Intellectual Invasion in Public Education in Bangladesh: An Analysis of Curriculum Content

Muhammad Aminul Hoque[1],*

[1]Department of Da`wah & Islamic Studies- International Islamic University- Chittagong, Bangladesh.

*Corresponding author: aminulhoque@iiuc.ac.bd

Keywords

Abstract:

This study investigates the manifestations of intellectual invasion in public school curricula in Bangladesh, with a special focus on cultural and doctrinal issues in the textbooks of civic education, social studies, Bengali, and English taught in grades 1–10 during the 2012–2022 curriculum cycle. A descriptive-analytical method was employed to examine the content of some textbooks selected from those which have been approved by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). To validate the findings, expert opinions from Islamic scholars and education specialists were consulted. The analysis revealed several elements that encourage the equalization of religions, promote participation in non-Islamic festivals, mislabel polytheistic rituals as "festivals," and present religious innovations (bid'ah) as Islamic holidays. Additionally, elements of Hindu culture were presented as national traditions, and secular perspectives on gender equality were embedded in educational materials. These practices pose significant risks to the preservation of Islamic creed and identity among students. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, emphasizing the need for alignment with Islamic principles while respecting cultural diversity.

الغزو الفكري في التعليم العام ببنغلاديش: تحليل لمضامين المقررات الدراسية

محمد أمين الحق[1]*

[1] قسم الدعوة والدراسات الإسلامية الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية، شيتاغونغ، بنغلاديش.

المؤلف:* aminulhoque@iiuc.ac.bd

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة عن مضامين الغزو الفكري في مناهج المدارس الحكومية ببنغلاديش، مع التركيز على القضايا الثقافية والعقدية في كتب التربية المدنية، والدراسات الاجتماعية، واللغة البنغالية، واللغة الإنجليزية المقررة للصفوف من الأول حتى العاشر في المناهج الدراسية خلال الفترة 2012–2022م، وقد استخدمت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي مدعومًا بتحليل محتوى لعدد من الكتب المدرسية المعتمدة من المجلس الوطني للمناهج والكتب (NCTB) ، وللتحقق من النتائج، تمت الاستعانة بآراء خبراء من العلماء الشرعيين والمتخصصين في التعليم، وكشفت التحليلات عن وجود عدة عناصر تشجع على مساواة الأديان، وتحث على المشاركة في الأعياد غير الإسلامية، وتعرض الطقوس الشركية في صورة «مهرجانات»، كما تضمنت إدراج البدع باعتبارها أعيادًا إسلامية، بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم تقديم عناصر من الثقافة الهندوسية بوصفها تقاليد وطنية، كما تضمن المحتوى التعليمي منظورًا علمانيًا حول المساواة بين الجنسين، وتمثل هذه الممارسات مخاطر كبيرة على الحفاظ على العقيدة والهوية الإسلامية لدى الطلاب. وتخلص الدراسة إلى جملة من التوصيات لإصلاح المناهج، مؤكدة ضرورة مواءمتها مع المبادئ الإسلامية مع احترام التنوع الثقافي.

Introduction:

School curricula are central to shaping the intellectual, cultural, and religious identity of future generations. In Muslim-majority countries such as Bangladesh, where over 90% of the population follows Islam (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015), educational content plays a vital role in the preservation of religious identity. However, the infiltration of non-Islamic concepts into curricula can disrupt the doctrinal foundation of Muslim youth. Previous studies (Al-Hindi, 2001; Ismail, 2013) highlight how curricula worldwide have been used as a vehicle for intellectual and cultural influence. This study examines the extent to which Bangladeshi curricula reflect such trends and explores their implications for students' Islamic identity.

Research Problem

The study addresses the presence of ideologically driven content in Bangladeshi public school curricula that may dilute Islamic creed and promote cultural assimilation under the guise of coexistence. While pluralism and tolerance are essential social values, presenting all religions as doctrinally equal and encouraging participation in rituals alien to Islam threatens the distinctiveness of Islamic identity.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze school textbooks (2012–2015 editions) from grades 1–10 in selected subjects to identify doctrinally problematic content.
2. To examine how these materials promote religious equivalence under the guise of cultural coexistence.
3. To assess the potential impact of these contents on students' Islamic identity through expert evaluation.
4. To suggest some recommendations for curriculum development in line with Islamic teachings and cultural integrity.

Research Questions

1. What are the manifestations of intellectual invasion in Bangladeshi public school curricula (2012–2022)?
2. How do textbooks promote religious equivalence and blur doctrinal boundaries?
3. What are the possible effects of such content on students' Islamic identity?
4. What reforms can ensure alignment of curricula with Islamic principles while maintaining social harmony?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research stems from the fact that it attempts to explore an under-researched topic concerning the preservation of Islamic creed in Bangladeshi education. By critically analyzing curricular content, the study highlights risks of cultural and doctrinal dilution and provides recommendations that may guide policymakers in charge of the development and reform of curriculum. It also emphasizes the importance of involving Islamic scholars in curriculum development.

