

The Role of NGOs in Promoting Christianity: The Case of Bangladesh

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Abstract: *Western Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are operating in all parts of the world. Many are doing great work in alleviating poverty and helping with development efforts. Unfortunately, some have hidden agendas. Presently Bangladesh has the NGO density of 3.5 foreign NGOs per square mile. Most of the foreign NGOs, under the banner of "development partner", are working to alleviate poverty and to promote education and progress. Their direct and indirect involvements in evangelization, however, have brought about an increase in tensions and social problems in Bangladesh.*

Following independence in 1971, Bangladesh received foreign aid from many developed countries. After the first phase of spending relief works, planners realized that if rural poverty was to be alleviated on a long-term basis, a systematic development approach had to be adopted. This is possible with the increased activity among social workers and social groups. This was the starting point of the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) activities in Bangladesh. NGOs organized meetings, and educated the rural poor, and embarked on the package programme commonly described as "participating activities for the rural poor in target groups to promote development."¹

The growth in number of NGOs in Bangladesh was accompanied from the beginning of 1990s by protests and violence, supposedly instigated by the religious right against the NGOs. The Islamic groups charged that dozens of foreign NGOs, in cooperation with their local counterparts, were engaged in anti-Islamic and proselytizing activities.² One Muslim religious leader from Bangladesh accused as many as 52 NGOs of working against Islam and carrying out "proselytizing" activities.³ This paper examines the

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allegations of NGOs being involved in promoting Christianity in Bangladesh.

The NGOs and Evangelization

NGOs have been described as associations formed by personal initiative of a few committed people dedicated to the design, study and implementation of development projects at the grassroots level. They work outside the government structures but function within the legal framework of the country.⁴

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) engaged in development offers a promising institutional strategy for transcending the trends of development offered by the state. The complementary role that Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs), other NGOs, and local organizations can play in supporting and advancing development efforts has been recognized as vital to achieving positive development outcomes.⁵ The rise of the NGOs as a strong institutional alternative reflects the growing recognition that the central government and private sectors lack sufficient capacity “to respond to the challenges of poverty alleviation and developments.”⁶

Numerous theories have been proposed with regard to the question of developing relations between the developed and the developing countries since the end of the Second World War. Two groups of theorists have been involved on this issue: classical developmentalists and dependency theorists. The classical development theorists believe that the developing countries can develop only through the establishment of their relationship with the developed countries, since the developed countries have the monopoly of capital and technology. NGOs are the best mediation to flow the capital and technology from the developed world to the developing ones. On the contrary, the neo-Marxists, popularly known as Dependency school, hold the view that the developing countries will never be able to overcome their problems by establishing relations with the developed North, rather they will become dependent on the developed world. They should instead establish their relations with other developing countries to overcome the dependency and advance benefit through their mutual exchange.⁷ They view NGOs as instruments to perpetuate domination of the developing countries.

Over the years, developing countries in Africa, South America and Southeast Asia have become heavily dependent on foreign assistance in the form of both governmental aid and loans. J. Daniel Curran and Claire M. Renzetti observe:

Evidence indicates that financial dependence on industrialized nations locks the Third world into persistent underdevelopment. The multi-nationalization

or corporation strips Third World nations of their resources and retards the growth of domestic industries. In addition, much of the money borrowed goes back to the industrialized countries as payments for goods and services. It is likely that the one sided relationship will continue because of Third World countries' dependency on foreign capital and because their government can not effectively regulate its industrial operations that they welcome in the name of progress.⁸

Most of the loan recipients are unable to meet payments giving rise to what is known as "the debt crisis." The donor countries are now more interested to give aid to different NGOs rather than directly to government. According to the group who holds skeptical view over the lucrative claims of NGOs, it has been proven that aid, which is the tantalizing way to penetrate into the poverty-ridden developing countries, is not at all a development strategy. The aid programmes and development strategies in the Third World countries undertaken by different western NGOs are viewed by them as the "revived form of imperialism." According to them, these western partners adopting "religio-approach" are engaged in evangelization as it was done by the former colonial masters.⁹ "Although the promotion of Christianity was one of the objectives of colonial powers, it deserves to be said in fairness to them, that their most important objective was economic and political exploitation."¹⁰ The methods used by these NGOs are corruption, seduction and conversion. The policy of the most Christian NGOs is to employ Muslims last and to favour those who convert. The idea is to create an economically and educationally influential community of converts who would, in due course, like in many parts of Africa, control all the key sectors of power: education, economy, social policy, bureaucracy, and military. They also think that involvement of the NGOs in missionary activities is the part of their old dream of establishing universal Christian State. As John Henry Borrowes said:

I might sketch Christian movement in Musalman land which has touched, with the radiance of the cross, the Lebanon and the Persian mountains as well as the waters of the Bosphorus and which will be sure harbinger of the day when the Cairo and Damascus and Tehran shall be the servants of Jesus and when even the solitudes of Arab will be pierced and the Christ in the person of his disciples, shall enter the 'Ka'ba'.¹¹

Christian Missions and NGOs in Bangladesh

It is difficult to ascertain the time Christianity first arrived in sub-continent. "According to third century Christian document, the *Acts of Thomas*, the Apostle Thomas was missioned to India. He settled in Kerala in the extreme southwest part of the country, converted thousands of Indians to the faith and was martyred there about CE 68."¹² Up to the end of medieval era, the

presence of Christians in the sub-continent was not significant. Like the present rulers of Bangladesh, the Great Mughal rulers of Delhi opened the door of the province of Bengal to Christian missionaries in 1517.

