

The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Promoting Communal Harmony: Bangladesh Perspective



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**THE ROLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN PROMOTING
COMMUNAL HARMONY: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE**

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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries, which have been duly acknowledged.

11 May 2024

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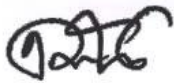


Ayesha Akter Sumi

APPROVAL OF THE SUPERVISOR

This is to certify that Ayesha Akhter Sumi's current research, "The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Promoting Communal Harmony: Bangladesh Perspective," is an outcome of her independent and original work. She has carried out this research under my direct supervision. I believe this thesis or any part of it has not been submitted elsewhere for publication.

09 May 2024



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ABSTRACT

In a diverse society like Bangladesh, achieving peace and harmony is crucial. Besides, tensions that may threaten communal peace also exist. International incidents such as the Rohingya crisis, the effects of the 9/11 attack, and the Israel-Palestine conflicts have influenced Bangladesh as well. Moreover, when politics intertwine with religion and political parties manipulate religious feelings, it worsens tensions. This manipulation leads to misunderstandings and fanaticism, disrupting the peace of the country. The aim of this study is to scrutinise the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering communal harmony within Bangladesh's diverse and multireligious fabric. This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilising primary and secondary sources, including interviews with participants engaged in interfaith activities, document analysis, and library research. The findings highlight that dialogue is pivotal for correcting misconceptions, promoting mutual respect among faith communities, and resolving conflict. It focuses on the essential role of education, media, and organisational efforts in promoting interfaith understanding. The national curriculum, alongside specific programs and activities is designed to foster an environment of mutual respect and tolerance. It systematically integrates themes of pluralism, tolerance, and interfaith understanding across diverse subjects, notably emphasizing these principles in social studies and religious education. Traditional and new media platforms highlight the importance of communal harmony, showcase the richness of the country's religious diversity, and address misconceptions and stereotypes that may lead to tensions. Noteworthy NGOs are actively engaged in promoting harmony through community-based initiatives, advocacy campaigns, research works, training programs and grassroots interventions. This study identifies significant obstacles to dialogue, such as educational disparities, economic constraints, and political instability. It recognises the need for comprehensive educational reforms incorporating teachings of religious tolerance & understanding and encouraging community engagement & empowerment through grassroots activities. Finally, the study concludes that effective interreligious dialogue is deemed integral to overcoming societal divisions and building a cohesive, peaceful community in Bangladesh.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAL	Bangladesh Awami League
BBF	Bangladesh Buddhist Federation
BICPAJ	Bangladesh Inter-religious Centre for Peace and Justice
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
CBCB	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh
CIID	Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue
ECCUID	Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue
INGOS	International Non-governmental Organizations
LNGOs	Local Non-governmental Organizations
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
RKM	Ramkrishna Mission
TAF	The Asia Foundation
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
URI	United Religions Initiative
WFDD	World Faiths Development Dialogue
WRC	World Religions and Culture

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In our increasingly diverse world, characterised by a rich tapestry of ethnicities, religions, and cultures (Wani et al., 2015), our daily interactions often involve people of different faiths as colleagues, friends, and neighbours. Consequently, interreligious encounters have become integral to our daily lives (Vineeth, 1994). In a society marked by this diversity, pursuing peaceful and harmonious coexistence is paramount. However, even in such a diverse societal landscape, underlying tensions pose a risk to interreligious interactions. Historically, South Asia has experienced periods of interfaith dialogue and racial peace, with Christianity and Islam taking root in the region. This peaceful coexistence persisted for generations. Conversely, contemporary global events such as the 9/11 attacks, the Israel-Palestine dispute, conflicts in the Middle East, and clashes between various religious groups in different parts of the world (I. Khan et al., 2020) have raised questions about the compatibility of religious beliefs and the potential for conflict. These incidents have forced people globally to engage in interfaith dialogue, as events. International events sometimes exacerbate local disputes between people of different faiths. Bangladesh, located in South Asia, is renowned for its rich diversity, comprising various ethnicities and faiths (Afolayan, 2001). In such a multifaceted society, religious harmony is crucial to maintaining unity and solidarity among its multi-faith supporters. Disputes between religious followers, while not uncommon, can become significant challenges for governments, religious leaders, and society in their efforts to maintain social harmony and peace among multi-faith devotees.

Historically, Bengal, the region encompassing present-day Bangladesh, has witnessed a succession of rulers from different religious backgrounds, including Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim dynasties (Chowdhury, 1967). Despite these changes in leadership and religious influence, communal harmony among the people was a notable feature. Regardless of the issues

related to national boundaries, the residents of Bengal historically united in their common causes. Contemporary communal harmony in Bangladesh can be traced back to the 1971 liberation struggle, when people of different faiths and backgrounds came together to fight for their nation's independence. This unity was also evident in the language movement 1952 and the six-point movement 1966. Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim nation, is officially secular, with its constitution recognising and respecting all religions equally in articles 12, 28 and 41 (Bhuiyan, 2017).

However, recent events have raised concerns about the state of religious harmony in the country. Acts of violence, such as the bombings of the Shajalal Shrine in 2004 and the widespread bombings in 2005, have caused loss of life and shaken the nation's social fabric (Datta, 2005). Subsequent incidents, including the hacking death of a Hindu tailor in 2016 and the Holey Artisan Massacre in 2016, where civilians and police officers were killed, have raised questions about the preservation of communal harmony (Md. N. Islam et al., 2023; S. E. Khan, 2017). In response to these challenges, the government and law enforcement agencies have taken measures to combat religious terrorism, viewing it as a destabilising factor in a predominantly Muslim nation. However, it is essential to recognise that while laws and enforcement can contribute to reducing religious terrorism in the short term (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006), fostering long-term and sustainable solutions requires a commitment to mutual harmony among religious communities, which is only possible through formal and constructive interreligious dialogue.

The modern era of interreligious discourse finds its roots in the world's first religious parliament held in Chicago in 1893 (Masud & Elius, 2016). Today, numerous national and international seminars, conferences, and workshops are dedicated to interfaith communication. Global religious institutions, such as the Religion for Peace, the Parliament of World Religions, and the United Religious Initiative, have taken proactive steps to facilitate communication among leaders of different faiths, with the overarching goal of creating a more just, peaceful, and stable world (Rozario, 2011). Interfaith dialogue involves communication, conversation, and collaboration among different faiths and religious groups. The Catholic Church, for example, established the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1964, actively organising dialogue among different faiths (BBC, 2021). In Wales, the Interfaith Council was established in 2003 as a platform for community and religious representatives to discuss faith-related issues (Weller, 2004). Furthermore, the Global Interfaith Dialogue Conference

convened in Madrid in July 2008, with representatives from Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism gathering to address global issues peacefully (Masud & Elius, 2016). These initiatives emphasise the importance of promoting dialogue and understanding among different faiths and cultures. In 2010, the United Nations unanimously adopted the World Interfaith Harmony Week, proposed by H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan, marking the first week of February as a time to promote interfaith harmony (Elias, 2022). This initiative, inspired by The Common Word Initiative, encourages Muslim and Christian leaders to engage in dialogue based on the shared principles of love of God and love of neighbour while respecting their respective religious beliefs. This inclusive approach extends to people of different religions and those without religious affiliation, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding and harmony. Initiatives to foster interreligious harmony in Bangladesh have sprouted recently. There are some organisations such as the Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Harmony (CIID), The Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), Commission for Christian Unity and Dialogue, Caritas Bangladesh, World Vision, Ramakrishna Mission are working for interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh during the post-1971 period.

This study aims to scrutinize the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering communal harmony within the diverse and multireligious fabric of Bangladesh. By investigating the historical interactions among different religious communities in Bangladesh and evaluating contemporary practices of interreligious dialogue, the research seeks to identify both the opportunities and obstacles that such dialogue presents in promoting societal peace. Utilizing both primary and secondary sources, including interviews with participants engaged in interfaith activities, the methodology encompasses a qualitative approach to capture the nuances of interfaith relations. Findings are anticipated to offer insights into effective strategies for enhancing interreligious understanding and cooperation, contributing to the broader academic discourse on religious pluralism & social cohesion and thereby offering implications for policy, practice, and further research in this vital area of peacebuilding & social unity.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Bangladesh, a nation celebrated for its diverse religious landscape, the fabric of interfaith relationships has historically been woven through local resolutions of conflicts among religious communities (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). These resolutions often stemmed from the collaborative efforts of individuals from conflicting groups, leveraging mutual respect and shared cultural

values. Local leaders from various religious backgrounds, including Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian, have played key roles in mediating disputes in many rural areas. However, this traditional approach to conflict resolution is challenged by global incidents that have the potential to stir or intensify communal conflicts within the country. Events like the Rohingya crisis (Ahluwalia & Toby, 2018) and the Israel-Palestine conflict (I. Khan et al., 2020), for example, have had ripple effects in Bangladesh, sometimes heightening tensions between local religious groups.

The impact of international events, such as the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, has also influenced interreligious dynamics in Bangladesh, leading to increased mistrust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, mirroring the global rise in Islamophobia (I. Khan et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, a country with a majority Muslim population, the repercussions have manifested in strained inter-community relationships, impacting social cohesion and communal harmony. Despite the constitutional endorsement of religious equality, Bangladesh has witnessed communal riots and conflicts, like the attacks on religious sites in 2001, 2012, and 2017, underscoring the disconnect between constitutional ideals and societal practices (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020)

Additionally, the intersection of politics and religion in Bangladesh complicates the landscape, with political entities sometimes leveraging religious sentiments for electoral advantages, further polarising religious communities (Md. D. Islam & Huda, 2011; Mostofa & Subedi, 2021). Such actions can foster an 'us vs. them' mentality, using religious identity as a political tool rather than a foundation for unity. The manipulation of religious sentiments by political parties exacerbates tensions and raises religious misconceptions and fanaticism, changing the peaceful situation and the goodwill of establishing peace (Kingston, 2019).

While Bangladesh has a rich history of interfaith coexistence, periods of Brahmanical Orthodoxy, along with colonial "divide and rule" strategies, have strained Hindu-Muslim relations (Belmekki, 2021; Chowdhury, 1967). Contemporary recognising literature on interreligious dialogue, although recognizing its value, often lacks depth in exploring its historical context and effectiveness in fostering communal harmony.

This study is necessary to explore the contemporary role of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh, aiming to bridge the gap between the nation's rich tradition of religious coexistence and socio-religious complexities.

1.3 RESEARCH PURPOSES

Interfaith dialogue of positively reinforcing relationships among all faiths (Jonah Obajeun, 2021). Religious chaos exists in all societies from the second world war to the present. So, time is required to foster interreligious harmony. The objectives of this study are:

1. To discuss the role of interreligious dialogue.
2. To explore historical relationships among different religious communities in Bangladesh.
3. To examine the current applications of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh.
4. To analyse the issues and challenges of interreligious dialogue for promoting communal harmony in Bangladesh.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on a single primary research question, this research was appropriately done. In addition, central question could suggest a few sub-central questions to help define the entire body of work.

1.4.1 Central Question

To what extent can interreligious dialogue play a vital role in promoting communal harmony in Bangladesh?

1.4.2 Sub-Questions

1. What is the role of interreligious dialogue?
2. What is the history of interreligious relationship in Bangladesh?
3. What are the current applications of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh?
4. What are the issues and challenges of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh?

1.5 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Dialogue among religions is important in eliminating social, religious, and political instability. It is essential to live in a peaceful community when a society comprises many cultures and faiths like Bangladesh. Small tensions in the social framework put interreligious interactions at risk. The inter-religious alliance in Burma, including Buddhist monks, is trying to limit the local violence that hit Mandalay, Burma in 2014 (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019). After 9/11, America has been trying to promote harmony among religions.

Interreligious dialogue is seen as a tool in the new millennia to mitigate religious differences. Being a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country, Bangladesh can be a model of interreligious harmony through practicing interreligious dialogue. As interreligious dialogue makes aware of people of diverse religions so, it is considered the right way to promote communal harmony in Bangladesh. Overall, the importance of this study extends beyond academic contributions; it offers practical solutions and strategic insights that stakeholders across various sectors can use to enhance interreligious dialogue, thereby building a more peaceful and inclusive Bangladesh.

1.6 ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

Eight chapters comprise this study-

Chapter 1 -Introduction—starts with the study's background, which proceeds to the problem statements, objectives, research questions, importance of the study, organization of the thesis, and concluding remark.

Chapter 2 -Literature Review—presents an overview of the literature relevant to interreligious dialogue, historical relationships among various religious communities in Bangladesh, and current practices of interreligious dialogue by different organizations, and educational institutions in the country.

Chapter 3 -Methodology—presents the chosen research approach followed by a description of the research purpose, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 -The Role of Interreligious Dialogue- starts with the concept of interreligious dialogue, then goes on to theoretical foundation, categories, some basic principles, phases and domains, and then proceeds to the historical background of the topic, its role in promoting communal harmony and sustainable development.

Chapter 5 -Historical Relationship among Different Religious Communities in Bangladesh—describes interfaith relationships in two sections: pre-independence and post-independence.

Chapter 6 -Current Application of Interreligious Dialogue in Bangladesh—discusses the role of several NGOs and INGOs in promoting communal harmony through dialogue. It also includes the role of Bangladesh's media and educational institutions.

Chapter 7 Discussion- This section analyses the findings from in-depth interview data and literature review. The analysis is done in several themes come out of the findings, which include conflict management, promoting values, liberal policy of the Palas, bigot policy of the Senas, organisational endeavour for promoting social integrity, media's focus on shared values, and the role of educational institutions in promoting harmony. Lastly, it discusses challenges of interreligious dialogue, for example: misunderstanding among the followers of different religions, attempting to convert others, the influence of local traditions and family values, political and institutional weakness, Muslim marginalization in neighbouring countries, economic constraints, loopholes in the educational systems and so on.

Chapter 8 -Concluding Remarks- includes a summary of the important findings, implications of the study, some limitations, and recommendations for further study.

1.7 CONCLUDING REMARK

We are living in a pluralistic society. The relationship between religion and humanity is so firm that it has been said that 'mankind is incurably religious' (Clarke, 1962). Most of the world's

population has religious beliefs and practices, but conflicts in the name of religion are occurring and shedding blood almost all over the world. But the truth is that religion does not teach and encourage extremism. The motto of every religion is "religion for peace". The occurrence of religious conflict is as old as history. Several organizations like Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Interfaith Dialogue of Wales organise dialogues to promote harmony. In the modern age interreligious dialogue has been seen as a key method in fostering communal harmony and eradicating social and religious instability. Though there are some obstacles to promoting harmony through dialogue, these could be overcome by mutual understanding and these could be overcome by mutual understanding and showing respect towards all religions. So, the purpose of this study is to discuss interreligious dialogue from historical background, the current initiatives that are working towards interreligious harmony, and to find out the main roadblocks to interreligious dialogue and outline the potential solutions for promoting interreligious harmony in Bangladesh.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of this study, "The Role of Inter-religious Dialogue in Promoting Communal Harmony: Bangladesh Perspective," the extensive research conducted by sociologists, religious scholars, philosophers, and theologians globally plays a crucial role in providing a foundational understanding of interreligious harmony. The wealth of existing literature, including books, academic journals, and thesis on inter-religious dialogue, peace, history, communal harmony, and pluralism, offers valuable insights and frameworks essential for conducting a thorough analysis of communal harmony in Bangladesh through interfaith dialogue. And lastly, articles, magazines, annual reports, and web documents provided knowledge about the current practices of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh. A brief literature review is given below:

2.2 CONCEPT OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In his seminal work, "*The Intrareligious Dialogue*," Panikkar (1999) explores the transformative potential of interfaith dialogue in evolving religious paradigms, highlighting its significance in the dynamic landscape of religious interactions. Despite these theoretical advancements, the practical implications and real-world outcomes of such dialogues remain underexplored, particularly in enhancing communal harmony in diverse societies. Panikkar's discussion provides a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for conducting inter-religious dialogues. Yet, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the actual impacts of these dialogues on religious communities and societal coexistence. The absence of empirical data on the direct effects of these dialogues in mitigating communal conflicts, promoting peace, and advancing mutual understanding within multi-religious contexts is evident. Furthermore, his emphasis on phenomenological methods and the shift from inter- to intra-religious dialogue

calls for additional research into how these discussions affect individual belief systems and community relations, underscoring a critical area for future inquiry.

In the 2005 study "*John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*," Cassidy examines the Catholic Church's approach to interfaith dialogue, particularly through the lens of Pope John Paul II's efforts to foster mutual understanding among diverse religious groups as a strategy for global peace and harmony. Cassidy's analysis illuminates Catholicism's theological and ethical foundations that advocate for engagement with other faiths. However, the study stops short of investigating how these ecclesiastical principles are enacted in the complex realities of socially diverse settings. The research outlines the doctrinal motivations for such dialogues but overlooks their practical implementation in scenarios characterised by significant religious plurality and the related challenges to harmonious coexistence. This omission highlights a crucial area for future research, suggesting in-depth studies exploring how the Catholic Church's ideals of interfaith understanding and cooperation manifest in actual community practices, transitioning from theoretical religious discourse to the concrete dynamics of interreligious relations.

Swidler (2013) provides a comprehensive historical analysis of the inter-religious dialogue movement in his book "*The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue*," tracing its critical contributions to developing a dialogical civilisation on a global scale. His narrative identifies landmark events and figures, such as Nikkyo Niwano's founding of the World Conference on Religion and Peace and William Swing's creation of the United Religions Initiative, which aims to enhance worldwide interfaith cooperation. Additionally, Swidler discusses significant proposals like Taesan's for a United Religions Organization and Hans Küng's launch of the Movement for a Global Ethic, underscoring their efforts to establish a global ethical framework. Despite this detailed historical account and acknowledgement of the initiatives' roles in promoting interfaith dialogue, the analysis does not extensively explore the practical implementation of these dialogues within various cultural settings nor their direct impacts on global peacebuilding initiatives. This overview sets a solid groundwork for understanding the movement's trajectory. It also highlights the need for deeper investigation into the effectiveness of these dialogical approaches in diverse environments, pointing to a research gap concerning their concrete contributions to achieving global harmony.

In "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue," Cornille (2013) critically examines the complex prerequisites for effective inter-religious dialogue. He posits that meaningful interactions between diverse religious traditions require a comprehensive array of virtues, central among them being epistemological humility and a welcoming attitude toward the truths of other faiths. Cornille argues that effective dialogue transcends mere conversation; it demands a profound commitment to one's faith alongside a willingness to be open to new perspectives that can enhance and deepen one's spiritual understanding. He articulates the need for virtues such as dedication to one's beliefs, a readiness to explore interconnections with other faiths, and empathy for understanding different religious practices and doctrines. These prerequisites illustrate that, although the foundational principles of dialogue are consistent across various religions, their practical application and the insights they generate can differ substantially. This nuanced exploration presents a sophisticated theoretical framework for interfaith dialogue but also indicates the practical challenges in applying these principles universally due to varying conceptions of truth and religious practices among different faith communities. Cornille's analysis suggests an ongoing need for research into how these essential virtues for dialogue are manifested and implemented across diverse religious landscapes.

Phan (2015), in his article "*Being Religious Interreligious: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*," explores the confluence of postmodernism, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue. He advocates for the practical applications of dialogue in diverse religious landscapes, underscoring the necessity of real-world interaction to foster understanding and cooperation among different faith communities. This study offers a robust theoretical framework for assessing the dynamics of interfaith dialogue in the context of postmodern societal challenges. However, Phan's research also identifies a significant gap in the existing literature. There is a lack of empirical research and detailed case studies that evaluate the effectiveness of these dialogue initiatives. There is a pressing need for further empirical studies that could provide a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of how interreligious dialogues can tackle issues stemming from religious pluralism. Such research could investigate these dialogues' specific strategies and outcomes, thereby substantiating Phan's theoretical claims and offering practical insights and actionable recommendations for communities and organisations engaged in interfaith dialogues in our diverse and pluralistic world.

In his detailed study, "*Interfaith Dialogue: Global Perspectives*," Chia (2016) examines the complex nature of interfaith dialogue, particularly within the framework of the Catholic

Church's interactions with a variety of religions around the world. This extensive compilation incorporates views from Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Bahá'í faiths across different regions, providing in-depth analyses of how these diverse religious traditions intersect and cooperate. The book includes case studies on Christian-Buddhist social activism, the integration of Muslims in Western countries, and the religious customs of communities in China, India, and Japan. It also highlights lesser-known narratives of indigenous groups such as the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia and the Karen tribes in Thailand, thereby broadening the scope of the dialogue examined. The text explores significant movements like Focolare, Gülen, and Risshō Kōsei-kai. It engages with the thoughts of Raimon Panikkar and Ken Wilber on dialogue methodologies such as Receptive Ecumenism, Comparative Theology, and Scriptural Reasoning. This volume sheds light on the practical implementations of interfaith dialogue across the globe and emphasises the benefits that Christians can derive from such interactions. It contributes profoundly to understanding religious pluralism and the enriching possibilities of cross-cultural and religious exchanges, underscoring the value of diverse communal insights in enhancing mutual respect and enrichment among different faith communities.

Masud & Elius (2016), in their seminal work "The Qur'anic View of Interreligious Dialogue and Harmony", explore the Qur'an's core messages of love, tolerance, peace, and human dignity, arguing for its role in promoting interreligious harmony. They critically address how misconceptions and misinterpretations of the Qur'an, often due to ignorance or manipulation by individuals for extremist purposes, have distorted these foundational messages. Through an analysis of Qur'anic directives and the actions of Prophet Muhammad, the authors aim to reassert the Islamic commitment to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. However, their research highlights a significant gap in the literature: the application of these Qur'anic principles in contemporary scenarios remains insufficiently examined. While the theoretical basis for interfaith harmony within Islam is well-articulated, the practical implementation of these teachings in addressing current conflicts and misunderstandings between diverse religious groups is not thoroughly explored. This identifies an urgent need for further studies that could provide concrete examples of successful interfaith efforts influenced by the Qur'an, potentially offering insights into how these ideals are actualised in modern contexts to promote peace and understanding.

Similarly, Melnik (2020), in his article “Types of Interreligious Dialogue”, introduces a detailed classification system to better understand the varied motivations behind interreligious dialogues. By distinguishing between polemical, cognitive, peacemaking, and partnership dialogues, each characterised by specific underlying intentions and objectives, Melnik provides a refined framework for analysing these interactions. His categorisation helps elucidate the different facets of interfaith dialogue through a clear typology of its forms and purposes. Despite the theoretical advancements presented by this classification, there is a noted deficiency in its empirical application. While robust conceptually, the framework lacks validation through case studies or practical examples in diverse religious settings. There is a compelling call for research that applies Melnik's typology to real-world dialogues to evaluate their effectiveness in achieving stated goals and demonstrate how these various dialogues manifest in actual interfaith interactions. Such empirical research could bridge the theoretical and practical divides, enhancing our understanding of how interreligious dialogues can foster communal cooperation, peace, and mutual respect.

In their collaborative work "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam," Khan et al. (2020) conduct a thorough analysis of the foundational texts and historical actions within Islam, including those of the second caliph, Umar, to explore its relationship with interreligious dialogue. Their research articulates Islam's deep-rooted principles of justice, equal rights, and freedom of religion, presenting the religion as inherently aligned with the ideals of peaceful interfaith engagement. This study convincingly shows how Islam, by doctrinally recognising all prophets before Muhammad, offers a structured framework for mitigating interreligious tensions and promoting global harmony. Despite the detailed exploration of Islam's textual and historical commitment to dialogue, Khan et al. highlight a significant research gap in applying these principles in contemporary settings. The study does not extensively investigate how these Islamic values are currently being implemented to tackle modern issues of religious conflict or their incorporation into ongoing global interfaith initiatives. This oversight underscores a critical need for further empirical research that could link these historical and theoretical insights with practical, modern-day strategies. Such studies would be invaluable in developing actionable methods for promoting interreligious understanding and cooperation within the Muslim community and across diverse societies, thereby helping to bridge the gap between ancient teachings and their relevance to current global challenges.

2.3 HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP AMONG DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH

A. M. Chowdhury (2004), in his book chapter “Ancient Bengal”, meticulously charts the evolution of religious diversity management in Bengal across various historical epochs, underscoring the region's long-standing tradition of communal harmony. This historical exploration sheds light on the adaptive and inclusive approaches adopted by different rulers to accommodate a mosaic of religious beliefs and practices, except for the Sena rulers who promoted Brahmanical Supremacy. However, Chowdhury's analysis stops short of bridging the gap between the historical narrative and the practical demands of modern interfaith dialogue. There's a missed opportunity to extrapolate from the past and apply these enduring principles to contemporary scenarios, where socio-political dynamics often challenge religious pluralism. The study leaves readers pondering how ancient wisdom and tolerance models could be recalibrated for today's globalised society to fortify interreligious harmony and mutual respect. It points to the necessity for further research that explicitly connects Bengal's rich heritage of religious coexistence with actionable strategies for navigating and enriching the complex landscape of today's interfaith interactions.

Nitish Sengupta (2011), in his book “*Land of Two Rivers: A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*” explores Bengal's rich history and its evolution from an ancient centre of commerce, learning, and culture through its medieval era under Muslim dynasties that crafted a unique cultural identity distinct from northern India. The region's transformation under colonial rule marked the beginning of modern Bengal, influencing its social and economic fabric. Sengupta delves into the formation of Bengali identity, the Bengal Renaissance, and the rise of nationalist movements, leading to the tragic partition in 1947 based on communal lines. The narrative highlights the struggle of East Pakistan against West Pakistan's domination, culminating in Bangladesh's independence in 1971 under Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman. This work provides a comprehensive yet accessible overview of Bengal's significant historical journey, emphasising its cultural richness and pivotal role in shaping the subcontinent's history.

K. N. Islam (2011), in a journal article titled “Historical Overview of Religious Pluralism in Bengal”, presents a comprehensive historical analysis of religious pluralism in Bengal, detailing how the region has maintained a socio-religious diversity and tolerance

traditions through various political and social upheavals. This study traces the evolution of Bengal's religious landscape, from its rich past of coexistence among different faiths to the contemporary challenges posed by efforts to impose a singular Islamic state ideology. While Islam's work significantly contributes to our understanding of Bengal's pluralistic heritage, it leaves room for a deeper exploration of how modern-day political dynamics and global influences impact this tolerance legacy. The paper stops short of fully addressing how recent political movements and the forces of globalisation may be straining the region's historical commitment to pluralism. Such an exploration could provide valuable insights into the strategies needed to uphold Bengal's tradition of religious diversity in the face of contemporary challenges, making a case for further research into the mechanisms that could support or hinder ongoing efforts towards interfaith harmony in present-day Bangladesh.

