

*Routledge Research in International and Comparative Education*

# **THE ROLE OF COLONIALITY, DECOLONIALITY, AND EDUCATION IN SHAPING PERSPECTIVES ON EXTREMISM**

**EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS AMONG STUDENTS  
IN BANGLADESH**

Helal Hossain Dhali



# The Role of Coloniality, Decoloniality, and Education in Shaping Perspectives on Extremism

This book extends a comprehensive overview of the treatment of extremism in education in Bangladesh, using a study of perceptions among students to explore proactive measures for the prevention of various types and forms of extremism prevalent among youth.

It offers a critical, holistic, and student-centred study of the role of formal education in shaping perceptions of extremism and intersectional differences among individuals, drawing on data from university students. The author employs post-colonial theory and multicultural educational approaches to highlight how understandings of extremism differ across young adults and policymakers. Ultimately, it demonstrates that students' overall understanding of extremism is much broader than that of policymakers, and how understandings differ between male and female students at the intersection of rural and urban locations and socio-economic positions. As such, it foregrounds a need to involve and organize formal education as a proactive means to raise awareness and counter all forms of extremism, through incorporating specific teaching strategies into pedagogical practices to foster an anti-communalist, humanistic, critical multicultural, and cosmopolitan outlook among students.

It will appeal to scholars and researchers with interests across multicultural education, comparative and international education, the sociology of education, extremism, and conflict and peace studies.

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# The Role of Coloniality, Decoloniality, and Education in Shaping Perspectives on Extremism

Exploring Perceptions among  
Students in Bangladesh

Helal Hossain Dhali

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“It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them”.

- Foucault (1974)

Chomsky, N. & Foucault, M. (2011) [1974]. *Human Nature: Justice vs Power. The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*, p. 49, London: Souvenir Press

**To all people who suffer from different forms of  
extremism, discrimination, dominance, inequalities,  
and oppression.**

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# Foreword

This book provides an impressive analysis of the various meanings attributed to extremism by young people in a world that has been witnessing terrible devastation when extremist ideology metamorphoses into violence and terrorism. Although the empirical work in this study was done in Bangladesh, it is relevant to all parts of the globe because violence by extremists is not confined to any geopolitical area.

In the contemporary world, extremism is not limited to militant religious ideologies, nor is it unique to any particular religion. But due to the global reach of ISIS, it had become the greatest and most visible threat before its defeat in 2017. Not only are fundamentalists involved in destructive acts that affect innocent civilians, claiming allegiance to all the major religions, but they terrorize people and prevent them from living peacefully. Today, violent extremism from Christian groups is largely confined to the USA (against abortion, gay marriage, government), Hindu and Sikh extremists to India, and Buddhist violence to Myanmar. This is not so with Islamist terrorist groups. Many youths who had left their countries to join violent religious extremist groups identify more with a pan-Islamic Ummah than with their countries. Despite the defeat of ISIS, the largest Islamist terrorist group, in 2017, and their loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, it remains a threat in the region and globally. It has infiltrated several countries, one of them being Bangladesh. Many other Islamist terrorist groups (Al-Qaida, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram for example) are operating in the Global South. It is important to emphasize that it is not the Muslim religion per se, but its distorted form of political Islam (Islamist) that is the source of this international terrorism.

Other violent extremist groups are political (leftist, rightist), social (racist, sexist, homophobic), and nationalist in their aims. Increasingly active in North America and Europe, groups that claim to be nationalist are, in fact, fascist. The nationalist groups are against immigration and refugees. The intersection of religion/race and nationalism (Christian/ultranationalism)

provokes them to use violence to preserve the predominance of the Christian/white character of the country.

An important focus of this book is to approach the concept of extremism in a holistic way from the experiences of youth in the most prominent university in Bangladesh. This has produced multiple perspectives on extremism which has led the author to point out the gulf that exists between the understanding of extremism by the youth of today and the policymakers in Bangladesh (and elsewhere), who have made a concerted effort to stamp out religious extremism and prevent terrorism to maintain a secular democracy and peace in the country. While the policymakers in Bangladesh focus on Islamist extremism, young students, both male and female have a much broader conception of extremism and have identified several types of extremism in addition to Islamist terrorism, such as religious violence, fundamentalist atheism, aggressive forms of Bengali nationalism, misogyny/gender-based extremism, and political extremism. In line with the multiple categories of extremism, the author has discerned several forms of violence as identified by the students which go beyond physical brutality to psychological and emotional cruelty and include verbal abuse and coercion against different kinds of minority groups.