Active missionary interest in Bengal is two centuries old. In 1757 the forces of British East India Company (the merchants had come to raise an army as well!) defeated the Muslim Ruler of Bengal, Nawāb Sirāju-d-Daulah, at the battle of Plassey. By 1793, the famous British missionary, William Carey, had arrived in Calcutta. Work started on rendering the Bible into Bengali language and preparing other literature, and the missionary-run schools began to set up all over Bengal.¹³

Such missionary activities then spread to other towns like Dinajpur (1795), Jessore (1805), Dhaka (1816), Barisal (1828), Khulna (1860), Chittagong (1881) and Rangpur (1891). Over the years missionary activities have increased. Missions were established between 1900-1947 and also between 1947-1971.¹⁴

New missions have been successful after the creation of Bangladesh because the Christian involvement in their struggle for freedom changed the attitude of government towards them.¹⁵ The influence that the missionaries wielded on the government headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is evident. The Churches, Missions and Christian agencies have been very happy with their work under such conditions. The objectives of all, apart from helping their own community, have been evangelization. Missionary bodies and organizations in Bangladesh are divided into 3 parts: the Protestant church, the Roman Catholic and various other agencies.

The Protestant Church denominations number more than the Roman Catholic. It has more Churches as well as missionaries, although the total strength of the Protestant Christian community is smaller than the Roman Catholics.¹⁶ The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses in Bangladesh. These are the dioceses of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Dinajpur. The churches under their jurisdiction number more than 500. The Catholic missionaries work closely with their dioceses in Bangladesh. Since the Roman Catholic structure is more hierarchical, close cooperation with the Church is greater than that found among Protestants. According to a 1973 estimate, there are four important Catholic missions in Bangladesh. These are: (a) Congregation of Holy Cross (came from USA), (b) Congregation of Holy Cross (came from Canada), (c) Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, and (d) St. Francis Xavier.¹⁷

The Government NGO Bureau has identified 52 NGOs as engaged directly in converting people to one of the Christian sects, though the

difference between the religious and secular NGOs is only of forms and not objectives.¹⁸ In addition, there are other agencies in Bangladesh, which work, in close cooperation with the Protestant and Catholic missions. In many cases they act as 'front' organizations, whose long-term objective is evangelization by aiding or creating feasible contexts for conversions. There are more than 200 agencies in Bangladesh working directly and indirectly for evangelization.¹⁹

The Target Groups and the Success of the Mission

The main targets of proselytisation are the vulnerables: the women, the children, the poor, the uneducated and alienated.²⁰ The social structure of Bangladesh is comprised of three major groups of people- Hindus, Tribal people and the Muslims.

According to the 1991 census, Hindus constitute 10.5 percent of the total population in Bangladesh. In terms of giving jobs, most of the missionary agencies give priority to Hindus, since it is easier for them to disseminate Christian culture among the Hindus than the Muslims.²¹ The Hindu caste system divides them in a hierarchical order in which the Brahmans are at the top, followed by Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudras. The major target of Christian evangelization is the Sudras. Altogether they number about 3 million, of which 3.1 percent have already been evangelized. This is just one example, but mission work is going on amongst most of these castes.²²

The tribals, who are mostly pagan, are the major targets for Christian evangelization. They are found in three regions of Bangladesh: Northern Bangladesh, which includes the districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Bogra; the Chittagong Hill Tracts and North Mymensingh and Sylhet districts. Some of the tribes among whom the missions are working are: Kuki, Lushai, Pankho, Bawm, Mru, Kayang, Kumi, Tipperah, Riang, Tanchangya, Magh, Chakma, Khasi, Mamburi, Hajaong, Garo, Hadi, Dalu, Santal, Mahili, Oraon, Munda.²³ According to the statistics of 1992, around 30 percent of them have been converted to Christianity already.²⁴ The Chittagong Hill Tracts is an important area for Christian evangelization. McNee writes:

The greatest gift we can give to Bangladesh is a Christianized Hill Tracts population. The Tribals are under pressure from many directions. The construction of Dam in the early 1960s displaced thousands of Tribals, especially Tipperahs. The war of independence has severed the tie, which the Hill Tracts had with India. Bangladesh is naturally concerned about the borders of the country, and therefore there is a military presence in the Hill Tracts, which is suspicious of the Tribals. All this has created a sense of

instability among the tribals of this area. The necessity for this change is near bursting point. Christians now number 5 percent of the population. The Hill Tracts is a top priority for evangelistic effort.²⁵

Evangelization of the Tribal population has continued on a wide scale. The missionaries believe that:

- (a) Every non-Christian in every Christian family must be converted.
- (b) Villages where half of the people are Christian should be concentrated on until entire villages become Christian.
- (c) Team evangelistic campaigns should become a regular feature of this work perhaps twice a year.
- (d) The leadership pattern should not revolve around educated young Baptist but around the actual leaders of the village congregations whether they are literate or illiterate.
- (e) To train the natural leaders, the book '24 Bible Stories' should be widely used. The truths of Christian faith are taught to village Christians best through stories.²⁶