As explored by (Hasan, 2012) in his article “Religious pluralism in Sultanate Bengal”, the concept of religious pluralism in Bengal offers a comprehensive analysis of the region's religious diversity and coexistence throughout history. Bengal, a region with a rich tapestry of religious beliefs, has witnessed the peaceful cohabitation of Vedic and Buddhist traditions in ancient times, transitioning to Islamic dominance in the thirteenth century following Bakhtiyar Khilji's conquest. This article explores the Sultanate period's politico-religious life in Bengal, examining the presence and implications of religious pluralism without seeking to justify it but to assess its historical validity. It endeavours to define 'Religious Pluralism' within the context of social sciences, challenging the notion of religious exclusivism while acknowledging the term's complexity.

Hasan (2017), in his article titled “The Pala Dynasty and Religious Pluralism in Bengal”, explores the concept of religious pluralism as an attitude of inclusiveness, cooperation, and harmonious coexistence among followers of different religions within a society or geographical area. This article examines the notion of religious pluralism in the state policy of the Pala rulers of Bengal, approaching the subject with an open mind to assess its validity rather than justifying it. Gopala I, the dynasty's first ruler, rose to power after political chaos. Other notable kings of this dynasty include Dharmapala, Devapala, Mahendrapala, Rajyapala, Mahipala I, and Ramapal. Despite their devout Buddhist beliefs, the Pala rulers adopted a liberal policy towards their non-Buddhist subjects, predominantly Hindus. An analysis of the copper plate grants from this era reveals a profound respect for Hindu subjects. Many kings constructed temples for Brahmanical deities and donated land for the upkeep of

these temples, demonstrating a politico-social behaviour that aligns closely with the principles of religious pluralism. The study's focus on state policy and royal decrees leaves room for further inquiry into grassroots interactions between religious groups, the impact of such pluralism on social cohesion, and the comparative analysis with other contemporary dynasties in the region. This gap underscores the potential for expanded research that bridges historical policy with the socio-cultural fabric of the time, offering deeper insights into the practical manifestations of religious pluralism in Bengal under the Pala dynasty.

Muhammad (2020), in his work “Tolerance and Co-Existence in Muslim India: The Religious Policy of The Mughal Empire”, delves into the historical interplay among various religious communities in India during the Mughal era, emphasising the empire's multicultural and multi-religious fabric. The Mughal Empire, established by Babur and lasting three centuries, is highlighted as a significant period where Islam, while recognised as the state religion, coexisted with indigenous Hindu practices and other religions in relative harmony and despite instances of temple destruction symbolising political dominance, the Mughal rulers, particularly during Akbar's reign, exhibited extraordinary tolerance towards the diverse religious landscape of their subjects. They permitted freedom of religious practice and included Hindus and followers of other faiths within the state's administrative framework, showcasing a nuanced approach to governance that respected India's multi-religious identity.

Ali (2016) articulated “Islam and Some Contemporary Issues” in his work, positioning Bangladesh as an exemplar of communal harmony, especially in terms of its treatment towards non-Muslim communities. His assertion draws attention to the inclusive and respectful approach Bangladesh has historically adopted towards religious diversity within its borders. This perspective is crucial, considering Bangladesh's demographic composition, where a significant Muslim majority coexists with Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religious minorities. Ali's analysis suggests that Bangladesh's social and legal frameworks, cultural practices, and policies have collectively fostered an environment where religious pluralism is accepted and celebrated. This model of communal harmony underscores the importance of tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding across different religious groups, contributing to the nation's overall peace and stability. By highlighting Bangladesh's approach to interfaith relations, Ali's work encourages further exploration into the mechanisms and practices that have enabled such harmony, offering valuable insights for other nations grappling with religious diversity and communal integration.

S. M. Ali (2017), in his book “From East Bengal to Bangladesh: Dynamics and Perspectives”, highlights how British colonialism exacerbated interfaith tensions in Bengal during the early 19th century. He notes that during this period, the British government and missionaries launched attacks on Islam, contributing to a strained environment for Muslims. Concurrently, the policy of colonial rulers led to increasing hatred from Hindus towards Muslims, particularly among the educated middle-class and Hindu zamindars. This negative sentiment fueled communal conflicts, manifesting in periodic revolts by Muslims against local oppressors like moneylenders, zamindars, and indigo planters. By the late 19th century, this discord had evolved into a bitter rivalry deeply rooted in economic competition and political contention, marking a significant threat to interfaith relations in Bengal.

Mostofa & Subedi (2021), in their article “Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism in Bangladesh. Politics and Religion”, discuss the dynamic political landscape of Bangladesh, focusing on the amendments to the constitution over time. He argues that these constitutional changes are not merely exercises in legal or political reform but are motivated by a desire to sustain and enhance communal harmony within the country, which was seen during the reign of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

2.4 CURRENT APPLICATION OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN BANGLADESH

2.4.1 Organizations and Educational Institutions

An online platform named “Peace Insight” details the Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), founded in 1983 by a diverse group of Muslims and Christians. BICPAJ aims to foster peace and understanding between religious communities through respectful dialogue and peaceful coexistence, thus contributing to a harmonious society (Peace Direct, 2017). The organisation engages in peacebuilding activities, including educational programs for children and teens that encourage critical thinking about peace and harmony. BICPAJ holds regular meetings on justice and peace and operates a peace education centre staffed by individuals trained in conflict resolution. These training programs target the youth, women, and ethnic tribal communities in Bangladesh, emphasising the importance of interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Roy et al. (2020), in their endeavour work titled “Faith and Education in Bangladesh: A Review of the Contemporary Landscape and Challenges”, observes that Faith-Inspired Organizations (FIOs) in Bangladesh, especially those from minority faith traditions, have been champions of religious pluralism and interfaith understanding well before recent conflicts. The Ramakrishna Mission (RM), dating back over a century to Swami Vivekananda, regularly organises "Interfaith Meets" to celebrate the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, drawing attendees from various faiths to foster mutual respect and understanding. Similarly, the Catholic Church, through initiatives like the Justice and Peace Commission formed by Holy Cross Father Richard “Dick” Timm during the post-Liberation War, focuses on peace and reconciliation, especially among Muslim leaders. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), recognised globally for its peace initiatives, has been active in Bangladesh since 1970, initially providing emergency cyclone relief and later expanding into comprehensive development programs, including peacebuilding. Caritas Bangladesh continues this tradition, emphasising peace and justice work, notably through its Justice and Peace Program (JPP), which started in 2002. The program, now in its fourth phase, concentrates on peace, reconciliation, human rights education for different faith leaders, and legal aid for victims of injustice, showcasing the enduring efforts of Bangladesh’s FIOs in promoting interfaith harmony and social justice. Roy also holds educational institutions such as Haqqani Mission Bangladesh, Dhaka Ahsania Mission and Moanoghar, and Banophool Adibashi Green Heart College, working towards interfaith harmony.

(Siddika, 2021) her article “Religion and Development: Assessing the Contribution of the Faith-Based *Organizations in Bangladesh*” highlights the presence of over a thousand organisations in Bangladesh engaged in various developmental activities, including NGOs, charity organisations, and political groups. A notable study by the World Faith Development Dialogue (WFDD) identifies 152 faith-inspired organisations (FIOs), encompassing entities motivated by religious beliefs to work in the development sector. Despite Bangladesh's reputation as a peace-loving nation, it faces challenges of conflict that hinder development, with religion playing a significant role in conflict generation and peacebuilding. Numerous organisations, including international NGOs, local NGOs, and academic institutions, are dedicated to fostering interfaith harmony. The Ramakrishna Mission, founded in 1897 by Swami Vivekananda, emphasises character building, spiritual development, and interreligious harmony through interfaith gatherings. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), known for its pacifist stance, has collaborated with the Brothers of Taize in France on peacebuilding

projects since 2007, focusing on conflict resolution and peace promotion. Caritas Bangladesh, established by Holy Cross Father Richard ‘Dick’ Timm after the Bangladesh Liberation War, launched the Justice and Peace Program (JPP) in 2002. This initiative focuses on reconciliation in conflict zones and provides human rights education to religious leaders from various faiths, highlighting the importance of interfaith dialogue in promoting religious harmony.

Taher (2022), in his book “History of the Department of World Religions and Culture of Dhaka University 1999-2021”, emphasises the universal teachings of love and goodness across all religions and the adverse impacts of religious misinterpretations, leading to exploitation and bigotry. Highlighting the necessity of mutual understanding among followers of diverse religions and cultures, Taher references the establishment of the Center for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID) at Dhaka University on March 4, 2008, inspired by Temple University's Institute of Inter-Religious Dialogue, CIID aims to foster dialogue and understanding through seminars, symposiums, and workshops on intercultural issues. This institution has been actively promoting interfaith harmony since its inception.

Sunandapriya (2023), in the magazine entitled “Saugata”, explains that the Bangladesh Buddhist Federation (BBF) is a religious organisation dedicated to fostering harmony between Buddhists and followers of other religions. Ven Bhikkhu Sunandapriya, the General Secretary of BBF, highlights that the federation organises seminars annually to promote peace through dialogue among different religious groups. These seminars serve as a platform for BBF members to participate in dialogues and share insights into Buddha’s teachings on interfaith harmony.

2.4.2 Media and Interreligious Dialogue

The Daily Sun (2019), in the newspaper article “Festivals in Bangladesh: Promoting Integration and Growth”, articulates that the media in Bangladesh has played a pivotal role in fostering interreligious dialogue and enhancing communal harmony through various publications and digital platforms. During significant religious festivities such as Eid, Puja, and other holidays, newspapers frequently publish special editions that carry messages of peace and unity from religious leaders across different faiths. These messages are strategically placed to reach wide audiences, aiming to foster a sense of solidarity and mutual respect among diverse religious groups.

F. Huda (2019), in her article “Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Checking Religious Extremism”, explores the potential of interfaith dialogue in mitigating religious extremism, emphasising the critical role of religious leaders and the media in presenting accurate narratives of religious teachings. The study suggests that social and mass media platforms should foster constructive discussions, steering away from moral degradation to effectively leverage interfaith dialogue as a tool against violence and hatred. It highlights the need for personal communication and the sharing of religious perspectives among different faiths to cultivate a non-communal atmosphere within society. However, it notes the underutilisation of the term "interfaith dialogue" in both public discourse and media, which limits direct engagement with the concept among the wider population. This observation points to a gap in promoting widespread awareness and participation in interfaith dialogue initiatives, underscoring the importance of integrating these discussions into mainstream media channels to enhance communal harmony.

Al-Zaman (2020), in his work “*Religious Communication in Digital Public Sphere*”, delves into the recent interaction between religion and digital media. This area has received little academic attention in Bangladesh, especially regarding the digital Islamic public sphere and online religious communication. The analysis reveals distinct communication patterns within the digital realm: Muslims often dominate dialogues, Islamic content prevails over that of other religions, and there's a trend of using digital media to disseminate disinformation that marginalises religious minorities. While digital media can offer spiritual solace to devout individuals, it also serves as a platform for fostering communalism and extremism, turning the digital public sphere into a space that potentially exacerbates religious divisions based on the content and nature of online discourse.

Lewis (2021), in his book “*Bangladesh: politics, economy and civil society*”, asserts that the advent of digital media has significantly amplified the reach and impacted our religious life. Online news portals, influential blogs, and sprawling social media networks, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, serve as dynamic platforms for promoting interreligious dialogue. The interactive nature of these digital platforms allows for a broader community engagement, facilitating deeper understanding and respect across religious divides. For instance, media outlets launch specialised campaigns during religious festivals that highlight stories of unity and collective celebrations, which not only celebrate the festival's spirit but also underscore the shared values among all communities.

2.5 CONCLUSION

This comprehensive literature review has synthesised a broad spectrum of scholarly works that underscore the multifaceted nature of interreligious dialogue and its critical role in promoting communal harmony, particularly within the diverse societal context of Bangladesh. The texts reviewed span various perspectives and collectively highlight the rich historical legacy and contemporary applications of interfaith interactions in a multi-religious landscape. From the philosophical explorations of Panikkar, who stresses the evolutionary potential of interreligious dialogue, to the pragmatic approaches of Cornille and Phan that call for a deep, virtues-based engagement among diverse religious communities, the literature paints a complex picture of the theoretical underpinnings of interreligious dialogue. Additionally, the case studies and historical analyses provided by scholars like Swidler and Cassidy offer insights into the practical implementations and the sometimes gap between theological ideals and their real-world applications. The recurring theme across the literature is the pivotal role of interreligious dialogue in enhancing understanding and reducing conflicts in societies characterised by religious diversity. This is particularly relevant to Bangladesh, where historical coexistence has occasionally been marred by communal tensions exacerbated by internal and external pressures.

Moreover, the review has identified clear gaps in the existing research, particularly in empirical data on the outcomes of interreligious dialogues and the application of theoretical models in specific cultural contexts. These gaps suggest significant opportunities for future research to explore how interreligious dialogue can concretely contribute to peace and stability in Bangladesh and similar multicultural settings. In summary, this literature review chapter has laid a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of interreligious dialogue and set the stage for this study to further investigate and address the unique challenges of promoting communal harmony in Bangladesh through interfaith interactions. It underscores the necessity of bridging theoretical concepts with practical implementations. It highlights the critical need for ongoing research to navigate the complexities of interfaith relations in an increasingly interconnected world.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study follows several research methods to achieve its objectives. The focus of this chapter is to outline and justify the research methodology chosen for this study on interreligious dialogue to promote communal harmony in Bangladesh. The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilising in-depth interviews (to gather rich, textured data on the perspectives and experiences of the participants involved), document analysis and library research. This methodological choice reflects the study's aim to delve deeply into the complexities and nuances of interreligious dialogue, going beyond surface-level understanding to explore the underlying motivations, perceptions, and impacts of such encounters.

At the heart of the research design is honouring the participants' voices and recognising their experiences as integral to the research process. As such, the study employs a thematic analysis approach, following the guidelines (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This method offers a flexible and robust means of interpreting qualitative data, allowing the themes and patterns within the participant narratives to emerge organically rather than imposing predetermined categories or theoretical constructs.

Using NVivo software will further enhance the efficiency and systematic nature of the data analysis process. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for the participants' autonomy, are paramount in this study and are discussed in detail in this chapter.

In line with the qualitative nature of the study, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the credibility and trustworthiness of the research design, highlighting the steps taken to

ensure the rigour and validity of the findings. By providing a detailed account of the methodological approach, this chapter aims to offer transparency and reflexivity in the research process, affirming the integrity of the study and its contribution to the body of knowledge on interreligious dialogue. The figure below provides the overview of the methodology for this research:

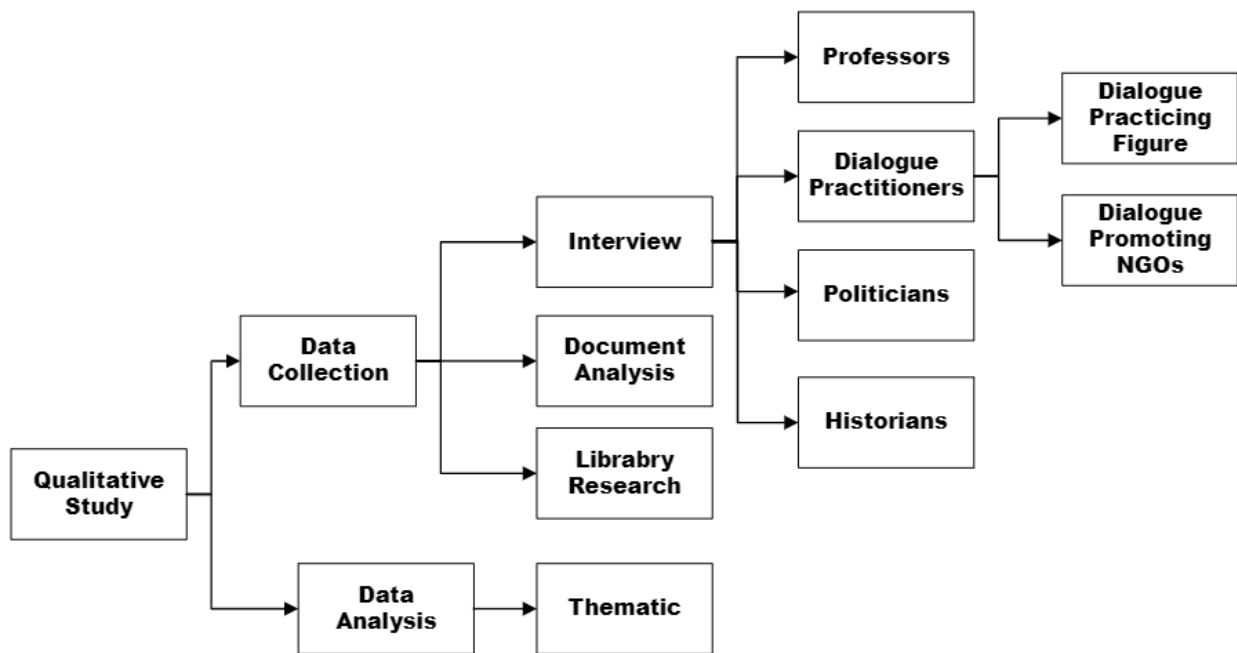


Figure 3.1: Methodology of the Research

3.2 RESEARCH PURPOSE FOR THIS STUDY

Exploratory research, in the context of interreligious dialogue, is not just an academic pursuit but is crucial in fostering communal harmony in our increasingly globalised society. This research methodology is particularly pertinent as it allows for a holistic understanding of various religious phenomena, even those that might not be easily quantifiable (Rauscher & Greenfield, 2009). For example, exploratory research can help researchers understand the nuanced relationships between religious belief systems, societal values, and cultural practices within a given context, illuminating areas requiring further, more structured research (J & A, 2020). An integral part of this process involves recognising and emphasising the importance of cultural and religious literacy (Prodromou et al., 2018). Interreligious dialogue often

employs exploratory research to identify and analyse patterns, similarities and differences in belief systems, rituals, ethical codes, and religious institutions across cultures (Fernando & Jackson, 2006). This approach allows the exploration of interactions between religion and communities, understanding how these relationships shape societies and promote communal harmony.

Religion and communities are inextricably intertwined, with religion serving as a cultural system comprising symbols that establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in individuals by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence (Ware et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding interreligious dialogue aids in fostering intercultural dialogue, promoting mutual respect, and mitigating conflict, ultimately contributing to communal harmony. However, inherent challenges exist in this research area. Particularly, the potential for ethnocentric bias, where one's cultural or religious perspective might influence the interpretation of other cultures and religions, must be cautiously addressed (Kiessling & Harvey, 2005). Thus, the research design should be flexible, adaptive to change, and conscious of its potential limitations (Saunders et al., 2009).

Furthermore, this type of research could benefit from interdisciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, sociology, history, and philosophy. This diversity of viewpoints provides a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of world religions and cultures, supporting the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony (Malhotra, 2010).

3.3 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Based on the objective of this study, it adopts a qualitative approach. This is because in-depth information is required to determine the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony. Qualitative research design plays an essential role in understanding the dynamics and nuances of interreligious dialogue aimed at promoting communal harmony. As Zikmund (2008) elucidates, this research design provides a platform for a deep dive into social phenomena, helping to interpret and understand meanings and nuances that cannot be captured merely by numerical data (William et al., 2013). To study the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering communal harmony, relying on quantitative data such as the number of people practising a certain faith or participating in a cultural practice can fall short. The depth and

breadth of individual and community experiences can be better captured through qualitative research methods. These include in-depth interviews, participant observations, and textual analysis, which help explore the beliefs, practices, values, experiences, and interpretations that form the fabric of religious and cultural life (Wuthnow, 2011).

Clifford Geertz (1973), for instance, utilised qualitative research to provide detailed descriptions and interpretations of the Balinese culture and religion in his seminal work, "The Interpretation of Cultures" (Wuthnow, 2011). This allowed him to explore the significance and underlying meanings of various cultural and religious rituals, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the Balinese worldview. Such insights are invaluable in interreligious dialogue to promote understanding and harmony.

Similarly, Victor Turner's (1969) qualitative study on the Ndembu tribe in Zambia offered insights into the symbolic meanings embedded in their rituals (Turner, 1980). His work contributed to the emergence of symbolic anthropology, highlighting the role of symbols in interpreting cultural and religious practices – a crucial aspect of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, qualitative research is key to exploring individual religious experiences that influence one's approach towards interfaith interactions. As an example, William James' (1902) "The Varieties of Religious Experience" utilised qualitative data in the form of personal narratives to delve into the psychological nature of individual religious experiences (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). Such insights could provide the foundation for promoting empathy and mutual respect in interfaith dialogues.

However, qualitative research does come with limitations. The interpretive nature of the research means findings may be influenced by the researcher's personal biases and subjective interpretation (Malhotra, 2010). Additionally, the findings' generalizability is often limited, given that qualitative research often involves smaller, non-representative samples (Sharp, 1998).

In conclusion, qualitative research is an indispensable tool in the study of interreligious dialogue aimed at promoting communal harmony. Providing a nuanced understanding of religious and cultural phenomena helps uncover the underlying meanings, beliefs, values, and experiences that form these domains, facilitating a meaningful dialogue towards peace and understanding.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

The study employed several data collection methods (primary and secondary). Multiple data-gathering techniques help confirm the results and raise the research's credibility. The following techniques were used to gather data.

3.4.1 Primary Data

Primary data collection is a cornerstone in the study of interreligious dialogue, particularly in understanding its role in promoting communal harmony. Primary data allows researchers to delve into the intricacies, complexities, and richness of religious and cultural practices and beliefs within their specific contexts (Torres et al., 2009). Such data is gathered directly from the source, often through interviews, surveys, observations, and even analysis of religious texts or cultural artefacts (Suzuki et al., 2007).

Anthropologists, such as Geertz (1973), have effectively used comprehensive ethnographic methods involving extensive fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation to comprehend religious rituals and practices in their sociocultural contexts (Krumeich, 2001). This approach provides valuable qualitative primary data, highlighting the meanings and significance attributed by individuals to their religious practices and their implications for interreligious dialogue.

Regarding harmony studies, primary sources such as art, music, literature, film, or social media can be analysed to grasp cultural norms, values, and discourses. For instance, Said's (1978) study of Orientalist texts and images contributed deep insights into Western perceptions and misconceptions of the 'East,' enriching the conversation around interfaith dialogues (Li & Zhang, 2022).

However, primary data collection is not without challenges. It can be time-consuming, expensive, and sometimes hindered by linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and access issues. Furthermore, it necessitates careful ethical considerations, particularly when studying sensitive topics or vulnerable populations (Penrod et al., 2003). Despite these challenges, primary data allows researchers to explore and understand interreligious dialogue and its role in promoting harmony in a way that secondary data, not collected by the researchers

themselves, may not provide. In this study, primary data is collected from the following sources:

3.4.1.1 Interview

Qualitative interviews are conducted to obtain in-depth information. They are mandatory to obtain rich and in-depth information. The study employs a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview is typically composed of planned open-ended questions, with other questions arising naturally from the interviewer and interviewee's discussion (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). For qualitative research, semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most frequently used.

Either one person or several people can engage in it. Normal completion times range from 30 minutes to many hours. There are many benefits to the interview process. As the researcher inadvertently participated in the interview process, David Wilkinson and Peter Birmingham explained that the interview method achieved 100% response to the questions (Randell et al., 2017). The interviewer might choose a follow-up question. For any information that is required, he can ask more questions. The interviewee's body language and speech tone can also be seen.

For this study, the interview participants were divided into four major categories: 15 persons belonging to four major religions and interviewed between May 2023 and August 2023. Two vital techniques of the interview were maintained. First, there was no predetermined time limit for the interview. Priority was given to the interviewee's interest and sincere responses to build rapport between the parties. The longest interview was one hour and 16 minutes, and the shortest was 18 minutes. Second, the interviewer had four sets of questions. One is set for religious representatives, one for NGOs and persons who practice dialogue, one for politicians, and one for historians.

Interviews were mainly carried out in Dhaka, Bangladesh. With the permission of the interviewees, 13 of the 15 interviews were recorded. Two interviewees were unwilling to record their interviews. Johnson claimed that recording, along with interview transcription and coding, supports the accuracy of the data collection (Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, four interviewees were unwilling to reveal their names. Respondents' privacy, anonymity and

confidentiality were ensured. All interviews were transcribed after the interview session was over. After hearing and reading the transcribe, all the interviewees signed a consent letter. A list of the interviewees is attached in Appendix 1. A general set of questions is attached in Appendix 2.

3.4.2 Secondary Data

The utilisation of secondary data is paramount in studying the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony. It often forms the foundation of many research initiatives. Secondary data comprises information gathered by others for a different purpose. This includes books, articles, historical documents, census data, organisational records, videos, and personal documents (William et al., 2013). Such data offers a wide context that aids more specialised primary research.

In the domain of interreligious dialogue for communal harmony, researchers frequently turn to secondary sources such as canonical texts, historical records, previous ethnographic research, and interpretive literature (Lee, 2013). Religious texts such as the Bible, Quran, Bhagavad Gita, and others provide insights into the doctrines, beliefs, narratives, and ethical codes of respective religions, influencing the dialogue between them. Additionally, previous ethnographic research offers a wealth of data about religious rituals, practices, and communal life that can inform interfaith dialogue.

Scholars working on promoting harmony through interreligious dialogue also heavily rely on secondary data. Media content, including books, films, music, and social media platforms, can be analysed to understand cultural discourses, symbols, and values that influence the dialogue. Historical documents like national archives, newspaper archives, and government reports offer crucial insights into cultural histories and transformations, influencing how dialogue is conducted (Manoff, 2004).

The use of secondary data brings numerous advantages. It is cost-effective and saves time, as the data has already been gathered. It can offer longitudinal, national, and international data that a single researcher may find impossible to collect. Nevertheless, the limitations of secondary data cannot be overlooked. The data may not perfectly align with the research question, and the quality and accuracy of the data can raise concerns (Perreault & Leigh, 1989).

In conclusion, secondary data is crucial in studying interreligious dialogue and its impact on communal harmony. However, researchers must critically engage with these sources, maintaining an awareness of their potential limitations and biases. Secondary data were collected from the following two sources:

3.4.2.1 Library Research

Library research is required for qualitative research. Examining both modern and historical writings is a part of library research. The secondary data needed for this research's goal is gathered through library research.

