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MADRASAS IN BANGLADESH

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In Bangladesh, a country where political uncertainty and poverty exist, the madrasa education system is a fundamental institution. While the government struggles to provide its population with a secure environment and economic development, this system offers a vital service to society. Despite this fact, madrasa education usually generates negative views and stereotypes that typify it as “backward” and “radical”, and associate it with anti-Western sentiment, terrorism, fundamentalism, and terrorist training camps. In the aftermath of the 9/11 incident, several accounts have been written in the West perpetuating this inaccurate conception. This brief seeks to provide greater understanding of the madrasa system of education in Bangladesh. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate that while this institution indeed has its problems, it is aware of and has made efforts to mitigate them while experiencing tremendous growth. It is necessary therefore to address this system as a legitimate and major institution in Bangladesh.

HISTORY OF MADRASAS IN BANGLADESH

Madrasas have historically been centers of learning in the Muslim world and continue to be so today. In the Indian sub-continent the madrasa system was conceived with the introduction of Islam preached by Muslim Sufis and saints, and the advent of Muslim rule. Madrasas were originally places for spiritual worship or *khanqas* that later developed into *maktabs* which taught Quran recitation and Islamic rituals; in time, madrasas were formed as sites of Islamic theological education. From the 13th to 19th centuries, the Muslim rulers of this region built *maktabs* or madrasas alongside mosques to teach both religion and science. Consequently, as Muslim rule consolidated,

madrasas became the principal institutions in the education system.

As Muslim empires fell or declined, one after another, Muslim learning went into decline and the Muslim education system began to crumble. The subsequent period was, in Muslim history, one that deeply affected the functioning and philosophy of the madrasas all over the Muslim world. Where once they had been open to reason and free thinking, scores of Muslims deserted these pursuits, and began to concentrate on the teachings of Islam as contained in the Quran. The madrasa system was further influenced by British colonization when the British took over the territory of Bengal in 1757. While educational institutions had earlier been run independently, the British assumed responsibility for them and began to introduce reforms. The British also began to modernize the system in 1826 by introducing English in the madrasa curriculum and establishing numerous modern schools, and shaping them on a “parcellized” understanding of Islam.¹ Consequently, the number of madrasas was steadily reduced. The British also set up the Calcutta Aleya Madrasa in 1781, establishing a new direction in madrasa education since it favored instruction in Muslim law and jurisprudence instead of an all-round education of the Muslims. The first Head Maulvi of the Madrasa, Mulla Majid-ud-Deen, formed the Madrasa based on the Dars-i-Nizami system of madrasa education, which required students to have completed their studies by the age of 17

¹ Imtiaz Ahmed, “On the brink of the precipice: Contemporary terrorism and limits of the state,” *The Independent*, 4 December 2005, <http://www.independent-bangladesh.com/news/dec/04/04122005ed.htm>.

or 18, and to be able to read and understand 99 prescribed books written in Arabic and Persian. The madrasas of Bengal followed this system, and Islamic education thus became associated with the state.

Subsequently, in 1910, the British divided the education system into two branches, the Old Scheme Madrasa and the New Scheme Madrasa. This dichotomy represented the separation of secular education for the elite and religious education for the poor; essentially the British sought to separate the state and religion by this new system. This design, however, was not received favorably by Muslim leaders who perceived it as a threat and sought to replace it with what they saw as the true form of Islam. With the introduction of a new modern secular education system in the colonial period, the British fundamentally changed the madrasa education system in Bengal. They not only displaced many madrasas but, due to disrespect for the system, created a sense of backwardness about it as compared to the modern educational system conceived. Following independence in 1971, the madrasa education system in Bangladesh was significantly transformed; there were now two types of madrasas, Aleya madrasas and Qawmi madrasas, both of which have continued to the present-day.