The long-term plan of the Christian missions is to make Chittagong Hill Tracts, the one-tenth area of the territory of Bangladesh, an independent "Christian State", and they are providing fuels to the tribal rebels for this movement. One foreign company prepared the map of Bangladesh excluding the area of Chittagong.²⁷ The current "68-point Peace Accord" signed on 2nd December 1997 between Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) and Bangladesh government, which ensured autonomy for the tribal people, will work as milestone to execute the long-term plan of the Christian missions. Some of the provisions of the accord are as follows:

- i) The Regional Council of Chittagong (RCC) will oversee and co-ordinate the administration, law and order and development activities. It will also grant license for NGO activities and setting up of heavy industries.
- ii) The tribal people will be given priority in the employment of all positions in the government, semi-government and autonomous bodies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).
- iii) The existing law notwithstanding, no khas land in the CHT region can be leased out, purchased, sold or transferred without the permission of the council.
- iv) The government of Bangladesh will not impose any tax on CHT area.²⁸

The Muslims, who form the majority of population, live in the rural areas. They are extremely poor and, because of this, they are vulnerable to both internal and external influences. The main thrust of the missions

among the Muslims has been in the rural areas where conversions could be made more easily than in the urban areas. In urban areas, missions have to tackle educated people and this has to be done in a more sophisticated manner. In some cases, if conversion is not possible through mission education, they can be secularized or de-Islamized. Conversion among the Muslims is also achieved by taking advantage of situations. Among the Muslims there is no caste system; therefore the missionaries attack the poverty-ridden or those in some kind of trouble. One report suggested that because of the Burmese government atrocities, Muslims fled to Bangladesh, missionaries converted many of them so that they could go back as Christians. In other cases, conversion is carried out through aid, monetary incentives and treatment of poor masses.²⁹

According to news reports from Jamalpur District, more than 250 poor Muslims have been converted to Christianity and the number is increasing on a daily basis.³⁰ The converts have to take oath by putting the Qur'an under their knees, and holding the Bible by hands. They are required to pronounce: "(a) by the name of Jesus, from today I enter the fold of Christianity, leaving Islam forever, and (b) by the name of Jesus, I will not reveal the secrets of my conversion to others until the one-third population of my society is converted to Christianity."³¹

In the 190 years of colonial rule in united Bengal only 111,426 people were converted to Christianity. Out of this converts, about 50 thousands belonged to Bangladesh.³² The number of Christians in the territory had risen by 400 percent from about 50,000 in 1947 to 200,000 in 1971.³³ According to one estimate, "in the period between 1971 and 1991, the number of Christian converts in Bangladesh has risen from 200,000 to 400,000."³⁴ Christian sources tend to underplay their numbers, but it is reported that they have as their target a population of 10-12 million Christians in the next 20 years.³⁵

The Message of the Missions

The faith of New Testament is that Jesus is Lord and that everything and everybody rightly belongs to him. The objective of the mission, therefore, is to bring all mankind to acknowledge Jesus as Lord.³⁶ They say that Jesus is the only saviour of mankind. "Church of Bangladesh is one Christian NGO which is seriously disturbing the communal harmony by embarking upon its aggressive evangelization program. In 1965 it set up Christian Memorial Hospital at Malumghat, in the district of Cox's Bazar. At the time of opening the hospital the then government of East Pakistan cautioned the hospital authority not to indulge in evangelization activities."³⁷ But since its inception Dr. Vigo B. Alsen MD, the chief of the hospital, has been

engaged in evangelization. It has intensified its activities of the evangelization after the war of liberation in 1971. According to a survey conducted by the Islamic Foundation Dhaka, it has converted 10 thousand adults directly and with the children and dependants, their number exceed 40 thousand. Under the rehabilitation program it has scattered these families to all over greater Chittagong district.³⁸ With a view to avoiding reaction and criticism of the local people, Church of Bangladesh transfers the converted people to other places.

It is reported that NGOs adopts dubious method to disseminate their message in its Malumghat Hospital area. As reported, the doctors would prescribe and administer wrong medicine to the patients and ask them to seek blessings of Muhammad (SAW) (or in the case of Hindu of Ramakrishna patients) for early recovery. When the patient is not cured, the doctors would apply correct medicine and ask the illiterate patients to seek the blessings of Christ for recovery. Thus cured, the hospital authorities would attribute the healings to Jesus. The patients were told that:

- Since Jesus has cured you, he can also give you paradise. Believe in him and his religion.
- Muhammad is very unlucky and as such his followers are poor. If you want good economic life, become Christian and Jesus will bless you.
- It is stated in the book *Morone Nahi Bhoi* (There is no fear in Death) that compared to the Bible, the Qur'an is much inferior. There is nothing in the life and teachings of Muhammad. Descendents of Muhammad are thieves, etc.
- Pressurize the poor employees such as nurses, gardeners, helpers, carpenters etc., to accept Christianity. Unwilling employees are sacked.
- Conversion is made through cash money, free medicine, and jobs in different places.³⁹

