The Religious Landscape of Bangladesh: A Primer

Religious and development institutions in Bangladesh play distinctive and intersecting roles that affect many dimensions of social, economic, and political development. Despite the importance of faith communities to the development agenda in Bangladesh there is lack of reliable and up-to-date information about them. This brief provides a concise and accessible overview of Bangladesh’s faith communities pointing to opportunities for engagement with key religious actors on shared development priorities.

Religion is a central element of the social fabric in Bangladesh, but can be a complex and often divisive issue. We should not underestimate the challenges presented by the engagement of religious actors in development. However, this should not obscure the hugely important roles that religious beliefs and institutions play in the everyday lives of nearly all Bangladeshis (see figure 1). Recent polls suggest that religiosity has only been increasing as the country develops.1

Religious actors in Bangladesh are well-positioned to contribute to development efforts, particularly on issues with a strong social dimension. Religious organizations are focal points for community life and enjoy considerable trust in Bangladesh (see figure 3). Religious leaders’ social influence and status as opinion shapers in many communities suggest that the ultimate success of many development interventions can hinge on their support or opposition.

**RELIGION IN BANGLADESH AT A GLANCE**

Bangladesh has the fourth largest Islamic population globally. While roughly 90 percent of Bangladeshis are followers of Sunni Islam, there is significant diversity within the country’s Islamic traditions.2 Islam in Bangladesh has long been noted for its openness and syncretism. There are many localized Sufi orders, as well as small but significant Ismaili and Ahmadiya Muslim communities.

Bangladesh hosts religious minorities that reflect the diverse faith traditions that have been influential in the historical region of Bengal over the millennia. Hindus, at 9.1 percent of the national population, are Bangladesh’s largest religious minority, though the Hindu population has declined significantly over the past 60 years since Partition (see figure 4). Buddhist communities, concentrated mainly in the Chittagong region, make up another 0.5 percent. Christians, from a range of denominations, live throughout the country and though they constitute a mere 0.2 percent of the population they have had a large influence on development in Bangladesh since independence. Animists, Baha’is, Sikhs, and Jains also have a presence in Bangladesh, though the communities are small.
The long and unique history of Islam in Bangladesh has resulted in religious institutions and traditions that are deeply embedded in the social structure, influencing everything from land tenure to local dispute arbitration. Islam was first introduced into the Bengal region by Muslim traders in the ninth and tenth centuries. Conversions in this era, however, were likely minimal. After the Turcic conquest of Bengal in 1204, Islam was established as a courtly religion for an elite Muslim class known as ashraf. It was not until Mughal rule in the sixteenth century, that Islam was adopted by broad swaths of the peasantry in what was then an almost entirely rural society.

In the context of Bengal’s eastern frontiers, Islam became enmeshed in the grassroots social structure in ways that differed from most areas of the subcontinent. A Mughal campaign to increase rice cultivation in the lightly settled delta and eastern frontiers offered land grants to religious gentry, mullahs, returned pilgrims, and holy men (pirs). These new communities were often anchored by a mosque or shrine. Each village established at least one society or samaj composed of respected elders (matbars) who were responsible for resolving community problems at a village tribunal known as a shalish. These samaj are typically organized around a mosque and matbars typically developed their public reputation by serving on Mosque committees. These institutions retain much local influence. One reason that religious leaders have opposed some development efforts is the perceived threat that they pose to traditional power structures.

Sufis have a strong cultural influence in Bangladesh that has contributed to the country’s traditionally open and tolerant interpretations of the Islamic faith. Especially in the thirteenth century, itinerant Islamic mystics known as Sufis played an important role in conversion. These charismatic figures professed the core beliefs of love of God and unity of mankind and often absorbed and incorporated elements of preexisting religious practices. There are hundreds of local Sufi orders present in Bangladesh, however the five largest are Qadiri, Maizbhandari, Chishti, Naqshbandi, Suharwardiya, and Mujaddidi. They typically have a single leader who traces his lineage back to the order’s founder and are centered on various shrine complexes associated with a mazar or tomb of a Sufi saint or pir. Many are located in the eastern divisions of Chittagong and Sylhet. Each order has its own set of festivals known as urs, which commemorate the birth or death of various pirs and can feature songs and dance and mixing of the sexes. Sufi shrines and festivals are often frequented by non-Muslims.

