

The Importance of Madrasa Education in Bangladesh's Islamic Culture

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Abstract

Madrasa education has significantly influenced the religious, educational, and socio-cultural development of Bangladesh, making its contemporary role an important area of study amid on-going educational reforms. This study examines the historical evolution of Islamic education from the Sultanate period to the present, focusing on the Aliya and Qawmi madrasa systems. Using a qualitative historical and analytical approach, the study draws on historical literature, policy documents, academic publications, and empirical research. The findings reveal that madrasah have made substantial contributions to religious education, literacy, social cohesion, leadership development, and socioeconomic mobility, particularly among disadvantaged communities. However, challenges remain, including curriculum fragmentation, limited integration of modern and vocational subjects, quality assurance issues, and governance constraints. The study argues that context-sensitive reforms incorporating contemporary knowledge, critical thinking, digital competencies, and employment-oriented skills while preserving Islamic values can enhance the effectiveness of madrasah education. These findings offer practical guidance for policymakers and curriculum developers seeking to strengthen Bangladesh's Islamic education system.

Keywords: Madrasa education, Aliya, Qawmi, Islamic culture, Bangladesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has one of the largest groups of Muslims in the world. For a long time, its Islamic traditions have been intermingled with the languages, cultures, and social structures

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of the area. One of the most important places is a religious school, or *madrasha*. They are places where you can learn, grow, and help other people. Families with low incomes can also move up the social ladder by receiving an education that isn't too expensive.

Madrasha education is an essential element of Bangladesh's Islamic culture, however it has problems with being relevant, high quality, useful for finding work, including girls, and getting its curriculum officially recognized. The *Aliya* and *Qawmi* systems have an impact on religious scholarship and community life, although their contemporary state is up for debate. There is an absence of a comprehensive and unbiased academic analysis of their historical importance and present limitations. This study addresses this need by utilizing evidence to analyse the impact of *Madrasha* education on pupils and the requisite modifications.

This research is predicated on two principal inquiries. First, how has Islamic tradition in Bengal and Bangladesh changed throughout time and among different schools of thought? Second, how important are *Aliya* and *Qawmi* *madrasha* education for religious knowledge, social capital, and personal growth? How could policy improve their contributions? The main goal of this study is to look at how *Madrasha* education in Bangladesh has changed over time, how it is set up, and what it does today, all within the context of Islamic culture. The study analyzes the historical evolution of Islamic tradition and *Madrasha* education from the thirteenth century to the post-1971 era. This article uses a narrative review method, together with case studies and an analysis of public policy documents. It provides a thorough examination of the historical underpinnings, structural frameworks, curricular elements, and current policy discussions pertaining to *Madrasha* education in the country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Madrasha education has long been recognized as a key institution for preserving Islamic knowledge, religious identity, and cultural heritage in Bangladesh. Previous studies have explored its historical development, institutional structure, educational functions, and policy challenges. Historical research by Rahman (2008) and Ahmed (1981) traces the origins of *madrasha* education to the Sultanate and Mughal periods, concluding that *madrashas* preserved the teaching of the Qur'an, Hadith, Fiqh, Arabic language, and Islamic ethics while shaping the religious identity of Bengali Muslims.

Comparative studies distinguish the two principal *madrasha* systems, *Aliya* and *Qawmi*. Bano (2014) found that the *Aliya* system integrates religious and general education under government supervision, enabling graduates to access higher education and diverse careers. In

contrast, the Qawmi system maintains the traditional *Dars-i Nizami* curriculum and institutional autonomy, thereby preserving classical Islamic scholarship. Empirical evidence further highlights the social significance of madrasahs. Asadullah and Chaudhury (2009) reported that madrasahs expand educational opportunities for disadvantaged rural communities through free or low-cost education, contributing to literacy and human capital development. Similarly, Hefner (2009) and Bano (2014) emphasized their role in promoting moral values, community leadership, social cohesion, and the preservation of Islamic culture.

