Disinformation About Religious Minorities in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study investigates disinformation about the employment of religious minorities in Bangladesh's public sector. It examines the religious composition of approximately 119,436 public sector employees. The analysis reveals that the percentage of religious minorities mirrors their proportion in the overall population (which is 9 percent). This finding contradicts claims by some Islamic religious leaders and politicians of minority overrepresentation in public sector employment (which is 25-35 percent), highlighting these assertions as disinformation.

1 Introduction

Disinformation profoundly impacts society, and its influence has intensified in recent years.[1] [2] While disinformation spans various domains such as economics, politics, and religion (Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Lanoszka, 2019; Petratos, 2021), this study narrows its focus to the religious sector. Specifically, it examines disinformation targeting religious minorities, a phenomenon that has seen a significant surge in recent times.[2] Bangladesh presents a prime case study for investigating this issue, as disinformation targeting religious minorities is a major tool used in their persecution (Roy et al., 2023). In Bangladesh, it's common for the homes, businesses, and temples of religious minorities to be targeted and destroyed (Minority Rights Group International, 2016). This often occurs following the spread of disinformation, which incites mobs and general public unrest (Minority Rights Group International, 2016; Roy et al., 2023). Some types of disinformation can be countered by presenting accurate information to the public. However, other forms persist due to a lack of evidence, continuing to cause issues over an extended period. This study will zoom into such persistent disinformation and its long-term implications.

There are some studies that investigate easily detectable disinformation (Ng et al., 2021; Schaewitz et al., 2020; Vasist & Krishnan, 2023). However, there is a lack of empirical investigation into persistent disinformation. This is where this paper comes in.

This study delves into the persistent disinformation, particularly focusing on the alleged overrepresentation of religious minorities in Bangladesh's public sector. Islamic religious leaders, including mullahs, imams, and maulavis, as well as some politicians claim that these minorities occupy 25-35 percent of public sector jobs, despite only constituting 8-12 percent of the population.[3]

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[1]https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU
(2021)653635_EN.pdf

[2]https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653641/EXPO_IDA
(2021)653641_EN.pdf

[3]https://m.u71news.com/article/145373/index.html

[4] [5] [6] [7] [8] Moreover, various Islamic figures often depict these minorities as security threats, advocating against them.[3] However, the lack of detailed religious demographic data in public sector employment makes it challenging to verify these assertions, contributing to the ongoing spread of this potentially misleading information.

This study initially investigates approximately 119,436 public sector employees across various sectors. It finds that their participation at all levels is between 9-14 percent, aligning with their proportion of the total population. By unraveling this "black box", the study reveals the persistence of disinformation that has been propagated year after year.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, Section 3 details the data and variables used in this study, Section 4 presents and discusses the results, and finally, Section 5 concludes the study.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Disinformation, Religious and Political Leaders, and Minorities

This study defines disinformation as a kind of fake news, that is intentionally created to harm certain group of the population.[9] The influence of disinformation has magnified in the digital age, where social media platforms have become fertile ground for the rapid spread of disinformation, impacting critical areas such as electoral processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Religious minorities are often targets of various disinformation regarding their belief, values, and political alignment (Al-Zaman, 2020; Das & Schroeder, 2021). This disinformation is sometimes propagated by religious figures (Al-Zaman, 2020). When disinformation is disseminated by religious

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[4]https://www.bd-pratidin.com/city/2019/07/22/441999

[5]https://old.dailyinqilab.com/article/222187

[6]https://fatwaa.org/////-/

[7]https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=1723176751181728&external_log_id=970d449a-69ca-4f69-8427-88f929bf1891&q=

[8]According to the 2022 population census, the actual percentage of religious minority is 9 percent. See Figure 6

[9]According to cambridge dictionary, Disinformation is the "false information spread in order to deceive people".

figures, given the influential role these leaders hold in molding community beliefs and actions (as detailed by Heward-Mills et al. (2018)), its potential to sway public opinion increases significantly. Disinformation aimed at religious minorities is also spread by political figures (Lee & Hosam, 2020). It has also been observed in the electoral campaign and also throughout the presidency of Donald Trump (Lee & Hosam, 2020).

In total, disinformation is easy to generate; however, it takes lots of effort to detect (Kumar & Shah, 2018). There are machine learning and deep learning methods that many studies have already used to detect disinformations (Hakak et al., 2021). If disinformation can be detected, it can significantly help to present it to the public and prevent its spread or negative influence. However, if disinformation cannot be detected, it can continue to cause harm for years. This study will focus on persistent disinformation, which is difficult to detect.

