

Peace and Tolerance: Challenges and Way Forward



Prothom Alo organised a roundtable titled "Peace and Tolerance: Challenges and Way Forward" on June 26, 2018. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Abdul Quayum, Associate Editor, Prothom Alo and Moderator of the Roundtable



Two years ago, on July 1, an act of intolerance took the lives of almost 29 people. Apart from the Holey Artisan attack, other isolated acts of violent extremism shook the country within a short span of time. Thanks to the

tactical efforts of our law enforcement agencies, we have been successful in containing such terrorist activities to an extent. However, we can truly be successful only when we are able to create awareness amidst people that intolerance, bigotry and killings can never be the answer. Those in the public sphere should also be careful to not offend religious sentiments or instigate any group of people through our writings or other activities. Additionally, we also need to remind people that there are legal measures and other tolerant ways to confront statements that may inadvertently hurt public sentiments.

Under the charismatic leadership of Bangabandhu we liberated the country. We dreamt of a developed Bangladesh where there would be equal opportunity for all citizens and the rule of law would be established. We are hopeful that just as the way the country has moved forward in terms of economy, health and job opportunities, we will also carry on our journey to a tolerant and peaceful future.

Mir Manzur Mahmud, Chairman, Council for Social Development Foundation



Bangladesh is a land of communal harmony and people are living here peacefully since time immemorial. Unfortunately, this glorious tradition is now at stake. We are failing to uphold the spirit of

Liberation War.

Peace is closely connected with tolerance. We have to be tolerant to establish peace in the society. The main barrier towards establishing peace is intolerance. In an intolerant society a minor incident can cause a havoc.

Good thoughts come from good faith. It leads to positive action. We have to spread good thoughts through education.

I have had the opportunity to work with over 100 youth leaders and scholars, and several intra- and inter-faith leaders of the country. While working with some faith leaders, I asked them to recite some excerpts of their sermons. I learnt that some of these leaders would often use the word *bidhormi* (infidels) in their sermon. When I explained to them that this was offensive to people of other faiths and showed an attitude of intolerance and bigotry, they said that they never meant to disparage other religious beliefs, but never realized that they were using the wrong words. Instead of calling them 'infidels', I explained that the term 'people of other faith' would show far more compassion and tolerance.

If faith leaders are able to promote values of mutual respect, tolerance and acknowledgement in their speech, actions and instructions, it can bring about a change in people's thought process. If a religious leader, for example, is able to help people of other faiths or even offer comfort to those in distress, he will be paving a path for others to follow, as they will witness firsthand that their leader does not only talk the talk but is also able to walk the talk.

Md. Riaz Uddin Khan, Media Expert and Chief Moderator, Community Radio Hackathon 2018



Through our work on community radio, we noticed that the important issue of communal harmony and tolerance has more or less been neglected. While there is an understanding of the importance of the issue,

there is little public discussion on it. The public is hesitant about discussing about this subject as arguments and disagreements often rise from these discussions, and so public participation in raising awareness about a peaceful and tolerant society is quite limited.

Mass media can play a strong role in increasing public participation in activities that promote peace and tolerance. Mass media has four essential roles: to inform, to educate, to entertain, and to persuade. If these

functions are performed with diligence and honesty, it can bring about a positive change in a person's way of thinking and motivate them to take steps towards a more peaceful society. But national media cannot fully meet the information demand of diverse population. Community radio can successfully fill this gap.

Community radio can act as an important and powerful agent of change. There are several research studies which show how people can be engaged through community radio, and motivated to be active citizens of the country. This is because those involved with community radio are most often members of the community. They speak the language of the community and are able to reflect the issues and problems of a particular group of people. Thus, when the community itself is engaged, they are bound to be attracted to and be persuaded by the messages relayed.

Recently we organized Community Radio Hackathon 2018, involving 17 community radios of Bangladesh where most of the participants were youth. They conducted some intensive discussion and found that inter-community relationships, mental wellbeing and social media, among other vital factors, are affecting peace and tolerance in the community. Through such assessments and findings, they developed and broadcast different types of programmes focusing peace and tolerance. The programme also focused on engaging people, particularly youth, in socio-cultural activities to promote harmony in the community. Many organizations are working towards establishing peace and tolerance. If they incorporate community radio in their programmes their efforts would be more productive.

Asma Afrin Haque, Monitoring and Reporting Analyst, UN Women



'Women in Ensuring Peace and Tolerance', through which we tried to identify factors which motivate women to engage in terrorist activities. Under this programme, we want to work with female perpetrators of terrorist activities, to help them realize that they too can play a positive role in combatting terrorism. Through our initiative, we are trying to offer protection to women who are involved in such deviant activities perhaps without even realizing the magnitude of their actions.