3.4.2.2 Document Analysis

A systematic technique for analysing documents, whether printed or electronic, is known as document analysis. Documents are a priceless source of data for qualitative research, according to Margaret Olson (Belk, 1992). One of the crucial forms of data sources for explanation and analysis in qualitative research is contained in them, along with interviews and observations. According to Glenn A. Bowen (Bowen, G. A., Gordon, N. S., & Chojnacki, 2017), document analysis is a cost-effective method to obtain empirical data. It can be obtained quickly and with little effort. Document analysis for this study includes assessing the documents of the following:

- i. Annual reports
- ii. Periodicals
- iii. Magazines
- iv. Souvenirs
- v. Governmental initiatives gazettes
- vi. Web documents

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

Given the nature of the study on the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony, this research employs a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is suitable for analysing qualitative data obtained through interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unlike PLS-SEM, which is more suited for quantitative data, thematic analysis is a flexible method that identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within the data and interprets various aspects of the research topic, including interreligious dialogue and communal harmony (Nowell et al., 2017).

In-depth interviews with participants provide a rich, detailed, and complex account of the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony. The thematic analysis allows for these complexities to be captured and for both explicit and implicit ideas about interreligious dialogue and harmony to be analysed and reported. This qualitative analysis technique is advantageous as it allows for a flexible research design, with themes derived inductively from the data and deductively from existing theoretical frameworks or literature on interreligious dialogue and communal harmony.

It should be noted that, unlike PLS-SEM, the thematic analysis does not assume a linear or additive relationship between variables but seeks to capture the complexity and diversity of human experiences in their cultural and social context, including experiences of interreligious dialogue and communal harmony. The focus is not on testing hypotheses but on providing a rich, detailed, and complex account of data related to interreligious dialogue and communal harmony.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are pivotal in any research study, dictating the credibility and integrity of the researcher. In this research project focusing on the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony, the researcher strives to ensure the absence of any ethical breach. Consequently, the researcher has considered the University policies and codes of conduct that guide ethical practice.

This research involves participants in interviews, who provide personal information on their experiences and perceptions of interreligious dialogue and communal harmony. In this

context, the researcher obtained informed consent from these interview participants before conducting the research. The interview questionnaire has been meticulously constructed to avoid conflicts with legal stipulations, codes of conduct, and sensitivity to religious beliefs and practices.

In addition to primary data, the researcher also used secondary sources sourced from public domains with proper authorisation from the copyright holders. These data are being used with the appropriate approval from the respective authorities, ensuring respect for intellectual property rights. The protection of the privacy of the respondents has been a paramount consideration, and strict measures have been taken to preserve confidentiality. Moreover, the researcher is keenly aware of the sensitive nature of discussions around religion and harmony and has taken utmost care to respect all participants' beliefs, practices, and sentiments.

In essence, researching the role of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony has been approached with extreme care, ensuring adherence to ethical standards while remaining sensitive to the multicultural, interfaith nature of the subject matter.

3.7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, thematic analysis, as this chapter outlines, is a robust methodological approach for analysing qualitative data from in-depth interviews. By applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide to thematic analysis, this study can address the research questions at hand in a detailed and comprehensive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through thematic analysis, the study has the potential to uncover intricate patterns within the data and to provide rich insights into the nuanced experiences and perspectives of the participants. Furthermore, using NVivo 14 software enhances the systematic nature of the data analysis process and ensures organised data management, strengthening the findings' reliability and validity. It is essential to note the flexible and iterative nature of the thematic analysis process, which does not adhere to a strictly linear progression. The flexibility of this approach allows the researcher to thoroughly explore and interpret the complexities inherent in the participant narratives, thus capturing the diversity and richness of human experience in its cultural and social context. The strength of this qualitative research study lies in its potential to generate nuanced and rich descriptive data, which offers a deeper understanding of interreligious dialogue. It seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, offering unique insights

that quantitative methods might overlook. In sum, this chapter has provided a detailed account of the research design, the selection of participants, the data collection and analysis procedures, and the ethical considerations. By adhering to these rigorous methodological steps, the study ensures the trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings, contributing valuable insights to the existing literature on interreligious dialogue.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Interreligious dialogue is still a wonderful phenomenon, regardless of how common it may be today. Adherents of various traditions have, at best, ignored one another for generations and, at worst, engaged in conflict (Lock, 2010). Interreligious meetings have occurred in the past, but the dialogical "turn" is a relatively modern phenomenon (Moyaert, 2013). Even while there are still many violent interreligious disputes in the world, there is a rising belief that there is also potential for kind and respectful interactions between the various religions and their followers. Religious harmony or communal harmony is not a topic that has arisen as a result of the current events in Bangladesh; rather, it is an issue that has been debated for a very long time and has not yet yielded a workable solution despite the sincere wish of every sensitive and peace-loving person (Rahman Belal, 2001). Why does the world consider interreligious or inter-communal harmony? The reason for the current unrest is either religion or community or how people view religion. The problem might be simpler if the cause could be determined (Bishop et al., 1985).

Over the past few years, the historical occurrences in Bangladesh highlighted the underlying animosity between adherents of various religions (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). This requires that every person, regardless of affiliation with a particular religion or group, be aware of and respect different faiths and communities (Levin, 1994). Hans Küng, an expert in ecumenical theology, once stated that there can be no religious harmony without interreligious dialogue (Basuki, 2018). This chapter will discuss several aspects of interreligious dialogue to obtain the research goal.

4.2 CONCEPT OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Interreligious dialogue exchanges only became widely accepted in the last century's socio-political and religious spheres (Neufeldt, 2011). However, most people are generally unaware of the meaning and objectives of it. Catholics' understanding of interreligious interaction was reframed by the Vatican II text *Nostra Aetate* fifty years ago (Morgan, 2015). Because of this historic pontifical statement, interfaith goals were studied and addressed globally for the first time in history (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Suppose a precise definition offers a solid foundation for understanding and engaging in interreligious dialogue. In that case, governments, religious communities, companies, and the general public can better realise interfaith dialogue's aims.

Two Greek terms are the origin of the word dialogue: 'dia and logos' (Lapid, 2003). The meaning of these two words is a conversation through words as they denote through and word. " In the Qur'an, dialogue is described using two Arabic words (Mir, 1992). The first is called *war* and refers to any conversation between two or more individuals that attempts to correct errors, provide arguments, establish facts, refute dubious arguments, or respond to incorrect claims or viewpoints (Lecocq & Schrijver, 2007). The second is *jadal*, utilised to defeat the other side even when the evidence against him is insufficient but has the same broad meaning as *hiwar* (Vaezi, 2018).

Some Muslim scholars define dialogue as *da'wah*, which includes preaching Islamic teachings, promoting virtues and avoiding vices, diverting people to a religion that is beneficial to them and helps them avoid divergence, moving people from one place to another, and giving them in-depth knowledge to understand the meaning of life (Karim & Saili, 2009). The well-known Islamic scholar Ismael Raji al-Faruqi defines dialogue as "*da'wah*" and "*mission*," and he sees it as a crucial tool for both Muslims and Christians (Al Faruqi, 1998). Here, it should be noted that Islamic *Da'wah* aims to promote both human values and Islam as a religion for the benefit of all.

The best way to describe interreligious dialogue is as a purposeful meeting and interaction of adherents of various religions acting as adherents of various religions. Adam Seligman and other interfaith professionals emphasise the value of interfaith discourse as a powerful learning opportunity (Moyaert, 2018). Dr. Mahbubur Rahman, a scholar and interreligious activist, summarised the basic goal of interreligious conversation before defining

it. It aims to foster understanding amongst followers of other faiths and traditions to realise meaningful coexistence (Fergus, 2020). Most interfaith professionals concur that the primary goal of interreligious dialogue is peace-making. Thus, interreligious dialogue is a method of fostering peace among those who practice other religions.

Dialogue is defined in two parts by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. "[First,] it means reciprocal communication that leads to a shared objective or, at a deeper level, interpersonal connection at the merely human level. Second, communication might be interpreted as friendship and respect (de Béthune OSB, 2013). In general, interfaith dialogue is a discussion in which two or more persons of various religions and faiths exchange ideas and views. Despite stark disparities in religious beliefs and practices, interfaith dialogue aims to foster cooperation, peace, and mutual understanding.

4.2.1 Theoretical Assumptions of Interreligious Dialogue

The concept of interreligious dialogue can be examined through the lenses of various theories, including religious pluralism theory, conflict resolution theory, communication theory, and social cohesion theory.

4.2.1.1 Religious Pluralism Theory

Religious Pluralism Theory, articulated by scholars like Diana L. Eck in her work "Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras," emphasises the coexistence and mutual respect among various religious traditions (Adjei, 2023). This theory advocates for acknowledging and accepting religious diversity as a societal strength rather than a source of division. Many studies have explored the role of religious pluralism theory and interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony. Sung - min Kim (2020) and Resane (2022) emphasise the importance of interfaith dialogue in maintaining harmony, with the latter specifically highlighting the use of Comparative Theology. Kruja (2021) and Chaudhari (2016) focus on the role of education and dialogue in promoting peacebuilding, with the former discussing the impact of religious education in Albania and the latter emphasising the need for positive interaction between different faith communities. Larson & Shady (2009) provide theoretical frameworks for interfaith dialogue, with the former discussing the concepts of inclusion and embracing and proposing creative forms of dialogue. Lastly, Arthur (2011)

argues for the importance of interreligious dialogue in respecting religious differences and developing shared values.

4.2.1.2 Conflict Resolution Theory

Conflict Resolution Theory provides a framework for understanding and resolving disputes peacefully and constructively. As expounded by scholars like Morton Deutsch in "The Resolution of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Processes," this theory focuses on identifying and addressing the underlying causes of conflict (Deutsch, 1973). M. Swamy (2012) discusses the need for dialogue to address the root causes of conflicts, with calling for a re-visioning of dialogue to incorporate grassroots experiences. Gopin (1997) and Abu-Nimer (2001) highlight the potential of interfaith dialogue in conflict resolution. Gopin calls for a systematic examination of religious decision-making, and Abu-Nimer proposes a training model for interreligious peacebuilding.

4.2.1.3 Communication Theory

Communication Theory examines the process of transmitting information and how this process influences human behaviour and society. In "Theories of Human Communication" by Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, the authors explore how different contexts, channels, and perceptions affect communication (Littlejohn, 2010). Mustofa (2022) emphasises the importance of dialogue and understanding in diverse communities and specifically highlights the role of collaborative governance and communication models. Sung - min Kim (2020) focuses on the practical application of communication theories, with Kim using Habermas' theory of communicative action to analyse interfaith dialogue in Indonesia. Malakhov (2019) underscores the need for dialogue and understanding in overcoming religious conflict, specifically highlighting the potential of dialogical communication in achieving social harmony. Ali-Dib (2008) and Cherian (2019) provide specific case studies and perspectives, with Ali-Dib discussing the role of interfaith dialogue in Syria and Cherian proposing a Christian perspective on interreligious dialogue in South Asia.

4.2.1.4 Social Cohesion Theory

Social Cohesion Theory, explored by Noah E. Friedkin, revolves around building unified societies that respect diversity and ensure social welfare (Friedkin, 2004). It stresses the

importance of shared values, community engagement, and a sense of belonging among members of society. Skeie (2019) and Sulistyani et al. (2020) delve into the concept of social capital and the negotiation strategies local religious groups use to establish harmony, respectively. C. Holland & M. Walker (2018) stresses the importance of interfaith dialogue in embracing diversity and promoting peaceful coexistence.

These theories provide a comprehensive understanding of interreligious dialogue and analyse the dynamics of diversity, conflict, communication, and social integration, especially in interreligious dialogue contexts.

4.2.2 Categories of Interreligious Dialogue

A multitude of formats for dialogue are possible. The four types of interreligious dialogue that Melnik (2020) and Ugwoji (2008) stress are dialogue of religious experience, dialogue of

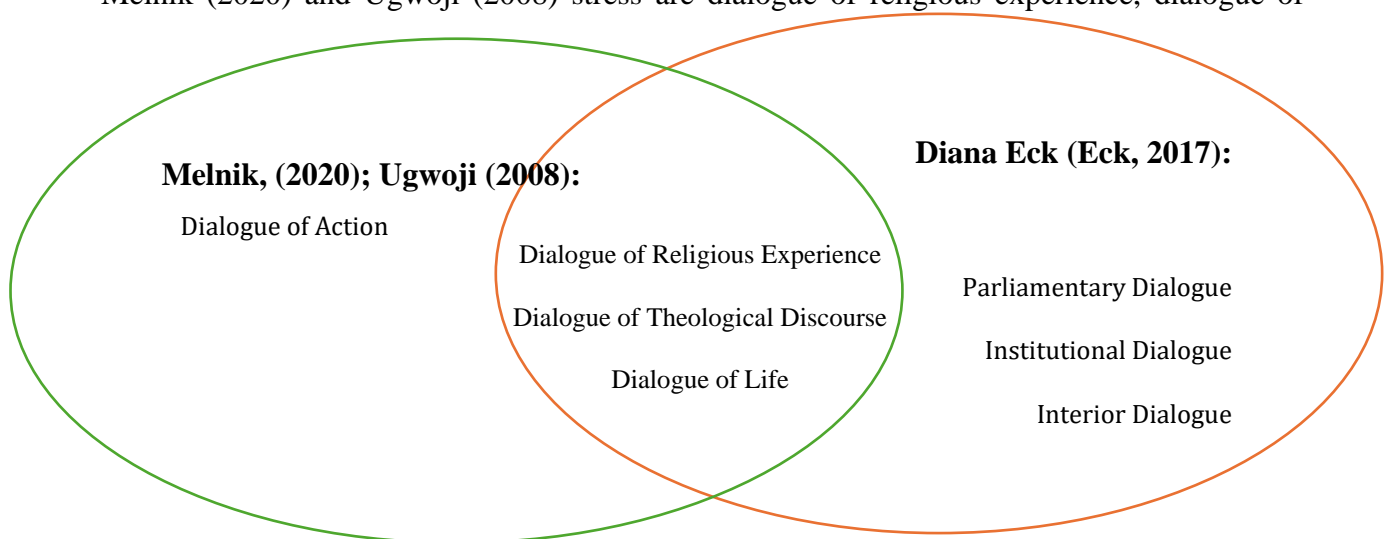


Figure 4.1: Categories of Interreligious Dialogue

theological discourse, dialogue of action, and dialogue of life (Ugwoji, 2008) (Melnik, 2019). Diana Eck uses six categories to classify dialogue (Eck, 2017), of which three are common, including parliamentary, institutional, and interior dialogue.

A brief description of each follows the following list of dialogue types:

- i. The Dialogue of Life entails good encounters through frank discussions of various viewpoints, ideas, and values. It is a method of using religious discussions to make friends and have fun together. Sharing and discussing the human experience in our daily lives in harmony will probably lead to understanding.

- ii. Dialogue of *Religious Experience* is an intelligent conversation about the human experience that pays close attention to the influences of one's religious and moral upbringing (Friday, 2013). While comparing various points of view on the religious and spiritual aspects of human existence, there is mutual respect and appreciation amongst all parties.
- iii. Dialogue of Theological Exchange aims to promote peace and harmony via cooperative dialogue on theological issues such as religious principles and values (Neufeldt, 2011). This discussion makes clear the parallels and contrasts between theological and philosophical positions.
- iv. An alliance for peacebuilding initiatives is called *Dialogue of Action*. By working together on theological issues, a deeper understanding is created while considering individual religious origins (Al Qurtuby, 2013).
- v. A significant ecumenical gathering, like the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, is covered by *Parliamentary Dialogue* (Swamy, 2012).
- vi. Institutional Dialogue aims to create avenues of contact between various religious communities using institutional tools. This discourse is being promoted by many international organisations (Masud & Elius, 2016).
- vii. Studying other religions' sacred texts and realising their deeper implications encourages *Inner Dialogue* (I. Khan et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Some Basic Principles of Interreligious Dialogue

The main goal of a dialogue is for each participant to learn from the other to develop and grow (Duffey et al., 2009). Each participant in a dialogue must listen to the other as empathetically and freely as possible to comprehend the other's standpoint as precisely and, as it were, as much from within as feasible. Each person must enter the discussion with the utmost integrity and honesty. Each participant must presume the other partners share their total honesty and sincerity. Each member must enter the discussion without preconceived notions about the areas of disagreement (Ball et al., 1995). Instead, each participant should listen to the other participant with compassion and openness and try to agree with the dialogue partner to the extent that this is possible while still upholding the principles of his own tradition. Only on the foundation of mutual trust can dialogue take place. Only dialogue between equals, or *par cum*

pari as the Vatican II put it, can be had. As a result, there cannot even be a conversation between an accomplished scholar and a "person in the pew" type. Each member eventually needs to make an effort to "feel from within" the partner's religion, as religion affects both the individual and the collective spirit, heart, and "whole being," in addition to the intellect (Swidler, 1983). John Dunne describes "crossing over" into another person's religious experience in this passage and returning enlightened, widened, and deeper (Swidler, 1983). One should be prepared and able to engage in appropriate self-criticism of one's tradition.

4.2.4 Phases and Domains of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue takes place in three domains: the practical, in which we cooperate to benefit humanity; the cognitive, in which we seek knowledge and the truth; and the "spiritual," in which we try to know "from within" the partner's faith (Swidler, 1983). The three phases of interreligious dialogue are similar. In the first stage, we understand each other more accurately after unlearning erroneous information. In phase two, we start to recognise the partner's tradition's values and want to incorporate them into our own. We may occasionally move into phase three of the dialogue if we are serious, persistent, and sensitive enough. Here, we start to investigate new facets of reality, significance, and truth that neither of us had ever considered (Swidler, 2004).

4.3 Expansion of Interreligious Dialogue: A New Movement in The Age of Humanity

Throughout history, people have tried to understand each other, leading to dialogue between different religions for as long as these religions have existed. There are many examples of this kind of dialogue from ancient times. One clear example is when Prophet Muhammad led Medina. He created a constitution for Medina after talking with its people, who were from various backgrounds, including Muslims, Jews, Christians, Polytheists, and those not following any religion (Diab, 2018). This constitution is considered the first of its kind, setting up a diverse and open-minded community. Under Prophet Muhammad's leadership, Medina was where different religious groups lived peacefully from 622 to 632 (Koller, 2004).

Similarly, Muslim Spain, especially under the Umayyad dynasty from 756 to 1031, was known for its religious diversity (Masud & Elius, 2016). Islam, Judaism, and Christianity were all practised side by side, creating a golden age of tolerance and harmony among different

religious and ethnic groups (Masud & Elius, 2016). This spirit of coexistence was also seen under the Ottoman Turks from the 15th to the 19th centuries, where Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in peace mostly (Dursteler, 1998). Emperor Akbar of India, ruling from 1556 to 1605, was particularly tolerant of different religions, further showcasing how history is filled with peaceful interfaith relationships.

The start of modern interreligious dialogue can be traced back to the first World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1983, marking the first official meeting to discuss faith among people from different religions globally (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2011). Since then, numerous national and international seminars, conferences, and workshops on interreligious dialogue have been organised worldwide.

Four initiatives among the Christian communities followed the expansion of interreligious dialogue. Firstly, Nikkyo Niwano founded the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) for the first time in Kyoto, Japan (Covell, 2014). It has an international conference every five years and has affiliations in 75 countries (Swidler, 2013). Nikkyo Niwano co-founded the 6.5 million strong Rissho Kosei Kai Japanese Buddhist sect in 1938. Early in the 1960s, Pope Paul VI travelled to Niwano for the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) (“10 Risshō Kōseikai,” 2018). The Oriens Institute for Religious Research was created in Tokyo by Joseph Spae, a Belgian Catholic priest trained in interreligious dialogue and Buddhism (Swidler, 2013). After making this decision, Niwano resolved to focus heavily on interreligious dialogue both personally and through Rissho Kosei Kai. As a result, the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace was founded in 1976 and became a member of the WCRP (“10 Risshō Kōseikai,” 2018).

The second was the launch of the United Religions Initiative (URI). In 1993, after receiving a request from the UN to host a sizable interfaith festival in San Francisco to commemorate the UN Charter's fiftieth anniversary, California Episcopal Bishop William Swing came up with the idea for URI, according to the organisation's charter (Haynes, 2018). This organisation has affiliates in 75 different countries.

Third, a year after the WCRP was created, Taesan (1916-1998), the second Head Dharma Master of the brand-new Buddhist sect known as Won Buddhism, proposed a United Religions Organization (URO) (Swidler, 2013). According to Taesan, United Religions was

founded to " build spiritual power through the cooperation of the world religions and promote human happiness and world peace by the balance and harmony of political power and spiritual strength". The URO was present at the UN in New York during the 20th century's latter decades but eventually amalgamated with the URI.

The fourth is the first official announcement of the Movement for a Global Ethic. *'Project Weltethos'*, Hans Küng's most recent book, was sent to Swidler in the fall of 1990 (Swidler & Küng, 2021). According to the book's core concept, they need a shared ethical framework. Hans received a fax requesting his signature on an editorial. Swidler had just written for the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. One of the journal's first associate editors was Hans. In the editorial, it was suggested that the next stage in creating a universal ethic was to try and create one that every organisation, whether religious or not, and every person could, and eventually would, publicly ascribe to, similar to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Swidler eventually submitted the idea to ISAT. A committee in Chicago organising the second Chicago Parliament of the World's Religions asked Hans to compose a proclamation around the same time. It was disseminated after the 200+ religious leaders signed at the September 1993 Chicago World (Swidler & Küng, 2021). It was made similarly to or during ISAT. The most recent Institute for World Ethics was founded and is a part of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies.

At the end of the twentieth century, interreligious discourse expanded increasingly broadly and deeply, reintroducing religion into all the institutions that shape society's opinions. It is no longer restricted to theological/religious study and cultic practice. Interreligious dialogue is currently permeating all societal systems worldwide, emerging from its nascent enlightenment roots and guiding humanity toward developing a Global Dialogical Civilization. In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and intellectuals united to explore shared beliefs between Islam and Christianity, showing a strong push towards interreligious harmony (Kayaoglu, 2015). In July 2008, about 300 representatives from Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism gathered at the Global Interfaith Dialogue Conference in Madrid (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2011). This meeting aimed to address global issues through peaceful dialogue among different faiths. It called on the United Nations General Assembly to back its suggestions, including the proposal for a special UN session dedicated to dialogue.

4.4 THE OFFICIAL START OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE 21ST CENTURY IN BANGLADESH

This century (21st) has witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of minorities from Bangladesh to other countries (Vertovec, 2007). The Muslim community has been present in Bangladesh for centuries. Islam has become an integral part of Bangladesh's religious landscape in the past centuries. However, in the past years, Muslims have recognised that they cannot afford to live in impregnable fortresses and that living in a pluralistic milieu requires active engagement with the other. The liberation war of 1971 also proved to the Bangladeshi Muslim community that pluralism in Bangladesh is a social reality from which it cannot escape. Muslims have also realised that because of the activities of terrorists, both their Islamic identity and their Bangladeshi citizenship are at stake (Joppke, 2009). The Muslim community has acknowledged that the silent majority syndrome must end, and they should be involved in conversation (dialogue) with other faiths rather than conversion. And this effort in Bangladesh has given birth to a new movement.

Interreligious dialogue, while a phenomenon that traces back centuries, has seen a revitalised approach in the early 21st century, particularly within Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice, established in the 90s to foster peaceful co-existence among different faiths, has organised numerous workshops, seminars, and dialogues that bring together leaders and followers of various religions. Simultaneously, the Department of World Religions at Dhaka University has contributed significantly to academic and practical approaches to interfaith dialogue. Since its inception (1999), this department has offered courses that explore the theological, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of various religions and facilitated interfaith conferences that encourage scholarly and communal exchanges. The conversation known as "National Inter-faith Discussion for Strengthening Social Stability in Bangladesh," which took place in May 2006, offered a variety of discerning concepts based on the talks and presentations, some of which are included below (Chirzin, 2006):

- i. Promotes the harmonious coexistence of the many faith groups.
- ii. Insinuates that community leaders should constantly be on the lookout for such bad forces to prevent harmful outcomes.
- iii. Encourages South Asian governments to work with groups that promote religious harmony and vice versa.

- iv. The dialogue calls for support for measures to counter the threat of "injustices" of religious communities in the region at all spheres of life and mistrust from all stakeholders, including policymakers, the media, and academics.
- v. Supports the involvement of Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians in finding solutions to one another's concerns.
- vi. Suggests that the UN and the country in the region establish a code of conduct to safeguard the honour and dignity of all prophets, significant religious figures, and holy sites of all faiths.
- vii. The discussion strongly urges any existing national policies to eliminate those that foster prejudice, hostility, or hatred.
- viii. Calls on religious figures to serve as social activists for issues such as gender equity, access to health care and education, human trafficking, etc., to raise awareness and inspire action.
- ix. a centre for interfaith dialogue may be considered for a potential future action program.
- x. Works to advance interfaith communication and information exchange with other interfaith organisations domestically and abroad.

World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW), established in 2010, was initially proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan to advance a culture of peace and nonviolence in the United Nations. This resolution (A/RES/65/5) was swiftly adopted by the UN General Assembly, declaring the first week of February each year to be World Interfaith Harmony Week and urging governments, institutions, and civil society to observe it by taking part in various projects and activities that would further the WIHW goals (Draft Resolution on Measures to Promote Cultural Diversity and Protect Cultural Heritage in Asia, 2023). Since 2014, the Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue at the University of Dhaka has participated in the UN Interreligious Harmony Week to promote interfaith harmony and peace (Nations, 2019).

On April 27, 2011, at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre, the Honorable Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the chairman of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, delivered a speech. Cardinal Tauran stressed the significance of interfaith communication when he talked about how it is necessary to maintain a pluralistic society

because it allows for the presence and participation of religions in the "very soul of the nation." Most Reverend Joseph Marino, the Apostolic Nuncio (Ambassador of the Holy See) to Bangladesh, has also praised the level of inter-communal collaboration in Bangladesh (*The Church Grieves the Passing of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran*, 2018).

The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue, The Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace, The Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Harmony (CIID), Warm Heart Association, The Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought (BIIT), Caritas Bangladesh, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice are some organisations. To promote interreligious tolerance in Bangladesh, these organisations have been funding various activities, such as seminars, workshops, and international conferences on various topics. Interreligious conversation has been adopted in Bangladesh to promote peace and harmony.

