

Engaging madrasas to meet the EFA targets: Evidence from South Asia

Dr Masooda Bano¹

Since September 11, madrasas, Islamic schools, are often in the media but mostly for negative reasons. This paper, however, shows that madrasas are prominent providers of education in South Asia, especially for children with limited access to regular schools in Muslim communities. The paper presents comparative analysis of the state-led madrasa-modernisation programmes in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, which aimed to introduce secular subjects in the madrasa curriculum, and shows that madrasas can be important partners to meet Education for All targets. The forging of such a partnership is, however, contingent on the state making a serious financial commitment to the reform programme and building a trusting relationship with the religious elite.

Introduction

Since September 11, madrasas¹ (Islamic schools) in South Asia have been a focus of policy attention both for the security and development specialists. The former are interested in testing the validity of their alleged links with Islamic militancy (Blanchard 2005; ICG 2002), the latter in exploring whether engagement with madrasas can help integrate them better in the mainstream society— an outcome that can potentially help the de-radicalisation process while at the same time making madrasas a partner in meeting development targets. While more recent studies contradict earlier claims that only the poor enroll in madrasas (Cockcroft et al. 2009; Bano 2007; Nelson 2006), which is an important corrective, they do acknowledge that by providing free education and boarding, madrasas increase education opportunities for children from low-income families. Madrasas thus are argued to have the potential to become important partners in helping the state meet Education For All (EFA) targets provided the madrasa curriculum incorporates a higher proportion of secular subjects.

The debates about radicalisation or development are however relatively contemporary modes of approaching the study of madrasas. Madrasas have always been central to studies of Muslim societies because of being the traditional seat for exercise of Islamic authority along with the mosque. By virtue of interpreting the Islamic texts, the ulama within the madrasas have traditionally played a central role in defining what it means to be a good Muslim (Henfer and Zaman 2007; Robinson 2007). It is this moral authority, which made madrasas central to working of the Muslim empires that as a routine patronised madrasas. Indeed, madrasas were the premier education institutions under Muslim empires training officials for the princely courts and the local elites. The centrality of madrasas to shaping of Muslim societies made this institution a focus of reform for both the colonial and post-colonial regimes in most Muslim societies (Hefner and Zaman 2007)— the assumption was that if the Muslim societies are to modernise then the madrasas, the primary base for teaching of Islamic texts, must be the first to reform.

¹ Oxford Department of International Development, 3 Mansfield Road, University of Oxford, OX1 3TB, UK. e-mail address: masooda.bano@geh.ox.ac.uk Ph: +441865271924

Madrasas in South Asia remain an important area of study for both academics and policy makers. Hosting two largely Muslim countries, namely Pakistan (98 per cent) and Bangladesh (90 per cent), and an equally large Muslim population in the multi-religious India (12 per cent), South Asian madrasas have been at the centre of concerns about militancy. At the same time, the number of madrasas in the three countries is large enough to make some argue the potential benefits of using madrasas to impart secular education given the challenges faced by the region in meeting Education for All (EFA) targets. There are 16,000 registered madrasas in Pakistan, 9000 in Bangladesh and while no government-recognised data on Indian madrasas is available, all estimates place the figure at several thousand (Sikand 2004).

This paper examines the nature of state and madrasa engagement in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The central concern is to investigate how far the state, whether with the support of the western donor agencies or on its own initiative, has been able to engage with the madrasas to enable them to incorporate teaching of modern subjects in their curriculum. In presenting this analysis, the paper provides insights into the strategies pursued by the state and the Islamic elites in South Asia to either defend or exert their authority vis-à-vis the other. At the same time, the three country comparative analysis, also informs contemporary debates about the factors that facilitate or hinder formation of a partnership between the state and religious organisations to meet development targets.

