

Doctoral Dissertation

A Study on Reformation Process of Qawmi Madrasas in Bangladesh:

Focus on English Subject

(Summary of the Dissertation)

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Qawmi madrasas (Islamic seminaries) are one of the two types of religious schools in Bangladesh where students receive education from primary to Master's degree level. This study aimed to scrutinize the process of the reformation of the syllabi of Qawmi madrasas, in particular, the introduction of English as a general subject in 2012, and the call, in 2018, for equivalation of the top degree of Qawmi madrasa. The study sought to discover the impacts on Qawmi madrasa students in Bangladesh of the reformation process of general subjects and to understand how the changed Qawmi madrasa curriculum impacted on Bangladeshi education community. The author conducted ethno-methodological surveys in 2017, 2018 and 2019, respectively, with interviewees of Qawmi madrasas, Alia madrasas and government schools across Eastern (Chittagong and Brahmanbaria), Southern (Barishal and Jhalokhati) and Central (Dhaka) regions of Bangladesh. Notably, no previous study has investigated the introduction and practice of the English language in Qawmi madrasas syllabi and in classes up to the level of Grade 8.

This study found that the reforms undertaken by Qawmi madrasas resulted from internal and external pressures; however, these reforms were found inadequate to meet the present demands of education community. The motivation for reform was generated by social agents, such as education providers, families of students, the media, etc. Within the current Qawmi madrasa syllabi, creative, exploratory, persuasive and argumentative discourse was commonly absent; yet, this is pivotal for students seeking to gain skills by exploring the nature of writing in the professional communication domain. Students chiefly practised English reading comprehension and the descriptive genre of writing, ranging from essays to letter writing, on different topics.

This study revealed that the English writing skills developed at the fully residential Qawmi madrasas were very poor. The madrasas produce their curriculum content entailing language and literature in Bangla and English, based on their own affiliations. In contrast to the colloquial language skills exercised by students at general schools, Qawmi madrasa students mainly practise colloquial and traditional English. From 2012, some changes have been made to their general syllabi. However, these changes do not address secularised cultures and modern issues. Their students cannot cope with the English language, as their practice, culture and mindset are different to those of students at general schools. The process of learning in Qawmi madrasas is revivalist and far from reformist. It should be modernised as has happened in the general curriculum in various general subjects and should embrace other cultures. The word "secular" indicates that it relates to all religions and cultures so students participate as part of the global village. Qawmi madrasas produce meticulously educated religious knowledge-based graduates. When the government of Bangladesh hurried to accept the Qawmi madrasa certificate in equivalation with a Master's degree of Islamic Studies or Arabic at the university level, the author encountered significant irritation among recognised intellectuals due to these epistemological and ontological aspects. Two aspects that were lacking were structural reform of the syllabi and greater interest among students.

It is worth noting that, through Qawmi madrasa students gaining English skills, they would be able to fill gaps in their knowledge. At the same time, the initial academic impact of these reform efforts would be profoundly felt by students, while the ultimate economic impact, interlaced with the social impact, would be seen within society in the near future. Finally, English language skills should be taught to the expected level at Qawmi madrasas. Otherwise, no change will be seen in the quality of Qawmi madrasa education matching that of mainstream learning. Even the government initiative to achieve equivalation of the top degree of Qawmi madrasa would be unable to stop the reverse reformation process of Qawmi madrasas. However, Qawmi madrasas earned this equivalation by the concurrent political action of Hefazat-e-Islam which acted as a sister concern. Therefore, although it can be seen as a political decision, with reformation intended, it can be considered as “change”. Here, it is noted that, politically, members of Hefazat-e-Islam have portrayed themselves as being against the idea of progress (e.g., Education Policy, 2010). As far as equivalation is concerned, educational equivalation should be followed by cultural and philosophical equivalation, thus meaning a transformation from ego-centrism (e.g., “we are the best”) to cultural equivalation (e.g., “learn to live in a democratic multicultural environment”), as every ideology-centred type of education has been found to generate ego-centrism. Therefore, any reformation should be accompanied by the secularised reformation concept.

Keywords: Qawmi madrasa, syllabi reform, reformation process, English education, Bangladesh.