

## Understanding the relation between Inter-religious marriage and social taboo

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**Abstract:** The Special Marriage Act 1872 is considered valid in Bangladeshi marriage registration. According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center from 2008 to 2012, only 10% of Bangladeshi Muslims are comfortable with their daughter marrying a Christian (Hassan, 2018), and the acceptance rate is 14% when marriage is between a son with non-Muslim girl (Ahmed, 2022). The role of cultural socialization in the Sylhet area propagates religious and social dilemmas which create conflict in their personal preferences. This study is aimed to understand the relationship between Inter-religious marriage and social taboos, mainly finding the social factor to analyze the consequence of inter-religious marriage. This study adopted a qualitative study design and conducted ten in-depth interviews with inter-religious couples and eight KII and four case study of inter-religious marriage couple who is describing the challenges of livelihood in Sylhet and major themes following the thematic analysis. Studies reported that religion could not be a barrier in marriage; understanding each other is real tie. Couples often face harassment which preventing their recognition as married individuals through state regulations. As a result, minority people are threatened with religious conversion or insecurity of life by the decisive majority community. Government should take the initial step to ensure a secure livelihood right to everyday life.

**Keywords:** Inter-religious marriage, social taboo, moral development, Inter-religious marriage, and religion.

### 1. Background

Marriage is a religious sacrament in which a man and woman are bound in a permanent relationship for the physical, social, and spiritual purposes of dharma, procreation, and sexual pleasure (Sandhya & Somashekarappa, 2019). Every society has its social norms and values to maintain marriage mores. Inter-religious marriage is not acceptable in all societies (Islam, 2014). Interreligious marriage threatens the values, security, and continuity of religion and an endogamous eligibility system that extends to the incorporation of children of intermarried couples into one or the other religion

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(McCutcheon, 1988) and (Cavan,1970). According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2001 (McCarthy,2007), the national data of the U.S. indicated that "22 % of Americans marry outside of their religious traditions." Conversely, this is less than half of Jewish intermarriage, 52 % in 1990 (McCutcheon, 1988). The Religious Landscape Study found that almost four-in-ten Americans (39%) who have been married since 2010 have a spouse in a different religious group. (Murphy, 2015). Over 1.6 million Indian Americans live in the United States, and 90% follow Hinduism, the world's fourth-largest religion (2008 Undergraduate Fellows Report). By contrast, only 19% of those who wed before 1960 report being in religious intermarriage (Murphy, 2015). In U.S. adults married since 2010, almost one-in-five (18%) are in marriages between a Christian and a religiously unaffiliated spouse (Murphy, 2015), whether married or living together in a romantic relationship. The Jews considered intermarriage a threat to the survival of the Jewish people (Packouz, 2004). British nationals used to follow Christianity to make matrimonial relationships with Indian people in order to establish their local power (Hassan, 2018). In modern times, inter-religious relations are becoming more communalized in the South-Asian context (White,2012), in the same contrast inter-religious marriage is considered an anti-social, punitive, unscriptural work prohibited by society in Bangladesh (Alam,2018). The religious mentality is associated with better mental health outcomes, including lower levels of anxiety and depression, a greater sense of emotional well-being, and personal fulfillment (Bangstad, 2004).

According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center from 2008 to 2012, only 10% of Bangladeshi Muslims are comfortable with their daughter marrying a Christian (Hassan, 2018). The rate of acceptance rises slightly to 14% when the marriage is between the son and a non-Muslim girl (Ahmed, 2022). In the Sylhet region, religious perspective, conservativeness, and thinking of traditional marriage systems are the factors of negative mentality towards inter-marriage (Alam,2018). Women face inequality in every marriage system, especially inter-religious marriage (Kamruzzaman, 2016). Such couples are always in problems with social behavior, adaptation, and acceptance, and their children also have problems in society (Ciocan, 2016). So, understanding the relationship between inter-religious marriage and social taboo in the context of moral development requires an examination of cultural values, socialization processes, and how they shape individuals' beliefs and behaviors. It can influence moral development by shaping individuals' beliefs about what is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. Therefore, understanding the relation between inter-religious marriage and social taboo in the Sylhet area requires an exploration of the social context, including the role of religion, cultural values, and socialization processes.

