



Speakers' Forum on Religion and Development Faith and Education: Contestations around the Madrasa in Bangladesh

The fourth Speakers' Forum "**Faith and Education: Contestations around the Madrasa in Bangladesh**" was held at BRAC Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh on March 12, 2016. Its focus was madrasa education in Bangladesh, exploring the history of these institutions and their contemporary role as education providers. Ongoing reform efforts and the role of madrasas in increasing social polarization was a central theme. The Forum began with a discussion of the institution of the madrasa in the South Asian context. It then explored the particularities of Bangladeshi madrasas, notably their contribution to education provision and broader social impacts. The day ended with a session on the social alienation of madrasa students and the challenges of integration and inclusive citizenship. The goal is to inform the ongoing and often contentious debate around madrasa education in Bangladesh.

The Speakers' Forum on Faith and Development in Bangladesh is a joint initiative of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and BRAC University's Department of Economics and Social Sciences. Drawing on the experience and expertise of scholars and development practitioners from local, regional, and international contexts, the Forum offers a non-politicized space for constructive dialogue on the real and potential contributions of faith-inspired actors to key development challenges. The Forum involves a series of daylong events organized around critical social issues and development topics, highlighting areas where religious leaders or institutions play significant roles or where a fuller understanding of religious dimensions can enrich development work and policy. The Forums are part of a broader initiative exploring the intersection of religion and development in Bangladesh.¹

Background:

The madrasa challenge

Madrasas (schools that provide an Islamic education often supplemented with secular subjects) have long been an integral part of the education landscape of South Asia. In the context of rapidly modernizing Bangladesh, far from being moribund, these longstanding religious institutions are playing a large and expanding role in the country's complex education system. The number of madrasas has grown rapidly in Bangladesh since independence, from less than two thousand in 1971 to over twenty thousand in 2014. There are two main types: the government-run Alia system, consisting of 9,341 institutions and 3.6 million students, and the independent Quomi system, which number an estimated 13,902 and serve roughly 1.4 million students. Madrasas currently account for approximately 13.8 percent of primary enrollment and 21 percent of secondary enrollment. They have played a major role in efforts to achieve gender parity at the primary and secondary levels; responding to government incentive programs introduced in the 1990s, many of these traditionally male institutions opened their doors to girls and were responsible for 35 percent of the overall increase in girls' enrollment between 1990 and 2008. Madrasas have proven especially important for girls in

¹ <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-bangladesh>

conservative areas, providing an educational context where purdah can be observed, without which many would not have had the opportunity to attend school.

Madrastas, and Quomi schools in particular, are controversial institutions in Bangladesh, central to the polarized discourse about the role of Islam in society and concerns about radicalization. Most Quomi madrasas in eastern Bengal (Bangladesh) traditionally operated on the ‘Deobandi’ model and still today look to Deoband in India as the standard bearer in Islamic education. After the Liberation War (1971) Quomi madrasas in newly independent (and proudly secular) Bangladesh came under considerable suspicion; they were widely seen as collaborators with the Pakistani Army in their attempts to maintain a unified Islamic state. In 1974 the Education Commission suggested that the madrasa system be abolished, a plan that sparked widespread outrage among the Islamic community. While this plan was eventually abandoned, suspicion and distrust continue. Critics regularly point to antiquated curricula and pedagogical methods and claim that students are inculcated with regressive social norms and radical ideology. Quomi madrasas have largely resisted various efforts to reform curriculum and incorporate the institutions into the national education system, though pressure from the government on both fronts has increased in recent years. The emergence of a coalition of Quomi madrasa teachers and students known as Hefazat-e-Islam, who staged a series of protests in 2013, has been a critical development in furthering the ideological and political divide that madrasas, especially Quomi ones represent. Coupled with allegations of radicalization, their political mobilization adds to the alienation of Quomi madrasa students who struggle to find mainstream employment in the country.

