



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religion, politics and the everyday moral order in Bangladesh

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An understanding of religion as lived experience is essential to challenge and complement analyses of the role of religion in macro-politics. Drawing on in-depth research in Bangladesh, this paper shows how religion structures and is changed by people's perceptions, experiences and actions in everyday life, in their families and communities.

Wellbeing has cultural and religious dimensions but these are rarely well understood or clearly described. As a result, policies intended to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing may not address poor people's priorities or be appropriate and effective.

Much contemporary analysis of the relationships between religion and development focuses on the role of religion in macro-politics and governance. Previously neglected in analyses of politics in Bangladesh, religion is now hyper-visible. Founded on secular principles in 1971, the state in Bangladesh (under both military and democratic regimes) has been forced to make concessions to Islamist forces, including lifting the ban on religious political parties in 1972. As a result, the politics of radical Islam has become more prominent and conservative expressions of Islam have gradually become mainstreamed in the public sphere, not only in politics but also in the growth of the madrassah education sector and increased observance of core Islamic practices such as prayer, fasting and women's dress codes.

These are important trends but are not the whole picture. Religion and its role in society constantly evolve within a context of wider social change. Debates within Islam on what constitutes 'proper' Islamic practice interact with people's attempts to cope with economic and social change, influencing their everyday lives, religious beliefs and practices, and interactions with wider social organizations. Based on extensive research in Bangladesh, especially ethnographic research in two

villages in Dinajpur District, in the north-west of the country, this paper develops an understanding of the social and moral order that informs villagers' lives and religious practices.

First, the local word for religion, *dharma*, is discussed. *Dharma* constitutes a deeply rooted cultural norm, a sense of the desirable moral and social order that structures people's lives and relationships. In addition, it provides a benchmark against which particular ideologies and practices, whether of 'religion' or of 'politics', are judged. The main findings relate to the ways in which *dharma* in this sense, in everyday life, is expressed, especially in community politics.

The main conclusions include:

- Religion should not be seen solely in terms of its role in macro-politics, because this both neglects the role it plays in people's everyday lives and runs the risk of mis-specifying what 'religion' is.
- Religion in Bangladesh is not a discrete set of doctrines and practices: it includes both specific beliefs and practices and also an underlying moral order that informs perceptions of the proper way of living and good social relationships, commonly expressed in the concept of *dharma*.
- The context of rapid economic and social transformation evident in Bangladesh produces everyday challenges to notions of order or *dharma*. These are manifest in concerns about unruly behaviour (especially of young people), the fragmentation of local communities and challenges to established local leaders.
- Such leaders have an important role in maintaining or restoring social order, through strategies that have traditionally concentrated on providing valued resources (such as assistance to those in need or investment in community facilities such as mosques) and demonstrating their moral integrity and legitimacy.

- Other ways of reforming society emphasize a more central role for Islam. One example is the *Tablighi Jamaat*, a reformist movement that offers a vision of reform based on spiritual development, piety (*tabligh*) and good moral behaviour and has drawn in many young people. Non-members express concerns, however, that excessive religious practice might clash with what are regarded as more fundamental expectations related to family and community relationships and responsibilities.
- Thus people's everyday choices, struggles, fears and aspirations are shaped not only by religion but also by other social factors.
- recognition that people's everyday choices, struggles, fears, aspirations and social relationships, are influenced by many social factors other than religion, even in a mainly Muslim society.
- ways of dealing with social and economic transformation that recognize both people's anxieties about social relationships and their attempts to deal with change, and the competition between religious and other actors promoting their own visions of a desirable social and moral order.

The research demonstrates the need for

- a greater focus on everyday understandings and experiences of religion in Bangladesh, to avoid misunderstandings arising from a sole concentration on abstract doctrines and beliefs or the role of religion in macro-politics.

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