

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. There is tremendous diversity in delivery of education services worldwide – ranging from public schools financed and operated by the state to purely private schools. Within that spectrum one finds a cornucopia of financing and delivery arrangements, such as public-aided private schools, school vouchers to subsidize household expenses for private schooling, and non-formal schools operated by NGOs. Often this blend is found even within education sub-sectors of the same country. What shapes the incidence and nature of these education delivery systems is a complex confluence of history, idiosyncrasies, and above all, politics. The public discourse about how the state should include or exclude the private sector rages vociferously across both rich and poor countries, and within that debate, the role of private religious providers is particularly contentious. For example, despite the constitutionally ingrained separation between Church and state in the USA and the constitutionally mandated financing of Catholic schooling in Canada, in both countries there is lively debate between political parties, religious groups, teachers unions, and parents about public financing of private religious providers (school voucher eligibility for parochial private schools in the USA; extending public-funding to all religious schools in Ontario, Canada).

2. While mass schooling of any type is a modern phenomenon, several Europe countries and the United States relatively have the longest experience with provision of schooling¹. Particularly in Europe, historically schools were often founded and operated by Christian Churches to simultaneously serve as institutions of religious and worldly learning. Currently several European countries such as Ireland, Netherlands, and UK still have a significant numbers of state-financed religious schools as part of that historical legacy. For example, almost one third of schools in UK operate under a religious orientation. Most of these European schools operated by religious establishments and financed by the state are supposed to be open to all eligible pupils, however, like in the case of UK, these schools can ration based on denomination/religion in cases of over-subscription. Recently the public discourse of the role of state financing has been amplified due to concerns about the fact that these religious schools might be inculcating their graduates with values fundamentally different from the mainstream. For example, there is a major debate in Sweden about banning ‘creationism’ from biology classes in some Christian schools which receive public funding. The major policy concern in many European countries is, however, with public financing of Islamic schools (madrasas), reflecting the inter-twined concerns about extremism and ‘integration’ given that most children attending Islamic schools tend to be from immigrant households (e.g., polarizing public debate in Netherlands to change Article 23 of the Constitution to bar all public funding to private religious schools, with the subtext of stopping funding to Islamic schools). Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, madrasas have been of particular interest to the foreign policy formulation of many Western governments.

3. Muslim-majority countries with a large state-funded religious school sector such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Turkey are grappling with similar issues, reflecting recent geo-political events as well as intrinsic domestic concerns. For example, the contestation of the state between secular forces and political parties with a ‘Muslim identity’ has been at the forefront of the current Turkish political debate. While graduates of government-funded Islamic schools in Turkey have been characterised as being disproportionately partisan to the

¹ Even compared to Europe, United States was a league ahead – it had mass provision of *secondary schooling* by early the 1900s (Golding and Katz 2008).

agenda of 'Muslim' parties, some graduates of madrasas in Bangladesh and Indonesia have been characterized with a more nefarious identification - terrorism. In the absence of evidence-based research, much of the current discourse on madrasas in Bangladesh (and South Asia is general) is predicated on anecdotal accounts. The rise of religious extremism and intolerance in South Asia has been traced to the growth of the madrasa education system (e.g. Stern, 2001; Bandyopadhyay, 2002; Lintner, 2003; Ahmed, 2005; Griswold, 2005). Some extremist madrasa school graduates in Bangladesh have indeed been involved in despicable acts such as killing of judges and bombing traditional musical festivals – i.e., targeting symbols of the state and secular society. Furthermore there has indeed been a steady increase in the number of religious schools in these countries. Madrasas in Bangladesh are the fastest growing sub-sector of the education sector, allegedly making up for the lack of government provision and as a response to poverty. A similar pattern is also observed in Pakistan, although, in terms of absolute and relative measures, Bangladesh hosts the largest number of registered religious seminaries in the sub-continent, 2nd largest in the world (after Indonesia). It is rarely noted that Islamic extremists associated with violence in Bangladesh tend to be associated with certain non-regulated private madrasas, rather than graduates of public-aided private madrasas. Long before 9/11 Bangladesh had embarked on a pragmatic direction to reform madrasas at the secondary level which sets it apart from other countries in the region. First it introduced fiscal incentives to traditional unregistered predominantly all-male madrasa high-schools to register and include modern subjects such as mathematics. Then it introduced another financial incentive to registered madrasa high-schools to start admitting female students. Most madrasa secondary schools in Bangladesh are now registered, follow a modern curriculum alongside traditional religious subjects, and have become coed (50% of the enrollment in Madrasa high-schools are now females) – an unparalleled development in South Asia so far.