4.5 THE ROLE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN PROMOTING INTER-COMMUNAL HARMONY

Dialogue is one of the most crucial ways to get to know people, exchange interests, encourage collaboration, and determine the truth. Dialogue is the best and only realistic option to achieve mutual respect and collaboration in interpersonal relationships and peaceful cohabitation among communities. Dialogue is necessary to reduce the risks associated with the aggressive alternative in our religiously pluralistic global society because religious communities need to meet one another and present opposing truth claims. Bangladesh's diverse religious backdrop is a testament to the possibilities and challenges of fostering communal harmony through interreligious dialogues. Varied instances from the nation's history and present provide insights into how dialogues among different religious communities can cultivate an environment of understanding, respect, and mutual growth:

4.5.1 Mitigate Religion-Inspired Extremist Violence

An aspiration is to achieve "interfaith harmony." However, it might be so idealistic and lofty in the current environment that it undermines power. Managing religion-inspired violence is the more immediate and crucial issue. Dialogue is one of the most important ways to meet people, share interests, foster cooperation, and ascertain the truth. Dialogue is the most practical

and effective way to foster cooperation and respect in human interactions and promote peaceful coexistence between populations.

In our religiously heterogeneous global society, dialogue is crucial because it allows religious communities to interact with one another and offer divergent views on the nature of truth. As a result, dialogue lowers the risks associated with the aggressive option. This calls for a commitment from each religious community to look inward, to face the violence ingrained in their traditions, to confront it, and to reframe those components of their traditions in the service of peace and coexistence. It is, at best, feigned ignorance and, at worst, conspiracy to deny the violent nature and expressions of our separate traditions.

The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism acknowledges that violent extremism is an insult to not just the goals and ideologies of the UN but also to the core beliefs and teachings of all major religions (Nations, 2023). Religious leaders and followers must reaffirm this insight with consistency in their language and deeds for it to be of utmost relevance. The Plan of Action also identifies several other factors as the primary contributors to violent extremism, including a lack of socioeconomic opportunities, marginalisation and discrimination, poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law, protracted and unresolved conflicts, and radicalisation in prisons. In their efforts to reduce suffering among people, promote social justice, and promote peace, religious leaders and faith-based organisations have a long-term role in highlighting and resolving these core issues. In this regard, interreligious dialogue is vital in creating awareness among people about religions. The motto of every religion is “Religions for Peace”.

4.5.2 Involve Local Communities in Dialogue

The practice of interfaith dialogue has undergone a significant transformation from being an exclusive domain of a select group of global "inter-religious dialogue" to a more inclusive and community-based approach. This shift is crucial as it broadens the scope of dialogue to encompass a wider spectrum of participants from various socio-economic backgrounds, enhancing its effectiveness and reach. Historically, interfaith dialogue was often confined to high-level theological discussions among scholars, religious leaders, and intellectuals within closed forums (Cornelio & Salera, 2012). This elite circle was limited in scope and disconnected from the everyday realities and challenges that ordinary member of various faith

communities face. Such dialogues, while valuable, often failed to address the grassroots issues or to change perceptions and build trust among the general populace. In contrast, today's approach to interfaith dialogue emphasises involving local communities in the conversation. This strategy involves bringing the dialogue to local neighbourhoods, schools, and community centres where it can directly engage individuals from all walks of life. By incorporating diverse voices and experiences, including those of women, youth, and minority groups, the dialogue becomes more representative and grounded in the realities of community life.

4.5.3 Move Beyond Tolerance to Respect

Like this, the usefulness of the term "tolerance" needs to be reconsidered. The word "tolerance" may suggest an unequal power dynamic in which the stronger party "tolerates" the weaker party (Kheireddine et al., 2021). However, people who tolerate others may decide to stop doing so at any time. By embracing variety, abstaining from prejudice based on religion or belief, and upholding the human rights of all people, we can go beyond mere tolerance and begin to respect and accept one another. In other words, we must strive for complete respect for each person's right to their religion or belief and equal citizenship rights for everyone.

4.5.4 Include Women and Young People in Dialogue

This is crucial considering the tendency of religious institutions to exclude women, young people, and oppressed groups from active engagement and agency, whether on purpose or out of ingrained habit. Their absence is especially reprehensible in the context of religiously motivated violence, which disproportionately affects women and young people (Kele et al., 2022). Discrimination will be lessened if they are included, leading to harmony, cooperation, and peace. Nowadays all of the NGOs are working towards involving the grassroot people specially women and young generation.

4.5.5 Prioritise Humanity

The interaction between religious identity and ethnic and national identity is another crucial topic that requires thorough consideration. After the Second World War, a number of Christian leaders were determined to establish the World Council of Churches (WCC) to give effect to their conviction that their shared identity as Christians superseded their various national identities, which should never again be allowed to compete with one another in such a

destructive manner (Kirby, 2001). Today, however, it is common for a Bangladeshi Muslim to declare that Islam comes first and, afterwards, nationality. Because of their shared national fight for independence from occupation, many Palestinian Christians identify themselves first and foremost as Palestinians. This fact is fairly widely acknowledged in ecumenical circles.

However, people are not identified in interreligious conversation sessions based on their nationality or faith. No complex of superiority or inferiority exists. And this kind of thinking promotes peace. The rising link between religion and politics reflects the complex interplay of identities, and as a result, many disputes and tensions bear the imprint of religion. The deadly coin's two sides are the "politicisation" of religion and the "religionisation" of politics (Md. D. Islam & Huda, 2011). However, interreligious dialogue places humanism over religion, nationality, and politics.

4.5.6 Interreligious Dialogue Creates Sympathy

The actual conflict in our world, therefore, is not between religions and ideologies per se but rather between violent, intolerable, and manipulative ideologies. The use of violence, the marginalisation of minorities, and political dominance are all justified by such beliefs. Religious minorities who are part of a different majority culture are frequently the main victims. A crucial area of consideration for religious groups in a healthy self-examination process should be how each community respects religious minorities when they hold a majority status. In this aspect, dialogue is particularly beneficial since it fosters an atmosphere of sympathy and compassion among religions.

4.5.7 Interreligious Dialogue Promotes SDG

It is a significant step forward and accomplishment that peace has been included as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) (Yarnall et al., 2021). Humanity is tasked with "Promoting peaceful and inclusive communities for sustainable development, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, responsible, and inclusive institutions at all levels," according to SDG 16. By involving religious leaders and actors to provide a platform for intra- and interfaith dialogue and discussions, tolerance and understanding between communities can be promoted, and the peaceful and humanitarian values inherent in their theologies can be

emphasised. Religious leaders and actors can voice their rejection of violent doctrines. Then, the potential for this goal to advance peace can be more fully appreciated.

4.6 Relevance of Interreligious Dialogue and Communal Harmony with Sustainable Development

Communal harmony and interfaith dialogue are urgently needed. Interfaith dialogue is about appreciating the distinctiveness of each religion and its beliefs, not about settling our religious disagreements. It is to create bridges to bring about peace and harmony in society (Asif et al., 2020). It encourages reciprocal dialogue to achieve a common purpose, foster a friendlier attitude, and advance understanding and mutual trust (Fahed & Daou, 2021). It focuses on initiatives for problem-solving, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. Positive peace is created where there is no physical violence and no structural violence (Fahed & Daou, 2021). As a result, it is closely related to objectives for sustainable development, for which peacebuilding plays a crucial role.

Religious leaders were among the many stakeholders who helped frame the sustainable development goals. Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, published the encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015, which focuses on how humans interact with the natural world (Klein & Laczniak, 2021). This inspired all of the adherents and faith-based organisations to address ecological problems and preserve the environment.

A lot of development work is done by reputable Christian organisations like "World Vision International" (Bornstein, 2001). Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) is an organisation that promotes social advancement from the perspective of Islam. Similarly, the well-known Hindu religious organisation Sewa International (SI) significantly contributes to the development initiatives and activities. Another organisation, 'Baha'i International Community', based on the Baha'i faith, works for the welfare of the people to bring justice and unity. All these are examples of how world religions contribute to development works and peace-building.

In Bangladesh, numerous religious communities coexist, with Islam and Hinduism predominant. The cultural mosaic, enriched by diverse festivals like Durga Puja, Eid, and Pohela Boishakh (Bengali New Year), signifies the potential. The collective participation of

multiple communities in these festivals underlines a tacit harmony. It provides a foundation for more structured dialogues for social stability, fostering an environment conducive to sustained development. A commendable exemplification of economic cooperation and communal harmony in Bangladesh can be witnessed in its thriving textile industry. Individuals from various religious and ethnic backgrounds work cohesively, contributing to an industry that propels the nation's economy. Moreover, the local markets (bazaars) often see Hindus and Muslims, among others, engaged in trade and commerce, illustrating the prospects of cooperative ventures across communal lines and ensuring that economic development is inclusive.

The efforts to include varied communities in governance and policymaking are evident in the quota system in Bangladesh, which reserves seats for minority groups in the Parliament, ensuring that they are represented in the legislative process. Engaging different communities in dialogue ensures that policies are designed with a multifaceted perspective, incorporating the needs and aspirations of all and guiding the nation towards an equitable and holistic development. Bangladesh's rich cultural and educational heritage, intertwined with diverse threads from its varied communities, presents a vibrant tapestry that can be further enriched through communal harmony. The mutual respect and celebration of different cultural practices, languages, and traditions are underpinned by a strong educational system that promotes mutual understanding and respect, enhances the societal fabric, and plays a pivotal role in sustainable development.

The concept of collective guardianship of the environment, particularly relevant in Bangladesh, which faces significant environmental challenges such as flooding and river erosion, can be fortified through communal harmony. Joint efforts between communities in addressing environmental challenges, sharing traditional wisdom and innovative solutions, and participating collaboratively in environmental conservation activities can bolster the nation's endeavours towards achieving environmental sustainability (Victor, 2006).

By fostering an internal environment that emphasises dialogue and communal harmony, every country can present itself on the global stage as a nation that values and embodies unity in diversity (Ratner, 2004). This enhances its international image and opens avenues for global partnerships, collaborations, and participation in international peace and

development initiatives, thereby facilitating its journey towards sustainable development. This is also the case in Bangladesh.

The examples and conceptual illustrations above underscore the multifaceted implications of dialogue and communal harmony in paving the path towards sustainable development in Bangladesh. A symbiotic relationship, where social stability facilitates development and vice versa, can be fostered through inclusive dialogues, collaborative efforts, and policies that celebrate and leverage the nation's diverse communal tapestry. This inherently ensures that the developmental trajectory is not only economically viable, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable but also stable and sustained long-term, resonating through each echelon of the diverse society. To advance toward sustainable development, the role of religion and the relationships between religious players and the government must be increased (Norgaard, 1988). In this regard, Interfaith dialogue plays a major part.

4.7 CONCLUSION

The study of interreligious dialogue in promoting communal harmony in Bangladesh underscores a critical pathway toward understanding and respecting the intricate mosaic of faiths within the nation. This chapter illuminates the transformative power of dialogue in bridging divides, fostering mutual respect, and nurturing a culture of peace through a detailed examination of theoretical frameworks, historical expansion, and contemporary initiatives. The theoretical underpinnings of religious pluralism, conflict resolution, communication, and social cohesion theories offer a multidimensional perspective on the mechanisms through which interfaith conversations can contribute to societal harmony. This chapter also highlights the expansion of interreligious dialogue as a vibrant movement, responding to the challenges of religious extremism and local community engagement, moving beyond mere tolerance to genuine respect, and ensuring the inclusion of marginalised voices in the conversation. The nuanced exploration of dialogue categories and principles further enriches understanding how diverse religious experiences can merge into a unified force for communal harmony. Conclusively, interreligious dialogue emerges as a theoretical ideal and a practical instrument of peace, integral to Bangladesh's pursuit of sustainable development. Bangladesh sets a compelling example of how dialogue among diverse religious communities can pave the way toward a more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable society by weaving together the threads of historical tolerance, contemporary engagement, and future aspirations for harmony. The

interconnection of interfaith harmony with the broader objectives of sustainable development accentuates the indispensability of nurturing a dialogue-driven culture that embraces diversity, fosters mutual understanding, and champions coexistence.

CHAPTER V

HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP AMONG DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Interfaith relationships are being discussed by academics worldwide as one of contemporary society's most important and divisive issues. As the number of conflicts and tensions rises, the numerous religiously affiliated groups are becoming increasingly aware of the major obstacles to preserving world peace and harmony. As long as human civilisation has existed, there have been interreligious relationships. Except for the Sena period and Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, this relationship was harmonious in Bangladesh. The genesis of communalism in the sub-continent surfaced during the British Colonial period. Historians think that the colonial rulers adopted the 'divide and rule' policy that widened the gap between two communities and incited communal violence. But the effort and philosophies of Raja Ramamohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Dr Govinda Chandra Dev and Dr Mahanambrata Brahmachari; the music of Lalan Shah and Baul, and the literary work of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam were the pioneering during the British colonial rule which works towards preserving the communal goodwill of this country.

5.2 INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE BENGAL

The Buddhist document known as the Milinda paha, which dates from between 100 BC and 200 AD, has the earliest recorded interreligious discussion in this region. Milindapanha is in a Dialogue between King Menander and the Buddhist Monk. The conversation is said to have occurred in the second century BC between the Indo-Greek king Menander I and the Indian Buddhist scholar Nagesana. Menander I, also known as Milinda/Menander, is said by the Milindapanha to have accepted Buddhism. Their discussion topic was society, religion and politics. The Milindapanha describes Menander as "Milinda by name, the monarch of Sgala in India, intelligent, articulate, smart and able." According to Buddhist legend, Menander

pledged to practice Buddhism "as long as life shall last" after speaking with Ngasena. He eventually gained awareness after that (Kubica, 2021). So, it can be said that the history of interfaith relationships is as early as human civilisations. In this chapter, interreligious relationships will be discussed under the following sections: Gupta period, Pala Dynasty, Sena Dynasty, Medieval Muslim period and some isolated efforts during British colonial rule were very helpful in maintaining interfaith relationships:

5.2.1 Gupta Period

From the 4th to the 6th centuries CE, the Gupta period is often hailed as a golden age of Hindu culture, arts, and sciences in India (Ferrier, 2018). However, this era was also significant for its approach to interfaith relationships, particularly in Bengal, under the influence of Gupta cultural and political hegemony. During the Gupta era, Hinduism saw a resurgence and consolidation, with the promotion of Vedic rituals, the construction of grand temples, and the proliferation of Hindu art and literature (Fisher, 2017). This period is marked by combining various Hindu traditions and the emergence of important Hindu deities in the pantheon, such as Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess in her many forms. Despite this Hindu predominance, the Gupta rulers practised religious tolerance, allowing Buddhism and Jainism to flourish (Howard, 2017).

In Bengal, the Gupta influence bolstered the Hindu cultural and religious framework, yet it did not eclipse the presence and practice of Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism, in particular, continued to have a strong presence in Bengal during this period, as evidenced by the archaeological remains of Buddhist stupas and monasteries found in regions like Paharpur, which is home to the Somapura Mahavihara, one of the greatest Buddhist viharas in the Indian subcontinent. However, it was established later, in the Pala era (Howard, 2017).

The Gupta rulers' approach to governance and religion can be described as inclusive. They patronised Hindu temples and Brahmins and supported Buddhist and Jain establishments (Lopez Jr, 2020). This patronage is evident in Buddhist art and architecture flourishing, such as the Ajanta Caves, which, while not in Bengal, exemplify the Gupta-era artistic and religious syncretism that influenced the broader Indian subcontinent (Huntington, 1984). Furthermore, the Guptas' support for scholarly and religious gatherings promoted intellectual exchange among various religious traditions. The famous Chinese pilgrim and traveller Xuanzang, who

visited India in the 7th century (slightly after the Gupta period), documented the vibrant religious life and the coexistence of different faith communities, providing indirect evidence of the interfaith dynamics that had been cultivated during earlier centuries, including the Gupta period (Amar, 2012). The Gupta period's religious tolerance and support for multiple faiths contributed significantly to Bengal's cultural and religious mosaic. While Hinduism was ascendant, the foundations laid during this era for interfaith respect and coexistence allowed for a rich intermingling of religious ideas and practices, which continued to characterise the spiritual landscape of Bengal in subsequent periods. People in this country have practised Hinduism since the beginning of time.

5.2.2 Pala Dynasty

The Pala dynasty, ruling from the 8th to the 12th centuries, is notable for promoting Buddhism in Bengal, making it a significant period for interfaith relations in the region (Lewis, 2021). Founded by Gopala, the Pala dynasty is often credited with the last major Buddhist expansion in India, patronising Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism and establishing several important Buddhist centres of learning, such as the universities at Nalanda and Vikramashila (Chowdhury, 2004). Under the Palas, Bengal became a thriving hub for Buddhist culture and scholarship, attracting students and pilgrims across Asia. The Palas supported Buddhism and showed considerable religious tolerance and inclusivity, allowing various religious traditions to flourish under their rule (Swearer, 2013). This inclusive approach is evident in their patronage of Hindu temples and deities, alongside Buddhist ones, reflecting a syncretic religious environment.

Despite being staunch Buddhists, the Pala kings did not impose their religious beliefs on their subjects (Swearer, 2013). This tolerance allowed for a coexistence of Buddhism with Hinduism and other local religious practices. The Pala period is marked by the construction of significant Hindu temples and the commissioning of texts that contributed to Buddhist and Hindu religious and philosophical thought (Hasan, 2017). Interfaith relations during the Pala dynasty were further enriched by the advent of various religious movements and the intermingling of cultural practices. The rise of Tantric practices in Buddhism and Hinduism during this period is a testament to the cross-pollination of religious ideas and practices (Chowdhury, 2004). With its esoteric rituals and philosophies, Tantrism was found to be

expressed in both religions, indicating mutual influence and tolerance for diverse religious expressions.

The Pala era's approach to interfaith relations exemplifies a period of religious harmony and intellectual exchange in Bengal's history. The dynasty's support for Buddhism did not translate into excluding or suppressing other religions. Instead, it fostered an environment where religious diversity was respected, and different religious communities could coexist and interact—this period significantly contributed to the rich tapestry of Bengal's religious and cultural heritage, laying the groundwork for subsequent periods of religious evolution in the region.

5.2.3 Sena Dynasty

The Sena dynasty, which ruled Bengal from the late 11th to the early 13th centuries, is often characterised by its strong patronage of Hinduism, particularly the orthodox Brahmanical form (Chowdhury, 2004). The dynasty's founder, Vijaya Sena, succeeded the Pala dynasty, which is known for its Buddhist inclinations. The Senas, originating from Karnataka in South India, brought with them a strong adherence to Hindu social and religious norms, which they sought to implant in Bengal. This region has experienced a rich tapestry of religious practices, including Buddhism and local folk religions (Nitish Sengupta, 2011). During the Sena period, Bengal witnessed a significant resurgence and reinforcement of Hindu practices and Brahmanical orthodoxy (Chowdhury, 2004). The dynasty is credited with the revival and establishment of the caste system (Streissguth, 2008), which had not been as pronounced under the previous Buddhist rulers. This was part of their broader strategy to consolidate power by aligning with the Brahmanical social order, legitimising their rule among the Hindu majority.

The Sena kings were great patrons of literature and the arts, particularly supporting works that promoted Hindu religious and philosophical thought. The most notable among the Sena rulers in this regard was Ballal Sena, who was credited with commissioning important Hindu texts and promoting the caste system through the introduction of social reforms (Nitish Sengupta, 2011). These reforms were aimed at strengthening the position of Brahmins in Bengal society, thereby consolidating the Hindu orthodoxy. Interfaith relations during the Sena dynasty were marked by a degree of religious exclusivity and promotion of Hinduism at the expense of Buddhism and other religions (Hasan, 2012). The Senas' patronage of Hinduism

and the corresponding relegation of Buddhism can be seen as a significant shift in the religious landscape of Bengal, leading to a decline in the prominence of Buddhism in the region. The construction of Hindu temples and promoting Hindu rituals under the Sena rule further established Hinduism as the dominant religion in Bengal.

However, it is important to note that while the Sena dynasty promoted Hinduism, the existing religious diversity of Bengal, including practices of Buddhism and local folk religions, continued to influence the region's cultural fabric (Sen, 1999). The decline of Buddhism in Bengal was a gradual process influenced by various socio-political and economic factors and not solely the result of Sena policies.

5.2.4 Medieval Muslim Period

Within a century of Islam's founding, Arab Muslim traders arrived in coastal Bengal; however, it took until the eleventh century for Muslim Sufi saints to begin preaching (M. N. Islam & Islam, 2020). Sufism, with its inherent inclusiveness and spiritual orientation, played a crucial role in bridging communities in Bengal. Sufi missionaries or Pirs not only disseminated the tenets of Islam but also integrated local beliefs and practices into their teachings and rituals. The teachings of renowned Sufis, like Hazrat Shah Jalal, were imbued with notions of love, charity, and compassion, and often, they were welcomed by Hindus and Buddhists alike (S. Alam, 2015). Their Mazars (shrines) became spaces where people from different religious backgrounds congregated for spiritual solace and communal activities, promoting shared spiritual experiences (Kozlowski & Eaton, 1995). The teachings and objectives of the Sufi saints had a profound impact on numerous Buddhists, Hindus, and other indigenous peoples who later converted to Islam.

Islam was fully established here after the conquest by the Turks at the beginning of the thirteenth century (Mohsin, 2004). Islam offered oppressed people social justice and ideas of equality and fraternity at a period when the culture was replete with injustice and caste oppression, and they saw it as their rescuer. It should be mentioned that many Christian converts to Islam upheld the customs and social mores of their forebears, as evidenced by the fact that these practices are still prevalent today (Kammerer, 1990). As a result, Muslims also embraced several Hindu rites, while Hinduism was significantly influenced by the social and religious practices of Muslims (Z. R. Khan, 1985).

Alauddin Husain Shah ruled Bengal from 1494 to 1519 CE. During that time, Hindus were permitted to hold several important government positions, thanks to his tolerance and liberality toward them (Tarafdar, 1965). Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah, a Muslim king's non-Muslim subject, treated Sri Chaitanya with compassion, a testament to religious tolerance (Tarafdar, 1965). According to numerous Hindu zamindars, political leaders and military leaders were commended for their devotion to the state (Hasan, 2012). Between 1339 and 1358, Sultan Ilyas Shah recruited many Hindus for his army (M. Islam & Islam, 2018). In addition, he selected Hindu Shaha Deva as the army's chief of staff. Non-Muslims suffered less during Muslim control (Islam & Islam, 2018). Bengali non-Muslims were never subject to their Muslim lords' jizya (Ahmad & Sharma, 1976).

The Mughals had no interest in converting Bengal to Islam. Due to the government's support of the faith, many Hindus could live comfortably (Schendel, 2009). Regarding religious law, Humayun didn't have a lot of room for manoeuvre. Humayun retained his allegiance to Shi'a standards and customs after leaving Persia. Humayun gave 300 acres of land in the Uttar Pradesh district of Mirzapur for the upkeep of the Jangamvadi Math in Banaras (Eaton, 2009). Akbar's religious policy, which sought to synthesise world religions, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and various teachings from each, included assimilating these teachings into a way of life (Ahmad & Sharma, 1976). Akbar's court developed into a representation of a rich religious legacy by incorporating significant theological and intellectual accomplishments. His initiatives encouraged independent thinking and the development of a broad intellectual community among his supporters (Ahmad & Sharma, 1976). Additionally, they promoted a spirit of acceptance and adaptability. Akbar the Great upheld religious beliefs, which led to his court's reputation as a meeting place for various religious traditions and an example of interfaith tolerance. Akbar believed that regardless of the specific religion, all essential religions continued to have a core unity and that conflicts and differences in religious practices and beliefs were simply matters of perspective. Tolerance and religious freedom are at the heart of all his effective policies.

All the Mughal emperors maintain interfaith relationships except Aurangzeb. The role of Aurangzeb in interfaith relationships in Bengal during the Mughal period is complex. His reign is marked by policies that could be seen as undermining the pluralistic fabric of the empire established by his predecessors. Historians note that Aurangzeb's policies marked a departure from the more pluralistic and inclusive approaches of his predecessors, such as Akbar, who is

renowned for his policy of Sulh-i-Kul (universal peace), promoting tolerance and dialogue among different religions (Sarkar, 1930). Aurangzeb, conversely, is known for his orthodox Islamic stance, which influenced his administrative and fiscal policies, including the re-imposition of the jizya (a tax on non-Muslims) in 1679, which had been abolished by Akbar (Ahmad & Sharma, 1976). This act has been interpreted by many as discriminatory towards non-Muslims, indicating a less tolerant approach to interfaith relations.

Syncretic traditions in Bengal, especially during the Mughal period, have been characterised by an amalgamation of Islamic and Bengali cultural, religious, and social practices. Eaton (1995) articulated how Islam adapted to the local cultural and social environment, resulting in a unique blend of traditions that spanned religious and social spectra (Kozlowski & Eaton, 1995)—Mughal architectural marvels, like the Lalbagh Fort, incorporated elements of both Islamic and Bengali aesthetics. The local Bengali language was also integrated into the governance and administrative systems, enriching and diversifying the region's cultural tapestry (Chowdhury, 1967). Local folk tales, music, and practices often blurred the lines between Islamic and Hindu traditions, creating a distinctive Bengali cultural identity transcending strict religious boundaries.

5.2.5 British Colonial Period

During the British colonial period in Bengal, politics, religion, and culture they have significantly impacted interfaith relationships, particularly between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The British "divide and rule" policy exploited existing religious differences to maintain control over their vast empire, leading to a strained relationship between the two major religious communities (Manzur-I-Khuda, 2004). This policy was evident in several administrative decisions, such as the Partition of Bengal in 1905, which was ostensibly carried out for administrative convenience but aimed at dividing the Hindu and Muslim populations to weaken the growing nationalist movement (Nitish Sengupta, 2011). According to the Indian Statutory Commission, 112 communal riots were listed from 1923 to 1927. In the 1940s, over 1,809 riots occurred in 1945, and 3,176 riots were recorded only in 1946 (S. Das, 1990). At the end of their rule, when tensions between religions rose high, the colonialists partitioned India into two based on religion. Pakistan and India came into being as two separate states.