Leadership in Islamic communities in Bangladesh is highly decentralized, which can present challenges for development actors looking for avenues of engagement. As elsewhere in the Sunni world, there is no ordained clergy or established religious hierarchy for Muslims in Bangladesh. A group of Muslim legal scholars known as ulama fulfils the role of religious clerics, often also doubling as important leaders in the local community. Ulama are differentiated by level of religious training e.g. Mawlawi, Imam, and Mufti. Most religious training in Bangladesh is within the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence. Ulama in Bangladesh are exclusively men, however, there is a growing number of Qur’an reading groups among urban educated women that are noteworthy. The local mosque is the focal institution of Islam in Bangladesh and there are more than 250,000 mosques according to the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Sunnï Islam in Bangladesh has no formal sects, though there are noteworthy sub-currents, namely modern, orthodox, and popular or folk interpretations. Modern interpretations are influential among the urban elite, while orthodox movements have adherents in both urban and rural populations. Popular Islam is syncretic, incorporating polytheistic beliefs and rituals aimed at placating supernatural forces. It is an important force in rural areas, particularly among women. It has been estimated that half of all Muslims in Bangladesh practice some form of popular Islam.

Bengal has been the site of several Islamic reform movements, beginning with the eighteenth century Fairadi Movement, which introduced concepts of Islamic orthodoxy to the region. The hadiths, the deeds or sayings of the prophet Mohammad, have often featured centrally in the development of orthodox thought and practice in Bengal. Today, the large and loosely bound Ahl-e-Hadith movement is one of the most important forces in orthodox Islam in Bangladesh. Those that reject the authority of the hadiths are known as Qur’anists and, though much smaller in number, are still a noteworthy influence in orthodox Islam.

The most broad-based Islamic movement in modern Bangladesh is Tabligh Ja’maat. The Tabligh Ja’maat movement is focused on revival rather than reform and...
is intended to inspire personal spiritual development through piety (tabligh). Unlike past movements, which were largely ulama-led, the Tabligh Jā'maat is grassroots and driven by lay Muslims. The movement is centered on dawah (proselytism) and encourages followers to regularly undertake khuruj, a proselytizing tour during which they temporarily locate themselves at local mosques to hold a chilla, or Islamic teaching session. The annual meeting of the Tabligh Jā'maat in Bangladesh, the Bishwa Ijtema, is the largest Muslim congregation in the world outside of the Hajj, drawing more than five million faithful to the town of Tongi near Dhaka for prayer and other acts of devotion.

ISLAM IN BANGLADESH: KEY INSTITUTIONS FROM A DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Islam has a strong tradition of service to the community in Bengal. Though never centralized, the use of zakat (see box) has been used as a means to lift community members out of poverty and contribute to creating a more egalitarian society.

Education has been an important service of the Islamic community; madrassa historically provided the only access to education for the rural poor. Today there are an estimated 36,000 madrasas across the country serving some three million students. These are divided between Aliya, or government run madrassas, which teach the national curriculum and orthodox Quomi madrassas, which are largely unregulated and consequently issue diplomas that are not recognized by the Government of Bangladesh. Madrassa education is a heated and complex issue. Bangladesh has recently seen violent protests against the government’s secular education policy staged by Hefazat-e-Islam, a group comprised of teachers and students from several hundred Quomi madrassas formed in 2010. Many see madrassa reform among the most pressing social issues facing Bangladesh at present.

Many Islamic faith-inspired organizations work on a number of relief and development issues. While large transnational faith-inspired organizations such as Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid have a significant presence in Bangladesh, there are also many national FIOs that reflect the great diversity of Islam in the country. Some have a Sufi inspiration including the highly regarded Ahsania Mission and Haqqaani Mission, stressing values such as peace, unity, and divine love. Orthodox organizations include Islamic Aid Bangladesh and Al-Markazul Islami Bangladesh focusing on education, health, and poverty reduction. The Mosjid Council for Community Advancement (MACCA) runs a range of programs and excels particularly at engaging local ulama. Jamaat-e-Islami, the country’s largest Islamic political party also runs a number of charities. Besides these larger and higher profile FIOs, there are also countless mosque-based civil society organizations created by local ulama, intended, at least in part, to fight for social influence in Bangladesh’s crowded civil society sector. Some estimates put the number of these local Islamic groups at over 200,000. The Association of Islamic Welfare Agencies in Bangladesh, established in 1993, is the apex body of 320 Islamic FIOs and works to build capacity within many of these grassroots organizations in financing, project design, and monitoring and evaluation.

Understanding how important the support of ulama can be to development programs, several institutions attempt to engage them and provide education, training, and exposure to development projects. The focal institution in this effort is the Islamic Foundation, a department of the Government of Bangladesh’s Ministry of Religious Affairs. Their Imam Training Academy works with a number of international organizations, notably the Asia Foundation. The Mosjid Council maintains their own extensive network of ulama.

