

Religious Crisis Communication during Covid-19 Pandemic: Observing Religious Interaction and Information Gap between Rural People and Religious Leaders in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Through disseminating religious beliefs and bits of advice, religious leaders can play a very significant role in creating awareness among rural people and their decision-making against any kind of crisis moment. From the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic surged in Bangladesh, people were informed and requested to follow all restrictions and guidelines provided by the governmental and non-governmental authorities, especially to avoid social gatherings and keep social distance everywhere, more exact at mosques. But in rural areas, most of the time people were keen to go to mosques more than other public places without taking any safety as well as ignoring distancing zone during prayer time. Giving importance to this crisis, this study feels the demand of judging the activities and interaction of religious leaders with the rural people in creating awareness during this pandemic. The first objective of this research is to find out if rural people and religious leaders maintain restrictions and guidelines provided by the authorities during the pandemic, adding more if there was any information gap among rural people and religious leaders regarding pandemic related knowledge. The second objective of this study observes if the religious leaders are well informed by the authorities' restrictions or deluged with conservative thinking and rumors during this pandemic, and the last objective deals with the impact of religious leader's talk on rural people in shaping their beliefs, decision making, and responses against the pandemic. This study follows rational choice theory, information gap theory, and decision-making theory besides surveying 150 rural people and a key informant interview and an in-depth interview with three respective religious leaders living in a village to meet the objectives of the study.

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Introduction

At present, the whole world is trembling with the terror of the corona pandemic. During this corona period, amongst others, in the society, there can be seen different kinds of opinions among various experts regarding religious

superstition and religious awareness. In some cases, religious leaders are playing an important role, and in some cases, the opposite is seen. As a developing country, Bangladeshi people are naturally pious. By capitalizing on this religiosity,

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some religious leaders overwhelm society with superstitions in various ways. In this pandemic, religious superstitions are socially inciting people to discriminate in different ways. Looking back to history, we see that during every crisis moment, one group of people are likely to give priority to superstition, while increasing the number of sick and infected people, this group of people refrains themselves from taking proper treatment.

The first case of the corona virus was detected in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020. After that, Bangladesh declared a lockdown from March 17, 2020, like other infected countries. Throughout the early days of this lockdown, there were some people or online pages that spread misinformation, and rumors everywhere, especially on social media. According to the World Health Organization, only awareness can save us from this terrible situation. But some people in society are constantly wandering around under the false pretext of religion. Some belief includes that you would die if it is in your face, and fearing corona or any other things other than Allah would be against religion, along with giving Azaan in the middle of the night, eating Asiatic pennywort, drinking tea would be the remedy for corona pandemic. This is not the end; some are thinking that the real Muslims would not be affected by this virus or that the people who are indulged in sins would get affected and would die soon.

However, when reviewing the religious restrictions and guidelines, a complete exception is observed. It is narrated in Hadith No. 1075 of the Tirmidhi Hadith that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, *“if there is an epidemic somewhere if you are staying there, do not leave that place and if there is an epidemic in any place, do not go there unless you have stayed there.”* Thus, about one and a half thousand years ago today, the Prophet (peace be upon him) taught us the method of quarantine to prevent infection and instructed us to follow it. Again, in our society, the dead person affected by the epidemic is considered a sinner or hellish. It is completely wrong and sinful to have such an idea and pedagogy. This shows that lots of rural people have religious literacy and pedagogy gap. In Hadith No. 2629 of the Book of Hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) described a person affected by the plague as a martyr. So, regulations have worked here properly. Throughout human history, many rules and religions are alive to keep disease at bay. Those that adhered to it were healthy, and those who violated it, have endangered themselves and others. In this article, we aim to discuss the situation of Covid-19 diseases, how local people and religious communities were responding to the pandemic, especially at the local level, their trend of following restrictions, beliefs, the religious literacy gap, etc.

Throughout the data gathering process, this article follows both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A survey, a key informant interview, and an in-depth interview are done successfully in this research. The finding shows that there is an effective interaction between religious leaders and rural people in creating consciousness during this Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Objectives

The study follows specific objectives. These are:

1. To find out if rural people and religious leaders maintain restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities regarding religious issues during the pandemic, to more extent, if there's any Covid-19 related pedagogy or information gap among them.
2. To explore if the religious leaders are well informed of restrictions and guidelines provided by both authorities or deluged with conservative thinking or rumors during the pandemic. And
3. To evaluate the role of religious leaders in shaping rural people's beliefs, decision-making, and overall responses against the corona pandemic.

Literature Review

During the corona pandemic, the world has gone through a lot of research on Covid-19 and related works, and still, new works are going on over time. Some related research is examined here carefully.

