growth but also has deeper implications for community advancement and unity.

4.1.4 Media and Social Media Platforms

4.1.4.1 Misinformation and Fake News

In the age of swift digital communication, the widespread presence of misinformation and fake news causes massive challenges, significantly impacting inter-religious relations in Chittagong. The swift propagation of false information and fabricated news, especially when it relates to sensitive religious topics, can have extensive and significant effects. The dissemination of false information can particularly affect Chittagong, where religious beliefs have a strong connection with traditional and social identities. Spreading false narratives or misrepresenting information about religious communities or their traditions can instantly provoke the emotions of believers, resulting in a lack of respect for other religions and conflicts.¹¹⁶ Misinformation and fake news in inter-religious relations generally include misrepresenting a particular religion as a threat to others. These narratives can originate from false allegations, such as the destruction of religious symbols, or insulting comments about religious people. The transmission of such misleading remarks via social media platforms and messaging applications catches the attention of a broad audience within a brief period.

On some occasions, planned speech provoked by individuals or organizations aiming to create social instability for political or personal agenda.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, it could arise from a deficiency in understanding the media throughout the wider community. It can result in an unwillingness to differentiate between reliable and misleading information. Misinformation and fake news have a highly destructive impact on trust, both among individuals and overall communities. Violation of trust significantly hinders the promotion of understanding among diverse religious groups.

¹¹⁵ Kazi Sameeo Sheesh, "Educating Children about Peace and Conflict: Voices of the 'Education Professional' of Bangladesh," December 11, 2021, 2.

¹¹⁶ Md Sayeed Al-Zaman, "Religious Communication in Digital Public Sphere," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, June 28, 2020), 29, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3637443>.

¹¹⁷ K. Anis Ahmed, "In Bangladesh: Direct Control of Media Trumps Fake News," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 4 (2018): 909.

False narratives promote distrust and hatred, which can undermine the progress of social harmony over generations.

4.1.4.2 Hate Speech and Online Harassment

Instances of hate speech and online harassment within inter-religious relations include the misuse of digital platforms to propagate messages that instigate animosity, aggression, or bias towards religious communities.¹¹⁸ The detrimental effects of such misunderstandings can be significant in Chittagong, where religious affiliations have a complex relationship with cultural and social aspects of life. In certain instances, online platforms have transformed into areas where provocative language is spread, intensifying religious divides and developing an atmosphere full of intolerance and mistrust. Hate speech and online harassment are insidious due to the characteristics of the digital environment. The ability to remain anonymous on this platform empowers users to openly argue contentious issues without the fear of negative consequences, thereby encouraging the use of phrases and visuals that might be avoided in person. Additionally, this anonymity complicates the task of holding people responsible for their actions.

The effects of hate speech and internet harassment have profound impacts. For individuals and communities who are the recipients of such discourse, it can result in psychological distress, social exclusion, and a feeling of vulnerability. Furthermore, internet language has the potential to incite actual acts of violence in the real world, targeting persons or religious sites.¹¹⁹ Misleading or provocative content can quickly go viral, fueling anger and resentment. Additionally, certain groups or individuals might use online platforms strategically to sow discord and division for personal agendas.

¹¹⁸ Syeda Gulshan Ferdous Jana, “Bangladesh: Social Media, Extremism and Freedom of Expression,” . *Bangladesh*, n.d., 111–13.

¹¹⁹ Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, “A Content Analysis of Social Media Users’ Reaction to Religious Disinformation in Bangladesh,” *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-Journal)*, February 10, 2021, 8, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/4890>.

4.1.4.3 Lack of Responsible Media Reporting

The absence of accountable media coverage in the region of Chittagong has a substantial impact on the establishment and sustenance of harmonious interreligious relations. Modern media is a significant influencer in shaping public sentiment and perceptions which can exacerbate religious tensions through the absence of accountable and impartial journalism.¹²⁰ The media plays a crucial role in society by not only providing information but also shaping people's perceptions, and understanding of events, including those associated with religious matters. Misunderstandings and mistrust among diverse religious communities in Chittagong can be further intensified by media coverage that is partial, sensationalized, or lacks depth, given the complex and nuanced religious dynamics that characterize the area. The manifestation of irresponsible media reporting can take various forms:

- **Sensationalism:** Engaging in sensationalism by prioritizing attention-grabbing stories over accurate and impartial journalism in order to attract a larger audience or readership. This encompasses the act of intensifying conflicts or portraying them in a manner that encourages emotions rather than providing objective information.
- **Lack of Context:** Insufficiently providing history or context while reporting on religious matters, resulting in a shallow comprehension of the intricate nature of the subject matter.
- **Bias:** Exhibiting explicit or implicit prejudice towards a specific religious group, which can strengthen preconceived notions and intensify divisions.
- **Neglecting Minority Voices:** Insufficiently portraying the viewpoints of religious minorities, hence suppressing their experiences and concerns.

The consequences of irresponsible media reporting are multifaceted. The frequent portrayal of specific religious groups in a negative manner by media outlets can generate an atmosphere of fear and hate. This not only exacerbates inter-religious tensions but also perpetuates the social exclusion of these people. Furthermore, sensationalized or biased journalism has the potential to incite communal violence, transforming

¹²⁰ Sheikh Islam, "Coverage Bias of Bangladesh Television Media: A Portrayal of Power and Politics," *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 32 (December 1, 2016): 256, <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2016-3202-13>.

underlying tensions into implicit conflicts.¹²¹ Moreover, when the media fails to offer precise and thorough coverage, it hinders people's ability to form adequate viewpoints regarding religious affairs. The absence of well-informed comprehension poses a substantial obstacle to the establishment of a harmonious coexistence among diverse religious communities in society.

4.2 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE INTERVIEW RESPONSES

The development of positive inter-religious relations in Chittagong faces multiple challenges, as identified by participants from different religious communities. The most prominent issues include misinformation, political manipulation, economic inequities, and lack of communication, which were frequently highlighted during the interviews.

Misinformation and misconceptions emerged as significant concerns across all respondents. Misunderstanding of religious practices, stereotypes, and ignorance often leads to mistrust and fear. As the Muslim participant noted, “Misinformation about different religions creates prejudices and fear.” Similarly, the Hindu representative emphasized that “ignorance of each other's opinions often leads to prejudices and mistrust.” This highlights the need for educational initiatives to bridge knowledge gaps and dispel stereotypes.

