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THE ROLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN PROMOTING INTER-COMMUNAL HARMONY AND COUNTERING THE COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

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1. Introduction

Communal violence has always been a major problem in the governance of religious diversity in South Asia. In Bangladesh, until recently, the incidents of communal violence were sporadic. However, in recent years, there has been frequent and escalated communal violence against religious minorities (predominantly against Hindus) by majoritarian Muslims. This alarming escalation of violence has become a significant challenge for achieving stable state-religion relations and maintaining interreligious peace and harmony. In light of existing theoretical traditions of ethnic conflict, this paper explains how different historical, political, social, and economic factors contributed to communal violence in Bangladesh. It illustrates how these factors reinforce the sense of distrust, animosity, hatred, division and disengagement between Hindus and Muslims, which collectively elicits communal violence. The paper contends that the existing legal and institutional frameworks are mostly ineffective in preventing and eliminating communal violence. This paper proposes interreligious dialogue as a solution to communal violence. The paper examines the existing literature and case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue in addressing the problem of communal violence. The paper critically evaluates existing initiatives to assess the potentiality of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh. It shows that these nominal initiatives were insufficient to make a tangible impact. Finally, the paper enquires about the challenges in developing a culture of dialogue and recommends the conditions for successfully employing and integrating interreligious dialogue to de-escalate and eliminate communal violence in Bangladesh.

2. Problematising communal violence in Bangladesh

Bangladesh, a constitutionally secular country, is often misreferred by Westerners as a moderate Muslim country (Chowdhury, 2010). This particular form of branding may be conceived because more than 91.04 percent of the population comprises Muslims¹, and Islam is the state religion of Bangladesh. That being said, demographically, it is deeply plural in terms of religion, ethnicity, caste, and culture. This diversity often becomes the point of contradiction in Bangladesh, a phenomenon common in South Asia. This contradiction is often manifested in the form of communal violence, the most frequent and obstinate form of religious extremism in South Asia. Communal violence can also be considered the most detrimental form of extremism because it causes external damages (bloodshed, loss of life, vandalism, etc.) and severely affects the formation of national unity and multicultural nationalism (Modood, 2019). The incidents of the large-scale post-partition communal violence between Hindus and Muslims are agonising testimony of the violence's external damages and internal effects.

The idea of Bangladesh was based on the aspiration to move away from the horror of post-partition communal politics vis-à-vis reviving the indigenous culture of religious harmony (Halim, 2014). Secularism² was adopted to eliminate communalism, ensure freedom of religion, bar religion-based politics from occupying the political space within Bangladesh and facilitate the solidarity of multi-religious and cultural identities in social space. In reality, the process of achieving those ideals never got actionable momentum due to the post-1979 Islamisation of the political and social sphere while abandoning secular policies (Rahman, 2022). This process gradually fostered the dominance of Muslim communities vis-à-vis the seed of communalism. The violence against minorities, especially Hindus, had increased over this period.³

The most violent manifestation of communalism was the attack against Hindu minorities of Bangladesh as retaliation for the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (India). The Hindutva movement⁴ that led to the devastation of the Babri Masjid in the north Indian city of Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, may give the impression that these two communities are opposites (Siraj, 2008, p. 321). Since the Babri Masjid incident, there has been intermittent communal violence.⁵ Communal violence has manifested in many forms, triggered by several interrelated social, religious, and political factors. Some of those notable incidents are illustrated below:

* I would like to thank S. M. Morsalin Hider for his research assistance in preparing this paper.

¹ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2022/07/27/census-2022-number-of-muslims-increased-in-the-country> accessed on 17 August 2022.

² 'The principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of - (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.', art 12, Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

³ <https://apnews.com/article/13fb4612b61af36933facca1c0744af9>

⁴ The Hindutva movement (a Hindu rightist political philosophy) alleges that Hindus are the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, history shows that Hindus, previously known as Aryans, came here from Central Asia and drove the Dravidians—original inhabitants of the North Indian plains—to the South Indian peninsula. Muslims eventually arrived by three different routes: They first arrived as traders from Arab nations along the Malabar coast in Kerala; then, Arab-Muslim forces invaded Sindh in 712 AD; and ultimately, Muslims migrated from Central Asia via the Khyber Pass (now between Pakistan and Afghanistan). This resulted in the foundation of a Muslim monarchy in Delhi, which lasted until 1857. According to Hindu community leaders, there was a temple that Muslim rulers demolished and built Babri Masjid there. See: (Siraj, 2008, p. 319).

⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20121018084907/http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country%2C%2CMARP%2C%2CBGD%2C%2C469f3869c%2C0.html> accessed 20 January 2022.

In 2001, widespread post-election violence targeted the Hindu minority community (Guhathakurta, 2012, p. 295; Ranjan, 2016, p. 137). The Hindus, Bangladesh's second largest vote bank, often become the subject of politically motivated violence as they were blamed for the election's outcome. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) followers attacked Hindus, presuming they supported the Awami League opposition. Also, in Bangladesh, there is a general perception that Hindus and India are synonymous because of their apparent affinity for the League (Datta, 2002, p. 317).

Between 2012-2022, there has been an alarming escalation of communal violence against minorities, particularly Hindus,⁶ by the majority Muslim communities. Some notable recent incidents are:

In March 2021, according to a report⁷, 70 to 80 Hindu homes were allegedly destroyed and burned down by the members of *Hefazat-e-Islam* (a Muslim religious group). A local journalist stated that at least 500 Hindu homes were attacked and burned down. Islamic fanatics also damaged eight temples. The report also states that a fanatical Muslim mob of almost 3,000 people, headed by instructors and students from the Upazila's eight madrasas, stormed over two dozen Hindu residences and a temple in eastern Bangladesh after rumours spread two Hindu youngsters had defamed Prophet Muhammad on Facebook. On 15 October 2021, hundreds of Muslims protested in the south-eastern Noakhali district over a viral social media photograph of the Quran at the knee of a Hindu idol during the 10-day Durga Puja celebration.⁸ BBC reports that community leaders have described this as the "worst large-scale mob violence" against Hindus in Bangladeshi history. Aside from holy places, Hindu village homes were set on fire, and animals and other valuables were taken.⁹ In July 2022, A crowd vandalised a Hindu temple, a grocery shop, and many residences in the Sahapara district of Lohagara, Narail. Angry villagers went on a rampage in the afternoon, stating that a Hindu man, thought to be 18 years old, wrote a Facebook post that offended their religious feelings.¹⁰ These incidents are only a fraction of incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh.