We worked with women of six districts, including refugee camps and host communities in Cox's Bazar. Our work ranged from awareness raising to helping these women find ways of income generation so that they are not lured to deviant activities.

We have also included around 600 women in our financial inclusion package through which they are able to help other disadvantaged women in their community. These women have formed a group that they call 'Polli Shomaj'; this group unites women to identify miscreant activities in their community and allow them to take the case to their local police station.

Progyananda Bhikkhu, President, Cox's Bazar District Buddhist Protection Council



It's been almost six years since the riots that devastated the minority communities in Ramu. Those who had created this situation were able to instigate people against an entire community. If the public felt

that their religious beliefs were hurt, they could have taken legal recourse. Some patience and tolerance could have averted that frightful incident.

If we are to disregard certain isolated incidents, however, we will see that the sense of tolerance is entwined with the very soul of this country and its people. If that were not so, we would not have different religious communities and institutes co-existing peacefully.

We have to establish peace and tolerance to take the country to the global platform.

Otherwise we will not be able to fulfil the dream of Bangabandhu.

Pervez Siddiqui, Films4Peace Foundation



We are working with the host community of Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar. We spoke to different communities in Ukhiya to determine the reasons behind extremism and disharmony. We discovered that women are not

allowed to participate in public decision-making process. They do not have any suitable platform to voice their opinions, and even when they attempt to participate in public activities, the male members of the community do not view this in a positive light. In the five unions that we are working with in Ukhiya, we observed that there are no cultural platforms, clubs or even parks and fields. Thus, drug peddlers and human traffickers have found access to the young members of the community. It is therefore very easy to convince this young population to engage in deviant acts.

While NGOs and international organisations are offering material help to the refugees in Ukhiya, the need for peace education is basically neglected. When we spoke to the host communities and state agencies, we discovered there is a sense of conflict, as due to the refugee influx, young men of the host community are not getting any employment opportunities. Local businesses are not able to make profits due to various reasons, including the fact that they have to shut down their shops when VIPs visit the camps. All of this has led to rising conflicts and a tense situation.

Abdulla Al Mamun, Programme Coordinator, Manusher Jonno Foundation



We need to look at the factors to identify who is being lured to religious extremism by whom and why. Population dividend needs to be looked at, alongside the rising use of technology. While the use of social media is getting

more and more popular, there is not much knowledge amongst the public about how to use the internet and what to follow and what not to follow. Moreover, with rapid urbanisation, more and more young people are coming into the cities for work. While the eight hours of their work are accounted for, we have no idea what they do with their free time, who they meet or are inspired by, and whether they are involved in any wrongdoing. Even in schools and education institutions, communal disharmony and intolerance is creeping in, as students can often be found comparing and fighting over their religions.

I am not worried about religious extremism in Bangladesh as law enforcers have been able to more or less bring these factions under control. However, I am worried about the spread of reactionary thoughts. We need to address and identify this to avoid other incidents like Ramu.

Manusher Jonno Foundation tried to identify the narratives used by extremist groups and the alternative narrations can be used to counter them. We also need capacity building to promote peace building amongst communities. Furthermore, we need to promote cultural thinking, a space for debates and discussions, and skills development. We need to create positive role models, and monitor social media while developing strong alternative contents.

Umme Habiba, Project Coordinator, Prerona



Many youth organisations are working toward peace and tolerance but if we can bring them under one umbrella, the work can get more traction. We should not just talk about promoting peace and tolerance but also uphold

and protect the strong values that already exist in our country. Our organization works with students in private universities. Unfortunately, a majority of these students don't have any idea about the meaning of intolerance, as they associate

this word only with violence. They can't understand how intolerance affect their daily life or is reflected through their actions. When they are asked about how to create a tolerant, harmonious society, they are unable to say anything. This is because they are not given the space to learn about tolerance and acceptance or given access to the rule of law.

We also encourage students to initiate cultural programmes, debates, seminars, and other knowledge based endeavours to identify and understand about the space of tolerance and intolerance, not only in the political or religious sphere, but also in the economic, personal, social and everyday life.

Shazzad Hossain Mukit, Director, Funush Pvt Ltd.



Lack of knowledge about a person or a group of people feeds the othering process. For example, the word Rohingya has become a derogatory term in our country. If people become aware about the

rich history of the Rohingya community, the feeling of otherness can disappear. We are producing educative content for both online and off-line platforms to bridge this knowledge gap.

Career-related frustration often leads to involvement in violent activities. We are working on creating an online platform where young people will get evidence-based advice to help plan their career. For example, in Bangladesh we need more nurses than doctors. Our medical institutions are overwhelmingly focused on producing doctors but little attention is given to training nurses. If students have a clear idea about the job sector, they will be able to plan their career path in an informed manner.