Political manipulation was another dominant issue, where participants pointed out that religion is often exploited for political gains, creating divisions among communities. The Hindu participant stated, “Political misuse of religious beliefs separates communities,” while the Christian representative added, “Politics can exploit religion to divide us.” This recurring theme reflects how external actors capitalize on religious sentiments, amplifying tensions and disrupting peaceful coexistence.

Economic inequities were also mentioned as factors contributing to inter-religious tensions. Poverty and social inequalities exacerbate frustrations, often viewed through a religious lens. The Buddhist community leader highlighted this, saying,

¹²¹ Elsebeth Frey, ed., *Negotiating Journalism: Core Values and Cultural Diversities* (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2017), Chapter 7- Press freedom dynamics in Bangladesh, 103.

“Economic and social difficulties also weaken relations.” Addressing these disparities through development initiatives could significantly reduce misunderstandings.

Finally, the participants emphasized the lack of dialogue and communication as a barrier to fostering mutual trust and understanding. The Buddhist participant explained, “Dialogue is needed to debunk myths and identify common objectives,” while the Christian participant stressed the importance of addressing sensitive issues openly to avoid conflict.

The researcher discusses the detailed information about the participants and the analysis process in the methodology section (pages: 4-6). The pie chart below visually represents the frequency of challenges mentioned by participants. It illustrates that misinformation and political manipulation were the most frequently discussed issues, each accounting for 30.8% of the responses. Lack of dialogue followed at 23.1%, while economic inequities accounted for 15.4%.

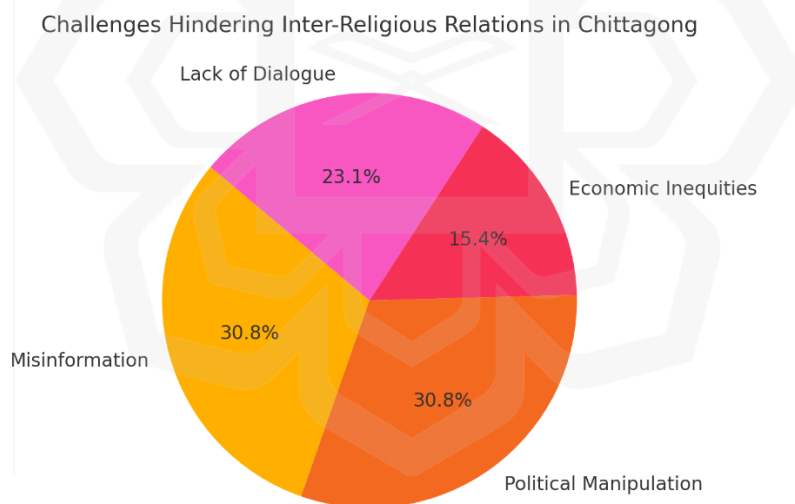


Figure 4: Challenges Hindering Inter-Religious Relations in Chittagong

The pie chart effectively summarizes the distribution of challenges, providing a clear understanding of their relative importance. Chittagong maintains strong positive inter-religious relations, but these obstacles underscore vulnerabilities that require attention through education, economic development, depoliticization of religion, and structured interfaith dialogue initiatives.

CHAPTER FIVE

WAYS TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES

This chapter focuses on resolution to the complex issues and challenges to interfaith interactions in Chittagong. It provides guidance and hope for building bridges and promoting mutual respect and understanding among various religious communities in the region. It also presents a detailed and practical plan for individuals and groups from different fields to work together towards the shared objective of promoting inter-religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Though persistent, the challenges that are already mentioned—including, but not limited to, theological disagreements, social biases, the politicization of religion, and the dangers of media communication—are not inevitable. To meet those challenges faced by the people of Chittagong, this chapter emphasizes the significance of a comprehensive strategy for peaceful coexistence. It explores new and effective tactics that can deconstruct barriers and establish bridges between various faiths through interfaith dialogue, education, trust-building, community empowerment, policy reform, and responsible media reporting.

5.1 INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT

When it comes to resolving the complex structure of religious interactions in Chittagong, interfaith dialogue and participation are key strategies for developing an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance.¹²² In this section, the researcher explores the power of discussion initiatives to influence social dynamics for betterment by offering theoretical foundations and practical ways. A wide variety of programs are included under the umbrella term "inter-faith dialogue" that aim to bring people of various faiths together in a positive way. Its goal is to minimize prejudice and increase mutual understanding by providing a safe environment in which people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.¹²³ Further strengthening the

¹²² Fazrin Huda, "Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Checking Religious Extremism," *Philosophy and Progress*, November 21, 2019, 106, <https://doi.org/10.3329/pp.v6i1i1-2.44204>.

¹²³ Andrew Orton, "Interfaith Dialogue: Seven Key Questions for Theory, Policy and Practice," *Religion, State and Society* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2016.1242886>.

relationships between varied religious communities, the engagement component expands discourse into collaborative actions and initiatives that address common societal challenges. One cannot exaggerate the importance of such discourse in Chittagong. Misunderstandings and distrust can thrive in this environment because of historical conflicts as well as modern problems like disinformation and social segregation. Interfaith discussion and involvement can offer a counter-narrative, highlighting the common humanity and shared ideals that transcend religious boundaries.

Ways for fruitful conversations and engage people of different faiths:

- **Creating platforms:** It is important to make sure that all religious groups in Chittagong, especially those that are minority and sometimes marginalized, have a voice by creating venues and platforms that welcome them all. Events in the community, as well as more official settings like conferences and seminars, can serve as these platforms.¹²⁴
- **Facilitation and training:** Proficient facilitation is essential for effective discourse. Training programs designed for facilitators, with a specific emphasis on conflict resolution, active listening, and empathy, have the potential to improve the overall quality of interactions. Moreover, establishing guidelines and anticipated outcomes for participants could foster a courteous and inclusive atmosphere.
- **Inter-cultural projects:** In addition to discourse, collaborative initiatives focused on community service, environmental protection, or cultural exchange can strengthen connections based on common interests and shared objectives.¹²⁵ These efforts not only have a positive impact on the broader community, but also provide as tangible evidence of the practical results achieved through inter-religious collaboration.

¹²⁴ M. Ruhul Amin, "Inter-Faith Dialogue," *Bangladesh Journal of Integrated Thoughts* 2, no. 3 (2006): 115, <https://doi.org/10.52805/bjit.v2i3.47>.

¹²⁵ "How Bangladeshi Students Enrich Intercultural Learning at European University Campus. Case Study from University of Gdansk Masterclass by INNOCAMP PL | LinkedIn," https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-bangladeshi-students-enrich-intercultural-learning-igoqf/?trk=organization_guest_main-feed-card_feed-article-content.