Madrasa reform: Looking ahead

Bangladesh has been remarkably successful in extending education to nearly all of its citizens and closing the gender gap in enrollment. This is in significant part the result of innovative public–private partnerships that have included active government cooperation with NGOs and madrasas as providers. The result is a complex system with 13 types of providers, 10 examination boards, over 150,000 institutions, 40 million students, and one million teachers. The government recently initiated a series of reforms within the quasi-public Alia madrasa system. It has tried, with increasing energy, to nationalize the Quomi system. Quomi madrasas are not currently subject to national regulation, but fall under one of five education boards: Bangladesh Quomi Madrasa Education Board (Befaq) in Dhaka, Befaqul Madarisil Arabia in Gopalganj, Azadbini Edaraye Tamil Madarisil in Sylhet, Ettehadul Madarisil Arabia in Chittagong, and Tanjimul Madarisil in Bogra.

The Quomi institutions value their independence, so reform efforts are sensitive and the government has moved slowly and looked to engage several high-ranking members of Hefazat-e-Islam, including chief Shah Ahmad Shafi, appointing him head of a 17-member panel to explore reforms in April 2015. Ultimately internal divisions among Quomi institutions doomed this effort. There was considerable dissent within the panel, with Shafi unilaterally releasing an eight-point charter that agreed to reforms as long as they did not require government aid to madrasas and did not necessitate a change in teaching methods. Reform efforts are stalled, and questions of curriculum/content, societal assimilation, and employability of madrasa graduates, cultural Islamization, and religious radicalization plague the public imaginary.

Summary of discussions:

Welcomes and introduction

The Forum opened with remarks by Professor Samia Huq of BRAC University, Professor Mohammad Abdul Bayes Chair of BRAC University's Department of Economics and Social Sciences, and Professor Katherine Marshall executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue and senior fellow at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion Peace and World Affairs.

Professor Samia Huq opened with the observation that though madrasa education has very direct development implications related to education provision, it also involves broader issues of identity, social cohesion, and political mobilization. The expansion of madrasa education in Bangladesh has brought with it cultural and ideological fissures that many believe do not bode well for the country's future. Despite the topic's critical nature, it is rarely discussed in Bangladesh in an open and nuanced way. For that reason the Speakers Forum has given it a priority. Huq explained that this forum aims to contribute to a better contextual understanding of madrasas in South Asia as well as concerns unique to Bangladesh. It will explore the role of madrasas in education and in the community, examine the social alienation experienced by many Quomi madrasa students and graduates, and detail initiatives that engage madrasa students in programs aimed at inclusive citizenship. She noted that this event and the Speakers Forum series is designed to encourage greater interaction and communication around the importance of faith, culture, identity, and history in the development process.

Professor Mohammad Abdul Bayes emphasized the special significance of the discussion. Despite widespread misgivings about madrasa education in Bangladesh, many positive elements receive much less attention. The Forum represents an effort to take a comprehensive look at problems and prospects for madrasa education in Bangladesh that are critical to informing ongoing policy discussions. He observed, however, that simply holding isolated workshops and dialogues will not do full justice to these important issues. There is a need to establish research centers in Bangladesh that will continuously produce new knowledge and foster dialogue around faith and development. BRAC University, he said, is well positioned to be a partner in such an effort.

Professor Katherine Marshall gave a brief overview of the Speakers Forum series collaboration and specific expectations for the Forum on the madras challenges. She described the near total blindness in development thinking towards religious ideas and institutions, in Bangladesh as elsewhere, despite their obvious importance. Religion has become, in many ways, almost a taboo subject with many development practitioners hesitant to discuss it openly. This has specific and negative consequences in Bangladesh, in an immediate context but also looking at Bangladesh development strategies long term. The Speakers Forum series was initially conceived as an effort to address this challenge, breaking taboos and opening dialogue on sensitive but vital issues around religion. In 2014 WFDD joined with BRAC and a group of scholars of Bangladesh and development practitioners to reflect on the complex and sometimes fraught issues of religion and development in Bangladesh. The discussion made clear that there is very little space within Bangladesh for dialogue on the difficult and sensitive issues around religion. The Speakers Forum was the result and is now in its fourth iteration, as a platform for such dialogue. It has stimulated objective and probing exchanges around some of the most complex issues of our time: the meaning of secularism, issues of religion and women's empowerment, conflict and peacebuilding, and the role of religious institutions in development. Professor Marshall emphasized that these events are to prompt a broader, continuing exchange that opens doors to further research and dialogue.

Session One: What is a madrasa?