2.2 Context of Bangladesh

Research, including studies by Semyonov et al. (2004) and Scheepers et al. (2002), indicates that individuals with lower levels of education, income, and strong religious beliefs are more inclined to perceive threats about minorities. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of Bangladesh, as highlighted in the works of Hossain and Hassan (2017), Riaz (2022), and Titumir (2021). The country is characterized by challenges such as poor quality of education, low income levels, and a strong attachment to religious beliefs. These factors collectively suggest the presence of perceived threats about minorities in Bangladesh.

Apart from this, hate speech and violence against minorities are also daily life happening in the country.[10] At the same time, there is also different disinformation about minorities that caused lives of many people and many people's displacement.[10] [11] Some of these disinformations are easy to detect (following the methods explained by Hakak et al. (2021)) and violence caused by disinformation can be stopped. But some of these disinformation are not detectable, due to the non availability of data and continue causing harm to the religious minorities. For such kind of disinformation, as anti rumor agent

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[10]https://en.prothomalo.com/topic/Communal-violence

[11]https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/bangladesh-protection-of-hindus-and-others-must-be-ensured-amid-ongoing-violence/

(as explained in the rumor transmission theory[12]) is absent thats why people are more likely to be affected by this and as a result religious minorities face more hate and more discrimination.

Although there are many reserach about anti- minority hate in bangladesh (Al-Zaman, 2020; Minar & Naher, 2018; Roy et al., 2023), however, there is a notable gap in terms of understanding whether there is any such kind of persistent disinformation that disseminate taking the advantage of the absense of anti-rumor agent. This paper aims to address this critical void, focusing on disformation that are difficult to detect.

The study specifically focuses on information indicating the overrepresentation of religious minorities in Bangladesh. Such information is largely disseminated by some religious leaders and politicians, as mentioned in the earlier section. The information has been circulating for years, claiming that religious minorities fill 25-35 percent of the total job positions in the public sector, despite making up only 9 percent of the total population. This study suggests that since religious minorities go through the same education system as the religious majority,[13] it is unlikely for their participation to be 25-35 percent. If their participation is not within the 25-35 percent range but similar to their percentage in the total population, then the information about their participation claimed by some religious leaders and politicians is nothing but disinformation.

3   Data and Variables

This study employs a combination of primary and secondary data sources. Initially, this study conducts a comprehensive review of various government websites, spanning from top-tier entities like ministries and universities to mid-level districts (District) and lower-level sub-districts (Upazila) between June and September 2023. At the top level, this study focuses on the websites of ministries where government employee lists are available, including names.

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[12]Liu et al. (2022) elucidate the pathways through which rumors, irrespective of their nature, are disseminated (that's why it is called rumor transmission theory). This study posits that disinformation concerning the labor market involvement of religious minorities follows similar transmission channels, where in the absence of an anti-rumor agent, disinformation can spread without any deterrence.

[13]It is important to acknowledge that in addition to the common education system, there is also a religious education system that persists in Bangladesh, such as the Madrassas. Although the common education system is the first choice of a large part of the population.

In Bangladesh's context, it is possible to infer an individual's religion based on their name, although this method is not without its limitations. For instance, it cannot accurately identify atheists. The subsequent survey of this study reveals that approximately 1.6 percent of the population in Bangladesh identifies themselves as atheists (see Figure 7), suggesting a potential 1.6 percent margin of error in our religious classification based on names.

This study meticulously examines names of individuals in key positions like secretaries, additional secretaries, and joint secretaries across various ministries. In universities, the focus was on academic staff, including lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and professors. This detailed manual analysis of names across multiple levels of government and educational institutions aimed to provide a comprehensive view of the religious landscape in these sectors.

At the district level, this study conducts an extensive review of various government office websites. This includes the District Education Office, District Police Superintendent's Office, District Agricultural Extension Department Office, and so on (for a comprehensive list of all the offices, visit: https://www.sirajganj.gov.bd/ or any other similar websites). This study applies a similar approach at the upazila level, exploring the websites of respective local government offices.

This study also obtains a comprehensive list of all Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) officers from 1982 to the present from the Bangladesh Civil Service website. These officers primarily serve at various administrative levels, including upazila, district, and ministry. This list will be instrumental in providing an overview of the evolving recruitment trends across different regimes.

4 Results and Discussion

Figures 1 & 2 illustrate that religious minorities are respectively 8.92 and 10.51 percent at the ministry and university levels. The pattern of figures 1 and 2 holds true at the mid-level (District level), where religious minorities comprise 13.46 percent of employees. Interestingly, at the lower tier (Upazila level), their representation is almost the same as the district level (13.75 percent). It should be noted that figures 1-4 are based on the most recent information available on websites. Due to the lack of historical employment data on websites, it is not feasible to construct a historical trend line. To ad-

dress this, this study subsequently collects data on Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment to analyze and present these trends.