The education challenge in South Asia

Despite recording relative improvement in education indicators overtime, progress towards EFA goals in the three most populated South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) remains slow (UNESCO 2008). The weakest performer is Pakistan, which together with Nigeria is expected to contribute one-third of the global total of out-of-school children by 2015, and also has particularly wide gender gaps in enrolment (UNESCO 2008). In all three countries, the inability of the state to ensure quality education for all has created room for non-state actors to play a prominent role, including private providers and NGOs. Development agencies have generally focused on successful NGO models, such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh, and have supported replication of these low-cost innovative models to reach marginalised groups. They are also increasingly directing attention towards the potential of low-fee private schools to reach the poor. However, little attention has been paid to madrasas that remain prominent actors within the non-profit education sector in most Muslim communities.

Studies suggest that total student population in madrasas in India and Pakistan is relatively low: 4 per cent of Muslim children in India (Sachar 2006) and less than 1 per cent of the school-age population in Pakistan (Andrabi et al. 2005) are estimated to be in madrasas. However, two considerations make madrasas significant for policy analysis. First, in terms of absolute numbers, these percentages reflect a large number: in Pakistan, for example, the officially recognised number of students in registered madrasas is 1.5 million (GoP 2006). In Bangladesh, according to Ministry of Education data, there are 1.77 million students within the Aliya (reformed) madrasa system alone, operating across the six divisions of the country. Second, their share in education provision in some instances, such as Pakistan, is larger than that of NGOs

(Bano 2008; Cockcroft et al. 2009). It is therefore important to understand their potential to become partners in education provision.

Of these three South Asian countries, the madrasa education system features most prominently in the state education-sector plan in Bangladesh, where there are two types of madrasas: Aliya (reformed) and Qoumi (unreformed). Aliya madrasas are ones that have registered to receive state support, in return for covering the same secular subjects as taught in secular primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. They differ from secular schools by accommodating Islamic subjects, and so allocate less time for the teaching of secular subjects. There are over 9000 of these madrasas registered with the government's Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board, offering education from primary to Master's levels. The Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas primarily focus on religious subjects and work completely independently of the government, that is, they neither follow a state-approved curriculum, nor do they receive financial support from the state or are registered with it.

By contrast, in Pakistan, despite state actors debating plans to introduce a reform agenda for madrasas as early as 1960s, a madrasa-modernisation programme was implemented only in 2002 as a result of official support from the USA. In India, state support to madrasas for teaching secular subjects differs among states, with some states providing support through separate madrasa boards. The West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education presents one of the most developed madrasa-support programmes in India.

In all three countries, the majority of the madrasas continue to operate independent of government support and opt to register with wafaqs – umbrella organisations of madrasas, which can be established in the name of a specific school of Islamic thought. The wafaqs have an elected body of representatives and each country has more than one wafaq. In Bangladesh, there is estimated to be close to 15,000 Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas.³ Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al Arabia, the biggest wafaq of Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas in Bangladesh, has 9000 registered madrasas.⁴ In Pakistan, over 16,000 madrasas are registered with the five state-recognised wafaqs.⁵

The Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al Arabia, the largest wafaq in Pakistan, has 10,000 madrasas registered with it, while Rabata-ul-Madaris Al-Islamia, the most recent wafaq to be established there, has over 1000 registered madrasas. In West Bengal, Rabata-i-Madaris, the main umbrella organisation of Kharzai (unreformed) madrasas, has over 550 madrasas.⁶ These collective platforms have been instrumental in strengthening the bargaining power of madrasa leadership vis-à-vis the state in each of the countries. It is important to situate the current working of madrasas in a historical context to enable a better understanding of the factors that shape the contemporary dynamics of state-led reform programmes. As the next section shows, attempts by the state to reform madrasas are not new – some dating back to the immediate post-Independence period.

History of state-madrasa engagement

Madrasa system in India started emerging from twelfth century (Sikand 2004), and was consolidated under the Mughal Empire, when madrasas became the primary institutions for training the elite for the Muslim courts (Nizami 1983). The madrasas, however, remained largely informal in their method of teaching. Teaching was

focused around the teacher rather than a fixed curriculum; the teacher chose the relevant text for the student based on the assessment of his interests and calibre (Nizami 1983). On completion of the education cycle, the students' competence was judged by the merit of the scholar who taught them rather than some certificate.