An interesting difference is identified by the author between male and female students' perceptions particularly at the intersections of urban/rural location and socio-economic position. Women are more concerned with gender-based violence, gender stereotypes and roles, and gender inequities than extremism of other forms.

Although the literature on extremism is growing rapidly, there are very few empirical studies that could inform a theoretical understanding of how extremist thinking evolves to violent acts. This study does not claim to do that, but it contributes to the first step, that is an empirical grounding towards an understanding of the complexity of the concept as described by those who are potentially in danger of getting involved in violent extremism. This book makes a significant contribution from that point of view. Furthermore, it proposes a set of theoretical deductions that can impact the understanding of extremism which is a global problem. The use of a broad theoretical framework makes it possible to have a holistic look at the concept. Extremism studies have relied heavily on psychological theories to look at motivations and mental processes that may drive one to violence. But extremism appears in multiple forms and can be non-violent. A broad conceptual structure is essential to capture the multidimensional factors involved in the complex evolution of the extremist spectrum to its full development. Unlike other studies in this area that use post-colonial theory to explain the vulnerability of the oppressed, this author uses post-colonial theory to examine the structures of inequality that shape the marginalized people's need to "strike back" at the oppressors.



How do children develop their worldviews as they grow up? An interesting finding of this study is that all participants state that their conceptions of extremism developed from their life experiences, their own observations, and knowledge derived from sources other than what they were taught in school. Although school is a major institution where socialization takes place, extremism was not generally discussed in the participants school experience despite the many instances of terrorist acts in the country. If at all, Islamist terrorism was mentioned. The National Educational Policy of Bangladesh (2010) attempts to expose students to values of a democratic culture, different ideologies, and diversity, but the system remains inadequate in dealing with and rebutting extremist thinking.

The origins of extremism are historically based, and the author gives a very good analysis of the tension between the religious fundamentalists and the State that shaped the evolution of religious extremism which has plagued the country. The Bangladesh government has been very proactive in its range of legislative and policy measures which are both coercive (hard measures that are weapon-based) and non-coercive (soft measures such as campaigns), but the author points out these are focused on “pull factors” rather than on “push factors” which do not deal with the foundations for the development of extremist thoughts. Although terrorist acts have been greatly reduced in recent years, the government policies, educational and other programs have been inadequate in decreasing religious extremist violence in the country. This is indicated by the well-publicized cases of aggression against minority religious groups such as Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and even Muslim sects such as Shias and Ahmediyyas. Of course, intolerance of minority religious groups is not limited to Bangladesh but happens in many countries both in the Global South and the Global North.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this research is the model of education it proposes to lay the foundation of values that would develop critical and cosmopolitan minds that value democratic ideals of social justice and open-mindedness. Its strength is in the type of education that is advocated as a soft approach to prevent the educational experience from being a push factor towards radicalization. Critical multicultural pedagogy together with zero-tolerance policies against hate and extremism are both needed for creating peaceful societies.

**Ratna Ghosh**

Distinguished James McGill  
Professor Emerita, McGill University,  
Montreal, Canada

# Preface

I am excited that Routledge has published this book and allowed me to disseminate some insights from my doctoral study. I studied a sensitive, critical, and timely issue that needs the close attention of the policymakers, academics, students, teachers, and individuals concerned about and vulnerable to extremism. The reasons why I selected this topic for my doctoral thesis can help readers understand how this book can help them and society. A few of the reasons are described below.

I started my career with a faculty position at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh in 2010. The university was established in 1921 during the British period and was reconstituted in 1973 after Bangladesh became an independent country. The university is not only one of the best public universities in Bangladesh but also has significantly contributed to many progressive movements that have changed the country's history, such as the contribution of the university's teachers, students, and staff to the language movement, the independence movement, the movement against the autocratic government of Pakistan, and the movement against war criminals. Teachers and students at this university are also known as changemakers in the country as they are directly and indirectly involved in the policymaking process; they set standards for many aspects of socio-political, cultural, and religious life; contribute to science, art, culture, and literature; and assist educational policy formulation and curriculum development in the country. In brief, Dhaka University is considered to be the brain of the country. Therefore, it is expected that this university not only provides degrees and certificates but also produces a group of young people embodying progressive minds.

Besides teaching, I also worked as a house tutor at one of the student hostels (residences) at the University of Dhaka. These hostels are usually occupied by students from different regions in the country, and thus, the residents must be open-minded and tolerant towards differences in other people in order to live in shared places like student hostels. In many cases, it is also evident that individuals from different cultures with a progressive

mindset are less vulnerable to extremism as they share common spaces and learn to believe and practice diversity within a society. Thus, it is expected that students in the hostels can be more open-minded than other groups of young people.

