

Education or Religious Conversion: Do We Need to Worry?

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ABSTRACT

Religious conversion frequently serves as an instrument of cultural hegemony over Indigenous peoples (IP), undermining traditional beliefs, customs, and social structure, resulting in a loss of identity. Analyses of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) setting increasingly emphasize the significance of education in facilitating religious conversion, especially in its more 'fundamentalist' manifestations. The region, historically marked by ethnic and religious diversity, has experienced religious conversions, cultural absorption, and alterations in local political dynamics due to the proliferation of Islamic-driven policies and initiatives. This essay analyzed the processes by which Islamization is transforming Indigenous identities, mostly through schooling and governmental educational programs as a part of counter insurgency. This essay examined schooling in and out of CHT, emphasizing systematic conversion cultures shaped by the dual influences of homogenization and social exclusion, which are anchored in colonial legacies and an ultra-religious, assimilative yet exclusionary nationalistic ambition. This essay also regarded conversion as a coping mechanism. Comprehending these processes is essential for tackling the socio-political dynamics of religious homogenization in an area characterized by intricate ethno-religious identities. This conceptual essay enhances the discourse on religious nationalism, identity politics, and resistance movements in contemporary CHT.

Keywords: Islamization, religious conversion, indigenous peoples (IP), hegemony

Education, a political invention, is an effective tool in the hands of authoritarian regimes, helping them to preserve the existing socio-political system, for example, in contrast to the support lent for institutionalizing the education for men, there was little colonial interest in the education of girls (Bharti, 2025). Authoritarian regimes skillfully use education to consolidate their power, effectively minimizing dissidence and questioning the existing public order. Not only the content of education (especially in humanitarian disciplines) but also the teaching and learning methods used in state schools further these aims. When used under the guise of colonialism, this tool becomes an instrument of oppression.

While 91 percent of Bangladesh's population adheres to Islam, making it one of the most homogeneous countries in South Asia, Indigenous individuals constitute only approximately 2 percent, numbering 1.7 million (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Niko et al., 2024). The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), adjacent to the border of India and Myanmar, is a culturally diverse region comprising 14 distinct ethno-linguistic communities: "Chakma", "Marma", "Tipperas", "Murungs", "Tanchangyas", "Khyang", "Reangs", "Lusheis", "Bawn", "Khumis", "Chak", and "Pangkhuas", "Gurkhas", "Ohomias" collectively known as 'jumma'. Predominantly Buddhist, with Hindu, Christian, and Animist communities, these communities have been residing in the area for

centuries, yet have long faced social and economic neglect by the government (Minority Rights Group International, 2016) and others, recently, religious conversion – the adoption of a new faith, in this case, Islam – has become a concern. Choosing or following one particular religion is a part of human rights. However, coercing, compelling, or clandestinely moving people to convert to a particular religion by exploiting their circumstances is illegal and unethical (Rahman, 2022).

However, the emerging tendency towards converting indigenous children to Islam is concerning, as these conversions are facilitated by religious organizations to alter demographics and undermine diversity nationwide. Poverty-stricken indigenous families are allegedly exploited by extremist groups to transfer their children away (Zaimob, 2017; Clark, 2022). Individuals who have converted to a different religion, including their descendants after several generations, often encounter social ostracism within their communities due to the belief that their conversion was insincere and driven by the anticipation of material advantages or other secular motivations (UN, 2015).

Concerning this issue, this conceptual essay examined how education is used as a tool for conversion, as part of a systematic demographic engineering strategy by the state, through the synthesis of secondary sources (academic studies, NGO reports, credible news).

Understanding the political context

Following World War II, the authorities of the newly independent nation endeavored to create homogeneous societies, despite the presence of a complex multicultural landscape that underpinned internal political conflicts of identity. The political leader embraced the French Model of the Nation State, which promotes the integration of minority communities into the dominant culture (Nayak, 2023) resulting in direct or indirect governmental patronage aimed at integrating minorities into a singular framework. With the project of ‘modernity’ in the 19th and 20th centuries in different parts of the world, nation builders constructed national boundaries and developed national narratives borrowed from colonial notions, which resulted in a homogenized linguistic policy that Bangladesh later adopted (Kabir, 2009).

The first constitution of Bangladesh, enacted in 1972, marginalized ethnic identities by embedding 'Bangalee nationalism' as a core value (Dowlah, 2013), effectively internally colonizing them. The then president of newly established Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, proclaimed, *"We are all Bengalee. Disregard your ethnicity and embrace being Bangalee. If you persist in your demands, I will allow the Chittagong Hill Tracts to be inundated with Bangalee,"* in response to a delegation of indigenous leaders presenting a memorandum (Ahmad et al., 2008). The Government of Bangladesh implemented many measures to Islamize the CHT region, including the 'Population Transfer Program,' militarization, and the perpetration of religious persecutions and human rights violations (Jena & Chakma, 2008).