The curriculum had a combination of rationalist (such as mathematics, logic) plus transmitted subjects (those focused on the religious texts) and was very flexible. The establishment of British colonial rule, however, dramatically transformed the role of madrasa education in South Asia: by introducing Western educational institutions and replacing Persian with English as the official language, colonial rule made madrasa education irrelevant to the needs of the state and the economy. This period led to major shifts within madrasas, where the focus of the curriculum shifted from 'this-worldly' to entirely 'other-worldly' emphasis. This period saw the rise of Dar ul Uloom Deoband, a madrasa established in the nineteenth century, whose ulama (Islamic scholars) consciously responded to the changing context of Indian society under colonial rule by focusing primarily on inculcating personal piety among Muslims (Metcalf 1978). This puritanical school of Islamic thought soon led to the emergence of sister madrasas and today this school of thought has the largest number of madrasas in South Asia.

Deliberations on madrasa reforms were initiated soon after the creation of the newly independent states of India and Pakistan. The political leaders of these newly independent states were keen to follow the Western model of development and wanted the religious establishments to meet the demands of modernity. The state's ability to roll out a reform programme and the degree of acceptability of these reforms within madrasas has varied enormously. Under the political leadership of General Ayub Khan, who gained power in 1958, Pakistan was most vocal in its critique of madrasa education (Malik 1997). It is, therefore, ironic that it was the last of the three countries to roll out a reform programme. While the national government trialled a madrasa-reform programme under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in the early 1980s, a formal programme was only launched in 2001 with a provision of \$225 million aid package made available by the USA under the banner of the 'war on terror' (Bano 2007c). Pakistan is also the country where the reforms have met the severest resistance from the religious elite: by 2007, only 250 of the 16,000 registered madrasas in Pakistan had accepted the state reform programme (Bano 2007c).

Despite its misgivings at intervening in a minority educational institution, the Indian government launched a madrasa-modernisation programme a decade earlier than Pakistan, with the inception of the Area Intensive Madrasa Modernization Programme in 1993–94. However, much older madrasa-reform programmes were already in place in some states of India (Nair 2009). The state of West Bengal had a madrasa board – West Bengal Board for Madrasa Education – in place as early as 1927 to manage state-supported madrasas. Although many prominent Indian Muslims were suspicious of the reforms (Nair 2009), the modernisation programme has had a higher level of acceptance within madrasas in India compared to Pakistan. While the seats of religious authority, namely the leading madrasas such as Dar ul Uloom Deoband and Nadwa tul Ulama, remain at a distance from the modernisation programme in most states, the West Bengal Board for Madrasa Education has been able to create a system of reformed madrasas. In terms of the number of the affiliate madrasas, these rival the Kharzai (unreformed) madrasas: by 2007, some 500 madrasas were reported to be

registered with the Board and 550 with Rabata-i-Madaris (the board of Kharzai madrasa).⁷

The Bangladesh madrasa-reform programme differs from those in both India and Pakistan. The last country to emerge on the map of South Asia was paradoxically the first one to roll out a national-level madrasa-development programme. By 1978, the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board was in place and the process of enrolling madrasas interested in joining the reform programme started the following year. Bangladesh is also the country where the reforms have had highest acceptability among madrasas: the Aliya (reformed) madrasas have recorded steady growth to 9000 in 2008,⁸ which compete with an estimated 9000–15,000 Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas. Some Aliya madrasas were established anew, while others are converts from Qoumi madrasas. The reforms have thus had different levels of success across the three countries.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand the dynamics of the state–madrasa relationship across the three countries and the factors that have facilitated the acceptance of proposed inclusion of secular subjects by the madrasas in some contexts but not in others. An intensive three weeks of fieldwork was conducted in each of the three countries⁹ with a focus on gathering a wide range of perspectives on the dynamics of the state–madrasa relationship. The study focused on identifying and interviewing the key respondents, including the government officials concerned with the madrasa reforms, the madrasa leadership, and the academic and journalist community that has observed this interaction over time.