- **Youth engagement:** Involving young individuals in inter-faith discourse and initiatives effectively challenges the imperative of ensuring the enduring viability of these endeavors.¹²⁶ Programs targeting young individuals have the potential to be highly effective in confronting and dispelling preconceptions, while simultaneously producing a future generation of leaders who are dedicated to fostering harmonious relations between different religious groups.¹²⁷
- **Public exposure:** Disseminating positive inter-faith initiatives via media and social networks can enhance their influence, by countering dominant narratives of discord and highlighting instances of collaboration and harmony. Celebrating inter-faith harmony days or commemorations can also enhance consciousness and promote wider engagement.

Though there is a great opportunity for positive change through interfaith discourse and interaction, there are several factors that must be taken into account. The success of these endeavors depends on fair depiction, the absence of indifference, and the careful handling of delicate subjects. Maintaining interest and turning discussions into actionable results also calls for sustained effort and dedication from an individual perspective.

5.2 EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

Education and awareness play a crucial role in addressing the obstacles to inter-religious interaction in Chittagong, serving as influential agents for transformation. This section examines how a deliberate emphasis on these areas can greatly contribute to eradicating biases, promoting mutual admiration, and nurturing a knowledgeable and compassionate society. Education has a fundamental role in fostering a full understanding of the diverse religious landscapes across the globe. It possesses the distinctive capacity to shape the intellectual abilities of young individuals, inspire them with principles of acceptance, and equip upcoming generations with the ability to navigate a diverse society with understanding and respect. Incorporating inter-religious

¹²⁶ Pavlos E. Michaelides, "Interfaith Dialogue in Global Perspective and the Necessity of Youth Involvement," *Asia Europe Journal* 7, no. 3 (December 1, 2009): 449, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-009-0240-4>.

¹²⁷ Siegfried O. Wolf et al., eds., *The Merits of Regional Cooperation: The Case of South Asia* (Cham ; New York: Springer, 2014), 30.

education into the curriculum can provide students with an opportunity to explore a variety of religious beliefs and practices. This can help to challenge preconceptions and clarify misunderstandings that contribute to societal divisions.

Strategies to enhancing education and awareness:

- **Curriculum reform:** Reforming the educational curriculum to incorporate extensive teaching on global religions, encompassing their historical background, philosophical tenets, and cultural and civilizational impacts. This method fosters an appreciation for religious variety and facilitates the comprehension of similar ethical concepts among different faiths.¹²⁸
- **Training educators:** Providing instructors with the necessary knowledge and expertise to approach complicated religious subjects with caution and objectivity. Professional development programs may center on inter-religious teaching approaches, conflict resolution, and creating inclusive learning environments.¹²⁹
- **Awareness campaign:** Implementing public awareness initiatives targeting the wider community to emphasize the significance of religious tolerance and the adverse consequences of prejudice and discrimination.¹³⁰ These campaigns can employ various media outlets to effectively target a broad audience and spread optimistic messages of unity and collaboration.
- **Community workshops:** Community members and parents can attend seminars and workshops that emphasize the value of religious tolerance and the part that families play in fostering harmonious relationships.¹³¹ Also, participants in these programs can get resources to help them overcome religious prejudice at home and in the community.

¹²⁸ Suzanne Owen, "The World Religions Paradigm Time for a Change," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022211408038>.

¹²⁹ Ranjit Podder and Sheikh Riad, "Bangladesh Teacher Education Journal (BTEJ)," February 26, 2022, 135.

¹³⁰ "Combating the Defamation of Religions (2008) | Australian Human Rights Commission," July 4, 2008, 39, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/projects/combating-defamation-religions-2008>.

¹³¹ "Human Rights, Families and Community Interests," accessed February 7, 2024, <https://aifs.gov.au/research/family-matters/no-37/human-rights-families-and-community-interests>.

Implementing education and awareness programs effectively requires overcoming a number of obstacles. There is a need for resources and qualified teachers; there are societal protests from groups with traditional or exclusive views; and it is important for students to learn about a variety of religions and their perspectives. Furthermore, assessing the effects of these activities requires a considerable amount of time and patience, as shifts in attitudes and actions may develop gradually over time.

5.3 POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

The role of policy and governance is crucial when it comes to controlling the obstacles and creating an appropriate environment for religious harmony in Chittagong. This section explores the role of beneficial policymaking and governance in establishing and maintaining sustainable inter-religious tolerance. It emphasizes the strategies for implementing such policies and the potential challenges that may develop.

Strategic policy interventions:

- **Legal frameworks for protection:** It is essential to have strong legal protections to combat religious discrimination and hate crimes. Implementing policies that explicitly restrict hate speech, religious harassment, and violence targeting individuals based on their religious identity can serve as a strong deterrent, therefore, strengthening the government's dedication to preserving the rights of all religious communities.¹³²
- **Inclusive representation:** Ensuring that Chittagong's religious diversity is properly represented in all levels of government. An adequate distribution of resources and the opportunity for religious minorities to have their voices heard in politics are both possible outcomes of inclusive representation policies.¹³³

¹³² Li-ann Thio and Jaclyn L. Neo, eds., *Religious Offences in Common Law Asia: Colonial Legacies, Constitutional Rights and Contemporary Practice*, Constitutionalism in Asia Series (Oxford, UK ; New York, NY: Hart Publishing, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), Chapter 4: Between Religious Coexistence and Religious Hierarchy: Divergent Developments in Religious Offence Laws in Common Law Asia, 122.

¹³³ Yousuf Hasan, Rashed Al Deen, and Fairouz Shahana, "Inclusive Governance and the Role of Women and Minorities in the Bangladeshi Administrative System," October 11, 2023, 4, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8432693>.

- **Inter-faith council:** Establishing inter-faith advisory councils inside governmental frameworks can serve as a forum for discussion and consultation on issues related to inter-religious interactions. These councils can provide valuable perspectives on community issues, recommend solutions, and help resolve problems before they escalate.
- **Establish governmental platforms for public awareness:** Employing governmental platforms to initiate public awareness campaigns that emphasize the significance of religious tolerance and the societal contributions from various religious communities. These efforts have the potential for significant impact on public opinions and counter misconceptions that promote division.