All the missionary bodies and agencies convey the message that the optimum mercy of God is upon the Christians, and the followers of Jesus will not face any financial difficulties.⁴⁰ In many of their books, like *Islam Under the Magnifying Glass*; *The Sources of Islam and the Qur'an*; *The Secrets of the Qur'an*; *Prophets and Prophecy in Islam*; *A Question that Demands an Answer*; *Who is Allah in Islam?*; *What is Islam?*; and *The Black Gold and the Holy War*, they criticized al-Qur'an, Islam, and Prophet Muhammad (SAS), and made a lot of lampoons.⁴¹

The Methodology of Evangelization

As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh has the NGO density of 3.5 foreign NGOs per square miles most of which are directly and indirectly engaged in

evangelization. The methods of these NGOs are usual: corruption, seduction and conversion. The policy of the most Christian NGOs is to “employ Muslims last” and to favour those who convert. The idea is to create economically and educationally influential community of converts who would, in due course, like in many parts of Africa, control all the key sectors of power: education, economy, social policy, bureaucracy and military.⁴² The long-term dimensions of their strategies are discussed here:

1. People’s Movement

The people’s movement is not a ‘mass’ movement as some Christian writers have considered. On the contrary, it is a one caste or one tribe movement such as those in Punjab.⁴³ The missionary tries to launch a people’s movement in one particular tribe or caste and does not go about converting one person from one caste/ tribe and another from another caste/tribe. In the past experiments, such people’s movements have multiplied converts because the social pressure from members of one tribe influences others of the same tribe to gain Christianity. Thus, for example, there were 4,123 Garo Christians in 1921 and these increased to 40,268 by 1974,⁴⁴ and 142,000 by 1997. There are 11 Baptist missions, and 11 Catholic missions working among the Garo. The Garo had their own culture and traditions. All of their cultures and traditions have been diffused to and replaced by Christianity.⁴⁵

2. Education

Missionary schools have been used as an effective tool of evangelization in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, for reasons clearly outlined by McNee:

- (a) The isolation enforced by boarding schools created in the pupils an attitude of dependence on the mission.
- (b) Many schools were situated purposely to isolate children from their parents. This was the reason why the Oxford Mission developed a school in Barisal when the center of its work was 40 miles away.⁴⁶

The importance given to education by the Roman Catholics was evident in response to a survey conducted among them which shows that a majority of the clergy (54 percent), laity (75 percent) and sisters (62 percent) believed in the essential need of maintaining private schools. Most of them also agreed that without its schools and institutions, Christianity could not survive.

They established thousands of schools and colleges in various places of Bangladesh. There are 67 missionary schools only among the Garo tribe. Learning Christianity is compulsory in the missionary-run schools. They have been able to attract the poor people, since they normally provide

scholarships and accommodation.⁴⁷ The missionaries are very much successful in converting their students. For example, most of the students in Horizon School in Sayedabad, Dhaka, have been converted to Christianity.⁴⁸

3. Evangelization of Women

Another important area targeted by the evangelists is the women in Bangladesh. There are estimated to be 431 sisters belonging to 17 different congregations, who are active in 47 parishes to try to convert Muslim women. Through evangelization of the women the other family members can also be influenced.⁴⁹

4. Christian Literature

More than 22 thousand Christian organizations and service agencies, around 5 thousand foreign missions, and more than 100 thousand missionary institutions are working in the Muslim world. The Christian missionaries translated the Bible into 1907 different languages. According to the census of 1990, their 22 thousand service agencies, 23,800 news papers and 2160 radio and TV centers are engaged in disseminating Christianity.⁵⁰ In Bangladesh the Protestant missionaries have placed a strong emphasis on literature evangelism. There are five groups, which are very active in this regard:

- (a) Christian Literature Center
- (b) National Council of Churches
- (c) Bangladesh Bible Society
- (d) Association of Baptists for World Evangelism
- (e) Bangladesh Mission (Southern Baptist).

Bibles, New Testaments, Gospel and selections have been specially translated into Bengali and other minority languages. Distribution has already increased since 1971 when it was 51,000, and after the civil war it increased sharply to 324,000 in 1972 and to 50,000 in 1973. The 1972 Annual Report of the United Bible Societies shows that 324,770 items were distributed of which there were 4,825 copies of Bibles, 2,137 New Testaments, 238,360 Gospels and 79,448 selections. The number is increasing every year.⁵¹ Different attractive cards equipped with nice pictures and gospels and videos on the life of Jesus are now widely distributed free in Bangladesh.⁵² To attract the people now they take the new method of using Arabic and Persian terms in their translation, such as, *duā*, *Allah*, *Sharīf*, *‘aqīdah*, *jannat*, *jahannam*, *ākhirat*, *tarjama*, *imām*, *firista*, *nabī*, *kalima* and so on.⁵³ The missionaries also make use of newspapers and magazines. The Weekly *Protibeshi* (neighbour) is one of

their renowned magazines. The left-wing newspapers and magazines are also giving big coverage to the Christians.