The primary method of data collection was in-depth interviews. In the first stage, interviews were conducted with officials of the Ministry of Education in the three countries, particularly within the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board in Dhaka, West Bengal Madrasah Board in Calcutta, Ministry of Minority Affairs in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, and Madrasa Reform Programme in Islamabad. These interviews were followed by in-depth interviews with prominent ulama from traditional and reformed madrasas across the three countries.

In Pakistan, these respondents included the leaders of the prominent madrasas who have chosen to stay outside the reform programme, as well as some of the smaller madrasas that have adopted the reform programme. In Bangladesh, the emphasis was on engaging with the prominent Aliya (reformed) and Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas. Since the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board operates in the same manner across the six divisions of Bangladesh, the main focus was on Aliya (reformed) madrasas in Dhaka division (as Dhaka city hosts the head office of the Board), and the parent Aliya (reformed) madrasa. For insights into the Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas in Bangladesh, Chittagong division was most relevant given that it is the stronghold of these madrasas, including Dar-ul-Uloom Moin-ul-Islam Hathazari, Al-Jamia Al-Islamia Pattia, Al-Jamaat-ul-Islamia Al-Arabia Mozaher-ul-Uloom, and Jamia Dar-ul-Mar'arif Al-Islamia. In India, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal were selected for the study. Uttar Pradesh is home to the oldest and most prestigious Indian madrasas such as Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband and Nadwat-ul-Ulama, which continue to be held as models of excellence by ulama (Islamic scholars) in South Asia. West Bengal, on the

other hand, hosts one of the oldest madrasa education board, which has brought many madrasas within the reform fold.

Interviews were also conducted with prominent academics, journalists, and public intellectuals across the three countries who have been observing the evolution of the state and its relation with Islam, so as to get a neutral view of the political, economic, and social factors that have contributed to the state–madrasa relationship.

Factors shaping the relationships

What determines the state's ability to convince madrasas to become partners in imparting secular education? This section demonstrates that financial incentives, historical context, and establishment of a clear bureaucratic structure for engagement are critical for making faith-based organisations partners in development. However, the most crucial factor influencing the relationship is political will and a willingness to engage with the religious elites rather than to regulate them. In order to establish the significance of these factors, it is important to first establish that the difference in acceptance of the reforms does not rest in the design of the integrated curriculum proposed by the state, or the rigidity of the Islamic thought followed by the madrasas across the three countries.

One proposition for the difference in the level of acceptance of the reform programmes across the three countries is that it is a result of the different natures of the curriculum reforms introduced by the state. This proposition does not hold, however, because the reform programmes across the three countries have had a similar objective, namely, to introduce modern subjects – English, mathematics, social studies, and general science – into madrasas alongside their religious teaching.¹⁰ Across the three countries, the programme began by focusing on primary classes and then, during the second phase, shifting the focus to secondary education. What then explains the difference?

Nature of financial incentives

Analysis of the reform programmes reveals the importance of financial incentives in making madrasa leadership a partner in meeting EFA targets. Reforms have been mostly widely accepted in Bangladesh, where the state has provided most concrete financial incentives to the madrasas: the government pays for the salary of the core teaching staff within the Aliya (reformed) madrasas for secular as well as religious subjects – amounting to 72 per cent of total madrasa expenditure. By comparison, the financial incentives offered by the state in Pakistan and India have been more limited. In Pakistan, the reform programme provides for the training of 28,000 madrasa teachers for the teaching of secular subjects, and gives textbooks, stationary, computers, and furniture to the madrasas. However, in terms of core costs, it only provides for the salaries of the teachers of secular subjects and not the numerous religious-subject teachers who constitute the core of madrasa teaching staff.

