

ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Tradition, Trends, and Trajectories

Mumtaz Ahmad
Professor of Political Science
Hampton University, Hampton, VA 23668
<mumtaz.ahmad@cox.net>

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Mumtaz Ahmad is professor in Hampton University's Department of Political Science. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' "Fundamentalism Project," Dr. Ahmad has been a Research Fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Fellow of the American Institute of Pakistan Studies and the International Institute of Islamic Thought, a Fulbright Professor in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and a Visiting Professor at International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur. Dr. Ahmad holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. His main areas of academic interest are the comparative politics of South Asia and the Middle East, Islamic political thought and institutions, and the comparative politics of contemporary Islamic revivalism. Dr. Ahmad has published seven books and numerous papers and articles on politics of Islamic resurgence and Islamic developments in South Asia and the Middle East.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary

This paper provides an overview of Islamic education in Bangladesh and examines its place and role in the public sphere within the context of both the general education and the changing order of society. It shows that the Islamic educational system in Bangladesh is diverse and multi-dimensional, operates both under and without government oversight and, contrary to the popularly-held view, has undergone significant changes in the recent past. The paper finds that, in the main, there is no direct link, either doctrinal/ideological or institutional, between Islamic radicalism and the Islamic education system, which represents an integral and formative element of Bangladesh society.

Key findings

- Islamic schools have experienced phenomenal growth in recent years. Both the demand for religious and moral education and lower educational expenses are major factors that lead parents to send their children to Islamic schools.

- ‘Alia madrassas are under government control and are, therefore, open to reform initiatives. Quomi madrassas are mostly run by private donations and charitable endowments and are, therefore, not amenable to reform initiatives from outside. This does not mean, however, that the private madrassa system has remained totally stagnant and has not been able to generate changes from within, or has not responded to the changes in the socio-economic and political environment.
- While the conventional type of student politics is not uncommon in ‘Alia madrassas, with a few exceptions, most Islamic schools in the Quomi sector are either apolitical or non-political. No political activities, Islamic or otherwise, are allowed in the Quomi madrassas either by the students or by the teachers. There exists, however, a clear ideological and sectarian demarcation among the Islamic schools that may have some consequences for national politics.
- The author found no direct link between Islamic schools and militancy in Bangladesh, either doctrinal/ideological or institutional. Whatever little connection between the madrassas and radicalism or terrorism that one can observe in Bangladesh today is ideologically expressed by, and institutionally linked to, a small segment of the Ahl-e-Hadith, an ultra-conservative Muslim group.

Policy implications

- There is a significant level of awareness among the teachers and senior students about U.S. interventions in the Middle East and most of them are vocal in their opposition to such interventions. However, Islamic education systems in Bangladesh do not represent any terrorist threat as far as their pedagogic orientation is concerned.
- The limited terrorist activities in Bangladesh seem to have been informed primarily by social and economic injustice and apparent secularization of culture and only secondarily by the external political development in the global scale.
- Islamic educational institutions can play important formative roles in social development of Bangladesh especially in the field of eradication of illiteracy, environmental awareness, building up of civic awareness and promoting ideas of economic and social justice.

Introduction

On 17 August 2005, sixty three of the sixty four districts of Bangladesh came under a coordinated terrorist attack in which bombs were exploded at about four hundred places. This incident was followed by the killing of two judges and, later on, several other ordinary people in the first ever suicide bombing in Bangladesh. Though the actual casualties in these incidents have been nominal in comparison to those in New York, Bali or Madrid, they have serious implications for Bangladesh, which is the third largest Muslim state in terms of population and also one of the very few countries in the Muslim world where institutional democracy is functional. These incidents, however, appeared to be the culmination of a series of similar but small-scale religiously inspired violent events that have been taking place in Bangladesh since the early 1990s. In the wake of these incidents over a period of more than a decade, a considerable public discussion has centered on the madrassas or religious education system, which have been suspected of contributing to the rise of religious radicalism and violence.

Surprisingly, not much research has been done on the madrassa education in Bangladesh and the works that have appeared recently are based on impressionistic accounts and tend to place the system in the more obvious context of conservatism and emerging radicalism. Most of these works have been written from a remarkable intellectual and ideological distance and, in most cases, regard the madrassa system as the ominous ‘other’ of the mainstream education system. However, the persistence of traditional Islam as a significant cultural alternative and as the intellectual mode of still vital religious institutions in South Asian Muslim societies is nowhere more salient than in the madrassa system. Madrassas have long been the centers of classical Islamic studies and the guardians of the orthodoxy in South Asian Islam. They are the social sites for the reproduction of Islamic orthodoxy. Hence, to say that the ideological orientation of madrassa education is conservative is to state the obvious: they are supposed to be conservative as their very *raison d’être* is to preserve the integrity of the tradition. Indeed, it is fair to argue that madrassas constitute the core of the religio-cultural complex of Islam in Bangladesh, as in South Asia in general. Given the intimate historical and social context in which the people of the region engage themselves with the madrassa system, it is imperative that any serious research in this regard must take the subject matter beyond the media headlines.

In the context of an overwhelming need for a detailed investigation into the Islamic education system in Bangladesh, this paper seeks to provide an overview of Islamic educational institutions in Bangladesh, both government-funded and private; present a general sense of trends in Islamic education as a whole; examine the evolution of Islamic education in recent years in response to changes in state, society, and international affairs—paying particular attention to trends in madrassa-style Islamic educational institutions at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels; review the past efforts at reform of madrassa education in Bangladesh; assess the current role of Islamic education in politics and society; examine the extent of the connections between the madrassas and militancy in Bangladesh; and identify the areas of strengths and weaknesses in the Islamic education system in Bangladesh and offer relevant policy recommendations.¹

An Overview of the Educational System in Bangladesh

The educational system in Bangladesh is remarkably diverse in terms of both institutional structures and pedagogic focus. Broadly, the educational system in the country can be categorized into two streams: ‘moderately secular’ and ‘religious.’ The secular system, which is considered the mainstream, has evolved from its colonial past and has reached its current state after undergoing numerous policy shifts and experimentations during the past two centuries. As it stands now, the system offers a 17-year cycle of education between Grade 1 and the Masters level. The period between Grade 1, which enrolls student with an average age of 6, to Grade 5 is considered primary cycle; Grades 6 to 10 and 11 to 12 are secondary and higher secondary levels, respectively; Grade 13 to 16 represents Bachelors level; Grade 17 represents Masters level. Those who successfully complete secondary and higher secondary levels are awarded Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC), respectively. At this level, diplomas are also offered in different vocational and technical subjects, such as

¹ This research is the outcome of a combination of visits to several regionally and nationally well-known madrassas; interviews with madrassa administrators, teachers and students; primary and secondary data provided by several madrassas, government departments, non-government organizations, and think tanks; and published documents and newspaper reports.

nursing. At the Bachelors level, the degrees awarded include BA, BSc, BBA, BCom, BSS, LLB, BEd, etc. Similarly, at the Masters level, the degrees awarded include MA, MSc, MCom, MBBS (Medical), MBA, MSS, LLM, MEd.

Secondary level education is provided by 17,386 schools (public: 317, private: 17,069) with a student population of 8,126,362. There are 2,794 colleges that cater to higher secondary education and, in some cases, Bachelors level education for about 1,449,229 students. While the overall management of examinations and awarding of degrees at the secondary and higher secondary levels are under the Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board of the government, the Bachelors and Masters level education is administered by the National University of Bangladesh, also a government institution. The remaining need for graduate and postgraduate level education is met by about 70 universities, which includes both private and public universities.²

The religious education as offered in the madrassas in Bangladesh can be divided into two types: 'Alia madrassas, which are both wholly or largely funded and controlled by the government; and Quomi madrassas, which are privately managed and funded by community donations. Together, the 'Alia and Quomi madrassas constitute the core of Islamic education (primary through higher levels) in Bangladesh. The next section deals with these two systems in detail. Suffice it to mention here that the primary level of these two streams, known as Ebtadaee, is more or less equivalent to that of the mainstream primary education, though there are differences in the quality of learning and the emphasis given to religious subjects. However, it is at the secondary and post-secondary levels that the madrassa education, both 'Alia and Quomi, diverges considerably from the mainstream, general education.

It may also be noted here that though most universities in the country have secular pedagogic orientations, all public universities offer higher education in Islamic Studies and related subjects, and enroll students with an 'Alia madrassa education background. For instance, the first-generation public universities, such as the Universities of Dhaka, Chittagong and Rajshahi, offer degrees in Islamic History and Culture, Arabic Studies, Islamic Studies, etc. Among these, Dhaka University has been most well-known for the high quality of its programs in Islamic History, Islamic Studies and the Arabic language in the subcontinent. The only government Islamic University, in the western district of Kushtia, offers a full range of degrees in various sub-fields of Islamic studies. In the private sector, there are four universities, Darul Ihsan University, Asian University, International Islamic University Chittagong and Manarat International University, which claim to have primary emphasis on Islamic subjects.

As far as pre-primary education is concerned, there is no clearly demarcated institutional affiliation of students. At this level, where students of ages between 3 and 5 are generally enrolled, there are mosque-based or community learning centers (Maktab/Noorani madrassas where elementary religious matters are taught), and private nurseries, especially in the cities, that cater to the upper classes.³

² These 2003 data is from Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (henceforth, BANBEIS).

³ For a graphic description of the current educational system of Bangladesh, see Appendix II.

Types of Islamic Schools in Bangladesh

The roots of traditional Islamic education in Bangladesh can be traced back to the early thirteenth century when Bakhtiyar Khilji, the first Muslim ruler of the region, established some madrassas along with mosques and *khanqahs* (shrines/ places for spiritual counseling) in today's northern Bangladesh.⁴ The madrassa system continued to be the sole provider of education to the Muslim population until the establishment of British colonial rule in the mid-eighteenth century. It is estimated that in the pre-colonial period, there were about 80,000 recognized madrassas in the area that presently constitutes Bangladesh and the neighboring three Indian states of West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar.⁵ The British intervention in the traditional Islamic education of the region brought about significant changes in the existing system, the result of which seems to inform even today's debates on religious education in Bangladesh. Therefore, a brief historical sketch of the emergence of the system in its colonial context and an examination of the resulting typology would be relevant here.

'Alia Stream of Islamic Education

The main educational concerns of the British administration were to produce human resources that would efficiently serve the colonial state, particularly the legal, revenue and secretarial administration. However, as Persian was the court language at the time of the British takeover, the initial government focus was on Perso-Arabic education. To address the demand for a pool of government employees well-versed in Islamic law and administrative practices, the East India Company established the Calcutta 'Alia Madrassa in 1780. The curriculum that was introduced was a revised version of Dars-i-Nizami, developed by Mullah Nizamuddin Sihalvi (d. 1747) who was a scholar of some repute in Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy in Lucknow.⁶ With a slight discontinuity from the pre-colonial madrassa curriculum, the Dars-i-Nizami curriculum focused on grammar, logic, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy, reducing substantially the time and efforts spent on the study of the Qur'an and Hadith.⁷

In any case, the need for madrassa graduates came to an end when English was introduced as the official language of India in the 1830s. From then on, while secular institutions were given special patronage, madrassa education was discouraged. The Madrassa-i-'Alia in Calcutta was never recognized by the Calcutta University, the then premier university in India, and eventually madrassa graduates were deprived of any opportunity to obtain government jobs. This drastic change in the colonial education policy had serious consequences for the educational prospects of the Indian Muslim community, which then sought to sustain the bases of Islamic learning

⁴ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal* (vol. IB, Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985), p. 828.

⁵ Dr A.K.M. Ayub Ali, *History of Traditional Islamic Education in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1983), p. 214.

⁶ This curriculum was not the same as that which is associated with the name of Mullah Nasiruddin Tusi (d. 1064) and the Madrassa Nizamia that he established in 11th century Baghdad.

⁷ 'Alia madrassas, one of the two Islamic educational streams in present day Bangladesh, emerged from this Calcutta Madrassa system. It may be noted here that after the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947, the Calcutta 'Alia Madrassa moved to Dhaka with all its teachers. Its library, with its rich collection of Islamic books and manuscripts, and its official records remained in Calcutta, however. Thus the Calcutta 'Alia Madrassa was reincarnated as the Madrasah-i-'Alia, Dhaka in the Pakistan period. This is now one of the three madrassas in Bangladesh which functions directly under the government.

through private, community-supported madrassas. While this met the popular demand for Islamic education to a certain extent, these institutions remained on the periphery of the colonial rule for two reasons: first, they did not equip their graduates for jobs either in the government or in private professions under changing economic conditions; and, second, they were seen as a threat to the colonial government. In this context, the government introduced the ‘new scheme madrassas’ to attract Muslims. The ‘new scheme’ madrassa curriculum reflected a combination of religious and secular subjects, thus opening up new doors for graduates to enter colleges and universities and, thereby, the job market. For obvious reasons, these madrassas became immensely popular in Muslim Bengal. At the time of the birth of Pakistan in 1947, there were 1,074 New Scheme Madrassas in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), with about 86,000 students. In the 1960s all these madrassas were gradually transformed into ‘Alia madrassas.’⁸

‘Alia madrassa system, as it stands now, is a unique system of Islamic religious education with few parallels in the Muslim world. It represents a combination of modern, secular education and traditional religious learning. Designed to be taught in 16 years, it is divided into five distinct levels—Ebtadaee (elementary), Dakhil (secondary), ‘Alim (higher secondary), Fazil (B.A.), and Kamil (M.A.). These madrassas teach all the required modern subjects, such as English, Bengali, science, social studies, math, geography, history, etc., along with a condensed version of traditional Islamic learning. In general, the ratio between religious and secular subjects taught in different stages stands at 40:60. Although they are privately owned and managed—with the exception of three ‘Alia madrassas that are wholly controlled by the government—the Government of Bangladesh pays eighty percent of the salaries of ‘Alia madrassa teachers and administrators and a considerable portion of their development expenditure.’⁹

The degrees awarded in this system carry the same weight as those of the mainstream general education system in the country. It is interesting to note, however, that while the ‘Alia system represents a combination of modern, secular subjects on the one hand, and Islamic religious sciences, on the other, the general reputation of the quality of its education remains rather unenviable in both quarters: the Quomi madrassas regard the Islamic content of the ‘Alia education as “superficial” and the mainstream schools consider its ‘secular’ content as “half-baked.” But the fact that the ‘Alia system has experienced more than 55 percent growth during the past ten years, with a five-fold increase in its student population, indicates that a large number of people are not dissatisfied with its quality of education. In addition, the majority of ‘Alia madrassa graduates merge into the general stream, and continue their education in colleges and universities where admissions are competitive. A recent survey of Bangladesh university teachers in the humanities and social sciences found that 32 percent of them were graduates of ‘Alia madrassas.’¹⁰

⁸ Umme Salema Begum, ‘Swadhinata uttar Bangladeshe Madrassa Shikkhar Gatidhara’ (Trends of Madrassa Education in post-Independent Bangladesh), *Bangladesh Asiatic Society Patrika*, vol.23, no. 1 and 2, (June, December, 2005), pp. 80-82.

⁹ According to a major USAID report on madrassas in Bangladesh, about 87 per cent of income for these madrassas come from the government. See *Bangladesh Educational Assessment. Pre-primary and Primary Madrasah Education in Bangladesh* (USAID, 2004), p.21.

¹⁰ Mumtaz Ahmad, ‘Madrassa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh’ in Satu P. Limaye et al, *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* (Honolulu: Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004).

‘Alia madrassas represent considerable diversity in their theological/doctrinal orientations. A majority of them are associated with the more populist Brelvi School, followed by the Ahl-e-Hadith and Deobandis. However, most ‘Alia madrassas present themselves as non-sectarian in order to attract students from families of diverse doctrinal background. Their teaching staff, in many cases, also reflects this diversity. The most avowedly sectarian madrassas in the ‘Alia sector are those associated with the Ahl-e-Hadith School, the prominent among them being Aramnagar ‘Alia Madrassa, in Jamalpur; Muhammadiya ‘Alia Madrassa, in Sirajganj; Dhamrai ‘Alia Madrassa, in Dhaka; Rasulpur ‘Alia Madrassa, in Narianganj; Korpai ‘Alia Madrassa, in Comilla; and Jagatpur ‘Alia Madrassa, also in Comilla.

Being the recipient of state funds, ‘Alia madrassas have a centrally organized management and, for the same reason, they are susceptible to government control and reform initiatives. All ‘Alia madrassas operate under the control and supervision of the Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board, and the quality of their instructional programs, especially the teaching of ‘secular’ subjects, and the qualifications of their teachers are as closely (or loosely) scrutinized by the government as those of the general education. Some educationists are of the view that while the ‘Alia madrassas fare much better in the humanities and social studies, the general stream schools are better equipped for instruction in math and science subjects.

Quomi Stream of Islamic Education

Quomi madrassas also follow a revised and updated Dars-i-Nizami curriculum. However, this madrassa system has a separate history and ideological orientation, which makes it considerably different from the ‘Alia madrassa system. As mentioned earlier, the Calcutta ‘Alia Madrassa originally adopted a curriculum which reduced the focus on the study of the Qur’an and Hadith to a large extent. Further, in 1791, *Tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur’an) and *Usul al Fiqh* (Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence) were also excluded from the list of compulsory subjects taught in this institution. For obvious reasons, Persian was given preference to Arabic.¹¹ At the backdrop of the expanding colonial administration and its need to meet the exigencies of day-to-day administrative problems, especially in revenue collection and judicial matters, it is no wonder that the revised Dars-i-Nizami curriculum introduced in the Calcutta scheme would represent the first cleavages between the religious and the secular that was coherently synthesized within the pre-colonial traditional Islamic education system.

This revised curriculum was, therefore, not an ideal curriculum for those who saw madrassa education primarily as a means for acquiring Islamic knowledge centered on the Qur’an and Hadith and, only secondarily, to gain knowledge of worldly affairs. Such pedagogic discomfort matured to a real sense of alienation with the first anti-colonial War of Independence in 1857. The war, in which many prominent ulama actively participated, proved a failure and, subsequent to the crushing defeat of what was termed as the “mutiny,” the British began to see the entire Muslim community as a potential threat to their rule. The Muslim community responded to this existential threat in two different ways. On the one hand, there emerged a number of influential modernist and liberal thinkers, such as Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Syed Amir Ali, who found it more prudent and practicable to improve the economic and political conditions of the Muslim community by cooperating with the British rather than by confronting them. These scholars emphasized the need for Muslims to acquire Western education in addition to Islamic learning.