The first session aimed to expand and nuance common understandings (and misunderstandings) of South Asian madrasas through an exploration of their historical development in the region and the everyday lives of madrasa students. The discussion drew out the ideological traditions in which these institutions are rooted and explored how these ideologies inform the political and social sensibilities of madrasa students today. Professor Ebrahim Moosa of Notre Dame University was the speaker, and Professor Katherine Marshall served as discussant.

Drawing on his own experience as a South African youth studying in Indian madrasas, **Professor Ebrahim Moosa** began by pointing out that many Muslims come into contact with madrasas in a personal quest to discover an ‘authentic’ Islam. While this quest often leads Muslims to Islamic social movements and popular piety traditions, it can also lead to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. It is therefore critically important to interrogate what authenticity is in relation to Islam, why this search for authenticity is important, and whether there is only one path towards ‘authentic’ Islam. The madrasa, one of the most important and enduring institutions in Islam, lies at the heart of debates over ‘authentic’ Islam. Madrasas have long been crucial to shaping Muslim identity and the role that Muslims play in the world. We can trace the genealogy of the modern madrasa to the mosque of Medina, where the first focused attempts to establish a scholarly approach to interpreting the Messenger’s teachings took place. Jamias, or study circles, began to proliferate, first in North Africa and later across the Muslim world. One of the earliest and most important madrasas, the Kairaouine Mosque in Fez, was founded by the endowment of a woman, Fatima Al-Fihri. Jamaat Al-Azhar in Egypt has also been an important center of learning for centuries. From North Africa, Nizamiya madrasas spread in modern-day Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan under the Seljuks and produced many important historical Islamic scholars such as al-Ghazali.

Professor Moosa argued that a critical question is whether madrasas are viewed only as places for the preservation of tradition or whether they are also seen as places for the remaking of tradition. He emphasized the need to think of Islamic knowledge traditions as alive. Historically, madrasas combined worldly and divine knowledge from all available sources, building new knowledge paradigms. He asked why is this not happening in madrasas today? Madrasas produced countless great thinkers including Al Farabi, Ibn Rushid, Ibn Sina, Ibn Al Haytham, Al Qurtubi or Al Ghazali. For them no type of knowledge was considered inappropriate; they took the best of cosmopolitan learning from Greece, Persia, and India and brought it into the heart of the Islamic tradition. This dynamic synthesis of knowledge was essential in the creation of what we know as Islamic civilization. Why is it that knowledge of the present cannot be part of our learned tradition in Islam? The idea of resistance to the cultural hegemony of the West may be part of a political approach, but scholars like Ibn Rushid or Al Ghazali would certainly not have supported a wall of separation between knowledge of the East and the West. In Islamic cosmology, knowledge is sacred because it is what makes human beings different from other species and gives us dignity—this is called *karama*. The capacity to develop knowledge also gives humans the responsibility to act as stewards and do the work of God on earth. It is only knowledge that does not produce justice, compassion, and love that is questionable.

In contrast to this long-standing madrasa tradition, Quomi, Deobandi and Salafi madrasas of the Indian subcontinent are a development of the 18th century. They grew out of the Firangi Mahal School in Lucknow and a curriculum developed by Mulla Nizam Uddin, known as Dars-i-Nizami. The famous Deoband madrasa, founded in the wake of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, utilized this curriculum. While adopting some British administrative practices, the founders of the Deobandi tradition decided that the madrasa would be the place where Islam is curated in a traditional form in order to serve as a wall of resistance against cultural encroachment from the West. The founding ideal of the Indian madrasa was to serve as a bulwark against western culture and knowledge. The question of whether this approach should continue to be pursued has not been fully resolved and is the basis of many ongoing debates.

In madrasas across South Asia, tradition has been preserved, particularly with regard to the classic Islamic humanities, but it has not been updated with the experiences of the present to construct a meaningful dialogue—this remains one of the key challenges to the madrasa tradition today. Even in the major Islamic universities that were created to bridge this divide such a dialogue is absent. It is often only in Western Universities where students of Muslim heritage are creating a new synthesis of old and new knowledge that the true madrasas heritage is being continued. Discussion of madrasa curriculum reform has been ongoing for the last century. In some cases we have seen the addition of computer science or English to the curriculum, but we have not seen a substantial move forward. *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning), has long been touted as a magic bullet in a move towards a more open and critical hermeneutical approach, but this has not contributed a major reorientation of the intellectual tradition. In some cases *ijtihad* has even been used as an argument for more militant interpretations. In order for *ijtihad* to be successful, Moosa contends, students must read widely beyond their tradition.