4. Bangladesh has achieved impressive progress in certain human development outcomes. Gross primary enrolment rate is above 100 percent, secondary enrolment has more than doubled since independence, and the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) gender parity target has already been achieved at both the primary and secondary education level. These are all remarkable feats when compared to countries at similar levels of income in the region. Much of the achievement in the three-fold increase in overall secondary enrolments and seven-fold increase in female enrolments since 1980 has been a result of successful expansion of the private sector via supply-side incentives and gender-targeted demand-side incentives program since the early 1990s. However, despite these achievements, key challenges remain. These include: (a) low completion rates (only 50% of children complete primary schooling); (b) poor quality of learning outcomes, particularly in rural areas; and (c) many poor children are still left out of the secondary school system. The policy dialogue on these key issues is hampered by the fact that there is a dearth of rigorous studies on determinants of learning outcomes. In particular, we know very little about the religious segments of the education sector. This reflects the overall lack of rigorous documentation of learning quality of rural educational institutions in Bangladesh *regardless* of school-type (religious or secular). Thus, any discussion of *relative* school quality has to encompass the full spectrum of school-types operating in rural Bangladesh.

5. A unique feature of the Bangladeshi secondary education sector is the large presence of religious schools. However, unlike other countries in the region with large Muslim populations, the religious education sector comprises of both state regulated private madrasas as well as independent, private madrasas. The former are popularly known as *Aliyah* madrasas where alongside Islamic education, modern general education is also provided.

Given that these madrasas operate with state funding, they are well-regulated in terms of curriculum content and teacher recruitment policy. On the other hand, an *unknown* number of private, *traditional* madrasas exists outside the state sector. These seminaries specialize in religious education and are popularly known as “*Quomi*” madrasas.

6. Given that net secondary enrolment rate still remains low, achieving further progress under widespread poverty requires that we attract hitherto difficult-to-reach children from poor families to schools. However, if there is a positive link between poverty and religious education this will further increase the share of religious schooling. Therefore, a clear understanding of the religious school sector is necessary if this institution is to serve as an instrument for poverty reduction in rural Bangladesh. For at least three reasons, there is a serious policy concern regarding the provision of education through the institution of madrasas. First, these schools may not provide skills necessary a modern economy. The academic standard attained is popularly perceived to be much lower than in general education. Consequently, it is believed that madrasa graduates fail to pursue a productive economic life and therefore add to the pool of ‘educated’ unemployed. With little learning taking place, current attendance can only reinforce the curse of poverty in the future. Indeed, existing analysis of Bangladeshi labour market earnings data reveals a negative correlation between madrasa attendance and wages (Asadullah, 2009; Asadullah, 2006). Second, they may not promote civic values that are essential for a functioning democracy, thereby causing concerns among policy makers with an interest in the relationship between education and citizenship. Third, a segment of religious schools still remains completely outside the state system, making it a daunting task to regulate the curriculum content and practices.