¹¹ Ali, *History of Traditional Islamic Education*, p. 38.

Another response of the Muslim community to the post-1857 scenario was conservative in nature, and it sought a more tradition-bound educational system that would defend the community from the perceived threats of Western modernism and preserve the integrity of Islamic orthodoxy against alien ideas. The initiative in this regard was taken by two veterans of the War of Independence of 1857, Muhammad Qasim Nanotavi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, who established a madrassa in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, in 1866. The Deoband Madrassa, or Darul ‘Uloom, as it was originally named, soon became not only the most popular model Islamic educational institution in the subcontinent, but it also came to symbolize a school of thought, and a particular religious orientation—conservative, legalistic, literalist. A large number of Quomi madrassas in contemporary Bangladesh, as in India and Pakistan, represent the legacy of the Deoband madrassa.¹²

The Quomi system also has a 16-year curriculum that includes Ebtadaee (elementary), Mutawassitah (lower secondary), Sanaviah ‘amah (secondary/Dakhil), Sanaviah ulyah (higher secondary/Alim), Fazilat (B.A./Fazil), and Takmil (M.A./Kamil). The Deoband model that is followed by most of the Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh, as well as India and Pakistan, consists of about twenty subjects broadly divided into two categories: al-‘uloom an-naqliya (the transmitted sciences), and al-‘uloom al-‘aqliya (the rational sciences). The subject areas include grammar, rhetoric, prosody, logic, philosophy, Arabic literature, and dialectical theology, life of the Prophet, medicine, mathematics, polemics, Islamic law, jurisprudence, Hadith, and Tafsir (exegesis of the Qur’an). It is important to note that out of the twenty subjects, only eight can be considered as solely religious, and even among these fiqh (juristic formulations) takes the center stage. The remaining subjects are otherwise secular subjects which were included in the original Nizami curriculum both to equip the students for civil service jobs and as an aid to understanding religious texts. Also, facilities for teaching all of the subjects and books are not usually available in all madrassas. This is particularly true in the case of subjects such as medicine, mathematics, history, philosophy, prosody, and polemics. The result is that sometime students in smaller madrassas have to move to another, larger madrassa to complete their curriculum. In the past, this inter-madrassa transfer of students caused considerable problems for students in terms of their placement and promotion procedures, but the problem seems to have been solved by many Quomi madrassas who have decided to join one of the thirteen federating bodies (Wafaqs) that centrally administer examinations at various levels.

An overwhelming majority of the Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh are affiliated with the more conservative Deoband doctrinal orientation; madrassas of Brelvi—known as Hanafi in Bangladesh—orientation that represent populist, folk Islam, are few and far between in the Quomi stream, although their number is considerably larger in the ‘Alia system. Quomi madrassas affiliated with the Ahl-e-Hadith school, with its strictly literalist interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith and rejection of classical jurist’s authority, number about 200 and are mostly concentrated in the northern districts. It is important to note, however, that despite the well-known sectarian differences between Deobandi, Brelvi, and Ahl-e-Hadith schools, the curriculum taught and the textbooks used in their madrassas remain essentially the same.

¹² See both Ali, *History of Traditional Islamic Education*; and Ahmad, ‘Madrassa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh’.

The degrees awarded by the Quomi system are not recognized by the government and the graduates from these institutions generally seek careers in religious establishments—mosques and madrassas—and private business. These madrassas are private, receive no financial support from the government, and are supported by religious endowments or by zakat, sadaqa, and donations from the faithful from home and abroad. This financial autonomy of the Quomi madrasa system has been a major source of the independent religio-political power base of the ulama in Bangladesh. It has also enabled the ulama to resist the efforts of the state authorities to introduce reforms in the madrasa system and to bridge the gap between the traditional system of Islamic education and modern secular education.

Traditionally, the Quomi madrassas have operated as private enterprises wholly “owned” and managed by individual ulama, although every madrasa with a sizeable student body has a formal Majlis-e-Shura (Consultative Committee) that is usually meant to be a ceremonial and legitimating body rather than a real decision-making organ. Hence, the Quomi madrassas have been reluctant in the past to join any central, federating body for fear of losing their autonomy. It was only during the past three or four decades that the Quomi madrassas, facing the constant pressures from the state authorities to regulate their affairs and from their own constituencies to synchronize and coordinate their curriculum and examination systems, have decided to form federations consisting of “like-minded” madrassas.

Not all the Quomi madrassas, however, have been brought under one apex controlling body. The largest such body, Wafaqul-Madaris-ul-Arabia Bangladesh (Bangladesh Quomi Madrasa Education Board), controls 1,146 Quomi madrassas across the country.¹³ There are about twelve more such controlling boards. The Putia Madrasa-based Itehadul Madaris is another federating body with more than 550 Quomi madrassas as its members. Altogether, there are at present 3,651 Quomi madrassas—where complete Dars-e-Nizami curriculum is taught—that are formally affiliated with one of the thirteen federations (Wafaqs). These federations establish a uniform curriculum for their member madrassas; set standards for admissions, placements and promotions; provide guidelines for management practices; conduct centralized examinations; and award degrees. Then there are some individuals who have more than one madrasa under their control. For instance, Maulana Mujibur Rahman Juktibadi controls about 100 madrassas in different cities and towns.¹⁴ There are also madrassas—and these are in the majority—which are not affiliated with any of the Wafaqs and function independently (Table 1).

Table 1: Major Wafaqs (Association or apex body of Quomi Madrassas)

Name of Wafaq	Region	# of affiliated madrassas
Darul Ulum Moinsul Islam (Hathazari Madrasa)	Chittagong	1100
Al-Jamia al Islamia (Putia Madrasah)	Chittagong	500
Subhanghati Madrasa	Sylhet	400
Darul Ulum Madrasa	Kanaighat	225
Ranaping Madrasa	Sylhet	200
Gouhardanga Madrasa	Gopalganj	100
Madani Nagar Madrasa	Madani Magar	100

¹³ *Pariciti* [Introduction to Wafaqul-Madaris-ul-Arabia], Dhaka, 1997. The number must have increased since 1997.

¹⁴ *Prothom Alo*, Dhaka 3 April 2006.

Jamia Emdadia Madrassa	Kishorganj	80
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Deobandi Madrassas

An overwhelming majority of Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh are based on the Deoband model and, therefore, follow the doctrinal orientation of Deoband with its emphasis on fiqh, Hadith, and the Qur'an—and in that order. This does not mean, however, that the Deoband school gives more weight to jurists' formulations than it does to the Qur'an and Hadith; it is, rather, that the Deoband understanding of the Qur'anic text and the Hadith literature is derived principally from the interpretations given by the classical jurists and ulama. The Deoband tradition is identified with a more legalistic and literalist understanding of Islam, although there is a definite element of non-scholastic, “softer” Sufism that was also a part of the formative phase of the Deoband school. Deobandis are opposed, although not as aggressively as the Ahl-e-Hadith, to the more popular, syncretic and folk Islam that is practiced in the rural areas of Bengal where the orthodoxy has not penetrated very deeply, or where the influence of pirs (spiritual mentors) and saints has been quite extensive. Much of the extra-curricular training of the students in Deobandi madrassas is focused, therefore, on polemical disputations with the followers of the more devotional and populist Brelvi School. Madrassas in the Deoband tradition are also strongly opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami and do not allow their students to read books by its founder, Maulana Maududi. Also, much of the controversial “Fatwabaji” (religio-legal decrees issued by the ulama) on issues related to adultery, divorce and other marital affairs in recent years in rural Bangladesh has been associated with the mosque imams trained in the Deobandi madrassas.

Because of doctrinal affinity and common allegiance to the “*akaaberin*” (elders) of the Deoband School, there is a great deal of cooperation, solidarity, and inter-madrassa transfer of personnel among the Deobandi madrassas. Most of these madrassas are non-political and do not allow their students to engage in any political activity, including participation in the activities of Islamic political groups. There are instances, however, when the human resources of some madrassas have been used in election campaigns of the candidates of Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), the political party of the Deobandi ulama. However, this practice is limited to a very few Deobandi madrassas which are directly under the control of the leaders of the IOJ.

Brelvi Madrassas

Unlike in India and Pakistan, Brelvi (known in Bangladesh today as “Hanafi”) madrassas in the Quomi sector are few and far between in Bangladesh. There is no independent federation (Wafaq) of Brelvi madrassas; hence no reliable data is available about their numbers. In an interview in 2000, the Chairman of the government-funded Islamic Foundation reported that, according to their estimate, there were no more than fifty Brelvi madrassas in the Quomi system, and only half of them taught the entire Dars-e-Nizami curriculum. Surprisingly, however, a majority of the madrassas in the ‘Alia system are associated with the Brelvi school of thought. In the Quomi sector, the majority of Brelvi madrassas are operated by traditional pir families such as Pir of Sarsina and Athrasi Pir. Brelvi madrassas, like their counterparts in the Deoband tradition, also indoctrinate and train their students in sectarian polemics, both against the Ahl-e-Hadith and Deobandis. Politically, the Brelvi madrassas and their ulama are closer to the secularly-oriented Awami League, probably because of their populist and non-legalistic religious orientation.

Ahl-e-Hadith Madrassas

Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas started appearing in Western and Northern Bengal at the turn of the twentieth century. There were several dozen prominent Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Muslim Bengal in the 1920s, most of them in Calcutta and Northern Bengal.¹⁵ The most prominent Ahl-e-Hadith madrassa in North Bengal was run by Maulana Muhammad Bashiruddin Bengali in Dinajpur that was established sometime in the 1910s and produced a steady supply of prayer imams and khatibs for Ahl-e-Hadith mosques in North Bengal. A report prepared by the Jamaat-e-Islami, East Pakistan, in 1960 for the then Governor and Martial Law Administrator of East Pakistan, Lt. General Azam Khan, mentions more than fifty Ahl-e-Hadith Quomi and 'Alia madrassas, mostly in North Bengal¹⁶ Nevertheless, the number of Ahl-e-Hadith affiliated madrassas in East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, remained miniscule compared with both the Deoband-affiliated madrassas in the Quomi sector and the Brelvi-affiliated madrassas in the 'Alia sector.

It was only in the early 1980s that Bangladesh witnessed a considerable increase in the number of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in the country. Several factors seemed to have contributed to this sudden upsurge in the number of Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in the 1980s and in subsequent years. First, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the consequent sense of urgency on the part of the Saudis to "protect" the Sunni orthodoxy in South Asian Islam from the Shia religio-political influence of Imam Khomeini, led to a generous outpouring of Saudi funds to their doctrinal counterparts—the Ahl-e-Hadith—in Bangladesh (as well as in Pakistan and India).

Second, the pro-Islamic policies of both General Ziaur Rahman's and General H.M. Ershad's governments from the mid-1970s to the 1980s created a conducive political environment that facilitated the growth of Islamic activities and institutions, including the opening of new madrassas. Ahl-e-Hadith, along with others, also benefited from this opening for Islam. Today, According to Dr. Muslehuddin, the Acting Amir of Ahl-e-Hadith Andolon, Bangladesh (AHAB), there are close to 2,000 Ahl-e-Hadith Quomi and 'Alia madrassas of various sizes in Bangladesh. About two hundred of them were established with direct assistance from the Saudi and Kuwaiti Islamic charities. Major Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in the Quomi sector include Al-Jami'a al-Ahmadiya Salafiya, in Satkhira; Al-Markazul Islami, in Rajshahi and Bogra; Madrassa Muhammadiya Arabiya, in Jatrabari, Dhaka; and Madrassatul Hadith, in Nazirabazar, Dhaka. It is important to note that 80 percent of the operating expenses of the 'Alia madrassas are paid by the government treasury. The curriculum taught in Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas is almost the same as taught in other Quomi madrassas, except that the fiqh portion in the former is miniscule.

Current Trends in Islamic Education in Bangladesh

Expansion of Islamic Education and Enrollment Trends

Enrollments in both types of Islamic schools have grown steadily since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, and more sharply since the 1980s. Available statistics relating to the past decade suggest that the number of Islamic schools is growing faster than the population.¹⁷ Before

¹⁵ *Akhbar-e-Ahl-e-Hadith*, No. 43, v. 16, 26 September 1919.

¹⁶ "A Proposal to Establish an Islamic University," Typed Ms., Jamaat-e-Islami, East Pakistan, 1960

¹⁷ USAID, *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World*, p.37-38.

examining the trends at secondary and post-secondary levels, it is important to take a look at elementary level madrassas, known as Maktab or Ebtadaee madrassas, first formally approved by President Ziaur Rahman in 1978, though they had been in existence since the time of Muslim rule in Bengal.¹⁸ In fact, the earlier phases of census that were conducted during the early twentieth century showed a steady growth in the Ebtadaee madrassas even during that period (Table 2). These Ebtadaee madrassas now serve as feeder institutions for both the ‘Alia and Quomi madrassas.

Table 2: Maktab/Ebtadaee Madrassas in Early Twentieth Century

Year	Number	Students
1907-8	2444	50402
1911-12	4536	112785
1921-22	8855	279315
1931-32	16359	614717

Source: Ayub Ali, *History of Traditional Islamic Education*, p. 120

More than fifty percent of students in Quomi madrassas and more than seventy percent of students in ‘Alia madrassas come from an Ebtadaee background. A large number of students of Maktab or Ebtadaee madrassas, however, end up in the state or privately run general schools. It may also be noted that a substantial number of students who complete non-madrassa primary level education are also entering madrassas at the secondary level.¹⁹ The Madrassa Education Board of Bangladesh has approved only 5,150 of all independent Ebtadaee madrassas, with 23,176 teachers and 377,749 students. But a report in the *Daily Dinkal*²⁰ suggested the existence of 18,000 independent Ebtadaee madrassas, with 85,000 teachers and close to two million students. This latter figure should be closer to reality since a 1992 Ministry of Education estimate also puts the total number of Ebtadaee madrassas at 17,279. The significant fact in this regard is that, compared to other primary forms of education in Bangladesh, Ebtadaee madrassas act as the most stable feeder institutions for all kinds of secondary schools, religious and general, particularly because the primary cycle completion rate is the highest among these institutions compared to other primary education providers (Table 3).

Table 3: Attendance and Completion Rate in Primary Cycle

Primary school type	Net enrollment of 6-10 Year-olds (%)	Attendance rate (%)	Completion rate (%)
Government	61.10	59	76.1
Non-government	18.4	56	73.0
Non-formal	7.1	46	63.4
Ebtadaee	7.0	88	82.6

Source: Education Watch Report 2003

¹⁸ Ebtadaee madrassas operate in varied spatial and organizational circumstances. Some of them are attached to secondary level ‘Alia madrassas, others are affiliated with some voluntary associations, but a majority of them operate independently in response to the need of the children in the community and neighborhood.

¹⁹ *Education Watch Report 2005*, p.4.

²⁰ *Daily Dinkal*, Dhaka, March 2, 1998

In addition to the Maktabas and Ebtadaee madrassas, there are about 5,000 Noorani madrassas²¹ with about 1,000,000 students and 12,000 teachers. It is also estimated that there are about 100,000 students in other elementary streams, including mosque-based schools, schools operated by local level voluntary groups, and neighborhood tutoring and coaching centers.

At the higher levels of education, between 1985 and 2003, the number of ‘Alia madrassas (Dakhil to Kamil) increased by more than 55 percent, and the student enrollment increased five-fold (Table 4).

Table 4: ‘Alia Madrassas (Dakhil to Kamil) Enrollment

Year	No. of Madrassas	No. of students
1985	3,736	638,926
1995	5,974	1,837,013
2005	8,410	3,597,453 (provisional)

Source: Bangladesh National Bureau of Statistics (BANBEIS), 2005 and Bangladesh Economic Review, Ministry of Finance 2006, p.166

It is interesting to note that while the number of ‘Alia madrassas increased by 22.22 percent, as compared with the 9.74 percent increase in the number of general educational institutions during the current BNP-led Alliance rule (2001-2005), the picture was different during the 1996-2001 rule of the secularly-oriented Awami League (AL), when the number of such madrassas rose by 17 percent as against 28 percent increase in general educational institutions. Apparently, madrassa education has received more favor under the BNP government—which also includes two main religious political parties, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote—than it did under the AL rule. Surprisingly, however, the growth in the number of ‘Alia students during the AL period was considerably higher (58 percent, as compared to 33 percent increase in students of ‘secular’ schools) than the growth of madrassa students during the 2001-2005 BNP rule (10 percent as against 9 percent increase in the number of students in ‘secular’ schools). As several madrassa administrators suggested in interviews, this significant increase in the number of madrassa students during 1996-2001 should be seen as a popular “vote of no confidence” against the AL government by parents who were quite apprehensive about the secular rhetoric, if not the substance, of the government’s education policy.

Due to the absence of reliable data on the Quomi madrassas, it is difficult to obtain a clear picture of the growth in the Quomi system. A recent report states that Quomi madrassas represent about 25 percent of the entire Islamic schooling.²² If this estimate is correct, the total number of students in the Quomi madrassas (excluding the Ebtadaee and Noorani level students) comes to about 470,000. This may perhaps be a rather conservative estimate. An article published in 2001 estimated the number of secondary level Quomi madrassas at more than 4,000.²³ In early 2006, the Minister for Education informed the Parliament that the number of

²¹ Noorani madrassas are pre-primary to primary level community/mosque-centric informal schools which mainly help students to learn Qu’ran and achieve elementary literacy.

²² *Education Watch Report 2005*, p.33.

²³ Shah Muhammad Habibur Rahman, ‘The Education Policy and the Curricula of Madrassas in Bangladesh: An Evaluation in the Light of the Makkah Declaration’, *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol. 9, no.1 (2001), p. 232.

such madrassas was about 11,000.²⁴ According to the Wafaq-ul-Madaris-ul-Arabia Bangladesh (Quomi Madrassa Education Board), there are 15,250 madrassas in Bangladesh, with 1,857,500 students, and 132,150 teachers. The Secretary General of the Board suggests that the number of madrassas and students not under the control of the Quomi Madrassa Board would reach a similar figure. In all, the Quomi madrassa system, at all levels, hosts about 3,100,000 students.²⁵ An attempt can also be made to figure out the number of Quomi students with reference to the number of Quomi institutions. If one accepts the moderate government estimate of 11,000 Quomi madrassas, the number is still far more than that of 'Alia madrassas. If the 'Alia system, with 8,410 institutions, represents about 3,597,453 students, then the Quomi system, with 11,000 institutions, may well represent a similar number of students, if not more. It may be noted, however, that although Quomi madrassas are mostly of Deobandi orientation, the phenomenal growth in the number of Quomi madrassas does not necessarily reflect a trend toward 'Deobandization' of Islam in Bangladesh; among the factors that have contributed to the growth in the Quomi madrassas, doctrinal considerations seem to be least important.