Christianity began in Bengal in the sixteenth century because Portuguese Christian males married Bengali women (Halikowski Smith, 2016). Christian missionaries during the colonial period also played a controversial role. Converted Hindus and backward tribal populations make up the majority of Christians in Bangladesh. For most of the nineteenth century, colonial missionaries' attitudes toward Islam and Hinduism were hostile and severely critical (Porter, 1992). Naturally, this incited much animosity among Bengal's intellectual elite. This unfavourable attitude, nevertheless, was short-lived. While their primary aim was religious conversion to Christianity, their efforts sometimes inadvertently contributed to the existing tensions between Hindus and Muslims. The missionaries established schools, colleges, and hospitals, introducing Western education and medical practices (Mallick & Husain, 2004). However, their proselytising activities were often viewed with suspicion by both Hindu and Muslim communities, contributing to the perception of an external threat that further exacerbated communal divisions.

Despite these challenges, the British colonial period in Bengal was also a time of significant cultural and religious renaissance that contributed to preserving communal goodwill. Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Dr Govinda Chandra Dev, and Dr Mahanambrata Brahmachari promoted interfaith understanding and harmony (K. N. Islam, 2011). Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, advocated for religious reform and the abolition of practices like Sati, emphasising the unity of all religions. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa preached the harmony of religions, teaching that all paths lead to the same divine truth. Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev and Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari further reinforced the message of unity and communal harmony through their philosophical and spiritual teachings. The cultural contributions of Lalon Shah and the Baul music, along with the literary works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, also played a crucial role in this period. Lalon Shah's and Baul's music celebrated the oneness of humanity beyond religious boundaries. Tagore and Nazrul Islam, through their poetry and writings, critiqued communalism and promoted a vision of a unified society that transcended religious divides. Despite the efforts of these figures and the cultural movements they inspired, the British colonial rule and the activities of Christian missionaries had a lasting impact on Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal. The policies of divide and rule, along with the communal tensions they exacerbated, laid the groundwork for the Partition of India in 1947, which led to widespread violence and displacement (K. N. Islam, 2011).

5.3 INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP IN POST-INDEPENDENCE BANGLADESH

Religion was persecuted in Bengal, which the British ruled after the Mughals. After the liberation war in 1971, a fresh glimmer of hope emerged. By declaring secularism one of the nation's guiding principles, allowing for freedom of speech, and allowing freedom for religious practice, Bangladeshi governments were able to preserve religious peace. Moreover, governmental initiatives are also remarkable in this regard.

5.3.1 Governmental Initiatives towards Constitutional Amendments for Maintaining Interfaith Relationships

According to Article 2A of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "the state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions" (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011). Many other clauses in the constitution also provide equal treatment of the people of every religion. Since Bangladesh's independence, every government has tried to maintain interreligious harmony. In Bangladesh, various religious issues were placed in the constitution during the rule of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina from 1972-1975, 1975-1981; 1982-1990, 1991-1996 and 2001-2006; 1996-2001; and 2009-to present day respectively. Each government in Bangladesh has contributed to the country's interreligious harmony in its way:

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Government (1972-1975) Adopted secularism as one of the state principles, emphasising equal opportunities for all religions (Bhuiyan, 2017). Initiatives like recitations from the sacred texts of major religions on state-run broadcasts were introduced to promote interfaith harmony. Ziaur Rahman's Government (1975-1981) shifted away from secularism towards "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" but did not exclude non-Muslims from practising their faith. Ziaur Rahman provided funds for the renovation of non-Muslim religious institutions and formed a committee to address the issues faced by Hindus, promoting an inclusive approach to religious diversity (Franda, 1981). Hussain Muhammad Ershad's Government (1982-1990) declared Islam the state religion. It also supported non-Muslim communities by granting funds for their religious development, ensuring their freedom to practice their religions (Franda, 1981).

Khaleda Zia's Government (1991-1996, 2001-2006) maintained the religious policies of her predecessors without making significant changes to the constitution regarding religious affairs. Her government was noted for its sympathetic stance towards people of all religions in Bangladesh (M. S. Ali, 2016). In her first term, Sheikh Hasina's Government (1996-2001, 2009-present) maintained existing religious policies. In her second term, she amended the constitution to restore secularism while retaining Islam as the state religion but aimed to ensure that this coexisted with the guarantee of equal rights for all religious practices (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011). The government's approach was to balance Islamic identity with secular principles, ensuring no faith was marginalised. Each leader's approach reflects a nuanced attempt to navigate Bangladesh's complex religious landscape, striving to maintain harmony and respect among its diverse religious communities (Bhuiyan, 2017).

5.3.2 Governmental Projects in Maintaining Interfaith Relationships

State Minister for Religious Affairs, Faridul Haque Khan, has asked for regular interfaith dialogue at the district and upazila levels to preserve religious and communal harmony throughout society. He said dialogue should be held in such a way that participants can learn from others' religious experiences and good practices, as non-religion supports violence and terrorism. In Rajshahi, he made the statement while serving as the keynote speaker at a district-level interfaith conversation held in the conference room of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) (The Daily Sun, 2023a). One of the main challenges facing the current development process, according to him, is the violence caused by religion and communities. So, the best ways to ensure peace and calm can be through the joint efforts of religious leaders from all faiths and regular interfaith conversations.

Mayor Liton underlined the need to organise and promote extensive interfaith dialogues with a stronger approach at community levels to create a strong public opinion in favour of peaceful religious practices. He said the present government has been working relentlessly to establish communal harmony in society and make it free from all sorts of violence. Khairuzzaman Liton, who is also a Presidium Member of Bangladesh Awami League, called for concerted efforts of religious leaders from all faiths to combat terrorism and extremism everywhere in society (The Daily Sun, 2023a).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs arranged the dialogue to support its "Enhancing Awareness on Religious Harmony" project, which was well-attended by interested public figures, religious leaders, business executives, and other stakeholders. This project aims to increase efforts and interfaith discussions crucial to battling communalism, militancy, and extremism and liberating society from all troublesome aspects (*Current Project- Ministry of Religious Affairs -People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2023*).

The People's Republic of Bangladesh's Ministry of Religious Affairs initiated the "Development and Reform of Hindu Temples and Religious Institutions" Project nationally in March 2019, and it ran until December 2022 (Current Project—Ministry of Religious Affairs -People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2023). The government takes these initiatives to bring peace among multi-religious faiths in Bangladesh.

5.4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the interfaith relationships in Bengal have undergone significant transformations through various historical epochs, from the ancient Gupta period to the contemporary era. Each dynasty and ruling period brought its unique approach to religious coexistence, shaped by broader socio-political and cultural contexts. The Gupta era, characterised by a flourishing Hindu culture, laid the groundwork for religious syncretism, allowing Buddhism and Jainism to thrive. The Pala dynasty furthered this tradition of religious tolerance, with its strong patronage of Buddhism alongside respect for Hinduism and other local religious practices. However, the Sena dynasty marked a shift towards a more orthodox Hinduism, which, while promoting Hindu culture, also signalled a narrowing space for interfaith engagement. The arrival of Islam in Bengal introduced new dynamics into the region's religious landscape. The early Muslim period, particularly under the Sufi influence, was marked by a spirit of inclusiveness and adaptation, fostering a syncretic culture that blended Islamic and Bengali traditions. This period was a testament to the possibilities of peaceful coexistence and mutual enrichment among diverse religious communities. However, the Mughal era, especially under Aurangzeb, presented challenges to this syncretic ethos, with policies that sometimes-strained Hindu-Muslim relations.

The British colonial period introduced new complexities into Bengal's interfaith dynamics, employing divide-and-rule policies that exacerbated communal divisions. Yet, this

period also witnessed a resurgence of efforts towards communal goodwill, led by luminaries like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, and others who advocated for a return to interfaith harmony and unity amidst diversity. Post-independence, Bangladesh has navigated its religious plurality with a constitutional commitment to secularism alongside Islam as the state religion. This delicate balance reflects an ongoing endeavour to foster an inclusive national identity that respects and celebrates its religious diversity. Governmental initiatives and projects promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding underscore a continued commitment to communal harmony.

The historical and ongoing efforts towards interfaith understanding in Bengal and Bangladesh highlight the region's rich tradition of religious coexistence. While challenges remain, the enduring legacy of syncretism and the persistent efforts towards dialogue and mutual respect offer hope for a future where diverse religious communities can coexist harmoniously, contributing to a more inclusive and peaceful society.

CHAPTER VI

CURRENT APPLICATION OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN PROMOTING COMMUNAL HARMONY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, the fabric of interreligious dialogue is woven through the collective efforts of organisations, educational institutions, and media, each playing a pivotal role in promoting understanding and harmony among the nation's diverse religious communities. Faith-inspired organisations (FIOs) such as Ramakrishna Mission, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation and Caritas Bangladesh spearhead initiatives that blend spiritual development with humanitarian service, aiming to foster a sense of unity across different faiths. Educational institutions are instrumental in nurturing this ethos from a young age, with the national curriculum and specific programs designed to teach respect for religious diversity. The Department of World Religions & Culture at the University of Dhaka and various missionary schools stand out for integrating interfaith dialogue into their teachings, preparing students to appreciate and engage with Bangladesh's pluralistic religious landscape. Complementing these efforts, the media—from traditional outlets like television and radio to new media platforms—plays a critical role in amplifying the message of interfaith harmony. Through documentaries, talk shows, articles, and online campaigns, it showcases stories of cooperation, counters stereotypes, and celebrates the shared values among different faiths. Collectively, these sectors contribute significantly to promoting a harmonious and inclusive society in Bangladesh.

6.2 SEVERAL LNGOS AND INGOS PROMOTING HARMONY THROUGH DIALOGUE

Interreligious dialogue has been practised by numerous parties and organisations since the Liberation War of 1971 to promote peace. Local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) and academics are working to establish a model for interfaith collaboration in addition to the numerous international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

6.2.1 Ramkrishna Mission in Bangladesh

The Ramakrishna Mission was established in 1897 and named after Sri Ramakrishna, a well-known Hindu spiritual figure (*LAMB Bangladesh, 2022*). Sri Ramakrishna said all religions were legitimate and ultimately lead to the same place. Vivekananda's address at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions in 1893 sparked the interfaith movement (Swidler & Küng, 2021). Individuals' spiritual and moral growth is a priority for the Ramakrishna Mission. Their main objective is to encourage religious unity. (*LAMB Bangladesh, 2022*). The RKM's promotion of religious unity has been one of its greatest accomplishments throughout its century. Almost all major world religions have now embraced Sri Ramakrishna's message of religious harmony that Swami Vivekananda in Chicago delivered. Nowadays, few religious missionaries are willing to criticise other religions. Instead, modern attempts to demonstrate the superiority of one's religion are focused on fostering an atmosphere of harmony and acceptance.

Religious toleration should be distinguished from religious harmony. Tolerance implies condescension to some extent and refraining from doing something worse. Here, it's important to remember what Swami Vivekananda said: "Not merely tolerance, for so-called toleration is frequently blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. Why do I have to tolerate it? Toleration implies that I believe you are mistaken and am merely enabling you to survive. To believe that you and I are allowing others to survive is not a form of blasphemy (Dev, 2019)?"

When discussing religious concord, we frequently approach each religion as a single entity. The Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Churches in Christianity; the Sunni, Shia, and Wahhabi sects in Islam; and the Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada schools of Buddhism are all vertically divided into several main sects and a significant number of lesser ones. These sects frequently hold more hatred for one another than for other religions. Discussions of religious harmony should cover both interreligious and intrareligious harmony. Incorrect attitudes about religions other than one's own are the root cause of disputes between adherents of different faiths.

A person's perspective on different religions relies on several variables. Most modern religious studies have focused on interreligious attitudes, drawing on Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. Three main interreligious attitudes—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—have

been identified by Western scholars. As a fourth attitude advocated by the RKM, we might also include Swami Vivekananda's idea of universalism (Dev, 2019). Ramakrishna Mission and Ramakrishna Math Dhaka started in 1899 and were affiliated in 1916 as a branch centre of the worldwide spiritual and philanthropic organisation Ramakrishna. It has been engaged in various humanitarian, spiritual, educational, and socio-cultural services since its inception to serve humanity.

6.2.1.1 Practice of Interreligious Harmony at the Spiritual Centre

More emphasis has been placed on daily prayer, meditation, hymn singing, scripture study, and other spiritual practices in this place to improve the inner capacities of people. Throughout the year, lectures, seminars, and discussions on moral principles, philosophy, and religion are frequently presented to enhance human faculties (Siddika, 2021). In addition to commemorating the birthdays of Swami Vivekananda, Sri Sarada Devi, and Ramakrishna, there are discussions on the lives and teachings of other great souls and learned individuals of other faiths. Their yearly events serve as a shining example of interfaith tolerance.

Table 6-1: Yearly Activities of RKM

Occasion	Bengali Date	English Date	Year
Bengali Year	New 1 st Baishakh	14 th April	2023
Birth Anniversary of Ramakrishna Mission	17 th Baishakh	1 st May	2023
Budha Purnima	21 st Baishakh	5 th	2023
Janmasthanmi	21 st Vadra	7 th September	2023
Eid-e-Miladunnabi	11 th Aswin	28 th September	2023
Christmas Eve	8 th Poush	24 th	2023

Birth Anniversary of Sri Chaitanya	11 th Chaitra	25 th March	2024 ("Prabodhan," 2023)
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Interfaith dialogue sessions are held on the occasions above with excellent planning. They also happen often, and the purposes of many religions are discussed. As part of their daily rituals and activities, RKM engages in interfaith discourse.

To represent religious tolerance and diversity, a spectacular Sri Ramakrishna temple may be found on campus, spreading the maxim "As many religions, so many paths (Dev, 2019)." Various puja holidays, such as Durga Puja, Shyama Puja, and Saraswati Puja, as well as pertinent cultural events, are held here to arouse heavenly feelings among people of diverse Temperaments. A sizable crowd of believers, notable individuals, friends, and fans from many communities attends all its celebrations.

6.2.1.2 Practice of Interreligious Harmony through Humanitarian Services

Shri Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka, embodies the principles of interreligious harmony not just in preaching but also in action, especially during natural disasters and calamities. This harmony is seen in their extensive relief and rehabilitation efforts that extend beyond religious and cultural boundaries:

- i. **Flood relief:** In 1988-1989, thousands of affected people received food, clothing, utensils, medicines, etc.; in 1998, almost 20,000 affected families received food, clothing, medicines, etc.; in 1999 and 2004, 200 houses with GI sheets were built; in 2008, 2000 metric tons of rice were distributed ("Prabodhan," 2016).
- ii. **Tornado (1989-90) and Tidal Surge relief (1990-1991):** The construction of 1500 homes for homeless families in the years before and the distribution of food, clothing, household items, medicines, etc., to thousands of impacted people ("Prabodhan," 2016).
- iii. **Cyclone relief (1997-1998):** Building 300 homes for those who have been severely impacted and providing victims with aid items like clothing, food, etc. ("Prabodhan," 2016).

- iv. **Cyclone (SIDR & AILA) relief (2007-2008):** Sinking of new tube wells in the affected coastal areas, distribution of fishing boats and nets among the affected fishermen, renovation of houses, mosques and temples with GI sheets and distribution of food clothing utensils, medicine among thousands of affected people.
- v. About ten crores of taka were spent on all its services, as mentioned above.
- vi. **Winter & Festival Relief:** Besides relief efforts during natural disasters every year, Ramakrishna Mission Dhaka provided 3700 blankets to those in need throughout the country's harsh winter in 2015–2016 (RKM, 2017). Every year, the centre gives out fresh clothes and food to the impoverished and underprivileged as a way to demonstrate interreligious empathy during the holidays of Durga Puja, Eid-ul-Fitre, Christmas Eve, and Budha Purnima to foster the motto "serving Man as God."
- vii. **Slum Service:** To improve the literary and cultural condition of those residing in the slum areas in and around Dhaka City, services such as reading material distribution, religious and personality development motivational classes, and coaching for primary students have been provided in collaboration with Vivekananda Shiksha O Sanskritik Paroshad (a youth movement holding the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda).

6.2.1.3 Interreligious Interaction through Medical Services

The Ramakrishna Mission demonstrates a profound commitment to interreligious harmony through its inclusive Medical Service Centre. Housing main departments that cater to a spectrum of medical needs—from general medicine, cardiology, and paediatrics to ENT and dentistry—the centre operates under the expert guidance of specialist doctors. Each day, the facility assists hundreds of patients, charging only a nominal fee, embodying service and inclusivity principles. This institution addresses over 90,000 cases annually, focusing on the marginalised rural population.

In a significant display of interfaith understanding and cooperation, the mission organises an annual blood donation drive, especially during Ramadan. This initiative addresses the acute shortage in hospital blood supplies due to certain religious observances during this period (“Prabodhan,” 2018). Such medical endeavours, which cater to diverse sections of society irrespective of their religious backgrounds, exemplify how healthcare can serve as a unifying force, fostering interreligious harmony and mutual respect.

6.2.1.4 Interreligious Gatherings by RKM

They are free to visit the places of worship and adhere to the rites and traditions of their religions without being forced to renounce their devotion. The major founders of the global faiths are honoured on their birthdays in all RKM centres. The scriptures of several religions are presented to RKM novices, along with comparative religion. The monks of The RKM are free to research and learn from the writings of the saints and sages of every religion. Speaking disparagingly of other religions or their leaders is also prohibited within the boundaries of the RKM. Another way RKM promotes religious tolerance is by planning interfaith gatherings where representatives of other religions discuss their religions.

From 24th to 26th March 2017, RKM arranged an interreligious Harmony Conference (RKM, 2017). The conference featured speeches from leaders such as Maulana Fariduddin Masud, Bishop Sharat Francish Gomaj, Bishop Shourav Pholia, Bikhshu Sunanapriya, and Swami Sthiratmananda, who shared insights into the necessity of interreligious dialogue. Central themes included the importance of understanding and respecting each other's religious doctrines, the role of religious leaders in mitigating conflict, and the potential for religious platforms to promote peace. On the occasion of Eid-e-Milaunnabi, on 23rd January 2020, RKM arranged an interfaith dialogue (RKM, 2020). Maulana Mazharul Islam and Swami Purnatmanananda spoke on the integration and mutual respect between different religious beliefs, demonstrating the practical aspects of theological acceptance. This event also served as a platform for cultural exchange, where religious principles were discussed openly and without hesitation, promoting a deeper understanding among participants. On 24th December 2022, RKM arranged Christmas Eve (RKM, 2022). Activities included Christmas carols and discussions on the teachings of Jesus Christ, facilitated by members of RKM and lauded by Christian representatives. The dialogue centred around the universal messages of love and compassion, pivotal to both Christian and Vedantic teachings, as preached by Swami Vivekananda. On 5th May 2023, RKM organized Budha Purnima ("Prabodhan," 2023). Discussions led by Swami Purnatmanananda and Vadanta Krunaananda Ther revolved around Buddha's principles and their relevance to contemporary interfaith dialogue. The seminar explored how Buddhist ideals of compassion and non-violence could be integrated into daily life and across religious boundaries to enhance global harmony. Every year, RKM arranges the major religious festival of all the prominent religions of Bangladesh and speaks about the greatness of that religion. This is how RKM try to promote interreligious harmony.

6.2.2 Caritas Bangladesh

Caritas Bangladesh, originally established in 1967, has significantly expanded its scope and operations to include a vast array of projects to foster communal harmony and interfaith dialogue across diverse communities. Their initiatives are deeply rooted in the principles of holistic community development and aim to create a cohesive society where social justice and peace prevail. Caritas Bangladesh's concept of interreligious dialogue is characterised by its comprehensive and inclusive approach, integrating economic, social, educational, and health initiatives to build a foundation for sustainable peace and communal harmony (Caritas, 2021). Their efforts are a testament to the potential of holistic community development programs in fostering interfaith understanding and cooperation in a diverse society like Bangladesh. Through workshops and seminars, Caritas inspires people of all faiths to work together to support the weak and disadvantaged. Every year, a different theme is the focus of the program. The theme of 2023 is "Walking Together to Build Communion" ("Binimoy," 2023). Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity are the four primary religions prevalent in Bangladesh. Leaders of these religions are asked to provide written opinions on the year's topic. A yearly magazine including these reflections highlights shared values and aspirations across Bangladesh's religious community. Through their varied projects, Caritas advocates for interfaith dialogue and provides tangible examples of how such dialogue can be embedded in every aspect of community development and humanitarian assistance. Caritas's main mantra (vision) has a special appeal for peace, considering the social teaching of the Bangladesh Catholic Congregation (Costa, 2012). Caritas believes in a social system where everyone will live in harmony and respect for one another in the spirit of human values, including freedom and justice, peace and forgiveness. Caritas Bangladesh always seeks to assist the less fortunate in a society based on equality (Costa, 2012).

6.2.2.1 The Practice of Interreligious Dialogue in Caritas Bangladesh

Caritas Bangladesh arranged an interreligious dialogue conference in May 2023 ("Binimoy," 2023). This conference was held in Khulna. This meeting focused on reinforcing the importance of interfaith dialogue and how it can be a cornerstone for building a harmonious society. The speakers provided overviews of their religious doctrines' support for peace and dialogue. This could be an excellent basis for developing educational materials or community outreach programs highlighting these shared values across religions. The speakers suggested

that post-conference workshops and regular follow-up meetings can help maintain the momentum of the initial dialogues and deepen understanding. Also, implementing community-driven projects that require interfaith cooperation can provide practical experience in collaboration and promote mutual respect.

Formation of Youth and Teachers (FYTP) Project of Caritas Bangladesh Mymensingh Region and Inter-Religious Dialogue Commission, Mymensingh jointly organised a day-long Inter-Religious Dialogue Seminar on 27 May 2023 at Caritas Mymensingh Regional Auditorium (“Binimoy,” 2023). ‘Religious concord is the way that humanity should go’ was the seminar's core theme. Professor Mr Bimal Kanti Dey, District Mukul Faujo President, and Durgabari, Mymensingh Arya-Dharma Gyan Pradayini Sabha, conducted the program's opening. A presentation on the seminar's major topic was given by Mr Farid Ahmad Dulal, a Bangladesh Writers Club's praesidium member and an honorary member of the Interreligious Dialogue Commission. The conference was attended by 48 educators from schools and colleges, lecturers, members of the Mymensingh Inter-Religious Dialogue Commission, and spiritual figures from various followers. The seminar's main goals were to:

1. Make participants aware of the value of interfaith harmony and peace in the modern world and increase their sensitivity to such issues.
2. The participants will undertake several activities through educational institutions to transmit the lessons of peace and harmony throughout the world.

The Garo Women Leaders Conference 2023, which took place for the first time, ended on a high note, inspiring and motivating delegates in a magnificent demonstration of solidarity and empowerment. On June 15 and 16, 2023, the event brought together women leaders from diverse Garo groups at the Homeric Auditorium of the Ama Achik Rasong Museum, Bishop House, in Bhatikashore, Mymensingh. It promoted discussion, cooperation, and the sharing of ideas (“Binimoy,” 2023). At this conference, the speakers told of two initiatives for establishing harmony: Specialized training programs for women in community leadership and conflict resolution can empower them as key agents of change in promoting interfaith understanding and organising interfaith youth camps and competitions to engage younger generations in dialogue, and collaborative activities could ensure the long-term sustainability of these efforts.

6.2.3 Bangladesh Buddhist Federation

A Buddhist organisation dedicated to advancing social, cultural, and religious endeavours was established in 1981 as the Bangladesh Buddhist Federation (*Dhaka International Buddhist Monastery, 2021*). Twenty-five people made up the Dhaka International Buddhist Monastery Construction Committee, as it was once named. As president and general secretary of the Committee were SK Chowdhury and Bishwapati Barua. Bangladesh Buddhist Federation received its new name in 1984 (*Dhaka International Buddhist Monastery, 2021*). The Federation was founded with the help of prominent Buddhist experts in Bangladesh and is now actively defending the rights of Buddhists.

The Federation's programs include spreading the non-violence, friendship, equality, and sympathy teachings of the Buddha, as well as protecting the religious, social, and cultural heritage of the Buddhist community in Bangladesh. The Federation participates in a variety of socioeconomic and social welfare initiatives. It provides adult and technical education opportunities and religious seminars for kids, teens, and women. The yearly Dipankar, originally known as Smaranika, is published by this organisation (*Dhaka International Buddhist Monastery, 2021*). The Bangladeshi Buddhist Federation includes the National Buddhist Youth Federation. The BBF was established to carry out the following purposes and goals:

- i. Strive to equip Buddhist community members with the necessary tools to fortify their positions as practitioners and representatives of Buddha's teachings on non-hatred, loving-kindness, and compassion, concurrently nurturing unity, solidarity, and fraternity internally.
- ii. Aim to establish an International Buddhist Monastery (IBM) in Dhaka, accompanied by a meditation centre, library, museum, Dhamma study and research centre, and additional monastic amenities to facilitate the community's spiritual and social activities.
- iii. Execute initiatives like literary events, seminars, and souvenir creation to illuminate and propagate Buddhist literature, culture, and legacy while disseminating the enlightening teachings of Buddha to wider audiences.

- iv. Allocate financial aid for deserving and underprivileged students, thereby enabling Buddhist youth to seamlessly navigate their journeys in general and religious education.
- v. Foster cordial relations with individuals from worldwide Buddhist nations, orchestrating an exchange of international Buddhist literature, culture, tradition, and wisdom to weave a global unity and mutual understanding network.
- vi. Implement positive, developmental, and charitable programs that benefit the Buddhist community, ensuring its well-being and continuity (Sunandapriya, 2023).

BBF is a religious organisation. According to Ven Bhikkhu Sunandapriya, General Secretary of Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, BBF organises seminars yearly to maintain harmony among the Buddhists and other religions. The purpose of this seminar is to promote peace among religions through dialogue. Not only do the members of this organisation attend seminars and conferences throughout the year in many dialogical sessions, but they also represent Buddha's life, teachings and philosophy regarding interfaith harmony (Sunandapriya, 2023). According to Bhante Saranapala, there are five principles which help us to be kind and live together:

- 1) Samaga – We live together.
- 2) Sammodamana- Be happy with what you have in mind.
- 3) Avivadamana Abhibadamana- We have no conflict, irrespective of religion or caste.
- 4) Kirodakibhuta- We live happily together like a mixture of milk and water.
- 5) Annanannam Piyakakkuhi Sampassanta - We look at each other with loving eyes (Bhante, 2023).

These principles also preach harmony and peace. Members of BBF follow these principles.