The national-level reform programme in India similarly offers relatively weak financial incentives: the scheme includes 100 per cent support for two qualified teachers per madrasa on a salary of Rs. 3000 (\$65) per month, less than half the salary of teachers appointed in government schools, a one-time lump sum grant for science and maths teaching kits, and another amount for the establishment of a book bank. As in Pakistan, it does not provide for the salaries of religious teachers (Nair 2009). In

India, other very practical flaws in the design and implementation of the programme also restricted its impact. For instance, ignoring cultural constraints on women's mobility, female teachers were appointed to madrasas in remote places. The prolonged daily travel made these jobs physically taxing for these teachers and the transportation costs consumed a major share of their meagre remuneration (Nair 2009). In addition, many teachers did not know Urdu, making communication with the largely Urdu-speaking madrasa students difficult. In West Bengal, where the state madrasa board has succeeded in bringing many madrasas within the reform mould, the financial incentives matched those offered in Bangladesh, namely, coverage of all teachers' salary costs.

Given that in a madrasa the majority of teachers are engaged to teach religious subjects, in Pakistan and most states in India the reform programmes leave the main financial burden on the madrasa administration. Given that the governments were primarily concerned with the introduction of secular subjects into the madrasa curriculum, it is understandable why they have refrained from supporting salaries of religious-subject teachers. However, as a result the heads of the madrasas and the religious-subject teachers have had few incentives to accept the reform programme. The reform programmes have made greatest inroads in Bangladesh and West Bengal where the state did cover the salaries of the religious-subject teachers.

Trust in the reformer

The three-country comparison further shows that the level of trust that the state can establish with the religious community is another important factor for the implementation of state-madrasa reform programmes. The steady growth of the Aliya (reformed) madrasa system in Bangladesh is linked to the role of Jamaat-i-Islami (a prominent Islamic political party in South Asia) in Bangladeshi politics. Unlike some other Islamic political parties, the Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh has supported Aliya (reformed) madrasas as opposed to the Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas. This connection was noted in interviews with the officials of the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, as well as in those with journalists, observers of the madrasa system, and heads of the madrasas themselves. The connection is not formal. As one of the ulama (Islamic scholars) of the Qoumi madrasa explained: 'It is an ideological support. The teachers of the Aliya madrasa are of the Jamaat-i-Islami mindset'. Another added: 'Jamaat-i-Islami from the start developed close association within the Aliya madrasas. They have been able to cultivate the links in the madrasas by cultivating links with the teachers of the Aliya madrasas'. The Jamaat's philosophy is that religion has to be a way of life and the state has to be shaped by it. It does not believe in studying Islam just for the sake of becoming mosque imams (preachers) and religious teachers. Its leadership comes from educated middle-class professionals who believe that Muslim students should take a lead in all professions, but also have a good religious understanding. The Aliya madrasas, with their emphasis on combining religious and secular education, thus found their support within a dominant religious force in the country.

In contrast to Bangladesh, the state in Pakistan and India did not have any active religious body supporting the reform programme. In Pakistan, the reform programme implemented since 2002 has suffered from serious distrust from the religious community, because of it being seen as part of US-led 'war on terror', where the

objective is to control the madrasas rather than support them. As Maulana Naeemi, a senior Islamic scholar from the Brehlavi school of thought in Pakistan noted:

In the 1980s when the government made available some funds to support the madrasas, the impression was that the money is ours, now the impression is that the money is from outside. The madrasas are not letting the government come in because they feel that the government is engaging with the view to interfere in madrasa matters and to regulate the independent teaching of Islam. If you give money then you have a right to ask questions. Since the religious community does not have trust that the reform programme has been initiated out of a commitment to improving madrasa education, the bigger madrasas want to protect themselves and stay outside the government reforms.

There were often repeated objections by senior Islamic scholars on the use of the term 'reform'. The head of a Deobandi madrasa in Rawalpindi argued, 'The government use of the term "reform" implies that the government thinks that there is something wrong with the madrasa system, and the madrasas are understandably not very comfortable engaging with a government which is attempting to reform them rather than helping the madrasas support provision of better education'. In India, the minority status of Muslims has meant that all prominent Islamic groups associated with madrasas have refrained from developing reliance on the state to curtail influence of Hindu elements within the state on the Islamic education system. During interviews with Islamic leaders and Islamic scholars in India, a suspicion was voiced repeatedly that the Indian state is keen to support madrasas because it is a subtle way of eventually regulating the content of Islamic knowledge transmitted to the next generation of Muslims. Such concerns, frequently expressed by prominent Muslim personalities, were shared by Mahmood Madni, President of Jamaat-i-Ulama, the leading Muslim political party in India: 'The state does not support our efforts to establish secular educational schools for Muslim communities, so when the state repeatedly reiterates a commitment to supporting madrasa education it makes Muslims suspect the government motives'.