From the data on the number of examinees (who are usually far less than the number of students actually enrolled) under the Wafaqul-Madaris-ul-Arabia, which represents only a minority of Quomi madrassas, it also appears that the number of students in these madrassas has increased significantly between 1979 and 2004 (Table 5).

Table 5: Number of Examinees under Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia

Year	total examinees (Pre-primary to M.A.)
1979	732
1999	7711
2004	18,300

Source: Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia

An analysis of the government and non-government data and related considerations lead the author to believe that the Islamic education system, 'Alia and Quomi together, caters to the educational needs of no less than 50 percent of the entire student population in Bangladesh (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6: Students in General Education and 'Alia Madrassas, 2003

Level of schools	General education	Madrassa	
	Students	Students	Total
Secondary	8,126,362	2,195,438	10,321,800
Higher Secondary	1,449,229	554,573	2,003,802
Total	9,575,591	2,750,011	

Source: BANBEIS 2005

Table 7: Students in Islamic and General Education (from secondary to M.A. level), 2003

Education system	No of students
General	9,724,931
'Alia stream	3,597,453
Quomi stream	2,000,000 (estimated)

²⁴ *Quomi madrasar Curriculum and shikkha babostha* [Curriculum and Educational sytem of the Quomi Madrassas], *Shamokal*, 7 April 2006.

²⁵ *Prothom Alo*, 3 April 2006.

Total general	9,724,931
Total Islamic	5,597,453

Source: BANBEIS 2005; *Prothom Alo*, 3 April 2006

Regional Variations

With regard to regional variations in the number of students in the ‘Alia madrassa system, out of the six administrative divisions, only one—Rajshahi—represents a significantly larger number of students (Dakhil to Kamil) (Table 8). This relatively larger student population in Rajshahi division conforms to the higher population figures in the region. However, the higher numbers may also due to the fact that this region is ecologically more unstable and, thereby, has a relatively higher poverty rate than other parts of the country. As has been observed in other parts of Muslim South Asia, poverty-stricken families tend to enroll their children in the less costly, and often free, madrassa education system. Rajshahi has also traditionally been a stronghold of the ultra-conservative Ahl-e-Hadith community.²⁶ Given the intense efforts by the arch-sectarian organization Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh (AHAB) at religio-political mobilization of the Ahl-e-Hadith community in the northern districts during the past two decades, it is not surprising that the number of both ‘Alia and Quomi madrassas affiliated with Ahl-e-Hadith has also consequently increased in Rajshahi Division.

Quomi madrassas, on the other hand, are mostly concentrated in Chittagong and Noakhali regions, the two areas that have produced the largest number of ulama, imams (prayer leaders) and khatibs (preachers) in Bangladesh. Imams trained in Noakhali Quomi madrassas are attending to the religious needs of the faithful from Dhaka to Dubai, from Assam to London and from Karachi to New York. Chittagong also has a long history of community-supported religious education, and today hosts two of the largest Islamic educational establishments in Bangladesh: Hathhazari Madrassa, the oldest madrassa in Bangladesh established by the disciples of the early generation of the Deoband ulama, with more than 5,000 students; and Putia Madrassa, another Deobandi madrassa with a student population of about 3,500.

Both Hathhazari and Putia madrassas are considered trend-setters for other Deobandi madrassas and are regarded very highly for their high education standards, quality and reputation of their teachers, and almost impeccable physical facilities. Mymensingh and Jessore have relatively fewer full-curriculum Quomi madrassas, and most students from these regions come to Chittagong or Noakhali for their higher Islamic education. Noakhali, being the largest exporter of expatriate labor to the Gulf states, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has benefited enormously from foreign remittances that have, in turn, contributed significantly to the further

²⁶ Ahl-e-Hadith, who are mostly concentrated in northern Bangladesh, believe that most religious and legal matters have been clearly stated and resolved in the two primary scriptures—the Qur’an and the corpus of Hadith—and if there are issues on which there is no direct or clear guidance in these two sources, Muslims should exercise *ijtihad* (independent judgment, but within the general guidelines of the Qur’an and the Hadith). Since the classical jurists and the founders of the four orthodox schools of law were not infallible (*ma’sum*), therefore, according to this group, Muslims are not obligated to follow their opinions and legal judgments. It is not that the followers of other schools of thought do not follow Hadith; the difference between Ahl-e-Hadith and others schools (*madhaahib*) is that while others, by conviction, accept a given interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith as authoritative, Ahl-e-Hadith regard these interpretations as based on “opinions” and thus not religiously binding. Because of their more strident theocratic particularism, and their total condemnation of syncretic Islam as practiced at the popular level in Muslim Bengal, Ahl-e-Hadith have often been identified with the ideas of the 18th century Arabian theologian Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. Hence, they are sometimes called, pejoratively by their distracters, “Wahhabis.”

growth and expansion of madrassas in the region. Chittagong, as the main port city of Bangladesh, is a business hub of the country, and the close relationship between the ulama and the merchant class has proved immensely beneficial for local madrasa financing.

Table 8: Regional Variations in the Number of ‘Alia Students, 2003

Divisions	Total number of students (Dakhil-Kamil)
Barisal	411,744
Chittagong	659,603
Dhaka	742,802
Khulna	412,929
Rajshahi	1,098,668
Sylhet	112,961

Source: BANBEIS

Female Islamic Education and Enrollment Trends

In terms of enrollment of female students, the ‘Alia system offers an encouraging picture. In 1985, the female students in this system (Dakhil-Kamil) constituted 7.8 percent of total students. In 2003, female enrollment reached 46.8 percent. The growth in female student enrollment in ‘Alia madrassas apparently exceeded the growth rate in the mainstream secondary schools in the past one decade, though the national average of female enrollment remains nominally lower than that of the male students.

Although no empirical study has been undertaken so far to explain this significant increase in female enrollment in ‘Alia madrassas in recent years, interviews with madrasa administrators and anecdotal evidence suggest that parents find the environment of the madrassas more Islamically congenial for their daughters than that of ‘secular’ schools. For this reason, many lower-middle class, conservative families, who, perhaps, otherwise would not have allowed their female children to continue their education beyond elementary level, feel more ‘comfortable’ in sending them to madrassas for secondary and post-secondary education. In addition, in areas where no government secondary or post-secondary schools are available for girls, parents prefer ‘Alia madrassas over private schools, which are much more expensive. In many cases, parents may be willing to send their male children to relatively expensive private schools, but may not do the same for the education of their female children. Since the graduates of ‘Alia madrassas are allowed to merge into the general educational stream, the ‘Alia madrasa background does not become a major debilitating factor for girls to pursue further education in colleges and universities. Those who terminate their education after completing the highest level in ‘Alia madrassas and do not pursue ‘modern’ education in colleges and universities can seek employment as teachers in ‘Alia madrassas for women.

Female Islamic religious education at the Ebtadaee level, especially in mosques, has a long tradition in Bangladesh. At the Maktab/Ebtadaee level, boys and girls study together and there are reasons to believe that the number of female students at this level is at par with male students.

Due to lack of data, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the Quomi stream with respect to higher-level female students, but it is assumed that the percentage of female students would be much lower in the Quomi system. According to Maulana Anwari of Madrasa Kashiful-Ulum,

the total number of higher level (Dars-e-Nizami) female students in Quomi madrassas is approximately 1 percent, if not a little less than that, of the total Quomi madrassa students of comparable level.²⁷ However, the data concerning the examinees of higher-levels under the Quomi Education Board shows that the number of female students is growing (Table 9). Anecdotal evidence from Dhaka and Chittagong also suggests that the number of “Quomi-type” madrassas for girls that offer either condensed or full range Dars-e-Nizami curriculum has increased considerably in recent years. Interestingly, there seems to be so much demand for female teachers that, according to some madrassa administrators, most graduates of madrassas have job offers from more than one women’s madrassa. Quomi madrassas, which regard the ‘Alia education as “superficial” and usually do not employ teachers with ‘Alia background, are now making exceptions by recruiting female teachers with ‘Alia degrees for their madrassas for women.

Table 9: Examinees under Quomi System by Gender

Year	Total examinee (primary to M.A.)	Female students
1998	6598	566
2004	15651	2289

Source: Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia

Until very recently, there were no separate higher-level madrassas for women in the Quomi system, and allowing women to study along with the male students was, of course, out of the question for the Quomi madrassa ulama. It is only recently that some larger Quomi madrassas have opened up opportunities for higher-level Islamic education for female students by establishing separate “Madrassa-tul-banaat” (Women’s madrassas). In one such madrassa in Anwara Thana in Chittagong, Madrassa Ahya-al-‘Uloom lil-Banaat, there are more than 1,200 female students, 45 of them pursuing the complete Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, and ten of them specializing in the study of Hadith (*daura-e-hadith*), the highest level in Dars-e-Nizami. More than 80 percent of the teachers in the madrassa are female. In the areas in which female teachers are not available, male teachers are employed who teach classes behind curtains.

While one would assume that madrassa education, especially of the Quomi variety, would make women more religiously conservative and, as a consequence, more willing to unquestionably accept the male lead in religious matters, the evidence gathered from two major women’s madrassas paints a more complex and nuanced picture. In Ahya-al-‘Uloom girls’ madrassa on the Chittagong-Putia Highway, the two daughters of Maulana Anwari, who, after completing *daura-e-hadith* in the madrassa started teaching there, were observed to engage in intense debate with their father—himself a teacher at Sholakbahar madrassa and a Hadith scholar—and with other ulama in the madrassa on whether women can pray in the mosque side by side with men. At another occasion, they argued vigorously with another teacher that he had misinterpreted some parts of *Qaduri*, a standard fiqh textbook used in Dars-e-Nizami, and had given a biased interpretation against women. Maulana Anwari said that his daughters tended to challenge him on many of his views on Sharia matters and, like good Islamic scholars, were not satisfied with his answers until he was able to substantiate his responses with scriptural authority. According to some male teachers in another female madrassa in Chittagong, unlike their male counterparts, women teachers tend to be more inclined to derive *ahkaam* (rules of conduct) from the Qur’an

²⁷ Interview with Maulan Anwari, Sholakbahar, Chittagong, January 5, 2006.

and Hadith than from the standard juristic literature and are not as inhibited in exercising occasional *ijtihad* when it comes to issues pertaining to women.

Factors contributing to the Growth in Madrassa Education

The growth of the madrassa system, particularly in the wake of considerable expansion of modern educational facilities in Bangladesh in recent years—in both public and private sectors—and especially in the backdrop of the alleged terror connections of madrassas since September 11, 2001, demands a reasonable explanation. The popular belief is that it is poverty that drives most parents to send their children to madrassas where tuition is either free, or considerably lower compared to the schools in the mainstream education and, in most cases, poor students also receive free room and board.

However, this explanation has to be qualified by a number of other considerations. Poverty may be relevant in the case of rural areas, but may not be so in the case of madrassas based in towns and urban areas. For instance, the author found one of the madrassas in Dhaka to be more expensive than similar institutions in the mainstream education, but the number of students was growing there. Similarly, almost one-fourth of the students in a Chittagong Quomi madrassa were paying Tk 1,000 per month for room and board, and close to half of the day students in a Rajshahi Quomi madrassa were paying Tk 400 per month in tuition, which is not inconsiderable compared to private general schools. Most administrators of madrassas in major cities and urban areas concur that it is the lack of Islamic religious values and moral elements in the general education that is a major factor in the decision of parents to send their children to madrassas, although the poverty factor is also important in some cases. In the case of rural areas, however, both poverty as well as religious considerations seems to matter equally.²⁸

In addition, in most instances, madrassas either fill the gap in the countryside where there are no mainstream educational institutions available, or complement mainstream educational institutions that are inadequately equipped to take in a large number of students. In the case of secondary-level education, the average distance of schools from the nearest town of moderate size (Upazila or Subdistrict) provides an indication of the concentration or dispersal of different types of institutions in an Upazila. Whereas all the government schools are situated in the upazila headquarter in the town, the school-cum-colleges and non-government schools are on average 6.1 kilometers and 8.5 kilometers away from the upazila towns, respectively. The others, including junior secondary, and Dakhil and Alim madrassas, are more than 10 kilometres away from the upazila towns.²⁹ This indicates that madrassas are situated mostly in those remote areas where mainstream educational facilities are lacking.

At the primary level, in spite of commendable efforts by the NGO communities, the coverage of primary education programs remains limited.³⁰ In the field of informal education provided by the NGOs, BRAC's work is more extensive as it offers education to primary level students through

²⁸ For a detailed analytical and statistical assessment of the position of Islamic subjects in the textbooks followed in the general stream, see A.K.M. Azharul Islam and S.M. Habibur Rahman, "Bangladesh School O Madrassa Shikshaniti O patthyakrom" (The Educational Policy and Curricula of Schools and Madrassas in Bangladesh), (Cambridge: The Islamic Academy, 2003), pp. 36-64.

²⁹ *Education Watch Report 2005*, p. 69.

³⁰ 'Current Conditions: Education', USAID, <http://www.usaid.gov/bd/education.html>

its 34,000 informal schools. These schools cater to the educational needs of about 11 percent of the total pre-primary to primary school students, according to BRAC.³¹ However there are three main issues that prevent the BRAC model from becoming an overwhelmingly popular educational destination. Firstly, there is no religious element in the curriculum that is followed in these schools. The general perception about the NGO-operated schools, especially those run, funded and sponsored by, or connected in any way to, foreign NGOs, is that they are subversive of traditional Bangladeshi values, or worse, anti-Islamic. Thus, the anti-NGO propaganda unleashed by religious parties and the ulama has created an environment in which many conservative families do not feel comfortable in sending their children to the schools run by BRAC and other NGOs with a secular reputation. Secondly, BRAC schools are run on a 'patron-client' basis; that is, most of the children come from households that subscribe to the micro-credit programs offered by BRAC.³²

Further, the mainstream educational campuses, especially colleges and universities, have long been beset by student violence. Every major political party in Bangladesh has its own students' wing active on its behalf in all major campuses. These student organizations frequently clash with each other, keeping pace with the power politics of their parent bodies. These clashes often lead to bloodshed, strikes and suspension of classes for indefinite periods, leading to frequent "session jam." There are cases in which students of public universities have had to wait for years to have examinations, which could not be held due to strikes and riots on campuses, rescheduled. According to a senior educationist, "Bangladeshi colleges and universities are the most politicized and most violent in the Third World." It is this highly politicized, violent and semi-anarchic environment of public colleges and universities that also contributes to the decision of many parents to enroll their children either in private institutions—if they can afford them—or in madrassas that are free from student politics and violence.

Finally, the rampant corruption in the mainstream public education system does not always make it an ideal destination for students from poor families, who cannot afford to meet the frequent monetary demands from school/college administrators. A study on primary education in Mymensingh District revealed that though primary education is (officially) absolutely free in the country, parents are asked to pay substantial amounts in order to access facilities, including: admission, free books, school sports, promotion to higher classes, *Milad* (birthday of the Prophet) and other religio-cultural events, examinations, etc. Students are even asked to pay the cost of entertainment on the occasion of the visit of the Regional Education Officer and other dignitaries of the Education Department. In Mymensingh District, schools in the eight thanas (sub-districts) collected Tk. 18,200,000 in one year (2000) for conducting three exams that were supposed to be absolutely free. In an agrarian society where the average monthly income of a family is not more than Tk. 2,488, this is an enormous burden for parents.³³

Attempts to Reform Madrassa Education

³¹ <http://www.brac.net/education.htm>

³² 'BRAC Education Programme: http://www.braceducation.org/what_we_do.php.

³³ The survey was conducted during 22 September to 20 December 2000). See *Prathomik Shikkahi Durniti* [Corruption in the Primary Education], Transparency International Bangladesh, May 2001.

Reform Efforts in the 'Alia Sector

The madrassa education system has undergone numerous reform efforts, starting from the British period. The first major reform brought about the 'New Scheme Madrassas' in 1915. This took place in the wake of the declining demand for madrassa graduates in government departments ever since English replaced Persian (1837) as the official language of India. Under the New Scheme, the madrassa curriculum was revised to incorporate English and a few other modern subjects. During the Pakistan period, the New Scheme Madrassas were transformed into general education high schools with minimum religious content, and the madrassas that had not joined the New Scheme later on emerged as the 'Alia madrassas, pending more reforms ahead. In 1938, a Madrassa Education (Moula Baksh) Committee was formed on the initiative of A K Fazlul Huq, the most popular Muslim leader of undivided Bengal. The recommendations that the Committee made included the setting up of a University of Islamic Learning at Calcutta (now Kolkata) that would have jurisdiction and control over both New Scheme and Old Scheme madrassas; the establishment of a teachers training institution; and making the traditional maktab/Ebtedaee level education in the madrassas equivalent to the primary schools established under the Primary Education Act.³⁴

The first postcolonial reform attempt came with the Maulana Akram Khan Committee of 1949-1951. The Committee recommended the abolition of the Ebtedaee system and emphasized the need for teaching Bengali along with Urdu and Arabic. The next major Commission was formed under Aatur Rahman Khan (1957). The Commission reiterated the recommendations of the Akram Khan Committee in suggesting the abolition of the Ebtedaee stage to give way to a universal primary education, and also emphasized the importance of Bengali as a medium of instruction. The Committee recommended that the government should stop patronizing the Old Scheme Madrassas. The Aatur Rahman Commission was followed by four other Commissions/Committees (1959, 1966, 1969, and 1970) until the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

The 1969 Committee under Air Marshall M. Nur Khan attempted for the first time to bring the two streams of general and Islamic education closer. It recommended the inclusion of Islamic Studies as a compulsory subject in the mainstream education system, in all classes up to Class 10 and optional beyond that level. On the other hand, the Committee recommended that English, math and science should be included in the madrassa curriculum. The 1970 Committee under Shamsul Huq, like its predecessor, emphasized the importance of establishing equivalence between the madrassa and general streams of education to enable madrassa graduates to participate in national life along with students from the general stream. Organizationally, the Committee recommended the revival and reorganization of the existing East Pakistan Madrassa Education Board.