Despite these contributions, scholars identify challenges including curriculum fragmentation, limited science and technology education, inadequate teacher training, and restricted employment opportunities. Bano (2014), Asadullah and Chaudhury (2016), and UNESCO (2021) recommend context-sensitive reforms that integrate modern competencies while preserving Islamic values. However, few studies comprehensively examine madrasa education as a pillar of Bangladesh's Islamic culture. This study addresses this gap by analyzing its historical evolution, educational significance, and cultural importance within contemporary Bangladesh.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-source research design to examine the historical development and contemporary significance of madrasa education in Bangladesh's Islamic culture. The methodology integrates historical analysis, document and policy analysis, empirical literature review, and regional case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Historical analysis draws on secondary sources, historical records, and scholarly literature covering the Sultanate, Mughal, colonial, Pakistan, and post-1971 periods to trace the evolution of Islamic education in Bengal. Document and policy analysis examine national education policies, regulations governing the Aliya and Qawmi madrasa systems, curriculum frameworks, institutional evaluation reports, and accreditation standards to assess their educational structures and policy development. An empirical literature review synthesizes previous studies on madrasa education, social mobility, gender inclusion, educational quality, and graduate employability. In addition, published case studies from Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet, and northern Bangladesh provide regional perspectives on institutional practices and community engagement.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content and comparative analysis. The analytical framework focuses on historical evolution, institutional organization, socio-religious functions, educational approaches, and policy challenges, while comparing the Aliya

and Qawmi madrasa systems to evaluate their contributions to preserving Bangladesh's Islamic culture.

4. RESULTS

4.1 A Brief History of Islam in Bengal

Early Interactions and the Dissemination of Islam (13th–16th centuries)

Islam made its way into Bengal in a number of ways, such as through marine traders crossing the Bay of Bengal, Sufi shaykhs establishing khānqāhs, and later through political incorporation into the Delhi and Bengal Sultanates. Islamization in the delta took place slowly, not via force. This was due to the rise of agriculture, patronage networks, and the religious appeal of Sufi lineages whose shrines are still important places of worship (Eaton, 1993; Roy, 1983).

Sufi Orders and Devotional Cultures

The Chishtī, Qādirī, and Naqshbandī Sufi organizations greatly affected the way people worshiped, helped others, and wrote in their own languages. People still go to major shrines, notably in Sylhet and Chittagong, to contribute money, resolve arguments, and celebrate the seasons. This makes Islam a part of everyday life in the society (Khan, 2013; Eaton, 1993).

Literary Traditions and Academic Lineages

During and during the Mughal period, the Hanafi legal school and its associated scholarly lineages were well-known in Bengal. Commentaries, primers, and digests connected the madrasas in Bengal to centers of learning in North India. The Dars-i Nizami curriculum, created in South Asia in the early modern period, brought together the rational sciences (ma'qūlāt) and the transmitted sciences (manqūlāt). It had an effect on religious education in the area (Metcalf, 1982; Robinson, 2001).

Changes in the Colonial and Late Colonial Periods

Colonial rule impacted the way institutions worked, how religion was maintained, and how print cultures were growing in Bengal. The Deobandi, Ahl-i Hadith, and Bareilvi traditions are examples of reform organizations that changed the way religious authority and teaching worked. At the same time, Muslims in Bengal had to contend with problems with education, language, and their political identity (Metcalf, 1982; Sanyal, 1996). In the late colonial period, rising literacy rates, the rise of vernacular periodicals, and more heated debates about the goals of religious education were all signs of bigger arguments about how to modernize and reform communities (Eaton, 1993; Khan, 2013).

Paths After Partition and After 1971

After the splits in 1947 and 1971, religious organizations evolved because of changes in migration patterns, state-building processes, and the opening up of the economy. Islamic charities, international charity networks, and labor migration helped mosques and madrassas find different ways to get money (Zaman, 2002; Sikand, 2005). The government's strategy shifted between centralized regulation and institutional autonomy post-1971. Civil society organizations advocated for both non-formal education and faith-based schooling methodologies (Riaz, 2008; Ahmed & Nath, 2017).

4.2 The Landscape of Bangladeshi Madrasha

Kinds: Aliya and Qawmi

In Bangladesh, there are basically two kinds of madrashas. Aliya madrassas, which are part of the national education system, give public tests such as Ibtidā'ī, Dakhil, Alim, Fazil, and Kamil. They also teach general subjects including math, physics, social studies, Bangla, and English (Riaz, 2008; Ahmed & Nath, 2017). On the other hand, qawmi madrassas are still independent seminaries that are governed by ulama-led federations like Wifaq and Ittefaq. They follow the traditional Dars-i Nizami curriculum, which puts a lot of emphasis on Arabic, Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and uṣūl (Sikand, 2005; Zaman, 2002).

Governance and Accreditation

The Ministry of Education is in charge of Aliya madrassas. These schools have fixed curricula, teacher-training programs, and, in many cases, government wage support (Riaz, 2008). Federations determine the benchmarks for the curricula, assessments, and quality of Qawmi madrashas. Recent initiatives to recognize advanced Qawmi degrees have sought to enhance access to higher education and promote civic engagement (Ahmed & Nath, 2017; Zaman, 2002).