ZAKAT

Zakat is type of almsgiving within Islam intended to decrease economic disparity and increase social solidarity among Muslims. As one of the Five Pillars of Islam it is obligatory of all Muslims. There are eight categories of worthy recipients including those living in poverty, those in debt, and street children. Though no figure is cited in the Qur’an, 2.5 percent of total wealth annually is often employed. In Bangladesh as in many contexts multiple charitable organizations and Islamic financial institutions collect zakat, though recent conferences have explored the issues of centralization and improving collection and distribution.
HINDUISM IN BANGLADESH

The diverse Indic religious traditions today known as Hinduism have been practiced in Bengal for millennia, perhaps reaching their zenith under the royal patronage of orthodox Hindu Sena and Deva dynasties in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Despite large scale conversion to Islam under Muslim rule, eastern Bengal retained a significant Hindu population. The Goddess Devi, in her form of Durga or Kali, is the most widely venerated deity in Bangladesh’s Hindu community, although Vishnu, in the form of Rama and Krishna, is very influential among some segments of the population. Over the centuries there has been considerable syncretism between local Hindu and Sufi traditions in Bangladesh. Both often rely on a guru-disciple relationship for the transmission of esoteric knowledge and have a philosophical preoccupation with the fundamental oneness of humanity. It remains common, particularly in rural areas, for Hindus to worship at mazar or shrines to Sufi saints known as pirs.

Prior to the partition of India in 1947, Hindus constituted nearly a third of the total population in what is now Bangladesh. Since then, the population has seen a steady decline due to regular out-migration to India (see figure 4). While India does exert an economic and social pull, the push has at times been far more significant. The Hindu community, viewed as agents of India, suffered severe persecution in the years during and immediately following Partition. During the Liberation War they were targeted by the Pakistani Army and its sympathizers.

Recent episodes of violence against the Hindu community have been politically motivated. While their population has dwindled, Hindus still form a majority of the electorate in at least two parliamentary constituencies and account for more than 25 percent in a further twenty. Considered a voting bloc for the secularist Awami League, Hindus are often viewed as the deciding factor in what are often very close parliamentary races. The most severe recent episode occurred after the death sentence was announced for Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, Vice President of Jamaat-e-Islami and well-known ulama on February 28, 2013, for crimes committed during the Bangladesh Liberation War. The violence spread to 20 districts in nearly every corner of the country. Over a hundred Hindu-owned shops and homes were destroyed, and 40 temples were burned or vandalized. Despite these periods of persecution, Hindu communities still retain their vibrant traditions and continue to be an influential cultural force in Bangladesh.

Contemporary Hinduism in Bangladesh is highly heterogeneous and localized. Most Hindu worship takes place at local shrines, temples, and pilgrimage sites, some of which are overseen by male Hindu ascetics such as sadhus or swamis. Many of the most important Hindu sites of worship, including the famous Ramna Kali Mandir, were razed by the Pakistani military during the 1971 Liberation War. In the years since, Dhaka’s Dhakeshwari Temple has become one of the most important national centers of Hindu culture in Bangladesh, hosting important annual festivals of Durga Puja and Krishna Janmashtami.
HINDUISM IN BANGLADESH:
KEY INSTITUTIONS FROM A
DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

In part due to caste divisions and the decentralized nature of the Hindu faith, Bangladesh’s Hindus lack the unity seen in other minority faith communities. Persecution in recent years, however, has strengthened solidarity. Community organizations, which were created to plan and manage Puja celebrations have come to take on new advocacy roles and are now focal institutions in the Hindu community. The two largest and most influential are Dhaka-based: the Mahanagar Sarbajanin Puja Committee and the Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad (BPUP). However, many more are active across the country. There are few Hindu organizations with an explicit focus on social service or development more broadly. A noteworthy exception is Ramakrishna Mission, which has operated in Bangladesh since 1899. It hosts a range of interfaith and cultural programs and has become a critical cultural institution of people of all faiths. Ramakrishna Mission has 13 centers around Bangladesh offering education and medical services, as well as providing humanitarian relief after natural disasters.

BUDDHISM IN BANGLADESH

The historical region of Bengal features prominently in the history of the Buddhist faith, recognized as the final foothold of Indian Buddhism after its disappearance from the remainder of the subcontinent. With the rise of the Pala dynasty in the eighth century, Buddhism in Bengal entered its “golden era”, during which many of the region’s most renowned temples and monasteries were built. The Pala kingdom became one of the most important centers of Buddhist learning globally. Widely traveled Buddhist teachers such as Atisha Dipankara contributed to the revival and spread of Buddhism in Tibet and Southeast Asia. Tantric Buddhist writings of the Pala era were among the first major works of Bengal’s rich literary heritage. Buddhism in Bengal was largely extinguished after the advent of Muslim rule, but it did survive in Chittagong among Barua communities, as well as among some highland indigenous communities (known locally as adivasi) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), notably the Chakma, the Marma, and the Tangchangya.