Research Methodology

The study employed the descriptive-analytical method to analyze the content of the selected textbooks in civic education, social studies, Bengali, and English for grades 1–10 during the 2012–2015 cycle. Texts referring to religious festivals, gender roles, or national celebrations were in particular the focus of analysis. The principles of Islamic creed as followed in Bangladesh (Sunni-Hanafi school) provided the framework for evaluation. To avoid researcher bias, the findings were cross-checked with expert reviews from Islamic scholars and educationists. The potential effects of the content on students' beliefs were inferred through comparative analysis with Islamic doctrinal principles.

Scope of the Study

The study is confined to the textbooks that were officially approved by the Bangladeshi government and published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) between 2012 and 2022. It focuses on cultural and doctrinal representations in civic education, social studies, Bengali, and English textbooks taught in grades 1–10. Private and

religious schools' curricula were excluded in this study.

Linguistic and ideological definitions of intellectual invasion:

From a linguistic perspective, the concept of intellectual invasion refers to the deliberate introduction and dissemination of foreign terminologies, expressions, and discursive patterns into a local language in ways that alter its semantic structures and communicative norms. This process often results in the gradual erosion of indigenous linguistic identity, as borrowed terms and frames of reference tend to reshape the worldview embedded in the native language (Al-Faruqi, 1982; Hassan, 1998).

Ideologically, this concept denotes the systematic penetration of external thought systems, values, and cultural paradigms into the consciousness of a society with the aim of reshaping its intellectual framework and collective identity. It is not a neutral exchange of ideas but rather a strategic imposition intended to weaken indigenous epistemologies, diminish cultural autonomy, and promote the dominance of alien worldviews (Al-Attas, 1978; Ramadan, 2009).

Intellectual invasion is thus commonly defined as non-military cultural domination aimed at reshaping the identity of a community (Shanqiti, 2007). Scholars describe it as the imposition of foreign thought through education, media, and culture (Al-Hindi, 2001). Within the Islamic framework, it refers to attempts to distort the creed of a community by introducing doubtful or false ideas (Hamdan, n.d.). For this study, intellectual invasion is defined in operational terms as the incorporation of doctrinally problematic or culturally alien content into school curricula that undermines Islamic identity.

Examples of Intellectual Invasion in School Curricula:

1. Equalization of Religions:

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2015), Muslims constitute 90.4% of the population, Hindus 8.5%, Buddhists 0.6%, and Christians 0.3%. Despite this glaring disparity, the curriculum describes Bangladesh as a country with "four major religions": *"In our country, there are four major religions. The followers of all these religions hold certain religious festivals and celebrations. We participate in each other's festivals, even though we differ in religion"* (Nasrin et al., 2015, p. 12).

While such phrasing may be intended to foster inclusivity, it risks giving the impression that religions in Bangladesh are all equal in terms of demographic presence and social influence. From an Islamic perspective, Islam is uniquely positioned as the final and complete religion (Qur'an 3:19, 3:85). Scholars such as Al-Attas (1978) and Huda (2012) argue that presenting Islam in curricula as a religion on the same footing with minority religions may mislead students about its distinctive status in Bangladeshi society.

2. Encouragement to Participate in Festivals of All Religions

The curriculum further states: *"We participate in each other's festivals, even if we differ in religion"* (Nasrīn et al., 2015, p. 12). While this promotes interfaith harmony, classical Islamic scholars generally discourage Muslims from participating in the religious rituals of other faiths (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1999/2005). Siddiqi (2016) notes that conflating cultural cooperation with ritual participation can blur boundaries between permissible social interactions and prohibited religious practices. Therefore, curricular content needs to make a careful distinction between civic coexistence and religious participation.

3. Labeling Religious Worship as "Festivals"

Certain curricular texts categorize Islamic practices such as Shab-e-Barat, Laylat al-Qadr, and the Prophet's birthday as "festivals" alongside the two Eids (Nasrin et al., 2015, p. 12). However, Islamic jurisprudence only recognizes Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as lawful celebrations. Other ceremonious occasions are considered by many scholars as either contested issues or outright unlawful innovations (*bidʿah*) (see Ibn Bāz, 2002/1423 H). Including them under the label of "festivals" in textbooks may inadvertently

present disputed practices as mainstream ones, which could confuse students about normative Islamic teachings.

