

| SPECIAL FEATURE |

Government Madrasah-E-Alia, Dhaka is one of the oldest educational institutions of the subcontinent still in operation. Established in 1780, it was one of the few educational institutions where the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent could obtain both Islamic and secular education standardised and certified by the government. While the Qwami madrasas closed their doors to secular education and government interventions, Government Madrasah-E-Alia (located in Kolkata at that time) became the cradle for Muslim scholars and skilled professionals in British India. After the partition in 1947, the Government Madrasah-E-Alia was shifted to Dhaka and it became the centre of modern Islamic education in East Pakistan and subsequently in Bangladesh.

Thanks to the government's recognition and its pioneering method of unifying Islamic and secular education, Alia-madrasa-based education became widely popular among common Muslims. Privately managed Alia madrasas were established all over the subcontinent. There are presently 10,450 Alia madrasas in operation in Bangladesh where more than two million



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ALIA MADRASA



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students are enrolled in different classes from primary to post-graduate level, according to Bangladesh Education Statistics 2016, published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS).

However, most of these madrasas, including the Government Madrasah-E-Alia, Dhaka have lost their foundational spirit of producing skilled manpower by providing unified education with religious knowledge. Severe shortage of

qualified teachers, stigma towards madrasa education and lack of academic reformation has completely crumbled this education system. With poorly maintained science departments and a complete absence of business studies, most of the Alia madrasa students graduate from these institutions only with knowledge of Arabic literature, hadith and the Quran, just like their Qwami counterparts. In the medical and engineering institutions, and applied and

An education system on its death bed

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

theoretical science departments of the public universities, the number of Alia madrasa graduates can be counted on one hand. Once the breeding ground of Muslim scholars and leaders such as Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, scientist Muhammad Qudrat-I-Khuda and Syed Ameer Ali, the Alia madrasa system is now merely a shadow of its former self.

The reason behind this bleak scenario lies in the severe negligence towards secular education among teachers and students of Alia madrasas. Up to the Alim level (higher secondary level or grades 11 and grade 12), there are two departments in Alia madrasas: the general department, where students mainly learn Islamic studies, social sciences and arts; and the science department, where students learn

physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, information and communications technology (ICT) along with Islamic studies. However, according to Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board, 76 madrasas out of 119 in Dhaka district do not have any Alim-level student in their science departments.

The situation is quite similar even in the Government Madrasah-E-Alia. In this centuries-old institution, every year only 25-30 students study science at the Dakhil level (secondary level or grades 9 and 10) whereas around 250 students study in the general department. However in grade 11, the number of science students is less than 10. And, in the second year of Alim classes, or grade 12, not more than five students continue their education. A teacher of the science department of this Alia madrasa, requesting anonymity, says that he has only two students in grade 12 this year and they are extremely irregular. "One of my two students last attended the class in the previous month. Another of my students comes to class once in two or three weeks. I come to the madrasa every day but as I have no students, I cannot conduct my regular class," he says.

However, one of his two students is Didarul Alam who has been working as a full-time caretaker at a residential apartment complex since 2016. As a result he hardly has any time to attend class. "I study on my own. And, before the Alim exam, I will solve questions which might be given in the exams. My target is to just pass the exam and after that I will try to go to the Middle East for a better job," says Alam.

Alam's only classmate is a graphic designer now working for a computer-compose shop in Nilkhet. According to

Continued to page 5

| SPECIAL FEATURE |

ALIA MADRASA

After page 4

Alam and his teachers, most of the students in Alia madrasas have to work. As most of these students come from underprivileged families, they have to earn their living and educational expenses by doing menial jobs as well as provide for their families. "As a result, they don't choose science because subjects like physics, chemistry, mathematics, and biology require more time and effort, which these students cannot give," says Palash Mridha, Assistant Professor at the Department of Physics of Government Madrasah-E-Alia. He also states that most of the students at Alia madrasas have very poor foundational knowledge of science subjects which makes them ineligible for

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admission into the science department at the secondary or higher secondary level.