In the Q&A session that followed his presentation, Professor Moosa discussed the fear and anxiety around madrasas after 9/11. The Taliban did claim a link to the madrasa tradition and Mullah Omar, for example, studied at a Deobandi madrasa, but among many Western observers there is confusion between the madrasa tradition and *maktabs*, where students learn to recite the Quran. This is the tradition in which most Taliban have been immersed. Many moderates in the Deobandi tradition may oppose the Taliban, but are afraid to speak out. Despite widespread claims, there is no empirical evidence that Saudi money is flowing into Deobandi madrasas; most would not accept Saudi money because they see the Salafi perspective as anathema to their own tradition. This inclination to blame everything on Wahhabism is both a diagnostic mistake and an analysis that will give false answers. Many other factors are involved in creating the challenges we experience today.

The long-running trope, not only in the West, but in Muslim countries as well, that madrasas are dangerous places have inspired many calls for their closure. These calls, however, do not consider the outcome of such an approach. Without madrasas you would see a massive proliferation of ‘do-it-yourself’ Islam that we already see growing on the Internet, which allows for gross misinterpretation of the tradition, for example, singling out single verses to inspire Muslims to violence. Though we may consider madrasa education deficient in many ways, we would see an even greater problem without their more robust and curated tradition of Islamic learning. The approach must rather be to foster in madrasas a dynamic knowledge tradition that can deliberate on theological and juridical issues related to Islam in the contemporary world for the benefit of local communities. This concern goes beyond madrasas, given the over-emphasis on engineering and medicine in Muslim communities and extremely limited funding for the Islamic humanities and social sciences. These trends have severely limited capacity and growth in important civic and intellectual areas. Education has become market-oriented and designed to integrate individuals into certain political economies, a trend that is important to resist.

Professor Moosa discussed some of the recent trends in madrasa education, noting that one of the most important recent developments in South Asia has been phenomenal growth in women’s madrasas in recent years. From a traditional orthodox perspective, girls’ education happened almost exclusively in the home. Moving girls out of the domestic sphere to get an education at a madrasa is huge cultural change and has led to socialization among girls from a variety of backgrounds, contributing to new cultural forms and new aspirations. This is one area where madrasa education has not been static, but female madrasas still suffer from the same drawbacks as their male counterparts. Further, many teach an abridged curriculum aimed primarily at preparing girls for a life of domesticity rather than advanced scholarship.

Professor Moosa noted that the geographic centers of madrasa education are shifting, particularly at the higher levels. Due to post 9/11 travel restrictions in India, the new preferred destination for madrasa education is South Africa for those who reach the highest levels of madrasa education elsewhere and look to complete their education. Finally, he noted the emerging and distressing phenomenon amongst groups like the Taliban and Boko Haram, of burning or destroying schools. This demonstrates clearly that these groups view education as the political and cultural front line of their fight. Looking to establish their own version of education, they fear that they will lose support if students are inculcated in Western values through secular education.

Professor Moosa concluded the Q&A session by emphasizing that Muslims are not strangers to diversity in knowledge and many of the great Muslim thinkers have vastly differing perspectives; it was the doubt that arose from these differences that served as inspiration for some of the greatest works of Islamic thought. But among Muslims today there is a great deal of anxiety and insecurity in encountering diversity and intellectual challenges because their own identity is based on such a thin narrative. We need to thicken the narrative, incorporate all types of knowledge as part of our heritage and build a more robust, complex Muslim identity.

In South Asia, madrasas have gradually moved away from a tradition of originating and creating new modalities of knowledge and became a project of preserving identities. The institution of the madrasa turned from a ‘republic of letters’ into a ‘republic of piety’ in a narrow sense—in classical tradition, piety is to do good (*maruf*) in the world, but modern Islamic piety in the madrasa tradition has been reduced to external paraphernalia—the length of your beard, the garments that you wear-- in order to separate yourself from Western traditions and identity. Islamic knowledge and traditions cannot be preserved as if in a laboratory. This must be a dynamic living and growing intellectual tradition. Economic conditions in many parts of the Muslim world have dehumanized people and created a lack of self-worth and contributed to social anomie. Now more than ever we need to highlight lessons on how to restore dignity and the values of honor and self-worth. We have to create a connection between the individual and his or her higher aspirations. The madrasa has a critical role to play in this regard.

