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Case Study

Role of Religious Actors in Educational Provision: A Case Study in Bangladesh Context

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Abstract

Since 9/11, there has been a worldwide upsurge in studies on the role of religious actors in the education sector across the Muslim world. In the context of Bangladesh, a plethora of literature examined the role of state supported institutions and NGOs in providing educational provision to the students, but relatively little attention has been paid on the role of faith-based religious schools such as Qawmi education system in providing public education. However, the method applied in this current study was analytic and descriptive to deal with the secondary data. This study concludes with two core arguments. First, the Qawmi education system is playing a significant role in enhancing the capability of a large segment of the impoverished people. At the same time, the study acknowledges the potential problematic side of this education in a setting where the education, in many cases, creates segregation and friction. Second, Islamic actors are serving as bridging factor for grass root level education where the state is unable or not willing to reach.

Keywords

Religious Actors, Education, Non-state actor, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Historically, the religious actors are playing many different roles in a country, involving themselves in the governance of education, politics, economic affairs and so on. Education is given key priority in most of the major world religions like Islamic, Christian, Hindu, as well as Buddhist traditions. Religious schools, such as Islamic Madrasas, Church led schools, Hindu Pathshala (Hindu religious schools) play constructive roles in the governance of education, unless their teachings spread religious hatred in the wider society (van Ommering, 2009).

In Arabic, madrasa refers to "a place of learning or education" (Darlymple, 2005). In the Muslim majority countries around the world, madrasas role in political, cultural, economic and institutional sphere of life is widely acknowledged. In history and in different contexts, a madrasa

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is a place where the young people first learn to read, recite the Islamic religious text holy Qur'an and perform basic Islamic rituals. The term also meaning a place of advanced religious teaching, proper transmission and interpretation of Islamic texts since the beginning of Islamic centuries. In the Arab region, such as gulf countries, Lebanon and Egypt, madrasa is a term meaning all kind of schools regardless of their academic curriculum (Armanios, 2005). However, in South Asia, madrasa describes traditional religious institutions where people mostly from low-income families send their children to receive their education (Riaz, 2005). The role of Islamic actors in providing education is considered as an integral part of the education system in Bangladesh. Its origin traced back to the British colonial period and has continued to operate along with the general education system since the creation of the country (Riaz, 2014). Though Islamic actors are now deeply penetrated in the country's educational landscape, their role and education system has always had its critics. For many years, the urban secular intellectuals in the country are opposing this stream of education, urging governments to reform madrasa education and introduce a uniform curriculum (Ahmad, 2009). However, in reality, such demands never received popular support and approval from successive governments. The common critiques against madrasa education is that, it is kind of obsolete, backward and unable to keep pace with the modern education environment; these schools are not giving required skills to its graduates to run public office and hence, to design a good career and contribute in the development of the country. These schools are only preparing religious jobs like mosque imams, madrasa teachers and Islamic judge etc. Another criticism is that, the people who are running the schools are not well-trained and they lack necessary skills to equip the students to work in a modern workforce. However, the defender of this education stream refutes the criticisms by arguing that their pedagogical approach is the only way to preserve the authentic version of Islamic knowledge (Christopher, 2006).

In the context of Bangladesh, much emphasis has been placed on examining the role of state regulated institutions and NGOs in providing education provision to the people (Ahmed et al., 2007), but relatively little attention has been paid to the role of Islamic Qawmi education system in providing public goods such as education. A good amount of work has been done on Qawmi education, but they are mostly focused on its relation to extremism (Kumar, 2009) and political developments (Hossain, 2012); neglects its role as traditional religious institutions in the modern period. So, examining the role of Qawmi education system requires undertaking a considerable discussion and research. The role of Qawmi education stream has been studied because many of its graduates are increasingly playing an important role in many different social sectors in the country. By concentrating on this type of education stream, the research aims to bring two issues at the forefront. First, even though the formal education is playing an important part in the country's education landscape, the Qawmi education also deserves more attention from the policy community. And the second, it is important to know what factors are contributing to sustain and expansion of this education stream. It is against this background; this article examines the contribution of Qawmi madrasa education in Bangladesh by drawing literature on the historical role of Islamic actors in the education sectors. In doing so, the study examines the factors behind Qawmi educations perform in the country. The paper concludes with two core arguments. First, the Qawmi education system is playing a significant role in enhancing the capability of a large segment of the impoverished people. At the same time, the study acknowledges the potential problematic side of this education in a setting where the education, in many cases, creates segregation and friction. Second, Islamic actors are serving as bridging factor for grass root level education where the state is unable or not willing to reach.