SHAPING PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT MADRASAS

Madrasa education, as one of the three branches of the Bangladeshi education system – the others being general education and technical vocational education – plays a vital role in the country. Aleya madrasas are a unique system of Islamic religious education that has few parallels in the Muslim world, offering both religious education and modern general education. They function under the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board, an independent body funded by the government that is charged with establishing madrasas, assigning teachers, and formulating the curriculum. This system

mandates teaching modern subjects like English, Bangla, Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, Geography, History, and a modified version of the Dars-i-Nizami system. It is structured in five levels – *ebtidai* (primary), *dakhil* (secondary), *alim* (higher secondary), *fazil* (graduate), and *kamil* (post-graduate). Although these madrasas are mostly privately owned and run, they receive government support. The government of Bangladesh pays 80 per cent of the salaries of their teachers and administrators and a significant part of their development expenditure, provides scholarships and books, and assigns a substantial sum to the construction of additional private madrasas. The majority of the graduates of the Aleya madrasa system pursues a higher education or joins the job market.

Qawmi madrasas are private non-governmental institutions which are, for the most part, affiliated to the Deobandi faith and teach the traditional Dars-i-Nizami system. Before the government recognized the system in 2006, they had little or no association with the government, and were solely supported by religious endowments or by *zakat*, *sadaqa*, donations, and contributions from individuals or local and international Islamic organizations. These madrasas have been organized under a



Source: <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/photo/detail/4699/>

private institution called the Befaqul Mudarressin of the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasa Education Board, enjoying autonomy from the state. This has now become problematic as its financial independence has allowed the *ulema* in Bangladesh to wield religio-political power. What is more, it has permitted the *ulema* to resist efforts by the state authorities to institute reforms in the madrasa system and bridge the differences between the traditional system of Islamic education and modern secular education. Concerns arise when the entire education system comes to be seen as a religious institution because of this wing which has a traditionalist hard line policy and is against any kind of modern thinking.

It is important to appreciate the distinctions between the two types of madrasas. Qawmi madrasas continue to represent Islamic identity in Bangladesh, catering to its society's need for religious practices and services. At the same time, however, it contributes to a traditional rather than a modern education system. This does not



Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1971233.stm

help Bangladesh's development or its education system. Further, the Qawmi madrasas' use of the traditional education system generates incorrect beliefs that madrasas are archaic. Conversely, Aleya madrasas are viewed in a more positive light as they combine religious and modern subjects and, therefore, are seen as contributing positively to the education system.

Perceptions about madrasas tend to be aggregated into one category and then compared with the general educational system. These views are tempered by factors like socioeconomic class, regional level of development, urban/rural variations, and to some extent, gender. Studies show that madrasas are generally thought to be contributing to the educational, social, and economic development of the country. The majority of parents enroll their children in the madrasa education system, rather than general education, because of religious factors, believing it necessary to educate at least one of their children in religion, and also because they think that a madrasa education stresses moral values and has a strong disciplinary system. The socioeconomic class divide is a determining factor governing views on madrasa education. Those who belong to the wealthier, Westernized sections of society are influenced by the understanding that madrasas only offer religious teachings and do not produce useful members of society, and therefore have a more critical view of madrasa education while those who have a greater understanding about madrasas seem to have a more appreciative and optimistic viewpoint. Many view this type of education as fundamental for Muslims and even though negative views and stereotypes remain prevalent, those closely associated with the madrasa system still hold it in high esteem. However, there are also those who support government involvement, especially where Qawmi madrasas are concerned and realize that madrasas cannot focus exclusively on religious education.