2.1. Theoretical underpinnings of factors of the communal violence in Bangladesh

Multiple interrelated factors—historical, political, economic, and social- have contributed to Bangladesh's communal violence. These factors can be explained in light of different theoretical frameworks, namely essentialism, instrumentalism, constructivism, institutionalism, and civic engagement addressing the issues of ethnic conflict and violence. These frameworks are relevant because they focus on the issue of conflicts instigated on religious rounds.

2.1.1. Historical factors:

⁶ <https://www.opindia.com/2021/03/2012-2021-12-massacres-hindus-bangladesh/> accessed 20 August 2022.

⁷ <https://www.opindia.com/2021/03/2012-2021-12-massacres-hindus-bangladesh/> accessed on 07 September 2022.

⁸ <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/bangladesh-anti-hindu-violence-man-placing-holy-quran-at-comilla-shrine-identified-as-iqbal-hossain-422522> accessed 20 August 2022.

⁹ <https://www.southasiatoday.com.au/article-10195-hindus-in-bangladesh-the-roots-of-communal-violence-details.aspx> accessed 20 August 2022.

¹⁰ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/hindu-temple-properties-vandalised-3071456> accessed 20 August 2022.

Essentialists extrapolate that primordial animosity/ antagonism against other ethnic groups due to some inherent differences in race, religion or cultural lines can cause contemporary conflicts and/or violence (Varshney, n.d., p. 280, 2002, p. 28). The history of division and communal animosity between Hindus and Muslims in colonial India can therefore be considered an instigator behind the recent incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh. Some scholars argue that there was a lack of togetherness between Hindu and Muslim groups even in the 17th century and conflicts within the same religious community (Khan, 2017).

The primordial origin of the animosity can be contested based on the historical narratives of the Muslim period, which began in the early 15th century. Most Muslim rulers in India were tolerant, and forced proselytising the people of Hindu communities was not a common phenomenon (Gopal, 1959, pp. 5-12). For instance, during the time of Empire Akbar, the Hindus controlled some of the key administrative positions of the regime, and many Hindu kings continued their reign under his command. So, the tolerant rulers helped maintain the existing religious harmony culture (Salahuddin, 1994).

Despite evidence of peaceful cohabitation, historical animosity between Hindus and Muslims became the master narrative. The constructivists explain how that narrative was shaped. They argue that the primordial antagonism between communities is not the truth or based on scientific knowledge of its origin, beginning and spread; instead, only "discourses" or "narratives" created by the different social-political entities like colonial administration (Varshney, 1997, p. 2). British portrayed religion as the driving factor in all Indian affairs, laying the groundwork for a communal narrative of Indian history and perpetuating the stereotype of enmity between Hindus and Muslims before the colonial system (Pandey, 1989, p. 132 cited in Alam, 2013). British built and promoted it as such, partly because it suited them to divide India into its two main religious groupings and partly because the locals, the British thought, could not establish a modern nation—they could only conceive in terms of pre-modern religious communities (Pandey, 1989, p. 132 cited in Alam, 2013). The Post-partition communal violence exemplifies how this constructed historical animosity eventually turned into a real animosity that sustains even today.

Despite their differences, the essentialist and constructivist approaches show how the *history of animosity*, whether originated primordially or constructed through discourse, can influence future communal conflict and violence.

2.1.2. Political Factors:

Instrumentalists contend that ethnic conflicts occur when politicians purposefully use ethnicity to gain political power or extort resources from the state (Varshney, n.d., p. 282). This use of religion for political gain has been a common phenomenon in South Asia. This religion-based politics during the colonial era is generally considered the principal factor forging a sharp division that resulted in egregious post-partition communal violence.

The British coloniser used religion as an instrument to enforce their 'Divide and Rule' policy. As part of the policy, they started to give preferential treatment to Hindus and Muslims, which promoted communal division.¹¹ Along with the British, the leaders of Muslim and Hindu

¹¹ The Indian Council Act of 1909 also provided provisions for a separate electorate based on religious identity in the (Imperial Legislative) Council; the Government of India Act 1919, proposed special preferential representation of the Muslim and Sikh communities through the provision of separate electorates for these minorities; and

communities played a significant role in instrumentalising communal sentiment for their political gain.

Regardless of religious differences, Hindus and Muslims jointly participated in the anti-colonial *Swadeshi* movement (Biswas, 1995, p. 38)¹² for the national interest. However, the movement started inculcating religious elements by Hindu leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC)¹³, which alienated Muslims from the movement. This was the inception point for Hindutva philosophy. This communal attitude of the Hindu leaders changed the future of political trajectory, as Muslims came to realise that Hindu leaders could not protect their interests. This suspicion and distrust between the communities gave rise to a fear of Hindu dominance over Muslims. This led Muslim leaders, like Nawab Khwaja Salimullah, who propose the formation of a political party for the Muslims in British India.¹⁴ The All-India Muslim League was a political organisation founded in Dhaka in 1906 by a delegation of notable Muslim leaders who met the Viceroy of British India, Lord Minto, with the primary goal of defending Muslim interests throughout the subcontinent.¹⁵

By the 1930s, Hindutva was shaped into an idea that "equates religion and national identity: an Indian is a Hindu" and specifically considered Muslims as "others" and outside the nation (der Veer, 1994, p. 1). In mid-1940, communal politics had become so predominant that all integration possibilities were effectively excluded. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the spokesperson for the Muslim League, was offering a political solution to the emancipation of Muslims from the Hindu domain because Hindus and Muslims were irreconcilably opposed to a monolithic religious community, and there was no possible way to coexist peacefully.