Modern Buddhist practice in Bangladesh grew out of a mid-nineteenth century reform movement, which introduced Theravada orthodoxy via neighboring Burma. Isolated for many centuries, Buddhism in Chittagong had become quite syncretic, incorporating local tantric, Hindu, and animist ritual. In an attempt to reform what were perceived as degenerate practices and laxity in monastic discipline, an Arkhanese monk was invited to oversee the reforms and re-ordinations and also head the new sangha. One group of monks, while agreeing with reform efforts, objected to this foreign leadership and founded a rival order. These two fraternal orders or nikaya, Sangharaj Nikaya and Mahasthabir Nikaya respectively, remain the formal divisions in the Barua Buddhist Sangha today and are each led by its own Sanghanaj. The indigenous Buddhist communities follow three further nikaya: Sudhamma Nikaya and Dohara Nikaya among the Marma the Parbatya Boudha Bhikkhu Sangha among the Chakma.

Buddhism in Bangladesh is not as strongly hierarchical as it is in other Theravada countries, and because of its unique history, nikaya divisions not very pronounced. Perhaps the starkest division among Bangladeshi Buddhists is a cultural one, between lowland Barua and highland indigenous Buddhist communities. Indigenous Buddhist monks are often preoccupied by the unique struggles of their own communities following decade-long insurgency waged by the military wing of Jana Sanghati Samiti (JSS), which sought autonomy for the CHT region. Through a peace accord signed in 1997, the region remains under tight
military control and many grievances remain unaddressed. A growing influx of Bengali settlers has made land rights a salient issue for indigenous Buddhist monks who have been very socially active in support of indigenous rights.

As with Hindus, Buddhist communities have been targets of religiously-based violence. On the night of September 29, 2012 mobs burned more than 50 Buddhist-owned homes and 22 Buddhist temples; the attacks began in Ramu Upazila, but quickly spread throughout Chittagong. The violence was traced to the posting of an image which depicted the desecration of a Qur’an on a fake Facebook profile with the Barua surname. While there were initial reports that Rohingya refugees, themselves fleeing religiously-motivated violence in Myanmar, were among those involved in the attacks, these have since been proven unfounded. It is unclear if any relationship exists between the Ramu violence and recent anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar.

**BUDDHISM IN BANGLADESH: KEY INSTITUTIONS FROM A DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE**

Bangladesh's Buddhist community has important socially active elements, with many temples hosting schools, medical clinics, and other community services. Several larger temple-based associations have been formed with the joint objectives of growing and supporting Buddhism in Bangladesh and providing other social services to communities. The Bangladesh Buddhist Association, one of the oldest, was founded in 1889 and is based at Chittagong Buddhist Monastery. It has played a critical role in the regeneration of Buddhism in Bangladesh, and it remains a focal institution for the Buddhist community, running a variety of educational and health projects. Bangladesh Bouddha Kristi Prachar Sangha, founded in 1949 and centered at Dhaka's Dhammarajika temple, is another key organization running schools, clinics, and community savings groups.

Indigenous Buddhists in CHT have their own unique institutions. Many of the larger and more influential are rooted in Chakma communities, the region’s largest indigenous group. Moanoghar, a Buddhist community organization based in Rangamati district, served as a critically important resource for indigenous youth throughout the insurgency period (1977-1997) and today provides quality education in academic and technical subjects to disadvantaged youth from across the region. With cultural events and community health clinics, it is also a social hub. Another noteworthy socially engaged Buddhist endeavor is Parbatya Bouddha Mission in Khagrachari, which operates an orphanage, health center, school, and vocational training center.

**CHRISTIANITY IN BANGLADESH**

Compared to Bangladesh’s other major religions, Christianity is a relative newcomer to the region. Portuguese merchants first introduced Christianity to Bengal in the sixteenth century. Their trading center in Chittagong drew Catholic missionaries from Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan, and Jesuit orders that came to minister to European settlers and their families. In the late 17th century a young Bengali convert named Dom Antonio de Rozario, son of the naja of Jessore, began extensive missionary work among low-caste Hindus. He is said to have overseen thousands of conversions in the era, and many Catholics in Bangladesh still retain the de Rozario surname. Overall Roman Catholics account for roughly half of the total number of Christians in Bangladesh. The Portuguese exerted a very direct influence on the Catholic Church in Bengal until 1850 when Pope Pious IX established the Vicariate Apostolic of Eastern Bengal, which later evolved into the current Archdiocese of Dhaka. There are seven dioceses in Bangladesh at present (Dhaka,)
Chittagong, Dinajpur, Khulna, Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Rajshahi) As Archbishop of Dhaka, Patrick D’Rozario is the highest ranking bishop in the country.