2. Objectives

The subject has been researched by analyzing and evaluating the following aspects. The general objective is to investigate the historical role played by the religious teachers in the education

sectors around the world as well as in Bangladesh and to examine their contribution. The specific objectives are to delineate the educational terrain of Bangladesh and find out the key actors in this sector and to analyze the factors behind the spread religious actors led education provision in Bangladesh.

3. Literature Review

A good number of works has been done on Qawmi education; however, they are mostly focused on its relation to extremism and political developments and neglects its role as traditional religious institutions in the modern period. Therefore, a careful investigation on the role of Qawmi education system requires undertaking a considerable discussion and research. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the contribution of Qawmi madrasa education in Bangladesh by drawing on literature related to the historical role of Islamic actors in the education sectors as well as the factors behind the Qawmi educations' performance prevailing in the country.

3.1. Role of Religious Actors in Education Provision

In the history of human civilization, the importance of religious actors in the education provision has not been a recent phenomenon. Education as a tool of preaching and interpreting the words of God remains a core of the agenda of almost every major world religion. The role of Christian missionaries in providing education service till now, and their role in sustaining and constraining the legitimacy of the rulers during the Middle Ages is widely recognized. Many of the renowned institutions today in the west started by the Christian missionary actors as a school for religious teachings now transformed into a university which is operating as a beacon of secularist education (Nasr, 2000). Till now, in many countries of Africa, the Christian missionaries are working as key actors in providing education services to the people, for example, in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Catholic and Protestant churches have been present since the colonial period in providing the education services and the state is cooperating with them (Titeca and De Herdt, 2011). Following the attack on USA in September 11, 2001, a substantial number of research works have been done on Islamic education provision around the world. The scholars mostly tried to find out whether Islamic education has any potential links with militancy or not (Neyazi, 2002); while many others concentrated to examine the role of Islamic actors in education sector (Ahmad, 2006; Ahmad, 2009) and the question of reform in madrasa (Tana, 2009). The Islamic actors have a rich tradition in educating both the Muslims and Non-Muslims (Riaz, 2010) since the birth of this religion and their roles were not static. For several centuries, Islamic religious institutions like madrasas, Muslim universities and mosques have accomplished many great tasks. During the early stage of Muslim era, the Muslim *Sufis* (Muslim ascetic and mystic) and saints used to travel faraway lands to disseminate the words of Islam and moreover, they founded many religious seminaries to teach the people wherever they kept their footstep.

The first Islamic religious institutions called 'Al-Azhar Mosque' is said to have been established in Egypt by the religious rulers called Fatimid caliphs in 972 as a center place for Shiite (adherent of the Shia branch of Islam) Islamic teachings which later turned into university, famously called Al-Azhar University (Herrera, 2003). Till now, as a bastion of learning, the religious actors in Al-Azhar University significantly contributing to the education sector for several hundreds of years. Their influence is ranging from the public to private sphere in the society and beyond. In his famous speech at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, US President Barak Oabama said that "[A]t places like Al-Azhar -- that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment" (Obama, 2009).

3.2. Education Landscape of Bangladesh

The educational terrain of Bangladesh is composed of heterogeneous actors ranging from secular formal education to religious education system. There are four types of schools operating in the

country, the first one is government schools, the second, privately managed secular schools, the third, NGOs led school and the fourth type is madrasa education (Yusuf, 2014a). From the operational point of view, they can be categorized into two broad sectors-the primary education which is managed by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and from junior to higher education is administered by the Ministry of education (Yusuf, 2014a). And, it has four levels of education consists of: the primary schools (5 years of study), the secondary schools (5 years), and higher secondary education (2 years) and then tertiary education. The presence of the diverse types of schools is not surprising given the fact that school aged population in the country stood at forty-one and half million as the year of 2011 (BPHC in BEI, 2011).