In 1947, colonial India was divided into India and Pakistan. By this time, a deep sense of communal division and animosity had already been constructed, which resulted in insatiable communal violence in independent India and Pakistan through mass killing, massive exodus, forced deportation, and expropriation of property (Johnson-Roehr, 2008). Hindu-Muslim relations have oscillated between conviviality and hostility since partition in 1947, which resulted in up to one million deaths (Fahy & Bock, 2019, p. 22) and other forms of violence.

The religion-based politics continue to breed division and hostility within independent Pakistan. The rulers made no real effort to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims in Pakistan. The West Pakistani rulers' actions reflected Hindu fear (sometimes analogous to Indian fear), and they made every effort to subdue the so-called Hindu socio-cultural influence in broader Pakistan (Umar, 2004). The declaration of Urdu as the only official language of Pakistan was a direct denial of Bangla as the language of the majority population of Pakistan. This denial was based on an assumptive connection between Bengali and Hindu heritage (Oldenburg, 1985, pp. 724-725). As this decision constituted a direct denial of the linguistic

Government of India Act 1935, the Act introduced substantial measures of representative government through provincial autonomy) and administrative policy (e.g. during the territorial partition of the Bengal province).

¹² The boycott was initiated by a resolution that the people of Bengal will abstain from purchasing British manufactured goods, their education, and employment as a means to create economic pressure on the Government. See generally, A. K. Biswas, 'Paradox of Anti-Partition Agitation and Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1905)' (1995) 23(4/6) *Social Scientist* 38.

¹³ The Indian National Congress met for the first time in December 1885, while the concept of an Indian nationalist movement against British authority dates back to the 1850s. Congress was the most dominant political party with the majority of Hindu members. In 1905 when the majority of the congress members oppose the partition of Bengal the Muslim leader thought their interests are not protected in the hands of Hindu leaders.

¹⁴ https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Muslim_League accessed on 17 September 2022.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

identity of the people of East Pakistan irrespective of their religious identity, it created enormous national tensions, which fuelled the 1952 language movement (Schendel, 2009), mid-1960s political movements for regional autonomy and then liberation war to constitute Bangladesh, a secular state in 1972.

The purpose of introducing secularism in 1972 was to keep religion-based politics out of public spheres. Additionally, different measures were taken at the institutional level to promote secularism and discourage communal politics. These measures included banning religious and political parties; stopping broadcasting Quranic recitations on the national radio and Bangladesh Television; abolishing Islamic Academy (Bhuiyan, 2021).

Institutionalists argue that there are clearly recognisable links between ethnic conflict or peace on the one hand and political institutions on the other. For example, it makes a difference whether multi-ethnic cultures have coalitional or majoritarian democracies, federal or unitary administrations, single- or multi-member districts, and proportional representation. These institutional options can be related to ethnic harmony or conflict (Varshney, 2002, p. 34).

The post-independence institutional measures were adopted to respond to the instrumental use of religion-based politics and to avoid conflict. Nonetheless, Islamisation at the legal and institutional level between 1975-1990 by the military rulers affected the Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bangladesh (Islam, 2018). Legal and institutional measures, which included lifting the ban on religion-based politics, removing secularism from the Constitution, and declaring Islam as the state religion, reintroduced religion-based politics and created a pathway for the state endorsement of majoritarian religion; the practice continued today even after the return of democracy in 1992 (Rahman, 2022). As discussed before, communal violence has become a frequent phenomenon in Bangladesh since then.

2.1.3. *Economic Factors:*

There are also some economic dimensions to communal conflicts and violence in Bangladesh. Instrumentalists argue that conflicts occur when politicians purposefully use ethnicity for economic gain (Varshney, n.d., p. 282). After the independence in 1971, the first government of Bangladesh kept the infamous *Vested Property Act (Enemy Property)*, which allowed the government to confiscate the land of Hindus who left for India, considering them the enemy of the state. The egregious law put a target on the back of the Hindu communities of Bangladesh. For three decades, Hindus were persecuted by members of political parties consorting with corrupt government officials to illegally grab their land using different means (Guhathakurta, 2012, p. 294). Although in 2001, the law was abolished and the government took the initiative to return the property of Hindus, this was inadequate to reverse the years of damage it caused to the Hindu-Muslim relation in Bangladesh. For instance, between 1964 and 2013, around 11.3 million Hindus fled Bangladesh owing to religious persecution and violence (Barkat et al., 2009).

2.1.4. *Social Factors:*

The four theories of the investigation into ethnic conflict inform the historical, political or economic instigators behind the communal conflict, but they do not explain how they function in society. Even with the increased frequency of communal violence in Bangladesh, those incidents of violence had not been spread at the same level across the country. This means these factors do not function similarly and consistently across society. As such, there are unique

social factors that, either individually or collectively with other factors, instigate communal conflicts and violence.

Varshney (2002), under his civic engagement theory, explains the nature of those social factors. He argues that the single most important proximal factor in relation to ethnic violence is the pre-existing local networks of civic participation connecting the two communities (Varshney, 2002). Where such engagement networks exist, tensions and disputes are regulated and handled; where they do not exist, communal identities lead to endemic and heinous violence (Varshney, 2002, p. 9).

Civic engagement between the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bangladesh is mainly affected by the social actors who have a more significant role in creating divisions. The social forces with the agenda, e.g., migrant returnees influenced by Wahabi Islam of the Middle East,¹⁶ madrassah-trained clerics through religious sermon *Waz*, conservative Islamic groups, like *Hifazat-e-Islam*, with the agenda to spread Islamic puritanism, exclusivism and establish an Islamic state, propagates hatred and anti-Hindu sentiment and anti-minority/Hindu sentiment¹⁷ among Muslims.