Governance mechanism for implementation:

- **Monitoring and accountability:** Establishing systems to oversee the implementation of policies regarding inter-religious harmony and ensuring that institutions are held responsible for any violations.¹³⁴ This could include periodic evaluations, transparent disclosure, and mechanisms for community input.
- **Capacity building:** Allocating resources to enhance the capabilities of public authorities and law enforcement agencies in effectively and sensitively addressing matters related to religious diversity and conflicts. Training programs may encompass issues such as cultural competency, conflict resolution, and the legal entitlements of religious minorities.
- **Community engagement:** Promoting governance techniques that actively involve religious communities in decision-making processes.¹³⁵ Implementing this collaborative method will boost confidence in political institutions and

¹³⁴ Shaikh Abdur Rahman, "Religion Freedom Index of Bangladesh: Current Developments and Government Responses," *Modern Diplomacy*, May 5, 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/05/05/religion-freedom-index-of-bangladesh-current-developments-and-government-responses/>.

¹³⁵ Michael S. Evans, "Religion and Political Decision Making," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 1 (2014): 153.

guarantee that policies are responsive to the requirements of diverse populations.

Policy and governance have the potential to revolutionize inter-religious relations in Chittagong. However, there are various obstacles that could hinder their successful execution. These factors encompass political opposition, administrative apathy, insufficient resources, and the possibility of policies being exploited for political preference rather than serving as means of unity within society.

5.4 MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Media and communication have a significant impact on the inter-religious dynamics in Chittagong, either by fostering unity or exacerbating divisions among different religious communities. The concluding part of this chapter presents strategic methods for utilizing these influential instruments to foster comprehension, admiration, and cohesion within different religious environments.

Leveraging media for positive gain:

- **Promoting responsible journalism:** It is of utmost importance to urge media organizations to strictly follow ethical journalism principles when covering religious matters.¹³⁶ Providing journalists with training on sensitive coverage, comprehension of religious complexities, and avoidance of sensationalism can help reduce the dissemination of disinformation and minimize the escalation of hostilities.
- **Highlighting positive narratives:** Media channels should prioritize to stories that emphasize acts of inter-religious collaboration, unity, and reciprocal admiration.¹³⁷ Exhibiting instances of communities uniting across religious boundaries for shared objectives can serve as a source of motivation for similar endeavors and confront preconceived notions.

¹³⁶ “Defamation vs. Freedom of Expression in Bangladesh: Striking a Delicate Balance | LinkedIn,” <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/defamation-vs-freedom-expression-bangladesh-striking-delicate-fprvf/>.

¹³⁷ Stig Hjarvard, “The Mediatization of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change,” *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (June 2011): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2011.579719>.

- **Creating platforms for dialogue:** Using media as a platform for productive conversation between religious leaders and community members of other faiths helps cultivate an atmosphere of transparency and reciprocal education. Television roundtables, radio programs, and internet forums can function as platforms for these talks, so making them easily available to a wide audience.¹³⁸
- **Countering hate speech and extremism:** It is crucial to establish prompt and effective methods to challenge and refute hate speech and extremist narratives on social media and other communication platforms.¹³⁹ Furthermore, engage in partnerships with social media firms to implement and uphold regulations against hate speech can bring a fruitful outcome. Additionally, it is imperative to offer users the necessary tools and support to report and contest detrimental information.
- **Educational campaigns:** Executing media campaigns that specifically target education and awareness regarding religious diversity and the significance of tolerance has the potential to shape society attitudes. Employing a combination of conventional and contemporary media to target diverse populations guarantees a broad and influential effect.¹⁴⁰

Successfully managing the difficulties related to media and communication requires precise coordination. There is a potential for media to be used as a divisive instrument, however; in a positive way, media can be used to promote togetherness and understanding. To achieve this objective, it is essential to establish regulatory frameworks that uphold the right to freedom of expression while simultaneously preventing instances of misuse or exploitation. In addition, building relationships among media organizations, civil society, and religious congregations helps establish a collective dedication to fostering harmony.

¹³⁸ “Interreligious Contact and Media: Introduction,” 326, accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/0048721X.2020.1756061?needAccess=true>.

¹³⁹ UNESCO, *Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely!* (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2021), 149, <http://en.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>.

¹⁴⁰ Akhmad Rifa’i and Alimah Alimah, “The Interfaith Youth Campaign For A Culture Of Peace (A Case Study Of An Interfaith Youth ‘Pelita’ From Cirebon),” *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 5, no. 2 (2015): 16, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2015.5.2.%p>.

Leadership, particularly from religious and cultural figures, is highlighted as a driving force in bridging divides and fostering cooperation among diverse communities.

The themes of dialogue and awareness are also prominent, pointing to the need for open communication, educational programs, and awareness campaigns that address misconceptions and misinformation about different religious groups. Words like “Education,” “Schools,” and “Classes” stress the role of both formal and informal education in reducing stereotypes and fostering tolerance from an early age. Incorporating interfaith education into schools and organizing workshops can equip individuals with the knowledge to respect and appreciate religious diversity.

The importance of community engagement and shared activities is underscored by words such as “Events,” “Festivals,” and “Interactions”. Regular cultural programs, joint celebrations, and collaborative initiatives are seen as key opportunities for bringing communities together and building bonds of trust. The word cloud also reflects the significance of fostering values like “Tolerance,” “Compassion,” and “Understanding” to reduce prejudices and create an inclusive and peaceful environment.

Additionally, words like “Projects,” “Technology,” and “Healthcare” suggest that structural and community-oriented initiatives can play a role in fostering inter-religious cooperation. Collaborative projects, technological tools for outreach, and joint efforts in areas such as healthcare and environmental conservation can provide practical ways for religious groups to work together toward shared goals. These initiatives extend beyond theological differences and focus on addressing common societal needs, which can strengthen relationships and mutual respect.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This study explored the significance, challenges, and pathways for fostering inter-religious relations (IRR) in Chittagong, a diverse and historically significant region in Bangladesh. Religious diversity has long been a defining characteristic of Chittagong, with its rich tapestry of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities coexisting alongside various ethnic groups. This research has demonstrated through historical analysis, contemporary observations, and participant interviews that while shared values of cooperation and peaceful coexistence often shape inter-religious relations, challenges such as misinformation, political manipulation, religious extremism, and inadequate educational frameworks also undermine them.

The concept of inter-religious relations emerged as a cornerstone for building social harmony, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence in multi-religious societies. The findings underscore that fostering meaningful inter-religious dialogue, tolerance, and collaboration requires a holistic approach that addresses social, political, and cultural dimensions, while promoting initiatives like education, dialogue platforms, and community-driven engagement. This conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the research, synthesizing key insights to highlight pathways for overcoming challenges and sustaining harmony within diverse religious communities.