5. Bible Correspondence Schools and Reading Rooms

The Bible Correspondence Schools is another important evangelical tool. They support and supervise such schools:

- (a) Seventh Day Adventist Mission
- (b) International Christian Fellowship supervises the Bangladesh Bible Correspondence School. It began functioning in 1960 and is the largest correspondence school in the country.
- (c) The British Brethren started their operation in 1963.
- (d) The Assemblies of God started their own school in 1972 and used the materials of International Correspondence Institute.
- (e) Every Home Contact follows up contacts made by correspondence schools through simple correspondence courses, and personal visits.⁵⁴

The Bible Correspondence Schools act as a “soil testing tool” for they determine which segment of social structure could be attracted to Christian teachings. Enrollment at the Bangladesh Bible Correspondence Schools has steadily increased over the years since 1960 to 45,000 students. In 1973, 14,000 lesson papers of the nine-course curriculum were corrected and 1,300 new students were enrolled. Since 1972, it is reported that there was a 200 percent increase. The International Correspondence School is administered by a staff of five missionaries. Each month, on average, over 2,500 lessons are marked and the total number of enrollees since 1972 has reached 9,000.⁵⁵

6. Medical Services

Medical services are a very effective tool for evangelism. The Missions have several hospitals, dispensaries, leprosy hospitals, and family planning clinics in Bangladesh. Medical missionary work undertaken after the establishment of hospitals, clinics and sanitariums, is also guided by certain principles, which involve the participants with missionary activities in a subtle manner. Dr. VB. Olsen, a medical missionary who was highly regarded by the Mujib government for his services to the war-torn country, laid down certain principles favourable for evangelism to guide the medical missionary policy in Bangladesh.⁵⁶

The following NGOs have sponsored medical missions in Bangladesh:

1. American Churches of God with a hospital in Bogra and a dispensary at Khanjanpur.
2. Association of Baptists for World Evangelism with a hospital at Haluaghat and related clinics at Chittagong.

2. Australian Baptist Missionary Society with a hospital at Haluaghat and dispensary in Northern Mymensingh District.
3. Bangladesh Mission of Northern Churches with a general dispensary at Amnura.
4. British Baptist Missionary Society with a hospital at Chittagong offering a nurses training program, where the wives of Sangali converts are often trained for this profession. Also a clinic for the rehabilitation of the lepers has been established.
5. Church Missionary Society with a hospital at Bollobhpur and an outpatient hospital at Meherpur.
6. English Presbyterian Mission with a hospital at Rajshahi, also providing a nurses' training program.
7. New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society with a dispensary at Brahmanbaria.
8. Oxford Mission with a hospital in Barisal and momentary clinic at Jobarpur.
9. Fatima Hospital, Jessore.⁵⁷

Foreign missions occasionally do visit Bangladesh to see the development of missionary activities. For example, in December 1997 Plattner Orthopedic went to Bangladesh to visit Memorial Christian Hospital in Malumghat.⁵⁸

7. Orphanages

NGOs also establish orphanages where orphans are raised and trained for missionary activities. Since the government takes care of non-Christian orphans, Christian orphanages only take Christian children. The Roman Catholics opened a number of orphanages, which provide the orphans with food, clothing and education. Now they are playing very important role in evangelization.⁵⁹

8. Bible Reading Groups

The NGOs also adopt the method of gathering families in the evening when their work is over and let the most respected among them read a portion of Bible. This strategy is again a 'soil testing' operation for missionaries to find out the degree of interest, their needs and other aspects about these families-to make it easier to evangelize. In fact missionaries are advised to study such collectivities and develop a 'scale of awareness'. This scale ranges from a score 1 to 9 and includes the following items with corresponding scores:

- (a) Practically no knowledge of Christianity (9)
- (b) Interest in Christianity (8)
- (c) Village discussion about Christianity (7)

- (d) Understanding of the Gospel (6)
- (e) Implications of the Gospel understood (5)
- (f) Challenged to act (4)
- (g) Repentance and faith in Christ (3)
- (h) Post decision evaluation (2)
- (i) Incorporation into the Christian community (1)⁶⁰

9. Relief and Rehabilitation

The NGOs also use the most common strategy of relief and rehabilitation programme for people in times of stress, such as during the cyclone in Bangladesh (1970) and the aftermath of civil war (1971). Through these efforts the goodwill of the people is gained and trust is established between the people and the missionaries. The people are thus prepared to welcome and listen to missionaries. The Seventh Day Adventists not only supervise hospitals but also have donated large amount of clothing, food and medical supplies. Such donations amounted to \$49,716 in 1973, \$69,690 in 1974, \$109,961 in 1975 and \$133,138 in 1978. Apart from these there are many foreign cooperative agencies that provide funds to a large number of Christian projects. The World Council of Churches based in Geneva has three categories in which projects are allotted and marked for various countries.⁶¹ Projects under category one are of high priority for the life of the Church or community. Category 2 covers projects screened locally but of less immediate urgency, while category 3 contains projects of refugees, scholarship, and World Youth Urban Industrial Mission. In 1976, Bangladesh received \$26,410 under the first category and \$34,515 under the second category. In 1978 under the second category, six projects were selected amounting to \$1,894 in category one and \$18,500 in category two. More funds were made available later.⁶²

During the cyclone in 1991 hundreds of people stormed the office of an NGO in Kutubdia in Chittagong to protest against being asked to change their faith in return for relief materials. Muslims usually would be given a meager share of the relief aid. The Church of Bangladesh argued that these had come from Christian countries.⁶³