7. For the above reasons, many hold non-state provision of education by Islamist groups and the expansion of madrasas as a contributing factor to radicalization. These concerns are extremely relevant in the age of globalization as Bangladesh today competes with other developing countries in the international market. Education system should not only create a skilled workforce it also needs to reduce social polarization in order to guarantee a stable political environment. Therefore, it is vital for the government to identify the strengths and weakness of the educational institutional structure of the country in order to improve the skill set of the workforce on one hand, while improve social integration on the other.

8. Unfortunately, none of the available national datasets provide reliable information on enrolment in madrasas. While the latest round of the nationally representative Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) collected information on enrolment in both recognized and unrecognized madrasas², reliable information is not available on quality of madrasas. Therefore, any assessment of secondary education with a focus on both the incidence and quality of faith schools in Bangladesh requires purposefully designed yet nationally representative survey data combining both demand and supply side information on schooling. To this end, in the year 2008 the World Bank commissioned a multi-purpose sample survey to gather detailed information on all types of secondary schools in rural Bangladesh. A full census of all educational institutions was carried out in sample unions (an administrative unit bigger than village but smaller than sub-district) where secondary school quality was assessed by employing a battery of cognitive tests. Apart from a detailed survey of secondary school and madrasa students, a complete household census was carried out in

² Similar information is also available from another survey dataset compiled by CAMPE (2005), an NGO apex body in the education sector. Despite the comprehensive nature of the survey, it was not designed to shed light on the incidence of unregistered, Quomi madrasas, nor quality of education provided therein. For further details, see http://www.campebd.org/content/EW_2005.htm

sample villages, followed by a detailed survey of households with children of secondary school-going age. The research effort therefore combines data on education institutions, teachers, students, households, parents, and children students, from multiple inter-linked sources – census of primary and secondary schools, survey of secondary schools, household survey and census – in order to provide a detailed assessment of the secondary education with an emphasis on the institution of madrasa.

9. This is the first ever comprehensive survey on the size, structure and quality of religious schools in a Muslim majority country using data from Bangladesh. The comprehensive nature of the data collected allows us to not only present a detailed picture of the madrasa education system in the country, but also to draw comparison with the mainstream secular state and state-aided education sectors. Given the diversity of the Bangladeshi education sector, the data collected will help to dispel or confirm many popular myths about madrasa education. Household based survey data will be used to address issues in both the primary and secondary sector, while facility based survey data will focus on the secondary sector. Given the vastness of the data collected at different levels (ranging from learning assessment to social and political preferences), it is not possible for one report to contain all the possible descriptions and analysis. The two primary objectives of this report is to address the issue of *incidence* (how large is the madrasa sector?), and touch upon the issue of *quality* of education institutions operating in rural Bangladesh (are learning outcomes poorer in madrasas compared to secular schools?).

10. In order to highlight various specific aspects of the madrasa education system, we structure the report along the following lines. Chapter 2 provides background information on the secondary education system in Bangladesh and discusses various reform initiatives in the madrasa sector. In Chapter 3 we provide new evidence from available national (survey and census) datasets on the incidence of religious schools. This is followed by a presentation of results from quantitative analysis where we use linked secondary school/madrasas census and household survey data. Using this dataset, we achieve two purposes: (a) shed light on the spatial distribution of registered madrasas across the country, and (b) provide a basic description of household demand for madrasa education in Bangladesh. We pay particular attention to the role of poverty in decisions to send children to madrasas. Chapter 4 describes the survey design and methodology. First, we provide an introduction to the WB survey on "Quality of Secondary School Madrasa Education in Bangladesh" (QSSMEB). We then explain the survey design, sampling and sample selection, sample size and finally the survey contents. Main findings based on the WB survey are presented in Chapter 5. Here, we begin by documenting the question of "size" of the madrasa sector. Then, we describe the structure briefly commenting on selected institutional features of secondary rural schools and madrasas. In the remaining two sub-sections, we present evidence on quality, measured in terms of level of student achievement in four cognitive tests. We conclude in Chapter 6 by providing a summary of the main findings, implication for policy reforms, and outlining an agenda for future research.