The West generally has a negative view of madrasas. It frowns on this system, regarding it as a breeding ground for Islamic extremists. In Bangladesh, it considers the continued growth of madrasas as a failure of the government and argues that the growth of the madrasa system is associated with growing fundamentalism. Contrary to this view, however, the madrasas approach to Islam is conservative, methodical, legalist, and

sectarian rather than revolutionary, radical, or militant. Furthermore, in the traditional syllabus for the study of the Hadith, the chapters on jihad are excluded, and in that on the study of *fiqh* texts, any subject matter that addresses political or jihad-related issues is left out. It is apparent that those who propose a link between the madrasa curriculum and Islamic militancy ignore these realities. While there certainly is some truth to these observations – certain madrasas do function as “camouflage” for underground armed groups in the country – to make sweeping statements suggesting that all madrasas are radical, anti-American, religiously extreme, and other such simplifications, would be wrong.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

It is a general belief that the *ulema* have withstood pressure by the state to introduce reforms in the system and that the madrasa system remains resistant to change but there have been many changes over the past few years. The system recognizes the need to modernize and as the numbers of madrasas and students have grown, it is important to note, so have the number of girl students. More madrasas are becoming Aleya madrasas, integrating the general education curriculum with the religious curriculum and new linkages are being made between traditional and modern education, permitting students to transfer from madrasas to general education schools and universities with less difficulty. These interactions can be viewed as “creating a measure of shared intellectual space and a common language of religious discourse between the *ulema* and the modern-educated Muslim intellectuals” in the context of “an increasingly mature democratic political process”² in Bangladesh rather than

² Mumtaz Ahmad, “Madrasa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh,” in Satu Limaye, Robert Wirsing and Mohan Malik (eds.), *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Spring 2004, <http://www.apcss.org/Publications/Edited%20Volumes/ReligiousRadicalism/Pages>

fostering an unchecked Islamic extremism that could work against democracy. Furthermore, in August 2006, the Nationalist-Islamist government coalition in Bangladesh recognized Qawmi madrasas, qualifying their graduates for government jobs. This is a definitive step in the country’s education scheme for, as recognized by Education Minister M Osman Farruk, “Madrasah education is less qualitative. We need to modernize madrasa education, not campaign to repeal it.”³

Regardless of these developments, inaccurate negative perceptions of madrasas remain prevalent. Such views are particularly dominant in the Western-educated segments of society and those who fear that Bangladesh’s fragile democracy will be affected by religious extremism. One could argue that this is paranoia but given the presence of violent Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, it is understandable that those who are unaware and uninformed about madrasas would come to such conclusions; it is somewhat difficult to ascertain their exact role in a country that many view as becoming increasingly fundamentalist. The academic standards attained in madrasas is much lower than in general education, fueling the belief that madrasas do not equip their students for a productive economic life and create an unemployed section of youth who have are more likely to undertake fundamentalism. Madrasas, consequently, become part of the problem that afflicts the country; Although Bangladesh was declared to be a democratic and secular state upon its independence, in 1972, however, Islam was declared to be the state religion, and

from *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* ch5.pdf.

³ “Bangladesh to modernize madrassas,” *The Indian Express*, 14 March 2005, <http://www.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=43204>

the country has turned increasingly religious since then.

Despite the subject being sensitive in the current political and international circumstances, it is necessary to counter misperceptions about madrasas in Bangladesh. In 2005, 2,236,025 students graduated at the *dakhil* level, 550,813 at the *alim* level, 529,952 at the *fazil* level, and 16,431 at the *kamil* level; a total of 3,453,221 students either sought higher education or went into the job market.⁴ Given the total number of students who graduated in Bangladesh that year, those graduating from madrasa education equates to approximately 31.13 per cent. This percentage could be higher, given that Qawmi madrasas do not keep enrollment records; hence, it is difficult to ascertain what this exact number is. While critics of madrasas assert that schools are the responsibility of the state, the madrasas fill a void that the government is unable to bridge. By providing basic education to poor families who cannot afford to send their children to modern schools, or to schools that are either too expensive or too crowded, the madrasas perform an important function in an impoverished country.⁵ Given the value attached to madrasas, and to comprehend the rapid growth of madrasas in Bangladesh, it is therefore, necessary to evaluate the madrasas education system in a more balanced manner.

⁴ Ministry of Education, "Education Statistics 2005," Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 5 July 2007, http://www.moedu.gov.bd/edu_statistics.php.

⁵ Ahmad, n. 2.