

## Understanding Bangabandhu's Perception of Communal Harmony

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to analyse the thoughts and experiences of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, known as the 'Father of the Nation of Bangladesh', to explore his perceptions of communal harmony. Based on content analysis and archival research, secondary literature is used to understand the perception of Bangabandhu on communal harmony. A thematic method is employed to analyse relevant literature, whereas books, articles, poems, and news articles are the main sources of data. The implications of different theories of communal harmony, especially from psychological perspectives help to understand how Bangabandhu experienced and perceived communal harmony. Bangabandhu was a person with non-communalist thoughts. Although he experienced many incidents of communal violence, he was always against it and worked for communal harmony. The perception of Bangabandhu about non-communalism encourages politicians, community organizers, social workers, and the people of Bangladesh and of the world, which led this country to be recognized as a model of communal harmony.*

**Keywords:** Bangabandhu, Communal harmony, Communal violence, Non-Communalism, Partition of India, Social harmony

### 1. Introduction

It is commonly believed that the people in a community do not usually tend to experience communal violence. Nonetheless, there are many incidents of communal violence reported in the South-Asian region (Mehta, 2021). Bangladesh is a South-Asian country located in the Gangetic deltaic plain where people follow four major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. History proves that unity among the people is the most prevailing motivator, which nourished communal harmony in this country for ages (Huque, 2014). However, during the partition of India in 1947, communal violence had taken place that changed the scenario overnight (Graff & Galonnier, 2013). It was Mahatma Gandhi who stood up against communal violence and tried to save millions of lives from anarchy during the partition (Varshney & Gubler, 2012). In Bangladesh, there was also a saviour of communal harmony, Bangabandhu

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, known as the 'Father of the Nation of Bangladesh.' The main purpose of this article is to thematically analyse the perception and principles of Bangabandhu on communal harmony from various perspectives garnered from Bangabandhu's autobiography, his contributions, and other relevant materials written on his life. These are further enhanced by analysing Bangabandhu's experiences with different theoretical perspectives of communal or social harmony.

Communalism is a system of maintaining communal power or authority by a highly localized and independent community to have control over the society whereas non-communalism represents the opposite concept (Raychaudhuri, 2009). Communalism has an obvious consequence, which is communal violence (Upadhyay & Robinson, 2012). Communal violence is a form of violence that occurs across ethnic or communal lines where the violent parties would attempt to dominate or oppress the victims who are usually the marginalized communities (Huque, 2014).

On the other hand, communal or social harmony is a friendly relationship among all groups of people in a society where people live together in peace with no violence (Huque, 2014). Communal or social harmony is a social strength of Bangladesh where people from every religion and ethnicity live together without any violence (Rashid, 2011). People live with enchanted peace that was established in the early civilization and flourished by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The thoughts and perceptions of Bangabandhu on communal harmony are completely inspired by the passion of humanity (Kabir, 2013). The autobiography of Bangabandhu 'The Unfinished Memoirs' indicates that he experienced several incidents in his lifetime regarding communal violence. But he never supported communal violence, and he believed in and devoted himself to communal harmony throughout his lifetime.

## **2. Objective**

The objective of this article is to explore the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on communal harmony based on different theoretical perspectives of communal or social harmony.

## **3. Methodology**

The content is originally developed by archival research and content analysis and only secondary data and relevant documents are critically reviewed to develop this piece of content. Content analysis and library research are the data collection methods used to collect data from different kinds of sources such as literature, books, journal articles, newspaper articles, and online sources. A thematic method helps to understand the research issue by analysing and interpreting the meaning of the research issue by different sub-themes, patterns, or experiences (Morgan & Nica, 2020) and this method aims to explore communal peace from various perspective on different experiences of Bangabandhu. The autobiography of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman 'The Unfinished Memoirs' was the major source of gathering information for this content. The experiences and narration of Bangabandhu in this content are collected from this autobiography.