NGOs and Local Resistance

NGOs are increasingly assuming the role of invisible government having little regards to the history, culture, customs of people and rules and regulations of the government.⁶⁴ They run a very powerful parallel government and they can undo any order of the government any time they like. Government in Bangladesh is now in a state of utter helplessness. Neither they can overlook the volatile situation created by the NGOs nor do

they take any action against NGOs involved in the activities incompatible with the national interest and the sovereignty of the state.⁶⁵

NGOs are now humiliating the government at every step. When the NGO Bureau of the government took action against two powerful NGOs - ADAB (Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh) and SEBA (Society for Economic and Basic Administration) canceling their registration on the ground of defalcation of funds and receiving money from a foreign embassy without the permission or even the knowledge of the government, the foreign embassies allegedly compelled the government to withdraw the cancellation order within 3 hours of the issuance of the same.⁶⁶ After this humiliation the democratic government of the country has refrained from taking action against the corrupt NGOs and their executives involved in undesirable activities including violating government rules and indulging in political activities.⁶⁷ They are termed as "Neo-East India Company" in Bangladesh. Different newspapers highlighted the helplessness of the government, giving 3 or 4 column headlines as follows:

- (a) The government yields to dishonest and vicious NGO circle.
- (b) Plot to snatch away our independence through the tactics of East India Company.
- (c) Government fails to control NGOs etc.⁶⁸

Similarly, without the approval of Bangladesh government, Swedish Free Mission received 70.3 million taka, Proshikha Manabik Unnayan Kendro 110.2 million, Australian Baptist Society 60.3 million and BRAC received 870 million taka from the foreign embassies in 1990, and most of the amount had been spent for missionary purposes.⁶⁹ NGOs make Bible reading compulsory for their staff, including the Muslims. One big missionary NGO employed only Christian teachers in its schools and a student has to be Christian before he is given board and lodging in its hostels. While a pupil in a government or other private schools is taught only his or her religion, the study of Christianity is compulsory for all students in most missionary schools, which is also the threat to the government policy.⁷⁰ Once the Director of Bangladesh NGO Bureau went to visit the project of 'the Salvation Army' in Jessore, but he was not allowed to enter the premise and was told: 'even the President of Bangladesh will not be permitted to enter without the prior permission of our authority.'⁷¹ The NGOs are also active in political campaign violating the government rule. In many cases they actively participated in the election, financed them and run massive political campaign for them.⁷² So the response from the government is obviously impotent to this great power.

Khaleda Zia's government (1991-1996) indicated that it would like to enact a law to regulate the activities of the NGOs and to ensure that they operate within ethic and discipline of the country's social and legal framework. But "it would create suffocating atmosphere" and make it "impossible for the NGOs to conduct development work" warned the ADAB coordinator, and rejected the proposed law as "incompatible with the government's stated policy of democratization and liberalization."⁷³ However, the Awami League government (1996-2001) was very lenient towards the NGOs and missionaries, since the party got tremendous help from them during the parliamentary election in 1996. During Awami League regime, the NGOs and the missionaries enjoyed their hey-days. Like other Christian countries, the Christmas Day is celebrated in Bangladesh with pomp and grandeur, with full support and help of government.⁷⁴

The people of Bangladesh has launched massive protest against missionary NGOs. The NGOs have created social tension in Bangladesh as in the last few years many incidents have happened against which Bangladeshi community, particularly led by the *ulamā*, have protested. The simmering crisis spilled on the streets in 1994 when large demonstrations against the NGOs took place in various towns and cities of Bangladesh. The Islam-based party, Jamā'at-e-Islāmī, has confined its protests to the National Assembly.⁷⁵ The other Islamic parties, which do not have representatives in the parliament, have organized public meetings and rallies, to register their protest against the volatile situation created by the NGOs.⁷⁶ They claimed that the government must act before the country loses its sovereignty and Islamic identity.⁷⁷

The Islamic parties are not enjoying the support of left-leaning political parties. The left parties are primarily and presently concerned not with the NGOs but with the growing popularity of Jamā'at-e-Islāmī. NGOs' allegation against the Islamic groups is that they (the Islamic groups) have challenged NGOs involved in the rural development, female education, and income generation activities by women. For instance, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) complained that 1,400 of its 20,000 schools are vandalized with a good number of them burned. The Grameen Bank, another well-known NGO, has complained about the "fundamentalists".⁷⁸ In 1994, when the United Action Council (UAC), a coalition of 13 religious parties and supporting groups asked the government to bring NGO activities under its control, their action was seen as a collision between "liberals"⁷⁹ and "fundamentalists".⁸⁰

Conclusion

The Christian missionaries are successful in promoting Christianity in Bangladesh due to three reasons: firstly, the missionaries are very sincere and hardworking. They learn the language, live with the target population, and win over their heart. Secondly, they have very good cooperation and collaboration with some powerful NGOs, as they had with British colonizers previously. Finally, as far as the financial situation is concerned, most of the people in Bangladesh including the tribals are in miserable conditions. Hence, Bangladesh with an over loaded population of more than 120 million, paves the way for a conducive atmosphere and an opportunity for the Christians missionary activities. Because of these reasons, no tribal resistance against the missionaries has ever been reported.