Another passage asserts: *"Religion is for individuals, and festivals are for everyone"* (Mamud et al., 2012, p. 2). Such slogans, widely circulated in secular public discourse, reflect an attempt to redefine religious practices as cultural heritage accessible to all. Al-Faruqi (1982) critiques such formulations as part of a broader intellectual invasion that normalizes secularist perspectives within Muslim societies. From an analytical standpoint, the challenge lies in distinguishing whether the curriculum is promoting inclusivity or subtly undermining the exclusivity of Islamic religious observances.

4. Promoting Innovations (*Bid'ah*) under the Name of Islamic Festivals

In one lesson, the curriculum states: *"Muslims also have other festivals such as Shab-e-Barat (mid-Sha'ban), Shab-e-Qadr (Laylat al-Qadr), and the Prophet's birthday"* (Nasrin et al., 2015, p. 12). This classification is problematic, since Islamic jurisprudence recognizes only two religious festivals: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Labeling additional occasions as *Eid* or *festivals* reflects a curricular inaccuracy.

The night of mid-Sha'ban (*Shab-e-Barat*) is observed in various Muslim communities, though its religious status is disputed. Some scholars consider it a virtuous practice based on weak or fabricated narrations (Ibn Ḥumayd, 2014), while others explicitly dismiss it as a religiously unlawful innovation (Ibn Bāz, 2012). Similarly, performing prayer throughout the night of Laylat al-Qadr is unquestionably legislated in Islam, supported by the Qur'an (97:1–3) and authentic hadith (Abū Dāwūd, ḥadīth 1374). However, Islamic jurisprudence does not classify Laylat al-Qadr as an *Eid* but rather as a blessed night within Ramadan.

The celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid*) is another debated issue. While some Muslim scholars and communities regard it as a means of glorifying the Prophet, many others—including Ibn Bāz (2002/1423 H)—consider it an innovation, since neither the Prophet nor his Companions observed it. The Prophet's guidance on avoiding religious

innovations is reflected in the hadith: *"Whoever introduces into this matter of ours that which is not from it, it will be rejected"* (Abū Dāwūd, ḥadīth 4607).

In summary, while the curriculum introduces Shab-e-Barat, Laylat al-Qadr, and Mawlid as "festivals," Islamic scholarship consistently affirms that Islam only recognizes two ceremonial occasions as *Eids*: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha (Al-Qaradawi, 1995). Thus, such curricular content may unintentionally promote contested or innovative practices as normative.

5. Promotion of Hindu-Inspired Cultural Practices as National Heritage

The Bengali New Year (*Pohela Boishakh*) is presented as a cultural festival for all citizens, irrespective of their religions. Proponents describe it as an inclusive tradition uniting all Bengalis. However, several scholars (Rahman, 2010; Khan, 2017) point out that many of its rituals are rooted in Hindu religious customs. While such content is often framed as "national culture" rather than religious obligation, its integration into school celebrations can be seen as prioritizing syncretic cultural expressions over distinct Islamic practices. It is important to note, however, that *Pohela Boishakh* is not officially included as a religious component in the curriculum, but rather as a national festival.

6. Secular Perspectives on Gender Equality

Government school textbooks also tend to emphasize secular views of gender equality: *"Boys and girls study together in schools. When they finish school, they do not grow up as men and women, but rather as human beings, participating in the development of society"* (Nasrin, 2014, p. 90). Another text states: *"We do not think of any work as a girl's job or a boy's job"* (Nasrin, 2014, p. 82). Such excerpts promote the idea of gender parity in social roles, consistent with international human rights discourses.

From an Islamic perspective, however, men and women are viewed as equal in dignity but distinct in roles and responsibilities (Qur'an 33:35). Scholars such as Al-Qaradawi (1995) argue that ignoring these natural distinctions can lead to confusion about gender complementarity. Thus, the curriculum reflects

a secular orientation that may not fully align with traditional Islamic perspectives.

Findings

The content analysis identified six key manifestations of intellectual invasion within Bangladeshi school curricula:

1. **Equalization of Religions**: Textbooks tend to describe Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity as four "major religions," though census data show that Islam is followed by over 90% of the population (Nasrin et al., 2015). This phrasing may suggest doctrinal equivalence rather than reflecting demographic reality.

2. **Encouragement of Participation in Non-Islamic Festivals**: There are some lessons that encourage students to participate in the festivals of different religions, thereby normalizing engagement in non-Islamic rituals (Mamud et al., 2012).

3. **Labeling Acts of Worship as Festivals**: Islamic acts of worship, such as Eid, are presented alongside Hindu rituals (e.g., Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja) under the common category of "festivals" (Nasrin et al., 2015).

4. **Promotion of Religious Innovations (*Bid'ah*)**: Certain textbooks list Shab-e-Barat, Laylat al-Qadr, and the Prophet's birthday as Islamic festivals, despite scholarly consensus that only Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are recognized as canonical festivals in Islam (Ibn Bāz, 2012; Al-Qaradawi, 1995).