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

**4.1 Thoughts and experiences of Bangabandhu on communal harmony:** Bangabandhu used to spend time with Hindu friends in his boyhood, and many of them were very good friends of him. The local Hindus used to respect Bangabandhu's family in the village. Bangabandhu used to visit many of his Hindu friends' houses and most of them treated him very well. However, some of his Hindu friends were unable to invite him into their houses because their families feared that Bangabandhu would 'contaminate' them. For example, Bangabandhu had a friend named Noni Kumar Das, who was his school friend, and they used to live close by. One day, little Mujib visited Noni's house and after that, Noni asked Mujib not to come over to his house again. This is because Noni's aunt scolded him as he brought a Muslim to their house. Bangabandhu told Noni that he would never visit their house though he also told Noni that he was always welcome at his house (Rahman, 2012). But due to some unexpected experiences like this, some Bengali Muslims may have avoided Hindus for their religious prejudice against non-Hindus and vice versa. Nevertheless, these kinds of incidents never influenced the mindset and attitude of Bangabandhu and he neither supported communal violence nor held any resentment towards Hindus.

Contact theory is a common theoretical perspective in social psychology that explains the harmony of ethnos religious groups (Afandi, 2017). This theory implies the relations and interactions between people from different religious backgrounds who live in the same region (Harwood & Joyce, 2012). This theory further states that contact (interaction) between two or more different groups can decrease prejudice and develop the quality of social relations (Everett, 2013). It is evident that Bangabandhu had childhood friends (e.g. Noni) who were from different religious affiliations and the interaction and the contact he had with them helped to develop a sense of communal or social harmony in his mind since he was very young.

When Bangabandhu was a college student, he was a part of a group fund that provided financial support for poor students. Mr Narayan was in charge of administering the fund, who was a Hindu teacher. Although Mr Narayan knew that Sheikh Mujib worked for the Pakistan movement, he liked Mujib very much as a student. All the students in the college were Muslims and they were curious why a Hindu teacher was in charge of this fund. However, to Mr Narayan, the religious affiliations of the students were not relevant (Rahman, 2012). Bangabandhu was highly inspired by Mr Narayan's attitude made Bangabandhu even more motivated toward communal harmony.

The cross-cutting categorization theory from the social science branch articulates that the existence of orthogonal or crosscutting patterns of different social categories can decrease conflicts in heterogeneous societies (Afandi, 2017; Crisp et al., 2010). A cross-category takes place when two people from different social categories meet and they manage to find a common category and similarity as a means to keep positive relations (Urada & Miller, 2000). This crossing of social identities or categories can bring two different groups or parties to come together and find a common ground of identities, which

contributes to reducing intergroup bias (Ensari & Miller, 2001). For example, Mr Narayan who belonged to a different social category as a Hindu teacher, perhaps, the common ground (passion for social harmony) he had found in Bangabandhu's behaviour and beliefs was the crossing of social categories that promoted the positive working relationship between them. Consequently, this may have further contributed to managing intergroup bias between Muslim students and a Hindu teacher.

The Muslim teachers at the college supported Bangabandhu for the movement for the creation of Pakistan but Hindu and Christian teachers would remain neutral since all the students in the movement were Muslims. Bangabandhu noticed that Hindu and Christian teachers were not very keen on the creation of Pakistan (Rahman, 2012). Hence, he did not force the Hindu and Christian teachers to participate in the movement as he did not want any potential environment for communal violence in the college. He wanted to bring independence not only to Muslims but also to people from every religion and community. Bangabandhu believed that Both Hindus and Muslims could live together in India by having equal rights for each community. Hindus could live as citizens in Pakistan just as Muslims could live freely in India. He also wanted the Muslims of Pakistan would accept Hindus as brothers just as the Hindus in India would accept Muslims as their brothers (Rahman, 2012). It was the time when Bangabandhu also changed the tone of his public speeches and inspired people from every religion to live side by side.