Protestant Christianity, in the form of Baptist and Anglican denominations (currently the second and third largest Christian denominations in Bangladesh), first came to Bengal with agents of the East India Company in the seventeenth century. Explicit proselytism was banned in British territories at the time and it was not until 1793, with the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society in Serampore, a former Danish colony now in West Bengal, that Protestant denominations began attracting converts.

Protestant churches in Bangladesh can generally be grouped into ecumenical and evangelical denominations, each with its own apex organization. The National Council of Churches (an affiliate of the World Council of Churches) includes the large mainstream denominations, including the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha, the Church of Bangladesh (Anglican), and the Bangladesh Methodist Church. The National Christian Fellowship of Bangladesh (an affiliate of the World Evangelical Alliance) includes a range of smaller evangelical Baptist, Lutheran, and Pentecostal denominations. Outside of these main umbrella groups, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church maintains a significant presence in Bangladesh.

As with other religious minorities, Christian communities have been targeted for violence in recent years, though because they are such a small minority there have not been the same political motivations behind attacks. The motive in many incidents may be theft, as there is a perception that Christian institutions are affluent. A noteworthy recent incident occurred on July 6, 2014 at the convent of the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions Nuns in Boldipuku, Dinajpur. It is reported that 60 men raided and looted the compound and several nuns were victims of sexual assault. A significant amount of cash and property was stolen.

CHRISTIANITY IN BANGLADESH: KEY INSTITUTIONS FROM A DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Although Christians represent less than one percent of Bangladesh’s total population, the Christian community is well-organized and committed to development and humanitarian goals. The community supports many FIOs, several of which are highly influential. Though their capacity and focal issues can vary greatly, many Christian FIOs are well-funded and have significant international linkages. Christian organizations were leaders during post-Liberation War and Cyclone Bhola recovery efforts and have gone on to become the most well-respected development organizations in Bangladesh. Transnational Christian organizations, such as World Vision, Christian Aid, and ADRA, are active in Bangladesh. However, most Christian FIOs are local. Christian FIOs in Bangladesh are much more likely to be engaged in national networking and coordination platforms for NGOs than their counterparts in other faith traditions. However, Christian networking platforms including the ecumenical ACT Alliance and the evangelical Micah Network, are often the most important resources for Christian FIOs.

In many cases the work of Catholic FIOs is the continuation of a long-running charitable tradition in the region, particularly in education and health sectors. Catholics, through the work of religious orders such as the Holy Cross, Salesian, and Maryknoll brothers and sisters, have long been active in providing services to the poor, including health, education, and care for the disabled. These orders remain very active today and are well respected for their grassroots approach. Caritas Bangladesh is the largest and most active Catholic FIO in the country and one of the most influential national development organizations. Its distinctive participatory approach has served as an important model for other organizations.

Protestant FIOs also draw from a long-running legacy of social service in the region. The Baptist Serampore missionaries were influential proponents of education reform in India during the nineteenth century, founding many vernacular and elementary schools while also developing new curriculum and Bangla-language textbooks. One of the most influential Protestant FIOs, the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), is the development arm of the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh. Like Caritas, CCDB employs a grassroots participatory approach and is active in humanitarian and development sectors. The Church of Bangladesh Social Development Program is the Church of Bangladesh’s development wing in Bangladesh. Evangelical FIOs are numerous and diverse including international Organizations such as World Concern and World Relief, as well as a range of local organizations including HEED Bangladesh, Koinonia, and Bangladesh Nazareen Mission.
LOOKING AHEAD

This brief is intended to serve as a cursory glance at the complex and varied religious landscape of Bangladesh. It is part of a multi-year research program undertaken by World Faiths Development Dialogue and Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs that explores the roles that religious ideas, institutions, and leaders play in the wide-ranging fields of development and social welfare. This is the first in a series of briefs and reports that will be found at WFDD’s Bangladesh portal (http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-bangladesh).

There remain considerable knowledge gaps regarding religion in Bangladesh. Through systematic exploration, WFDD and the Berkley Center are working to further bolster the knowledge base on the religious communities of Bangladesh. This work will contribute to richer context evaluations for development actors and provide a solid foundation for fruitful collaborations between faith and development communities.

3“Country has 250,399 Mosques: Minister” http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2011/03/01/country-has-250399-mosques-minister