The first Education Commission in independent Bangladesh, Qudrat-i-Khuda Commission, submitted its report in 1974. The Commission was largely influenced by the new ideological landscape, in which nationalism, secularism and socialism were declared as guiding principles of state policies. The Commission described the madrassa system as outdated and narrowly framed, and recommended its abolition up to Class 8. It also recommended that Bengali be made compulsory at all stages. The recommendations, however, did not materialize due to the strong opposition from religious leaders, and also because the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur

³⁴ Ali, *History of Traditional Islamic Education*, pp. 115-17

Rahman himself did not agree with all the Commission's recommendations.³⁵ Any possibility of implementing the recommendations withered away with the fall of the ideologically secular Awami League government in 1975.

In 1979 a new 'Interim Education Policy' was formulated by an Education Advisory Council appointed by President Ziaur Rahman, which suggested the merging of the Ebtadaee level with the primary level; bringing symmetry between the different levels of the two educational streams; making Bengali the universal medium of instruction; establishing training institutions for madrasa teachers; recognizing the madrasa degrees of Dakhil, Alim, Fazil and Kamil as having equivalent academic value to Secondary, Higher Secondary, B.A. and M.A.; and bringing teachers and staff of both the educational streams within the same salary structure.

The M. A. Bari Committee (1990) that followed recognized the unique identity of the Ebtadaee system and recommended that the system be brought in line with the mainstream primary schooling while preserving its religious identity. Other recommendations of the Bari Committee included: importance of vocational courses at Dakhil level; introduction of social sciences at the 9th and 10th grade levels in the madrassas; introduction of business studies in Alim and Fazil levels; awarding the Kamil level with the status of postgraduate education; providing Kamil graduates the opportunity to pursue MPhil and PhD level research; sending select teachers for higher education to reputable institutions of Islamic learning in other Muslim countries. The government accepted these recommendations "in principle" but few measures were taken to implement them.

When the Awami League returned to power after twenty years with the general elections of 1996, it formed a National Education Policy Formulation Committee under the chairmanship of Professor M Shamsul Huq. The Committee, in its report (1997), referred to the Qudrat-i-Khuda Commission in many instances, but it did not entirely follow the Commission's recommendations in regard to madrasa education. On the contrary, it unreservedly recognized the madrasa education as an 'integral' part of the national education system. The Committee focused on a number of issues that were not raised in earlier reports, such as emphasis on greater participation of females in education; the establishment of new women's madrassas; the development of infrastructural facilities; and the provision of scholarships, free supply of textbooks and learning materials to madrasa students. After a series of public consultations the government accepted the report of the Committee in 2000 as the Education Policy of the state. It was decided that these recommendations would be implemented in phases by 2012. The government policy statement declared that once implemented, these measures would help produce madrasa students who would be "true servants and defenders of Islam" and would also be able to employ Islamic learning in both the temporal and religious spheres of life. It was also decided that the Madrasa Education Board should have the authority to evaluate only religious subjects; all other general subjects should be evaluated by the Secondary School Education Board.³⁶

³⁵ Abul Kashem Muhammad Sifatullah, *Qudrat-I-Khuda Shikkha Commision o Amader Jatiya Shikkah Niti* [Qudrat-I-Khuda Education Commission and other Education Policy], (Dhaka: IRS Publications, 2001), p.11.

³⁶ The discussion on national education commissions/committees between 1949 and 2001 is largely drawn from Islam and Rahman, *Bangladesh School O Madrasa Shikshaniti O patthyakrom*, pp. 138-152.

Soon after the return of the BNP to power in 2001, with three Islamist parties as coalition partners, a Madrassa Education Reform Committee was formed. Until then, issues relating to madrassas were considered within the framework of national education; this was the first time that madrassa education was taken up independently. Later, when the government formed a National Education Commission in 2003 with Professor Moniruzzaman Mian as the Chairman, the issues considered by the Madrassa Education Reform Committee were incorporated in the report of the new Commission, which was submitted in 2004.

The overall thrust of the new education policy as stipulated in the report was to transform the population of the country into human resources within the shortest possible time. In this context, the report called for bringing the two systems of education, general and Islamic, closer enough in terms of management, quality and gradation. One of the recommendations of the Commission was about the nationalization of all Ebtedae madrasahs. This is particularly significant because though there are 37,709 primary schools (along with another 20,000 registered non-government primary schools) in the country that enjoy government patronage, not a single Ebtedae madrasah receives any grant from the government. The Commission also points out that though there are about 58 teachers' training institutions for different streams of general education, there is only one such institution for the entire madrasah system. In this context, the Commission emphasized the urgent need for the establishment of madrasah teachers' training institutions, with faculty drawn from the graduates of university education departments.

Another significant recommendation involved the status of higher madrasah degrees. Thus far, the madrasah degrees of Dakhil and Alim were accepted by the government as equivalent to Secondary (SSC) and Higher Secondary (HSC) degrees, respectively, which made it possible for the 'Alia students with a HSC degree to migrate to the general stream. The next two levels, Fazil and Kamil, which are considered equivalent to B.A. and M.A., respectively, were not officially recognized to be so. The Commission recommended that Fazil and Kamil degrees should be officially recognized as equivalent to B.A and MA degrees. The government has, in principle, accepted this recommendation and the official notification in this regard is expected soon. This has been a long-standing demand of madrasah students. The implementation of this decision will mean that madrasah students would no longer need to take the general academic route after completing the Alim degree to pursue careers in public service. With the implementation of the decision, all 'Alia madrasahs would be brought under the National University, which manages the affairs of all government-supported higher educational institutions, except universities and vocational institutions.³⁷ This will also mean that the madrasah system would be better placed in finding more qualified teaching staff, since a majority of better students would not have to leave the 'Alia system in order to pursue higher studies in the mainstream. At the same time, however, this major shift in policy may actually serve to further separate the two tracks of the educational system, rather than mainstreaming the religious education or integrating it with general education.

A review of different state initiatives and recommendations suggests that all governments in Bangladesh have shown an active interest in madrasah education reforms. The national need for training productive citizens, political imperatives, popular expectations, and socio-cultural

³⁷ *Prothom Alo*, 15 May 2006.

developments—all have been important factors in initiating a debate on the reform of the system. At the same time, however, hardly any recommendation of the various reform committees and commissions has been implemented in its true sense. Administrative reorganization and some procedural changes initiated by the Ministry of Education and the Madrassa Education Board were easy to implement; when it came to restructuring the entire 'Alia system, including its curriculum and courses of studies, however, policy makers were either unwilling or unable to take any drastic action. In addition, most recommendations offered by various well-meaning commissions and committees were articulated as general principles and guidelines—with which hardly anyone could disagree—rather than in the form of specific measures that could be implemented.

However, the non-implementation of many of these recommendations does not mean that the system has not been able to generate changes on its own. Many 'Alia madrassas, for instance, started teaching 'secular' subjects long before they were required to do so by the government. Similarly, in order to remain competitive with their rivals in the general education stream, 'Alia madrassas sought to recruit better qualified teachers, which was not difficult given the high unemployment rate of the educated classes in Bangladesh. It has been suggested by an independent think tank that compared to secondary schools, the madrassas seemed to have a relatively better qualified teaching staff. Of all teachers, 50.58 percent of madrassa teachers attained their highest academic degree/certificates in second Division/Class, whereas a majority (61.24 percent) of teachers of secondary schools attained higher academic qualifications in 3rd Division/Class.³⁸ In terms of gender equality, the recommendations of different commissions on establishing women's madrassas have not materialized; only 9.72 percent of madrassas are exclusively for girls.³⁹ This has, however, been amply compensated by higher enrollment of girls in the madrassas with co-education. In 1985, the percentage of female students in the post-Ebtadaee level madrassa was 7.8 percent. In 2003, it rose to 46.8 percent.⁴⁰

Recently, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has taken special initiatives to assist the government in introducing math, English and computer education in madrassas. Its decision to do so has been informed by the desire to address the problem of inequality in the education sector, particularly in the context of the enrollment of poor children in the madrassas.⁴¹ A part of the reform agenda includes a civic education program for madrassa students along with students from the general education stream. A program on "Institutionalizing Democracy in Bangladesh: Civic Education Programme for the High School and Madrasa Students" seeks to help students understand the national Constitution, parliamentary system, civil liberties, human rights, civic duties, corruption and its impact and human trafficking. A recent workshop of this program brought together in Khulna several members of parliament, civil society members and 1,600 school and madrassa students representing Grades 8 to 10.⁴²

³⁸ 'Election 2001: National Policy Forum. Policy Brief on 'Education Policy'. *CPD Taskforce Report*, p.15, (Dhaka: CPD, 2000); No reasons, however, have been ascribed to this interesting phenomenon.

³⁹ 'Election 2001: National Policy Forum, p. 15;

⁴⁰ BANBEIS, 2005.

⁴¹ *Prothom Alo*, Dhaka, 10 May 2006.

⁴² *The Financial Express*, 28 April 2006.

Further, the government has sought to use the resources of 'Alia madrassas to create awareness of its "Millennium Development Goals," largely directed at the eradication of poverty in society. 'Alia madrassas have also shown considerable enthusiasm in participating in government-sponsored special education programs. In 2004 the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka started a two-year long scholarship program for a select group of forty madrassa students in order to help them learn the English language.⁴³ In Dhaka and Chittagong alone, more than 250 'Alia madrassa students were enrolled in 2005 in NGO-sponsored programs for teaching computer skills.

Reform Efforts in the Quomi Sector

It is important to note that all government policies, recommendations and programs about madrassa education in Bangladesh discussed above refer only to the 'Alia system; the Quomi stream, being totally autonomous, remained largely outside the purview of the educational policies of the state, except, of course, for some platitudes and exhortations about the need for reforms in traditional Islamic education. The ulama that run the Quomi system with the support of the community have been, largely, satisfied with the way the madrassas operate, train students in traditional Islamic sciences, and produce religious functionaries. Their idea of reforms in the madrassa system, if at all necessary, is to change a few textbooks and improve the quality of teaching. In their view, the basic structure of the Quomi curriculum is sound and adequately serves the purpose for which it was originally conceived. They do realize, however, the need for introducing some new subjects in the Quomi curriculum such as English, Math, Social Studies, Science, etc.—and that too as a result of the constant prodding by the state and civil society organizations—but, at the same time, they are not fully convinced that these 'modern' subjects are integrally relevant to the fundamental objectives of madrassa education. These subjects are seen as "useless" at best and "dangerous" at worst.

The most common response of the ulama to any suggestion for 'mainstreaming' the madrassa education is that the mainstream education system is itself in such a pitiful state, and therefore, not worthy of emulation. On the suggestion that the Quomi madrassas should introduce 'secular' subjects in their curriculum, the ulama are afraid that this will distract their students from the main focus of their studies, which is, traditional Islamic sciences. The ulama are also afraid that the introduction of 'secular' subjects will not sit well with their conservative constituency of benefactors, who donate to madrassas with their zakat and sadaka contributions as a religious charity for 'Islamic' education, and not for teaching English, Science and Math.

It is obvious that as long as the community continues to support the Quomi madrassas in their present form, and as long as there is no pressure from the core constituency of their financial base, they will not feel any need to change themselves, no matter how loud the calls from the state authorities and modern-educated elite, or how strong the pressures from the West. This leaves the Quomi madrassa system, not only in Bangladesh but also elsewhere in Muslim South Asia, in the most critical domain of public discourse, especially with reference to the current debate on its role in the Talibanization of Afghanistan and in Islamic radicalism and militancy in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. In the specific case of Bangladesh, public debate on madrassas has revolved around two central questions: first, where does the Quomi system stand in terms of rearing productive citizens for society? And, second, to what extent are the madrassas responsible for the emergence of Islamic radicalism, militancy and terrorism? Before taking up these questions in subsequent sections of this paper, it is important to first look at some

⁴³ VOA, 7 October 2004. Report by VOA's Dhaka stringer Matiur Rahman Chowdhury.

of the changes that the Quomi system has generated either from within, or in response to the changing socio-economic and political environment in Bangladesh over the past three decades. While some of these changes are substantial and have had a significant impact on the overall structure of the Quomi system, others remain either cosmetic or half-hearted.

1. Bengali has formally replaced Urdu as the medium of instruction in most Quomi madrassas, especially at the elementary and intermediate-level courses/classes, although Urdu is still being used as a medium in some larger madrassas, especially at higher-levels of education. The introduction of Bengali as a medium of instruction is an important step in the process of “indigenization” of Islam and Islamic scholarship and their de-linking from their Pakistani/North Indian Islamic wellsprings. The change from Urdu to Bengali as a medium of instruction in Quomi madrassas was long overdue but it came about only after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country, and in the wake of an apparent triumph of Bengali nationalism. Initially, there was considerable resistance on the part of the Quomi madrasa ulama—who were trained mostly in Pakistani and Indian madrassas and were taught in Urdu—to shift to Bengali as a medium of instruction. Once the shift was made, however, the ulama discovered that this “vernacularization” of Islam created new opportunities for them to establish linkages with the masses. The proliferation of both popular and scholarly Islamic literature in Bengali during the past thirty years is not unrelated to this development.
2. Bengali has also been made a compulsory subject up to the secondary-level (Marhala-i-Sanvia). It is interesting to note that Quomi madrassas did not teach Bengali at any level before 1972. This has also facilitated the process for Quomi madrasa students to merge into the general education stream by fulfilling some additional requirements.
3. Subjects such as social studies, geography, and history of Islam in the Indian subcontinent up to the establishment of Bangladesh, have been added in several larger madrassas. However, except in a few madrassas such as Darul Ma’arif of Chittagong, which is based on the Nadva model, most Quomi madrassas are not adequately equipped for teaching ‘new’ subjects. In smaller-sized madrassas that constitute the majority in the system, the facilities for teaching modern subjects simply do not exist.
4. English has been added as a compulsory subject in the primary section and several madrassas now provide facilities for English education at higher levels as well. Again, the facilities for teaching of English are not evenly distributed across the system. While in some reputable madrassas—the Putia Madrasa and Darul Ma’arif in Chittagong, for example—the quality of the English language teaching at the primary level is as good as, if not better than, any private English medium school in Dhaka, in most cases, especially at post-primary levels, teaching of English is assigned to inadequately qualified teachers.
5. Elementary school education has now been integrated within the Quomi madrassas, incorporating all subjects of general education along with the usual Islamic education. This has been a landmark development that has paved the way for many students of madrassas to continue their education in the general stream after completing their primary level in the madrassas.
6. Comparative religion (*taqabul-e-adyan*) has been added to the curriculum, although, in most cases, the contents of the comparative religion course remains highly polemical and, in some cases, the study of comparative religion is confined to the refutation of the doctrines of other Islamic sects and schools of thought. When asked about the syllabus of the ‘comparative

religion' course, a teacher at one of the largest Deobandi madrassas listed "Shi'iyyat (Shi'ism), Brelviyyat (Brelvi sect), Qadiyaniyyat (the Ahmadi sect), Perveziyyat (the group identified with the ideas of Ghulam Ahmad Pervez, who denied the authority of Hadith as a source of law), and Maududiyyat (the religious ideas of Maulana Seyyed Abu'l 'Ala Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami)." Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism are dismissed in a couple of lectures under the category of "false (baatil) religions—interestingly, the same category is applied to other Islamic sects as well. None of the Quomi madrassas we visited had any scholar who had specialized in comparative religions. Contrary to the general perception in the Western media, however, this author did not find any evidence of a concerted effort on the part of the madrassas to inculcate hatred of other religions or their followers among the students. It is obvious that madrassa education is based on the fundamental assumption that Islam is the only true religion. Like all seminaries, the madrassas train their students in the 'art' of disputation, and of refuting the beliefs of other religions in order to 'prove' the superiority of Islam. This does not mean, however, that the madrassas create an ideologically confrontational or hostile political environment against other religions. Their attitude is that of dismissal, not that of hatred.

7. Bureaucratization of admission and administrative procedures and professionalization of management practices, especially in large madrassas, have been under way for quite sometime. Many large madrassas are now using computers and are planning to streamline their records on computerized databases, although there is also a fear that more accessible data on madrassas might lead to government intervention in, and control of, their 'internal' affairs.
8. A major breakthrough has been the standardization of academic performance evaluation by instituting a centralized system of curriculum, syllabi, and examinations under the auspices of several major federations of Quomi madrassas—Wafaqs, which now claim to have more than 3,650 affiliated madrassas. The standardization of the academic calendar and practices, placement rules and grading schemes have now made it possible for students to transfer from one madrassa to another within the same Wafaq system.
9. Funding resources of the Quomi madrassas have also become considerably diversified. Although the traditional sources of funds for Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh—zakat, sadaka, and other charitable donations in cash and kind raised from local communities, bazaar merchants, and Pakistani businessmen—are still important, the expatriate Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf states, Western Europe, and North America have now become a substantial source of funding for Quomi madrassas. A Rajshahi University economist estimated in an interview in 2000 that close to 7 percent of the total remittances from Bangladeshis abroad were going to the building of mosques and madrassas, as well as to other religious charities in Bangladesh. The interesting thing to note is that, contrary to what one would expect, the expatriate community has not used its financial clout to impress upon the madrassas for any modernizing change; rather, it seems to have further strengthened the conservative base of the system, given the predominantly small-town, conservative backgrounds of many expatriates.
10. Similarly, Europe and North America-based Muslim NGOs, Saudi and Kuwaiti governments and the Islamic NGOs operating with their blessings and 'approval,' and some individual Muslim philanthropists in the Gulf and South Africa have also been providing generous funds to several Quomi madrassas, especially for elementary religious education. In the case of the madrassas associated with the Ahl-e-Hadith school—Al-Markazul-Islami al-Salafi in

Rajshahi, Al-Jam'iat-ul- Ahmadiya Salafiya in Satkhera, Al-Markazul-Islami in Naushipur, Bogra, Madrassa Darul Hadith, in Naugaon, Noakhali, to name a few—the Saudi-based World Muslim League (Rabita 'Alam Al-Islami) and Al-Harmain Islamic Foundation and the Kuwait-based Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage and the Society for the Revival of Sunnah (of the Prophet) have donated generously for Islamic education in Bangladesh. Although most of the funds from the Saudi and Kuwaiti sources have gone to their doctrinal fellow-travelers—the Wahhabi-oriented Ahl-e-Hadith—several Deobandi madrassas have also been beneficiaries of the Gulf-based Islamic NGOs. Much of the flow of funds for the promotion of Islamic education and other Islamic activities started soon after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state, which was seen by many conservative Arab Muslim countries as a setback for Islam, especially given the ideological preference of the founding fathers of the new nation for secularism, socialism, and nationalism. Support for madrassa education was thus seen as necessary to “reclaim” Bangladesh for Islam. These efforts were further augmented by the Arab Gulf regimes after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 to counter the influence of Imam Khomeini’s ideas, quell popular enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution, and dampen the developing soft-corner for Shi’a Islam in Bangladesh.