As a religious institution, madrasas exist all over Bangladesh and they are not in homogeneous nature. There are two categories of madrasas (Islamic school) exist in Bangladesh, one is Aliya madrasa, which is directly integrated with government supported institution called Madrasa Education Board and the other one is, Qawmi madrasa, which is managed privately by the Islamic actors and govt. does not have any oversight on them (Asadullah, Chaudhury and Josh, 2009). However only recently, on 11April 2017, the government of Bangladesh recognized the Dawra degree of Qawmi madrasa as equivalent to master's degree of government university. While announcing the decision, Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina said that:

> *"[K]eeping the unique characteristics of Qawmi madrasa and based on the basic principles of Darul Ulum Deobandh, the certificates of Dawra-e-Hadith of Qawmi madrasa has been given the status of master's in Islamic Studies and in Arabic" (The Daily Star, 12 April 2017).*

These two types of education stream- Aliya and Qawmi not only differ in terms of academic curriculum, but they also differ in terms of world view, theological stances and overall structure (Riaz, 2014). The Aliya madrasas receive substantial amount of funding while the Qawmi madrasas did not get any funding from the public sources as of yet. In addition to the teachings of Quran and Sunnah, the government supported Aliya madrasas adopted general education subjects to help its graduates to integrate with higher studies and for employment. On the other hand, the Qawmi education system narrowed its focus on teaching Islamic values and beliefs with the aim of producing "good Muslim".

The actual number of Qawmi madrasas in the country varies significantly from different sources and it subjects to elusive speculations. Because national education statistics on madrasa rarely include reliable information on these institutions, its size and significance, therefore the exact figure has been subject to tremendous controversy and debate. According to the Bangladesh government education statistics 2005, there were around 6800 Ebtidai (primary) madrasas and over 9214 Aliyah (post-primary) madrasas exist in the country which is recognized by the state. These numbers have increased to 8199 and 9341 by the year of 2014 (BANBEIS, 2014). According to one study, approximately 8000 madrasas of this type present in Bangladesh (Mercer et al., 2006), while Sattar (2004) by using data collected from one of Qawmi Madrasa Association, puts the number at 4000. Approximately 1.4 million students were reported to be enrolled in these types of madrasas (Asadullah and Choudhury, 2016). Riaz (2008) in his study mentioned that the total number of Qawmi madrasa is reported to be 60,000. Asadullah et al. (2009) in a recent report mentioned that the popular media within the country and outside exaggerates the figure of Qawmi madrasas in both primary and secondary level of education in the country which is much lower than the mentioned figures. BEI (2011) estimate suggests that, around thirty-seven thousand madrasas are currently operating in the country with around three hundred and thirty-four thousand students and approximately two hundred and thirty thousand teachers working in these religious schools. The number tells us that a large number of students are involved with this education system. However, the number of students significantly varies in different levels of education.

Figure 1: Distribution of primary enrolment share of educational institutions by type

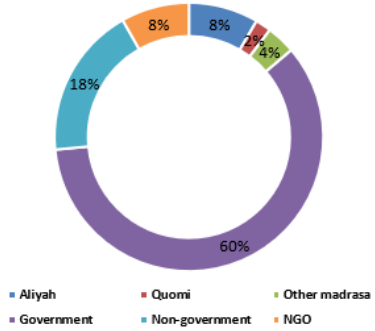
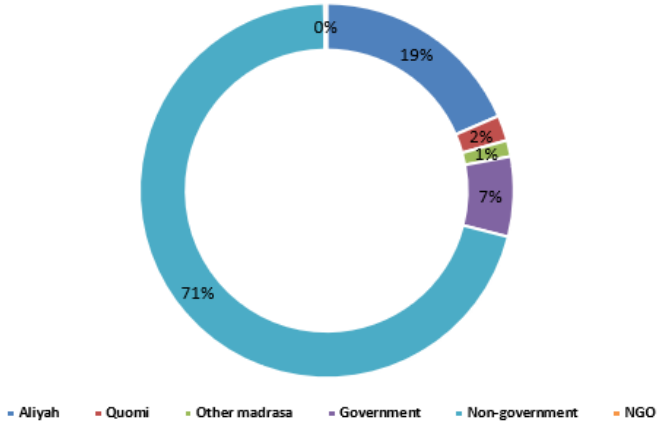


Figure 2: Distribution of secondary enrolment share of educational institutions by type



Source: Asadullah et al. (2009)

The above figure 1 & 2 shows that the student's enrollment varies in different section; the overall share of the madrasa students is approximately 31 percent in the primary and secondary level of education, of which Qawmi madrasa share around 4 percent. The enrolment in the secondary level in Qawmi institutions is almost same as the primary level enrolment.