The study of Adetunji et al. (2020) tried to explore the perspective of religious figures during the outbreak of Covid-19. Their research has found that not all religious leaders have behaved the same throughout the time of the pandemic, whereas some religious leaders have overlooked the notion of the pandemic, and some have found comfort in prayers and spiritual beliefs. Contrarily, some of them have had full faith in the Government taking initiative against the pandemic (Adetunji et al., 2020). Close to this work, there is another research whereas Rashid et al. (2011) worked on the role of herbal remedies at the healthcare system of Bangladesh. The study evaluates Bangladeshi Islamic Religious Leader's stands on herbal remedies (Rashid et al., 2011). The research work further looks into the harmlessness and obtainability of herbal medicine amongst Islamic Religious Leaders of Bangladesh (Rashid et al., 2011). Also, Green et al. (2020) argued that during pandemic mental health issues workers with prominent positions got more media and scholarly observation than the religious leaders.

The authors opined that on account of various restrictions imposed by countries in the course of the pandemic, religious leaders might not be able to conduct their regular religious activities. This situation might cause emotional distress among them (Green et al., 2020). Under these circumstances, the authors have recommended religious leaders take part in self-care, to get interacted with friends and families in this difficult situation, be prepared and acknowledge the possibilities of moral conflict, and being aware of the availability of the professional support (Green et al., 2020).

Ruijs et al. (2013) discussed the role of religious leaders in promoting acceptance of vaccination within a minority group. The researcher observed that religious leaders could help to approach minority groups with a common religion. Researchers found that religious leaders did not only stimulate deliberate decision-making, but they also guided by discussing the scripture. They also found some different types of religious leaders, the first types of religious leaders were those who did not need vaccination, and the second types of being were those who focus on having members of their congregation make a deliberate choice, nevertheless express their objections; and the others were those who preached against vaccination (Ruijs et al., 2013). On the other hand, Anshel et al. (2013) found several factors, whereas showed ironically prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, and the social interaction provided by religious practice each promoted good physical and mental well-being and these were the ways religious practitioners celebrated their faith. Researchers also found out that religious leaders had a particularly strong influence on the behavior of members of their religious institution and in the communities and religious leaders also have a unique opportunity to promote community health and help others in developing healthy habits, especially those habits related to proper diet and nutrition, and various forms of physical activity (Anshel et al., 2013). Focusing on communication patterns, Cheong (2011) in his essays discussed a new multimodal communicating means where religious leaders followed this pattern during the pandemic. He showed how religious leaders were adopting new multimodal communicating means in extending and establishing their authority to bring social changes (Cheong, 2011).

Shrivastava and Shrivastava (2020) have summarized the role of religious leaders and faith experts in tackling the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers found that religious leaders were very significant as they could maintain the bonding between the religious communities and the interruption chain of transmission and thereby reduced the overall caseload of the disease

(Shrivastava & Shrivastava 2020). Kuriyan et al. (2016) agreed that religious leaders and ethnic groups could play a role in perpetuating myths and misconceptions about mental health. Their findings indicate low educated people in the society possess a high level of myths and misconceptions associated with mental health irrespective of their religious or caste background (Kuriyan et al., 2016). In addition, Kanmodi and Badru (2017) found a very low awareness rate of palliative care among religious leaders. According to them, not only the religious leader but also educational programs were needed to enlighten this population group and society (Kanmodi & Badru, 2017).

All the articles analyzed here predict that there needs a good focus on religious leaders as they play as a good influencer in society it is important during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as in any crisis situational communication among the target groups.

Rational Choice Theory

In the early stage, the rational choice theory originated during the late century with the work of Cesare Beccaria. The basic assumption of rational choice theory has complied social behavior results from the behavior of individual actors, each of whom is making their individual decision. Individuals are in control of their decisions, according to rational choice theory. They don't make decisions based on unconscious motivations, cultural norms, or environmental factors. They analyze the consequences and potential advantages based on rational reasoning. Individual and societal behavior can be better understood using rational choice theory. It aids in determining why individuals, groups, and society as a whole make certain decisions depending on certain costs and benefits. The rational choice theory can also be used to explain what appears to be irrational behavior. Because all conduct is rational, any form of activity can be investigated for underlying rational motivations, according to rational choice theory.

Rational Choice theory plays a very important role in communication aspects. The rational choice theory framework can help explain how religious leaders can play a very significant role in our country during Covid-19 periods, also how they handle the people around them. Every time religions provide comfort and a sense of security throughout the history of human civilization, their roles in pandemics can be both productive and counterproductive at the same time. As a religious country, Bangladesh has faced both good and bad experiences regarding the religious views on Covid-19. As this theory determines the reasons why some groups take decision based on rational facts, thing acts the

same for religious interaction between religious leaders and rural people, as the two groups of people's choice regarding pandemic depends on their behavior and rational choice. If the two groups think Covid-19's restrictions to be rational and lay rational motivations to accept, then they take their decision and action. This research finds that the rural people were reluctant to give their heads to religious leaders' talk first, but after investigating and finding the rationality of the guidelines and govt. regulations delivered by the leaders, people decided to believe their talk gradually. This theory works actively in this research. Sato (2013) explained this theory as a social phenomenon by assuming rational choice at the actor's level and also showed how rational choice theory successfully would explain the problem. He remarks that the rational choice theory describes how religious leader influences the rural people and their beliefs. According to the rational theory, firstly the leader predicts the future and decides what he or she needs in this circumstance precisely (Sato, 2013).