The preceding discussion shows how various factors, either individually and/or collectively, instigate communal conflict and violence in Bangladesh. These factors do unremittingly enforce and reinforce the distrust, animosity, hatred, division and disengagement between Hindus and Muslims. As such, the solution(s) to communal violence must be robust enough to repel those factors while mending the damage already caused by them.

3. Existing means and mechanisms to prevent and eliminate communal violence

In Bangladesh, the existing legal framework does have some protection mechanisms to deal with the issue of communalism and communal violence. One of the main principles of secularism under the Constitution of Bangladesh is to eliminate communalism in all forms. The principal criminal statute, the Penal Code, also incorporates a number of provisions to address the issues of communalism (Rahman, 2022). However, the effectiveness of these laws and their application can be questioned. The presence of Islam as the state religion and other Islamic invocation in the Constitution¹⁸ and anti-secular elements of the Penal code undermines the secular aspects of the legal framework (Rahman, 2022).

At the institutional level, there have not been any concrete measures taken to address the issues of communal violence. Despite frequent pressure from different factions of civil societies and minority groups, the government neither established a specialised commission for minorities to oversee the matter of discrimination and communal violence nor formed any *ad-hoc* institutional apparatus in this regard.

¹⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/taslima-nasreen-wahhabism-has-invaded-bangladesh/a-18847335> accessed on 03 September 2022.

¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR1m-0Qq7nwU3yxNKYIFhCOOL1EsRL_oJ3MfLv-JbmoGKxRb91cXIMibKtM&v=MkaOgEjwiak&feature=youtu.be ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrFY8iyd5Tk> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ots8hHl8i8c> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC6VRsnzf9s> all accessed on 07 September 2022.

¹⁸ See, the preamble and art 2A, the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

The arrest and prosecution approach taken by the government in the recent past has not reduced the frequency of violence. This is partly because of the efficacies of the existing top-down and legalistic approach to managing the situation. The most frequently used approach is law enforcement to protect minorities by increasing security¹⁹ or prosecuting the alleged perpetrators for their acts of violence.²⁰ None of these approaches has yielded many benefits. 'Prosecuting the perpetrators has not been effective as the problems lie with a deep sense of mistrust, intolerance and hatred between Muslim and Hindu communities that have been forged over a long period of time' (Rahman, 2022). Government steps have not been enough to rebuild amiable inter-communal interaction and build trust. Peacebuilding requires changing actions and attitudes by restoring trust. "The parties are not merely contending over money interests but are suffering from badly broken social connections" in deep-rooted disputes" (Cornille, 2013, p. 151). The actionable steps to building this broken connection are missing in the existing governmental actions.

Given the inadequacies of the existing means and mechanism, this paper, in the next part, demonstrates that interreligious dialogue has the potential to bridge the gap between Hindu and Muslim communities of Bangladesh, facilitate unity/interreligious cooperation, build trust and revive the culture of peaceful coexistence and communal harmony.

4. Interreligious dialogue as a solution

People of many religions have engaged in interreligious dialogues at various points in history, in various situations, to attempt to understand one another better; they have succeeded in gaining one another's respect and have managed not only to survive but also to work together in common goals (Ramadan, 2005, p.1).

Religion promotes transformation by tracing the most profound links between the self, the other, and the universe (Cornille, 2013, p. 153). Interreligious dialogues are one means to find profound links. The long-standing attempts to bring together organisations and persons representing or belonging to many religious traditions have sometimes been called the "interfaith movement" (Fahy et al., 2018, p. 16). Despite significant variations in various faiths and customs, interfaith dialogue fosters cooperation, peace, and mutual understanding (Huda, 2019, p. 97). Dialogue is to develop understanding and acceptance of differences in thought and belief rather than eliminate them (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2007). Through enhanced understanding, inter-religious dialogue seeks to deepen trust and respect and create a feeling of "us/we." It entails "ongoing learning and re-education" (Braybrooke, 1993, p. 108 cited in Cornille, 2013) through honest, open, and active communication. (Cornille, 2013, p. 153). What separates inter-religious dialogue from other types of discussion is the use of spirituality and religious ethics as a primary source of commitment to social change (Abu-Nimer, 2002, p. 16, cited in Cornille, 2013). Also, Interfaith dialogue is one strategy for religious peacebuilding (Cornille, 2013, p. 152). Religious peacebuilding employs faith-based actors as well as religious resources such as texts, symbols and myths to minimise violence, inspire peace, and foster trust (ibid).

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/world/asia/15bangladesh-muslim-hindu-violence.html> accessed on 12 September 2022.

²⁰ <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/bangladesh-communal-violence-71-cases-filed-450-arrested-in-connection-with-attacks20211019102442/> accessed on 12 September 2022.

4.1. Interreligious dialogue and its potential

To resolve ethnoreligious conflicts, one must first understand how religious traditions and identities contribute to a culture of violence. Then how to explore religious beliefs, traditions, texts, and myths that promote justice, tolerance, cohabitation, and peace to restore confidence (Cornille, 2013, p. 152). To transform violent conflicts, religious and cultural values and images that promote reconciliation, coexistence, and peace must first be replaced with a culture of peace. Only the same religious tradition can supply the antidote when religious images, words, and symbols are exploited to sow the seeds of community hostility and suspicion via demonisation and dehumanisation (ibid, p. 151). Religious texts and prophetic stories can serve as models of peace-making, forgiveness, and compassion, resulting in a shift in attitudes and actions (ibid, p. 152).

Participants in inter-religious dialogue frequently present verses and sections from their respective texts on the selected theme or topic and ask other participants to discuss that text (Cornille, 2013, p. 154). Based on the premise that violent conflict is frequently the result of mutual misunderstanding and a lack of meaningful connection between parties, inter-religious dialogue seeks to promote mutual learning, explain misperceptions, and give chances for constructive contact with the "other" (ibid). Religious interpretations serve as the prism through which parties realise the inalienable dignity of all human beings, even the distinctive conflictual "other" (ibid).

Different approaches to interreligious dialogue:

Inter-religious dialogue is broadly approached in three distinct categories: theological, political, and peacebuilding.