6.2.4 The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Interfaith Dialogue

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which takes place from January 18–25, is observed by Christians in Bangladesh through special prayers and activities that prioritise and advance unity across Christian faiths (Bolen, 2017). Less than 0.5 per cent of the 160 million inhabitants in the Muslim-majority nation of Bangladesh are Christians, a minuscule minority (*Minority Forum Alleges Discrimination in Bangladesh's Budget*, 2023). About 350,000 of the estimated

500,000 Christians are Catholics, the majority. Bangladesh bishops have fostered ecumenism and interreligious discussion through the Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue since the late 1960s, following the Second Vatican Council (*Christian Unity Is a Matter of Survival in Bangladesh*, 2017). This organisation practices interfaith dialogue from time to time by organising workshops, seminars, training programs, and educational programs, such as:

On May 7–12, 2014, the Caritas Center in the Diocese of Mymensingh hosted a training program for the “Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue,” a branch of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB) (ECCUID, 2014). The initiative was supervised and managed by partners from Caritas and the Diocese, in addition to assistance from the national level. This program aimed to enhance the skills and knowledge necessary for effective dialogue between religious groups. It then necessitates expanding training programs for religious leaders and community influencers across all regions to include modules on conflict resolution, empathy development, and effective communication strategies emphasising interfaith understanding.

In response to acts of vandalism at a church property, the commission organised a ‘solidarity day’ in August 2014 to support the victims and demonstrate a unified stand against religious intolerance (ECCUID, 2014). This event included submitting a protest letter to the local authority, symbolising a collective voice against communal aggression. The commission also held an all-day “Interreligious Dialogue” session involving leaders from the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities, which facilitated open discussions and aimed to mitigate religious prejudices through personal interactions and shared concerns. One of the keynotes of this session was “working with governmental and non-governmental organisations to advocate for policies that support interfaith dialogue and protect religious minorities from discrimination and violence”.

The session titled “Educational Values of Interreligious Dialogue among the Students of Different Religions”, held from June 13 to June 29, supported by the Dhaka Archdiocese, focused on promoting interreligious harmony through education (ECCUID, 2015). By engaging students from various religious backgrounds in dialogues, the initiative aimed to instill a deeper understanding and respect for different faiths at an early age. Additionally, the commitment shown by members of the Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue on July 7,

2015, to support the Boldipukur victims further emphasised the practical application of interfaith dialogue principles in responding to communal challenges (ECCUID, 2015). These actions collectively highlight the role of educational and solidarity activities in fostering a culture of mutual respect and cooperation among diverse religious communities.

On September 29, 2016, the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue organised a seminar at the CBCB Center in Dhaka that profoundly promoted interreligious harmony (“Oikkotan,” 2016). The seminar centred around Mother Teresa's legacy of “great kindness, compassion, and loving service to humanity,” the seminar brought together Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian leaders, religious men and women, and students from various colleges and universities. By discussing their religious beliefs within the context of service to humanity, participants explored common values that transcend religious boundaries, fostering mutual respect and understanding crucial for societal peace. The symbolic presentation of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta's image as a “symbol of compassion to the world” by Chancellor Bijoy D' Cruz to each speaker further underscored the unifying message of the seminar.

In a similar vein, on October 24, 2021, a Roundtable Conference on “Interreligious Harmony and Tolerance” took place in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh, which was coordinated by The Asia Foundation (“Oikkotan,” 2021). This event brought together leaders and influencers from various religious backgrounds to discuss and strategise enhancing interreligious harmony. These sessions are vital in promoting interreligious dialogue, reducing ethnic and religious prejudices, and enhancing mutual respect among diverse groups, contributing significantly to the societal goal of sustained interfaith harmony.

On October 18, 2022, a diverse group of religious figures, including Imams, Hindu Priests, Christian Catholic Priests, Muslim Religious Women, and Catholic Religious Sisters, participated in an interreligious workshop named “Religious Leaders' Roles in Preventing Extremism” (“Oikkotan,” 2022)—the workshop aimed to promote interreligious harmony by exploring the pivotal role of religious leaders in curbing extremism. The session facilitated a mutual understanding and collaborative approach by bringing together leaders from multiple faiths to discuss common goals and share strategies. This gathering emphasised the importance of unity in diversity and equipped these leaders with the insights needed to foster a more peaceful and cohesive society. This workshop suggested that youth forums and interreligious

camps must be established for interreligious harmony to encourage young people from different faith backgrounds to work together on social projects, discuss their religious perspectives, and build friendships.

6.2.5 Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue

All religions of the world teach people to love. But millions of innocent people in different countries have been exploited, deprived, oppressed and victims of bigotry due to misinterpretation and analysis of religion. In this situation, it has become essential for the followers of different religions and cultures to know each other, understand each other deeply and create an environment of mutual camaraderie. For this purpose, on March 4, 2008, CIID was established in Bangladesh's oldest, largest, and best higher education institution, Dhaka University, on the Institute of Inter-Religious Dialogue of Temple University model in the United States (Taher, 2022).

The aims and objectives with which the Center for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue embarked are - organising inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between people of different religions at home and abroad, organising seminars, symposiums and workshops on various issues related to inter-cultural issues, publishing journals, cooperating in publishing books on inter-religious and inter-cultural issues, taking initiatives to publish Dharmakosh in Bengali, establishing Library of World Religions and Museum of World Religions.

The founding chairman of the Department of World Religions and Cultures came forward in a single role behind the establishment of this interfaith and intercultural dialogue centre, Kazi Nurul Islam (Sayem, 2016). He came in the presence of famous theologians and professors from home and abroad, and from their company, mastered the religions and cultures well and realised the immense importance of this subject in Bangladesh; he was motivated to establish this centre on their advice.

6.2.5.1 The Practice of CIID in Promoting Interreligious Harmony

The week of February 1–7, starting in 2010 has been declared by the General Assembly as World Interfaith Harmony Week. The Department of World Religions and Culture observes it yearly to promote world peace. World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) aims to spread awareness of the value of nonviolence and world peace (Nations, 2019). The Center for

Interreligious and Intercultural Harmony and the WRC department observe a week-long event every year that includes a rally, seminars, a concert, and workshops. From the standpoint of various religions, harmony and peace are the main themes of all the events. Without regard to caste, sect, or religion, students dress in religious garb for rallies (the Mars Procession). Additionally, several seminars on interreligious harmony are held. A harmony concert also occurred this week (Taher, 2022)

This institution has consistently promoted interfaith harmony by organising various seminars that bring together representatives from multiple religious backgrounds to foster understanding and dialogue. On July 29 and 30, 2016, Dr. Muhammad Abdur Rashid, head of the department of Islamic Studies, led a seminar on “Dialogue for Peace and Harmony”. This event further exemplified the institution's commitment to interreligious dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding, where diverse religious leaders and followers can engage in open and respectful exchanges about their beliefs and practices, thereby cultivating deeper mutual respect and reducing potential conflicts among communities. These sessions provide a platform for learning and understanding and actively contribute to the societal goal of achieving lasting interreligious harmony by emphasising shared human values and fostering a collaborative spirit.
(Taher, 2022).

The two-day seminar organised by the Center for International Interreligious Dialogue (CIID) on February 17 and 18, 2021, titled "Religion and Peace Building: Methods and Theories; Covid-19 Pandemic and Religious Practices; Unlocking the Potentials of Interreligious Dialogue: Challenges of South Religion: Prospects and Retrospective," significantly contributed to promoting interreligious harmony. This event featured key speakers such as Dr. Vincent Sekhar, a former director of the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR), and Sayyed Anwar Hossain, an associate professor at Arul Anandar College, who discussed the vital role of religion in fostering peace, especially highlighted during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. They explored various peacebuilding strategies and discussed how different religious practices adapted to pandemic conditions, thus showcasing the flexibility and resilience of faith-based approaches to crisis management. The seminar also delved into the broader potentials and challenges of interreligious dialogue in the South Asian context, offering a retrospective and prospective analysis of improving and expanding dialogue mechanisms. By bringing together academics

and religious thinkers to discuss and disseminate their insights on peacebuilding and interfaith understanding, the seminar helped to strengthen community ties. It encouraged the development of inclusive strategies to handle global crises, thereby enhancing mutual respect and cooperation among diverse religious groups (Taher, 2022).

The seminar conducted by the Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID) on October 20, 2021, across ten districts, including Pirganj in Rangpur and Dighi Nanua in Comilla, played a crucial role in promoting interreligious harmony. This event, titled “Against the barbaric attacks on the Hindu community and desecration of the Holy Quran,” brought together representatives from various religious communities to publicly denounce acts of religious violence and highlight the peaceful teachings common to all religions. By focusing on the age-old traditions of coexistence and the peaceful tenets upheld by different faiths, the seminar provided a platform for mutual understanding and solidarity among diverse religious groups. It demonstrated a collective religious community response against intolerance and violence. The CIID's approach of using seminars, demonstrations, movies, and concerts to raise public awareness about religious peace further enriched the discourse, helping to foster a more inclusive and tolerant environment. Through these efforts, the seminar effectively countered prejudice and promoted a unified stand against communal violence, reinforcing the importance of interfaith dialogue in maintaining social harmony (Taher, 2022).

6.2.6 Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice

The Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), a religious non-profit NGO founded in 1983, was established by a group of Muslims and Christians committed to promoting peacebuilding in Bangladesh. The organisation's goal is to promote respectful dialogue and peaceful coexistence between religious communities, thus enhancing mutual understanding and friendly relations in the country (Peace Direct, 2017). In addition to running projects for kids and teenagers to get them thinking critically about peace and harmony, BICPAJ hosts monthly meetings to debate topics of justice and peace (Peace Direct, 2017). The peace education centre of the organisation employs personnel with training in conflict resolution, instruction, and study. Training initiatives are geared toward Bangladesh's young people, women, and ethnic tribal populations. The organisation's goals are to:

- a. Make a sustained intellectual contribution to the advancement of interreligious dialogue.

- b. Provide leadership, coherence, and direction for national projects and involvements.
- c. Develop cooperative relationships with non-governmental organisations that are active in the field of interfaith relations.
- d. Encourage international research in interreligious cooperation and dialogue.
- e. Act as a resource for interfaith organisations and committees in the Asia-Pacific region regarding interreligious dialogue (Peace Direct, 2017).

6.2.7 Mennonite Central Committee

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a relief and development branch of the Mennonite church, was founded in 1920 with the mission of "sharing God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by satisfying basic human needs and promoting peace and justice (Adams & Stark, 2015)." Because of their unwavering commitment to social justice and nonviolence, Mennonites are regarded as one of the world's most influential "peace churches". Since its inception, MCC's work has strongly emphasised conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Beginning with the efforts of the MCC's Peace Section, which later evolved into the Mennonite Conciliation Service, Mennonites have played a significant role in resolving some of the most brutal and entrenched conflicts of the twentieth century, including those in Somalia, Liberia, Colombia, Northern Ireland, and Israel-Palestine (Adams & Stark, 2015). MCC began operations in Bangladesh in 1970 after Cyclone Bhola.

Before expanding into broad agriculture, job development, education, health, and peacebuilding programs, MCC focused primarily on providing emergency help. In 2007, MCC established Shanti Mitra, or "Friends of Peace," in collaboration with the Brothers of Taizé, a worldwide monastic community-based in Taizé, Saône-et-Loire, Burgundy, France. Like Mennonites, the Taizé Brothers are dedicated to love, simplicity, and reconciliation. The initiative in Bangladesh is located at Shanti Nir, also referred to as "The House of Peace," in the Mymensingh District and is mostly administered by volunteers. Members come from a range of ages as well as different racial and religious backgrounds. The Shanti Mitra Sangha meets monthly to discuss a range of peace-related topics and plan upcoming efforts. During the sessions, readings from many religious traditions are offered along with collective meditation (Adams & Stark, 2015).

MCC also aims to integrate peacebuilding and conflict transformation strategies into people's everyday lives around the country by setting up workshops and classes for students and staff members of adjacent NGOs. They aim to organize community-wide peace and justice-related events and translate and create original peacebuilding materials in Bangladesh (Star Digital Report, 2021). In 2014, MCC founded "Payara," a peacebuilding group, to expand its peacebuilding efforts in Bangladesh (Adams & Stark, 2015). Payara has been working towards interreligious harmony through interfaith dialogue.

6.2.8 United Religions Initiative

Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, and Muslims make up the United Religions Initiative (URI) in Bangladesh Cooperation Circle (CC) (a total of 7 members). To encourage tolerance and coexistence among adherents of many religions, they are active in Bangladesh. By meticulously researching and promoting Christian principles, they hope to bring a moral revolution in society. Over the last few years, CC members have organised domestic and foreign seminars. Among the most noteworthy occasions was the "International Seminar on Inter-religious Harmony" in 2004. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Canada, and Japan sent representatives to the event (*URI in Bangladesh CC, 2004*).

6.3 PRACTICE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Bangladesh has made substantial changes in the field of education. Above 74 % of people are literate. Millions of kids in Bangladesh receive education from many seculars and faith-based educational institutions, which help them develop interreligious understanding (The Daily Sun, 2023b). Interreligious dialogue in educational institutions in Bangladesh is critical in promoting communal harmony and understanding among students from diverse religious backgrounds (Siddika, 2021). The national curriculum, alongside specific programs and activities is designed to foster an environment of mutual respect and tolerance. The curriculum in Bangladesh integrates themes of pluralism, tolerance, and interfaith understanding across various subjects, especially in social studies and religious education (Roy et al., 2020). It aims to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the country's religious diversity, emphasising the ethical and moral teachings common across religions. For instance, textbooks include stories and lessons that highlight the virtues of compassion, kindness, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs. Educational institutions in Bangladesh offer

courses on different religions, focusing on Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, reflecting the country's major religious groups (Rob, 2020). This approach allows students to learn about various religions' beliefs, practices, and values from an early age, promoting a sense of respect and curiosity rather than fear or suspicion.

Schools and colleges in Bangladesh often celebrate religious festivals of all major religions, such as Eid, Durga Puja, Christmas, and Buddha Purnima (S. M. N. Alam & Naser, 2020). These celebrations are opportunities for students to participate in and learn about these festivals' rituals, traditions, and cultural significance, fostering a spirit of inclusiveness and communal joy. Educational institutions sometimes organise seminars, workshops, and discussion forums on interfaith dialogue and understanding (Rob, 2020). These platforms enable direct interaction among students of different faiths, encouraging them to share their religious practices and perspectives. An example includes the initiatives by institutions like the University of Dhaka, where panels and seminars on interreligious dialogue are held, featuring religious leaders and scholars as speakers to educate and engage students in meaningful discussions. Debate clubs, cultural organisations, and inter-school competitions often include themes and topics related to religious tolerance and interfaith harmony. Through these activities, students learn to articulate their thoughts on religious diversity and coexistence, enhancing their understanding and empathy towards peers from different religious backgrounds. Schools organise visits to religious monuments, museums, and places of worship belonging to different faiths. These educational tours provide a real-world context to the theoretical knowledge gained in classrooms, allowing students to experience the beauty and tranquility of sacred spaces and understand the cultural heritage shared among Bangladesh's diverse religious communities. Besides the above initiatives, the following institutions have developed distinguishing features to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding in Bangladesh.

6.3.1 Department of World Religions and Culture

Dr. Kazi Nurul Islam, a distinguished professor at the University of Dhaka, founded the Department of World Religions & Culture in 1999 to advance interfaith harmony domestically and abroad through scholarly study of many world religions (Sayem, 2016). In the Muslim world, this is the only academic division where all major, minor, active, and extinct faiths are taught from a historical, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and economic

perspective. This is more than a theological study (K. N. Islam et al., 2022). This department operates the Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID), which works to advance interfaith cooperation among followers of various religions across Bangladesh (Siddika, 2021). This centre organises research projects, seminars, field trips, and international conferences focusing on the need for religious harmony and bringing about peace through religion and respect (Taher, 2022).

6.3.2 Christian Missionary School

Christian missionary schools in Bangladesh have significantly promoted interreligious dialogue, emphasised mutual respect and understood among students of different faiths (E. K.-F. Chia, 2021). Notably, institutions such as St. Joseph Higher Secondary School and Notre Dame College in Dhaka stand out for their commitment to fostering a culture of interfaith harmony. While based on Christian principles, these schools' welcome students from all religious backgrounds, integrating interreligious dialogue into their curriculum and extracurricular activities. They organise events like interfaith prayer services, where students and teachers from various religious traditions unite to share and celebrate their faiths (Farid, 2022). Additionally, these schools encourage discussions on religious pluralism in social studies and ethics classes, providing a platform for students to explore and respect the diverse religious landscapes of Bangladesh. Examples of specific initiatives include organising seminars and workshops led by religious leaders from multiple faith communities to educate students on the core teachings and values that unite different religions. By incorporating these practices, Christian missionary schools in Bangladesh contribute significantly to building bridges of understanding and cooperation among the youth, laying a strong foundation for a more inclusive and harmonious society.

6.3.3 Ramkrishna Mission School

The Ramakrishna Mission (RKM) has long embraced the principles articulated by Swami Vivekananda, emphasising "man-making and character-building education." Founded in 1914, the Ramakrishna Mission High School started as a junior high school and has, over its century-long trajectory, sculpted thousands of individuals who have made significant contributions to society (Dev, 2019). Operating under the aegis of the Dhaka Education Board, this government-affiliated secondary school faithfully follows the national curriculum. Beyond its

academic curriculum, the school promotes interreligious harmony by hosting diverse activities, including organised sports, theatrical performances, and musical events. Significantly, the school respects and celebrates all national and religious holidays, fostering an inclusive environment. Currently catering to approximately 300 students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, the school is an educational pluralism emblem (“Prabodhan,” 2023). The serene and spiritually infused environment further bolsters the students' holistic growth. Additionally, the school's commitment to societal upliftment is evident in its provision of partial or full scholarships to many attendees (Dev, 2019). Through its curriculum and practices, this educational institution underscores the importance of unity and mutual respect, serving as a beacon of interreligious harmony in an academic setting.

6.3.4 Dhaka Ahsania Mission

Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), established in 1958 by the esteemed educator, social reformer, and devout Sufi Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, has been pivotal in driving education and social reforms within Bangladesh (M. A. Islam & Hoq, 2010). Ahsanullah, notable for being the first non-British member of the Indian Education Service and a significant figure in the founding of Dhaka University, aimed to expand educational access to rural and marginalised communities while eradicating communal biases. Drawing inspiration from Sufi principles, DAM prioritises inward spiritual development alongside serving humanity. Its foundational goals include fostering humanity's spiritual and social well-being, promoting unity and divine love, facilitating individuals' recognition of their duties towards the Creator and fellow humans, and alleviating human suffering

In its initial years during the 1960s and '70s, DAM concentrated on adult education, Quranic teachings, and vocational training to combat poverty, with faith being a driving force in its initiatives (Siddika, 2021). Today, it is Bangladesh's largest and most influential Sufi-inspired NGO, with the concept of divine love central to its service ethos. According to Dr. Ehsanur Rahman, the Executive Director of Dhaka Ahsania Mission, Sufi teachings on Allah's creation of humanity out of love and the resultant bond between the Creator and humanity are integral to DAM's holistic approach. Their motto, "Divine and Humanitarian Service," encapsulates their objective of enhancing communities' spiritual and social fabric (Roy et al., 2020). DAM also emphasises inter-religious harmony, advocating that despite the diversity in religious rituals, the underlying values across faiths are universal. Importantly, while inspired

by faith, DAM's activities are conducted outside mosque premises, enabling them to serve communities of various religious backgrounds effectively.

6.3.5 Moanoghar and Banophool Adibashi Green Heart College

Prajananda Mahathera, a Theravada Buddhist from the Chakma community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, founded Moanoghar and Banaphool Adibhasi Green Heart College. Within a few years, the college became a focal point of harmony. At Banaphool, most students are Muslims. The only Buddhist students are 150. It is interesting because although this school and college were founded with a religious mission, students from various religious backgrounds are enrolled here (Roy et al., 2020).

These practices within Bangladeshi educational institutions underscore the importance placed on interreligious dialogue as a foundation for building a cohesive and tolerant society. By embedding these values within the curriculum and school activities, Bangladesh aims to cultivate a generation of individuals who are knowledgeable about their own and others' religious traditions and advocate for peace and mutual respect in an increasingly pluralistic world.

6.4 PRACTICES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE BY MEDIA

Traditional and new media platforms highlight the importance of communal harmony, showcase the richness of the country's religious diversity, and address misconceptions and stereotypes that may lead to tensions. F. Huda (2019) highlights the need for personal communication and the sharing of religious perspectives among different faiths to cultivate a non-communal atmosphere within society. Talukder Maniruzzaman contended that although Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-1975) adopted secularism as one of the four state principles, he provided equal opportunity for all religions in Bangladesh (Maniruzzaman, 1990). That is why the recitation from the sacred texts of four major religions was introduced at the beginning of the state-run radio and television broadcasts (Maniruzzaman, 1990). Bangladesh Television (BTV), the state-owned TV station, along with private channels like Channel I, ATN Bangla, and others, frequently broadcast programs, documentaries, and talk shows focusing on religious tolerance, the historical coexistence of diverse faiths in Bangladesh, and the contributions of different religious communities to the nation's cultural and social fabric. These

programs often feature religious leaders, scholars, and community activists discussing the principles of peaceful coexistence, respect for all religions, and ways to combat religious extremism. By highlighting positive examples of interfaith cooperation and providing a platform for constructive dialogue, the media helps to counteract the forces of division and extremism, contributing to the overall stability and harmony of Bangladeshi society (F. Huda, 2019).

Newspapers and magazines in Bangladesh, including Bengali and English publications like *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo*, *The Daily Sun* and *The Daily Ittefaq*, regularly publish articles, op-eds, and features on interfaith issues. These pieces explore topics such as the common values of major religions, stories of interreligious cooperation, and the importance of dialogue in resolving conflicts. The Eid Special editions, Puja editions, and other religious holiday supplements often include messages of peace and unity from leaders of different faiths (The Daily Sun, 2019). With the rise of digital media, online news portals, blogs, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become powerful tools for promoting interreligious dialogue. A four-day training workshop on fostering interfaith and peacemaking dialogue through social media was conducted by Save & Serve Foundation and UNDP-Bangladesh with Muslim religious leaders and actors in 2019 (Burnett, 2019). The goals of this training workshop are to transform Muslim faith leaders into peace practitioners by educating them on their practical and professional role in preserving and promoting peace and tolerance as well as supporting women's empowerment in society, capacity building and awareness raising on how to use social media to best advantage in disseminating their peace-making dialogues, providing in-depth knowledge to modernise their perceptions on extremism, radicalisation and terrorism, and creating a community of religious leaders who can address local, contextualised conflicts and work toward fostering tolerance in society.

Many religious organisations, civil society groups, and individuals use social media platforms to share messages of harmony, organise interfaith webinars, and counter hate speech with narratives of love and inclusivity. For instance, the Bangladesh Interreligious Centre for Peace & Justice, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation and Caritas Bangladesh utilise Facebook to share information about their interfaith activities and dialogues, engaging a wider audience in conversations about religious tolerance (Peace Direct, 2017). Various media outlets in Bangladesh launch special initiatives and campaigns during religious festivals, emphasising unity and solidarity among all communities (Lewis, 2021). Through these practices, the media

in Bangladesh plays a critical role in enhancing interreligious dialogue, building bridges between different communities, and promoting a culture of peace and mutual respect.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The exploration of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh reveals a rich tapestry of initiatives spanning organisations, educational institutions, and media, each contributing uniquely to the fabric of communal harmony. Notably, the efforts transcend mere coexistence, delving into the deeper waters of mutual respect, understanding, and shared values among the diverse religious communities. The analysis unearths a dynamic landscape where faith-based organisations (FBOs) advocate for peace and actively engage in dialogue and service, embodying principles that resonate across religious divides. Educational institutions emerge as pivotal arenas for nurturing interfaith understanding from a young age, integrating curricula that foster an appreciation for religious diversity while celebrating common humanitarian values. Through festivals, seminars, and inclusive activities, these institutions groom a generation equipped to navigate and cherish the pluralism that defines Bangladesh.

The role of traditional and new media in amplifying the message of interreligious harmony cannot be overstated. It bridges, connects diverse audiences, and promotes narratives of unity and peace that challenge stereotypes and misconceptions. This triad of efforts—organisational initiatives, educational reforms, and media outreach—highlights a collective movement towards a more inclusive and harmonious society. These findings suggest a hopeful trajectory for Bangladesh, where dialogue, organisations, education, and media converge to weave a stronger, more unified national fabric. This chapter reflects on the current state of interreligious dialogue. It illuminates the path forward, highlighting the continued need for collaborative efforts to nurture a society rooted in mutual respect, understanding, and shared values across religious lines.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we delve into the complex world of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh, guided by insights from 15 diverse respondents (given in Appendix 1) and an extensive literature review, aiming to understand its role in nurturing communal harmony. Before unpacking the intricate themes from our analysis, we offer a snapshot of our respondents' demographics, shedding light on their varied backgrounds and perspectives. Participants hail from a rich tapestry of institutions, encompassing both organisations deeply engaged in dialogue efforts, such as the Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Church of Bangladesh, and the Ramakrishna Mission, and academic circles, predominantly from the University of Dhaka. This blend of academic and practical viewpoints is further enriched by including politicians and historians, offering a comprehensive overview of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh. Our thematic analysis, aligned with the research objectives, unveils critical discussions on the role of interreligious dialogue, its historical roots, and contemporary practices within the Bangladeshi context and ends with issues and challenges. We explore themes ranging from the foundational goals of dialogue through the lens of mutual understanding and peace to the specific challenges and opportunities it presents in fostering communal harmony. This analysis highlights the progress and persistent hurdles, such as educational disparities, economic factors, political instability, and marginalisation issues, that continue to challenge interfaith harmony efforts.

In conclusion, this chapter synthesises the diverse viewpoints and findings to present a nuanced understanding of interreligious dialogue's role in Bangladesh. It emphasises the importance of continued education, policymaking, and community engagement efforts to overcome existing challenges and promote a more inclusive, peaceful coexistence among the nation's varied religious communities.

7.2 DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE EXPERTS

This study compares various aspects of interreligious dialogue and its role in establishing harmony in Bangladesh. A total of 15 participants were involved, providing the present scenario of the concept and its contribution to peace and harmony. Here's a breakdown of the demographic profiles of the participants:

7.2.1 Institutional Diversity

Drawing from a diverse range of institutions, the Experts encompass both dialogue practising organisations like the Bangladesh Buddhist Federation (BBF), Church of Bangladesh, the Ramakrishna Mission (RKM), Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID) and Caritas Bangladesh as well as educational entities, notably the University of Dhaka from which a significant six out of fifteen participants hail. This dominance of the University of Dhaka underscores a pronounced academic lens in the study. Furthermore, the representation of politicians from the Bangladesh National Party and the Bangladesh Awami League offers a well-rounded political perspective. Additionally, historians provide insights on the topic from historical perspectives.