Session Two: Madrasas in Bangladesh: Education and social capital

Session two took a close look at madrasas in the Bangladeshi context, aiming to provide some insights into the expansion of madrasas in recent years and the impact these institutions have had on education and literacy, paying close attention to their role in enhancing (or detracting from) social capital. The Bangladeshi case highlights the significance of madrasas’ involvement with state policies, notably the results of direct and indirect reform efforts. Professor Niaz Asadullah of Malaya University was the speaker, and Binayek Sen served as discussant.

Professor Niaz Asadullah began by mentioning that, because the room for dialogue on issues of faith is so limited, this was his first presentation on the topic of madrasa education in Bangladesh in over seven years, and that it is critical for researchers to have such a forum to present their findings and inform discussions in Bangladesh. He stated that his research in Bangladesh corroborated Professor Moosa’s concern over the sharp division between secular and religious knowledge in madrasa contexts. Orthodox madrasas in their modern form in South Asia grew out of an environment of suspicion about the larger social environment of the colonial state and this extended to suspicion of Western knowledge traditions. He asked, given this history, if the madrasa can become a dynamic institution that evolves in response to social changes in the same way that competing education providers have. Could madrasas in fact have a comparative advantage over other types of education providers in producing socially engaged citizens?

Professor Asadullah’s research primarily focuses on secondary-level madrasas, the level at which you see a division between the reformed Alia and orthodox Quomi madrasas that follow the Deobandi tradition. Because of their emphasis on independence and suspicion of outside intervention, Quomi madrasas in

Bangladesh present a missing data problem, not much is known about how they function or what they teach. Asadullah points out, however, that many Alia madrasas operated as Quomi madrasas prior to registering with the government and updating their curriculum. Therefore some limited understanding of Quomi madrasas can be gained by investigating the history of Alia institutions. The Bangladeshi government agreed to recognize madrasa degrees if the school registered and if certain reforms were enacted, which among other things, made it possible for Alia graduates to work in public sector jobs, prompting many to undertake substantial reforms and become a type of quasi-public madrasa that is quite unique in the Muslim world.

Professor Asadullah highlighted several key trends since 1980, a period that has seen a rapid expansion in madrasas nationwide. Between 1980 and 2000 madrasas grew at double the rate of secular schools. Nationwide, madrasas now account for about 33 percent of secondary school enrollment. After 1990, there was a steep rise in female enrollment in Alia madrasas, as well as a modest rise in the share of female teachers in Alia madrasas. This corresponds to the introduction of the female student secondary school stipend program that offers schools incentives for enrolling girls. Roughly 48 percent of students at Bangladesh's 9,214 Alia madrasas are now female and madrasas currently represent about 30 percent of female enrolment at the secondary level. This new gender balance within Bangladeshi madrasas is another development that makes the Bangladeshi context unique in the Muslim world. While both madrasa types now admit women Alia classrooms are co-educational, Quomi institutions are sex-segregated. In some ways, the move to admit girls into these traditionally male institutions represents a response by madrasas to the changing nature of education in the country. For Quomi this reform was indirect, while for Alia it occurred as a response to a government incentive program. Including Alia madrasas in the female secondary school stipend program has been framed by some political actors as a 'pro-madrasa' intervention, however, it is clear that this approach has contributed significantly to efforts to achieve gender parity at the secondary level. In terms of curriculum reform Alia have long adopted the national curriculum, however recent years have also seen the introduction of non-religious education into Quomi curriculum, albeit on a limited scale. Asadullah's data shows that an estimated 73 percent of rural Quomi madrasas teach some English, 70 percent teach some science, 59 percent teach the Bengali language, and 44 percent teach some math (at grade 8 or its equivalent). It is clear that recent years have seen a change in the Quomi curriculum, but it has not been systematic. The slow but significant influx of new teachers in both types of madrasas has introduced new norms and ideas, acting as the agents of change in madrasa education.

