

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 SUMMARY

117. The evidence presented herein constitutes by far the most detailed account of secondary educational institutions in Bangladesh, and unregistered traditional madrasas in general in any Muslim majority country. The evidence presented on the incidence of religious education in this report comes from a variety of sources, namely: (a) multiple rounds of nationally representative household survey data; (b) nation-wide census records on registered secondary educational institutions; (c) complete census of all educational institutions in 48 unions across 12 districts; (d) a near census assessment of secondary students enrolled in grade 8 (or its equivalent) in the sample unions; and (e) complete population census in 96 villages in our sample unions. While the analysis in this report only represents an initial foray into the vast data collected in this endeavour (please see appendix for examples of specific studies to be conducted with the dataset), a number of conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the findings reported in this study.

118. We do find some evidence that *madrasas are more likely to be located in poor rural areas, and there is a relationship between household poverty and madrasa attendance*. The income effect is, however, small in magnitude indicating that there are other major factors besides household wealth that influences madrasa enrolment. Regardless of what factors ultimately shape household decision to send their children to madrasas, *the incidence in terms of enrolment share of unregistered traditional madrasas in primary and secondary education is very small*. This finding is similar to the only other serious study on the incidence of madrasas which finds that enrolment share of madrasas in three districts of Punjab Pakistan is also extremely small (Andrabi et al, 2005). It is also consistent with the available data on enrolment share of madrasas in India where most of the Islamic seminaries operate outside the state sector: A high level government commissioned study on the educational status of the Muslim community in India report only 3% of Muslim children among the school going age going to Madarsas (Sachar, 2006). However, unlike India and Pakistan, Bangladesh does have a large registered reformed madrasa sector. For example, *the combined enrolment share of madrasas (Aliyah and traditional combined) is larger than the NGO share in primary*. While there is a lot of emphasis given to the role of NGOs in the primary sector of Bangladesh, there is very little discussion on the role played by madrasas in service provision in rural Bangladesh. This finding is extremely important for the exact size of the madrasa education sector in Bangladesh has been subject to intense media speculation. Again, going back to our earlier citation of Ahmed (2005) on behalf of the International Crisis Group (ICG): “Bangladesh's madrasa sector has mushroomed, reaching an estimated 64,000 madrasas from roughly 4,100 in 1986, with little if any government oversight”. While there indeed has been an expansion in the share of students studying in the madrasa sector, it has not been without any government oversight – to a large extent it has rather been due to a conscious government policy to bring secondary school madrasas into the mainstream.

119. The first recommendation from our report is that there needs to be a more nuanced policy discussion regarding madrasas reform – we must distinguish between Aliyah and Quomi madrasas not only for syntactic reasons but for policy relevance. Private Aliyah madrasas funded by the government and regulated by the state sanctioned Madrasa Board now have a similar curriculum to that of aided private secular schools. Private unaided traditional Quomi madrasas still have a major difference in curriculum content and in pedagogic orientation. Theoretically at least, further Aliyah reform is relatively easier than

trying to reform Quomis. The transaction costs of Aliyah reform should be lower given that the state has to negotiate with one central Board, not to mention that Aliyahs themselves are dependent upon state financing. On the other hand, the overwhelming number of Quomis are not registered, operating without any government oversight, some under a plethora of informal undocumented boards, and most of all – *financially independent* of the state.

120. For the sake of argument, let us assume away the small traditional madrasa sector. Is there an issue with the rising share of enrolments in registered government-aided Aliyah madrasas? This study tries to explore this from the dimension of learning outcomes.²⁸ It is our hope that the policy dialogue can be anchored along the metrics of learning assessments in subjects such as Mathematics, Science, English, and Bengali. To that end our report draws upon the near census assessment of secondary students enrolled in Grade 8 in the sample unions to focus on achievement levels in Math and English. We do find that Aliyah madrasas fare worse than their school counterparts, particularly in English.

121. The second recommendation from this report is that we need to reduce the quality gap, particularly in English, between public-aided secondary schools and Aliyahs – Aliyahs must be held responsible for improving learning outcomes. Efforts to improve learning outcomes should also have a gender focus. The gender gap in quality of learning outcomes is most pronounced in madrasas. Thus, while Aliyah madrasas have played an instrumental role in reducing gender inequality in access, the Government should ensure that they are also not inadvertently increasing gender inequality in learning. This finding also highlights the shortcomings of only relying upon SSC pass rates as an indicator of quality. The SSC pass rate is higher for aided-Aliyah madrasas compared to aided-schools²⁹. However, we find that in terms of assessment of actual numerical and literacy skills, Aliyahs fair worse than schools. Currently the SSC examination system is under different regional and institutional boards – making it difficult to compare quality across providers.

122. Having underscored the learning deficiency in Aliyahs, we should immediately stress the point that it should not be about Aliyahs raising their standards to match schools – both need to be held accountable for raising learning outcomes. *The ‘punch line’ of this report remains that quality of schooling in rural Bangladesh is poor regardless of institution type.* Thus, the third recommendation is that the government should find more innovative ways to link substantial public resources that it pours into these aided private institutions, religious or otherwise, with concurrent improvements in numeracy and literacy skills. This requires holding each and every type of provider accountable to improving quality standards. In that regard the government has to take learning assessments seriously. It would be ideal if Bangladesh participated in international testing such as TIMSS or institutionalize a national assessment of numeracy and literacy skills. Furthermore widespread dissemination of information on learning outcomes should be made available to parents, communities, schools, media, and larger civil society to increase ownership of the quality discourse. More information flows and parental/community involvement should also help to improve the governance and accountability of these institutions. Ultimately, it is up to the state to link its financial support to providers with minimum performance standards based on student

²⁸ There is the dimension of social outcomes that this paper has not explored in detail. Issues such as these require careful exploration of a host of individual, household, institutional, and community factors that ultimately shape social attitudes. For example, Asadullah and Chaudhury (2009, *Forthcoming*) have shed some light on this issue, and do find that female Aliyah madrasa graduates have a more traditional view of female roles (schooling, work, family life) compared to their counterparts in schools.