Curriculum Structure: Dars-i Nizami and Its Variants

The Dars-i Nizami canon, encompassing Arabic grammar, logic, rhetoric, jurisprudence, legal theory, hadith, tafsīr, kalām, and Qur'anic recitation (Metcalf, 1982; Robinson, 2001), is utilized by both sectors, albeit in different manners. Aliya's classes include general education classes that match national criteria. Some Qawmi boards have started to teach a little bit of Bangla, English, and math (Riaz, 2008; Sikand, 2005).

Fairness, Access, and Enrollment

Most madrashas are in rural and suburban settings, and they largely help families with modest incomes and first-generation students. Boarding arrangements, zakāt-based scholarships, waqf support, and community sponsorship enhance accessibility (Khan, 2013; Ahmed & Nath, 2017). The number of girls who sign up for Alim and Fazil classes has gone up a lot since Aliya institutions started offering gender-segregated programs (Riaz, 2008).

4.3 The Cultural and Social Functions of Madrasah

Religious Literacy and the Growth of Morality

Madrasahs promote Qur'anic reading, ritual expertise, and moral discipline, thereby nurturing a normative culture of piety, service, and communal responsibility. Many graduates continue to serve as imams, khatibs, educators, qāri'/ḥāfiẓ, or community mediators, drawing upon traditional Islamic education (Riaz, 2008; Zaman, 2002).

Community Services and Public Safety

Many madrasahs do more than just teach. They also provide dorms, help orphans, give out food, and help people who have been affected by disasters, especially in places that are apt to flood. These responsibilities merge religious authority with various forms of social protection and local governance (Ahmad, 2009; Sikand, 2005).

Language, Literature, and Public Discourse

Learning Arabic is related to writing in Bangla and Urdu. Both print and modern digital networks transmit sermons, devotional poetry, and prose that teaches. Conversations about fiqh, gender, and justice come up when madrasahs, mosques, and other groups work together (Robinson, 2001; Khan, 2013).

Sufism, preaching movements, and madrasa networks

Many Qawmi institutions are shaped by Deobandi intellectual traditions; yet, the wider religious landscape also includes Sufi traditions and missionary networks like the Tablighi Jamaat. This makes a religious environment with several layers, where textual orthodoxy and ritual commitment can both be present (Metcalf, 1982; Sanyal, 1996; Eaton, 1993).

4.4 The policy environment and reasons for change

Independence vs. Standardization

For a long time, there has been a policy debate over how to find a balance between institutional autonomy and doctrinal purity and the need for more broad standards in math, science, and languages. The Aliya model demonstrates the efficacy of an integrated curriculum, whereas Qawmi federations emphasize autonomy (Riaz, 2008; Ahmad, 2009).

Making Sure of Quality and Learning Outcomes

A comparison analysis reveals inconsistent learning outcomes, marked by proficiency in higher Arabic-Islamic sciences coupled with variable basic skill levels. Improving teacher training and formative assessment can help students do better in school while still keeping traditions alive (Mohsin, 2019; Ahmad, 2009).

Being Ready for Work and the Steps to Take

More recognition of equivalences, university articulation frameworks, and vocational or ICT modules can help madrasa graduates find positions in education, social services, halal sectors, Islamic finance, media, or launching their own businesses. Taking English and math bridging classes can help make these shifts simpler (Riaz, 2008; Mohsin, 2019).

Gender Inclusion and Safe Learning Spaces

The community's preference for small, easily accessible institutions has led to more women participating, notably in Aliya streams. To get fair outcomes, it is necessary to make sure that campuses are safe, that there are qualified female personnel, and that science and health programs are appropriate for the age group (Ahmad, 2009; Sikand, 2005). Money and the government, community donations, zakāt, waqf, diaspora generosity, and official subsidies (for Aliya institutions) also help pay for madrasahs. Institutions are more accountable when they have open governance, school-based management, and boards that include parents and alumni (Riaz, 2008; Mohsin, 2019).

4.5 Case Studies

The Chattogram (Chittagong) Area

There are a lot of Qawmi madrasahs in the Chattogram area that have strong regional boards and big ḥifẓ programs. Libraries and publishing ventures get aid from the merchant community in the port city and scholars who work across boundaries. Some schools have tried to incorporate English and ICT classes to the basic Islamic sciences (Riaz, 2008; Mohsin, 2019).