Theological dialogue: From a theological perspective, there are several goals for the interfaith discussion. One overarching goal is to improve understanding of the "other" (Neufeldt, 2011, p. 349). Theological conversations are frequently held in settings with religious components to intergroup conflict, and religious actors are driven to resolve differences and reinterpret tradition, but they are not designed to address political concerns (ibid).

Political dialogue: The political approach to interfaith dialogue has numerous overarching goals. One goal is to achieve social cohabitation or peace (Neufeldt, 2011, p. 354). This usually entails teaching the "other," who might be a negotiating partner or the greater religious constituency of those involved in a conflict (ibid). Participants in political dialogue are religious leaders because they are seen as competent and trustworthy and represent their communities in public forums (ibid). After participating in a conversation and providing shared remarks and a high-profile model of collaboration, leaders accelerate support for cohabitation (ibid, p. 358). Statements of peace, harmony, and cohabitation are expected to successfully challenge extremist elements within religious groups' teachings and exhortations to violence and mobilise the faithful to peace. If political leaders implement ideas offered by religious leaders, structural transformation can result (ibid, pp. 355-356).

Peacebuilding dialogue: Interreligious dialogue has four key goals in terms of peacebuilding. One goal is to change people's attitudes and views of the "other." Second overarching goal is to get access to and build on people's underlying spiritual beliefs and motives. The third goal is to increase the number of individuals involved in peacebuilding. The ultimate goal is to create a collaborative platform for action to address the core causes of the conflict as well as

its repercussions (Neufeldt, 2011, p. 358). The peacebuilding viewpoint is distinguished by the belief that violent disputes are caused, in part, by misconceptions and a lack of constructive solutions (ibid). This implies that players tend to regard dialogue as a means of improving communication and broadening the range of alternatives available for conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives (ibid). Participants reduce conflict by preserving some degree of humanisation of the "other" and continuing to communicate as conflict rises. Participants keep conflagrations at bay by exchanging information, debunking rumours, resolving confrontations, and meeting with spoilers (ibid). This approach intends to tap into basic motivations and relationships across religious communities and leverage interfaith discussion to spur change from political involvement to grassroots-level livelihood projects (ibid, p. 362).

Moreover, interreligious dialogue can facilitate social change. Social action encompasses any action in which humans aim to eliminate what hinders and enhances what improves human and environmental prosperity (Cornille, 2013, p. 133). Religious persons who are strangers to each other might build the hermeneutical framework for getting to know each other and understanding one other's differences by working together to solve the needs of those suffering. They build a community of solidarity with oppressed people, which evolves into a community of dialogue with one another (ibid, p. 142). By bringing in fresh voices, socially engaged discourse teaches religious people that they cannot truly understand each other until they first listen to and strive to comprehend others suffering (ibid, p. 143).

4.2. Case studies of impactful interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue has proven effective in complex situations, contexts, and geographical locations. The successful application of large-scale and/or problem-specific strategic interreligious dialogue can be found worldwide. Reflecting on some notable instances of interreligious dialogue would further substantiate its potential to be an effective means of peacebuilding and developing mutual respect and communal harmony.

Interfaith dialogue at community peace museums in Kenya

In Kenya, Community Peace Museums Heritage Foundation (CPMHF) was founded in 1994 as a community development initiative following a significant number of wars in East Africa in the 1990s, including those in Somalia, Burundi, and Rwanda.²¹ The community of ranchers in Kenya also experienced conflict because of cattle rustling. The foundations' two primary aims were: to expose people to African peace history and to help the community gain access to resources and manage traditional peace materials (Gachanga & Mutisya, 2015). To achieve these objectives, the museum curators study, collect, document, and show material culture, environmental symbols, and oral history intimately related to peacebuilding. Their peace programme is aimed at young people (both primary school students and young adults) and includes volunteer activities (ibid). They organised a 'beaded peace tree initiative' in 2008, which reached over 30,000 individuals in 22 localities (ibid). They organised a travelling exhibition on Kenyan peace traditions in 2013-2014, which was a huge success. Over 3000 Kenyans participated in the initiative, contributing to dialogue and link development (ibid). The value of cultural heritage as a tool for peacebuilding and interfaith engagement was clearly proven. It is a remarkable example of a peace museum's endeavour to foster interfaith dialogue

²¹ <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/lari-memorial-peace-museum/?location=kenya&theme> accessed on 10 September 2022.

to foster open-mindedness instead of prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance (Gachanga & Mutisya, 2015).

Swiss Canton of St. Gallen: Interreligious Dialogue as a Tool for Integration

In 2005, during “Interreligiöse Dialog- und Aktionswoche ida” (ida-week), the Roman Catholic Bishop, the President of the Church Council of the Reformed Church, the President of the Muslim umbrella organisation (DIGO), the State Councillor of Home Affairs of the Canton, and the City Councillor of St. Gallen signed the St. Gallen Declaration for the Coexistence of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue (Schmid, 2020). The declaration is a statement against prejudices and radicalism in favour of peace, human rights and tolerance and has a strong symbolic character (ibid). To realise this statement, ida-week has been taking place since 2007 to spread and became a model for the civically organised Swiss-wide annual week of faiths, which serves as an umbrella platform for a wide range of interreligious demonstrations throughout Switzerland (ibid). The radio initiative "ida on air" tries to reach younger audiences (ibid). The ida-week serves as a foundation; achievements such as establishing Muslim chaplaincy at the Cantonal Hospital in St. Gallen and establishing a Muslim burial plot in the St. Gallen cemetery are cited and considered an incentive for the spread of similar measures (ibid).