From the overview of Religious Peace Activism (RPA)-the rational element of the religious elite's decision-making Processes, de Juan and Vüllers (2010) consider those religious leaders who can be particularly important and effective in this pandemic situation. In many violent conflicts, religious actors have effectively contributed to peace (de Juan & Vüllers ,2010.). According to Bruce (1999), religious organizations and cultures differ greatly in the demands they make of their members, it varies in every country. Religious leaders try to influence the society people; they also try to dominate entire societies combined with high self-regard and considerable toleration of laxity. Religious Leaders traditionally can also handle the problem of varying degrees of attention to spiritual teachings by having a system that allows sins to be periodically wiped away by some spiritual exercise (Bruce 1999).

Information Gap Theory

The information gap theory is one of the most important theories for this research and from a communication perspective. Through this philosophy, we can approach some objectives. The Info-Gap (IG) theory is a way of evaluating options and making judgments in the face of extreme uncertainty. The difference between what is known and what is needed to make a responsible decision is known as an info-gap. The knowledge of a worst-case scenario or credible probability distributions is not required for info-gap analysis. Uncertainty in parameters and the forms of functional relationships is represented by info-gap models of uncertainty.

From this context, we have discussed how religious leaders may help local people in a

pandemic scenario by providing information. In the book on the knowledge gap theory of communication, Birch (2013) has explained that the knowledge gap theory is largely concerned with the unequal distribution of information throughout society, as well as the socio-economic status-related access to knowledge. Adding more, Ben-Haim (2019) considered that knowledge of a worst-case scenario or credible probability distribution is not required for info-gap analysis. This theory decided that the gap between what is known and what is required to make a decent decision and present the shapes of functional relationships. He added info-gap theory making choices and decisions in the face of extreme uncertainty (Ben-Haim, 2019).

Throughout the discussion and the aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is obvious that religious leaders are well informed by the instructions and guidelines provided by the governmental and non-governmental authorities. As this theory explains the difference between 'what is known and what is required to make a decent decision', this study discusses and found that there is no gap between what the religious leaders have and what they need to have regarding Covid-19 related knowledge and information. What is more, after being well informed, they did always spread all kinds of those messages among the rural people. In this theory, it has been observed that people are more likely to be dependent on religious leaders and would believe their messages in terms of getting any important information, and lastly made their decision to the end. Finally, this theory proves that both rural people and leaders have enough information, and there is no knowledge gap among them. In this way, this theory suits the most with the first two research objectives respectively.

Decision-making Theory

Decision-making theory is commonly defined as a process or sequence of activities that includes steps such as problem recognition, information gathering, alternative definition, and actor selection from two or more options consistent with prioritized preferences. This notion is a vital ability that plays a significant role in everyday life and is required for environmental adaptation and autonomy.

Let's have a look at the setting in which the decision-making theory was developed by Herbert A. Simon, an American economist and popular scientist. He is well recognized for his work on behaviorism, and the study of how companies make decisions. Herbert Simon's famous book administrative behavior introduced the Decision-making Theory in 1947. This approach breaks down the decision-making process into three

stages: intelligence, design, and choice. In this article, decision-making theory observes how religious leaders influence rural people's views, decisions, and responses to the corona pandemic. Grocki (2019) discussed decision-making process entails comprehending the theory from the perspective of decision action referring to a set of activities logically linked to one's mental state and leading to the solution of a decision-making problem by selecting one of several options (Grocki, 2019). Fernando (2005) found that religion has a considerable impact on judgment and emotional and motivational aspects. The most prevalent way of connecting with this higher reality is through religious practices (Fernando, 2005). In research, Phipps (2012) has stated that religion plays a significant role in leadership, claiming that leaders impose their religious beliefs on their leadership approaches. There are a few academic papers that touch on the personal spiritual beliefs of leaders linked to strategic leadership, according to an authorized study that analyzes the link between spiritual beliefs and strategic decision making (Phipps, 2012). Also, Hage and Posner (2015) discovered that religiosity has a major impact on workplace leadership. During disasters, emergencies, conflicts, and outbreaks, religious leaders help communities in a variety of ways. Religious leaders have also been instrumental in supporting communities around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Under this circumstance, religious leaders have a strong influence on aspects of leadership. In this pandemic situation, they are playing a vital role in decision-making among rural people. Also, religious leaders are continually shaping their beliefs and concepts. Again, it is obvious that the first and the third objectives are reflected in this theory very well.