7.2.2 Designation & Professional Background

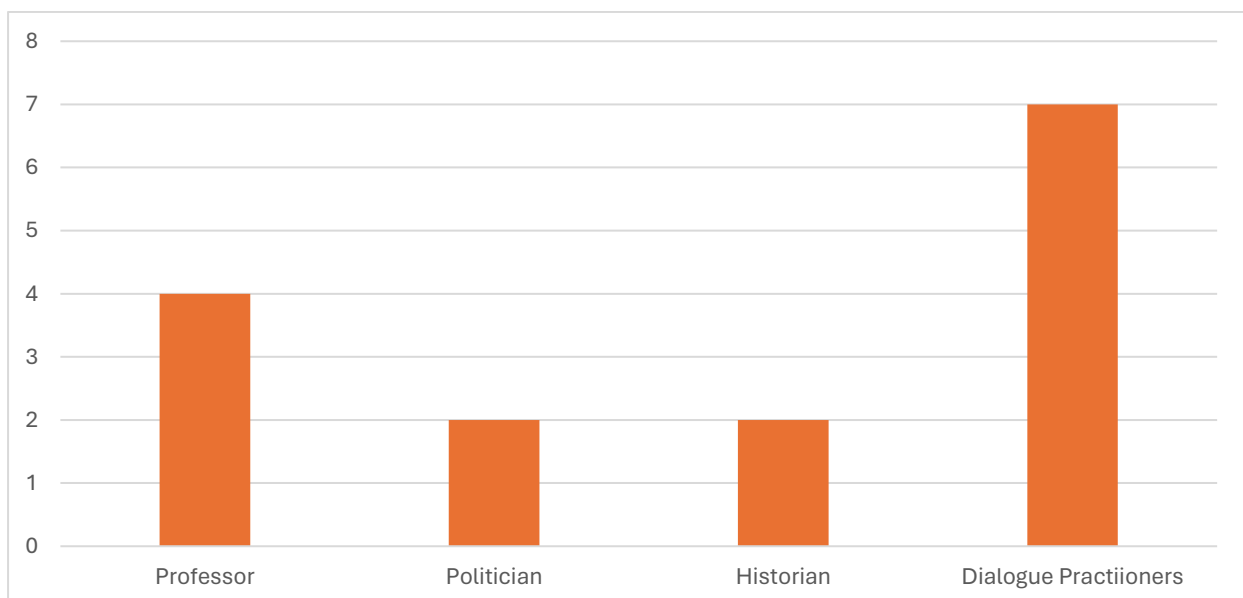


Figure 7.1: Designations of the Experts

The designations of respondents range from historians, professors, and dialogue practitioners to politicians. This diverse professional background ensures that the study captures academic and practical insights, potentially enriching the findings.

7.2.3 Gender

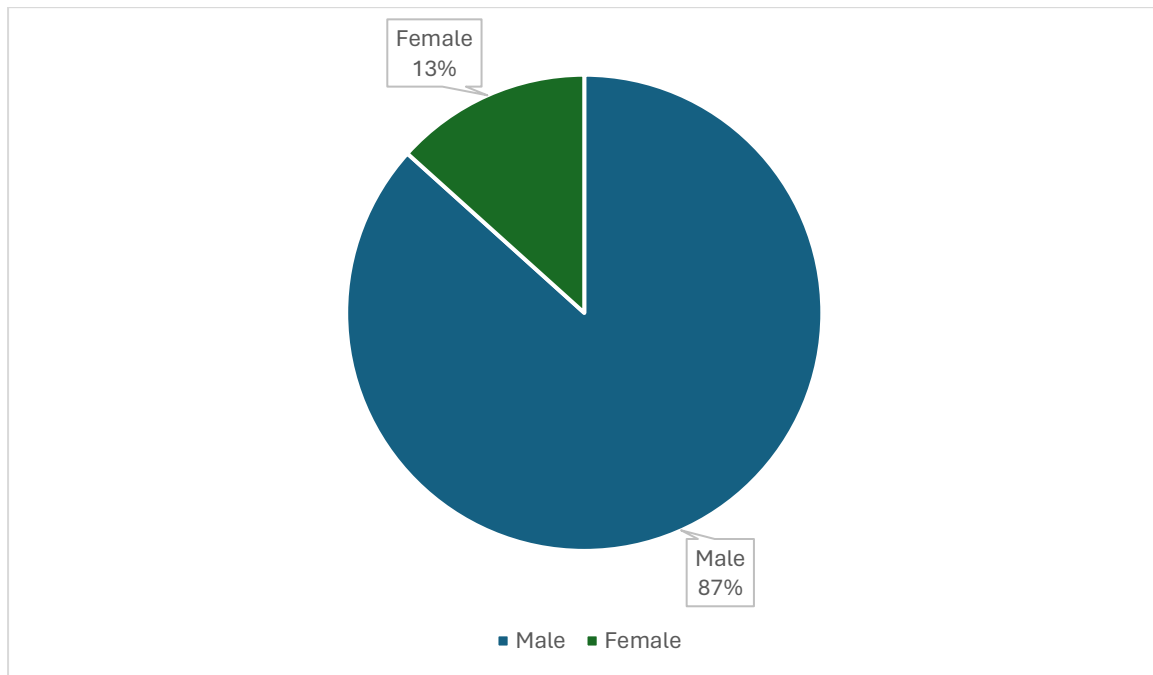


Figure 7.2: Gender Representation of the Experts

Out of 15 respondents, 13 are male, and two are female. The study has a male-dominant representation, which could suggest that certain institutions or roles are male-dominated, or it may reflect the general gender dynamics of the selected institutions.

7.2.4 Religious Diversity

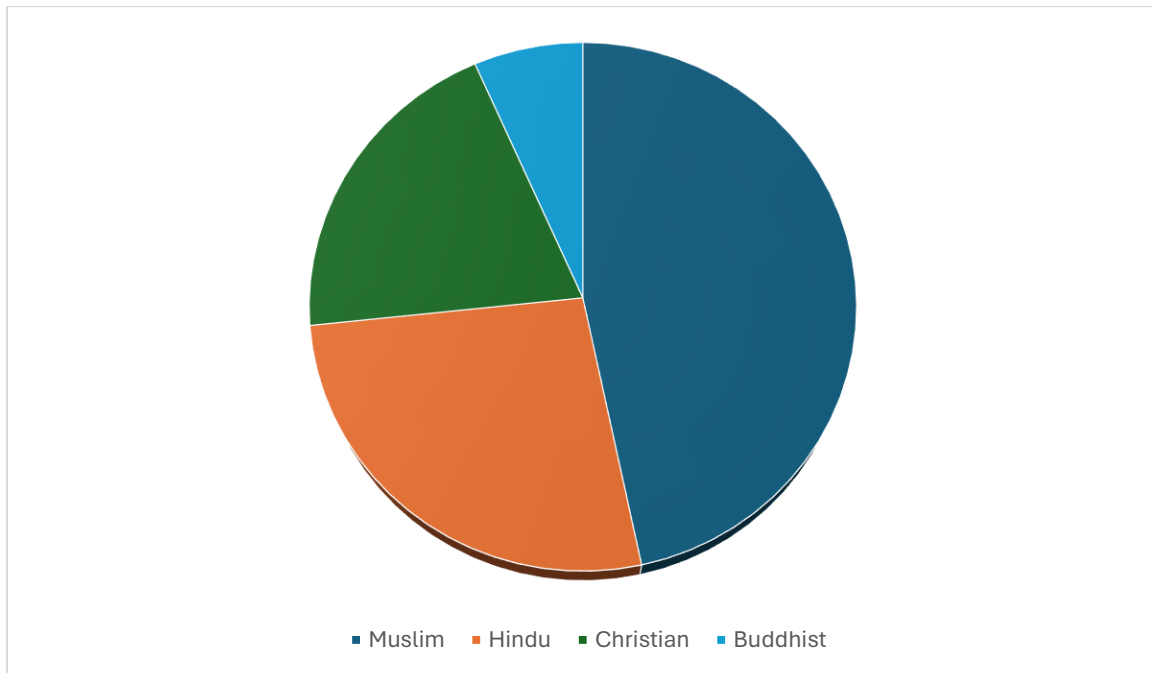


Figure 7.3: Religions of the Experts

This mix ensures that the study encapsulates varied religious perspectives. However, Muslims are the most represented, followed by Hindus, with fewer representations from Christians and Buddhists. This distribution might reflect the overall religious demographics of the region.

This study aims to capture a broad spectrum of opinions by including experts from various backgrounds, professions, genders, and religions. The dominant representation from the University of Dhaka suggests a strong academic lens. At the same time, including politicians, historians, dialogue-practising figures & organisations, and religious members ensures that practical, historical, and religious insights are not overlooked.

7.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This data analysis process follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to conducting thematic analysis. NVivo (version 14) is utilised to assist in organising and managing the interview data. NVivo is a software package designed to aid qualitative researchers in managing, coding, and analysing non-numerical and unstructured data. Initially, the researcher

familiarises herself with the data and generates initial codes across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, potential themes related to interreligious dialogue and communal harmony are identified, reviewed, and refined. After defining and naming the themes, a comprehensive report is produced. Based on the interview data and literature findings, the most common themes have been identified and categorised according to research objectives as such:

7.3.1 The Role of Interreligious Dialogue

7.3.1.1 Conflict Management

In this context, interfaith dialogue emerges as an essential tool for fostering unity and achieving peace through collective participation. Arun Maharaj echoes this sentiment, emphasising “Dialogues aren't mere rhetorical exercises but are dedicated efforts to reconcile divergent religious views.” Azizul Bari Helal further delineates the goals of interreligious dialogue, which extend beyond mere discussion. He asserts “It aims for conflict management, the elimination of discord, and the establishment of harmony among diverse religious groups.” In the literature it is evident that dialogues aim to achieve harmonious coexistence among varied faiths (Fergus, 2020). The goals and outcomes of dialogues are multifaceted, with a primary emphasis on peace-making and fostering mutual understanding, peace, and cooperation (Fergus, 2020).

7.3.1.2 Promoting Common Values

The essence and values of any religion revolve around peace, understanding, respect, and humanity. “Many religious traditions share common values such as compassion, justice, and peace,” according to Arun Maharaj. Respondent z emphasises, “The heart of every religion is peace, which can only be truly realised when one deeply understands and genuinely practices their religious teachings.” Hazi Biplob Sarkar delves into the importance of personal sacrifices for the greater good, suggesting “Harmonious coexistence demands individuals to let go of personal biases and embrace understanding.” Meanwhile, Milton Kumar Dev emphasises the value of mutual respect in inter-religious dialogues, asserting “True dialogue is anchored in respecting different faiths”. Sunandapriya's insights further elevate the discourse, highlighting “The goal of religion is to champion the cause of humanity, emphasising that both religion and dialogue serve as tools to further human welfare”.

Interreligious dialogue, deeply rooted in the essence and values of various religious traditions, has been pivotal in shaping interactions among diverse faiths. The nuances of dialogues, as exemplified by the meanings of ‘hiwar’ and ‘jadal’ from the Qur'an, range from correcting misconceptions to establishing facts (Lecocq & Schrijver, 2007). The Vatican II text *Nostra Aetate* ushered in a transformative phase in the Catholics' understanding of this dialogue, highlighting its inherent value (Morgan, 2015). From an Islamic viewpoint, the dialogue encompasses da'wah, which signifies preaching Islamic teachings and understanding life's deeper meanings, emphasising its foundational principles (Karim & Saili, 2009).

7.3.2 Interfaith Relationship before and after the independence of Bangladesh

Throughout Bangladesh's history, its populace has consistently engaged in interreligious dialogue. This section delves into the initiatives adopted by various dynasties under several themes aimed at fostering and preserving communal harmony.

7.3.2.1 Mutual Relationships in the Gupta Period

The historical context of one of the most influential dynasties in South Asia emphasises the Gupta period's role in fostering religious dialogue and mutual respect among various faiths. Sunanadapriya offers a broader perspective of Bangladesh as a land of religious diversity with a history of dialogue and coexistence. Specifically, the Gupta period stands out for its significant interactions between Jainism and Hinduism. He points out, “It wasn't just religious dialogues that marked this era but also evident social, economic, and administrative exchanges.” These interactions showcased the fluidity and openness of the Gupta era and set the foundation for a pluralistic society where diverse faiths could coexist harmoniously. Milton Kumar Dev further corroborates this view, emphasising the existence of mutual respect during the Gupta period. Such a statement signifies that the era wasn't merely about tolerance but a deeper understanding and appreciation of different faiths, which was embedded in the fabric of society.

Literatures support that the Gupta era was a time of Hindu revival and consolidation, which emphasised Vedic rituals, the construction of magnificent temples, and the flourishing of Hindu art and literature (Fisher, 2017). This period saw the integration of various Hindu traditions and the prominence of deities like Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess in multiple forms.

Despite the dominance of Hinduism, the Gupta rulers maintained a policy of religious tolerance, enabling Buddhism and Jainism to thrive alongside Hinduism (Howard, 2017).

7.3.2.2 Liberal Policy of the Palas

Dr. Shafi Mostofa and Dr. Jahangir Alam emphasise the harmonious era, stating the Palas' pivotal role in promoting interfaith harmony. Their tolerant attitude is evident through their rule and engagement with various religious communities. This is highlighted through Sunandapriya's and Dr Fazrin Huda's mentions of how people of various religions were seen in different administrative positions in the Palas, reinforcing the narrative of a merit-based system where religious backgrounds did not influence one's place in governance. This is aptly captured in the mention of the Pala reign being the golden age of interfaith harmony in the book "Everyday Life in Pala Empire" by Dr. Fazrin Huda. Yet, Uttam Kumar's statement paints a slightly different picture, suggesting the existence of preferential treatment. Respondent X points out that land was given to Hindus for pilgrimage, an indication of religious appreciation and respect, reflecting the Palas' commitment to fostering the religious practices of different communities. Dr Jahangir Alam indicates the Palas' proactivity in providing state patronage and fostering societal harmony. Milton Kumar Dev emphasises the Palas' adherence to the principles of non-violence, further solidifying their reputation as peace-promoting rulers. Hazi Biplob Sarkar poses a different view, suggesting "The Palas might have exhibited tolerance not just for harmony but also as a tactic for retaining power."

Scholarly works suggest that during the Pala Empire's reign, rulers like Dharmapala and Devapala championed religious tolerance and communal harmony in Bengal. They established notable educational institutions such as Vikramashila and Somapura Mahaviharas, hubs of intellectual diversity, attracting scholars and students from various religious and cultural backgrounds (Chowdhury, 2004). The Pala rulers' commitment to not imposing their religious beliefs on their subjects facilitated this harmonious coexistence of ideas. Such practices allowed for the co-flourishing of various religions, laying the foundation for religious harmony that would echo throughout history (Lewis, 2021; Swearer, 2013).

7.3.2.3 Bigot Policy of the Senas

The theme “Sena's Bigot Policy” dives deep into the Sena era's religious, social, and political complexities, highlighting a distinct approach that contrasts sharply with the more inclusive policies of some of their predecessors. Milton Kumar Dev touches upon the Sen era’s dogmatic approach, hinting at a rigid adherence to religious principles and emphasizing strict observance. Niranjan Adhikary mentions that “Hindu revivalism underlines a resurgence of Brahmanical practices.” Dr. Jahangir Alam, Hazi Biplob Sarkar, and Dr. Shafi Mostofa point out the noticeable absence of harmony during the Sena period. This sentiment is echoed by Azizul Bari Helal, who isn't aware of efforts to preserve communal harmony during this time. Respondent X and Dr. Fazrin Huda provide vivid accounts of the persecution faced by Buddhists and Jains, especially in East Bengal. This intense persecution paints a picture of an era marked by religious intolerance. The Senas did not accept anything from other religions.

Above view is supported by literatures as mentioned in the writings of M. N. Islam & Islam (2020), the subsequent Sena Dynasty in Bengal is often associated with its orthodox Hindu practices. The dynasty is credited with the revival and establishment of the caste system (Streissguth, 2008), which had not been as pronounced under the previous Buddhist rulers.

7.3.2.4. Integrated Approaches of the Medieval Muslim Rulers

As per respondent X, the Sultanate period was characterised by harmony. Dr. Jahangir Alam further echoes this sentiment, stating that “Medieval rulers promoted harmony.” Sunandapriya also points out that a “non-sectarian spirit” prevailed, and harmony continued throughout Muslim rule. “The inherent humanity and non-casteism of Islam appealed to many, attracting followers from various backgrounds,” as noted by Sunandapriya. According to Arun Mahraj, emperor Akbar's establishment of Deen-e-Ilahi and the subsequent dialogues between different religions highlight the importance of fostering open communication between faiths”. Arun Maharaj points out that dialogues weren’t always formal but equally essential. Azizul Bari Helal notes that rulers, even those from Turkey and Afghanistan, recognised and respected all ethnic and religious identities. This respect was evident in adopting policies that recognised the local culture, as evidenced by the emphasis on giving a “Bengali identity”. Dr. Fazrin Huda mentions the translations of significant Hindu texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata into Bengali during the reign of Hussain Shahi. This showcases the importance of cultural exchange

and mutual respect. Hazi Biplob Sarkar and Milton Kumar Dev acknowledge adherence to Islamic principles. However, they also note the overarching liberalism in religious policies during Muslim rule. Niranjana Adhikary offers a nuanced perspective, noting both antagonism and the positive influences of Islamic fakirs, saints, and dervishes. This highlights the dual nature of the rulers' approach, balancing power dynamics with religious harmony. Uttam Kumar provides a perspective on the motives behind some policies, suggesting “while some policies might have been designed to retain power, they resulted in maintaining peace and coexistence.”

Mohsin (2004) mentions that with the advent of Islam, especially after the conquest by the Turks in the 13th century, religion was seen as a beacon of social justice, equality, and fraternity. In a society marred by caste oppression and injustice, Islam's egalitarian principles were perceived as a rescuer, further facilitating its acceptance and integration into the societal fabric of Bengal. Muslims in Bengal, while embracing Islam, also retained certain practices from their ancestral beliefs (Kammerer, 1990). The mutual respect and integration of practices fostered an environment where Muslims and Hindus could coexist harmoniously, influencing each other's traditions (Z. R. Khan, 1985). All over this period, harmony prevailed. Only a little strain remained during Aurangzeb (Sarkar, 1930).

7.3.2.5 Sufi's Humanitarian Approaches

Respondents X and Hazi Biplob Sarkar illuminate harmony's central is in the Sufi approach. Sufis sought to bridge divides and create an inclusive environment where everyone could coexist peacefully. A shining example of this commitment to equality is the establishment of “langarkhanas” as highlighted by both contributors. These community kitchens symbolise the Sufis' dedication to treating everyone equally, regardless of their background or status. Uttam Kumar emphasises the Sufis' priority of humanity and harmony over proselytisation. This suggests that for Sufis, the essence of spirituality wasn't in conversions but in fostering a deep sense of human connection and mutual respect. Hazi Biplob Sarkar succinctly captures the essence of Sufism by stating that “Humanity was their philosophy.” This underscores the Sufis' unwavering commitment to humanistic principles, making them stand out as beacons of tolerance and compassion in various contexts.

With its inherent inclusiveness and spiritual orientation, Sufism played a pivotal role in bridging different communities in Bengal (S. Alam, 2015). Renowned Sufi missionaries or Pirs not only propagated the tenets of Islam but also amalgamated local beliefs and customs into their rituals. These efforts fostered a setting where followers of diverse religions, including Hindus and Buddhists, found common spiritual ground (Eaton, 2009). Such inclusive and spiritual approaches to religion certainly laid a foundation for communal harmony in Bengal.

7.3.2.6 Interruption of Harmony by the Colonial Ruler

This theme delves into the significant impact of colonial rule on the previously harmonious interfaith relationships in Bangladesh. Uttam Kumar highlights the British colonial strategy of “divide and rule” which was meticulously applied to exacerbate religious differences, turning them into sources of conflict rather than unity. He said, “By manipulating administrative and political power, the British colonial authorities systematically favoured one community over another, eroding the interfaith harmony that had prevailed.” Milton Kumar Dev points out specific instances where colonial policies led to increased competition and mistrust between Hindu and Muslim communities, disrupting the social fabric that had woven diverse religious groups together. Hazi Biplop Sarkar offers a critical examination of the role of the colonial education system in perpetuating religious stereotypes and biases. Arun Maharaj focuses on the economic policies of the colonial rulers that aggravated religious tensions. The colonial administration deepened societal division by creating economic disparities and favouring certain communities for administrative roles and jobs.

The British “divide and rule” strategy exacerbated existing religious divides to maintain dominance over their empire, leading to heightened tensions between major religious communities in Bangladesh. Scholarly sources hold that Christian missionaries in the colonial era often adopted contentious stances, predominantly converting Hindus and marginalised tribal groups to Christianity. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, these missionaries displayed overt hostility and criticism towards Islam and Hinduism. However, the British colonial era in Bengal also witnessed a cultural and religious renaissance that played a key role in sustaining communal harmony despite these adversities (Manzur-I-Khuda, 2004; Porter, 1992).

7.3.2.7 Interfaith Relationship under Several Governments

This theme examines the evolution and dynamics of interfaith relationships in the aftermath of independence, as navigated by various governments. Azizul Bari Helal focuses on the foundational period under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, often called the Father of the Nation. Helal's analysis highlights Mujib's efforts to establish a secular state that embraced all religions equally amidst the challenges of rebuilding a war-torn country. The 1972 constitution of Bangladesh, promulgated during Mujib's leadership, embedded secularism as a core state principle, aiming to foster a culture of mutual respect and tolerance among the diverse religious communities. Uttam Kumar examines the tenure of President Ziaur Rahman, who introduced the “Islamic Solidarity” policy to unify the nation under a shared religious identity. Milton Kumar critiques this approach, arguing that “while it aimed to strengthen national unity, it inadvertently marginalised religious minorities and shifted the country's secular orientation.” Niranjan Adhikary delves into the recent governments led by Sheikh Hasina, noting her efforts to reassert the secular ideals of the country's founding constitution. Adhikary highlights that “legislative and policy initiatives aimed at restoring and promoting interfaith harmony, such as reaffirming secularism alongside recognising Islam as the state religion, reflecting an attempt to balance religious identities with secular principles.”

Literature findings hold under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership (1972-1975), Bangladesh embraced secularism as a core principle, fostering equal opportunities for all religions and promoting interfaith harmony through initiatives like broadcasting sacred texts of major religions (Bhuiyan, 2017). Ziaur Rahman furthered religious inclusivity by renovating non-Muslim places of worship and addressing the concerns of the Hindu community (Franda, 1981). Khaleda Zia's tenure was marked by a sympathetic approach towards all religions (M. S. Ali, 2016). In her terms, Sheikh Hasina upheld religious policies, amending the constitution to affirm secularism alongside Islam as the state religion, ensuring equal rights for all faiths (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

7.3.3 Contemporary Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue

7.3.3.1 Constitutional Principles Focuses on Human Equality

Bangladesh's approach to fostering communal harmony is deeply embedded in its Constitution, reflecting a commitment to uphold secularism and ensure equality among all religions. Article

2A of the Constitution declares Islam as the state religion. Still, it guarantees equal status and rights to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions, ensuring no discrimination based on religion. Uttam Kumar highlights “This dual recognition underscores the nation's commitment to religious inclusivity.” Respondent X highlights, “The Constitution's Preamble, reflecting the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh, invokes the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. It narrates the historical struggle for independence, driven by a desire to establish a society where all citizens can live free from exploitation and discrimination.”

Md. D. Islam & Huda (2011) in their work hold that the constitution of Bangladesh promotes harmony in Article 2(A), 12, 28 & 41. According to Bhuiyan (2017), secularism is the spirit of Bangalee nationalism, which evaluates everyone equally.

7.3.3.2 Organisational Endeavour for Promoting Social Integrity

Organisations such as BICPAJ, Caritas Bangladesh, Ramkrishna Mission and Universal Peace Prayer have been highlighted for their dedicated efforts towards interfaith dialogue. Respondent Y mentions the multifaceted approach of BICPAJ, which not only facilitates dialogue but also furthers international research in this arena, underscoring its commitment to promoting understanding and peace on a global scale. Hazi Biplob Sarkar also reiterates the importance of organisations like BICPAJ and Religious Welfare Trusts, which play a crucial role in safeguarding larger societal interests. These trusts ensure that the broader goals of peace, understanding, and welfare are pursued and protected. Respondent Z focuses on the holistic approach of the Church of Bangladesh, emphasising its non-discriminatory welfare services. He add that the Church's offerings span women's fellowship, social development activities, and childcare, showcasing a broad spectrum of services that cater to the needs of all, regardless of religion, caste, or community. The motto of the Church of Bangladesh succinctly encapsulates its mission and vision, emphasising service as a testimony to its faith. Milton Kumar Dev provides insights into the symbolic gestures and practices at Ramakrishna Mission. This institution observes various religious functions and celebrates birth festivals of revered figures across different faiths, such as Jesus and Buddha. The celebration of Eidd-e Miladunnabi, a significant event in the Islamic calendar, further underscores the mission's commitment to fostering interfaith connections. He noted “The establishment of emblems representing six

different religions on the temple is a profound gesture of harmony by the Ramakrishna Mission.”

Literature holds that institutions such as RKM, with its 205 centres globally, led by example in organisational welfare. Embodying the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, RKM tirelessly promotes interfaith understanding (Dev, 2019). Similarly, Caritas Bangladesh and BICPAJ have continuously worked towards nurturing a cohesive society, with their efforts rooted in respect for various religious symbols and traditions (Peace Direct, 2017). Events are another key avenue through which harmony is fostered. From RKM’s Interfaith Harmony Conference to Caritas Bangladesh’s dialogue programs, platforms are regularly curated for religious authorities to discuss and appreciate diverse beliefs (“Binimoy,” 2023b; “Prabodhan,” 2017; “Prabodhan,” 2020). This appreciation extends to celebrating religious rituals and traditions, enhancing community mutual respect (“Binimoy,” 2023; RKM, 2022).

7.3.3.3 Commitment of Educational Institution to Peace

Dr Fazrin Huda emphasises the role of educational institutions in shaping young minds to appreciate and understand the diversity of religious beliefs and practices within their communities. She argues “Schools, colleges, and universities are not just centres for academic learning but are crucial spaces where students learn about tolerance, respect, and the value of peaceful coexistence”. “By integrating interfaith dialogue into their curriculum and organising interreligious events and workshops, educational institutions can equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate a pluralistic society.” The Department of World Religions & Culture establishment at the University of Dhaka exemplifies the academic commitment to this cause. Unique in the Muslim world, this department studies major and minor religions from varied perspectives (K. N. Islam et al., 2022; Siddika, 2021) aiming at promoting harmony among religions.