## **2. The rationale of the study**

The significance of studying inter-religious marriage in anthropological research is analyzing how it has been influenced by cultural assimilation, cultural shock, intercultural sensitivity, and willingness to adapt to provide a total picture of people's perception and society's expertise in Sylhet society. The study aims to understand people's attitudes and perceptions towards inter-religious marriage in Sylhet society, which is not widely accepted due to social norms and religious beliefs. The research highlights the scarcity of studies on inter-religious marriage in Bangladesh and aims to contribute to analyzing the root situation of individuals through primary and secondary data to investigate people's attitudes and cultural practices toward inter-religious marriage.

## **3. Objectives and Methodology**

The study aims to understand the relationship between Inter-religious marriage and social taboos. This study was conducted from September (2022) to January (2023). The Sylhet area has its own culture, practices its ideology, and prioritizes religious identity, which makes it exceptional to select those fields as a study area. The study area is selected for choosing respondents in purposive sampling because individuals mainly migrated for education and urbanization, and those who developed ideology from the institutional and moral context. There are selected nine no Sylhet City Corporation wards for the study area. Akhalia, Baghbari, Kuliapara, Madina Market, Nehari Para, and Pathantula as a the research areas. The data collection tools are included IDI, KII, observation, Case studies, and questionnaires. Primary data may also be generated through direct measurement, reviewing secondary data, and informal management of processes. Each IDI and KII took 45–60 minutes and 150–200 minutes to conduct the case study with detailed field notes were prepared during the interviews. For all IDI, KII, interviews, and case studies on verbatim transcriptions were performed and recorded. The study can develop categorized themes by using a thematic analysis approach. The objectives of this study to explores and captures the relationship between inter-religious marriage and social taboos to understand the situation from people's perspectives and social factors. This study also maintains all aspects described in the consent form, such as removing any personal identification during the analysis, and obtains written consent from the participants. The methods used by participants are listed in the table.

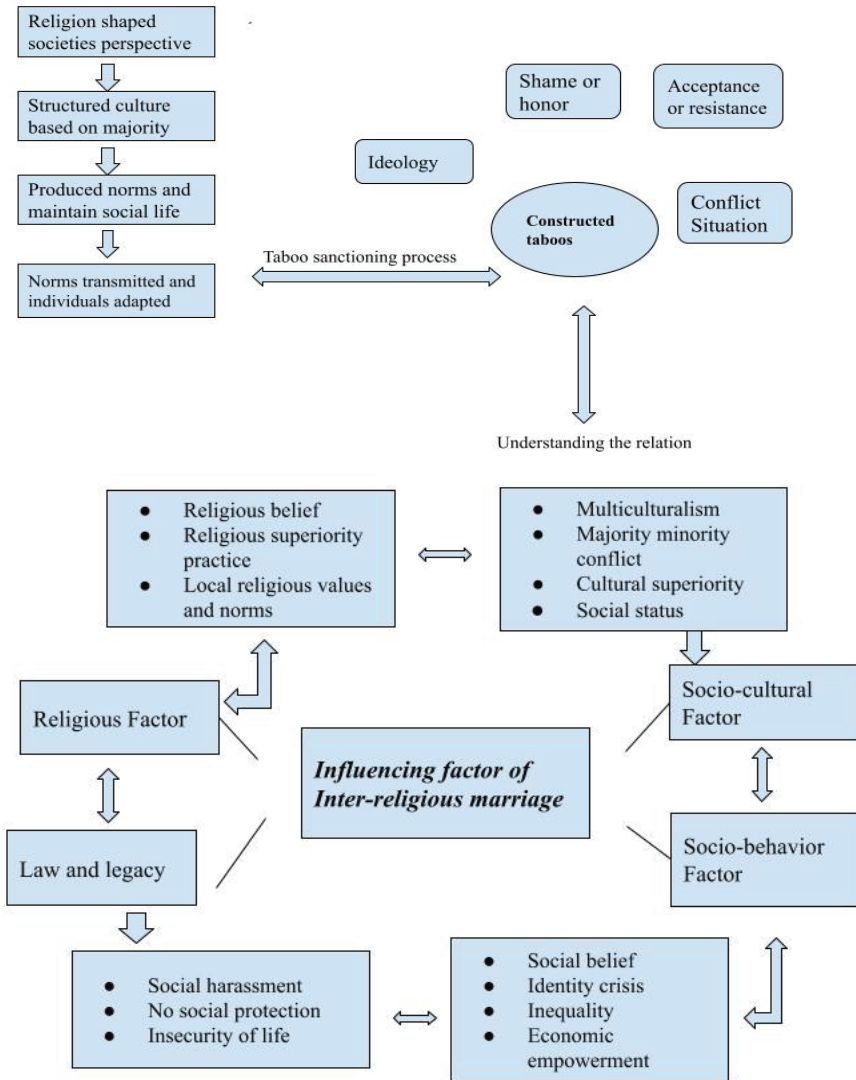
Table 1: Data collection tools and technique