11. It is worth noting that the local sources of earning are more extensive and diverse than generally perceived by those who think that most madrassas are dependent on foreign donations. The Wafaqul Madaris identifies the following sources of income for the madrassas: zakat, sadaka, and fitra—mandatory religious donations; lump sum grants; regular donations, given monthly or annually; *musti chal*, (donation of a handful of rice everyday before cooking by housewives); seasonal contributions of harvest such as paddy, jute, etc; contributions raised during annual meetings of the madrassas; rent from real estate owned by the madrassas; share of crops or lease-money from landed property endowed for the madrassas; admission fees; tuition fees; *mannat* (donations people pledge in order for a wish to be fulfilled); sale of skins of animals sacrificed during 'Id-ul-Adha; fruits or crops from privately owned graveyards; and sale of fish from madrassa-owned ponds.⁴⁴ The author’s field research clearly revealed that an overwhelming majority of Quomi madrassas rely on community support, which, in most cases, is quite enthusiastic and unflinching. Rarely was there a case of a madrassa that had to be closed down on account of a lack of community support.

These broad observations are further illustrated in the following case studies of representative madrassas in Bangladesh.

Case Studies

Case study # 1: Darul 'Uloom Moinul Islam (Hathazari) Madrassa, Chittagong

⁴⁴ *Madrassar Hisahb Nikash nirdeshika* [Guide to Accounts Keeping in the Madrassas], (Dhaka: Al-Wafaq Publications, 2003).

Commonly known as Hathazari Madrassa, with 5,500 students and 80 teaching and administrative staff members, this madrassa is the oldest and largest institution of its kind in Bangladesh. Established in 1901, Hathazari was the first madrassa in the Deoband tradition that was established in Muslim Bengal by the first generation of Deoband graduates from the region. The number of students and teachers in 2001 was 5,000 and 70, respectively. The institution follows the curriculum of Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia. About 1,500 students graduate each year from the madrassa. Students are admitted on a competitive basis. In 2001, 1,007 students were admitted out of more than 1,500 applicants. In 2005, again more than 1,500 candidates applied for admission and 1,334 were admitted. The madrassa's policy making body is its Majlis-e-Shura (consultative council) which consists of eminent Islamic scholars of the country and representatives of local business community.

Unlike many other Quomi madrassas, Hathazari Shura is not merely a ceremonial body; nominated by the senior peers, the members of the Shura take their duties seriously and participate regularly in making policy decisions. The madrassa, in the words of its Rector, "follows the principles of consensus decision making in the Shura, and collegiality and mutual respect among its faculty members." The madrassa is also particular on the completion of all required course work before it allows its students to sit for the examinations of the Wafaq. The madrassa largely depends on donations from private sources, but follows strictly the Deoband tradition of not accepting contributions with any strings attached. Another policy of the madrassa is not to allow any administrative interventions from government officials and rich donors. It is interesting to note that even with these uncompromising principles and a genuine desire to retain autonomy, the madrassa's financial situation has been quite healthy. In 2005, the madrassa had a surplus of about Tk. 669,536 after meeting all current expenses. The budget for 2006 was stipulated at Tk. 52,400,000. For 2002, the budget was Tk. 42,775,000. Of the 5,500 students, 2,600 students are offered full or partially free accommodation and subsistence. In the most recent budget, close to 20 percent (Tk. 9,500,000) was earmarked for providing free room and board to the students. This forms the second largest portion of the budget, the first being the construction of residential buildings (see Appendix I).

Of the five objectives stated in the madrassa brochure, one is "to create a group of people who, by their sharp writing and impressive oratory, would contribute toward an Islamic renaissance." It was apparent from discussion with the madrassa ulama, however, that the "Islamic renaissance" they have in mind is not that of intellectual creativity but the revival of traditional Islamic institutions and practices, and creating a society of "truly believing and practicing Muslims." Their vision of an ideal Islamic society is constitutive more of the legal-institutional structures of traditional Islam and individuals' behavior informed by Islamic morality, rather than that of socio-economic development, political power, intellectual vigor, and cultural creativity.

Hathazari is one of the few Quomi madrassas that, besides focusing on purely religious subjects, spends a substantial portion of its budget on teaching non-religious subjects as well. The madrassa was also among the first to acquire personal computers, both for teaching and administrative purposes. Its library is well-stocked in classical Islamic literature as well as in contemporary Islamic scholarship in Urdu, although its Bengali collection is relatively weak and

books and magazines hostile to the Deoband doctrine and sectarian position are thoroughly censored.

As the oldest madrassa in the Deoband tradition, and as the headquarters of one of the largest Wafaqs, Hathazari is a trend setter for many Deobandi madrassas in religious and academic matters. Its alumni and senior teachers have been co-opted as Shura members by many Quomi madrassas in the region. According to several ulama interviewed by the author, Hathazari alumni not only constitute the largest number of teachers in Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh, but are also the founders of their own madrassas in various parts of the country. The madrassa's *Darul Ifta* (the Fatwa issuing department), which receives hundreds of inquiries on the application of Sharia in specific, real life situations, is regarded very highly by its peers and by the community at large. Hathazari, along with Putia, another Deobandi madrassa in the same Chittagong region, has thus been a major source for implanting and strengthening the Deoband's ideological and doctrinal influence in Bangladesh.

Hathazari's official position states that it does not allow any type of political activities on the part of its teachers and students, on or off-campus. However, being a major center of Deobandi ulama, the political sympathies of its teachers and students for Islami Oikya Jote—the Deobandi ulama-led Islamist political party—and a deep-seated antagonism toward the Jamaat-e-Islami are no secret. In the early and mid-1990s several students were expelled from the madrassa when they were found reading books by Maulana Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami. The non-political stance of the madrassa does not preclude, however, the interest, involvement and participation of its students and teachers in what the madrassa officials describe as “purely religious” issues such as the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, Khatam-e-Nabuwat Movement (the movement to declare the Ahmadis as non-Muslims), the Taslima Nasrin case, and “anti-Islamic” activities of the NGOs, especially those associated with Christian missions. According to some reports, more than fifty students from Hathazari went to Afghanistan during the 1980s to join the jihad against the Soviets. Hathazari also has close relations with the Tablighi Jamaat. Madrassa officials not only allow but also encourage their students to participate in the Tablighi Jamaat da'wa meetings (*ijtema*) and tours. Thursday evenings are usually earmarked for the senior students to join the visiting Tablighi groups in their missionary tours to nearby neighborhoods, towns and villages.

Case Study # 2: Al-Jami'atul Islamia Kasemul 'Uloom (Jamil) Madrassa, Bogra

Jamil Madrassa was established in 1960 by a Mohajir⁴⁵ family who owned an industrial concern named Jamil Group of Industries. After migrating from Kolkata, the family, consisting of five brothers, settled in the northern district of Bogra. The eldest brother, Maulana Suhailuddin, also the chairman of the Group, was a graduate of the Deoband madrassa in India. He found Bogra lacking in Islamic learning and decided to establish the Jamil Madrassa. He visited several madrassas in Chittagong, including Hathazari and Putia, from where he received moral and institutional support for his new madrassa. With the considerable financial support of the family and cooperation from the Deobandi establishment, the Jamil Madrassa continued to grow until

⁴⁵ 'Mohajir' is a term applied to migrants from India after the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent.

1970 when, in the wake of the War of Independence, the Jamil family moved to Pakistan. The madrassa remained closed until 1974 when a local government official took interest in the madrassa and started the process of its regeneration.

Currently there are about 1,500 students and 50 faculty members and staff. All students stay and study free in the madrassa. These students come from different parts of Bangladesh, although a majority of them belong to Bogra district and its vicinities, and have diverse economic and social backgrounds. Being absolutely free in terms of tuition, room and board, the madrassa attracts a large number of students from poor families from Bogra and neighboring districts. The annual expenses of the madrassa amount to about Tk. 48,000,000, most of which are borne by charitable contributions from the local business community, and also by the continued support from the Jamil family in Pakistan. Jamil Madrassa is affiliated with Ittehadul Madaris, another Quomi madrassa Wafaq of Deobandi madrassas, that conducts its exams and supervises its academic affairs.

In one of the madrassa's recent annual commemorative volumes, the Principal of the Madrassa expressed his strong opposition to the "new, modern curriculum" proposed by certain quarters, and described the Deoband curriculum as "*elhami* (divinely ordained)" and, therefore, not open to any change. He also advised graduating students not to participate in the activities of any political party that did not "truly conform to the teachings of *Salf-e-Salehin Ahl-e-Sunnat-wal-Jamaat* (early generation of the followers of the way of the Prophet)," and to strive for the establishment of "an ideal Islamic society."

In response to criticism that the madrassa system is "archaic," "unproductive," and, at worst, a "source of religio-political violence," a student of the madrassa, referring to the existing social and political instability in Bangladesh, said that no Quomi madrassa educated student "triggered a pistol, stabbed anyone, raped someone, threw acid to disfigure a girl after being rejected in love, destroyed a teacher's residence—all the things that we hear being done by the students of schools, colleges and universities." Another student referred to "the destructive student politics" that have rocked the campuses and the entire general education system since the independence of Bangladesh. "While many universities and colleges remain closed for months because of violence," he said, "no Quomi madrassa has ever experienced such things." Interestingly, however, this awareness of social and political instability in Bangladesh has not moved the madrassa students to play any role in politics and try to change things through political action. They see their role as preachers of religious values and, although critical of politicians, would like to leave politics to them. The Constitution of the madrassa in fact, focuses more on the formation of social capital and creating "ideal human beings." It categorically discourages the following habits among students: "finding faults with others, starting a quarrel between people, mud slinging, and damaging people's reputation, life, property and honor." It is not clear, however, that these moral exhortations would also apply to the followers of other religions.

Case Study # 3 Al-Markazul Islami al-Salafi, Nowadpura, Rajshahi

One of the largest Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Bangladesh is al-Markazul-Islami al-Salafi in Rajshahi, located on the Airport Road in Nowadpara, a suburb of Rajshahi. The madrassa was established in 1981 and moved into a new, huge complex of buildings, funded entirely by the Kuwait-based NGO, Al Jamiyat al Ahya-al-Sunnah (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society), with

which Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, a Professor and Chairman of the Arabic Department at Rajshahi University and the founder of the madrassa, had established contacts during his trips to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.⁴⁶ The madrassa today has more than eighty rooms of classrooms and faculty and administrative offices, and a hostel for students with 28 large rooms. The madrassa, which started with less than a hundred students in 1981, today has more than 2,000 students with about 400 resident students. The remaining students are from nearby towns and villages and from Rajshahi city, many of them provided with school transport. Tuition is free but resident students pay Tk. 400 (about \$5.50) per month for board and lodging. In 2000, there were 160 students, mostly orphans, who were on full scholarship, paid for from funds received from “foreign donors.”⁴⁷ In January 2006, the number of orphan and poor resident students was 400 for which the same “foreign donors” were reportedly paying Tk. 1,000 (about \$16) per student per month.

The total annual budget, which in 2000 was Tk. 2.5 million (about \$35,715), was more than Tk. 3.5 million in 2004 (\$45,915). There are 25 permanent teachers, a few of them sponsored and paid for by Al-Harmain Islamic Foundation of Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Saudi Government, and Al Jamiyat al Ahya-al-Sunnah, Kuwait, which also has an office in Dhaka. It was not clear whether these foreign funds have continued after the arrest of Dr. Ghalib in January 2005 on charges of involvement in militant activities, but Al-Harmain Islamic Foundation was banned from operating in Bangladesh in 2004 after it was declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State.

While the Kuwaiti NGO gave cash money for salaries and other expenses, Al-Harmain and al Ahya-al-Sunnah also provided funding for the construction of new buildings “for orphans.” According to Dr. Ghalib and his successor, Dr. Muslehuddin, all the recurring expenses of the madrassa—about Tk. 3.5 million—are borne by donations, zakat and sadaka from the local Ahl-e-Hadith community and “some Islamic NGOs.”

Five teachers who receive their salaries from Saudi Arabia are all graduates of Medina University where they studied on Saudi Government scholarships. Seven of the madrassa teachers received their higher Islamic education in Jamia Salafiyya in Karachi, a well-known Ahl-e-Hadith madrassa of Pakistan. The rest of them are either graduates of other Bangladeshi Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas or are alumni of al-Markazul-Islami.

Al-Markaz is the “central madrassa of Ahl-e-Hadith in Bangladesh,” which also controls six other satellite madrassas including the five large ones in Satkhira, Bogra, Joipurhat and Gaibandha, and Rajshahi city. The number of students in these satellite madrassas is more than 4,000 in total. Most of the expenses of these madrassas are borne by the local communities but “some financial aid is also provided by some foreign Islamic NGOs,” according to Maulana Saeedur Rahman, the Vice-Principal of Al-Markazul Islami. The madrassa maintains close contacts with other Ahl-e-Hadith religious and educational establishments not only in Bangladesh but also in West Bengal, India, and Pakistan, as well as with the prominent Saudi Wahhabi ulama. This madrassa has served as an important source of manpower for Dr. Ghalib’s large network of religious and social welfare organizations and for his arch-sectarian Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan, Bangladesh (AHAB). All students of secondary level and above are required to

⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Dr. Asadullah Ghalib, June 22, 2000

⁴⁷ Author’s interview with Dr. Ghalib, *ibid*.

join the Ahl-e-Hadith Jubo Sangha, the youth wing of AHAB, and students of primary level are recruited in Sonamoni, AHAB's children's wing. The teaching staff of the madrassa is also intimately involved in the organizational politics of the Ahl-e-Hadith movement.

Although the curriculum taught in the madrassa is more or less the same as that taught in other Quomi madrassas, i.e., Dars-e-Nizami, its doctrinal and fiqhi (juristic) orientation is ardently sectarian, that is, anti-Shia, anti-Brelvi and anti-Deobandi. As a champion of Ahl-e-Hadith doctrine and practices, the madrassa prepares its students for polemical disputations (*manazara, mujadila*) with its doctrinal rivals, especially against the followers of the four classical fiqhi schools.

Case Study # 4: Madrassa Muhammadiyah Arabiah, Jatrabari, Dhaka

This madrassa, located in a busy Dhaka suburb, is the central and the largest madrassa of the Bangladesh Jami'yat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith, which is the central organizational platform of the Ahl-e-Hadith population in Bangladesh. Though the followers of the Ahl-e-Hadith form part of the Sunni mainstream, in doctrinal orientation and ritual practices they rely entirely on the Qur'anic injunctions and the tradition of the Prophet rather than on the juristic formulations (*mazahib*) that developed in early Islam. The followers of the Jami'yat, as the organizational platform is generally known, claim that the Ahl-e-Hadith constitute about 20 per cent of the entire population of Bangladesh. They are largely based in northern Bangladesh.

The Madrassa Muhammadiyah Arabiah, in common with other Quomi madrassas, refers to Shah Waliullah, Shah Ismail Shahid, Syed Ahmed Brelvi, and Titu Mir as the progenitors of the educational system that it hosts. This madrassa was established in 1975 by an eminent industrialist named Muhammad Husain. Until 1978, it used to offer Ebtadaee and secondary education only. In 1979 the madrassa was taken over by the Jami'yat-e-Ahl-e-Hadith, Bangladesh (JAHB), which was then led by Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari. During this time, the madrassa introduced the highest degree (Kulliya/Daura-e-Hadith). There are 500 students enrolled at different levels, mostly from Dhaka and nearby towns. The madrassa expenses, according to the Principal, are met by Tk. 3,000,000 paid annually by 500 students toward their own expenses, and Tk. 80,000 per annum rental income from a storage space owned by the madrassa. If there is a shortfall in the budget, it is taken care of by the parent organization, JAHB and by a local Haji, who also pays for the salaries of about 25 faculty members.

The curriculum at the madrassa, which also serves as the headquarters of a major federation (Wafaq) of more than 200 Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas, mostly based in northern Bangladesh, is a unique combination of the curricula of three different institutions: Darul Hadith Rahmaniyya of Delhi, the oldest madrassa in Delhi of Shah Waliullahi tradition, Islamic University of Medina, and the Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board. In this sense the madrassa, which is supposed to be more conservative than its peers in the Quomi system, has shown more flexibility and a pick-and-choose approach in the formulation of its curriculum. From the Waliullahi tradition of Rahmaniyya, the madrassa has placed the study of Hadith at the helm; from the Medina University in Saudi Arabia, with which it has, over the years, established an academic exchange program, the madrassa has made the study of modern Arabic language a major part of its curriculum; and from the Madrassa Education Board, it has taken the lead to introduce several 'modern' subjects, such as English, Bengali, History, Math and Social Studies. Surprising as it

may seem from an Ahl-e-Hadith establishment, generally known for its ultra-conservatism, this synthetic approach to curriculum development has met with an enthusiastic response from both madrassa teachers and students. By the end of 2005, 235 students had completed the daura-e- Hadith degree and among them 97 had gone to study at Medina University in Saudi Arabia. It is important to note that with a degree from Medina University, a student can enroll in a relevant MA program in the public universities of Bangladesh.

In response to the author's query, a senior teacher of the madrassa stated that they were open to reform and that Bengali, Math, English and other 'modern' subjects should be taught in such a manner that students become useful and productive members of society. Having said that, he stressed that the madrassas should not forget the fundamental objective of Islamic education: to produce "an ideal Muslim" who serves the cause of Islam in every walk of life. On questions of teaching tolerance of other religions, pluralism, and the idea of citizenship, he said that the Islamic ideas of tolerance and civic responsibility as enunciated in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet are sufficient to cover these issues.