Methodology

This research has been conducted with mixed research methods, which follow both quantitative and qualitative studies that are used to get the research goals accurately. This research depicts that, it is largely qualitative-based research and partially quantitative research.

In the quantitative study, the current study takes the shelter of a survey method, whereas a data collection technique, a structured questionnaire has been developed. Rural people were interviewed over the phone because of lockdown restrictions. This method focuses on the questionnaire that involves peoples' activities in mosques regarding maintaining social distance and regulations, their obligations and knowledge about Covid-19 situations, people's perception of Imam's interaction with people, their Covid-19 related

knowledge, and to more extent their roles and activities in creating awareness during the pandemic. What is more, the survey has been completed with the ending questioning on peoples' belief on Imam's activities regarding pandemic during the pandemic. Adding more, the survey method has been done on 150 rural people from a village, aged between 25-50 years. The size of this number of people (population) has been selected through the purposive sampling method. In this way, it made it possible to reach out to the right people that helped to search for the answers to mainly 1 and 3 numbers of research objectives.

To get a clear view of all research objectives again, this study also follows a qualitative study, where in-depth interview and key formant interviews (KII) has been undertaken as the data collection tool. Two different checklists were prepared for the two interviews, where one checklist is developed for the Imam of a mosque, and another is prepared for the two respective religious leaders, including a teacher of a Madrasah, and the president of a mosque's committee. These checklists add some common questions along with relevant questions focusing on how Imams have played their roles and responsibilities including social distance rules, and health guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the decision-making tendency in any crisis moment during the pandemic. What is more, the concerning issue shows the need to find out if the religious leaders are well informed by government advice or deluged with conservative thinking or rumors during the pandemic, and the role of leaders in shaping rural people's beliefs, their decision making, and their responses against corona pandemic. As it is mentioned before that this current research is mainly qualitative based, eventually it proves the right. The answers to all research objectives (1, 2, and 3) here have been searched through this method.

Throughout the survey, in-depth interview, and KII, it was important to judge the interaction and the Covid related knowledge gap between and among the rural people and religious leaders. Moreover, both of the study methods brought out the answers to three specific objectives in this study. It is needed to explain that there were no questions while conducting an in-depth interview, KII, and surveys that have conflicting issues as well as can concern the respondents. After conducting the survey and case studies, the results have been analyzed and presented in this study.

Results

Survey Data Analysis

Throughout the quantitative method, the survey has been conducted and the followings are the data findings.

People's maintaining restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities regarding religious issues during the pandemic

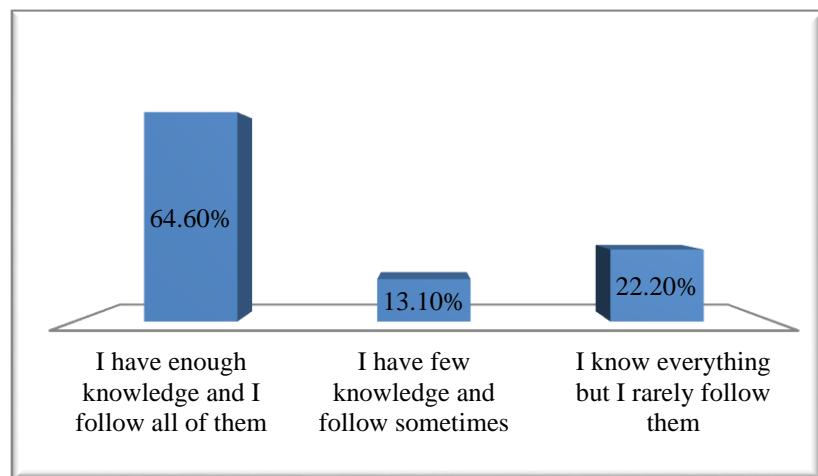
In the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, people's activities regarding religious facts got more attention in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas because of their involvement in religious matters than before; especially their tendency to go to mosques during the pandemic has increased surprisingly. This is obvious that people didn't give their ear to the distance restrictions at mosques given by the government. In this research, data from the survey shows that

57.7% of respondents used to go to the mosques regularly during the pandemic time, while 23.7% said they went there sometimes, and 18.6% of them said that they spent a very short time at mosques during this time. Findings also found that at the beginning of the pandemic, most of the respondents used to go to mosques in a large number and there was no abidance of restrictions provided by governmental and non-governmental regarding religious issues. But now the scenario has been changed, and 86.6% of the people said they try to maintain all kind of restrictions and guidelines during this pandemic.

People's knowledge about 'what to do or what not to do' during the pandemic

Most of the respondents said that they have had enough knowledge and are punctual in this regard. The actual scenario found after conducting personal observation is completely different from what their replies were (see Figure 1).

