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**CHALLENGES FOR MODERN BUDDHISTS IN  
BANGLADESH: NAVIGATING IDENTIFY, SOCIO-  
ECONOMIC FACTORS AND CULTURAL  
PRESERVATION**

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## **Challenges for Modern Buddhists in Bangladesh: Navigating Identity, Socio-economic Factors and Cultural Preservation**

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### **Abstract**

Buddhism, deeply intertwined with the historical and cultural fabric of Bangladesh, continues to face intricate challenges in the modern context. As a minority community in a predominantly Muslim-majority nation, modern Buddhists in Bangladesh navigate a complex terrain of identity negotiation, socio-economic constraints, and cultural preservation. The multi-layered experiences and struggles of the Buddhist community within the broader societal landscape highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of their predicament. The dynamics of identity negotiation for modern Buddhists in Bangladesh involve a delicate balance between asserting their distinct cultural identity and fostering harmonious relationships within the diverse religious mosaic of the nation. Socio-economic constraints pose formidable obstacles, contributing to disparities in access to education, employment, and resources. The preservation of Buddhist cultural heritage remains a critical concern, necessitating efforts to safeguard ancient traditions, artifacts, and historical sites from the threats of neglect and cultural erosion. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by modern Buddhists in Bangladesh. Specifically, it seeks to illuminate the intricacies of identity negotiation within the Buddhist community, examine the socio-economic factors influencing their well-being, and assess the initiatives undertaken for the preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage. By addressing these objectives, the study endeavors to shed light on the nuanced experiences and resilience of the Buddhist community in Bangladesh. The study conducted qualitative surveys across various regions in Bangladesh.

Qualitative data analysis enabled a nuanced understanding of the subjective experiences and identity negotiations within the Buddhist community, providing insights into the intricate dynamics of their daily lives. The research findings underscore the challenges and resilience of modern Buddhists in Bangladesh. Participants articulated the complexities of maintaining their cultural identity within a diverse religious landscape, highlighting the necessity of fostering interfaith understanding and cooperation. The impact of socio-economic disparities emerged as a significant concern, impacting the community's access to education and economic opportunities. The study also highlighted the community's proactive efforts in cultural preservation, showcasing their initiatives in safeguarding ancient Buddhist traditions and historical sites, emphasizing their commitment to preserving their rich cultural heritage. The challenges faced by modern Buddhists in Bangladesh, encompassing identity negotiation, socio-economic disparities, and cultural preservation, necessitate nuanced and collaborative approaches. The proactive engagement of the Buddhist community in addressing these challenges highlights the importance of fostering interfaith understanding, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and safeguarding cultural heritage. By acknowledging and supporting these efforts, Bangladesh can foster a more inclusive and harmonious society, preserving its diverse cultural heritage for generations to come.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Buddhism, cultural preservation, identity, socio-economic challenges.

## **Introduction**

Bangladesh, known for its vibrant cultural mosaic, boasts a diverse population that includes a significant Buddhist community. However, the modern era presents new challenges for Bangladeshi Buddhists, who must navigate their religious and cultural identity in a dynamic and rapidly changing society. While Buddhism has deep historical roots in the region, contemporary Buddhists face a delicate balancing act as they strive to preserve their heritage while adapting to the realities of the 21st century. Against this backdrop, this article delves into the multifaceted challenges confronting modern Buddhists in Bangladesh, exploring identity struggles, socio-economic disparities, and the imperative of cultural preservation.

## **Identity Struggles**

Modern Buddhists in Bangladesh face a perennial battle to assert their religious and cultural identity amidst the dominance of Islam in the country. The pressure to assimilate into the mainstream religious narrative often results in marginalization and discrimination against Buddhist communities (Kabir, 2015) with Buddhists comprising a mere 0.7% of the population, their minority status underscores the uphill struggle to safeguard their distinct identity. Buddhists in Bangladesh often find themselves in a precarious position, navigating their religious and cultural identity in a predominantly Muslim-majority society. The pressure to conform to the dominant religious narrative can lead to various forms of marginalization and discrimination against Buddhist communities. For example, Buddhist festivals and cultural practices may receive less recognition and support compared to those of the majority religion. Additionally, Buddhist individuals may face challenges in accessing resources and opportunities due to their minority status.

In grappling with their religious and cultural identity, modern Buddhists in Bangladesh find themselves at the intersection of tradition and modernity. On one hand, there is a deep-seated reverence for Buddhist teachings and practices, which serve as a source of spiritual nourishment and cultural pride. On the other hand, there is the undeniable influence of globalization, urbanization, and mass media, which exert pressure on individuals to conform to mainstream norms and values. This tension between tradition and modernity often manifests in identity struggles, as Buddhists seek to reconcile their religious heritage with the demands of contemporary life.

### **Socio-economic Factors**

Socio-economic factors further compound the challenges confronting modern Buddhists, particularly in rural areas where many Buddhist communities reside. Limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities perpetuates poverty and social exclusion among these populations (Chakma & Rahman, 2019). Healthcare infrastructure in Buddhist-majority regions may also be inadequate, leading to disparities in health outcomes. Economic opportunities are often limited, with few avenues for employment and income generation. As a result, many Buddhist families struggle to make ends meet and experience heightened vulnerability to economic shocks and crises. Furthermore, socio-economic disparities intersect with other forms of marginalization, such as gender and ethnicity, exacerbating inequalities and hindering upward mobility. Addressing these challenges requires holistic approaches that prioritize equitable access to education, healthcare, and economic resources, while also empowering communities to advocate for their rights and interests.