Dhaka and the Places Nearby

Aliya madrasahs in Dhaka help a lot of individuals in the city. They also organize language groups, labs, and other activities as part of the national assessment system. Young people who live in cities commonly go to evening dars groups and short weekend classes (Ahmad, 2009; Ahmed & Nath, 2017).

Sylhet Division

Sufism shrines, individuals traveling from one country to another, and diaspora charity have all helped to make madrasa facilities in Sylhet better. Numerous graduates participate in da'wa, pursue careers in media, or seek postgraduate education in the UK and the Middle East (Riaz & Fair, 2011; Sanyal, 1996).

Northern Districts (Rangpur–Rajshahi Belt)

Enrollment rates are affected by poverty in rural areas and people moving to find work during certain times of the year. Residential madrasahs often take the place of secondary schools when there aren't many of them. Religious studies and training in how to make a living, such

growing poultry and fishing, have been merged through partnerships with agricultural extension offices and NGOs (Mohsin, 2019; Ahmad, 2009).

4.6 Islamic Intellectual Life: Texts, Curricula, and Methods

Texts and Commentaries That Are Canonical

The basic curriculum includes tafsīr primers, canonical ḥadīth collections with muṣṭalah manuals, Hanafi fiqh compendia, and books on logic and rhetoric. Commentarial traditions provide interpretive frameworks, legal maxims, and hermeneutical procedures that shape higher scholastic education (Zaman, 2002; Robinson, 2001).

Ways to Teach: Ḥalaqa, Dars, and Ijāza

Lectures (dars), supervised reading, memorization, and disputation (munāzara) are all significant features of higher-level instruction. Formal ijāza is needed to pass on Qur'an recitation and ḥadīth. Both oral and written tests are still important parts of the assessment (Metcalf, 1982; Sikand, 2005).

The Digital Shift

A growing number of madrashas are using online fatwa services, smartphone apps for Arabic morphology, and audio-visual technologies. Big cities are trying out structured blended learning after the epidemic (Mohsin, 2019; Riaz, 2008).

4.7 Modern Critiques and Misunderstandings

Sometimes, the public and the media talk about madrasas in terms of poor security or modernization. Nonetheless, empirical studies highlight significant disparities in curricula, educational outcomes, and civic duties. Effective policy requires disaggregated analysis, attention to regional variation, and collaborative reform instead of antagonistic narratives (Ahmad, 2009; Riaz & Fair, 2011).

4.8 Suggestions for Change That Take the Situation into Account

Get better at math, science, English, and Bangla while still following the rules at school (Mohsin, 2019). Establish cooperative training institutes between madrasa boards and universities that focus on pedagogy, evaluation, and subject matter proficiency (Ahmad, 2009). Expand equivalence frameworks and preparation programs to ease the transfer to higher education and technical institutes (Riaz, 2008). Collaborate with BANBEIS, universities, and madrasa federations to obtain precise data on enrollment, advancement, and educational results (Ahmed & Nath, 2017).

5. CONCLUSION

Madrasa education remains one of the most influential pillars of Bangladesh's Islamic culture and educational heritage. Beyond its role in religious instruction, it has significantly contributed to moral education, social cohesion, leadership formation, and educational inclusion, particularly among disadvantaged communities. The findings of this study reveal that madrasa education has played a fundamental role in preserving Islamic culture, religious identity, and moral values in Bangladesh since the Sultanate period. The study further found that the Aliya and Qawmi madrasa systems perform complementary roles within Bangladesh's educational landscape. The Aliya system integrates religious and general education under government supervision, providing students with broader opportunities for higher education and public employment. In contrast, the Qawmi system emphasizes the traditional Dars-i Nizami curriculum and has been instrumental in preserving classical Islamic scholarship and producing religious scholars and community leaders. The analysis also demonstrates that madrasas contribute significantly to literacy, social cohesion, leadership development, and educational access for economically disadvantaged communities, particularly in rural areas. Nevertheless, the study identifies persistent challenges, including curriculum fragmentation, limited integration of science and technology, insufficient teacher training, inadequate quality assurance, and restricted employment opportunities for some graduates. Regional evidence from Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet, and northern Bangladesh further indicates variations in institutional development and educational practices. Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening curriculum integration, digital literacy, vocational education, teacher development, and institutional quality assurance can enhance graduates' competitiveness without compromising the religious foundations of madrasa education. Therefore, future reforms should adopt a balanced and context-sensitive approach that harmonizes Islamic educational traditions with the demands of modern society. Such an approach would enable madrasas to continue preserving Bangladesh's Islamic cultural heritage while making a more effective contribution to national development and sustainable educational progress.

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