Promoting Christianity in Bangladesh by the NGOs is an issue to those concerned groups who want their religion, culture and custom not to be jeopardized by external forces. Muslim religious groups are now in the forefront in this regard. They think that the alarming situation is very evident in Bangladesh due to the extensive activities of Christian missionary groups and NGOs, which have made massive assault on custom, culture and religion of the poverty-stricken people and that Bangladesh is proceeding towards a Lebanon-like situation. The activities of the missionary NGOs are termed as "the revived form of imperialism" and "neo-colonialism" which poses a great threat to and challenge for the whole nation. However, the great flaw of the Muslim religious groups is that they are unable to launch extensive programmes alternative to the accused NGOs to eradicate poverty, promote education, health and other social services. The successive governments of Bangladesh have also not been in a position to curb NGO evangelization activities.

Notes

1. Aditi Nag Chowdury, *Let Grassroots Speak* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1996), 15
2. Interview with Maulānā Obaidul Haque, Khatib, Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Dhaka, Published in the Weekly *Bichitra*, (Dhaka), August 12, 1994.
3. *Thikana* (New York), July 1, 1994 cited in M. Rasiduzzamān, The Liberals and the Religious Rights in Bangladesh, *Asian Survey* 34, no. 2 (November 1994): 986.

4. See Noeleen Heyzer, James V. Ricker and Antonio B. Quizon eds., *Government-NGO Relation in Asia* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995).
5. See Koenraad Verhagen, *Self-Help Promotion: A Challenge to the NGO Community* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: CEBEMO/Royal Tropical Institute, 1987).
6. Samuel Paul, "Government and Grassroots Organization: From Coexistence to Collaboration" in *Strengthening the Poor: What Have We Learned* ed. J.P. Lewis (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, Overseas Development Council, 1988), 62.
7. Mohd. Mazharul Houque, *Towards Asian Coexistence: A case Study of Japan-Bangladesh Relations* (Masters Thesis, International Islamic University, Malaysia, 1999).
8. Daniel J. Curran and Claire M. Renzetti, *Social Problems: Society in Crisis* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 76.
9. Md. Saidul Islām, "The Issue of East-Timor: Towards Having Independence," *Weekly Sonar Bangla* (Dhaka), October 1 issue, 5; see Rehmān Sobhān, "The Politics of Food and Famine in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 1, 1979).
10. Muhammad Rasjidi, "*Christian Missions in the Muslim World*" In *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah*, (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 69.
11. Cited in Nūruzzamān, *A Study on the Role of NGOs in the Abnormal Growth of Christian Population in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Priti Prokason, 1993), 3.
12. Historians do not agree on the validity of this ancient tradition. For more information, see Alan Neely, *Christian Mission: A Case Study Approach* (New York: Orbit Books, Maryknoll 1995), 38-40.
13. Cited in Nūruzzamān, "NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism: Aid Merchant Buying up Sonar Bangla" *Impact International* (London), (July 1994): 9-10.
14. Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh. A Survey* (London: Islamic Foundation, 1981), 4.
15. See A. Hussain, *Birth of Bangladesh: The Political Role of Missions* (London: Islamic Foundation, 1981).
16. Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh*, 5-8.
17. *Ibid.*, 8.
18. Asghar Hossain, *Avishapta NGO abong Amader Dharma, Sadhinota o Nari* (Cursed NGOs and our Religion, Independence and the Women), (Dhaka: Priti Prokason, 1997), 32-33. These missionary NGOs include: (1) World Missionary Evangelism, (2) The Salvation Army, (3) Bangladesh Foreign Mission Board, (4) Main-night Central Committee, (5) Seven-day Adventist Church of Bangladesh, (6) Adventist Development and Relief Agency International, (7) New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society, (8) Bangladesh Luther Mission (Venice), (9) International Christian Fellowship, (10) Baptist Mid Mission Bangladesh, (11) New Life Center, (12) Baptist

Missionary Society, (13) Social and Institution Board, (14) Church of God Mission, (15) Christian Service Society, (16) Community Health Care Project, (17) Finnish Free Foreign Mission, (18) Association of Baptist, (19) Christian Reform World-relief Committee, (20) World Vision of Bangladesh, (21) Bangladesh Luther Mission (Finnish), (22) Young Women's Christian Association of Bangladesh, (23) Bangladesh Bible Society, (24) College of Christian Theology, (25) Christian National Evangelism, (26) The Australian Baptist Missionary Society, (27) World Alliance of YMCA Bangladesh, (28) National Council of YMCA Bangladesh, (29) New Apostolic Church of Bangladesh, (30) Calvary Apostolic Church, (31) Assembles of God Mission, (32) Santal Mission Norwegian, (33) Presbyterian Plebes in Bangladesh, (34) Bangladesh Luther Mission (Norwegian), (35) Jatio Church Parishad, (36) The Church of Bangladesh Social development Program, (37) Friends of Bangladesh, (38) Rainbow House International, (39) Christian Life Bangladesh, (40) Connie, (41) Life Bangladesh, (42) Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), (43) CARITAS Bangladesh, (44) Swedish Free Mission, (45) Hid Bangladesh, (46) BCRS Foundation Homes, (47) Action aid, (48) World-vision Prayer League, (49) Ideas International, (50) Rangpur-Dinajpur Rural Service, (51) Dip-Shikha, and (52) World Vision.