Figure1 What to Do or What not to Do



According to the figure, 64.6% of respondents think that they have enough knowledge regarding pandemic consciousness, and they follow them, while 13.1% have little knowledge and follow sometimes in need. Interestingly, 22.2% of respondents were found who know everything about pandemic consciousness but they rarely think of following these rules. These are the scenario from the survey, but the actual scenario is that people know everything but feel disinterested and reluctant to follow them.

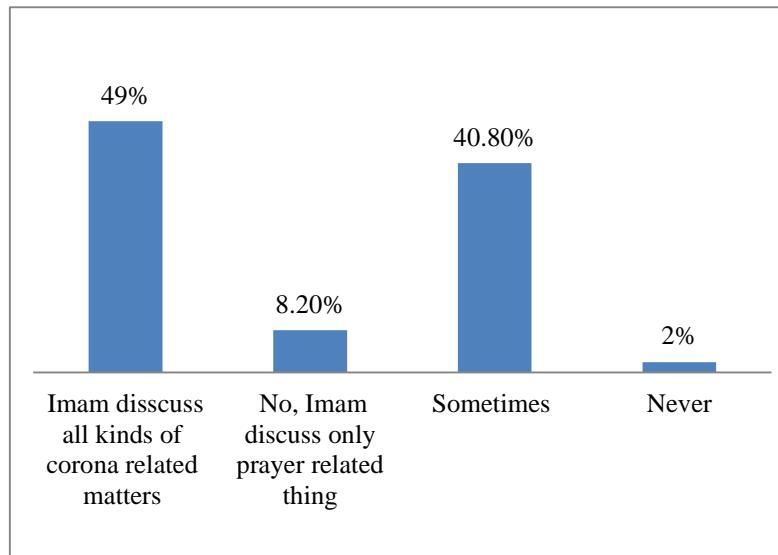
People's opinion towards Imams' activities and restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities regarding religious issues during the pandemic

The most positive responses are received from respondents in this matter. Respondents think Imams can be the most influential persons and they follow all kinds of restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities during this pandemic. The followings are people's opinions towards Imam's activities during the corona pandemic.

Imam's discussing corona related matters before or after prayer

Respondents were asked if Imam discussed corona-related matters with them before or after prayer time. Most of the respondents said that Imams did this during the corona pandemic, but now this attempt is somewhat decreasing day by day (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Imam's Discussing Pandemic Related Matters Before or After Pray



According to Figure 2, 49.0% of respondents think that Imams discuss corona-related matters during the pandemic, whereas 40.8% opines that Imams do this sometimes during prayer time. On the other hand, 8.2% of respondents said that Imams discussed only prayer matters, while only 2.0% of them gave their negative views because they have never seen Imams do this ever during the pandemic.

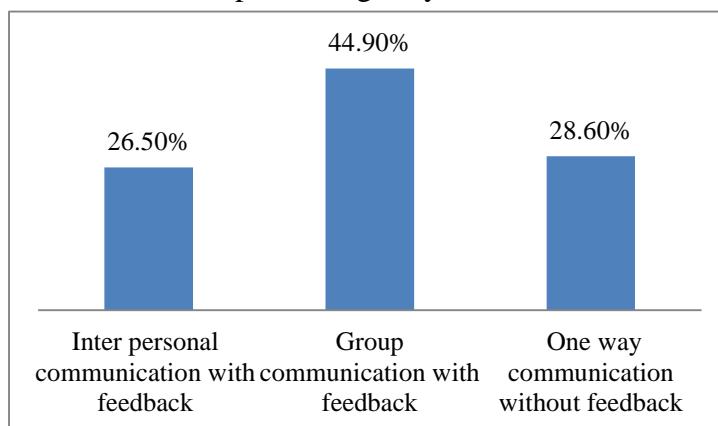
Way of Imam communicate with people during prayer time while discussing pandemic

The majority of the respondents found that Imams followed group communication while discussing pandemic issues before or after prayer time, but a significant number of respondents think Imams only preferred to keep one-way communication with rural people without having any feedback. Notably, data result shows that

Imams communicated only with rural people during prayer time while taking any decision about the corona pandemic.

According to Figure 3, 44.9% of respondents found that Imams maintained group communication with feedback, whereas 26.5% thought Imam only maintained interpersonal communication. But 28.6% of respondents were upset, saying that Imam maintained only one-way communication and there was no feedback. Data from the survey also shows that 57.7% of respondents agreed that Imam arranged special conversations during prayer time in case of any occurrences happened during the pandemic, and can make effective decisions; on the other hand, 42.3% of respondents argued that there was no initiative from Imam regarding the special conversation with rural people during the pandemic.