Inter-religious relations (IRR) are essential for promoting mutual respect, cooperation, and inclusivity in societies marked by religious diversity. At its core, IRR emphasizes the importance of dialogue, tolerance, and shared understanding to dismantle misconceptions and prejudices that often lead to religious and social conflicts. By fostering interaction between different religious groups, IRR creates opportunities for communities to develop mutual appreciation, respect each other's values, and collaborate toward shared goals such as humanitarian efforts, cultural preservation, and conflict resolution.

The research has demonstrated that one of the primary objectives of IRR is to promote religious tolerance as a means of mitigating tensions and creating a stable

society. While religious diversity contributes to cultural richness, misunderstood or misrepresented communities often cause division. Tolerance, therefore, emerges as a fundamental value that allows individuals to celebrate diversity while maintaining their own religious identity. The findings further highlighted that promoting inclusivity and preventing discrimination are critical components of IRR. Discrimination not only isolates religious minorities but also weakens the social fabric of a community, preventing individuals from participating fully in societal progress.

Furthermore, building social integration emerged as a key goal of inter-religious relations. By bridging gaps between communities, IRR fosters a shared sense of belonging and identity. Historical examples in Chittagong, such as the influence of Sufi saints and joint religious celebrations, underscore the role of cultural exchange in nurturing social unity. The research also emphasized that educational initiatives play a vital role in promoting IRR by addressing ignorance and creating awareness about diverse religious beliefs. Educational programs, interfaith curricula, and workshops can equip younger generations with the knowledge and empathy necessary to navigate a pluralistic society.

Conflict resolution remains a central function of IRR, particularly in contexts where religious differences have been sources of division. By encouraging dialogue and negotiation, IRR provides mechanisms for addressing grievances and preventing tensions from escalating into violence. Religious leaders, policymakers, and community activists have a critical role to play in fostering spaces for dialogue and collaboration, ensuring that differences are resolved through peaceful means.

The broader significance of IRR lies in its capacity to address global and local challenges. In a world increasingly marked by religious and cultural conflicts, promoting IRR is not only a means of fostering local harmony but also a tool for achieving global peace and understanding. By advocating for religious freedom, cultural exchange, and community building, inter-religious relations create pathways for cooperation that transcend religious, cultural, and national boundaries.

The study revealed that the complex interplay of positive interactions and ongoing challenges shapes the contemporary state of inter-religious relations in Chittagong. While shared religious events, cultural exchanges, and mutual respect have fostered peaceful coexistence and cooperation among Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and

Christian communities, the persistence of misinformation, social tensions, and political exploitation remains a significant concern.

On the positive side, the research illustrated that interfaith celebrations play a pivotal role in maintaining harmony among diverse religious groups. Events like Ramadan iftars, Durga Puja, and Christmas serve as opportunities for fostering cooperation and strengthening bonds between communities. Participants noted that such celebrations act as bridges, enabling individuals from different faiths to come together, share experiences, and transcend religious boundaries. These shared moments of cultural unity reinforce a sense of common humanity, underscoring the value of diversity as a source of strength rather than division.

At the same time, peaceful coexistence emerged as a dominant theme in participants' reflections, with many emphasizing the tradition of mutual respect and long-standing harmony in Chittagong. The general sentiment highlighted the ability of different religious groups to live side by side, drawing on shared histories and cultural traditions to sustain relationships rooted in trust and understanding. This reflects Chittagong's legacy as a region characterized by rich religious and cultural diversity, shaped by centuries of coexistence.

However, the research also brought to light the challenges and vulnerabilities that threaten this harmony. Misinformation and social media conflicts were frequently cited as critical issues, where false narratives and hate speech spread quickly, often escalating minor misunderstandings into significant tensions. Participants expressed concerns about the misuse of social media, which fuels prejudices, misrepresents religious practices, and exacerbate existing divides. This highlights the need for initiatives to counter misinformation, promote digital literacy, and foster responsible use of online platforms.

Additionally, political manipulation of religion emerged as a recurring theme, with participants highlighting how religious sentiments are often exploited for political gain. Such strategies create artificial divisions, deepen mistrust, and marginalize minority groups. Economic inequalities intensify these challenges by framing poverty and resource competition through religious lenses, thereby intensifying communal tensions.

The study also identified the importance of dialogue and communication in addressing these challenges. Participants noted that a lack of interfaith engagement perpetuates stereotypes and misunderstandings. Open and sincere dialogue is crucial for breaking down barriers, debunking misconceptions, and creating spaces for cooperation. Efforts to foster interfaith discussions, especially among youth, are critical for building trust and addressing sensitive issues proactively.

The findings emphasized that while positive themes such as peaceful coexistence and interfaith cooperation dominate the narrative, underlying challenges like misinformation, political exploitation, and economic disparities pose risks to long-term harmony. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that combines education, structured dialogue, media accountability, and inclusive policymaking.

The study identified a range of challenges that hinder the development of positive inter-religious relations in Chittagong. These challenges, spanning religious, political, educational, and media-related dimensions, reveal the complexities of fostering harmony in a diverse society and underscore the need for targeted interventions.

Theological differences emerged as a significant challenge, where differing interpretations of divinity, religious doctrines, and rituals often create divisions. The research highlighted that those monotheistic religions, such as Islam and Christianity, emphasize exclusive devotion to a single deity, which can sometimes clash with polytheistic traditions like Hinduism or philosophical systems like Buddhism. These differences, though rooted in theology, often manifest in daily life, fostering a dual mindset where one group perceives its beliefs as superior to others. Such perceptions deepen misunderstandings and create barriers to interfaith dialogue.

The study also revealed a lack of inter-religious understanding as a fundamental obstacle. Misconceptions, ignorance about religious practices, and insufficient knowledge of other faiths exacerbate distrust and stereotypes. Participants expressed that misinformation and the actions of certain religious preachers, who emphasize exclusivity or intolerance, often fuel misunderstanding among communities. This underscores the need for educational programs and interfaith dialogue to bridge gaps in understanding and promote mutual respect.

Religious extremism and fundamentalism were identified as major threats to peaceful coexistence. Extremist ideologies that reject contemporary interpretations of religious teachings or promote exclusionary beliefs create an atmosphere of intolerance. Such attitudes undermine the shared values of compassion, love, and respect that are central to most religions. Additionally, religious extremism disrupts the social fabric of a diverse society like Chittagong, leading to hostility and, in some cases, violence.