Interfaith initiatives by The Jewish Christian Muslim Association (JCMA) of Australia

The JCMA Australia is an intriguing case study of how an interfaith group might exist in our unpredictable environment of near-constant geopolitical upheavals. Throughout the year, the JCMA engages in various activities, including public education, civic rights and advocacy, and maintaining a presence at intercultural and interreligious events and festivals in Melbourne (Schottmann, 2013). However, its two major projects are a series of school visits in which teams of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim speakers visit schools across Victoria to introduce themselves and their traditions to Year 10 students and two annual conferences (ibid). The JCMA has produced invaluable personal friendships across religious lines over the course of its 10-year history, initiated a number of important civil society projects that bring together Jews, Christians, and Muslims, enlightened participants to the diversity of their religions as well as the other faiths, and helped transform mutual perceptions of one another (ibid). Most importantly, the discussions at the JCMA winter conferences constitute a definition of conversation that stresses listening and suspending judgement as prerequisites for effective communication (ibid). The winter conferences have helped considerably to gradually establish trust and friendship (personal and professional) links that must reverse decades, if not centuries, of inherited hatred and mistrust (ibid). While the JCMA was modelled after a successful European model, it has adapted amazingly well to Australian terrain and has shown to be a vital tool for building bridges and overcoming divisions (ibid).

5. Interreligious dialogue in the Bangladeshi context

The preceding sections demonstrate the potential of interreligious dialogue to build peace and develop mutual respect and communal harmony. Now, the question is, will that work in Bangladesh? Considering the ineffectiveness of other means of redressing communal violence and the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue in complex situations, contexts, and geographical locations, it can be argued that it has immense potential to address the issue of communal violence in Bangladesh. Therefore, a more pressing question is how to make it work.

Besides, what are the obstacles to doing that? To answer these questions, it is necessary to get a sense of the existing initiatives of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh and if it has been used to their fullest potential. The following sections reflect on those queries.

5.1. The existing initiatives of inter-religious dialogue in Bangladesh

Interreligious dialogue is not a new concept in Bangladesh. It has been practised in this country for many years by different denominational organisations, civil society organisations, and educational institutions. There are no significant, organised or large-scale initiatives, policies or frameworks by the government to promote and implement the practice of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh. Before scrutinising the effectiveness of the existing initiatives and explaining the obstacles to adequately implementing the widespread use of interreligious dialogue, it is important first to outline prevailing initiatives of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh over the years.

(i) *Government's Initiatives:*

The Ministry of religious affairs has undertaken a project on 'Enhancing Religious Tolerance and Awareness' to increase community tolerance since 2018.²² In addition, the government occasionally organises discussions on religious tolerance and harmony, anti-communalism, and other related issues. As part of the project, an interfaith dialogue was organised in the Rajbari district on 4 December 2022.²³

(ii) *Interfaith dialogue by Denominational organisations*

- a. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh established a commission for interreligious dialogue. This commission promotes the formal study of the Bangladesh religions and personal involvement with various faith communities.²⁴
- b. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB) Episcopal's Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Conversation sponsors nationwide workshops on interreligious dialogue.²⁵ This programme aimed to learn about the church's doctrines, practices, and experiences with interfaith dialogue.
- c. On February 28, 2009, 150 Christians and Sikhs gathered at a Sikh temple in Dhaka. The event was arranged by the Interreligious Dialogue Commission of the Bangladeshi Bishops' Conference and is said to be the first of its kind between the two religions.²⁶

²² <https://mora.gov.bd/site/page/e62b3e73-e19a-4a22-95d6-e0214bbc83ca/চলিন-প্রকল্প>, accessed 20 December 2022.

²³ <https://rb.gy/j5huxz> accessed on 6 December 2022.

²⁴ Burrell, David B. Interreligious conversations as Da'wah: An Invitation for Comparative Study and Praxis among Muslims and Christians, Muslim-Christian Interreligious Dialogue: CTSA Proceedings 56 / 2001

²⁵ <https://www.rvasia.org/asian-news/bangladesh-catholic-church-holds-yearly-interfaith-dialogue-seminar> accessed on 12 August 2022.

²⁶ <https://hwpi.harvard.edu/pluralismarchive/news/bangladesh-christians-sikhs-stress-unity-first-religious-dialogue> accessed on 12 August 2022.

- d. Throughout the year, the Ramakrishna mission invites specialists from all religions to speak from their own religious perspectives to discuss religious harmony and peace, following one's own religion and respecting others.²⁷
- e. On January 16, 2010, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, Bangladesh, hosted a "Meet on Inter-Faith Harmony" in Dhaka.²⁸
- f. World Faith announced the establishment of a new chapter, World Faith Bangladesh. On July 29, 2011, 11 young leaders gathered for the first formal meeting of Bangladesh's Interfaith Youth Chapter, led by Bipul Gonsalves, national director of World Faith Bangladesh.²⁹
- g. At a conference for interreligious dialogue hosted by the Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism at St. Michael's Church in Bangladesh's Chalna parish, representatives from the Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim faiths gathered.³⁰
- h. On November 5, 2022, the Rajshahi diocesan Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue hosted a seminar titled "Unity for Peace, Harmony, and Child Protection" in Dhamoirhat in Naogaon.³¹

(iii) Civil society and international organisations

- a. In 2018, Save & Serve Foundation hosted a two-day workshop titled "Fostering Peaceful & Inclusive Communities in Bangladesh," with the assistance of UNDP Bangladesh. The participants agreed to work on narrowing the gap between mainstream religious groups and minorities practising different faiths, preventing incitement to violence, hate speech, and intolerance, stamping out religious extremism in all strata of the Bangladeshi social fabric, and bringing all stakeholders together.
- b. In 2019, they organised a 'Training and Development of Muslim Faith Leaders on Fostering Interfaith and Peace-making Dialogue via Social Media' where 50 Muslim religious leaders from various parts of Bangladesh participated. The training aimed to promote the necessity of interfaith and peace-making communication as a key principle of Islam.
- c. Bangladesh Inter-religious Center for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ) was founded to promote interfaith cooperation. They usually train people with the mission of

²⁷ <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-swami-sthiratmananda-assistant-secretary-ramakrishna-mission-dhaka> accessed on 27 September 2022.