A critical question in understanding Bangladeshi madrasas is how and why parents demand and value madrasa education. Asadullah has found that demand for madrasa education is driven in part by economic motivations. Although madrasa graduates stand to earn less money than those who attend secular schools, they are likely to send a larger proportion of their income to their parents. This was identified as one factor shaping parents' decisions about where to send their children to school. Parents are also motivated by the social capital associated with Quranic literacy, as well as the experience of a rule-bound environment which is understood to produce moral and disciplined citizens and "good wives". In terms of learning outcomes, in rural Bangladesh education quality at government school can be quite poor and in the end parents may see little benefit of choosing a government school over a madrasa when deciding where to enroll their child.

Asadullah's research suggests that the choice in rural areas is often between Alia and government schools on the one hand and Quomi schools on the other and this may come down to a choice of possible career paths. If one hopes to become an engineer or enter another technical profession, an Alia madrasa or a government school would be their choice, if one wishes to become an Imam in that case he would choose a Quomi madrasa. Madrasa education is seen as producing attributes like obedience, respect, submission, and trustworthiness that are not only a form of social capital within local communities, but also have particular importance for those looking to pursue a future as an Islamic leader. These are all attributes that many Bangladeshis feel are critical to the production of model citizens, rooted in moral values with a willingness to

support their fellow citizens socially and financially. However, because of their relative isolation from society, Quomi madrasa students have limited interaction with certain segments of the broader Bangladeshi population. This can undermine social trust particularly between religious communities, despite the great emphasis on responsibility towards one's neighbors in Islam. Alia madrasa students, in comparison are somewhat better integrated into their local communities and have more opportunities interaction with individuals from other segments of society.

Professor Asadullah's research has demonstrated that Quomi madrasas are not entirely resistant to government incentives, running counter to suggestions by some that forcible reform is a necessary approach. The education sector in Bangladesh more broadly is marked by institutional diversity, including many pro-poor providers. Many of the recent changes within Bangladeshi Quomi madrasas can be seen from one perspective as an indirect response to the educational approaches utilized by other providers. We must keep in mind, however that ongoing reforms are also occurring in relation to major social and economic changes in Bangladeshi society. Educational reforms have been much less widespread in Quomi madrasas than in Alia. This is of particular concern because Quomi madrasas are leaders in the analysis of social issues from a theological perspective. Many Bangladeshi citizens turn to religious figures for guidance for a range of domestic and community matters. While an indirect approach to reform within Quomi institutions has had some impact it has been limited and we need to learn more about the circumstances in which change has occurred. The extent to which further progress can be made may depend on the level of trust that can be built between the government and Quomi madrasa leaders.

In the Q&A session that followed his presentation, Professor Asadullah focused initially on the topic of female madrasa education in Bangladesh. He observed that it is still not known if the increased enrollment of girls in madrasas will have a wider economic or social impact because those girls who entered madrasas after the stipend program was introduced in 1990 are just now beginning to enter the labor market. Regarding changes in gender roles, one question is whether these reformed madrasas are simply sites of social reproduction, in that they are seen as producing submissive women with traits socially desirable in a patriarchal society. He then mentioned the issue of poverty and school choice, noting that the demand for Alia education is generally not about piety. These schools offer an affordable alternative that can act as a springboard to post-secondary education. In response to the question of why Quomi madrasas don't teach Bengali as a mandatory subject 40 years after independence, Asadullah pointed out that Bangladesh has failed to produce a large body of Islamic scholarship in Bengali. Likewise, few of the classical textbooks have been translated from Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, creating a dependence on pedagogical literature that is largely in languages other than Bengali. Quomi madrasa are therefore constrained linguistically by the available literature.

Professor Asadullah concluded the Q&A session by noting from his own experience that those who research madrasas in Bangladesh encounter a great deal of suspicion. Their agenda and funding come under close scrutiny by madrasa and government authorities. He has also been criticized by secular elites for promoting madrasa education and giving these institutions legitimacy. He noted that this is part of a larger debate over who should be able to discuss the future of madrasa education in Bangladesh. Should it only be those who come from this community or are all citizens of Bangladesh able to contribute to this discussion? He stressed that elites must also be willing to discuss issues of religion openly and without prejudice if this type of dialogue is to be successful.