Local context

Local context and history also have a role to play in shaping the specific nature of the reform programmes and their acceptance within the religious community. One factor contributing to the rise of the Aliya (reformed) madrasas in Bangladesh was the significance of the Bengali language movement in the war of liberation. In 1948, the Government of Pakistan had declared Urdu as the official language. The Urdu language was viewed as the lingua franca of Indian Muslims. It had developed under Persian, Arabic, and Turkish influence in South Asia during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. Having been developed on the basis of the Arabic script, Urdu was closely associated with the identity of Indian Muslims. By contrast, Hindi and Devanagari scripts were representative of the Hindu culture. Urdu developed most among the Muslims of north India, while, Bengali remained the dominant language of Bengal.

The declaration of Urdu as the national language led to strong resentment within East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) as it meant that Bengalis would be at a disadvantage in applying for any government positions, given that the government officials are required to be well-versed in the national language. This resentment turned into a popular movement when a protest organised by the students of the

University of Dhaka met severe resistance from the police, resulting in the death of several students. This tragedy in 1952 resulted in the launching of a formal Bengali Movement and was sufficiently effective to get Bengali recognised as the second official language of Pakistan in 1956; it also became a forerunner of the Bengali nationalist movement.

The critical role of the Bengali language in the entire liberation movement placed the Qoumi (unreformed) madrasas in an awkward position. Despite the strong emphasis on Bengali in East Pakistan, madrasas were one place where Urdu had priority as the language of Indian Muslims. The senior ulama of the top Qoumi madrasas in Bangladesh had often studied at the most prestigious Jamias in Uttar Pradesh in India, the heartland of Urdu language. As noted by a teacher in Hathazari madrasas in Chittagong, 'Much of the scholarship on Islam was in Urdu too as the South Asian ulama had contributed much to Islamic publications, sometimes on issues not addressed in literature available in Arabic language'. The madrasa leadership was thus keen to preserve the Urdu language as the medium of instruction. However, after the 1971 war of liberation, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, Urdu became even less relevant for social and economic purposes in this newly established state.

The issue of language thus started to create pressure for reform within the madrasa community. In this setting, when the government in Bangladesh established the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board and proposed madrasa reforms, including a switch to teaching in the Bengali language, the idea did not prove controversial. Even the bigger Qoumi madrasas like Hathazari, which up till then had placed heavy emphasis on learning Urdu, treat it as an additional language and not as the main medium of instruction, which is Bengali. For the smaller Qoumi madrasas, given resource constraints, even teaching Urdu as an additional language is not an option. Thus, Urdu has gradually been phased out of madrasa education in Bangladesh and the government financial incentive package which allows for salaries of core teachers for both secular and religious subjects has helped bring about that shift.

In the view of a prominent Bangladeshi academic:

Madrasas were financially weak in the 1980s. More importantly, they were giving education in Urdu and they were losing students as they were not getting jobs anywhere and the curriculum was also very biased towards certain kind of jobs. So there were structural issues that forced them to come to participate in the government reform. The Islamic elite had affiliation with Arabic but less so with Urdu, so it was an affiliation they could consider giving up.

Political will

The three-country comparison reveals the great significance of political will in establishing partnership with madrasas. All the factors identified above that can facilitate a state–madrasa partnership are in reality conditional on this. What becomes clear across the three countries is that the state has placed verbal emphasis on madrasa reforms, but has only matched it with actual commitment in contexts where the proposed reforms have suited the political interests of the leadership of the time (Bano 2007a, b). In Bangladesh, due to the unique post-liberation context discussed above, the political interests of the elite were best served by supporting the reform programme, as society was open for a new public face of Islam compared to what had been promoted under West Pakistan rule. In India and Pakistan, by contrast, the

political landscape made the national political elite less inclined to push for reform, because it disturbed the comfortable political alliance with the Muslim religious elite (Bano 2007a). In both these countries, the ulama influence electoral outcomes through the formation of Islamic political parties and through influencing the voting behaviour of their followers (Haqqani 2005; Yadav 1999).