The common in-group identity model theory indicates that people from two groups can be united if the dissimilarities between the two are managed or optimized (Crisp et al., 2010). The underlying principle of this theory is to understand how to optimize the elements that can manage the bias between groups by redeveloping the self of each member from, different groups into the self-categorization based on the same group (Gaertner et al., 1993). It is also believed that self-alignment will bring changes in beliefs, feelings, and individual behaviour, based on the new group- established system (Afandi, 2017). Bangabandhu's self-alignment of not forcing Hindu and Christian teachers arguably helped to promote the idea of Muslims and Hindus living together as brothers; the changes in the public speeches of Bangabandhu became more inclusive and inspiring for people from all religious backgrounds to become unified.

In 1938, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and A. K. Fazlul Huq were scheduled to visit Gopalganj, and Bangabandhu was given the responsibility of forming a volunteer brigade to make this visit successful. As instructed, Bangabandhu was determined to form a brigade with young people from every religion but the Hindu boys decided to leave the brigade one by one, which surprised him. Later on, he heard from his friends that it was a political reason that made Hindu boys leave (Rahman, 2012). Since Bangabandhu truly believed in communal harmony he wanted to form the brigade with young individuals from every religion, though he failed. When Bangabandhu was a student, we were actively involved in politics and all he could think about was working for the Muslim League and Muslim Student's League because he assumed that the future of the Muslims would be dark without the birth of Pakistan. To clarify, his thought about the future of the

Muslims through the creation of Pakistan was not a movement against the Hindus but the British (Rahman, 2012). The sense of communal harmony was developed in his mind because he wanted to decrease the disparity among people from different religions. He assumed that if the Muslims lag other communities, then the disparity may increase and can eventually bring chaos between the two or more communities.

When Muhammad Ali Jinnah announced the 'Direct Action Day' on 16th August 1946, he urged everyone to observe this day peacefully (Raghavan, 2021). Bangabandhu broadcasted the propaganda in the street of both Hindu and Muslim neighbourhoods that it was not a movement against Hindus but British. But the propaganda campaign launched by Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress made Hindus believe that the movement was against them. Bangabandhu urged that the Muslims were neither willing nor prepared for any kind of communal violence on that day. Unfortunately, many lives were lost in that political riot (Sengupta, 2006), but it was also noticeable that many Muslims died to save Hindus and many Hindus died to save Muslims. The Muslim League office had turned into a refugee camp during the political riot of 1946. Bangabandhu describes that the Muslim League office received many phone calls from Hindu families to call for support for the Muslims who were safely sheltered in their houses. Bangabandhu worked relentlessly to save both Muslims and Hindus during the riot (Rahman, 2012). Despite this horrible occurrence, Bangabandhu still believed in communal harmony, tried to stop this riot through propaganda, and worked during the riot to save the lives of people.

While misunderstanding, ignorance, and competition can influence stereotypes and negative attitudes toward other groups, cooperative cooperation, and mutual understanding can help reduce biases between groups, and this is explained by the theory of cooperative cooperation (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Gaertner et al., 1989). This theory works as a model for cooperation among members of different groups to achieve higher goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Even though Bangabandhu wanted to build cooperative cooperation by working with both Hindu and Muslim neighbourhoods to stress that it was not a movement against Hindus but British, arguably his attempts for such social harmony somewhat failed due to the misleading propaganda of Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress.

Bangabandhu had an opportunity to meet with Mahatma Gandhi when he announced that if there was another riot between Hindus and Muslims, he would start to fast (Rahman, 2012). Bangabandhu was inspired by Gandhi's slogan 'Hindus and Muslims are brothers', which helped him to hone his passion for communal harmony. After the partition of India, a meeting was held to form of Democratic Youth League where Bangabandhu declared that the only objective of this league would be to promote communal harmony so that there would be no riots that would lead to the exodus of Hindus from the country (Rahman, 2012). Bangabandhu also mentioned in this meeting that only two months of the country's independence had passed so the emphasis of this league should be on communal harmony (Rahman, 2012). Thus, Bangabandhu attempted to ensure communal harmony and prevent communal violence after the birth of Pakistan. During the formation of the Awami Muslim League, Bangabandhu believed that since

Pakistan gained independence, there was no point in creating a political party based on communal ideals. He dreamed about a non-communal party based on a sound manifesto, though he also thought that the time had not come yet for such a party (Rahman, 2012). Eventually, in 1955, his idea of a secular political party was successfully implemented when the 'Awami Muslim League' changed its name to 'Awami League' and proved his dedication to communal harmony.