Moreover, my department – the Department of Women and Gender Studies – was the first institution in a public university in Bangladesh to focus on subjects related to sex, gender, sexuality, women’s rights, gender-based inequalities, and violence against women. Although the department was ten years old when I joined it, I observed its development since its beginning as I was a student of the first cohort of the undergraduate program that was launched in 2001. As a new department of social sciences and as a discipline embodying multidisciplinary subjects, this department has introduced many new ideas on women, gender, and sexuality that challenged existing norms and values prevailing in the country. Although the department did not pursue any specific ideology, the issues it covered and taught were not usually considered routine matters for teaching in the context of Bangladesh. In that sense, the department was one of the most advanced academic spaces that was progressive in its commitment to a growing sense of equity, diversity, freedom of choice, and equal rights among its students.

Despite the progressive culture in my home department, I observed that the university students in general were violent towards those who held different views. Many active political, cultural, regional, and religious groups operated at various units such as hostels, faculties, and departments in the university. Many students were directly or indirectly involved with those groups. Those who were not directly involved with one of the formal groups were still inclined towards various cultural, religious, or political ideologies. Depending on their affiliation or inclination, they often became violent and abusive physically/verbally/ psychologically/emotionally. Their violent attitudes were evident in classrooms, hostels, and other shared spaces in the university, such as the canteen, teacher–student centre, sports centre, and marketplaces near the university. I also observed that students verbally attacked each other in classrooms discussions about various topics. In addition, there were several incidents where students reacted violently to teachers’ views on a topic (e.g., freedom of speech, secularism, women’s purdah) and vice versa.

My time at the University during that phase was momentous for many incidents, such as (i) several terrorist attacks at different places in the country by some Islamist groups; (ii) petrol bombing in public places and vandalizing public property by political opponents of the ruling party and some religious-political organizations, including a party that was banned for its involvement in war crimes during the independence war in the country; (iii) killing of progressive intellectuals in the country by religious extremists;

(iv) a growing movement against religious party-based politics; (v) developing religious fundamentalists; and (vi) blogging against religions. Moreover, gender-based violence, including rape, killing, and harassment, was also rising (Rahman et al., 2021). In addition, there were movements against and for a women's development policy for ensuring equal rights for women in every aspect of life. Those against women's rights were mostly religious fundamentalist groups and those for progressive change in women's rights were mainly women's organizations.

During this period, I observed that many university students were involved in debates, discussions, and some activities on issues relating to the above-mentioned momentous events. They seemed divided in their opinions, actions, and movements on those issues. In fact, even in the allocation of accommodation in student residences, political parties exercise power through student unions. I noticed that many of the newly admitted students came to the university with a set ideology that was rigid and exhibited various forms of violence without being aware that they were involved in extremist acts. I became aware that extremism was growing among individuals at all levels, including our students, regardless of their affiliation to any specific group or ideology. Even though they might change their ideological position later during their study, their rigid and authoritarian mentality remained the same, and they continued their acts of violence in different forms.

The presence of some features of extremism among the university students and their unawareness of those features made me wonder about the connection between their formal educational background and their perceptions of extremism. I am specifically interested in the influence of formal education because the national education policy in Bangladesh aims to develop an awareness among students that is open to different ideologies, a democratic culture, and readiness to live with diversity (National Education Policy, 2010). Thus, I was curious about our students' perceptions of extremism and our K-12 formal education's role in shaping their perceptions.

As extremism affects individuals differently depending on their various locations in a society, such as gender, rural/urban location, and economic condition, I also wanted to see if there were differences among participants' perceptions of extremism and the role of formal education in shaping these perceptions. I was particularly interested in gender because, as a student and later faculty member of gender studies, I observed that ethnic, political, or religious extremism seemed to affect women more than men in society because there were greater restrictions on their mobility and rights. Meanwhile, I wanted to explore how the intersectionality of gender and other markers of social identities and categories shaped people's perspectives and experiences vis-à-vis extremism and education.

To achieve these objectives, my research mainly relied on university students' views about extremism because extremism had largely been rising among young adults in the country. Guided by a set of post-colonial theories and some educational approaches, data were gathered through a few qualitative methods including Active Participatory Discussion Sessions (APDSs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

The findings of my study show that students' overall understanding of extremism is much broader than that of policymakers. Students mentioned several types and forms of extremism besides Islamist terrorism, such as religious extremism, anti-religious extreme atheism, Bengali ethnocentrism, misogyny/gender-based extremism, and political extremism. Students also identified some issues as extremism that do not fit the general understanding of extremism and as it is used in the study. Students have developed conceptions of extremism through their observations, experiences, and learning from various sources rather than their school educational experience. Formal education in Bangladesh neither emphasizes controversial topics like extremism, gender and other differences, and sexuality nor highlights important concepts like difference, diversity, and inequality in educational curricula.