Eight years after Bangladesh's independence, President Ziaur Rahman convened a clandestine meeting in mid-1979 and resolved to resettle 30,000 Bangladeshi families the following year (Hossain, 2015). During the conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from 1979 to 1997, the government directly supported the relocation of approximately 300,000 to 340,000 residents (Adnan, 2008). This initial political decision to incorporate a distinct ethno-religious minority group into a new state with a different dominant identity created a fertile ground for later assimilationist policies.

The Islamization of the CHT is reflected in the swift proliferation of Islamic institutions during the 1970s (Nayak, 2023). In 1961, there were 40 mosques in the CHT; this number rose to 421 in 1979 and reached 592 in 1981 (Barua, 2001). In 1961, there were merely 2 madrasas; this figure rose to 20 in 1974 and 35 in 1981. Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics indicates that between 1982 and 2001, the number of mosques in the CHT expanded more than fourfold, while madrasas surged over forty-fourfold.

Concepts and context

The term ‘Islamization’ refers to the historical and ongoing process by which Islamic principles, values, and institution exert influence on the legal frameworks, education systems, political structures, and social norms of a given society. In the context of Bangladesh, this process is not solely a reflection of deep ideological shifts within the populace. Instead, it is shaped by political calculation, driven by the rise of Islamist social movement, intense political competition, and transitions towards semi-authoritarian governance.

Over the 7 years, police have rescued 72 Indigenous children from a crime ring led by fanatics (Dhaka Tribune, 2017). Many disadvantaged Indigenous children, particularly those who are Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians, are targeted by tempting their parents with promises of quality education in Dhaka, leading to the coercive conversion of madrasas across the country to Islam. Religious zealots are clandestinely collaborating to 'Islamize' the entire nation. In this context, they are employing education to entice the indigenous families. Due to the remote locations of most indigenous villages, their children lack access to quality educational institutions. Economic deprivation and insufficient access to quality education remain persistent issues for communities residing in CHT. The literacy rate in this region is currently 69.60% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022) compared to the national figure of 74.80% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Bandarban exhibits the highest vulnerability at 35.86%, followed by Rangamati at 49.73% and Khagrachari at 46.11% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The literacy rate in this district is notably low, with only 35.86% of the population being literate (BBS, 2023). The local conversion process facilitates the enticement of impoverished, uneducated parents with the promise of quality education. Indigenous children are coerced into doing Islamic prayers, donning hijabs, and adopting Islamic names (Foundation, 2021). Textbooks glorify Islamic past while neglecting indigenous traditions (CHT Commission, 2020). In many cases, local authorities ignore such activities because they themselves believe that if they can convert a non-Muslim to Islam, then they will be rewarded after death (Barua & Jyoti, 2017). Meanwhile, the Islamization policy of the government has swiftly changed the demographic balance. The Bengali Muslim population, which was only 1.5% of the total population of the CHT in 1947, has swung to a high 49% by now; whereas the Jumma population during the same period constituted 98.5% of the total population has now dwindled to a low 51% (PCJSS, n.d.). Individuals whose faith lacks an institutional structure, such as Animism such as Mro and Tripura, are the primary focus of conversion efforts. Having no structured form of religion and due to being deprived from socio-political participation they seem conversion as a means of emancipation. The Mro tribe was initially followed 'animism', in other word 'social materialism'. They worshiped Tuurai, Mro's Chief God. Having no written religious book and influenced by the then king Chandra-Surya in the time of A.D. 146 some of them gradually converted into Buddhism (Phayre, 2000). In the time of British rule in Bangla, missionaries were expanded in the whole region and to some extend of Mro's were converted to Christianity. However, religious conversion was continued. In recently some of them were converted in Islam. Religious conversion at a time of political and social crisis becomes a potent instrument of resistant to powerful structures such as State or Churches (García-Arenal & Wieggers, 2019). A similar happened to Mro community who denounced the risk of denial of existence into others adopted a new religion 'Krama', invented by a Mro man, Menley Mro in 1985 in the time counter insurgency in CHT. Like Mro community, Tripura were animist previously. Later, they embraced Shakti-cult and Vaishnavism, a form of Hinduism as animism was close to rituals of it (Debbarma, 2024) though their rituals, beliefs are a bit different from the Hindu castes in India. After 1900, few portion of Tripura came with the touch of Christianity after massive expansion of missionaries activities in CHT. Tripura's and Mro's conversion to recognized religion was influenced by limited access to land, education and population growth.