Once, Bangabandhu spent a few days in prison with Chandra Babu, who was a social worker. Bangabandhu said to Chandra Babu that he always treats every person as a human being in politics, and makes no distinction between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians as we all are part of the same human race (Rahman, 2012). The thoughts and perceptions of Bangabandhu were inspired by humanity as he never distinguished people by their religious affiliations. Bangabandhu always wanted a democratic nation where every person of all faiths irrespective of their racial, ethnic, and religious background would have equal rights. After the birth of Pakistan, it was, however, very unfortunate that the people who were against the Pakistan movement tried to represent Pakistan as an Islamic state (Rahman, 2012). Bangabandhu never supported such thoughts in politics because he knew that using religion to achieve political gains would poison politics.

Bangabandhu explained that it was impossible to manipulate the people of the country by concocting slogans in the name of religion. He believed that although the Bengali Muslims loved their religion, they would never allow themselves to be influenced by people who were trying to use religion for political interests (Rahman, 2012). He also stated that the Awami League and its supporters detested any kind of communalism and prejudice, and the League considered that Muslims, Hindus, Bengalis, and non-Bengalis were all the same (Rahman, 2012). It is, therefore, apparent that Bangabandhu successfully developed an environment of non-communalism in his political party. While imposing Governor's rule in East Bengal on the radio, Muhammad Ali Jinnah mentioned A. K. Fazlul Huq as a 'traitor' and Bangabandhu as a 'rioter' even though both of them always attempted to prevent communal violence and ensure communal harmony among the people in East Bengal (Rahman, 2012). Even though Bangabandhu devoted himself to humanity and served the country with non-communalist thoughts, he was still sometimes accused as a rioter.

Bangabandhu addressed the historic 7th March speech in 1971 when he empathetically uttered the importance of maintaining Hindu-Muslim communal harmony to achieve independence from Pakistan. (Sarkar, 2021). In the first constitution of Bangladesh introduced in 1972, secularism was included as one of the fundamental principles of state policy of newly liberated Bangladesh (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1972) because of Bangabandhu's uncompromising efforts to make the country non-communal. This was the journey that Bangabandhu started to transform Bangladesh into a non-communal society and polity. He tried to cherish harmonious communal atmospheres empirically.

#### **4.2 Perception of Bangabandhu on communal harmony**

Harun-or-Rashid (2013) states that Bangabandhu had been constructing his non-communal attitude since his boyhood. He was born in Gopalganj where the majority of the population were Hindus, and he had many Hindu friends during his school life. Bangabandhu fought for the liberation of Pakistan to secure the existence of deprived Muslims. During the 'Great Calcutta Killing' in 1946, he risked his life to save both Hindus and Muslims as he was devoted to humanity and communal harmony. After the partition of India, Bangabandhu did not leave Kolkata and attended the peace mission with Mahatma Gandhi and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy to work for communal harmony (Harun-or-Rashid, 2013). This further reinforces the idea of balance theory to build psychological and social harmony.

Balance theory was introduced by social psychologist Fritz Heider who mainly attempts to discuss the patterns of interpersonal relations (Malle & Ickes, 2000). However, this theory has also been employed to explore attitudes and opinions regarding social events and ideas. Heider explains that a balance must exist in the interpersonal relationships between two or more individuals or groups so that a sense of psychological harmony can be achieved (Crandall et al., 2007). The efforts that Bangabandhu made to continuously work together with Mahatma Gandhi and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy for communal harmony indicate that the interpersonal relationships with such political figures contributed to psychological or social harmony.