The political will of the state affects the financial resources it is willing to commit to the programme; it also determines the establishment of bureaucratic procedures to implement the reforms. In addition to the state providing greater financial incentives, a formal Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board responsible for the administration of reformed madrasas was established in Bangladesh in 1979 as a department of the Ministry of Education. In Pakistan and India, the programme has been administrated through ad hoc bodies.

Within Pakistan, the programme falls under a project director within the Ministry of Education and has been beset with numerous problems, including delays in release of approved funds and inadequate staffing. During interviews, officials across the four provinces responsible for the reform programme raised serious concerns about the design of the programme, the nature of incentives offered, and most importantly the inadequate number of staff appointments and lack of required facilities, such as vehicles to facilitate access to the madrasas. The officials also noted concerns about the basic conception of the programme: the programme was perceived to be facing resistance from the religious leadership because it was externally funded and adopted a language of 'reform' rather than 'support'.

Similarly in India, the madrasa-modernisation programme is under the supervision of the Ministry of Minority Affairs, rather than operating as an independent board. In West Bengal, however, where the state madrasa-support programme has expanded the most, the state has a separate madrasa board just like in Bangladesh. The history of Aliya madrasas in this state – the first Aliya madrasa was established by Warren Hastings in Calcutta in 1781 – and the strong presence of the Communist Party seems to have contributed to consolidation of the reform programme in West Bengal compared to other states.

Ulama's ideological commitment

Last but not least, any full explanation for refusal of the madrasa leadership to accept government support to teach secular subjects has to take into account the ideological commitment of the ulama, especially in bigger madrasas. That the ulama were ideologically opposed to reform across the three countries is clear; the ulama and state officials clashed on the very conception of what knowledge is (Zaman 1999). For senior ulama, knowledge demands the pursuit of truth for its own sake with little consideration of employment matters, while the state is more concerned with education to produce a productive workforce. The walls of many madrasas visited during the fieldwork were engraved with quotations emphasising the pursuit of Islamic scholarship in the search for knowledge for its own sake. Interviews with leading ulama across the three countries revealed the perception that state reform programmes were aimed at secularisation and commercialisation of madrasa education rather than improving the madrasas' ability to train more learned alims (Islamic scholars).

The ulama also repeatedly highlighted the practical limitations of the proposed reform programmes: inclusion of secular subjects in the curriculum beyond matriculation level was argued to lead to madrasa graduates excelling in neither religious nor secular education. In the view of Maulana Jalandari, Secretary of Wafaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia in Pakistan, 'Today is the time of takhassus [specialisation]. Every teaching institution selects the curriculum according to its objectives. No one has said that why the doctor graduating from King Edwards College is also not an alim, the same should hold for the madrasas. Specialisation in religious subjects demands devoted scholarship which cannot sustain inclusion of secular subjects at the higher levels without seriously compromising the quality of religious education taught within the madrasas'.

Additionally, the ulama repeatedly recorded concerns that acceptance of state funds could, in the long term, lead to compromises on core religious principles, even if in the initial phase the reforms were within acceptable limits. There was a recognition that, once the head of a madrasa becomes used to a regular income from the state, the comfort of that regular income can lead to compromise on religious beliefs; therefore, it is thought best not to get used to such comfort. To justify their resistance, senior Pakistani ulama quote examples of the relative secularisation of madrasas over time in states where they have accepted state money (Zaman 1999).