19. *The Daily Inqilāb* (Dhaka), November 5, 1994.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *The Daily Inqilāb*, September 8, 1998.

22. Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh. A Survey*, 10

23. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

24. See Nūruzzamān, *A Study on the Role of NGOs in the Abnormal Growth of Christian Population in Bangladesh*.

25. P. McNee, *Crucial Issues in Bangladesh* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1976), 83.

26. *Ibid.*, 74.

27. Asghar Hossain, *Avishapta NGO abong Amader Dharma, Sadhinota o Nari*, 60.

28. *The Bangladesh News Bulletin* 1 no. 1 (December 1-15, 1997); also, see the *Weekly Sonar Bangla*, September 3, 1999.

29. See Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh: A Survey*, 12-13.

30. *The Daily Sangram*, February 8, 1999.

31. *Ibid.* April 24, 1999.

32. See Prof. R. Amīn, *Christian Missionary Activities in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Dhaka University Press Ltd, 1983)

33. Nūruzzamān, "NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism, 10.

34. Nūr Hossain Majidi, NGO: Bangladeshe Christander Sorojantra (NGO: The Conspiracy of Christians in Banngladesh), *Al-Furqān* 10 no. 8 (July 1994): 21; see Dhaka *Courier*, June 17, 1994.
35. Nūruzzamān, "NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism, 10.
36. Arne Rudvin, *The Concept and Practice of Christian Mission. Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 19
37. *The Daily Inqilāb*, March 13, 1993.
38. Ibid.
39. Cited in Nūruzzamān, *A Study on the Role of NGOs in the Abnormal Growth of Christian Population in Bangladesh*, 3.
40. *The Daily Sangram*, April 4, 1999.
41. *The Daily Inqilāb*, November 5, 1995
42. See Nūruzzamān, "NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism, 8-10.
43. See L.W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (Lucknow: Publishing House, 1969)
44. Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh*, 13-14.
45. *The Daily Inqilāb*, December 20, 1997.
46. P. McNee, *Crucial Issues in Bangladesh*, 137.
47. *The Daily Inqilāb*, December 20, 1997.
48. Ibid., August 8, 1998.
49. See Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh*, 15.
50. Asghar Hossain, *Avishapta NGO abong Amader Dharma, Sadhinota o Nari*, 54-55.
51. *Bangladesh: Status of Christianity Country Profile* (Montovia: MARC, 1974), 4.
52. *The Daily Sangram*, February 2, 1999.
53. Ibid., December 11, 1995.
54. Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh*, 16
55. See *Bangladesh: Status of Christianity Country Profile*, 3-4.
56. See V. Olsen, *Daktar/Diplomat in Bangladesh* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 350.
57. Ibid.
58. "Plattner Orthopedic goes to Bangladesh", www.plattners.com/banglade.html,
59. See *CARITAS Bangladesh Annual Report*, 1978, 60.
60. See Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh*.
61. *Service programs and list of Supplementary Projects for 1976* (Geneva: WCC), 1976; also, see *List of supplementary Projects* (Geneva: WCC), 1976.
62. See Abdul Karīm Khan, *Christian Missions in Bangladesh: A Survey*, 20-21.
63. Nūruzzamān, "NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism, 10-11.
64. *The Daily Inqilāb*, September 13, 1992.
65. *The Daily Millat* (Dhaka) August 26, 1992.

66. Ibid.

67. It was not a case of not knowing and doing nothing, it was a case of knowing and not being able to do anything

68. See Nūruzzamān, *NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism*, 12.

69. Asghar Hossain, *Avishapta NGO abong Amader Dharma, Sadhinota o Nari*, 40

70. In one case when the District Education Officer pointed out this irregularity, he was told “we are not funded by your government and we are not obliged to answer you”; See Nūruzzamān, “NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism”, 10.

71. Asghar Hossain, *Avishapta NGO abong Amader Dharma, Sadhinota o Nari*, 40

72. They actively participated in the National Parliamentary Election 1996. Many NGOs especially FEMA spent millions of dollars for election purposes so that the Islamists could not win in the election and they are quite successful in their anti-Islamic campaign; See the *Report from Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh about the National Parliamentary Election* (Dhaka: Jamaat-e-Islami, 1996).

73. Nūruzzamān, *NGOs - The Web of New Colonialism*, 12.

74. See *The Daily Ittefaq*, December 26, 1997.

75. Jamāʿat’s Parliamentary Party Leader Maulānā Motiur Rahmān Nizāmī and other Jamāʿat MPs addressed Parliament at that time.

76. Syed Serājul Islām, Impact of Technology and NGOs on Social Development: the Case of Bangladesh. *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1998).

77. Ibid., 84.

78. Farīd Hossain, “Mullahs Escalate NGO-Bashing,” *Holiday* (Dhaka), April 1, 1994.

79. Liberals support freedom of speech, secularism, and individual and women’s rights.

80. See Farīd Hossain, “Mullahs Escalate NGO-Bashing.”