4. Methodology

This study is conducted by applying qualitative research approach. The data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The source materials like the GoB documents/ archived reports in the public domain, journal articles and book chapters have been extensively used for the study. The newspaper reports and editorials of leading dailies have also been consulted and incorporated appropriately. While undertaking research, maximum use has also been made of the internet to access both primary and secondary sources of information.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Historical development and Contribution of Qawmi Education System

Since the early 20th century, the Qawmi madrasa education has been rapidly proliferating in the rural Bangladesh (Bhuiyan, 2010). The economic status of the student's family background plays

a major role for the enrollment in Qawmi madrasa education. Scholarly works found a correlation between household income and the education in the madrasa system. BEI (2011) studied in some districts of Bangladesh found that 82 percent of the students in the madrasas where the research is conducted are from poor economic background; and they are from difficult to reach areas where state led programs are not widespread due to geographical isolation, poor infrastructure and other limitations. The study by Asadullah et al. (2012) found that madrasa enrolment falls as household income increases. The Qawmi education system offers the poor students and orphans free of cost education, room for boarding, free food facilities and thus they mostly appeal to the students from impoverished families (Yusuf, 2014b) while the students who have wealthy family background, they finance by themselves (Banu, 2007). In terms of flexibility of the operational activities, whereas the officially recognized education system requires good physical learning environments to operate, the Qawmi madrasas are able to run within particular local settings without any good physical infrastructure, even in a single mosque or in a small house (Yusuf, 2014b).

Given the complex situation in the management of education sector in many rural parts of the country, the Qawmi institutions are playing a vital part in terms of increasing student's enrolment. The study by Al-Samarrai (2007) shows that where the state lacks proper education intervention the madrasas are joining there to fill up the gaps. However, the quality of the Qawmi education remains a major challenge which needs to be taken into account. The tussle between the government and the Qawmi madrasa authority is going on for many years over the reform in their academic curriculum but significant improvement is yet to be done. The government of Bangladesh formulated a policy in the year 2012 and a commission was formed to reform the Qawmi madrasa systemin general, particularly the academic curriculum (Riaz, 2017). But the effort did not succeed.

Most of the graduates from the Qawmi madrasa education system find jobs in the religious functionaries like imams (prayer leader) and Muazzin (a person who summons for prayer from mosque in every five times a day) of mosques in different parts of the country (Banu, 2007), and they also get jobs in foreign countries like in Middle East where they are recruited as Imam. Moreover, they find employment opportunities in the countries where there are a significant number of Bangladeshi people reside. These people are contributing in the increasingly booming remittance sector of the country. The top fifteen to twenty percent of graduates find jobs as teachers in different madrasas and rest of them take various professions like small scale businessmen or marriage registrar etc. (Ahmad, 2006). Despite poor salary structure, the teaching profession in madrasas does give the graduates an opportunity to earn a livelihood. It also allows them to transfer their social and religious knowledge to the wider community. The madrasa-educated graduates also participate in religious forums, organizations and institutions in different parts of the country. For its critics, a frequently made allegation is that the academic texts taught in the Qawmi education have some elements which seeds intolerance among its graduates towards western materialistic culture and the society and some even went further to argue that the curriculum is promoting militancy within the Qawmi students. However, the study by Ahmad (2005) didn't find any correlation between the academic curriculum and militant activities. Another criticism made by its critics is that the Qawmi education is creating contention among the Ulamas in the society at large. In an ethnographic study by Kabir (2009) in one of the rural Qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh shows how the teachings and academic curriculum of this education system is creating and sustaining the concept of "others" towards other sects of the Muslim community who follow different traditions.

5.2. Factors behind Qawmi Education System's Performance

After the independence of Bangladesh, the rapid growth of the madrasa sector can be attributed to a number of supply-side and demand-side interventions to the mainstream education in the

country. Scholars find a number of factors behind the proliferation of Qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh which can be divided into two broad categories- the first one is internal factor, such as, the existence of strong faith towards religion, economic exclusion of a large segment of the rural people, the demand side incompatibility towards the mainstream education system, the religio-political nexus, and lack of physical access to a formal school in rural areas (Bhuiyan, 2010) and the second, external factor like migration, donations from foreign sources and historic connections etc. (Kabir, 2009).