On the political front, the study emphasized the detrimental impact of political instrumentalization in religion. Politicians and leaders often exploit religious sentiments to gain power, mobilize support, or marginalize minority communities. This practice not only deepens societal divisions but also undermines trust among religious groups. Competition for resources—both economic and social—further intensifies these tensions, as communities compete for political representation, land, and other assets. Participants highlighted instances where political actors manipulated religious identities for personal gain, thereby destabilizing inter-religious harmony.

Educational challenges also play a critical role in perpetuating misunderstandings and divisions. The lack of inter-religious curricula in schools and limited opportunities for exposure to diverse religious perspectives restrict students' ability to develop inclusive and open-minded attitudes. As a result, stereotypes and biases persist into adulthood. Moreover, educational inequalities disproportionately affect minority groups, limiting their access to quality education and opportunities for social advancement. Such disparities create feelings of exclusion and marginalization, further straining inter-religious relations.

The study also highlighted the role of media and social media platforms in shaping inter-religious dynamics. Misinformation and fake news are significant challenges, as they spread quickly, inciting fear, hatred, and conflict. Social media platforms are often misused to propagate hate speech and online harassment, intensifying tensions and mistrust among communities. Additionally, irresponsible media reporting, characterized by sensationalism, bias, and neglect of minority voices, exacerbates religious divisions and fuels misunderstandings.

The participants emphasized that addressing these challenges requires a collective effort from religious leaders, policymakers, educators, and media professionals. Education emerged as a key solution, particularly in promoting inter-

religious understanding and dispelling misconceptions. Participants also stressed the need for structured dialogue platforms to foster open communication and build trust among religious groups. Participants identified addressing political manipulation and ensuring responsible media practices as critical steps towards sustaining peace and harmony.

The study identified several practical solutions and strategies to address the challenges hindering inter-religious relations in Chittagong. These solutions emphasize the importance of education, dialogue, leadership, and policy reforms in fostering long-term harmony. The findings highlight that proactive, community-driven initiatives can mitigate significant challenges like misinformation, political manipulation, and social tensions.

One of the most prominent pathways is the promotion of education and awareness programs. Participants emphasized that interfaith education should be integrated into curricula to cultivate understanding and empathy from an early age. Such programs can equip students with knowledge about different religions, dismantling stereotypes and promoting respect for diversity. Beyond formal education, experts highlighted community workshops and interfaith training as effective tools for bridging gaps in understanding and dispelling misconceptions. These initiatives can provide platforms for individuals to learn about the beliefs, values, and traditions of other religious groups, fostering a culture of tolerance and inclusivity.

Religious communities emphasized interfaith dialogue and communication as essential tools for overcoming mistrust and building relationships. Structured dialogue platforms create safe spaces for open discussions, enabling individuals to address sensitive issues, resolve conflicts, and develop shared goals. Participants noted that dialogue fosters mutual understanding and highlights common values, which are crucial for mitigating tensions. The study revealed that religious celebrations and cultural events could serve as informal but powerful platforms for promoting interfaith engagement and cooperation.

Leadership and community engagement emerged as another critical factor. Religious and community leaders play a pivotal role in shaping attitudes and behaviors within their respective groups. Participants highlighted the importance of proactive leadership in advocating for tolerance, peace, and collaboration. Leaders must model

respect for diversity and work together to address shared challenges, such as misinformation and political manipulation. Religious leaders have highlighted their involvement in joint community service projects, disaster relief, and humanitarian efforts as a means to foster trust and demonstrate the shared humanity that transcends religious boundaries.

To address political manipulation and economic inequities, the study proposed policy reforms and development initiatives. Ensuring the political neutrality of religion is essential to prevent its exploitation for divisive purposes. Policymakers must adopt inclusive strategies that promote equal representation of all religious groups in governance and public life. Development initiatives, particularly in marginalized communities, can address economic disparities that often exacerbate religious tensions. Providing access to resources, education, and opportunities can reduce mistrust and foster cooperation among different groups.

The role of media and social media accountability was another critical area of focus. Participants emphasized the importance of responsible reporting in preventing sensationalism and bias in coverage of religious issues. Media outlets must prioritize accuracy, context, and inclusivity to build trust and understanding among communities. Similarly, combating misinformation and hate speech on social media requires coordinated efforts, including digital literacy programs and stronger regulatory measures to hold platforms accountable. Promoting positive narratives and showcasing examples of interfaith cooperation can also counteract divisive rhetoric.

Finally, the study emphasized the importance of long-term initiatives that focus on cultural exchange and shared experiences. Programs that encourage interfaith collaboration in areas like art, literature, and environmental conservation can strengthen bonds between communities. Celebrating shared cultural heritage and fostering a sense of collective identity can create a foundation for lasting peace and unity.

6.1 RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Performing longitudinal studies to monitor alterations in inter-religious relations over time, offering understanding into the efficacy of methods and the changing characteristics of religious dynamics.

- **Comparative studies:** Studying inter-religious relations in various geographic areas to pinpoint distinct issues and effective strategies that can be implemented in the context of Bangladesh.
- **Impact of media coverage:** Looking at the ways in which digital platforms and social media affect religious tolerance and understanding, including the possibilities for virtual interfaith discussion and the threats posed by hate speech on these platforms.
- **Role of youth:** Studying the unique roles of youth in fostering inter-religious understanding and peace and developing methods to increase their involvement in interfaith projects.
- **Inter-sectoral collaboration:** Investigating the effects of relationships among religious organizations, civic society, government entities, and the commercial sector on mitigating religious conflicts and fostering social cohesion.

By expanding on these findings and investigating the suggested areas for future research, scholars and practitioners can further enhance the development of successful methods for enhancing inter-religious relations, not only in Chittagong but also in other situations encountering comparable challenges. This study advocates for a united effort to establish a society that is more inclusive, tolerant, and peaceful, where diversity in faith and belief is viewed as a strength rather than a cause of division.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SCRIPTS

Q1: What is your understanding of inter-religious relations, and how do you perceive its significance in a multi-religious society like Chittagong?

Muslim:

Islam emphasizes getting along and respecting each other's beliefs in inter-religious relations. In Chittagong, where several religions coexist, it's crucial to maintaining peace and making everyone feel valued and included. The Quran advises us to embrace our differences because they make the world interesting. Understanding and appreciating each other will prevent disputes and create a community where everyone can freely express their faith.