Figure 5 depicts the recruitment trends in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) from 1982 to the present. The data indicates that, on average, the percentage of religious minorities in BCS recruitment so far stands at 12.44 percent (taking the average of the complete trend). The trend line of Figure 5 also helps to observe the recruitment trends across different regimes. Under military rule until 1990, religious minority recruitment in the public sector averaged 12.51 percent (see Table 3). However, since the emergence of the two dominant political parties in post-1991 – the Awami League-led liberals and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led right-wingers – the recruitment of religious minorities has not exceeded 15 percent under either regime. Specifically, during the BNP-led right-wing tenure, the recruitment rate for religious minorities in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) was 9.04 percent. In contrast, under the Awami League-led liberals, this rate increased slightly to 14.14 percent (details in Table 3).[14]

In examining the full hierarchy of government employment, it becomes clear that the average participation rate of religious minorities closely matches their proportion in the total population, which is nearly 9% according to the latest census (see Figure 6). However, a tier-specific analysis reveals some disparities. At the ministry level, the representation of religious minorities is less than their proportion in the general population. In contrast, at the mid or lower (district or upazila) level, their participation slightly exceeds their population share. The slight rise in the representation of minorities is consistent with expectations, given the quota benefits extended to groups from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and some other minority communities across the country in various government jobs. These measures are likely to contribute to a slight increase in the overall proportion of minorities in these roles. But in total, they are not overrepresented at all. The same result can be seen in the historical trend.

Consequently, these findings contradict claims by some Islamic religious leaders, including mullahs, imams, and maulavis, as well as some politicians, of minority overrepresentation in public sector employment.

So, the analysis leads to a significant conclusion: the claims made by

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[14]It is noteworthy that these BCS officers eventually serve at various levels, including ministries, districts, and upazilas. So, the data depicted in Figures 1, 3, and 4 are largely based on them.

certain religious leaders and politicians—that religious minorities comprise 25-50 percent of Bangladesh's public sector is unsubstantiated and constitutes disinformation. This revelation is akin to "opening a black box", as the Bangladeshi government does not publicly disclose the religious demographics of its public sector employees. This lack of data has historically made it challenging to verify the accuracy of such claims. However, this study has effectively opened the black box, revealing that these religious leaders and politicians have been propagating disinformation, potentially fueling anti-minority sentiments.

In total, there are numerous factors contributing to the rise of anti-minority sentiments in Bangladesh. Previous explanations have primarily focused on how hate preachers use provocative language, leading to acts of violence and the destruction of homes, temples, and properties owned by minorities (Roy et al., 2023). However, this study reveals a new dimension to this issue. This study demonstrates that persistent disinformation requires more attention as it can cause long-term harm to religious minorities.

5 Conclusion

This study has a major contributions. It reveals that minorities in Bangladesh are not overrepresented in public sector jobs, as claimed by some Islamic religious leaders and politicians. This claim is nothing but disinformation.

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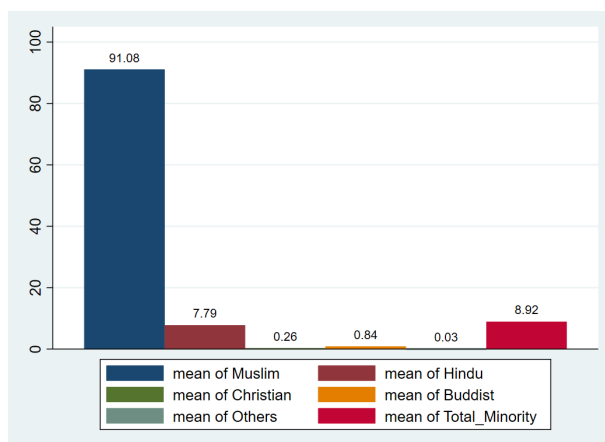
7 Figures & Tables

Figure 1: Religious Demography at Ministry Level Jobs
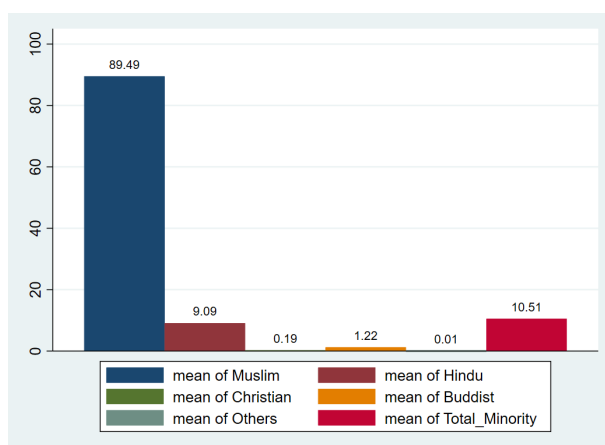