In response to the author's query regarding the alleged connection of the Ahl-e- Hadith to the recent spell of bombings in Bangladesh, the principal of the Madrassa admitted that the two leaders of the Jama'atul Mujahedin, Bangladesh (JMB)—Sheikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiquil Islam alias Bangla Bhai—happened to be from Ahl-e- Hadith families, "but this has nothing to do with the Ahl-e Hadith madrassas or their curriculum, which is peaceful in nature and orientation." He further asserted that, aside from Abdur Rahman himself and his son-in-law, there was hardly anyone associated with the terrorist incidents who could be termed as "properly literate in Islamic education." According to the madrassa Principal, even the chief of the armed wing of the JMB, Bangla Bhai, is not properly educated in Islamic studies and does not know Arabic well. "He was, in fact, an unemployed vagabond before taking up job in a college to teach Bangla," the Principal said. The madrassa Principal was of the opinion that "a person with a low level of Islamic learning is always susceptible to misguidance falsehood." If at all there are some people with a madrassa background who were involved in terrorism, the responsibility is entirely theirs; "our madrassas didn't teach them to engage in violence." There is "absolutely nothing in our curriculum or in our teaching that incites students to violence and terrorism; on the contrary, we teach them to respect people and call them to Islam with decency and '*hikma*' (wisdom)," the Principal said. He asserted that most field-level terrorists were not only poor but also illiterate as far as the Islamic idea of "literacy" is concerned.

There were some reports in the local media that Madrassa Muhammadia Arabia had some connection with the militancy associated with a section of the Ahl-e-Hadith. When the author asked the Principal of the madrassa about these reports, he was informed that one morning a local private TV channel came to visit the madrassa and saw the spacious storage facility adjacent to the madrassa. "When they wanted to take a look inside, we told them that the space had been rented out to a private businessman for storage purposes and that he had the keys to the storage. The Channel aired the report the same evening that this place was being used for the training of terrorists!"

Case study # 5: Tamirul Millat Kamil Madrassa, Jatrabari, Dhaka

This 'Alia madrassa is run by Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, which is a major Islamic party in the country and a member of the present four-party coalition government. The madrassa was

established in 1963, but started functioning in full swing in 1976. This is the only madrassa in the country which has two campuses, one for men and the other for women. In the main campus there are about 4,000 students and 52 faculty members. In the second campus, situated in the Dhaka suburb of Tongi, there are about 2,500 students and 35 faculty members. In the campus for female students in downtown Dhaka, the number of students and teachers is about 800 and 22, respectively.

As expected, the madrassa follows the curriculum prescribed by the Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board. Being a Jamaat operation, however, the madrassa also includes books by Seyyed Ab'ul 'Ala Maududi, especially his well-known commentary on the Qur'an, *Tafhimul Qur'an*, in the reading list for students, although these books are not mentioned in the syllabus in order not to go out of the way of the national syllabus. The Principal of the Madrassa, who has been at the helm of the madrassa for about twenty years, informed the author that about 15 to 16 faculty members of the University of Dhaka, the premier national university, and Rajshahi University, hail from this madrassa. There are numerous members of the elite national civil service cadre, Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS), who are graduates of this madrassa.

The madrassa, like most other 'Alia madrassas, has a strong presence of Islami Chhatra Shibbir (ICS), the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami.⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that although the madrassa is connected to a particular political network, the students come from a diverse political background. For instance, an influential political leader of the Awami League, which is deadly opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami, recently decided to send his son to this madrassa "to turn him into a good human being."

The mohila madrassa (women's madrassa) is part of the larger establishment but has a separate campus. All faculty members are women in the mohila campus. It is interesting to note that when the government, at the suggestion of some international donors, insisted that all educational institutions receiving public funds must accommodate at least 30 per cent women in their faculty, the madrassa authorities convinced them that, by including the mohila campus, the proportion of female teachers in their madrassa was more than 30 per cent of the total faculty of the institution. The madrassa was thus able to both accommodate the government regulations and preserve its gender segregation policy.

Case study # 6: Ummahatul Mominin Mohila (Women's) Madrassa, Badda, Dhaka

This is a medium-size madrassa for women, affiliated with a Quomi madrassa of Deobandi orientation. Established in 1994 with less than 100 students, it has more than 350 students at present. The author was informed by the administrator of the madrassa—a gentleman—that there were so many applicants for admission that the madrassa had to decline many of them for lack of facilities for more than the existing number of students. The madrassa has 24 teachers, 12 of them being female. Five male teachers have degrees from Deoband, India. The madrassa follows

⁴⁸ It may be noted here that except in the University of Dhaka, which is still a "no go area" for Islamists, most public universities in the country have seen spectacular rise in political activities by Islami Chhatra Shibbir. In recent years the ICS has won university level elections in Rajshahi, Chittagong, Jahangirnagar, Kushtia, and Sylhet universities, as well as in several professional colleges throughout the country. Private universities, numbering 54 at present, do not allow any student politics or students' unions elections on their campuses, although informal political groupings do exist there as well.

the curriculum approved by the Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia, a major federation of Quomi madrassas in Deobandi tradition. Besides the typical courses of Dars-e-Nizami, the madrassa also teaches Home Economics, using the textbook published by the Bangladesh National Textbook Board, and tailoring as a part of vocational training.

An interesting thing to note was about the financing of the madrassa: about 50 percent of the parents, from different parts of the country, are paying for full tuition and room and board for their daughters' Islamic education. It is obvious, therefore, that for many parents sending their children to the madrassas is not a question of cost; it is, rather, the question of where their children will get a better Islamic environment and education. The author was told that most of the fully paid students came either from families with medium-sized businesses or from families of mid-level government and private sector employees. Interestingly, the fathers of a few of them were themselves modern-educated professionals but chose to send their daughters to a Quomi madrassa. The rest of the students are either orphans or very poor; they stay and study free at the madrassa and their expenses are borne by donations raised from zakat and other occasional charitable donations. Several rich parents volunteer to pay for the educational expenses of a few other students who cannot afford to pay.⁴⁹

Case study # 7: Jami'atul Aziz al-Islamiah, Muhammadpur, Dhaka

This is a new type of madrassa recently launched within the framework of the Quomi system, but with considerable innovations. Established under the patronage of a renowned Deobandi scholar Sheikhul Hadith Azizul Haq, also the President of Khilafat Majlis, another Islamic party that forms the current coalition government, the madrassa represents an important milestone for reform and innovation in the Quomi system, although it is not clear whether other Quomi madrassas, including Sheikhul Hadith's own old madrassa, would follow the lead of these innovations.

The Khilafat Majlis of Sheikhul Hadith is ideologically opposed to both the secular Awami League and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami and advocates the revival of classical Islamic *khilafa* (caliphate) in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Islamic World. In order to establish such a caliphate, the Majlis wants to reform the current system of education in order to create an intellectual and moral climate conducive for Islamic change. The introductory pamphlet of the Jami'atul Aziz criticizes not only the general education system for neglecting religious teachings, but also the 'Alia system for its failure both to meet the challenges of the time and to provide an all-encompassing view of Islam.

In its search for integrating elements of both religious and modern knowledge, the madrassa seeks to develop a curriculum with the following three objectives in mind: first, the syllabus is to be formulated based on the merit and usefulness of a subject; second, a common/integrative education is to be introduced for all students up to the 8th grade of secondary education; third,

⁴⁹ We were told that in the boys' section of this madrassa, situated a few kilometers away, a guardian once came and asked the Principal that he wished to enroll his two sons in that madrassa but he wanted a special room for them with air conditioning, which he would install at his own expense. The Principal agreed on the condition that the gentleman would get the entire madrassa air conditioned for the sake of equality among students. The gentleman did not return.

after this stage, a student can choose either the general or Islamic education stream and go on to the highest level of his chosen field.

It is expected that after completing the 8th grade of common/integrated curriculum, students would be so well-versed in the basics of both the education streams, secular and Islamic, that they would fare very well in any of the streams they take for pursuing further studies. But the two streams would not be totally detached from each other even in later stages; mutual pedagogic exchange would be necessary to train better Islamic scholars and modern professionals. Completing education in this way, a student taking the Islamic stream would be knowledgeable in Islamic sciences with a deeper understanding of temporal activities and modern science and technology; and the student who takes the general stream would also have a solid Islamic training to enable him to live a life of virtue.

It is too early to evaluate the performance of the madrassa in terms of its stated objectives since it is still in the early stages of its development. Initially, the madrassa uses the traditional Dars-e-Nizami textbooks, with a few changes and replacements, for its 'Islamic' subjects, while the prescribed textbooks for general, 'secular' subjects, such as Social Studies, English, Geography, Introduction to Environment, are those published by the National Textbook Board.

Case Study# 8: Al-Jami'ayat-ul-Madina Kashiful 'Uloom, Sholakbahar, Chittagong

This Deobandi madrassa, with more than 1,000 students at various levels and 45 full-time teachers is located in a crowded commercial section of Chittagong city, and is highly regarded for the quality of its education, the high profile scholarly reputation of its *muhtemim* (principal, administrator) Mufti Abdur Rahman, and especially for its *Dar-ul-Ifta* (the department that issues fatwas, or religious decrees, on religious issues). It is also one of the few madrassas that has a separate department for training of madrassa teachers (*Dar-ul-Mu'allemin*). The madrassa has added, for many years now, modern subjects like English, geography, general science, and Bengali as compulsory subjects up to Grade 8. The medium of instruction is still Urdu/Arabic, although teachers are asked to translate/explain their lessons in Bengali as well, especially at the earlier phase of Dars-e-Nizami.

Most of the teachers of Kashif-ul-Uloom have been trained in other prominent Deobandi madrassas of Bangladesh; a few of them attended some Pakistani madrassas in the 1980s as well. More than 700 students are pursuing the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum, and 95 percent of them live on campus. The madrassa provides free tuition, room and board to about 400 Dars-e-Nizami students; the remaining 300 students, who come from relatively well-off families, pay for their own meals at the rate of Tk 1,000 per month. According to the madrassa administrators, the majority of the madrassa's students come from peasant families, or from families of small scale merchants and shopkeepers, and of clerical-level employees in the government and private sectors. An overwhelming majority of students is from outside Chittagong, most of them from areas where there are few Quomi madrassas. According to a senior teacher who is in charge of admissions, "Free tuition and *khana* (food) is, of course, one of the factors for poor families to send their children to madrassas, but the main motivation is to give them Islamic education. Several hundred parents are paying as much money to educate their children in our madrassa as they would have paid to any good private school."

Madrassa expenses are met by zakat and sadaka contributions and by voluntary charitable donations from the local community. People also contribute in kind, such as rice, *dals* (pulses), meat, vegetables, clothes, skins of slaughtered animals, blankets, beds, etc. Most cash contributions come in small amounts (Tk 100 to 500), although some prominent Chittagong businessmen and exporters and importers contribute larger amounts, either as obligatory zakat or voluntary sadakas. The madrassa also owns some commercial property attached with the campus that brings substantial rental income. According to the madrassa management, “Kashif-ul-Uloom has never received a single Taka from any foreign country or foreign NGO.”

Most graduates of the madrassa find jobs as imams and khatibs of mosques in different parts of Bangladesh, and even in foreign countries where there are Bangladeshi communities. The top 15 to 20 percent of graduates find jobs as teachers in madrassas. The rest either become teachers of Noorani madrassas and Maktabas, or take up some small scale businesses of their own, such as bookstores and stationary shops. The interesting thing to note, according to the madrassa administrator, is that “We are not aware of any of our last year’s graduates who is looking for a job and is still unemployed.” This compares favorably with the unemployment figures for the ‘modern’ educated youth that, according to some estimates, stands at more than 20 percent. This fact goes against the general perception about madrassa graduates who are seen as “social parasites” and “unemployable” because of their “useless” education.

Kashif-ul-Uloom maintains strict discipline over the life of its students; only students of the higher level can leave the walled and gated campus with proper permission slips, and that too for not more than a couple of hours. Students of primary and Noorani levels are not allowed to leave the campus at all. No political activities are allowed on campus, either by students or teachers. Teachers are prohibited to affiliate themselves with any political group or party, not even with the Deobandi ulama-led IOJ. According to one senior teacher of the madrassa, “Once politics enters the madrassa from one door, Islamic education leaves the madrassa from the other.” The madrassa management and teaching staff are deeply concerned about the allegations in the press that madrassas are spreading militancy, and that the activists of the two militant Organizations—Jama’atul Mujahedin (JMB) and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB)—involved in several terrorist acts during 2005 came from madrassas. “Not only that it is extremely embarrassing for us to be associated with terrorism,” says one senior teacher, “but it is also affecting our fund raising. A shopkeeper, who is our regular donor, recently told one of our staff when approached for donation to buy new books for students, ‘Maulana sahib, is it really for books or for explosives that you want my money?’ A few ‘goondas’ (ruffians) have tarnished the noble reputation of all of us.”

Muhammad Habibur Rahman, age 25, is a student at Kashif-ul-Uloom who completed his Dars-e-Nizami course in 2005, but decided to postpone his *daura-e-hadith* level for a year in order to take computer courses at a USAID-sponsored “New Horizon” program. Rahman wants to pursue M.A. and Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from some “good” university, preferably from some Arab university. He can read, write and speak Arabic and Urdu very well and also has a working knowledge of English, although he spoke English haltingly. He told the author that he did not read newspapers regularly but listened to the Bengali news on BBC on his transistor radio. He was reasonably knowledgeable on the Bangladesh political situation but had never voted or

participated in any political rally. He believed that the ulama should guide the government on Islamic matters but should not directly involve themselves in politics.

Rahman did not come to madrassa education by his own choice but considered himself extremely fortunate to have this opportunity. His father, a non-commissioned officer (NCO) in the Bangladesh army did not have any children for several years after his marriage. He consulted a religious leader who advised him to promise that if Allah gave him a son, he would “give away” the child “in the service of Allah.” When Habibur Rahman was born soon after that, his parents decided to let him first finish his primary school near their home in Rajshahi, where his father was posted at that time, and then started looking for a good madrassa where their son could prepare himself to “serve in the cause of Allah.” In 1994, Habibur Rahman was admitted in Kashif-ul-Uloom where he first memorized the Qur’an, then completed his Ebtedae level, and later Dars-e-Nizami in 2005.

Throughout his stay in Kashif-ul-Uloom, Rahman’s father took care of his educational expenses, including paying for his room and board and pocket money. His mother was so concerned about his comfort that she sent him money to rent a private room near the madrassa when she came to know that the living space for students in the madrassa was a bit congested. Rahman kept the room to please his mother but stayed in the madrassa with his classmates and teachers.

Habibur Rahman is very popular with his teachers who praise him for his piety, love for knowledge, polite manners, and commitment to academic excellence. Last year when he completed his Dars-e-Nizami course, he approached the madrassa administrator, Mufti Abdur Rahman, to make arrangements for the teaching of Islamic economics, about which he had read a few articles in Bengali newspapers. The Mufti sahib said that he could not possibly introduce a new course for only one student. Rahman then persuaded four other senior students to join him and the management agreed to assign one of the teachers to lecture these four students on “Islamic principles of economics,” with the aid of a few Urdu and Arabic texts.

Case Study Analyses

The brief case studies of these representative madrassas and related issues examined lead the author to reassert that the madrassa as an educational institution and terrorism as an illegitimate form of Islamization do not stand together. There is no denying that many Islamic radicals and terrorists had some kind of madrassa background, but this phenomenon has to be qualified by several related issues. It appears that the most reasonably pertinent question about madrassas in Bangladesh relates not to radicalism, militancy or terrorism, but to the formative forces that the system hosts.

First, madrassas represent an age-old system of pedagogy that essentially aims at both transmitting traditional Islamic sciences and training Islamic religious “functionaries.” Additionally, the system has been a major, and in many cases the only, source of imparting literacy to hundreds and thousands of people in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia.

Second, it may not be correct to assume that the madrassa system is a totally closed and inaccessible domain of learning. In fact, the author did not find a single madrassa which did not

teach some sort of non-religious, practical subjects often prescribed by the National Curriculum Board. Some madrassas are experimenting with new curricula, new teaching methods, and new technologies as well—all without any prompting from the government. What seems to be driving these madrassas to introduce changes—howsoever small and incremental in many cases—are socio-economic or, to put it bluntly, ‘market’ forces. The introduction of English, for example, in several Quomi madrassas up to secondary-level, especially in Noakhali, Sylhet and Chittagong regions, is a direct response to the increasing demand for prayer imams and khatibs who can communicate in English among the Bangladeshi expatriate communities in Western societies. Also, the Quomi madrassas are facing competition from the increasing number of English medium schools in urban areas that claim to combine modern and Islamic education and are becoming quite popular among the educated middle classes. In addition, several madrassas—the most important among them being the Putia Madrassa in Chittagong Division—have added facilities for imparting technical training to their students that include plumbing, electrical repair, air-conditioning repair, metal work and training as medical and pharmacy assistants.

Third, the madrassa system is not a monolithic institution. The system is not only represented by the organizational streams of ‘Alia and Quomi, but also by different networks, different ideologies, different doctrinal orientations, and different pedagogic emphases. One thing that remains clear, however, is that these madrassas are integrally embedded in the social structure of Bangladesh and are there to respond to the need for Islamic education in their localities as well as in the country as a whole.

Madrassas, Politics and the Question of Militancy

A great deal has been written on madrassas in the West in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy and the United States’ war on terrorism. In general perception, madrassas, especially in Muslim South Asia, have become synonymous with terrorism and terrorist training camps. Many journalists and commentators have suggested that these madrassas teach “jihadi literature” in their courses of studies and that their entire curriculum is intended to produce “holy warriors.” It has also been suggested by many among Western scholars that there is an inherent relationship between what is taught in the madrassas on the one hand and religious extremism, Talibanism, militancy, anti-Americanism, and even terrorism. It is also argued that the madrassa students, inspired by the concept of jihad, which they acquire in the madrassas through their reading of religious texts, become “soldiers of God” and engage in militant activities against those they consider enemies of Islam (See, for example, Jessica Stern’s article in *Foreign Affairs*, Jeffery Goldberg’s article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Robert Kaplan’s *Holy Warriors*, and statements ad nauseum by Congressmen and Senators blaming “maadraaasas” for terrorism). These assertions have by now turned out to be universal cliché but still remain as central points of reference in policy circles as well as in the public sphere. These issues, therefore, deserve a close examination involving not only the syllabus of the madrassas but also other relevant issues. The following observations could be made on madrassas, politics, and militancy:

First, the overwhelming majority of Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh are nonpolitical or apolitical. Their teachers and students are strictly prohibited from participating in any political activities or agitations. Even Islamic political parties—especially the Jamaat-e-Islami—are not

allowed to operate in the madrassas. This does not mean, however, that the teachers and senior level students are not well-informed about domestic politics and Muslim World issues. But the author found no evidence whatsoever of any extremist political activity or militancy in Deobandi-affiliated Quomi madrassas. The only exception in this regard was some Ahl-e- Hadith madrassas in Rajshahi, where both the teachers and upper-level students were recently mobilized by the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan Bangladesh for political action. Another exception is the Dhaka-based madrassa of Sheikhu Hadith Azizul Haq whose Khilafat Majlis is a part of the ruling BNP alliance and who has frequently used students of his madrassa and those associated with his followers for his political campaigns. The two largest Deobandi madrassas in Bangladesh—Hathazari and Putia—strictly enforce the “no politics” rule and describe it as a cause for expulsion in their guidelines for students. The Constitutions of all major madrassa federations (Wafaqs) require their affiliates not to engage in politics or allow their administrators, teachers or students to participate in any political activity. The Constitution of the two largest Wafaqs clearly stipulate that membership of those madrassas in violation of this rule would be cancelled forthwith.