The religious beliefs and cultural forms of capital considered as central factor behind the operation and expansion of Qawmi education system in Bangladesh. Here, "capital" refers to Bourdieu's notion of "all the goods, material and symbolic, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 178). The education also teaches about the importance of economic and social capital, which every Muslim people must value to preserve their faith, actions and manners for the process of being a good Muslim (Bhuiyan, 2010). The economic considerations also provide a significant impetus in terms of enrolment in the Qawmi madrasas. This institution arguably provides a cheaper alternative to the non-madrasa schools and therefore likely to attract the relatively poorer households. The parents who were unable to afford admission fees, purchase of textbooks, transportation cost and private tuition fees required to attend in government recognized schools and/or Aliya madrasas may often find that their only option is admission in a Qawmi madrasa. In addition to the household poverty, the community characteristics may matter in terms of enrolment in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Whilst some research findings lend supports to the argument that the ideology of individual households' matter in terms of enrolment (e.g. religious belief and concern about the fate after death), it could still be led by the factors such as access to madrasa and the location of household.

Over the years, the Qawmi madrasas have their own clientele from local, national and international level to support their works. The local political elites, powerful people and other institutions donate money, land and other forms of material resources for building and maintaining mosques, madrasas, and shrines around the country (Ahmad, 2006). The influence over and blessings from the madrasa is working as a vital factor for local political elections since the religious actors have a soft power to manipulate the voting mind of local religious people. In fact, the Qawmi madrasa itself is working as a vote bank. Hence, maintaining good relations with this religious institution through donation and some other forms of social relations is a good investment for the local political leaders. Sometimes power struggle among the political parties over the influence on the madrasa takes into surface where one party compete with other party to attain the support from madrasa by making different kind of pledges (Bhuiyan, 2010).

During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, people from different professions ranging from wealthy people, businessman, civil servants, extortionist to contractors generously donate money and seek blessings for the hereafter. The financial independence of the Qawmi madrasa system has been a major source of the religio-political power base of the Ulama in Bangladesh. It has also enabled them to resist the reforms proposal introduced by the government in the education system. The households who do not afford the expenses of mainstream education they find the nearest Qawmi madrasa as a good option for their children. The public education stream has been struggling over the years to accommodate the increasing number of students. Their enrolment has risen in the last few decades, the quality of the state-run schools has fallen down.

Apart from the local socio-political and economic factors, the external factors like interaction with the Middle Eastern countries over the years through migration and the sense of community feeling, the individual donations from some foreign sources andthe poltical development in the muslim majority countries play an instrumental role in the spread of this education (Begum and Kabir, 2012).The study by Hossain and Curtis (2010) showed that Qawmi madrasas received

financial support from the MENA countries- Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Libya in the 1970s to 1990s. They also receive individual donations from the Bangladeshi diaspora community, primarily from the United Kingdom. On the basis of media reports and other secondary sources, Riaz (2008) identified some externally supported Islamic NGOs and political developments (particularly the influx of Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh on the one hand and Bengali people to counter tribal rebels on the other) in the northeastern part of Bangladesh as important catalysts that helped to expand of Qawmi madrasas. The Qawmi madrasas also receive patronization from Darul Ulum Deobond, India in the form of teacher and student exchange program, sharing education materials and advanced religious training etc. (Kabir, 2009) which acts a impetus for its operation .

6. Conclusion

As a denominational affliate of Deobond education tradition and custodians of Islamic knowledge, the Qawmi madrasas are having a significant impact on the social and public life in Bangladesh.The growing particiaption and emrging voice by many of its graduates in the social, economic and political affairs in the country is a sign of the constructive role playing by thethe religious actors. The enrollement number of Qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh has not increased in a significant number in the last few years (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2016), with most graduates employed in the teaching profession, whether working in existing madrasas or establishing a new one.There are a range of factors working behind Qawmi educations operation in Bangladesh which includes both internal and external factors which is clearly discussed above. Those social, political and economic factors help the actors of Qawmi education to expand its activities over the years. The Qawmi education system's demarcation of boundary in terms of management, teaching and academic curriculum, in many cases, making a doctrinal zone which further createssegregation of this communitywithin the greater society. From the human capitalist point of view, the graduates in the Qawmi madrasa education may not act as a pivotal role in increasing the labor market productivity but the education system equips its students with the informed choice that they give value most. In a broad way, the education stream has contributed a lot in increasing the access to education, by providing education to the hard to reach people, preparing its graduate in Islamic knowledge and job market.

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