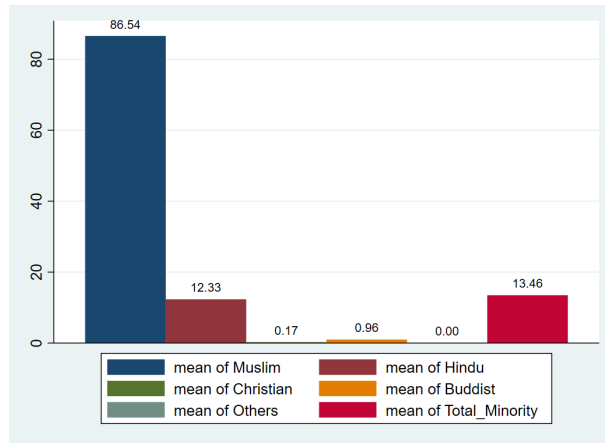Figure 2: Religious Demography at University Level Jobs

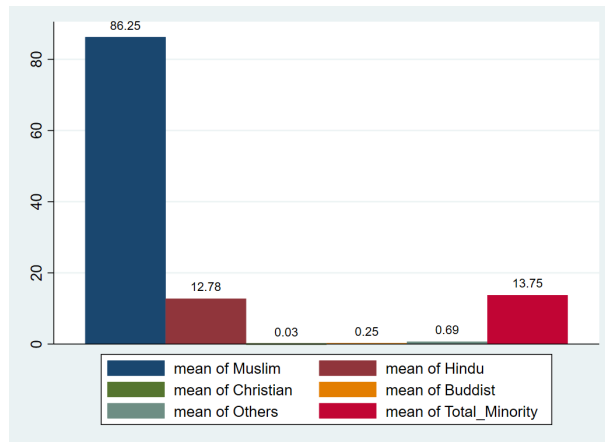Figure 3: Religious Demography at District Level Jobs

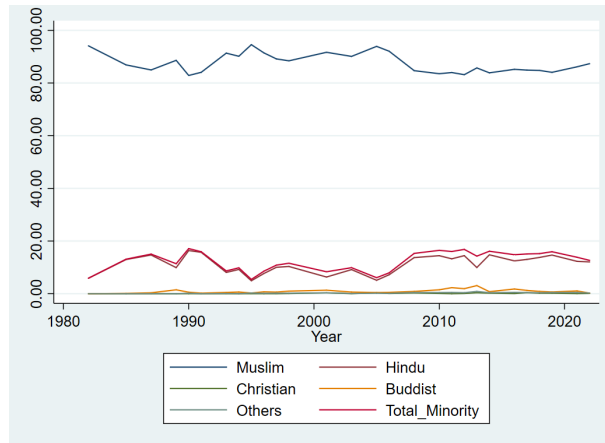Figure 4: Religious Demography at Upazila Level Jobs

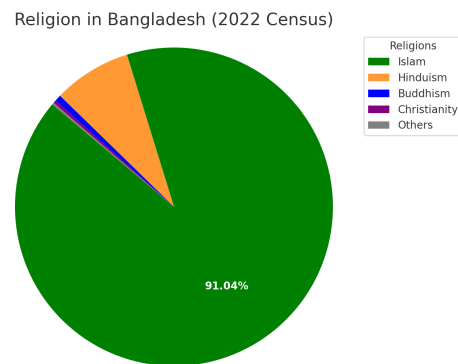Figure 5: Religious Composition of Top Govt Officials From 1982-2022

Figure 6: Religious Demography from the Census 2022

For more detailed information about the census, refer to the link in the footnote.[15]

[15]https://sid.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/sid.portal.gov.bd/publications/01
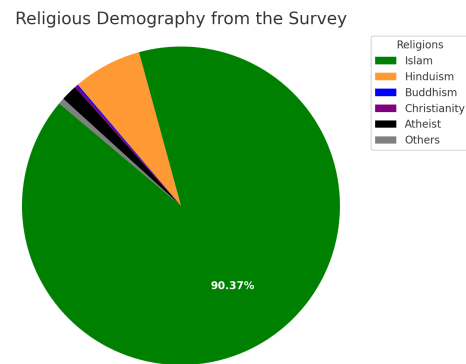ad1ffe_cfef_4811_af97_594b6c64d7c3/PHC_Preliminary_Report_(English)_August_2022.pd
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Religious Demography from the Survey

Figure 7: Religious Demography from the Survey

Table 3: Average Percentage of Different Religious Groups

	In total	Military regime	BNP-led right-wing regime	Awame league-led liberal regime
Muslim	87.56%	87.49%	90.96%	85.85%
Hindu	11.16%	11.97%	8.38%	12.28%
Christian	0.10%	0%	0.06%	0.15%
Buddist	0.92%	0.51%	0.49%	1.31%
Others	0.26%	0.04%	0.11%	0.41%
Total Minority	12.44%	12.51%	9.04%	14.15%