The politicization of the government-subsidized ‘Alia madrassas, however, is a well-known phenomenon, spearheaded first by the student-wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami in 1963, when it brought close to one million ‘Alia madrassa students on the streets of Dhaka to press their demands. Even today, the influence of Islami Chhatra Shibbir (ICS), the student-wing of the Jamaat, in ‘Alia madrassas remains considerably strong. Other major political parties, particularly the Awami League and BNP, also have some presence in ‘Alia madrassas, although they are overshadowed by the ICS and by the students influenced by the Tablighi Jamaat, a non-political da’wa movement. The important thing to note here is that the politicization of ‘Alia madrassas is neither of recent origin nor is it connected to the current upsurge of Islamist politics; it has been, rather, an important part of the larger scene of student politics in Bangladesh, stage-managed by various political parties through their protégées on campuses.

Second, the few madrassas that have some sort of connections with militancy are of recent origin, and almost all of them are based in Pakistan. Further, these were not institutions originally conceived as madrassas that later turned into an abode for some terrorists; rather, they were, from their very inception, conceived as militant training camps, and were given the cover of a madrassa to provide ‘Islamic’ legitimacy to their operations. However, compared to Pakistan, such madrassas are very few and far between in Bangladesh. For instance, Shimulbari madrassa in northern Bangladesh was established about 100 years ago. Only, in 1994, it started receiving funds from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to refurbish its classrooms and hostel. It was reported that about this time a teacher named Nurul Islam left the madrassa and, with instructions from the spiritual leader of the JMB, Shaikh Abdur Rahman, established a new madrassa and started terrorist activities in the Saghata Upazila in Rajshahi. The same report, however, states that there were only 15 students in this newly established madrassa.⁵⁰ Similarly, a few Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in northern Bangladesh which, according to some newspaper reports, are allegedly connected to militancy are all of recent origin and seem to have been organized solely for purposes of recruitment and fund raising for militant activities by the JMB and its affiliate, JMJB.

⁵⁰ *Prothom Alo*, {Lost notes containing exact date of the issue in which the report appeared; am working on it}

Third, madrassas, as community institutions of enormous Islamic significance, are integrally embedded in the social fabric of Bangladesh and have deep emotional connections with the Muslim masses. The militants capitalize on this broad community support for madrassas, finding it easier to seek public financial support for their activities in the name of madrassas. Recently, when one of the seven members of the Majlis-i-Shura of the JMB was arrested, the police seized from his possession a money collection book of receipts. Apparently, he was using the receipt book to collect money from the public in the name of a certain madrassa, although he had neither any authority from, or any institutional connection with, any of the known madrassas.

Fourth, contrary to the belief of many critics of the madrassa system, with the exception of a few dozen known cases where foreign funding was involved, the Quomi madrassa system is entirely financed by local, private funding and religious charities.⁵¹ Of all the madrassas we surveyed, only a few had received foreign, i.e., Middle Eastern, funds, and that too only in recent years. It is possible that some of these funds received from the Saudi government or the Saudi and Kuwaiti-sponsored Islamic NGOs may have gone to support militant activities in some cases. But it is difficult to imagine that these donors intended their funds to be spent on destabilizing the BNP government or on terrorism. The Saudi and Kuwaiti government agencies and NGOs were primarily interested, first, in strengthening the Islamic trends in Bangladesh in the wake of what they perceived as growing secularization of society under the Awami League and the increasing influence of the Western, especially the Christian missionary, NGOs, and second, in promoting a particular version of Islam in Bangladesh.

Fifth, and most important, the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum of these madrassas is the most pacifist in its orientation. Its approach to Islam is ultra-conservative, literalist, legalist, and, in some cases, sectarian, but definitely not revolutionary, radical, or militant. More than half of the time of madrassa students is spent on studying books on grammar, rhetoric, prosody, logic, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and dialectics. But even in purely ‘religious’ subjects like *Tafsir*, Hadith and fiqh, the author found nothing that could be described as even remotely radical. It is interesting to note that in the standard syllabus on the study of Hadith, for example, chapters on jihad in all the six standard collections of the Prophetic tradition are not discussed at all. During the study of fiqh (jurisprudence) texts also, the entire time is spent either on issues relating to *tahaarat* (rules governing personal ritual purity) and correct ways of saying ritual prayer, or on laws relating to marriage, divorce, custody, *halal* (things that are permitted) and *haram* (things that are absolutely forbidden) and other similar legal hairsplitting rather than on political or jihadi issues.

Whatever degree of radicalism—whatever it means—one observes today in individuals or some groups with some association with the madrassas is not a result of the ideas and concepts that are derived from the madrassa curriculum, but is a product of certain political developments—domestic, regional and international—that are essentially extraneous to the madrassa system. The madrassas, in the perception of many observers, came to be identified with this radicalism and militancy only because of the political mobilization, and/or militant activities, of a section of the Islamic religious establishment—whose occupational location *is* the madrassa—on issues that, in its view, were of enormous Islamic significance and called for a militant Islamist response. But then, again, there are large numbers of documented cases from South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere in which the “Islamic militants,” who have been apprehended or

⁵¹ A list of sources and categories of income of Quomi madrassas is already provided above, p. 21.

identified, were modern educated, lay Muslims and had absolutely no madrassa background. To associate religious radicalism and jihadi militancy with the madrassas everywhere on the basis of the Taliban phenomenon in Afghanistan or the Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan is a generalization that is simply untenable.

The evidence from Bangladesh, and from many other cases including that of Southeast Asia, sharply contradicts suggestions that there is an inherent relationship between the madrassa curriculum and Islamic militancy and that the madrassas are nothing but “jihad factories.” This section concludes with the interesting case of Shaon, a recently arrested commander of the banned Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) who has confessed before a court that he was not only involved in the killing of a professor of Dhaka University, but he also killed an eminent writer who allegedly made some insulting remarks about Allah and the Prophet. Shaon was portrayed in the press as the product of a madrassa and, therefore, “proof” enough of the involvement of madrassas in terrorism. It was later discovered, however, that Shaon never attended a madrassa; he was educated in the mainstream educational system and after receiving a B.Sc. (Bachelor of Science) degree from a reputable college joined a madrassa in northern Bangladesh as a science teacher, but subsequently quit his madrassa job after one year in response to the JMB’s call for ‘jihad’.⁵²

Concluding Observations

1. The number of madrassas, both in the ‘Alia and Quomi sectors, has increased over the past fifteen/twenty years. The increase in the number of ‘Alia madrassas can be attributed, among other factors, to the deteriorating physical conditions of, and the quality of education in, government schools that seem to have led parents to send their children to madrassas. It is also the case that in rural areas and small towns, opening a new madrassa with the prospects of receiving substantial financial subsidy from the government makes good business sense. For most parents, however, the choice of ‘Alia madrassa is driven by a desire to provide their children with an Islamic education along with ‘modern’ subjects in a government-recognized system that also allows them to continue higher studies in the general stream, if they so desire. The growth of ‘Alia or government-supported madrassas should thus be considered more as a part of the growth in general education. The growth in Quomi madrassas, however, has mostly been at the elementary and the intermediate levels. During the past five years, the government-subsidized ‘Alia madrassas saw 22.22 percent growth compared with 9.74 percent growth in general educational institutions, and the number of students in ‘Alia madrassas grew at 10.12 percent as against the 8.64 percent increase in the number of students in general education. The Madrassa Education Board has about 9,000 ‘Alia madrassas on its list of affiliated institutions. The Quomi madrassas are estimated at about 15,000 (excluding the Maktab and Ebtadaee schools), although no reliable data exists in the absence of a systematic census. That there has been a considerable increase in the number of Quomi madrassas and the students thereof over the past 15 years is undeniable. But, again, reliable data on the rate of growth is not available. However, the author has tried to draw some plausible conclusions in this study by using indirect evidence.

⁵² The *Daily Star*, Dhaka, 5 June 2006.

2. What the author has observed in Quomi madrassas during the past fifteen years is the expansion in their programs, as well as the increasing number of students at the higher level. This has been happening especially since the early 1990s. One reason could be that the Indian government decided to refuse visas to Bangladeshi madrassa students for advanced Islamic studies in well-known Indian madrassas. Similar restrictions have also been enforced by Pakistan after 9/11. This has resulted in the upgrading of several Quomi madrassas and in the expansion of the higher level courses in Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh.

3. A regulatory mechanism to oversee the working of government-funded madrassas, both by the Ministry of Education as well as by the Madrassa Education Board, is lacking in some cases and weak in some others. As for the Quomi madrassas, which are privately managed and receive no state funds, the government has absolutely no control over their affairs, and until very recently, had no interest to know what was going on in these madrassas. The world of Quomi madrassas, as far as the government politicians and policymakers and government officials and modern educated intellectuals are concerned, was an alien world. It seems that Bangladesh policymakers and intellectuals have no clear idea of what is happening in the Quomi madrassas. The general attitude is that of dismissal of the Quomi madrassas with disdain, rather than that of understanding and engagement. Even now, when there has been some discussion of linking extremism and violence to some madrassas, and when there is a considerable pressure from the donor governments and agencies, the response of the Bangladesh government, both at the policymaking and bureaucratic levels, has been half-hearted, pro forma, and in many cases, of waiting for the storm to pass.

4. Both the government-funded and Quomi madrassas do not seem to feel any pressure, either from the government or from civil society (i.e., the civil society to which they are accountable) to introduce any fundamental change in their curricula or courses of studies. In other words, despite some occasional rhetorical statements from government officials and from the NGOs, there seems to be no popular, tangible and sustainable constituency for madrassa reform in Bangladesh, except, of course, donor agencies and governments who can apply only limited pressure. Whatever incremental changes are taking place in madrassas are mostly the result of long term changes in the socio-economic, ideological, and political environment of society, and not necessarily the result of deliberate public policy initiatives.

5. The inability of the government to play a pro-active role in introducing fundamental reforms in the madrassa education in the past—despite a plethora of commissions, committees and their recommendations—is related both to its unwillingness to take political risks and to its low level institutional and administrative capability. It is not only that all democratic governments, of BNP or Awami League, since the ouster of General Ershad's regime, have been weak, unstable, and have been constantly under political pressure by the opposition parties, and hence unable to undertake any policy initiative in the education sector. More important, however, is the fact that, as Rahman Sobhan has noted, the Bangladeshi state remains essentially a wayward and "disoriented state." The state lacks any permanent material base, and seems to represent no one except, at any given time, the parochial interests of the incumbent group of politicians and their cronies. The ideological hegemony of the state seen in the early years after the liberation under the banners of Bengali nationalism and secularism has withered away, and a new ideological formulation in the name of Bangladeshi nationalism merged with Muslim nationalism has yet to

take roots. Hence, the failure of the state to manage the ideological environment of the nation and to provide a coherent policy framework for education, a failure that may also have given some impetus to the religious extremism observed today in Bangladesh. If this analytical perspective is correct, then one cannot expect that the future efforts at madrassa reform will succeed where past efforts have failed.

6. Some small level efforts by the private sector have been recently initiated—probably with some covert support from the Ministry of Education and with foreign funding, especially the USAID and Asia Foundation, to persuade both the ‘Alia and Quomi madrassas to institute changes in their curriculum. But the emphasis here is to teach computer skills and the English language, and, in some cases, some modern subjects. The author’s preliminary impression is that to the extent these initiatives for “reform” are sponsored and organized by those who have had no previous links to the madrassa sector, they are not likely to have any effect beyond the duration of foreign funding. On the other hand, the initiatives taken by those who have integral links with the madrassa system, for example, the Misbah Foundation of Maulana Mukhlisur Rahman, who has sought cooperation from some respected madrassa ulama from different parts of the country and has successfully employed the ideological capital of Islam to strengthen his case for reforms, may have better prospects of success.

7. International pressures for reform in madrassa education seem to have produced two contradictory results: on the one hand, they have created a sense of urgency in some quarters to initiate changes on their own in order to forestall some unknown and untoward drastic actions from the government, e.g. compulsory registration of private madrassas, as is being done in Pakistan; on the other hand, they have also resulted in a resolve to resist what is seen as a Western conspiracy to dismantle the guardians of traditional Islam and replace it with a “modernized,” “diluted,” “new,” and “compliant” Islam.

9. In general, however, we found the majority of the Quomi madrassa ulama quite satisfied with their present curriculum in view of what they believe is the true purpose and function of the madrassa education. Even when they talk about reform in madrassa education, their perception of these reforms do not necessarily correspond with those of the modern educated elite or the government policymakers. As long as the madrassa ulama are not dependent on the state for financial needs, and as long as the community is willing to support them as they are, and as long as they have no moral, status, and material incentives, they will continue to operate as they have been operating in the past.

10. Having said that, it would also be wrong to assume that madrassas in Bangladesh have remained totally frozen in rigidity. ‘Alia madrassa system is one spectacular example of how the modern and traditional education systems have been combined. What is not widely known is that even the Quomi madrassas have introduced important changes since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. For example: (1) Bengali has mostly replaced Urdu as a medium of instruction; (2) Bengali has been made a compulsory subject up to the secondary level; (3) History of Islam in the Indian subcontinent has been introduced as a separate subject; (4) English has been added as a compulsory subject in most Quomi madrassas in the primary section, and several Quomi madrassas now provide facilities for English language teaching at higher levels also; (5) Primary education has now been integrated within the Quomi madrassas, incorporating

all the subjects of general education; and (6) a centralized and standardized system of curriculum, syllabi, and examinations has been established for most Quomi madrassas under the auspices of federations (Wafaqs).

12. The overwhelming majority of Quomi madrassas in Bangladesh are nonpolitical or apolitical. Their teachers and students are strictly prohibited from participating in any political activities, including those of the religious political parties. Most Quomi madrassa administrators and teachers strictly follow this “no politics on the campus” rule. This does not mean, however, that the madrassa ulama and the upper level students of Quomi madrassas are unaware of the political situation of their country or of the Islamic World in general. The author found considerable interest among the Quomi madrassa teachers and students in issues such as militancy in the name of Islam in Bangladesh—which was categorically denounced as un-Islamic by everyone interviewed—Palestine, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. war on terrorism and how it is connected to Islam and Muslims, and “anti-Muslim” policies of India. The author saw no evidence whatsoever of any extremist political orientation, activity, or militancy in Deobandi-affiliated Quomi madrassas. The only exception in this regard was some Ahl-e- Hadith madrassas in Rajshahi region where both the teachers and upper level students were recently mobilized by the Ahl-e-Hadith Andolan Bangladesh for political action but even here their radical political rhetoric did not go as far as to approve of the terrorist activities perpetrated by their fellow Ahl-e-Hadith activists of JMB and JMJB. Politicization of the government-subsidized ‘Alia madrassas, however, is a well-known phenomenon, but this is largely a part of the Bangladesh student politics linked with the ever-changing political scene of the country, and not spearheaded by the recent upsurge of Islamism or Islamic militancy.

13.

Policy Implications

In this author’s view, the most important finding of this research is that the madrassa system in Bangladesh is more deeply embedded within the social fabric and popular perception than the dominant ‘modern’ elite and a section of the Western media assume. A general observation is the fact that the madrassa system, which has been an integral part of traditional Muslim South Asian societies, and especially of their religious landscapes, is often misunderstood, and even undermined, by a section of the modern elite and intellectuals who consider the system not only as an archaic, fossilized and unproductive pedagogic machine, but also the training sites for terrorists.

But if the processes of modernization and globalization result in a situation in which their benefits come to be exclusively appropriated by a small, ‘modernized’ section of the society which, because of its socio-economic location and ideological preferences, aggressively promotes Western educational philosophy and patterns at the cost of Islamic education, then the madrassas, the time-tested site for the reproduction of tradition and orthodoxy, would certainly tend to be resistant. It should be noted here that the madrassa system, especially the Quomi system, did not experience a modernist hegemonic pressure even during the British colonial period, when the madrassas were allowed to operate without substantial colonial intervention.

In exchange, the system did evolve exclusively as educational institutions within its own pedagogic, albeit exclusivist, boundaries. It is no wonder that although the Deoband madrassa was established by the jihadi veterans of the War of Independence of 1857, the Quomi madrassas that grew out of this model in the Bangladesh region played a less than peripheral role against the British political authority. It was largely the modern-educated, Westernized, nationalist elite who led the anti-colonial resistance movements in the dying days of the Raj. In fact, in the Swadeshi era of the early twentieth century, it was a group of modern-educated Calcutta-based youth, including the secondary school students, who greatly terrorized the colonial state. In the Pakistan period as well as during much of the Bangladesh period, it was Dhaka University, and not Hathazari or Putia madrassas, that played decisive roles in major political strides, paving the ways to postcolonial nationalist and modernist leadership. Only in the 1980s and 1990s, when the madrassa system in the subcontinent came to be entangled in a web of certain regional developments—not of their own making—and, as a consequence of the events of 9/11, became subject to hostile criticism and persecution, that it turned out to be more agitative and, in some cases, radicalized. Why so and in what ways?

This study has shown that the resistance against Western hegemony offered by the madrassa is mainly cultural, and to a certain extent, political in nature, but certainly not jihadi or terrorist. Therefore, before proposing any policies or reform agenda, policymakers should make a special attempt not to generalize the madrassa system as merely a terror-machine. When policymakers have overcome this barrier of hegemonic representation about the madrassas and come to appreciate it as a potentially formative form of educational system, only then can any efforts toward reforms be successful.