Forced and covert religious conversion

Education is often perceived not merely as a mechanism for skill development but also as an instrument of social control (Freire & Macedo, 2014). The roots of religious conversions are varied and complex. While some individuals may convert to new faith due to spirituals beliefs or a desire to affiliate with a particular group, other may do so for practical reasons related to their socio-economic circumstances. Textbook content predominantly emphasizes the characteristics of a particular religion, even among secular publications. A chapter has been incorporated into the class-II Bangla textbook '*Sobai Miley Kori Kaj*' (Let do together), utilizing an Islamic personality as an exemplar. Furthermore, the content of Bangla textbooks for classes III, IV, and V depicts the Islamic persona, implies the apparent deficiency of comprehensive curricular information about the many religious traditions of the CHT signifies a wasted chance to cultivate inter-religious understanding and respect among students, raising critical enquiries about the state's dedication to religious pluralism in education.

In Bangladesh, the school oath commencing with "*O Almighty Allah, grant me strength*" exemplifies Islamic expression. Students at boarding school sometimes are required to adhere to the established rules of authority. Students at that school are compelled to passively adopt the authority's faith, indicates a possible conflict between fostering religious identity and maintaining tolerance for religious minorities in educational institutions

In that school, a non-Muslim student, especially who was admitted in early age observe most of the teachers, peers, staffs and overall culture followed a particular faith, seem to have inquisitive to explore and becomes attractive to that particular faith.

Early adolescents from primary to secondary school are likely to seek help from teachers and peers to form a new social network and adapting in mentally and physically to new learning environment (Crone & Dahl, 2012). Religious mosaics – combinations of religious attitudes, behavior, and identities are intertwined with adolescent friendships primarily- through peers influence, where adolescent's profile tend to become more similar to those of their friends over time (Adams et al., 2020). According to Bandura, a psychologist, one learn by observing and initiating others that affect in the consequences of behavior (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). Encompassing both attractive forces (e.g. social bonding, shared values, positive modeling) and coercive forces (e.g. overt pressures, fear of ostracism, manipulative tactics) influence of peers is not monolithic. In multi-religious countries like Bangladesh students in boarding school where majority follow a particular faith often experience social isolation unless they conform. There is an ample evidence that students' affective relations with their teachers are crucial to reshape their well-being, social behavior, and school engagement (Bosson et al., 2000). Muslim teachers had more positive attitudes towards Muslim students in Belgium than non-Muslim one (Charki et al., 2022) as people have basic tendency to favour the groups they belongs to (Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015; Karim, 2021; Alfarraj et al., 2026) implying teacher's coercive and systematic pressures through pedagogical approaches, biasness towards non-Muslim students may have impact in taking decision to convert.

Moreover, within the CHT setting, religion frequently functions as a domain of hegemony, with numerous Indigenous peoples perceiving the predominant religion of the country as the driving force behind all aspects of society. They perceive Islam as a source of empowerment. They endeavor to seize all available possibilities without understanding the underlying politics of that support.

Gramsci's viewpoint, I recognize that not all individuals accept hegemonic messages. Some resist explicitly, while others internalize them partially and navigate both worlds. The state's portrayal of Islamic identity as empowering can hold appeal, but Indigenous peoples have their own intellectuals and leaders who reinterpret that appeal through their own values. Critically, this essay emphasizes that *education should not be reduced to "dangerous"* by itself; rather, it is the content and context of that education that determine its effects. Schools and NGOs with an embedded pro-Islam agenda- especially when backed by state power- become dangerous to minority identity.

Conclusion

Rituals, customs, and traditions are essential in unifying a civilization. The inhabitants of Bangladesh, especially those residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, are subjected to a governmental initiative aimed at "preserving" the culture and traditions of these many communities. On the surface, this initiative appears commendable; however, anthropologists and ethnographers contend that it is part of a broader dehumanizing and Islamizing agenda that deems the ethnic and cultural identities of these smaller groups as inferior, thereby categorizing them under "tribal identities" to imply that they are on the verge of extinction. Utilizing education as an instrument of internal colonization, the internal colonizers aimed to convert Indigenous peoples to Islam, thereby undermining native belief systems and assimilating them into dominant cultural norms. This frequently enabled the enforcement of colonial dominance and resulted in the diminishment of Indigenous sovereignty, as indigenous spiritual practices were supplanted by foreign religious traditions. The State's philosophical stance regarding indigenous peoples must be unequivocal.

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Author contributions

The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

Data availability

The dataset analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

AI disclosure

In the preparation of this essay no Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used.

Biographical sketch

Shantimoy Chakma, an independent researcher, graduated from Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. His research interest includes not limited to Curriculum Studies, Indigenous Studies and Education Policy.

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