²⁹ <http://www.banbeis.gov.bd>

learning outcomes. The Government has done an excellent job tying provision of schooling to teacher pay – it needs to be more creative in beginning to seriously tie performance to teacher payment as well, particularly in the non-state sector where it is less encumbered by civil-service bureaucratic constraints.

123. Besides fiscal incentives tied to performance, the government should also facilitate identification and placement of qualified teachers. Recently the government has carried out several policy reforms and project interventions to improve the quality of aided institutions. For example, under a World Bank supported education sector reform credit, the government has implemented a National Teacher Registration and Certification Authority (NTRCA) body to ensure that only qualified teachers could be hired in these aided schools and Aliyahs. Initiatives such as NTRCA are a major step in the right direction towards improving transparency and accountability. The government has also recently launched an innovative project with World Bank support (Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project - SEQAEP) to improve learning outcomes. Under SEQAEP, a series of fiscal incentives tied to improvement in performance are given to institutions, teachers, and pupils. Furthermore, acknowledging the difficulty these private institutions have in recruiting qualified mathematics and English teachers to work in rural areas, the government is helping to identify and post a pool of qualified mathematics and English teachers to work with teachers and pupils in project schools on a temporary basis. Programs and projects such as these are essential in improving the quality of education in rural Bangladesh.

124. Given the difficulty in coordinating improvements in quality and governance in thousands of aided private schools, some have called for increasing the provision of public secondary schooling. The government voted into office in December 2008, has already expressed the need for setting up some more government high schools in rural areas. It is not automatic that these new government high schools will do better than aided private schools. Currently government high schools (on average) do better (in terms of 10th grade secondary school completion exams) than their private aided counterparts - given that the government focuses on a handful of high schools located predominantly in urban areas/district headquarters with tight admission standards and staffed with highly qualified teachers. However, it is not known to what extent this apparent government school advantage is owing to selection of students of higher socio-economic backgrounds and screening out of lower-ability students through entrance exams. Besides, it will be non-trivial to replicate the 'model high school' experience in remote rural areas. Note that instead of increasing the supply of public high school staffed with civil-servant teachers, these new schools could be instead still managed by the government, however, staffed by non-civil servant teachers on a contract basis with payment/contract tied to performance. While the government contemplates various options, at least in the short to medium term, it should continue to focus on improving quality and accountability in these private aided institutions.

125. The first National Education Commission in Bangladesh 1974, headed by Dr. Kudrat-e-Khuda, recommended uniform, free and compulsory primary education of 8-years' duration. Anyone wishing to pursue Madrasa education could do so after the 8th grade according to the Commission. Interestingly, a new commission formed in 2003 had the following recommendations: introduction of the same textbooks in Bangla, English and Mathematics in Ebtidai Madrassas (primary Aliyah equivalent) as in public (and government-aided) primary schools. The current Government has announced that the Kudrat-e-Khuda 1974 Commission findings will form the basis of its overall education reform agenda. We hope that key

insights from that Commission, as well as more recent serious empirical studies will help to inform the madrasa reform dialogue.

126. Now coming back to the issue of unregistered Quomi madrasas – what is the role that the government can play? Even though a tiny fraction of rural children attend these institutions, the state should have an obligation to ensure quality education for all. The issue of school choice, particularly in rural Bangladesh is quite complicated though. Many of these households who send their children to Quomis might actually have had alternatives – they could have sent their child to a school or an Aliyah madrasa, but still picked a Quomi madrasa. Is the customer always right? If the parents only care about whether their child excels in religious studies, then as we point out in the report Quomis are actually doing a good job. Unlike traditional madrasas in Pakistan, traditional madrasas in Bangladesh seem to have undergone some structural changes even in the absence of any state intervention. Some have started to admit girls in recent years in addition to undertaking some modernization of the curriculum. Still, the pace of this change is unsystematic and slow. The fourth recommendation from this report is that we cannot ignore Quomis given that the overwhelming majority of their graduates have very limited exposure to subjects that are universally recognized as critical to a modern economy. The government should engage in a dialogue with Quomi madrasas to explore options such as introducing modern subjects, paired with fiscal incentives (*a la* Aliyahs), and oversight under a unified regulatory body.

127. A final ‘recommendation’ from the authors is that the policy discourse on madrasas in Bangladesh should have a sound empirical basis. Unfortunately, that is currently not the situation. For example, in a recent edition of the *Harvard International Review*, Evans (2008) states that madrasas in Bangladesh have risen as competition against private English medium schools – which could not be further from reality.

128. While the focus of this report has been on the secondary sector, it is important to note that there has not been any serious attempt to reform madrasas in the primary sector. Even though a small fraction of children graduate from primary madrasas, there is serious concern about quality of learning had persistence of underperformance through secondary cycle (Asadullah et al. 2007). Compared to MOE, there has not been any major reform initiative from MOPME. Similar to the secondary sector, this reform agenda must be embodied in a larger reform agenda to improve quality across the board for all primary institutions given the low quality of learning.