Session Three: Panel discussion - Madrasas and social participation

This session delved into the contemporary context in Bangladesh, exploring the approaches to and challenges of integrating madrasas into the broader national education system and improving education quality. The session took on the contentious issue of curriculum reform, probing current approaches, progress, and remaining challenges. It explored the nature of social alienation and (allegations of) radicalization in Quomi madrasas. Panelists shared their experiences working with madrasa teachers and students on education reform and efforts to foster greater community participation and inclusive citizenship. Nathaniel Adams moderated a panel made up of scholars and practitioners deeply engaged on the madrasa issues in Bangladesh.

Talat Mahmud, education sector director of Save the Children Bangladesh, described a project that the organization piloted, which worked with over 100 Quomi madrasas in Rajshahi Division. The project focused on curriculum and pedagogical reform and the establishment of madrasa-based early childhood education centers. This was Save the Children's first project on madrasa education and they remain one of the few major NGOs to engage Quomi madrasas. At the outset getting access to these institutions proved a major struggle and it took a significant amount of time to build trust with imams and ulama, many of whom found their motivations suspicious and feared giving up control to an NGO.

Talat noted that there are a number of institutions that prepare children for madrasa education. Maktabas, the most common, can be very informal, run by an imam out of a mosque. The focus is often religious behavior and Quran recitation. Students will attend a few days a week for 1-3 years. Nourani madrasas, in contrast, have a more formal curriculum, which includes Arabic literacy as well as basic religious subjects, and recitation of the Quran and Hadith. Students will typically attend for 4-6 years. Save the Children's research found that parents enroll their children in Quomi madrasas for a variety of reasons. The most common reason cited by parents is that madrasas provide free religious education and boarding for poor families. Despite being nominally free, there are costs associated with government schools. Most respondents Save the Children surveyed stated that they knew that the madrasa was not designed to produce engineers or doctors, but rather to train scholars to interpret Islam in relation to the demands of contemporary times and preserve an authentic Islamic heritage. Parents also said that madrasa education was the best way to develop good human beings, with positive values and strong faith in Islam. Many parents want their children to follow the path of the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) and be obedient to Allah. Learning Arabic, in order to read the Quran, is another important motivation.

Save the Children also found that teachers in Quomi madrasas vary widely in training and experience. There are no standard qualifications and no consistent teacher training. Many are self-taught. Only a few madrasa boards organize teacher training and teachers must pay for that training out of pocket. The basic curriculum is set by the local madrasa board but there is a good amount of flexibility within this. Rote memorization is the primary pedagogical approach. The teacher-student relationship tends to be very formal and respectful, but generally not open to dialogue or debate. Multi-lingual education is one major benefit, as madrasa students may learn up to four languages Bangla, English, Urdu and Arabic. However, there is little supplementary reading material in these languages. Looking ahead, addressing education quality and issues of teacher recruitment and teacher training at Quomi madrasas will be important, but we must also recognize the great demand of parents for values-based education, an area in which secular schools are seen as deficient.

Nurul Momen Bhuiyan of Bangladesh National University described his experience conducting ethnographic research in a Quomi madrasa in rural Sylhet. He suggested that the wall of separation cuts both ways and noted that elite forums like this event are often not open to madrasa students, but that such forums are a necessary first step in the establishing constructive dialogue. Despite the perception that Quomi madrasas are closed off, Bhuiyan has found that most will welcome anyone who seeks honest engagement

with Islamic teachings, but that the same is often not true for elite universities, which are often off limits to Quomi students. He noted that there is a need to address the negative portrayal of madrasas in the media in Bangladesh, which contributes enormously to social division and mistrust. The perception that these institutions are closed off from their communities is not always correct. The madrasa in which he conducted his fieldwork was part of a larger bazaar complex and had a high level of community interaction. Bhuiyan noted a great deal of student turnover in the madrasa that he studied, which was a result of the challenging curriculum and the sometimes-harsh corporal punishment. Despite the challenges, many students remain in Quomi madrasas as they do not have another option.

Madrasa students and graduates often feel caught between two worlds and not a part of either. He cited the lack of teaching resources is a major obstacle; occasionally Quomi madrasas will rely on the materials produced for Alia institutions. He noted that Quomi madrasas are community-based institutions and demand for madrasa education has persisted over time, indicating that there is a broadly perceived local benefit to these institutions. Clearly much more research is needed to better understand the madrasa in Bangladeshi society.