Source	Objectives	Method	Participant
Primary Data	To explore how the taboos are sanctioned, viewers process from different people about inter-religious marriage.	Key Informant Interview (KII) (n=15)	Inter-religious marriage registers (n=1) Religious expert (n=2) Political leader (n=2) Social activist (n=1) Police (n=1) Professors (n=1)
	To explore what kind of taboo prevails in Sylhet around inter-religious marriage.	In-depth Interview (IDI) (n= 10)	Individuals who are in Inter-religious relationship (n= 10) Male 03 Female 07
	Finding the influencing factor to analyze the consequence of inter-religious marriage due to the taboos.	Case Study (n=4)	Individuals who are inter-religiously married. Male 2 Female 2
Secondary Data	Literature, articles, and the movie based on Inter-religious marriage (international and national perspective)		

*Source: Fieldwork, September 2022 - January 2023, Sylhet.*

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This study included a conceptual framework to understanding the taboo sanctioning process, relation between inter-religious marriage and social taboos which influencing investigation of interreligious marriage by placing it within the dimensional context. The situations of inter-religious marriage is related to the homogeneity theory and religious hegemony theory, which hegemonized a culture through religion and significant group of people ruled to shape sylheti culture for mate selection process and give punishment for breaking the social norms and values (Perez, 2020). This framework elucidates how religion and culture influence societal views and taboos regarding inter-religious marriage, impacting human behavior and suggests applying intergroup relation theories to understand the dynamics of interreligious marriage. Thematic analysis identified the following themes:



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework of understanding the relation between inter-religious marriage and taboo.**

*Source: (Fieldwork, September 2022-January 2023, Sylhet)*

**4.1 Taboo Sanctioning Process**

Every society's culture is formed around various elements of history, geographical location, and environment. Likewise, various rules and regulations have been developed based on Sylhet's religious history. Many respondents stated that there is much prejudice regarding religion and caste during the marriage. Also added that inter-religious marriages are prohibited in Bangladesh because they create social complications. Even if the state is

legitimate this marriage, the people of the society will have take time accepting the new culture. Religious beliefs and practices in a society and social organization units (the family, the kin group) are functionally interrelated and provide customs, moral standards, and moral ideals at all stages of human culture. According to the interviews, everyone governs society through religious beliefs and practices. Many of them claimed that the family had forbidden marriage for religious reasons. In this case, religious experts say that families are formed on religious grounds and that there are restrictions based on regional religious beliefs to ensure that society operates appropriately. The respondent added that many families are unwilling to accept inter-religious marriages for fear of social degradation. Moral ideals have gotten their religious chief (Imam, Pristist, Provu) sanctioned, their strong hold from religion, for the masses of every civilization. The following statement from the Imam of Masjid explain the situation,

Inter-religious marriages are prohibited in order to maintain social order. A Muslim girl cannot marry a non-religious boy, nor can a Muslim boy marry a converted boy. Inter-religious marriages are illegal because they do not worship Allah.

As a consequence, people begin practicing with faith and become moderate in their behavior and attitude. Family is essential in accepting norms and maintaining a social life. Religion is a byproduct of psychological mechanisms that produce religious thoughts and behaviors.

