Confronting poverty and educational inequalities: Madrasas as a strategy for contesting dominant literacy in rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In a context of globalisation and the rapid expansion of low-paid 'global' jobs, formal schooling is no longer perceived as contributing to the acquisition of skills that are appropriate or even relevant to active engagement with the new opportunities. Based on empirical material from a village in Bangladesh, this paper explores the role of madrasa education in challenging the dominant paradigm of learning embedded in formal secular schooling. Despite charges of low quality and traditionalism, local narratives reveal how madrasa learning is used to negotiate and transform inequalities, both in material and social terms. Madrasa education is cheaper, and addresses issues of poverty, but the narratives also emphasise learning the Arabic language, seen to facilitate male overseas migration to the Gulf countries, a channel for upward social and economic mobility. In a context of global competition that supports individualism, a focus on character and morality as represented through an Islamic identity, alongside communitarian values, is seen as important for maintaining a degree of social cohesion and is hence socially valued. Reading and reciting the Quran are also viewed as essential traits for a woman, enabling her to appropriately socialise her children in the absence of her migrant husband. One finds here a simultaneous process of contestation and resistance, seeking successful occupational trajectories and social recognition for men, while at the same time contributing to the reproduction of gendered inequalities.

1. Introduction

Post 9/11, madrasas (Islamic schools) have been a focus of policy interest globally, viewed as they are as promoting Islamic extremism and militancy, and serving as a recruiting ground for terrorism. Some however argue that they play an important role in education provision in several Muslim countries where state infrastructure hardly exists and poverty makes private provision beyond the reach of the poor (Blanchard, 2008). These views have led to a concern for madrasa reform that seeks to displace potentially extremist religious tendencies within madrasas by ensuring a degree of state control over the curriculum (Bano, 2007), alongside setting in place mechanisms for monitoring and accountability (Hartung and Reifeld, 2006). While Bangladesh has been unique in South Asia in its regulation of registered madrasas since the 1980s, the reform agenda has regained prominence in a context where madrasa education has been rapidly expanding, rather than being replaced by secular schools. An additional concern here is that madrasas should provide an education that

can enable its students engage with the modern economy and with processes of globalisation, rather than being confined to religious work. This is crucial given that the export-oriented garments industry and remittances from overseas migrants account for about 20 per cent of the country's GDP (Rahman et al., 2009).

While the compulsions for madrasa reform are both political and socio-cultural, in this paper, I use ethnographic material from research in Achingaon,[1] a Bangladeshi village, to explore the challenges posed by madrasa education to the dominant paradigm of learning embedded in formal, secular schooling. It needs to be noted that though madrasas are largely perceived as traditional institutions, lacking a modern outlook, wherein rote learning of religious scriptures leaves little room for creativity or critical thinking, there is in reality a great diversity within this sector, ranging from the purely religious Quomi madrasas to the aliya madrasas which combine general and religious education.

Local narratives, however, portray the madrasas as a positive alternative for enhancing economic opportunities and social standing, as well as challenging inequalities, in particular around poverty, with an emphasis on the dignity of labour, language and

[1] All names have been changed in the paper.

moral character. Catering largely to the poor, literacy and language learning in the madrasas are used as resources by them to construct a positive social identity and give meaning to their lives in relation to the social structures and cultural systems within which they are embedded. As Kress (1996: 14) points out, there are two key aspects in terms of meaning-making which are at play here, the representational and the communicational. The first involves the cultural construction of their learning as including the moral values of sacrifice, hard work and patience, while the latter reflects the use of their literacy and the meanings accorded to it across different spatial and social contexts, such as employment in the less skilled labour markets of the Gulf States. This notion of literacy and learning moves beyond discrete and decontextualised skills to understanding it as a dynamic set of activities, embracing a way of life and their very sense of personhood.

I focus in this paper on both strands of meaning-making in relation to madrasa education and its perceived links to the occupational trajectories of men. I argue that there is a carefully crafted discourse around the representation of madrasas that systematically highlights the differences with secular, state provision, in order to challenge its educational hegemony, in the process serving both the practical and power needs of the students. Yet, the understanding of inequalities remains gendered, with a growing conservatism visible amongst madrasa graduates in relation to women's roles, supporting a traditional patriarchal social structure where boys are preferred and supported both for higher education and employment, while girls play a home-making role (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2010).[2] In the next section, I discuss the historical roots and the current basis for valuing madrasa education and go on then to discuss the meanings ascribed to it, and its uses.