Figure 3 Imam's Interaction with People During Pray

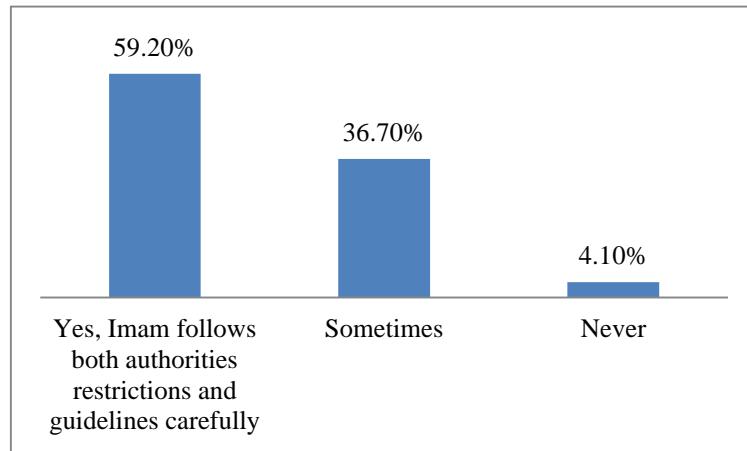


The tendency of Imam's following governmental and non-governmental provided restrictions and guidelines during the pandemic

The positive responses are huge in percentages in this regard. Most of the respondents think that Imams follow guidelines provided by govt. carefully while few numbers of them think oppositely.

According to Figure 4, 59.2% of respondents believe that Imams follow govt. guidelines and information during the pandemic, while 36.7% gave moderate answers. Only 4.1% of respondents do not think Imam is following govt. restrictions and guidelines in this regard.

Figure 4 Imam's Following Governmental and Non-governmental Provided Restrictions and Guidelines

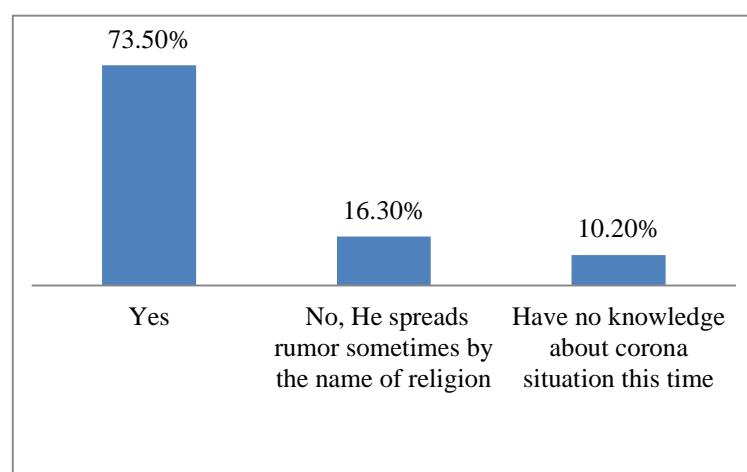


People's belief in Imam's speech and responsibilities during the pandemic

A huge number of respondents thought that Imams provided authentic information during the pandemic. The survey finds that 85.6% of respondents have belief in Imam's speech

regarding the corona pandemic while 14.4% of respondents have no belief in Imam's doings. Figure 5 shows the people's belief in Imam's activities during the pandemic.

Figure 5 People's Belief in Imam's Activities



The figure shows that 73.5% of respondents said that Imam provided authentic information about the pandemic, whereas 16.3% had the opposite opinion that Imams could spread rumors in the name of religion. There are also 10.2% of responses from respondents who think Imams do not know about the pandemic situation.

Influence of Imam's activities on people's beliefs and decision making during the pandemic

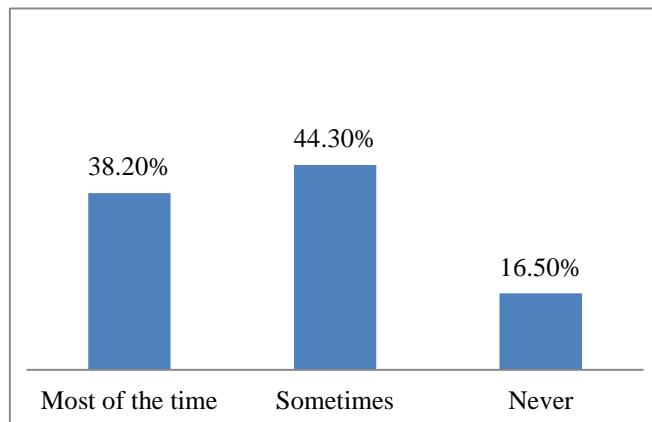
Respondents were asked if their beliefs and decision-making got influenced by Imams'

activities and speech in any situation during the corona pandemic. Most of the responses were yes, and a few numbers of people had the opposite views in this regard.

According to Figure 6, data result indicates that 38.2% of respondents thought their beliefs and decision-making got influenced by

Imams, while 44.3% of them thought it could happen sometimes. 16.5% of respondents had careful thinking of any issues regarding pandemics and made their decision by themselves without influencing by Imams.

