Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the state has largely failed to assist the poor or reduce poverty, and NGOs have grown dramatically, ostensibly to fill this gap. There are more and bigger NGOs here than in any country of equivalent size. The target group approach has allowed NGOs in Bangladesh to work successfully with the rural poor and provide inputs to a constituency generally bypassed by the state. This innovation led to a concentration of efforts into small-scale, home-based income-generating activities such as cattle and poultry-rearing, food processing, social forestry, apiculture and rural handicrafts, combined with the provision of microcredit, to which the landless had previously been denied access except from local moneylenders at high cost. Recently, most NGOs in Bangladesh have taken microcredit as their major activity, which has resulted in resistance from some religious leaders and organisations. Charging of interest is forbidden in Islam. NGOs said the fundamentalists had objected to Muslim women going out to work. Other NGO activities like non-formal schools for children and trees planted by NGO clients have also been attacked.

While religion and development were considered to be two distinct categories with no overlap for the better part of the 20th century, their interdependence came to be recognized during the last decade. Two premier world organizations, the World Bank and the UN have felt compelled to look for and promote the linkages between religion or spirituality and development and conflict resolution. In August 2000 the UN sponsored the First Millennium World Peace Summit to which leaders of various faiths from all over the world had been invited, in recognition of the role religion can play in bringing about peace and harmony between warring groups and nations. In Bangladesh the link between religion and development is even more evident, because religious and spiritual leaders have a great hold on people’s hearts and actions. They can trigger impulses leading to sustainable development or mar development through fundamentalist attitudes.

This article will inquire into the problems and prospects of Religious NGOs (RNGOs) in Bangladesh in gaining trust, assistance, and financial resources from donors, the state and public. Finally, this article will make recommendations for the NGOs, donors and the state to foster mutual co-operation and on ways to make help to the poor people in Bangladesh more effective. RNGOs are: a) organizations which strive for progress of humanity through adherence to the tenets of religion b) more aware of religious sensitivities. That is, the mosques, temples and churches and private individuals who support their NGOs do so for its mission, while the donors of other NGOs want more specific results. There has been far too little academic study of the attitudes of donors, the state and public about the RNGOs and such study is needed.

One Islamic, one Christian, one Hindu and one Buddhist NGO were studied for this research. The methods of inquiry were predominantly ethnographic and/or qualitative with limited quantitative work. It included in-depth case studies, structured/semi-structured interviews and informal interviews/discussions with selected field workers, NGO managers and clients, religious leaders as well as documentary search. It was found that RNGOs face some common problems. For example, most people were suspicious about the activities of RNGOs. Interestingly, each type of NGO was suspected for different types of reasons. Christian NGOs were suspected of evangelism, Muslims of promoting terrorism and accused
of obstructing the activities of secular/non-religious NGOs who promote greater role for women outside home. In the absence of an effective state monitoring system, millions of Taka are channelled into the country to several Islamic NGOs both legally and under cover to finance wide range of ‘religious activities’, according to the investigation of an English daily. Government officials, businessmen, top police officials and some priests of mosques believe that ‘fundamentalist groups with outside connections’ are taking full advantage of the government lapses.

A major complaint against the Buddhist and Hindu NGOs was that they target mainly followers of their own faith. Another major complaint against all RNGOs was corruption. Corruption is widespread in the Bangladeshi society and the NGOs too. It seems that the religious missions did not impede these NGOs from getting rid of this evil. One major Western donor of a Buddhist NGO stopped funding because of allegations of corruption against that NGO.

In Bangladesh, there is a general view that RNGOs are well funded from outside. It is believed that Islamic NGOs are funded by state agencies and NGOs of the oil-rich Gulf countries, Christian missionary NGOs from their fellow Churches and their followers in the West and Buddhist NGOs and temples from their friends in South-east Asia and Far-east. This research has found little evidence to support these allegations. However, most RNGOs are struggling for getting funds to continue their work in an environment of decreasing resources from overseas donors and more paper work and harassment from several state agencies to clear their funds. This was more so in case of the Islamic NGOs after 9/11 and its consequent events in many parts of the Muslim world. The government has increased its surveillance on the funding and activities of Islamic NGOs. This has happened because of international pressure on a predominantly Muslim country like Bangladesh not to harbour any Islamic fundamentalist/terrorist organization. In all cases RNGOs were found to be paying bribes to get their funds released from the government offices to do their ‘God’s work’.

It was found that lack of transparency in the finances and activities of RNGOs greatly hamper their credibility and accountability. Interestingly, this allegation can be made against the secular NGOs too. One way to face the problem is to make RNGOs more transparent to the state and public on their sources of funds and expenditure. In reality, the only way to counter the influence of hostile governments and donors is through increased reliance on the clients - the rural poor. Only through the development of a system of accountability to the poor and public could NGOs truly transform themselves into organizations of the poor. Only by becoming organizations of the poor could NGOs truly prepare for a sustained struggle for empowerment.