²⁸ <https://ahmadiyyatimes.wordpress.com/2010/01/18/bangladesh-ahmadiyya-muslim-community-hosts-interfaith-dialogue/> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWjcUTxDYBU>; <https://ahmadiyyatimes.wordpress.com/2010/01/15/bangladesh-ahmadiyya-muslim-community-to-arrange-event-to-promote-inter-faith-harmony/> all accessed on 13 August 2022.

²⁹ <https://worldfaith.org/world-faith-announces-new-chapter-in-bangladesh/> accessed on 13 August 2022.

³⁰

http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2017/02/21/bd_islamic_leader_promises_protection_to_christians_hindu/en-1294060 accessed on 13 August 2022.

³¹ <https://www.rvasia.org/church-asia/bangladesh-inter-religious-meet-unity-peace-harmony-and-child-protection> accessed on 13 August 2022.

promoting respect for other religions. 20 to 30 people usually attend their training sessions.³²

d. The Asia Foundation (TAF) held the discussion titled "Religious Freedom, Peace Building, and Tolerance" as part of its initiative "Promoting Community Driven Early Warning System to Reduce Religious Freedom Violence in Bangladesh."³³

e. The United Religions Initiative (URI) in Bangladesh Cooperation Circle (CC) is made up of Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, and Muslims (a total of 7 members). They operate in Bangladesh to promote interfaith understanding and peace among people of different religions.³⁴

f. In March, USAID organised a "Regional Conference on the Role of Religious Leaders in Advancing Development in Asia" in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with at least 70 religious' leaders, elected officials, and other chosen participants from 14 Asian nations, as well as USAID and US representatives from each country.³⁵

g. YES programme and the United States Department of State supported a workshop which enabled interfaith discussion through Podcasts.³⁶

(iv) Educational institutions

- a. The Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Interaction, University of Dhaka, was established in 1999 with its commitment to advancing modern readings of diverse faiths' sources and traditions, supporting changes and working on more practical interreligious communication programmes in Bangladesh. They conduct research, rally,³⁷ organise workshops and seminars, and facilitate interreligious dialogues.³⁸
- b. The Asian University of Bangladesh and Rotary Club of Dhaka Scholars organised an Interfaith Dialogue in 2019. Representatives from Hindu, Muslim and Christian religions have participated in that dialogue.³⁹

5.2. The existing initiatives of inter-religious dialogue: how effective?

³² <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-jarlath-d-souza-secretary-of-bangladesh-inter-religious-center-for-peace-and-justice> accessed on 27 September 2022.

³³ <https://bangladeshpost.net/posts/frequent-interfaith-dialogue-stressed-66255> accessed on 27 September 2022.

³⁴ <https://www.uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/uri-bangladesh-cc> accessed on 09 September 2022.

³⁵ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning/interfaith-engagement> accessed on 09 September 2022.

³⁶ <https://www.yesprograms.org/stories/alumni-spotlight-samiur-rahman-and-uma-shatabdi-halder>; https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2010/10/28/bangladeshi-leaders-concerned-about-interfaith-relations&post_id=61580 accessed on 27 September 2022.

³⁷ <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-dhaka-bangladesh-01st-feb-2016-center-for-interreligious-and-intercultural-94474743.html> accessed on 12 September 2022.

³⁸ See more initiatives taken by the Centre: https://du.ac.bd/research_program_activity/314; accessed on August 2022;

<https://sarabangla.net/post/sb209515/?fbclid=IwAR0ri1tjqpMISjgZSupzy8Jr4UfrtdM2E2smu2zBf7PEC7Ii69HrkaBac#> accessed on August 2022; <https://www.upf.org/interfaith-programs/5739-dialogue-between-interfaithactivists-and-buddhists-in-bangladesh> accessed on 12 September 2022.

³⁹ https://m.facebook.com/aub.edu.bd/photos/a.1010135682332507/2624232894256103/?type=3&locale=th_TH accessed on 12 September 2022.

Limited instances and participation: The secondary data reveals a strikingly low number of mentionable events of interreligious dialogue. Moreover, the initiatives taken so far are minimal regarding the number of participations. This means a very limited number of people are getting access to the idea and importance of interreligious dialogue. No available data corroborates that these limited number of trained participants are making any noticeable impact on society.

Prevalence of intra-community dialogues: The most frequent dialogues are organised by minority faith-based organisations and usually occur with the members of the same minority community, e.g., interreligious dialogue within the Christian community. These dialogues may be effective because they promote the essence of intra-community interfaith harmony and enhance the sense of respect and tolerance towards other religious communities. However, minimal (mostly ceremonial) or no participation from the majoritarian Muslim community could not make much impact in establishing intercommunal peace building and developing a healthy intercommunal relationship with the majority community.

Limited initiatives from the Muslim faith-based institutions and religious actors: Unlike other faith-based organisations, the preceding section indicates a clear absence of meaningful initiatives from Muslim faith-based institutions and religious leaders. These religious institutions and actors strongly influence the religious life of the common people of the Muslim community. Their non-involvement and reluctance to take the initiative are major impediments to spreading the culture of interreligious dialogue within the mass population.

Dialogues among narrow circle: In Bangladesh, some notable initiatives have been taken by educational institutions, and civil society organisations are limited to seminars, discussions, and workshops with minimal participation, which also appeared less compelling. Ramadan (2005) pointed out that some organisers, through colloquia, conferences, and seminars, try to establish bridges, address delicate topics, and avoid conflicts. With time, these dialogue experts got to know one another and developed good relationships based on civility and respect. This is a significant gain. Nonetheless, the difficulty remains that these are relatively narrow circles whose members are not usually in direct communication with their own religious organisations, making it challenging to communicate the accomplishments achieved in these countless sessions to the centre of each religious community (Ramadan, 2005).

Failure to engage closed minds: Interreligious dialogue between convenient non-conflict narrow cycle does not facilitate much in building peace, promoting mutual respect and harmony because it is the most closed minds, e.g., religious radicals, conservatives or exclusivist), which are the root of the problem (Ramadan 2005), i.e., promoting communal and anti-minority/Hindu sentiment and instigating conflict and violence. In the initiatives taken so far, these closed minds never meet, which makes these dialogues less effective in preventing or curtailing communal violence.