Fawzia Khondokar, Executive Director, Pragroschor



When children see domination, intolerance and violence in their family, it affects them negatively. They try to imitate what they learn from their family in the outside world. Furthermore, excessive use of social

media and internet leaves little time for family members to spend together. Therefore, we need to begin with the family and instil values of tolerance in children by strengthening family relationships. Our educational institutions also have a big role in this regard.

Siddhartho Goswami, Project Associate, Violence Cluster, UNDP



Different organizations are taking different kinds of initiatives to tackle intolerance and violence. There should be coordination and exchange of knowledge and information among different entities working in the same field.

UNDP, in cooperation with government and non-government organizations, and academia, has developed a database platform called Bangladesh Peace Observatory Facility (BPO). It will provide data, analysis, research, and education opportunities to create better understanding of the state of violence in the country and how to counter it.

We need to change the mindset of labelling people minority based on their religious identity. Minority are those people who think in communal line.

More emphasis should be given on teaching moral education in primary and secondary schools. We have to instil the sense of Bengalianness in students through celebration of our culture and tradition. Young people should be effectively engaged in deradicalisation programmes.

Swami Dhrubeshananda, Principal, Ramakrishna Mission, Dhaka



No religion promotes intolerance. We need to learn about the values of every religion and respect them. We conduct a school which is open to all. Here we teach students about different religions. We regularly

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ Moral teaching should begin at the family level.
- ❑ Promote Bengali culture and uphold the spirit of Liberation War.
- ❑ In social media, information should be provided along with entertainment.
- ❑ General public need to be made aware of the harmful effects of religious extremism.
- ❑ All religions should be respected. Defamation and misinterpretation of any religion should be prevented.
- ❑ People who spread false and misleading information should be brought under law.
- ❑ Effective implementation of law should be ensured.
- ❑ Create opportunities to engage young people productively.
- ❑ Instead of isolating a radicalised person, he or she should be helped to come out of it.
- ❑ Create alternative narrative to counter extremist propaganda.
- ❑ Community media can be an effective tool for community engagement.
- ❑ There should be coordination and exchange of knowledge and information among the government and non-government entities working in this field.

hold seminars where students from different religious backgrounds participate and share their values. It helps to know each other and create inter-religious harmony. We need more of such initiatives all over the country.

Dr Mohammad Monzur-E- Elahi, Associate Professor, National University



False information and knowledge gap contributes to intolerance. Educational and religious institutions and media have a big role in educating people and countering any sort of propaganda. Our educational institutions have to provide quality education so that students learn how to differentiate between the truth and lies. They have to instill love for knowledge in their students. Similarly, religious institutions have the responsibility to counter any false propaganda which promotes religious intolerance. Media also needs to be more alert in countering fake news and false information.

Youth unemployment is a big problem in the country. When a person does not have any productive work to do, he or she might be involved in deviant acts. We have to create adequate opportunities to engage our young population productively.

Md Kabir Hossain, Former Public Prosecutor, Dhaka Metropolitan



I have dealt with several terrorism cases and had the scope of talking to terrorists, including Mufti Hannan. When I asked them why they had committed such violent acts, they did not have any valid explanation.

Some of them admitted that they led the attack in hopes of going to heaven in the afterlife. In most cases, they were brain-washed and misguided. Hence, our efforts should be directed towards countering misinterpretation of religion.

Abdul Mannan, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) Unit, Dhaka Metropolitan Police



I want to pay my deepest respect to the brave boy Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain, who has set a great example of humanity and friendship, which are crucial forces in the fight against violent extremism.

We are conducting an extensive research on violent extremism in collaboration with Dhaka University. The research results will be made public soon. We are also preparing a database of the terrorists incorporating detailed information about their life and how they were radicalized. These initiatives will help fill the existing knowledge gap in this field.

I think radicalisation of the general public is more threatening than some isolated terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, this threat is growing rapidly in our country. It is the first stage of terrorism. Every radicalized person is a potential terrorist. After studying the background of terrorists, I found that most of them were brought up in a radicalised environment. This is due to the deterioration of our secular culture and deviation from the spirit of Liberation War. Our family values have also become weak. Children do not find their role models in parents or teachers. Our efforts should be directed towards stopping this ominous trend. We have to repair our social value system.

We have to make people immune to religious extremism through proper education and correct theological explanation. It will also help to bring back radicalized people to the path of peace and tolerance.

Instead of just publishing news about terrorist attacks, media should focus more on bringing out the story behind how a person is radicalised so that people can be aware of it. General people need to be made aware of the harmful effects of religious extremism.

To de-radicalise a person, we have to show love and sympathy and help him or her to come out of it. Family members should inform the law enforcement agencies about involvement of any family member or relatives in extremist activities. If they inform on time there will be an opportunity to bring back the person from ensuing danger.