The analysis of Harun-or-Rashid (2013) about the non-communal perception of Bangabandhu implies that despite suffering from communal violence and experiences, Bangabandhu never gave up and held his nerve to make people understand why communal harmony is needed. Poet Samad (2014) writes in his poem 'Ai Bangla Mujibmoy' that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerges in this country as a king of the people. The poet refers to Bangabandhu not as a king of Muslims or Hindus but as a king of all people. Bangabandhu served his life for the people of all religions, races, and communities.

Nobel laureate Bengali economist Amartya Sen said that in the Indian subcontinent, Bangabandhu is considered a paragon of non-communalist leaders. In his talk on the Bangabandhu Birth Centenary held at the London School of Economics in January 2021, he linked Bangabandhu with the Mughal Emperor Akbar on secularism and non-communalism. He said that learning from the way Sheikh Mujib and Emperor Akbar clarified the concept of secularism is important not only in India but in many countries. This secularist view of Bangabandhu inspired the people of Bangladesh to fight for the nation-state. (Sen, 2021) As a result, all people fought for liberation, forgetting all the differences between religions, castes, and communities, being willing to live together in peace and harmony.

According to Considine (2016), once Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stood up at a funeral when a Jew passed away. His companions asked why he stood up for a Jew's funeral. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) replied that all human souls are equal, and it is our responsibility to show respect to the departed soul (Considine, 2016). Bangabandhu was

also inspired by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and stated in his autobiography that God and his Prophet prohibited actions that kill innocent people. Bangabandhu also writes that a true Muslim cannot kill any innocent people (Rahman, 2012). Famous Indian historian Tapan Raychaudhuri (1926-2014) specialized in British-Indian history, Indian economic history, and the history of Bengal discusses in his work *Bangalnama* that communal violence had obstructed the progress of Bangladesh for many decades (Raychaudhuri, 2009). We all know how communalism can be a threat to humanity and peace.

Bangabandhu also considered communalism as a threat for the nation and he always wanted to make peace and ensure communal harmony among the people. The perception of Tapan Raychaudhuri and Bangabandhu is quite similar because the harsh reality of communalism can never bring peace to society. The resemblance between their perceptions represents the ideology and constructions of communal harmony in this country. Kabir (2013) delineates that Bangabandhu wanted to cease communal politics and give equal emphasis to all religions. Thus, the constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 banned religion-based politics. Bangabandhu also anticipated that religion-based communal politics would lead to chaos and extremism that may threaten communal harmony (Kabir, 2013; Rashid, 2011). Communal harmony is required for a harmonious development of a nation so Bangabandhu wanted to ensure a prosperous nation in the light of harmonious development.

## **5. Conclusion**

The perception of communal or social harmony in Bangabandhu is a key motivator that inspires the people of Bangladesh to ensure harmonious development. This is because it is empirically proved that the characteristics and behaviour of political leaders are generally observed and followed by people (Metz, 2021). Varshney and Gubler (2012) describe that the prime responsibility of a government is to ensure the safety and security of the people. Bangabandhu also believed the same, and the governing body of Bangladesh needs to be meticulous to protect the lives of people from every religion, race, ethnicity, and community. Hall (2001) states that communalism is the prime cause of such violence where many people lose their lives. Hence, Bangabandhu wanted to save the lives of both Hindus and Muslims when communal riots occurred in 1946. He never supported any kind of communal violence because it could only perpetuate hatred among people. The impact of the perception of communal harmony by Bangabandhu is noticeable as most people of Bangladesh tend to believe in non-communalism. The general public of this country is not usually possessed by communalism but there have been a few incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh in the past few years (Ahmed, 2013). Therefore, it is a case of social research to investigate the reasons behind such communal violence and what are the hidden motivating factors that influence such violence.



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