Hindu:

Our religious scriptures say, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," which means the world is one family, and "Sarva Dharma Sambhava," which promotes religious tolerance." This teachings shape my views on interfaith interactions. These concepts help me grasp how important such ties are in our multi-religious society. Chittagong needs peaceful coexistence, mutual enrichment, and community building through inter-religious ties.

Buddhist:

I see inter-religious relation with compassion and kindness . Tolerating differences isn't enough—I want to understand and respect them. This knowledge is essential to societal harmony in Chittagong. It enriches and unites our community by highlighting each faith's unique contributions. Our mutual respect and conversation help us resolve conflicts peacefully. Engaging with diverse religions recognizes our shared goals—peace, pleasure, and decreasing suffering. Supporting each other helps us grow and improve our community.

Christian:

I believe inter-religious relations should be built on understanding, respect, and cooperation. Jesus' teachings of love and compassion for all impact my vision of our multi-faith society. In Chittagong, where many religions coexist, healthy connections between these groups are essential to peace and harmony. This method strengthens our community life and gives a great example of coexistence in a religiously divided society. Building a welcome and cohesive community requires practicing the Christian value of loving all our neighbors, regardless of religion.

Q2: In your experience, how would you describe the current state of inter-religious relations in Chittagong? What are some positive examples of inter-religious cooperation and understanding you have observed?

Muslim:

What I have seen right now relations between different religions in Chittagong are complicated. I mean a mix of peace and problems. Different religious groups have lived together peacefully and respected each other for a long time. Different faiths have lived together and celebrated their own holidays and even joined each other's. As for good examples, there are lots of them. During Ramadan, iftars are beautiful events where people of different religions get together to break the fast. These get-togethers are more than just a way to share a meal; they are a strong sign of respect for each other's traditions and unity. We have some problems. There are times of tension and confusion. Sometime people fight on social media. Sometime ignorant people post disgusting posts on social media and fight in real life. And some people do not respect other religion.

Hindu:

I think currently we are at peace. But there are also some problems. I think politicians are the reason for religious problems. In Durga Puja, our Muslim neighbors come to our Puja Pandals to join the fun. Many Hindu families also send good wishes to their Muslim friends in Eid. Overall, the people of Chittagong are living together peacefully.

Buddhist:

I see relations between different religions in Chittagong are currently changing. There is a lot of peace and respect between different religious groups. Recently people are celebrating Christmas parties, Durga Pujas together. There are also interfaith dialogues and seminars. I see religious leaders talk about living together in peace and harmony. I think these events help people. There are also some problems. There may be misunderstandings, false beliefs, and foreign pressures.

Christian:

I think relations between different religious groups in Chittagong are generally good right now. There is a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect between the different religious groups. This doesn't mean there aren't any problems, but overall, there is a sense of peaceful coexistence.

I have seen people of different religions work together in Chittagong is when there is a crisis or a need in the community. Many times, when natural

disasters happened Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities work together to help. People go to celebrations for holidays like Christmas, Eid, Durga Puja, and Vesak Day. Celebrations like these bring people together.

Q3: Can you identify any challenges or obstacles that hinder the development of positive inter-religious relations in Chittagong?

Muslim:

Building good relationships between different religions can be challenging in Chittagong, as it is everywhere else. I think the main problems are confusion about other religions, the use of religion for political gain, and poor economic conditions.

Hindu:

Misinformation, misconceptions, and prejudice hamper interfaith relations in Chittagong. Political misuse of religious beliefs separates communities, emphasizing the necessity for independent politics. Limited faith-group connections also hinder empathy and understanding.

Buddhist:

We struggle to foster good interfaith ties in Chittagong. Stereotypes and ignorance of other faiths are major issues. Educational initiatives may fill this gap. Economic and social difficulties also weaken relations. Political manipulation of religious beliefs can divide us, thus natural politics is essential.

Christian:

Our concerns in Chittagong include religious disinformation and misunderstandings. Addressing this requires greater education and dialogue. To avoid splits, politics should not abuse religion. We also need greater interfaith, dialogue and leadership from all communities to address delicate problems. We want to make Chittagong more peaceful by focusing on these areas.

Q4: From your perspective, how do religion and cultural diversity impact the dynamics of inter-religious relations in Chittagong?

Muslim:

As Muslims, we are taught to respect all religion. This is an important concept in a city like Chittagong, where people practice their religion in many ways. This variety makes our culture stronger by bringing together different practices and celebrations.

Hindu:

The vast religious and cultural variety of Chittagong enriches and challenges our inter-religious relations. Diversity enriches our city's culture, providing education and tolerance. Diversity can lead to misunderstandings and tensions due to lack of experience. Religious and community leaders must guide these ties toward mutual respect and understanding.

Buddhist:

The diversity of religions and civilizations in Chittagong affects our interactions. I believe diversity strengthens our community. It offers new viewpoints and customs that can teach us tolerance and understanding if we're open to them. Diversity might lead to misunderstandings, but these are opportunities to learn and grow together.

Christian:

I consider our city's religious and cultural variety as a privilege and a challenge. Our community benefits from learning and celebrating each other's traditions. Different faiths share kindness and tranquility, which can unify us. Diversity can lead to misunderstandings if we're not careful, especially when people don't contact with different religions.

Q5. What role do religious scholars, cultural activists, and community representatives play in promoting better inter-religious understanding and cooperation in the region?

Muslim:

Religious teachers, cultural activists, and community representatives promote interfaith harmony in Chittagong. Each group's distinctive contributions are important to me. To refute misconceptions about Islamic teachings, scholars like myself educate our communities. Cultural activists use art and activities to unite communities by highlighting our shared humanity and various traditions. Community leaders promote interfaith communication and partnership.

Hindu:

I believe religious scholars must educate their communities about our teachings of respect and tolerance and engage in open exchanges with other faiths. Cultural activists bridge religious divides with art and storytelling to foster mutual appreciation. Community leaders should organize campaigns that unite disparate groups.

Buddhist:

I believe religious experts should convey our faith's peace and compassion principles and learn from other religions to develop mutual respect. Cultural activists use the arts to unite communities and celebrate our diversity and human experiences. Community representatives organize practical, meaningful projects that help people to unite and get to know each other.

Christian:

I look at religious scholars like me as trainers, sharing our faith's teachings on love, peace, and tolerance and engaging in discussions to enhance mutual respect and refute misconceptions. Cultural activists unite people through art and culture to celebrate our humanity and varied traditions. This can unite and develop bridges. Community leaders organize grassroots activities and dialogue to promote collaboration and resolve conflicts.

Q6. Have you been involved in any inter-religious initiatives or programs in Chittagong? If so, could you share your experiences and the outcomes of such endeavors?