Findings also reveal some noticeable differences between the perceptions of male and female students at the intersectionality of rural/urban locations and socio-economic positions. Finally, this thesis highlights the need to involve and organize formal education as a proactive measure to prevent/counter all forms of extremism. It also suggests adding some crucial and controversial topics to K-12 curricula and incorporating specific teaching strategies into pedagogical practices to develop an anti-communalist, humanistic, critical multicultural, and cosmopolitan outlook among students.

Thus, this book offers a comprehensive perspective of extremism and suggests some proactive measures to prevent various types and forms of extremism prevalent among youth in Bangladesh.

I believe Bangladesh and other countries facing the challenges of extremism can benefit from this book.

**Dr. Helal Hossain Dhali**  
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# Table of Acronyms

<b>ABT</b>	Ansarullah Bangla Team
<b>ADB</b>	Asian Development Bank
<b>APDS</b>	Active Participatory Discussion Session
<b>AQI</b>	Air Quality Index
<b>BAL</b>	Bangladesh Awami League
<b>BBS</b>	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
<b>BCP</b>	Biplobi Communist Party
<b>BDT</b>	Bangladeshi Taka
<b>BJG</b>	Bangladesh Jihad Group
<b>BNP</b>	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
<b>CGPA</b>	Cumulative Grade Point Average
<b>CHT</b>	Chittagong Hill Tracts
<b>CPB</b>	Communist Party of Bangladesh
<b>CTTC</b>	Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime
<b>CVE</b>	Countering Violent Extremism
<b>DU</b>	University of Dhaka/Dhaka University
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>FIU</b>	Financial Intelligence Unit
<b>GB</b>	Gono Bahini
<b>GMF</b>	Gono Mukti Fouz
<b>GTI</b>	Global Terrorism Index
<b>HT</b>	Hizb-ut-Tahrir
<b>HuJI</b>	Harkatul Jihad-al Islam Bangladesh
<b>IDI</b>	In-depth Interview
<b>IE</b>	Institutional Ethnography
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>JSD</b>	Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dal
<b>MLPA</b>	Money Laundering Prevention Act
<b>MoPME</b>	Ministry of Primary and Mass Education
<b>MoED</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Government Organization

<b>NI</b>	Narrative Inquiry
<b>JMB</b>	Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh
<b>JMJB</b>	Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh
<b>LGBTQ</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transsexual, and Queer
<b>NCTB</b>	National Curriculum and Textbook
<b>PBSP</b>	Purbo Banglar Sabrahara Party
<b>RAB</b>	Rapid Action Battalion
<b>REB</b>	Research Ethics Board
<b>RMG</b>	Readymade Garments
<b>SHB</b>	Shaheed Hamza Brigade
<b>SPB</b>	Socialist Party of Bangladesh



# Glossary of Terms/Concepts/ Phrases

***Alkhalila*** A long gown used by the Arabs

***Aliya*** A stream of Islamic education

***Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)*** An Islamist group identified as a terrorist organization by the government of Bangladesh

***Bangladesh Awami League (BAL)*** A political party in Bangladesh that led the independence movement in Bangladesh in 1971. This party is currently in power

***Biplobi Communist Party (BCP)*** A violent leftist group in Bangladesh

***Bangladesh Jibad Group (BJG)*** An Islamist group identified as a terrorist organization by the government of Bangladesh

***Bangladesh Mahila Parishad*** A women's organization in Bangladesh

***Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)*** A political party in Bangladesh that was also in power for several periods

***Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami*** An Islam based political party alleged for war crimes during the independence movement in 1971

***Bharatbarsha*** Indian sub-continent

***Bir-Shrestha*** The brave freedom fighters who died for the independence of Bangladesh

***Burqa*** One particular manner of wearing a Muslim gown for women, where a woman's whole body, including hair and neck, are covered

***Chitragoda*** A play that Rabindranath Tagore wrote

***Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB)*** A leftist party in Bangladesh

***Dhormo*** Religion

***Dhormo jar jar utsob sobar*** A secular slogan indicating the inclusiveness of all religious festivals through separating them from religious beliefs

***Dog-ism*** A slung used to compare feminist issues with dog's needs,

***Eid Jamat*** Muslim prayer on Eid day

***Fatwa*** Religious edict

***Girls Guide*** Girl's scout

***Gono Mukti Fouz (GMF)*** A violent leftist group in Bangladesh