7.3.3.4 Media’s focus on shared value

Dr. Jahangir Alam focuses on the media's capacity to influence public perceptions and attitudes towards different faiths. Alam contends “Responsible journalism and media practices can play a significant role in bridging gaps between religious communities by presenting stories

highlighting common values and shared human experiences.” Uttam Kumar said that “Through documentaries, talk shows, and news features that showcase examples of interfaith cooperation and dialogue, media can challenge stereotypes and counteract narratives that sow division.” Niranjan Adhikary delves into the synergistic potential of educational institutions and media working together to promote interfaith dialogue. He suggests that collaborative projects, such as media literacy programs within schools or joint educational-media initiatives on interfaith topics, can amplify the efforts to foster a culture of dialogue and understanding.

Huda (2019) highlights the need for personal communication and the sharing of religious perspectives among different faiths to cultivate a non-communal atmosphere within society. Al-Zaman (2020) delves into the interaction between religion and digital media for harmony.

7.3.3.5 Government’s Policy for Communal Peace

In Bangladesh, the government has implemented various initiatives to foster communal harmony and ensure peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities. According to Niranjan Adhikary, “These efforts include establishing the Ministry of Religious Affairs, tasked with promoting religious tolerance and understanding across different faiths.” Azizul Bari Helal highlights, “The government also observes National Harmony Day, organising events encouraging dialogue and mutual respect among religions. Additionally, the implementation of educational reforms integrates teachings on religious tolerance and the importance of interfaith dialogue into the national curriculum.”

One of the government wings, The Ministry of Religious Affairs, arranges the dialogical section in support of several projects such as “Enhancing Awareness on Religious Harmony” and “Development and Reform of Hindu Temples and Religious Institutions”. These projects aim to increase efforts and interfaith discussions, which are crucial to battling communalism, militancy, and extremism, as well as liberating society from all troublesome aspects (*Current Project- Ministry of Religious Affairs -People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2023*).

7.3.4 Issues and Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue in Bangladesh.

The challenges regarding interreligious dialogue proposed by the literature are versatile. Since the objective of this study is to identify the challenges and issues to the ever-growing debates on interreligious dialogue, findings from the literature and interviews are organised and discussed in several themes below:

7.3.4.1 Misunderstanding among Faith Groups

There's a stark lack of understanding among the followers of different faiths. Misconceptions persist despite interfaith dialogue's goal to foster a deeper understanding of one's religion and to respect others' beliefs (Campdepadrós-Cullell et al., 2021). Both parties should acknowledge their differences in the scenario outlined. They ought to acknowledge the existence of differences and try to comprehend them without surrendering their convictions.

However, the populace believes that to blend in, they must "dumb down" or sacrifice their religious identity. This frequently happens when dialogue participants encounter an implacable difference, such as whether Jesus was the Son of God or whether he was a prophet (as per Muslim religion). When the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) negotiated a deal with non-Muslims, he encountered a similar circumstance. They proposed to worship Allah for a year in exchange for his pledge to honour all their other gods the next year. In verse 6 of Chapter 109 of the Qur'an, prophet responds, "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion" [109:6]. At the same time, he honours other religions. But the people of this age cannot maintain their religions individually. As a result, misunderstanding among followers is growing, hampering the interreligious goal.

7.3.4.2 Attempting to Convert Others

Historically and in contemporary settings, Christian missionary activities often include efforts aimed at conversion, driven by a theological mandate to spread the Christian faith. For example, the Jesuit missions in the 16th and 17th centuries were notable for their global missionary endeavours, aiming to convert indigenous populations in the Americas, Africa, and Asia to Christianity (Hsia, 2014). In modern contexts, Christian missionary organisations like Youth With A Mission (YWAM) and Operation Mobilisation (OM) conduct various educational, humanitarian, and evangelistic activities, with a component of their mission being

the spread of Christian teachings and the invitation for individuals to embrace Christianity (R. Das, 2022).

Proselytising or trying to convert others is another difficulty. Furthermore, this contradicts the notion of respecting one another's differences. When engaging in interfaith discourse, people should do so to learn about other religions' views, not to advance their own. Nevertheless, some Muslims view dawah (Islamic missionary effort) as a vital aspect of their culture. However, as Chapter 2, Verse 256 of the Qur'an states, 'There is no compulsion in religion [2:256].' Muslims must abide by this principle. Therefore, interfaith discourse should not be conducted to convert others, even though proselytising may have its place (as in other faiths like Christianity).

7.3.4.3 Limited to Small Group

Respondent Y raises a critical point about interfaith dialogue being "limited among the educated people." Dr Fazrin Huda highlights the geographical divide, pointing out "while promoting such dialogues in urban centres like Dhaka University might be more straightforward, the task becomes considerably more challenging when trying to engage individuals in rural settings." Being limited to a small group, especially among religious or intellectual researchers, is one of the fundamental problems with interfaith dialogue (Kadayifci - Orellana, 2013).

Respondents Y and Z emphasise the role of extensive publicity, campaigning, and dissemination to spread the message of interfaith dialogue. They suggest harnessing newspapers and research activities to broaden the reach and deepen people's understanding, signifying the role of public engagement in this endeavour. Arun Maharaj, Dr Fazrin Huda, Hazi Biplob Sarkar, and Uttam Kumar stress incorporating interfaith dialogue into the educational curriculum. They propose introducing courses on ethical issues, making radical changes to the education system to be more liberal and open-minded, and promoting moral education. These interventions, they believe, will equip the younger generation with the tools and mindset required to foster inter-religious harmony. Dr. Fazrin Huda also suggests involving grassroots people to interreligious dialogue. Sunandapriya suggests going beyond traditional education and weaving the essence of interfaith dialogue into cultural activities. Additionally,

Sunandapriya mentions the need for more research efforts on harmony and dialogue, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of the approach.

7.3.4.4 Economic Constraints

Arun Maharaj succinctly mentions “economic hardships” signifying the broad spectrum of financial difficulties that can influence decisions, actions, and outcomes. Shafi Mostofa brings a nuanced perspective by discussing the “economic interest” and “economic-political interest of the elites.” This underscores the idea that sometimes-economic factors aren't purely about available resources but are intertwined with the vested interests of the influential classes. Both Dr Jahangir Alam and Sunandapriya emphasise specific financial challenges. Dr Alam mentions the “lack of adequate budget” and Sunandapriya points out a “lack of funds.” These inputs drive home the point that economic factors often boil down to the unavailability of necessary financial resources to carry out certain initiatives or projects. The literature emphasises the importance of socio-economic factors in shaping religious perspectives. It suggests that extremists can leverage economic vulnerabilities to propagate radical ideologies (Mostofa, 2021). Therefore, financial solutions like empowering communities and providing economic opportunities can deter extremism, fostering an environment more conducive to dialogue.

Respondent Z emphasises the responsibility of the government, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to set aside a specific budget for promoting interfaith harmony. Such an allocation suggests that the state recognises the importance of these dialogues and is willing to financially back these initiatives. Dr. Fazrin Huda underscores the critical nature of proper funding. Financial backing ensures that the various activities, events, and dialogues associated with interfaith harmony are not hampered due to a lack of resources. Proper funding not only facilitates smooth operations but also amplifies the impact of these initiatives. Sunandapriya points to external agencies seeking governmental funds, such as NGOs and centres. This perspective indicates that while individual efforts are commendable, collective efforts backed by financial support from governmental agencies can significantly boost the outreach and effectiveness of interfaith dialogues.

7.3.4.5 Political and Institutional Weakness

Arun Maharaj highlights “political instability” as a significant concern. Political instability can cause unpredictability in policies and governance, creating an environment where fostering inter-faith harmony becomes secondary to maintaining power and order. In such settings, religious dialogue might be overlooked or even suppressed to cater to the political agendas of the ruling class. Dr Jahangir Alam draws attention to the “institutional weakness” as one of the hurdles in establishing inter-faith harmony. He said, “Institutions play a crucial role in framing, guiding, and facilitating dialogue. When these institutions are weak or lack a clear mandate, their efforts to promote inter-faith harmony might be ineffective.” He further said, “The absence of strong institutional support can lead to a scattered and incoherent approach, making it challenging to achieve meaningful results”. Respondent X highlights that personal interests and prejudices lead to conflicts between religions. Such conflicts, often driven by the interests of some biased individuals, pose a significant challenge to establishing inter-faith dialogue.

Respondent Z highlights that the current government is proactively taking steps to ensure harmony. By organising awareness campaigns and dialogues in various districts, such as Faridpur, Rajshahi. Azizul Bari Helal outlines specific actions taken by political leaders, such as Begum Khaleda Zia, to curb the effects of communal terrorism. He said, “By forming the BGR and taking proactive measures in Hindu-dominated areas, it illustrates a strong political intent to protect minority interests and maintain communal peace.” Dr. Fazrin Huda emphasises the crucial role of the government in advancing interfaith dialogue. Without governmental backing and support, the goals of harmony can remain elusive. Dr Jahangir Alam echoes this sentiment, advocating for state patronisation to help overcome barriers in this journey.

Communal riots and religiously driven violence further deter people from engaging in conversations (BD News 24, 2021; Manzur-I-Khuda, 2004). Religion's misuse, especially its political exploitation, remains a major impediment to genuine interfaith dialogue. While some political entities use religious teachings for societal betterment, others distort and misuse them for their own gain (Md. D. Islam & Huda, 2011). These manipulations often lead to misrepresentations, causing distrust and inhibiting interfaith dialogue.

7.3.4.7 Stereotypical Beliefs

Most people are affected by their family's religious traditions and the leaders of their local congregations. Both religious dogma and stereotypical beliefs are vital for developing an individual's psychological framework (Jones, 1994). Due to this mindset, it is extremely challenging to influence their cognitive perspective through interfaith discourse. As a result, these orthodox people lack interest in engaging in an open-minded dialogue.

7.3.4.8 Loopholes in Educational System

The Bangladeshi educational system's flaws are another major barrier to the growth of interfaith communication (Roy et al., 2020). Regarding patronising interfaith conversations, Bangladesh's educational system is quite far. The fact that religious textbooks have been specifically prepared for Christians, Muslims, or Hindus is the main reason why interreligious dialogue has failed. Because of this, students from various religious backgrounds can learn about their religions but are uninformed of those of other faiths. As a result, they are opposed to having interreligious teachings and discussions.

Arun Mahraj said, “If a common subject named ‘Moral and Ethical Teaching’ is to be included, students will have the same attitude to sacred and profane, right and wrong, harmony and conflict.” These teachings will help maintain interreligious harmony and interfaith relationships. In this condition, interreligious dialogue would be fruitful.

Moreover, the co-existence of several educational systems is very dangerous for Bangladesh. As the religious schools, including Madrasas, especially Qwami Madrasa, keep aloof from the teaching of secularism, the students of this sector are unaware of different religions, and they have many misconceptions in their minds. On the other hand, secular institutions don't give much attention to religious teaching and raising awareness among the students about religions. “Religion is for peace” should be taught in all educational institutions.

7.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter meticulously explores the multifaceted nature of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh. It synthesises insights from diverse respondents and a thorough literature review to underscore its significance in promoting communal harmony. It has highlighted the historical

roots, present engagements, and challenges that permeate this critical dialogue in the quest for societal peace. Education, community involvement, and persistent policy efforts require continuous focus to mitigate barriers, such as socioeconomic disparities and political unrest, that hinder interfaith harmony. This synthesis of diverse perspectives reaffirms the essential role of interreligious dialogue in fostering a cohesive society. It catalyses further research and action towards a more inclusive and peaceful coexistence in Bangladesh.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUDING REMARKS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The intricate tapestry of interreligious dialogue, as delineated in the preceding literature and interview data, serves as the foundation for this chapter. The vast scope of this literature not only broadens our understanding of the diverse dimensions of interreligious dialogue but also provides the rationale for the objectives of this study. Following the analysis, the researcher transitions into ‘the important findings’, where the broader ramifications of our findings on interreligious dialogue in Bangladeshi society will be discussed. This will be complemented by a reflection on the ‘implication of the study’ and limitations encountered during our research, and finally concludes with ‘future research directions’. This segment highlights uncharted areas, offering potential pathways for subsequent studies in this domain.

8.2 SUMMARY OF THE IMPORTANT FINDINGS

8.2.1 Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is a crucial mechanism for cultivating unity and peace across diverse faith communities, transcending simple discussions to address conflict management, discord elimination, and fostering harmonious coexistence. This dialogue's essence is deeply embedded in the foundational values of peace, understanding, respect, and humanity shared among all religious traditions. It aims to correct misconceptions and facilitate a deeper, mutual understanding and respect, thereby serving as a powerful tool for social cohesion, stability, and a conflict-free society. The process is rooted in communication and mutual exchange principles, advocating for a comprehensive understanding of one's and others' religious texts, thereby enhancing the universality of religious values.

Moreover, the growing recognition and positive portrayal of interreligious dialogue across various media channels signal a broader societal acknowledgement of its significance. This shift towards a more inclusive understanding of religious interactions emphasises the transformative potential of dialogue in establishing a harmonious coexistence among different faiths within Bangladesh's unique sociocultural context and beyond.

Interreligious dialogue has traversed a long and diverse path, marked by significant milestones and attempts that underscore its vital role in promoting global peace and understanding. The journey of interfaith dialogue from ancient times to a structured global movement illustrates a profound evolution in addressing religious harmony. Landmark events such as the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago and Swami Vivekananda's call for universalism have brought leaders of various religious traditions together to foster dialogue and exchange ideas. Four initiatives among the Christian communities followed the expansion of interreligious dialogue. Firstly, Nikkyo Niwano founded the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) for the first time in Kyoto, Japan (Covell, 2014). The second was the launch of the United Religions Initiative (URI). Third, The URO was present at the UN in New York during the 20th century's latter decades but eventually amalgamated with the URI. The fourth is the first official announcement of the Movement for a Global Ethic. These events, alongside the Treaty of Hudaibiya and the Charter of Medina, are early testaments to the enduring pursuit of interfaith harmony.

Historically, interreligious dialogue has been integral to societal structures, with Bangladesh offering a vivid example of this tradition. Even during the pre-colonial era, the coexistence and active interaction among religious traditions within the region highlight a long-standing commitment to religious inclusivity and harmony. This commitment to dialogue has only strengthened over time, transitioning from what was described as a "monologue era" to a more inclusive and structured "dialogue era." Establishing significant institutions like the Department of World Religions and Culture and the initiatives undertaken by organisations like the Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace further emphasise the systematic and institutional efforts to promote interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh and beyond.

The inception of structured interreligious dialogue in the 21st century, marked by initiatives such as the World Interfaith Harmony Week, seminars, rallies and conferences, represents a significant milestone in Bangladesh's efforts to foster a harmonious coexistence

among various faith groups. This reflects a broader, global commitment to interfaith dialogue, aiming to create a universal framework for ethical coexistence across religious divides.

8.2.2 Historical Relationship among Various Religious Communities in Bangladesh

Over centuries, Bangladesh has nurtured a complex interfaith landscape shaped by dialogues, policies, and initiatives from diverse dynasties. The Gupta era, known for its open exchanges between Jainism and Hinduism, laid the foundation for a pluralistic society where different religions coexisted peacefully, engaging in religious dialogues and social and economic interactions. The Pala dynasty built on this, promoting a liberal policy that encouraged interfaith harmony, characterised by tolerance and non-violence, making it a golden age of religious coexistence. In contrast, the Sena dynasty marked a period of intolerance, with a focus on Hindu revivalism that led to the persecution of Buddhists and Jains. The introduction of Sufism brought a new era of inclusiveness, focusing on humanity and mutual respect, that fostered communal harmony. During the Muslim rule and under leaders like Emperor Akbar, a spirit of harmony and open communication prevailed, highlighted by the non-sectarian spirit and the recognition of Islam's egalitarian principles, allowing for a harmonious coexistence between Muslims and Hindus. The role of Aurangzeb in interfaith relationships in Bengal during the Mughal period is complex. Historians note that Aurangzeb's policies marked a departure from his predecessors' more pluralistic and inclusive approaches.

However, the colonial period disrupted this harmony as British policies deepened religious divisions. Despite this, a cultural and religious renaissance during this time contributed to preserving communal goodwill, with figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa advocating for interfaith understanding. Post-independence, efforts to reestablish interfaith harmony have been evident, with leaders embedding secularism as a core principle and striving for a culture of mutual respect and tolerance. Despite varying approaches, the commitment to promote interfaith harmony and balance religious identities with secular principles has continued.

8.2.3 Current Practices of Interfaith Dialogue in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's multifaceted approach to interreligious dialogue underscores the nation's dedication to fostering peace and understanding among diverse religious communities. Various

organisations, constitutions, governmental initiatives, educational institutions, and media platforms play pivotal roles in promoting interfaith harmony. Organisations like the Bangladesh Interfaith Centre for Peace and Justice (BICPAJ), Caritas Bangladesh, and the Ramakrishna Mission, along with Universal Peace Prayer, actively engage in dialogue initiatives, international research, and non-discriminatory welfare services, embodying a commitment to service and peace across religious divides. The Church of Bangladesh's inclusive approach, offering a broad spectrum of services and the symbolic practices at Ramakrishna Mission, such as celebrating festivals of various faiths and establishing emblems of six different religions, underscore a profound gesture towards interfaith understanding. The Bangladesh Buddhist Federation and the Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (CIID) contribute significantly by organising dialogues and fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding among different faiths.

Bangladesh's constitutional framework and governmental initiatives are pivotal in fostering communal harmony. The Constitution emphasises secularism and equality among all religions as fundamental principles. The Constitution declares Islam the state religion and ensures equal rights and status to practice other religions, highlighting the country's commitment to religious inclusivity. Government efforts, including establishing the Ministry of Religious Affairs and observance of National Harmony Day, alongside educational reforms promoting religious tolerance, contribute significantly to promoting a culture of dialogue, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities.

Their efforts are complemented by educational initiatives, where institutions play a crucial role. The national curriculum and missionary schools in education have integrated interfaith dialogue into their programs, aiming to educate students about tolerance, respect, and the importance of peaceful coexistence. This educational approach is further supported by the contributions of Ahsania Mission, Moanoghar Banophool Adibashi Green Heart College, the Department of World Religions and Culture, and missionary School, which emphasises spiritual education and the development of moral values among students.

Social and print media have emerged as influential platforms for dialogue, where responsible journalism and media practices help bridge gaps between religious communities. Documentaries, talk shows, and news features highlight interfaith cooperation and dialogue, challenging stereotypes and promoting a culture of understanding.

8.2.4 Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue in Bangladesh.

Interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh is hindered by several challenges, including educational disparities that limit engagement across rural populations. Misconceptions and the quest for religious superiority obstruct productive exchanges, underscoring the need for enhanced public awareness and interfaith dialogue in educational systems to promote tolerance and understanding. Economic constraints, compounded by insufficient budgeting and the influence of elite interests, necessitate governmental support and funding. Political instability and weak institutions further impede the promotion of harmony, while the exclusion of women, youth, and marginalised groups, alongside attempts to establish religious dominance. Addressing these challenges entails comprehensive educational overhauls incorporating teachings on religious tolerance and understanding, fostering community involvement and empowerment through grassroots initiatives, and advocating for concerted endeavors to cultivate respect and mutual understanding among all religious denominations. The findings present that interreligious dialogue is foundational in building communal harmony in diverse societies.

8.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of this study in interreligious dialogue, particularly within the context of Bangladesh, are far-reaching and multifaceted. This study will contribute to the existing literature on harmony, dialogue, peace, and history by dissecting the literature and the themes identified from the interviews. The implications of this study can be split into two categories: practical implications and theoretical implications. Each offers a different perspective on the impact of interreligious dialogue on society.

8.3.1 Practical Implications

Firstly, this study underscores the importance of integrating interfaith dialogue initiatives within educational curricula and community programs to foster mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious groups. This can help reduce religious misconceptions and prejudices, thereby enhancing social cohesion. Secondly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering insights into the contemporary approaches of interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh. This expands the understanding of how various stakeholders, including governmental bodies, religious or secular organizations, educational institutions, and the media, engage in promoting communal harmony and understanding. Thirdly, this study

identifies specific issues and challenges hindering interreligious dialogue, providing a foundation for further academic research and exploration. By addressing these challenges, future studies can propose practical solutions and strategies for fostering greater interfaith understanding and cooperation. Fourthly, this study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, highlighting the role of diverse fields such as religious studies, sociology, media studies, and education in promoting peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among religious communities.

8.3.2 Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study reinforces the concepts of religious pluralism, communication theory, conflict resolution theory, and social cohesion theory within the context of interreligious dialogue. It asserts that religious pluralism, with its focus on affirmative coexistence and interaction among different faiths, communication theory is highlighted as crucial for dismantling misunderstandings and promoting peace, while conflict resolution theory positions interreligious dialogue as an effective means for de-escalating tensions and achieving sustainable peace and lastly, social cohesion theory enhances community bonds and fostering a unified society. These theoretical implications underscore the importance of interreligious dialogue in creating an inclusive narrative around religious identity and its role in advancing societal harmony and unity.

8.4 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

While the study presents significant contributions to the field of interreligious dialogue and communal harmony, especially within the Bangladesh context, it acknowledges several limitations:

- i. **Contextual Specificity:** The study's focus on Bangladesh offers in-depth insights into interreligious dialogue within its unique socio-cultural and religious context. However, this specificity may limit the transferability of findings to different regions with distinct religious and cultural dynamics.
- ii. **Sample Diversity and Size:** The participants and contexts selected for the study might not encapsulate the entire spectrum of interreligious interaction in Bangladesh. A broader or different mix of participants might offer alternative perspectives.

- iii. **Methodological Scope:** While the study's qualitative nature provides depth, it may not capture the prevalence and patterns discernible in quantitative analysis. Therefore, the results are interpretative and may not allow for statistical generalisation.
- iv. **Temporal Limitations:** The findings represent a temporal snapshot. Given the fluid nature of interreligious dynamics, the study's conclusions might not hold over time, necessitating continuous examination.
- v. **Thematic Concentration:** While focusing on dialogue and communal harmony, the study may overlook other significant factors influencing interreligious relationships, such as economic disparities.

8.5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of interreligious dialogue's impact and evolution in Bangladesh, detailing the extensive body of literature and insights gathered from interviews. It presents an intricate exploration of how interreligious dialogue has historically and presently contributed to societal harmony. This includes a discussion of major findings, highlighting the crucial role of such dialogue in promoting peace and understanding across diverse religious communities. The implications of these findings are considered alongside the study's limitations. The findings underline the ongoing importance of interreligious dialogue in fostering a cohesive and inclusive society in Bangladesh. To build on the foundation laid by this study, future research might take the following directions:

- i. **Comparative Cross-Cultural Studies:** Future research can benefit from comparative studies that examine interreligious dialogue in different countries or cultures to identify universal themes and culturally specific strategies.
- ii. **Expanding Participant Demographics:** Including a wider array of participants, such as individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds, ages, and educational levels, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of interreligious dialogue.
- iii. **Incorporating Quantitative Methodologies:** Subsequent studies can use quantitative approaches to measure the prevalence of attitudes and behaviours related to interreligious dialogue to complement the qualitative findings.

- iv. **Longitudinal Research:** Tracking the progress of interreligious relations over time can illuminate the long-term impact of dialogue initiatives and the sustainability of communal harmony.
- v. **Interdisciplinary Integration:** Integrating insights from economics, psychology, and political science can help understand how interreligious dialogue intersects with other societal factors and its broader impact on social cohesion and conflict resolution.
- vi. **Policy Impact Studies:** Research focused on the implications of interreligious dialogue for policymaking can provide actionable strategies for governments and NGOs to enhance communal harmony and social stability.

By adopting these research directions, future studies can deepen the understanding of the intricate dynamics of interreligious dialogue and its role in fostering peaceful coexistence within diverse societies.

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APPENDIX A LIST OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Tag	Respondents	Institutions	Designation	Date of the Interview
R-01	Ven Bhikkhu Sunandapriya	Bangladesh Buddhist Federation	General Secretary	19 th June 2023
R-02	Milton Kumar Dev	University of Dhaka	Professor	20 th June 2023
R-03	Hazi Biplob Sarkar	Bangladesh Awami League	Secretary of 18.no ward, Dhaka	21 st June 2023
R-04	Anonymous	Church of Bangladesh	Bishop	24 th June 2023
R-05	Azizul Bari Helal	Bangladesh National Party	Information and Communication Secretary	26 th June 2023
R-06	Anonymous	Bangladesh Interreligious Council for Peace and Justice	Anonymous	6 th July 2023
R-07	Anonymous	University of Dhaka	Professor	10 th July 2023
R-08	Uttam Kumar	Natun Palton Line School and College	Lecturer	13 th July 2023
R-09	Arun Maharaj	Ramkrishna Math and Ramkrishna Mission	Secretary	16 th July, 2023
R-10	Dr. Shafi Mohammad Mostofa	University of Dhaka	Associate Professor	18 th July 2023
R-11	Anonymous	Caritas Bangladesh	Librarian	20 th July 2023
R-12	Dr. Fazrin Huda	Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue	Secretary	25 th July 2023
R-13	Dr. Jahangir Alam	University of Dhaka	Professor	27 th July 2023
R-14	Niranjan Adhikari	University of Dhaka	Professor	29 th July 2023
R-15	Anonymous	BICPAJ	Librarian	31 st July 2023

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. From your perspective, how do you define interreligious dialogue?
2. What do you know about dialogue of life?
3. What is the relationship between interreligious dialogue and dialogue of life?
4. Is dialogue of life a new movement or it was in existence from the time immemorial?
5. What is the historical background of interreligious dialogue in Bangladesh?
6. How dialogue of life was in practice during rulers of ancient and medieval Bengal (from 6th century to 1971)
7. What are the existing practices of interreligious dialogue in current Bangladesh?
 - What are the governmental initiatives to maintain interreligious harmony?
 - -Evaluate the role of LNGOs and INGOs in conducting interreligious dialogue sessions in Bangladesh.
 - -Explain the initiatives of seminars and conferences in promoting interreligious harmony through interreligious dialogue.
8. What are the challenges of interreligious dialogue?
9. How to overcome those challenges?