Muslim:

Several inter-religious activities in Chittagong have been very rewarding for me. Interfaith engagement with religious leaders was a highlight. We discussed our religion essential values, such compassion and peace, to clarify misconceptions and promote harmony. Our collaboration as religious leaders during a natural disaster relief effort were another remarkable event. This benefited individuals in need and demonstrated our community's collective power.

Hindu:

I have been part of several interfaith projects. We were able to understand and respect each other's beliefs better by having interfaith dialogues with religious leaders. This led to a united effort to support community harmony. As we worked together to improve infrastructure and help kids in need on a community development project with people of different faiths.

Buddhist:

I participated in outstanding inter-religious work in Chittagong, especially with Rohingya refugee camps. Volunteers from all religions helped the Rohingya with material supplies and a message of togetherness and compassion. Another important event was an interfaith dialogue series with Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist

leaders and intellectuals. We discussed our religions' precepts and the problems of establishing peace.

Christian:

I've participated in some enriching inter-religious activities in Chittagong. Through dialogue with scholars from different faiths, we share and learn from each other. I also worked with volunteers from all major religions to help a poor rural area. I loved seeing everyone work together for a purpose.

Q7. How do you think technology and social media influence inter-religious interactions and perceptions in Chittagong?

Muslim:

Technology and social media influence interfaith interactions in Chittagong. They provide great chances for debate and education, helping us reach more people and foster understanding across faiths. Online forums and social media allow us to discuss our opinions, encouraging respect and research in various communities. However, misinformation and hate speech can swiftly escalate tensions. The conflict on the internet might inspire bad attitudes.

Hindu:

In recent times, internet and social media affect our relations in Chittagong differently. Through the internet, they promote interfaith understanding. Share positive stories of cooperation and unity to promote mutual respect. Unfortunately, social media now disseminates misinformation and misconceptions, causing conflict.

Buddhist:

Technology and social media have positive sides. It has provided us with new means to communicate our opinions and learn about others, encouraging peace and understanding. Online discussions and celebrations of each other's religious holidays have been helpful for reaching people. But there's a disadvantage. Online hate speech can cause conflicts. We must manage this double-edged sword properly to bring us together.

Christian:

Technology and social media offered us to learn about one other's beliefs. It helps foster understanding and prove harmony and cooperation. But unfortunately, our youths are not using these tools properly. They are now becoming the target of online hate speech

that can exacerbate religious tensions. Technology may bridge gaps, but if used improperly, it can expand them.

Q8. In your opinion, what are some effective strategies or practices that have proven successful in fostering harmony and mutual respect among different religious communities?

Muslim:

Interfaith talks have been crucial for fostering mutual understanding and shared values. Additionally, joint community service projects show that our differences don't outweigh our humanity. Cultural exchange programs also help everyone learn from each community.

Hindu:

In my opinion, several techniques have helped religious communities in Chittagong get along. Interfaith dialogue clarifies myths and foster mutual respect. Collaborating on community service projects fosters empathy. Educational programs about different religions foster tolerance and diversity early on. Cultural exchange programs promote awareness and appreciation of our diverse history.

Buddhist:

In my experience, a few important techniques assist in bringing Chittagong's religious communities together. Regular interfaith discussions help us share our values and clear up misunderstandings, building respect. As religious leaders, we must model unity and fight bigotry. Also, establishing friends with someone of a different faith can broaden our worldview and increase our appreciation.

Christian:

We have united religious communities in Chittagong using several methods. Regular interfaith dialogue helps us understand and appreciate each other. Early religious education helps children to learn tolerance. We must model peace and inclusivity as leaders and involve our youth—they are the future of our happy community.

Q9. In your experience, have you observed any specific factors or issues that contribute to tensions or misunderstandings among different religious communities in the region?

Muslim:

I have observed a few significant issues that cause religious misunderstandings and conflicts in Chittagong. Misinformation about different religions creates prejudices and fear, and politicians sometimes use religion to divide. Hate speech and insensitivity to cultural and religious norms can also affect relations.

Hindu:

My experience shows that some variables cause religious conflicts in Chittagong. Misinformation and ignorance of each other's opinions often lead to prejudices and mistrust. When communities are poor or lack opportunities, economic and social inequities, frequently viewed through a religious perspective, can cause tensions. Political manipulation of religious sentiments and aggressive comments can deepen differences.

Buddhist:

I noticed a few important concerns that sometimes cause religious friction in Chittagong. Without understanding, misinformation and preconceptions can cause fear and mistrust. Another issue is our lack of communication. Dialogue is needed to debunk myths and identify common objectives. Some sensitive subjects can cause misunderstandings and conflict.

Christian:

We have witnessed some religious tensions in Chittagong. One of them is Lack of knowledge about each other's religions. Religion is sometimes blamed for injustice without proper understanding. Politics can exploit religion to divide us. If we don't talk about delicate matters properly, it can cause conflict. We must address these issues to maintain peace and respect in our community.

Q10. Considering the diverse religious landscape in Chittagong, what are your recommendations for promoting sustained inter-religious dialogue and collaboration for the betterment of the community as a whole?

Muslim:

A diversified approach is needed to promote sustained inter-religious communication in Chittagong. Creating regular interfaith gatherings for religious leaders to discuss and collaborate is essential. All religions should be represented in these forums. Community engagement projects that address poverty and environmental conservation can also strengthen interfaith connections. Educational programs in schools and religious institutions should encourage early religious diversity awareness. Youth leadership

initiatives and cultural festivities can sustain our efforts. Legal rights advocacy and religious interaction in healthcare are also important. Interfaith tours, sports leagues, and amusement can unite people across religions.

Hindu:

Yes, encouraging long-term discussion and cooperation between different religions in Chittagong is very important for the overall well-being of our community. Along with education programs and regular interfaith forums, we should put an emphasis on face-to-face interactions to foster understanding and empathy. It's also important to deal with structural problems and use technology to reach out.

Buddhist:

I think some important plans include encouraging religious education or hosting cultural exchanges and festivals. We can participate in community events that include people from different religions. Besides this, using media to promote positive narratives, and seeking leadership from religious figures. A more peaceful and welcoming community can be ours if we follow these suggestions.

Christian:

I propose alternative modes of interfaith communication and engagement in Chittagong. At first, It is necessary for religious leaders and people of different faiths to have frequent meetings to plan and debate how to grow as a community. Second, classes on different faiths taught in schools and churches help kids develop tolerance and compassion at a young age.