Saiful Haque, founder and President of the Move Foundation, described the work of his organization, which engages Quomi madrasa students in the goal of inclusive citizenship. Quomi students often lack access to services like healthcare and job skills training and are marginalized in the broader society. No one group or institution is to blame for the current situation, but elite groups should not feel that they have a right to reform these institutions in accordance with their particular vision of society. It is critical to take a collaborative approach that engages madrasa authorities, local civil society, and government.

Haque noted several challenges that his organization faces in working closely with madrasa students. First, there is the lack of trust in civil society between religious and secular groups. This is exacerbated by the attitude of superiority NGOs and government bureaucrats sometimes take in trying to impose curriculum reform, rather than making madrasas equal partners in reform. Secondly, there is often a lack of time for students to engage with their program. Madrasa students have a full and highly regimented schedule of study and prayer. He noted, however, that both teachers and students were eager to engage with civil society programs and demand from the students in particular is high. In his opinion the biggest challenge is the political views that come from orthodox religious leaders. Haque argued that most of the leaders in orthodox madrasas believe students should not engage in issues of democratic citizenship and pluralism because they worry this might erode control over students. The younger leaders, however, are much more open to engaging with mainstream society. Many feel this work is important in part because of the perception that madrasa students are more inclined to take part in extremist political activities. There is a need to focus more on how to engage these students so that they do not become the victims of terrorist groups, but it is also critical that we do not blame madrasas for radicalizing students before we learn more about them through dialogue.

Finally, **Shagufe Hossain**, the founder of Leaping Boundaries, explained that she started her organization after recognizing the challenges of visibility and identity that many madrasa students face. She was inspired to start the initiative after reading an article in the *Daily Star*, which was the only nuanced and unbiased take on madrasas she had ever read. She resolved to work to increase the visibility of madrasa students on national platforms where they are underrepresented. She noted that many madrasa students simply do not have access to a-political, a-religious spaces where they can be visible and affirm their identities. Being unseen results in a kind of identity crisis for many madrasa students and graduates. The project seeks to provide platforms, but also ensure that madrasa students can represent themselves adequately by building capacity through English language training, computer programming classes, and soft skills training, as well as psycho-social support.

Leaping Boundaries works with about 200 Alia madrasa students aged 12-14, 120 of whom are girls. Although Leaping Boundaries originally targeted both boys and girls, Leaping Boundaries shifted their focus primarily to girls in part because girls face unique challenges in terms of visibility and affirmation. They need to be offered spaces to generate their own narratives. A recent assessment revealed that many girls report that they do not have a medium for self-expression and a creative outlet, and in response Leaping Boundaries recently conducted an art workshop led by emerging Bangladeshi artists with the theme of International Women's Day. Hossain has observed that madrasa students face two kinds of fear. The first is a fear of questioning. They feel that they cannot ask questions regarding religion to their peers or superiors without having their own piety questioned. They also face the fear of being questioned by those in civil society at large. They are aware that they are different because they are made to feel different and encounter significant fear and suspicion in their daily lives. Greater and more visible interaction with madrasas and their students can help to dissipate these fears.

Closing remarks:

Katherine Marshall closed the Forum with a brief summary of themes that emerged in the discussions. First, she noted that many speakers had raised the idea of a 'wall of separation,' which is intellectual, but also political and social. It is important to find ways to break down this wall. Many speakers also highlighted the idea that madrasas are an integral part of the larger education system in Bangladesh and challenges of quality and outcomes are shared broadly among the many diverse institutions. The discussion brought to the fore the fact that madrasa education is a long and venerable tradition that stretches back to the earliest days of Islam; that madrasas in modern-day Bangladesh are challenged by the demands of contemporary times, but they are changing and adapting in significant ways that are often poorly understood and appreciated. Finally, she highlighted a series of lingering questions about the development dimensions of the madrasa system: how do development challenges like equity, quality of life, values of citizenship, and human rights relate to the madrasa system's contributions to educating the future generations of Bangladesh? What about gender norms? Preparation for contemporary jobs? There is a pressing need for more dialogue and more engagement in seeking answers to such questions.