#### **4.2 Constructed taboos prevail in Sylheti culture toward inter-religious marriage**

According to the Special Marriage Act, a person who renounces his or her religion then will enter married life. It causes social upheaval due to religious discipline and questions about the identity of the child born. Even if a state has a unique marriage law, the social situation may not be readily accepted in this culture. Sylheti people have different constructed ideologies for prevalent beliefs and taboos on inter-religious marriage, considered *an evil sin*. After marriage, their child bear the worst consequences, people accuse of tarnishing the face of the family, couples cannot be happy. The constructed taboo generates the ideological situation of individuals in inter-religious relationships. The conflicted situation indicates shame or honor and acceptance or resistance. A female participant in an Inter-religious relationship clarified the situation,

My partner couldn't convince their family to accept this marriage. The relationship ended after two years because his sister would not be able to marry a respectable person in society, and his parents would not allow him to marry someone of different religion. If he marries me, the family's reputation will be ruined.

A male in an inter-religious relationship stated,

Our relationship is open, and we want to be together, but that is impossible in a place like Sylhet. So we will go to Dhaka furthermore because the family will never accept. So that, we want to go abroad, then there will be no issue.

### **4.3 Influencing factor to analyze the consequence of inter-religious marriage due to the taboos**

Marriage between people of different faiths involves a variety of rituals and rites tailored to the couple's religious beliefs and practices. This section analyzes the influencing factor of taboos in order to analyze the consequences on religious, sociocultural, and socio-behavioral factors of inter-religious marriage.

#### **4.3.1 Socio-Cultural Factors**

It is evident that sociocultural things are mainly influencing daily life. Individuals of two religions practice multicultural settings; their children grow up with one cultural superiority. Some cases indicated that children's identity depends on the father's hierarchy or not to implicate majority-minority conflict. On the other hand, most of the respondents are connected with educational institutions and have social recognition. So, migrated couples faced violence or life risk for the cultural superiority of the Sylheti religion. Children face bullying from friends and relatives; as a result, their cultural growth affects their social life, including a Case study to find the connection between inter-religious marriage and social taboo.

#### Case-1: Struggle of a mother against society

Monika (46) is the head of a reputed university, and national ID card identified her as a Muslim. She is from a wealthy and influential Muslim family in Barisal, comes to Dhaka to study, and gets involved in affairs with a Hindu boy. Their friends have often asked, *"Will I marry him or not?"*. Our family never accepted, but to legitimize the relationship, they decided to get married after getting their masters and keep secret. Then, someone informed the marriage news through an unknown letter at my home, and immediately father and mother came to Dhaka to verify the truth. My mother and brother tried hard to take me to Barisal, but I disagreed and told them to break off all ties with my grandmother. Nevertheless, no one would leave our religion, and I assured them that I would go to Barisal and inform my grandmother, which was the worst decision ever. When I went home after a few days, my uncle beat me with a stick, broke my leg, and was confined to the house for 72 days. The husband's family faced various activities like threats, disappeared, lied, and consented for the divorce. One day, I got a chance to run away from home alone, came to Dhaka, and cut off all relationships with my family. Then came Sylhet as a teacher to handle all economic and social challenges. In 2004, have got an unknown letter to write, *"You cannot live in Sylheti society by marrying a different religion person and would have given death threats."* For the recognition as a teacher, I showed the courage to publish that letter in the

BBC Bangla News Portal. Besides, in state land affairs, anyone who sees my husband's name gets harassed many times. The question comes, *"If they married, how a Muslim girl's husband can become Hindu, maybe they are not married yet, and want to see the marriage certificate."* After years, my husband was accepted as a Hindu son-in-law in my family. However, my mother still says that *our son-in-law is perfect but tells to convince him to become Muslim, then we would not have any problem if he converted his religion.* After facing all kinds of social obstacles or challenges, we decided to give our children an identity as *"Muslim citizens "* on national cards. *"So that my son does not have to face any questions like us".* Noticeably, *"Me and my husband have many friends, but my son has no friends."* Ever since his childhood, he has always heard the words "তুই কি পূজা করিস, না কি নামাজ পড়িস", "তোর মা কি হিন্দু হয়ে গেছে". After an extended period- families accepted us and the boy used to go to *his grandmother's home and feed his favorite food on Friday while trying for prayer of Jummah Namaz.* On the other hand, the same thing happened in his grandmother's house, and trying to prayer at the pooja house. Now my son had gone to Australia. When he was leaving, I felt best for my child, *because he does not have to be a victim of harassment or bullying for his religion or identity, he will have many friends and start a new life again.* If individuals are not too strong-minded, she suggest not doing inter-religious marriages. *Many struggles, bad times, and economic ups and downs must go through.* Only because she is now *"Economically Empowered,"* so far they are living in a healthy society, they can move, compromise all the harassment, and families are now by their side.