Lack of government initiatives: There is no large-scale government initiative to promote the culture of interreligious dialogue. The project ('Enhancing Religious Tolerance and Awareness') taken in 2018 could not offer any effective and consistent results to be considered impactful. From time to time, the government reiterate their intention to organise large-scale, widespread, and structured interreligious dialogue.⁴⁰ However, those initiatives are not visible.

⁴⁰ <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/interfaith-dialogue-be-held-different-levels-state-minister-2004353> accessed on 17 September 2022.

The escalation of communal violence in recent years indicates the failure of this government initiative. As such, the existing practice of dialogues cannot bridge the gap and division between communities.

5.3. Conditions for effective inter-religious dialogue

Community-level dialogue: The interreligious dialogue should not be confined to a limited and/or selected few. Instead, the dialogue should be taken to the masses in the community, especially in regions with frequent incidents of communal violence or areas that are susceptible to such violence. The case study from Kenya is a prime example of large-scale community-level interreligious dialogue. This actually leads to overcoming narrow-mindedness, intolerance and barriers.

Broader and active participation and initiatives from the Muslim community: The development of an effective culture of interreligious dialogue depends on active and broader participation and initiatives from Islamic faith-based institutions, Muslim religious leaders and community members. More involvement from the Muslim community would ensure expansions of the interreligious dialogue. The central government should use their local governmental and administrative bodies to arrange such dialogues and monitor their progress regularly. The government should support, encourage and collaborate with faith-based and civil society organisations to arrange community-level interreligious dialogue focusing on peace building and forging communal harmony.

Legal and policy framework: The government needs to adopt a specific legal and policy framework for implementing the large-scale community-level interreligious dialogue. The Swiss canton of St. Gallen can be an inspiration in this regard. The State Councillor of Home Affairs of the Canton and the City Councillor of St. Gallen and other religious institutions signed the St. Gallen Declaration for the Coexistence of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue (Schmid, 2020). The purpose of that declaration was a statement against prejudices and radicalism in favour of peace, human rights and tolerance, and it has a strong symbolic character (ibid). To realise this statement, *ida-week* has been taking place since 2007 to spread and became a model for the civically organised Swiss-wide annual week of faiths, which serves as an umbrella platform for a wide range of interreligious demonstrations throughout Switzerland (ibid). A similar initiative is needed in Bangladesh to restore peace and religious harmony.

Earning the victims' trust: The success of interreligious dialogue depends on participants' confidence in the process. Since minorities are the victims of communal violence, they need to feel confident engaging in interreligious dialogue. Without their trust in the process, the dialogue will not be fruitful. To earn their confidence and trust, redressing the violence committed against them is vital to bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Regulating and integrating the resisting forces: The existing socio-political situations often deter effective and broader engagement of people of different communities to dialogue. Certain factions in society and the political arena promote anti-minority sentiment and Islamic exclusivism. These factions involve many Muslim religious leaders, clerics, religion-based political parties and pressure groups. In religious affairs, they control the vast majority of the Muslim community. These factions need to be regulated from imparting anti-minority sentiment and hatred using existing legal means. Most importantly, these resisting forces must also be brought to dialogue.

Purposive use of different approaches to interreligious dialogue: Every means of socio-political transformation, like interreligious dialogue, would have limitations. Nevertheless, interreligious dialogue has proven effective means to that end. Its effectiveness in many ways is contingent on how it has been employed. So, it is also essential to strategically and purposively employ different approaches (theological, political, peacebuilding dialogues) to interreligious dialogue, considering the nature of the problem in a particular context.

Interfaith education and research: ‘Democratic societies must address inter-religious issues through education’.⁴¹ However, interfaith education⁴² is not adequately integrated into the current education system. The religious studies courses under the national curriculum are not designed to sensitise students to learn and develop respect towards other religions. Therefore, it is necessary to formally introduce interfaith education in the national curriculum to " actively shape the relations between people from different religions.”

It is also necessary to have extensive and continuance intellectual engagement and research to explore in-depth the potential interfaith education with a specific focus on interreligious dialogue as a means to unite the communities, develop mutual respect, promote peaceful coexistence and de-escalate and eradicate communal violence in Bangladesh.

6. Conclusion

Following the partition of India in 1947, communal violence has been a persistent problem in the Indian subcontinent. Following its independence in 1971, Bangladesh started its journey to eliminate the malign effect of post-partition communal politics and violence and adopted secularism as a constitutional principle. However, the problem of communalism has never been eradicated. Instead, over the years, communal violence has escalated, which has reached an alarming level in recent years. In light of existing theoretical traditions of ethnic conflict, the paper explains and illustrates how this division catalyses the process of othering, inter-communal distrust, animosity, and communal violence. This paper then demonstrates the potential of interreligious dialogue to bridge the gap between divided communities, creating mutual respect and a means of peacebuilding within conflicting communities. This paper presents some case studies of interfaith dialogue that successfully mitigated division and promoted mutual respect. Finally, it unveils that the initiatives taken so far in promoting interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh are inadequate to address the problem of communal violence. It proposes some strategies to implement the interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh effectively. Most centrally, for interreligious dialogue to seriously reduce communalism, especially communal violence, there must be more involvement in and commitment to it by the Muslim majority and their religious leaders, as indeed to the goal of harmonious religious diversity.

Interreligious dialogue alone cannot effectively solve communal violence problems and build a harmonious culture. The other existing legal and institutional means of governance of religious diversity also need to function properly and work in consonance with the process of interreligious dialogue. This concertation ultimately, however, largely depends on the willingness of the political and social actors.

⁴¹ UNESCO guidelines: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147878e.pdf>

⁴² UNESCO guidelines define interfaith education as aiming “to actively shape the relations between people from different religions”. See details <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147878e.pdf>

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