It is encouraging to note that the Government of Bangladesh as well as the international community is gradually beginning to view the madrassa system in a more differentiated, nuanced and, in some cases now, positive light, ushering hope of fruitful engagement. But it seems that these efforts are generally limited to either providing English language support or computer literacy. In this author's opinion, no tangible impact can be made by such sincere but shallow efforts. The madrassa system needs a fundamental but sustainable reshuffling. In this context, and in the light of the findings of this research, the author offers the following policy perspectives:

Existing Governance Scenario and Radicalism

The most important issue involves a reality-check as to why politically motivated religious extremism and the bloody quest for Islamization of the state have been taking place in recent years in Bangladesh. Whereas in the Middle-East terrorist attacks have been launched on foreigners, both civilians and uniformed personnel, and also in the political systems which are largely non-democratic, the picture is relatively different in Bangladesh where parliamentary democracy has been in place for the past fifteen years. Over these years, moderate and 'constitutional' Islamist polity has gradually made its mark, which has been reflected in the fact that three major Islamic political parties form the current ruling coalition. It is in this context of the rise of the politically and electorally engaged Islamism within the mainframe of power politics that the violent claims for the 'Islamization of the state' by the terrorists represents a rare

contradiction within the Islamist polity of Bangladesh. In this context, we need to seriously examine how the terrorists, allegedly recruited from some madrassas, define their ideological boundaries in relation to the constitution-bound Islam that is already, if in a limited way, capable of stimulating 'Islamization' at the state level?

In general, it appears that the discourse on the 'Islamization of the state,' as offered by both the underground extremists and, largely, by ordinary people of Islamist orientation, has resonance with the mainstream quest for 'good governance' and an honest and just administration. Perhaps, it is the existing way the state is run within both the framework of 'nominally Islamized' or secular-modernist statecraft that can answer the questions posed above. The answer obviously relates to the apparent 'failure' of the apparatus, agencies and programs of the state in addressing the problem of social justice. If we examine, for instance, the terrorist motivation of targeting the judicial system, we encounter the general interpretation that the extremists, by violating the existing judicial system, wanted to establish Sharia law at the state level. But it is also a fact that approximately 800,000 land-related cases, often triggered by land erosion and act of grabbing of newly formed alluvial lands by politically influential people, are pending in the courts of Bangladesh. There are many cases which have been going on for the past 35 years or more and the courts, both as a result of case-overload and corruption, have not decided these cases. One case in the southern district of Khulna was adjourned for 1,266 times!

If the age-old saying 'justice delayed is justice denied' is accepted in its literal form, then one does not need to be a madrassa graduate or a terrorist to question the efficacy of the judicial system in Bangladesh. In many remote rural areas, there are a number of underground Maoist outfits who have expressly justified their killing and brutality, the extent of which often exceeds that of the Islamist terrorists, on the excuse of the failure of the state to ensure justice and equality. In this context, it can be stated that if the stability, peace and development of the country demands that all citizens behave in a particular way, that is, through constitutional and legal means or through civil society mechanisms, then popular grievances have to be met with efficiency, equity and fairness. Unless this essential symmetry is achieved within the processes of operational statecraft, tensions may arise from all sectors: Islamists, leftists, civil society or even the army. It is, therefore, imperative that any curative measures are simultaneously aided by preventive measures as far as the state's capability to dispense essential services, justice, stability and economic growth is concerned.

Responding to Perceived Terrorist Threats from Madrassas

Though the madrassas as institutions of Islamic learning do not generally represent a terrorist threat,⁵³ there should not be any room for complacency either. Those few madrassas which have direct or indirect connection with militant activities, in whatever capacity, should be identified and due measures should be taken against them. Following the countrywide terrorist attacks on August 17, 2005, the government has arrested a large number of radicals including the top ranking leaders of the JMB and JMJB who were trying to use the cover of some Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas for recruitment of militants and fund raising. Seven leading terrorists have already

⁵³A USAID report finds that while the 'Alia system represents 'low or no' evidence of existing threat, Quomi system represents "potential" or "limited" threat. *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World*. p. 23

been sentenced to death by the courts. However, as far as we know, there has been no visible attempt by the state authorities to develop relevant case studies on the madrassas to find out the genesis, level and pattern of terrorist connection. Serious case studies of each madrassa identified with militancy would reveal its doctrinal and ideological orientation, political linkages, funding sources, organizational capacity and a profile of the domestic and international network it uses.

Organization and Development of the Madrassa Education System

One of the issues that needs urgent attention is the organizational setup of the madrassas. It is not expected that all madrassas in Bangladesh can be brought under the umbrella of one administrative authority but it may be possible to rationalize the existing system. 'Alia system has already a strong organizational framework in the form of the Bangladesh Madrassa Education Board, which controls and supervises all 'Alia madrassas in the country. The scenario is different in the case of Quomi madrassas. In addition to the hundreds of madrassas that are run independently, there are about twelve associations or apex bodies (Wafaqs) with different ideas, doctrines, and ideologies within the Quomi sector. It is important to bring them under as few authoritative bodies as possible. The Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia has the potential of becoming the foremost organizational authority for a majority of Deobandi madrassas. It should, therefore, be offered all government and civil society support to bring as many madrassas as possible under its control. Similar incentives can be offered to the madrassas already affiliated with other, smaller Wafaqs, and to those which have not yet joined any of the existing associations, to encourage them to join one, apex body. This will enormously strengthen the ability of the government to be in touch with the entire Quomi madrassa system through the Wafaq and will facilitate the implementation of government-proposed changes through its good offices.

The Quomi madrassas would benefit from its affiliation with the Wafaqul Madarisul Arabia in a number of ways. First, the Wafaq has already been recognized by the government as the only national organization of the Quomi madrassas and, in this context, it has the capacity to negotiate and bargain with the government on behalf of its member madrassas. Second, the Wafaq operates a publication wing which has been publishing required textbooks for the Quomi madrassas for some time and hence has the essential experience in matters of syllabi and textbook development. Third, the Wafaq is one of the moderate platforms within the Quomi madrassa groupings and represents a relatively more popular institutional framework. Fourth, as was evident from author interviews with its officials, the Wafaq is willing to work with the government authorities and civil society institutions if engaged with some sensitivity for its concerns. Fifth, the Wafaq, over the years, has developed a competent and fairly elaborate administrative, management and pedagogic framework in which the madrassas can operate successfully.⁵⁴ Sixth, and probably more important, the Wafaq has also developed a network of social welfare programs, activities, and organizational capacities that its member institutions can utilize for undertaking community services.

These programs and projects include: use of madrassa premises and attached land for agricultural purposes; fish farming; cultural activities and publications; Islamic da'wah or preaching of Islam; counseling in marital or family disputes and conflict resolution through mediation; promotion of literacy among children, adults and girls; social welfare and charitable and relief work, especially during natural disasters; provision of free medical care to the poor; encouraging

⁵⁴ This programs and activities are described in detail in *Dasturul Madaris* (Dhaka: Al-Wafaq Publications, 2003).

good works (*Amr bil Ma'ruf*) that relate to the welfare of individual, society, religion and the nation; and discouraging bad deeds (*Nahi 'Anil Munkar*) that are harmful to individual, society, religion and the nation.⁵⁵

The Wafaq officials, in interviews for this study, expressed keen interest in developing collaborative projects with the relevant government departments to provide social services or undertake extension education programs for development purposes at the community level, with the help of the vast human resources available in their member madrassas. They were also willing to sit down with policymakers and discuss how the two systems of education can come in close touch with each other and work together to improve the quality of national education and “to produce honest, useful, hardworking, and productive citizens who would serve the nation selflessly.” Nevertheless, the Wafaq and its member madrassas are equally emphatic that they will not yield their autonomous status, will not accept any “external pressures” for reform that do not recognize Islam as the core element of their education. It is imperative, therefore, that any reform effort initiated from indigenous or external sources must take into account the fundamental fact that *madrassas are meant for Islamic education*.

Textual and Pedagogic Issues

We understand that the Quomi madrassas are open to reform, but, at the same time, they do not want to compromise at all on the centrality of the Islamic core of their curriculum; it is important, therefore, that we define an acceptable interface which would meet the challenges of the modern world and would also preserve Islamic identity and the pedagogic preferences of the madrassas.

It seems that apart from religious subjects that form the core of its curriculum, the madrassa system has a heavy bias for the humanities. This is true both for the Quomi and 'Alia systems. It was apparent in our discussions with the officials of 'Alia madrassas that they would be more than willing to introduce more advanced science, technology, computer science, business management, pre-engineering and pre-medical courses to open up new opportunities for their students if the government was willing to support them with funds and other resources. This is one area where foreign technical and financial assistance would be most useful—and most appreciated. The Quomi madrassas may not be as forthcoming to introduce a large number of 'secular' courses for fear of leaving very little time for Islamic subjects but, in their case, balancing the humanities with a new emphasis on social sciences would be a more acceptable option.

Comparative Studies

Contrary to the popular perception, Islamic education is not a monolithic system representing the same curriculum, syllabi, doctrinal and ideological orientations, institutional structures, patterns of relationships with the state, or attitudes toward 'modernity' throughout the Islamic World. There are not only important regional differences but, as we seen in our study of Bangladesh, there is considerable diversity even within the same country. It is important, therefore, to undertake comparative studies of the variety of experiences of Islamic education and to see how the system operates in different political, doctrinal, and ideological contexts and institutional forms, and how other countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, the newly independent Central Asian Muslim Republics, and North and West African Muslim nations,

⁵⁵ See *Barshik Ishtahar* [Annual Bulletin], (Dhaka: Wafaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, 1424 AH)

along with the countries where Muslims are in minority (India, China, Russia, Sri Lanka, for example) have dealt with the issue of reforming their Islamic education sector within the context of their quest for scientific, technological, economic and social uplift in an age of globalization. Comparative data and insights from these empirically grounded studies will not only demolish many myths about Islamic/madrassa education, but they will also enormously help policymakers learn from a variety of reform experiences, to formulate their reform proposals on a more solid footing, and to know what succeeds and what does not.

Governmental Efficiency and the Madrassa Reforms

The government and foreign aid—both official and private through the NGOs—for reforms in the madrassa education has to be channeled through the most efficient institutional actors that have not only a proven track record of successful implementation of educational projects, but also have a deeper understanding of, and appreciation and empathy for, the religio-cultural sensitivities of those associated with the madrassas. The record of the Bangladesh government, like its counterpart in Pakistan, for example, is not encouraging as far as the implementation of past reform efforts is concerned. For instance, one of the largest projects on the development of selected madrassas (both government and non-government) taken up by the government in 1997 with a completion deadline of 2006 had the following objectives:

- Phase-wise development of the madrassa education in line with the mainstream, general education;
- Provide madrassa education system with necessary support to meet the needs of present time;
- Create opportunities for madrassa students in different parts of the country so that they can pursue further education in their chosen fields;
- Enhance physical facilities of the madrassas in order to accommodate the increasing number of students in these institutions;
- Improve the overall quality of the madrassa education system.⁵⁶

In practice, however, the project, which cost Tk. 1,997.50 million, ended up building two class rooms, and providing one jeep, some furniture and a few old model computers, some salary support, and some funds for contingency to a number of madrassas. The project did not meet any of the stated objectives except the fourth one, and that too in a limited way.

Socio-economic Aspects

It is generally assumed that the madrassa system, especially Quomi madrassas, have negligible contribution in developing skilled human capital in the country and that their graduates are unproductive, not tuned to the needs of the time, and hence, are a burden on society. The madrassa people, however, would strongly disagree with this contention. And they have their own points of reference. A recent government survey estimated that there were more than 200,000 mosques of various sizes in Bangladesh, staffed by approximately 350,000 religious functionaries—imams (prayer leaders), Khatibs (preachers), and Khadims (care-takers). In many small towns and cities, where there are no public halls or similar civic facilities, the mosque is not only a place of worship; it is also a forum for discussing public issues. A typical town will

⁵⁶ Projects of Directorate Secondary and Higher education, Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh, <http://www.moedu.gov.bd/downloads/a13749bad67f39d1158fb6ec5d3244bf.pdf>, p. 15.

have at least four or five major mosques (*Jami'ahs*) and at least one small mosque for each neighborhood (*muhallah*). These small neighborhood mosques are closely identified with their local congregations and the mosque staff forms an integral part of their daily lives and social activities. It is, therefore, no wonder that the graduates of the Quomi madrassas do not remain unemployed after completing their studies, unlike their counterparts in the general education stream whose fate hangs on the crude logic of market forces rather than on the community and its needs. It must also be noted that the Quomi madrassas do not rely on tax payers' money and their graduates return to the community which in many ways has supported them in their education.

It is therefore important to appreciate that attempts to undermine the madrassa education and its graduates on the ground that they are not 'productive'—while we are yet to formulate a non-hegemonic definition of the term 'productive'—could not only lead to social unrest, but it may also tear the social fabric apart. What is needed is to engage them, utilizing their unparalleled links with the communities they serve, in social development, such as eradication of illiteracy, extension education for development, environmental preservation, etc.

Having said that, we must not take the status quo as granted. The community has a limit to accommodate these madrassa graduates. And some of the jobs available to the madrassa graduates in the 'religious' sector are not well paid or merely seasonal. It is important, therefore, to develop alternative occupational outlets for the madrassa graduates by providing technical, small business management, and para-professional training facilities to the madrassas using the vast, but underutilized, resources in the modern sector. This is another area where foreign assistance can play a useful role.

Nationalization of all Ebtadaee Institutions

All Ebtadaee madrassas should be recognized by the government as is the case with most primary schools and be given all facilities enjoyed by the government primary schools, such as free textbooks, school uniforms, food for education, etc. Ebtadaee teachers should be given a salary package similar to that of government primary school teachers. This will enhance the capacity of the government toward meeting its Millennium Development Goals of reducing the number of illiterate children by half by 2015.

On the Question of Integration

While we understand that both the 'secular' and religious educational systems serve different purposes within their own pedagogic worldviews and career prospects, the existence of two different, and often mutually exclusive, systems of education has led to the development of diverse social, cultural and economic identities and patterns within the country, resulting in a great deal of tension in the public life. The most perennial issue in the debates on madrassa education since the turn of the 20th century has been on the need and on the probable ways and means of developing **one** unified or integrated system of education, which would be acceptable to all, thus putting an end to the existing socially and culturally divisive educational practices.

Almost all national education reform commissions and committees established by various governments and prominent educationists have raised the issue of integrating the two parallel

education streams but have, in the main, left the implementation part unarticulated or vague after expressing the pious hopes that this should be done somehow, someday. This has also been a subject of much controversy recently, particularly since the present government announced a plan to introduce one such 'integrated' system by a rather hasty importation of religious subjects into the mainstream 'secular curricula' without either introducing corresponding changes in the Islamic education sector or developing a mechanism for institutional linkages between the two systems of education. For understandable reasons, there was considerable opposition to this sort of 'integrated' education from civil society, and the government had to abandon the hastily conceived idea. What this particular case, and several other similar experiments done in Bangladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere in the Muslim World indicate is that 'integration' must be seen essentially as a philosophical and pedagogic project with important intellectual, cultural, socio-economic, and political consequences, and not merely a mechanical exercise of moving a few isolated courses and subjects from here to there.

Appendix I: Hathazari Madrassa Budgets⁵⁷

Account of Income and Expenditure for 2004-05, Hathazari Madrassa

Subscriptions		Sadka	
Surplus from last year	9,45,053	Surplus from the last year	5,95,424
Income of the current year	1,80,20,782	Income of the current year	78,72,724

⁵⁷ Source: Al-Muin, Annual Commemorative Volume, 2005 (Hathazari, Chittagong: Al-Jameatul Ahliah Darul Uloom Moinul Islam, 2005), p. 23

Total income	1,89,65,836	Total income	84,68,149
Total expenditure	1,87,36,832	Total expenditure	80,28,015
Surplus after expenditure	2,29,403	Surplus	4,40,133

Budget for 2005-06, Hathazari Madrassa

Expenditure areas	Approximate expenditure (in Bangladesh Taka)
Salary of the faculty and staff	45,00,000
Running of the Lillah Boarding	95,00,000
Establishment of Darul Muta'ala	30,00,000
Construction of student hostel	50,00,000
Construction of main gate	5,00,000
Construction of residential buildings	2,00,00,000
Computer	1,50,000
Free medicare center	20,00,000
General (for electricity)	2,00,000
Conveyance during subscription collection	12,00,000
Establishment of printing press	15,00,000
Electric and telephone bills	8,50,000
Printing and publications	2,00,000
Publications of monthly mouthpiece	5,00,000
Repairing, caretaking and refurbishment	3,00,000
Overhead water tank	30,00,000
Grand total	5,24,00,000

Appendix II: The Present Educational Structure in Bangladesh

Age	Grade											
26+												
25+	XX						Ph. D(Engr)	Ph.D(Medical)				
24+	XIX			Ph. D	PostMBBS Dipl					Ph. D (Education)		
23+	XVIII	M.Phil		M.Phil(Medical)								
22+	XVII	MA/MSc/MCom/MSS/MBA			LLM	M B B S BDS	MSc(Engr)	MSc.(Agr)		M B A	M.Ed & M A(Edn)	
21+	XVI	Bachelor (Hons)	Masters (Prel)	LLB(Hons)		BSc.Eng BSc.Agr BSc.Text BSc.Leath	BSc.Eng	BSc (Tech.Edn)	B B A	B.Ed & Dip.Ed	BP ED	
20+	XV		Bachelor (Pass)				Diploma (Engineering)					
19+	XIV											
18+	XIII											
17+	XII	Secondary	Examination			HSC			HSC Vocational	C in Edu.	C in Agri	Diploma in Comm
16+	XI		HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION									
15+	X		Examination			SSC	TRADE Certificate/ SSC Vocational		ARTISAN COURSE e.g. CERA			
14+	IX		SECONDARY EDUCATION									
13+	VIII		JUNIOR SECONDARY EDUCATION									
12+	VII											
11+	VI											
10+	V	PRIMARY EDUCATION										
9+	IV											
8+	III											
7+	II											
6+	I											
5+		PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION										
4+												
3+												

Source: BANBEIS, 2005