Figure 6 Influencing People's Belief and Decision Making by Imams



Key Informant Interview and In-depth Interview Result Analysis

In this research, three respected resource persons/ religious leaders are studied including an Imam, a teacher of a Madrasah, and the president of a mosque's committee regarding the Covid-19 pandemic respectively. Throughout the qualitative method, a key informant interview (KII) method has been conducted on the teacher and the president, while an in-depth interview has been conducted on the Imam.

Following research objectives, the first and foremost inquiry was about if rural people and religious leaders would maintain governmental and non-governmental provided restrictions and guidelines regarding religious issues during the pandemic. Clarifying the Covid-19 situation, especially the first phase of Covid-19 attack in Bangladesh and the village people's activities, Imam said *“People were so afraid at the beginning and gathered at the mosque for prayer to get rid of Covid-19. The number was huge. As this number increased day by day, there was no abidance of restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities during the pandemic, especially no distance while praying and no safety masks wearing as well as no health consciousness among people.”* He also added that he maintained every restriction and followed all of them from the beginning of the pandemic till now. *“I tried to make people understand the importance of following governmental and non-governmental provided instructions and guidelines relating Covid-19 pandemic and everything, but the effort was in the vein at first. And gradually, most of the people started to realize the situation,*

and became convinced and now follow governmental and non-governmental instructions and guidelines, but not in remarkable number, and now it is again in decreasing,” said Imam.

Moreover, three religious leaders were also asked the same question if the rural people ever changed their decision or got rid of confusing minds after getting instructed by the restrictions that got from governmental and non-governmental authorities regarding Covid-19. The Imam said that he did his best but there were a few numbers of people who always went against the restrictions of both authorities. So sometimes it became tough to maintain them. But the majority number of people maintained every advice and restrictions. The teacher of Madrasah and the committee president also agreed on this concern. They said that people started to believe their advice, and most of them tried to follow them.

While asking about any pedagogy gap including Covid-19 knowledge and information gap among rural people and religious leaders, leaders had a very positive answer to it. Imam and the president of the committee agreed that they already hold more than two meetings in a month from the beginning if there any bad situation rose or needed to deliver important messages to rural people. Adding more Imam said that ‘we found it very ethical to work with rural people as they follow and believe us more than other groups of people. They also revealed that they used to organize special conversations with rural people sometimes about the Covid-19 situation to disseminate every important message or guideline on behalf of the governmental and non-governmental authorities. Along with the

authorities' restrictions, they used to provide self-instructions regarding all kinds of information like what to do or what not to do during the pandemic to the rural people as they thought it was their moral duty to do it. That's why three religious readers firmly believed and already found out that there's no Covid-19 related knowledge and information gap between rural people and them.

Three of them also pointed out some rumors which got attention during the pandemic. They said that they were very aware of conservative thinking or rumors during the pandemic and after getting well informed about restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities, they tried to inform people about the aftermath and consequences that can be possibly occurred during the pandemic. When some rumors like, the pandemic is the punishment from Allah who is deviated from religion/Islam, and sometimes, giving Azaan and praying in the middle of the night, eating Asiatic pennywort, drinking hot tea would be the remedy for corona pandemic, we found it very alarming. We made the people believe that these kinds of remedies would not work, rather than we requested everyone to work on those things which would make them healthy.

Finally, the question was asked about the role of religious leaders in shaping rural people's beliefs, decision-making, and responses against the corona pandemic. Religious leaders said that *"it was hard work and challenging from the beginning to realize people the consequence of Covid-19 virus attack and pandemic, after few days, lots of people came to us and urged us to give them suggestions when they got fever, cold or cough. We did our best, and still, we are doing this. And the happy thing is that people now started to believe us and lots of them changed their confused mind positively after being convinced by us."* said Imam. The committee president and the teacher also agreed on this matter saying that the same things happened to them also. Finally, Imam, the committee president, and the teacher drew their line saying that *"standing with the rural people with helping hand like doing this role is our prime responsibility and we will do this in every crisis."*

Discussion

As this current study found throughout the discussion of religious leaders that rural people were very indifferent in the very first phase of Covid-19 pandemic attack in Bangladesh, but after the spreading of the deathly virus more in area, people looked like they started to believe the virus that made people religiously frightened, and surrounds them with the wrong

concept about the pandemic virus in the beginning. Gradually it turns into different kinds of rumors and wrong remedies came as result. When judging the survey findings overall, the current study finds out that 46.9% of respondents identified religious leaders as the most influencing people compared to other groups of people including family people, political persons, and senior citizens respectively.