According to experts, lack of qualified teachers in madrasas is the main reason behind students' poor basic knowledge of science subjects. Professor Siraj Uddin Ahmad, Principal of the Government Madrasah-E-Alia, argues, "Almost all the Alia madrasas of Bangladesh have a severe shortage of qualified teachers. We have 70 posts for secondary and higher secondary level teachers but we have only 31. Qualified teachers do not want to work at madrasas as our society does not have a good impression of those who teach at madrasas."

Again, due to the severe shortage of teachers, Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board took out ICT from Dakhil (secondary) curriculum which is a compulsory subject for students of grade 11 and 12. However, as madrasas do not get computer science graduates as teachers, teachers of other subjects conduct ICT classes at the higher secondary level. In fact, having teachers without a science background take science classes throughout all levels has become a common practice in Alia

madrasas. This practice, according to both teachers and students, severely affects students' performance in more abstract science subjects such as physics and mathematics.

On the other hand, very few Alia madrasas in Bangladesh have adequate infrastructure to teach science. According to the BANBEIS report, only 25 percent of Alia madrasas have a science laboratory and 14 percent madrasas have a computer laboratory. This is also one of the reasons why students are reluctant to study science in Alia madrasas. In fact, according to the report, in 2016, only around 10 percent of the two million students enrolled in Alia madrasas in Bangladesh studied science at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Their performance in the board and admission exams is very poor.

project, Dr Kaykobad suggests introducing distance learning for madrasa students. "Since there is a shortage of qualified teachers, we can record and televise the classes of top teachers through a dedicated education-based television channel and upload the videos to free online platforms such as You Tube. In this way, quality academic content can be made free and accessible to all madrasa and even school and college students," he adds.

However, this education system has also been handicapped by several draconian orders imposed by the Board. Students of Alia madrasas are overburdened compared to their counterparts in schools and colleges. Besides science or social science subjects, they also have to study four courses on the Quran, hadith, Islamic laws and

training institute for around 100,000 higher secondary level Alia madrasa teachers. According to Professor A K M Saif Ullah, Chairman, Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board, "Alia madrasas are struggling to run their regular academic activities with the existing science and general department. In this situation, allowing them to open a business studies department and graduate and post-graduate courses on new subjects would not be a good idea. However, we might allow well-performing madrasas to open a business studies department in the future."

Students of Alia madrasas in Bangladesh have been in a relentless struggle with their neglected, deteriorating education system. Burden of extra courses, shortage of teachers, lack of quality institutions and severe



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Arabic. In the past, Alia Madrasa students took a 100-mark Bengali and a 100-mark English exam at the Dakhil and Alim levels. Then, to make them eligible for university admission tests the Board imposed Bengali and English exams scored out of 200 marks without making any supplementary reforms in the curriculum. So, a student of the general stream takes a 1,300-mark Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) exam whereas a student of Alia madrasa has to take a 1,700-mark Alim exam which has been made equivalent to HSCs.

Again, the Board does not permit Alia madrasas to open business studies department or enrol graduate and post-graduate students to its courses except on Islamic studies. Their science department can take students only up to the higher secondary level. Also, there is a severe scarcity of training facilities for madrasa teachers. There is only one

dearth of resources have been forcing the students to practice rote learning, rendering science and business education ineffective and unattainable. On the other hand, stigma towards madrasa education has also marginalised madrasa graduates in the job market. To rescue this education system from its death bed, a complete overhaul of its curriculum and the teaching-learning process is necessary. At the same time, awareness raising programmes should be launched to eliminate stigma towards this progressive stream of madrasa education, which offers spiritual and materialistic knowledge simultaneously. If reformatory initiatives come into fruition, there is no doubt that this unique education system can once again be the breeding ground of our national leaders.

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