#### 4.3.2 Socio-behavioral factors

Sociocultural attitudes toward inter-religious marriage are complex and diverse. Although multiculturalism is valued, minority groups face prejudice and insecurity. Cultural superiority can also have an impact on attitudes toward interreligious marriages. Individuals who are financially empowered and have a higher social status are more likely to be accepted by society. Conversely, interreligious marriage is still regarded as a potential threat to the stability and efficient functioning of the family and religious institutions.

#### 4.3.3 Religious factors

Interreligious marriage is a contentious issue in Sylhet, where religion is central part of a society. Families are hesitant to accept members of other religions as neighbors, and attitudes toward religious segregation are related to educational levels. Religious beliefs and practices shape societal norms, and violators may face serious consequences such as social ostracism, even violence. Religious rules dominate social behavior despite the region's improving education and urbanization. Despite rising awareness and shifting attitudes, there is optimism that these taboos will be broken and inter-religious marriages will become more common.

## 5. Discussion

This study focusing on dimensional factors influence social and cultural attitudes towards interreligious marriages. Notably Bangladesh is a secular country with a dominant religion of Islam and interreligious marriages can be difficult due to lack of parental support and pressures from religious leaders. This study also highlights the lack of qualitative studies in Bangladesh to explore the relationship between inter-religious marriage and social taboos. Existing literature has focused on legal and legacy dimensions of marriage and impact of socially which providing little insight into societal attitudes towards inter-religious marriage and their connections with taboos. Besides, existing literature finds out the consequence of inter-religious marriage but the generalizing situation does not always reflect the impact and true story of an individual. But this qualitative analysis explores the dimension of the real impact of multiculturalism, religious and cultural beliefs, majority-minority conflicts, social discrimination, religious superiority, inequality and identity crisis among couple's and their families. The study contributing of inter-religious marriage in holistic perspective being considered a social taboo which influence the essence of inter-religious marriage and societal challenges. The novelty of the study is society now accepting new culture of interreligious relationships and marriages which determine the cultural reflections of institutionalize development and secularism ideology, influence this attitude towards interreligious relationship. Previous literature discusses the social taboo of interreligious marriage how it effects married couples, including societal perceptions and influential factors but, this study stated the dichotomy that educational institutions and western representation sometimes influence to facilitate inter-religious marriages and individual secularism practices which affect their personal and family life also. The impacts on socio-religious and political factors on established cultural identity and the role of government or administrative support is non-regulatory which labeled is not fitting within the norms of a social groups. Lead cultural aggression and persecution of marginalized people in shaping attitudes towards inter-religious marriage. Although this study provides a holistic understanding about interreligious marriages and couples' challenges to recommend that human ideological development can retain positive change in society.

## 6. Conclusion

The study examines the issue of inter-religious marriage in Bangladesh. It highlights the challenges inter-religious couples face, despite being recognized as a human right under international and national law. The research focuses on Sylhet, where inter-religious marriage is not permitted and identifies the difficulties posed by social norms and religious beliefs. The study concludes that religion should not be a barrier in marriage; understanding each other is the real bond. The government needs to take action by providing accurate information, education, and cultural counseling

to make inter-religious marriage socially acceptable and protect human life. The research also acknowledges the study's limitations, including the small sample size and difficulty accessing male respondents due to making comfort zone. In conclusion, the study shows that inter-religious marriages in Sylhet face obstacles influenced by sociocultural factors and religious beliefs. The social taboo surrounding inter-religious marriage can lead to challenges in raising children in a multicultural setting and affect their cultural growth and social life. However, with increased awareness and changing times, there is hope that these taboos will eventually break down, and inter-religious marriages will become more accepted in Sylhet society.

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