Turning to the objectives of this current study, it is important to mention the main focuses of the objectives' key issues again for the sake of good discussion and explanation. Key focuses are, finding out if rural people and religious leaders maintain restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities regarding religious issues during the Covid-19 pandemic, to more extent, if there's any pandemic-related pedagogy or information gap among them. The second one is, exploring if the religious leaders are well informed of restrictions and guidelines provided by both authorities or deluged with conservative thinking or rumors during the pandemic. And the last one is, evaluating the role of religious leaders in shaping rural people's beliefs, decision making, and overall responses against the corona pandemic.

When comes the first objective, needs a detailed discussion of the data findings of the survey, KII, and in-depth interview, respectively.

From the survey result, it is found that during this pandemic, 86.6% of respondents were positive in maintaining attributed restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities. 64.6% of respondents showed that they had enough knowledge regarding pandemic consciousness and they follow them regularly, while a few numbers of people think they had enough knowledge but there is no need of following rules anymore. While discussing the religious leader's role, current research finds that almost all people's opinion towards religious leaders is very positive, agreeing that 95.9% of them said that Imam follows all kinds of restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities during this pandemic. Most of the respondents almost 89.8% said that they would maintain group communication with people very effectively. At this point, looking at the result of the in-depth interview whereas Imam mentioned that a handful of people were always against the rules and regulations during the pandemic but the majority of people were well informed about the instructions, and tried to maintain all strictly. The above discussion proves the first part of the first objectives clearly, revealing that both respondents maintain restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities

regarding religious issues during the Covid-19 pandemic.

While discussing any pedagogy gap including Covid-19 knowledge and information gap among rural people and religious leaders (the second part of objective one), the current research finds that as both parties of respondents follow every restriction and guideline during the pandemic, it can be said that they have enough information and they certified each other in different views while conducting the survey, KII and in-depth interview. During KII and in-depth interview, the Imam and president of the committee agreed that they have arranged more than two meetings in a month; sometimes they would arrange special conversations whenever any crisis or bad situation rose or needed to deliver important messages among rural people. This also proves that there is no gap. What is more, the overall scenario depicts that there is no knowledge gap between religious leaders and rural people in delivering messages during this time. Moreover, these results met the first objectives of this study.

While discussing the second objective of this current study, in survey data, rural people indicated that though there were some alarming rumors and chaos while Covid-19 attacked first in Bangladesh, people also started to believe them, and this turned into an alarming situation. This time religious leaders came as a light to the people. It is obvious that the first objective of this research already has been discussed and proven, so it does in proving somewhat the second one too. Religious leaders and rural people already have enough knowledge and maintain every restriction, so it is to say that they are not indulged in conservative or rumored news anymore. From the survey result, 73.5% of respondents said that Imams provide authentic information about the pandemic, while 10.20% of respondents had the opposite opinion, and only 16.30% agreed that Imam could spread rumors in the name of religion. Supporting the big percentages of rural people (73.5% of respondents), while conducting KII and in-depth interviews, religious leaders said that they are very aware of conservative thinking or rumors during this pandemic. Moreover, religious leaders said they are well informed of restrictions and guidelines provided by governmental and non-governmental authorities and they spread every kind of message in any situation if it needs. From the survey, KII, and in-depth interview results, it is clear that religions are conscious and against rumors and conservative thinking, turns second objectives proved too.

As it turns into the last objective discussion regarding evaluating the role of religious leaders in shaping rural people's beliefs, decision making, and overall responses against

the corona pandemic, there are important issues that need to be explained again. As the above discussion proves the positive results already regarding religious communication during the pandemic, adding more to it, research findings reveal most of the respondents in the survey think that Imams are doing their work positively. After observing the people's opinion about if religious leaders can shape their beliefs, decision-making, and their response against the corona pandemic, this study found that 85.5% of respondents thought their beliefs and decision-making got influenced by Imams. During KII and in-depth interviews, religious leaders said that they are doing their responsibility very effectively because now people started to believe them, and follow them. Though they had to face lots of barriers at the beginning, now they think that they are successfully doing their job and efforts. Their final say is that they are committed and prepared to do the same in every situation in the future if it needs. The result of the final goals and objectives of this current research is here.

Conclusion

This study finds very positive results about the role of religious leaders in disseminating messages of restrictions and guidelines among rural people during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as a great contribution to religious crisis communication. Besides, rural people believe that having enough knowledge, religious leaders can play a great role not only in this continuous pandemic but also in any crisis that happened in society in near future. But in today's practical situation, the scenario is getting somewhat negative. As for how the pandemic situation recovers in our country and the risk rate is decreasing, so the rural people seem to be sometimes indifferent and have no health consciousness again. Our main focus is that in research, as rural people think of a religious leader as the most influential person, so, it is high time for the government to emphasize the role of religious leaders in rural areas, and work with them in real fields with more care. Thus religious leaders can play the most effective role during the pandemic compared to the other authorized body in society. Finally, this is important to say that the findings of this current study add the most important contribution to religious crisis communication fields. And it demands more literature and research works in the future.

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