## **Cultural Preservation**

Preserving Buddhist cultural heritage in Bangladesh is crucial for maintaining the unique identity and traditions of Buddhist communities. However, rapid modernization and globalization pose significant challenges to cultural preservation efforts. Traditional practices, rituals, and languages are at risk of being eroded or lost as younger generations become increasingly influenced by external cultural trends. Additionally, the encroachment of development projects and urbanization threatens sacred sites and cultural artifacts of historical significance. Preserving Buddhist cultural heritage in Bangladesh is not merely a matter of nostalgia or sentimentality; it is a vital component of the country's rich tapestry of diversity and pluralism. From ancient monasteries and sacred relics to traditional rituals and art forms, Buddhist cultural heritage reflects centuries of spiritual wisdom and artistic expression. Yet, this heritage faces myriad threats in the modern era, including urbanization, environmental degradation, and neglect. Safeguarding Buddhist cultural heritage requires concerted efforts to document, conserve, and promote awareness of its significance, ensuring that future generations can continue to draw inspiration from its timeless wisdom and beauty.

## **Strategies for Addressing Challenges**

Addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach encompassing advocacy, education, community empowerment, and cultural revitalization initiatives. Government policies promoting religious tolerance, social inclusion, and equitable development are indispensable (Rahman & Khan, 2016). One innovative strategy involves fostering community-based initiatives tailored to the specific needs of Buddhist populations. By empowering local communities to take ownership of their development through initiatives such as community centers or cooperatives, access to

vocational training, microfinance, and healthcare services can be improved, fostering self-reliance and resilience.

Additionally, promoting interfaith dialogue and collaboration can enhance understanding, tolerance, and social cohesion. Initiatives that facilitate dialogue between Buddhist and other religious communities can bridge divides and build mutual respect. Harnessing digital technology and social media platforms for outreach and advocacy can amplify the voices of modern Buddhists, raising awareness about their challenges and aspirations. Furthermore, investing in cultural revitalization programs, such as heritage walks and cultural festivals, can celebrate and preserve Buddhist heritage, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among Buddhist communities.

Advocating for policy reforms, including inclusive development policies and anti-discrimination laws, is crucial for addressing socio-economic disparities and structural barriers. Collaboration with international organizations and diaspora communities can mobilize resources and support initiatives aimed at overcoming challenges and building a more inclusive and harmonious society where all individuals, including modern Buddhists, can thrive. Through collective action and solidarity, the aspirations of modern Buddhists in Bangladesh to preserve their heritage and improve their socio-economic well-being can be realized.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

In conclusion, modern Buddhists in Bangladesh confront a myriad of challenges, including identity struggles, socio-economic disparities, and cultural preservation. By acknowledging these challenges and implementing proactive measures, stakeholders can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for Buddhist communities to thrive. Collaboration, advocacy, and concerted efforts are essential to preserve the rich cultural heritage and

religious traditions of Bangladesh's Buddhist populations for posterity. By addressing these challenges and implementing targeted interventions, stakeholders can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for modern Buddhists in Bangladesh to thrive. Collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and religious institutions is vital for developing holistic solutions that address the diverse needs of Buddhist communities. Additionally, raising awareness and promoting interfaith dialogue can help foster greater understanding and tolerance among different religious groups, contributing to a more harmonious and equitable society.

In light of the multifaceted challenges confronting modern Buddhists in Bangladesh, several key recommendations emerge to address these issues effectively. Firstly, prioritizing community empowerment initiatives tailored to the specific needs of Buddhist populations can significantly enhance local resilience and self-reliance. These initiatives should encompass access to education, healthcare, vocational training, and economic opportunities. Secondly, promoting interfaith dialogue and collaboration is crucial for fostering mutual understanding, respect, and social cohesion among diverse religious communities. By facilitating constructive engagement and cooperation, interfaith initiatives can contribute to a more harmonious society. Thirdly, leveraging digital platforms for outreach and advocacy can amplify the voices of modern Buddhists and raise awareness about their challenges and aspirations on a broader scale. This entails expanding digital literacy programs and utilizing social media to mobilize support and solidarity.

Additionally, investing in cultural revitalization programs that celebrate and preserve Buddhist heritage is essential for fostering a sense of cultural pride and identity among Buddhist communities. These programs play a pivotal role in safeguarding cultural diversity and promoting social



inclusion. Advocating for policy reform at both the national and international levels is another critical recommendation. This involves advocating for inclusive development policies, equitable resource allocation, and anti-discrimination laws to address socio-economic disparities and structural barriers facing modern Buddhists. Lastly, strengthening international collaboration through partnerships with global organizations, donor agencies, and diaspora communities can mobilize resources and expertise to support initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges faced by modern Buddhists in Bangladesh. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards creating a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive environment for modern Buddhists to thrive and contribute to the socio-economic and cultural development of Bangladesh.

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