Further, during fieldwork in Bangladesh and West Bengal, ulama from orthodox madrasas repeatedly expressed the view that the reformed madrasas had lost their original purpose, namely to promote Islam, and become just another form of regular school. Maulana Abdul Razak Alhabadi from Rabata-ul-Madaris in West Bengal argued, 'Their name is madrasas but they are actually high schools. Hindu boys also study there'. Senior ulama in Bangladesh echoed similar concerns. In the words of the son of Sheikh-ul-Hadith, a prominent alim and political figure in Bangladesh, 'the real purpose of the madrasa is to impart the teachings of the Quran and Hadith [Prophet Mohammad's sayings] and not to primarily be worried about the degree. If a child wants the degree to secure a job he will go to Aliya (reformed) madrasa, if he only wants Islam he will come to Qoumi (unreformed) madrasa. In our country, one did not become a good alim in Aliya (reformed) madrasa nor did one become a good Master's graduate, one became a hybrid'. Here it is important to point out that the bigger madrasas across the three countries in general already impart secular education to the middle of secondary level, because this basic education is argued to be an important prerequisite for embarking on higher studies in Islamic theology. They differ with the reform programmes on introducing secular subjects beyond secondary level. Thus, while senior ulama across the three countries argued that the smaller madrasas that are finding it difficult to make ends meet should feel free to draw on government support, they found this dependence on the state to be an inferior option and preferred to stay independent of state support.

Conclusions

The three-country comparative analysis of state attempts to make madrasas a partner in imparting secular education shows that madrasas are not inherently opposed to teaching their students secular subjects – they can become important partners in meeting the EFA targets. The large madrasas, which provide education all the way to master's level across the three countries, are already providing students secular education up to middle or secondary level; it is only after matriculation that they

defend an exclusive focus on religious texts. These madrasas see their role as training specialists in Islamic education to cater to the spiritual needs of society. Smaller madrasas, by contrast, often lack the facilities to teach secular subjects. It is these smaller madrasas which often cater for children who might otherwise be excluded from schooling, and so are the ones that the state needs to support in particular if madrasas are to become a partner in meeting EFA goals.

Smaller madrasas are generally open to accepting state support. However, the success of these partnerships depends on the level of state commitment to the reform programme. Only a state with strong political will and acceptance of the value of religious teaching is likely to be committed to providing adequate financial incentives, putting in place an appropriate administrative structure, and developing a trusting rather than adversarial or controlling relationship with the religious elite. The ulama also need to take initiative to engage with the state. However, given their limited resources, the engagement is likely to be more conducive if the state makes an active effort to reach out to them. Thus, the prevailing view within some development agencies that faith-based organisations are less likely to enter development partnerships than NGOs because of being guided by dogmatic religious beliefs are exaggerated (Clarke 2007). Even a faith-based organisation like a madrasa, which is often associated with radicalisation of religious beliefs, can be open to entering into partnership with the state, provided the state shows a genuine commitment to the programme. The condition, however, is that the state views madrasas as a partner, and makes a serious financial and administrative commitment to implementing these reforms.

Notes

1. Islamic teaching takes places through different platforms including mosques, madrasas, and sufi khankas. The madrasa education, which is one of the dominant models for following formal Islamic education, normally involves teaching of a set curriculum beginning with the process of hifz (memorisation of Quran) and leading to higher studies in Islamic theology.
2. This contribution attempts to assess the potential of madrasas to impart teaching of secular subjects. The objective is not to assess whether the religious education imparted in the madrasas is in need of reform.
3. Estimates provided by senior ulama and officials of the Madrasa Education Board during the fieldwork, as official data on Qoumi madrasas are not available.
4. Data provided by senior officials of the wafaq.
5. Data collected from the head offices of the five wafaqs in 2007.
6. Data secured from officials of Rabata-i-Madaris in West Bengal.
7. Source: Rabata-i-Madaris, West Bengal.
8. Source: Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board.
9. The analysis, however, benefits from the author's prior study of the madrasa system in South Asia, which involved over 18 months of fieldwork with madrasas across the four provinces of Pakistan.
10. For details of the reforms, the incentives offered, and the subjects introduced at each academic level see Bano (2007a, c) and Nair (2009).

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