2. Education and social identity

Educational systems are about knowledge and skills, but also about the ways in which people conceive of themselves, their identities and social positioning. They are ultimately about power and its negotiation in society. As Street notes in relation to the ways in which people address issues of reading and writing, "Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meaning and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular worldview and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and marginalise others" (2001: 7–8). Ultimately, these systems are the crystallisation of the political ethos of the State and its power, ideology and class character in relation to the larger society.

The 'modern' education system in the Indian subcontinent (which includes the current nation-states of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan), was over the last two hundred years, largely shaped by the imperatives of the colonial government as outlined in Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education in 1835 and detailed in Charles Wood's despatch of 1854. The primary purpose of education was to create an elite class of Indians, who could participate in running the government of the country, loyal to and unquestioning of the colonial masters.

[34] I feel … that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern … a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in

morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm accessed on 23 March 2009.

Education here is closely connected to the construction of a particular social identity and set of power relations – a class of people fluent in the English language, with tastes, morals and lifestyles in tune with the cultural elites at that time, namely, the colonial rulers. Several assumptions underlie the above text, pointing to the ideology driving the education system. First, there is an acknowledgement that providing basic education to the entire populace would be both an expensive and difficult task. Hence this needed to be a phased process, trickling down gradually from the elite to the masses, in other words, inequality in access to education was accepted and built into the educational policy and systems. Second, education in English language was seen as crucial for the 'intellectual improvements of those classes of people who have the means of pursuing higher studies' and could thereafter participate in government, and such English language education was not necessarily appropriate for the mass of people. Clearly, education, and English language more specifically, becomes a selective device to legitimise processes of domination and control, of creating class and power divisions in society on the basis of linguistic competence, and at the same time reinforcing prevalent social inequalities, with English becoming 'the possession of educated and affluent groups around the world' (Kress, 1996: 2).

A third related issue was the supposed linkage between the English language and science – there was an attempt to contrast both Arabic (Islamic) and Sanskrit (Hindu) education with notions of secularism, modernity and development associated with science and reason. A hierarchy of education systems was established with western, English education seen as 'modern' and the road to upward mobility compared to Islamic (or indeed Hindu) education,[3] such that the latter was gradually abandoned by the elite and left to poor students, mainly of rural origin (Hefner, 2007: 18). In the contemporary context too, this link between Islamic education and the poor persists and in fact drives the fear of madrasas, as the poor and unemployed are seen as easy targets and recruiting grounds for terrorist organisations.

A close correlation was also established between formal educational credentials and employment opportunities, ignoring the continuum of learning through time and space, crossing the boundaries between educational institutions and the everyday lives of learners (Street, 2005). Independence from colonial rule was won in 1947, yet this educational legacy has continued. Despite post-Independence efforts to promote mother-tongue education on the one hand and vocational and skills education on the other, alongside the exposure to a range of learning opportunities in a global context, basic mindsets in relation to educational and employment hierarchies have been hard to change. Private, English-medium schools for the elite, continue

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[2] Rahman (2004: 313) too found in his survey of schools in Pakistan (Urdu-medium, English medium and Sunni madrasas) that while madrasa education does not automatically translate into militancy, the students do support an aggressive foreign policy, are intolerant of religious minorities and do not support equal rights for men and women.

[3] Before the advent of the British, four types of educational institutions existed in much of India: the Sanskrit Chatushpadi or Toll and Madrasas as institutions of higher learning, and Pathashalas and Maktabs as elementary schools. Apart from reading, writing and arithmetic, they imparted practical knowledge like book-keeping and maintaining land records. These schools were a part of village life and the teachers were like public servants. The medium of instruction was the local language. http://www.educationbihar.in/cssreport/Chapter1_The%20Evolution%20of%20School%20Education%20in%20Bihar-%20A%20Historical%20Perspective.pdf accessed on 27/08/2009.