5. **Promotion of Hindu Culture as National Culture**: National celebrations such as Bengali New Year (*Pohela Boishakh*) are depicted as unifying traditions for all citizens, though their roots lie in Hindu cultural practices (Rahman, 2010).

6. **Secular Perspectives on Gender Equality**: Textbooks promote absolute equality between boys and girls in social roles, reflecting secular perspectives rather than the Islamic

framework of gender complementarity (Nasrin, 2014).

Discussion

The findings suggest that Bangladeshi public school curricula incorporate themes that may contribute to reshaping the religious identity of students. The equalization of religions, encouragement of participation in non-Islamic rituals, and inclusion of contested innovations could influence students' perceptions of Islamic doctrine. Furthermore, the emphasis on practices in Hindu culture as national heritage and the adoption of secular perspectives on gender appears to align with broader patterns of intellectual invasion observed in other Muslim contexts (Ismail, 2013; Shanqiti, 2007).

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that elements of intellectual invasion are embedded in the curricula of public schools in Bangladesh through the equalization of religions, encouragement of participation in non-Islamic rituals, the promotion of religiously contested practices, and the adoption of secular frameworks. Such curricular features may influence students' perceptions of Islamic teachings and gradually weaken their religious identity. The findings highlight the need for greater alignment between curricular content and the religious and cultural values of the Muslim majority, without disregarding the country's cultural diversity. More broadly, this research contributes to the wider debate on how education systems in Muslim societies negotiate external intellectual influences while preserving their distinctive identities. Future studies may expand this analysis by comparing the Bangladeshi case with curricula in other Muslim-majority countries, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the global dynamics of intellectual invasion in education.

References

[1] Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1978). *Islam and secularism*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia.

[2] Al-Faruqi, I. R. (1982). *Islamization of knowledge: General principles and work plan*.

Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought.

[3] Al-Hindi, A. R. (2001). *Intellectual invasion and its danger to Muslims*. Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Andalus al-Khadra.

[4] Al-Qaradawi, Y. (1995). *Contemporary fatwas*. Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Shorouk.

[5] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). (2015). *Population and housing census 2011: National report, Volume 4*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: BBS.

[6] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). (2015). *Population and housing census 2011: National volume 2: Union statistics*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Government of Bangladesh.

[7] Hamdan, N. (n.d.). *On the intellectual invasion*. Taif, Saudi Arabia: Maktabat al-Sadiq.

[8] Hassan, H. (1998). *Intellectual invasion and cultural identity in the Muslim world*. Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Salam.

[9] Huda, S. (2012). Religious pluralism in Bangladesh: Rhetoric and reality. *Journal of South Asian Studies, 35*(2), 257–274.

[10] Ibn Bāz, A. A. (2002/1423 H). *Majmūʿ fatāwā wa maqālāt mutanawwiʿah* (Vol. 3). Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Watan.

[11] Ibn Bāz, A. A. (2012). *Majmūʿ fatāwā wa maqālāt mutanawwiʿah: Tawḥīd wa mā yalḥaqu bihi*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Al-Riʾāsa al-ʿĀmma lil-Buḥūth al-ʿIlmiyya wal-Iftā.

[12] Ibn Taymiyyah, T. (2005). *Iqtidāʾ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (M. M. al-Qasim, Ed.). Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-ʿAsimah. (Original work published 1999)

[13] Ismail, A. (2013). *Intellectual invasion: The challenge and confrontation* (2nd ed.). Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Kalimah.

[14] Khan, A. R. (2017). Negotiating culture: Religion and nationalism in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Social Science, 45*(3), 289–310.

[15] Mamud, H., et al. (2012). *Kitabi Bangla (Bengali language), Grade 5*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: National Curriculum and Textbook Board.

[16] Mamud, M., et al. (2012). *Bangladesh and global studies for class five*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: National Curriculum and Textbook Board.

[17] Nasrin, M. (2014). *Bangladesh and global studies, Grade 5*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: National Curriculum and Textbook Board.

[18] Nasrin, R. (2014). *Bangladesh and global studies, Grade 6*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: National Curriculum and Textbook Board.

[19] Nasrin, M., et al. (2015). *Bangladesh and global studies, Grade 3* (2nd ed.). Dhaka, Bangladesh: National Curriculum and Textbook Board.

[20] Rahman, S. (2010). The cultural politics of Pohela Boishakh in Bangladesh. *South Asia Research, 30*(1), 23–45.

[21] Ramadan, T. (2009). *Radical reform: Islamic ethics and liberation*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

[22] Shanqiti, M. A. (2007). *Intellectual invasion and its impact on the Islamic world*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar Ibn al-Jawzi.

[23] Siddiqi, M. (2016). Religious education and interfaith practices in Bangladesh. *Islamic Studies, 55*(1), 77–95.