

# The Religious Education of Muslim Women in Bangladesh

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The Madrasas in present-day South Asia are bearers of the remarkable revival that Islamic religious education witnessed in colonial India during the late nineteenth century. This renewal began in particular earnestness with the establishment of the Dar-ul-Uloom Madrasa at Deoband in 1867. However, women were not part of this revivalist project in formal religious education, although on the level of informal religious education, they were taken into serious consideration by some Ulama who sought to promote individual piety, to re-Islamize household rituals and daily cultural practices, and to facilitate individual knowledge and observance of Qur'an- and Hadith-based religious injunctions as opposed to folk customs (Gail Minault, 1998, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press). One of the most well known among these reformist Ulama who showed significant concern for enhancing women's informal/household religious knowledge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the Deoband Madrasa-trained scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi (1864-1943). His encyclopedic work, *Bihishti Zewar* (The Ornaments of Paradise), was primarily aimed at women (although Maulana Thanavi strongly encouraged men to follow it as well) and contained a vast amount of extremely detailed religious prescriptions for conducting numerous daily religious and household activities and for purifying bodily, mental, and emotional states. Maulana Thanavi's emphasis on both Muslim men's and women's EQUAL obligations to seek knowledge and education was remarkably egalitarian for contemporary society, particularly the then worldview of many Indian Ulama and the Muslim elite (Barbara Metcalf, 1982, "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women: Maulana Thanawi's Jewelry

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of Paradise' in *Moral Conducted and Authority*, edited by Barbara Metcalf, pp. 184-95).

However, despite Maulana Thanavi's reformist emphasis on the egalitarian message of Islam, like most Ulama of his time and of many many decades later, the Maulana was opposed to women's access to public space and possibly could not therefore imagine women's access to even the most basic levels of Madrasa education, let alone women's access to higher levels of formal religious scholarly capacities.

The historical neglect of women's formal religious education continues to shape the sphere of women's access to religious scholarship in present-day South Asia, even though some changes are under way in the margins. The neglect of women's religious education in South Asia (and possibly elsewhere) is evident today not only in the abysmal gaps between the numbers of male and female Madrasa students and traditional religious scholars but also in the dearth of scholarship on women's Madrasas in South Asia. Thus, for instance, neither of the two most comprehensive, recent, and otherwise illuminating and timely scholarly articles on Madrasas in South Asia (see Mumtaz Ahmad's and Yogi Sikand's respective chapters in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, eds. Satu Limaye *et al*, Honolulu, Hawaii University Press, 2004) mentions female Madrasa students women even in passing. This essay will briefly discuss and analyze the current situation of religious education of Muslim women in Bangladesh and adjacent areas from a historical perspective.

### Gaps Between Islamic Canonical Teachings and Muslim Historical and Cultural Practices

Even though Islam has emphasized access to knowledge for all, the education of Muslim girls and women, particularly in the areas of religious scholarship and authoritative expertise, has been seriously marginalized in most parts of the Muslim world historically. The Prophet of Islam (sm) said that, "Securing education is an obligation for all Muslims (...)" The Quran has emphasized education unequivocally. The revelation even began with the word 'Iqra'

meaning read, recite.(Quran:96: 1) The Quran asks "Are those who know and who do not know equal?" (Sura Zumar; Ayat 9)

The Muslim community failed to implement its obligation to educate all its members, male and female. Studies of the Muslim history of various countries reveal that in the establishment of educational institutions, equal opportunities were not created for boys and girls. Of course, rudimentary religious education was imparted to all at home, such as recitation of the Quran, the formal and technical rules of Salat and Siam, and fundamental religious values of modesty, honesty, respect for elders (adab), duties towards one's parents, etcetera. But higher education and the realm of religious scholarship and authority became the preserves of men alone. Furthermore, despite the Qur'anic emphasis on the equality of all human beings and on the Prophetic stress on access to knowledge for all, discriminatory practices were found even with regard to men, let alone women. Thus, prior to the nineteenth century, access to Madrasa teaching and education was largely restricted to the communities of elite Muslims the ashraf nobility who were mostly migrants from Central Asia, Iran, and Arabia, and their descendents. The indigenous Muslims the ajlaf-were expected to remain satisfied with the most elementary knowledge of Islam (Yogi Sikand, 2004, "Reforming the Indian Madrassas: Contemporary Muslim Voices" in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*: 120).

However, sociopolitical changes began to sweep across the Muslim world during the 19th and 20th centuries. With the establishment of British colonialism, the Dar-ul-Uloom Madrasa at Deoband was established in 1865. This remains the largest traditional Madrasa in South Asia till this day. In the absence of Muslim rulers as patrons of Madrasa education, and concerned with the threat colonialism and intensifying Christian missionary work in the region posed to the production, sustenance, and enhancement of Islamic knowledge and sensibilities, Ulamas began to establish small and large Madrasas which increasingly turned to the ranks of ordinary ajlaf Muslims, with whom Ulamas and Madrasas had had little contact until then. The ordinary Muslim came to symbolize the survival and

well-being of Islam and to serve as the repository of Islamic knowledge and moral reform. In the wake of these changes, Muslim girls did not remain untouched by such reforms for too long. But it would not be till the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that Muslim girls began to gain access to higher education. At least, this was the case in former Bengal.

### **Women's Religious and Formal Education in Bengal**

The eminent lady who played the greatest role in mobilizing for formal and higher education for women in Bengal specifically, was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein, who against numerous personal/familial, cultural, and financial odds, established an Urdu-medium school for girls in Calcutta in the year 1911; by then Urdu had come to dominate the elite Muslim culture in Bengal, to be gradually replaced by Bengali in later decades. Named the "Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School," this school opened at 13 Waliulla Lane in a tiny classroom, with only 8 girls in attendance. In 1917, it became a middle English school. Begum Rokeya added a class every year till her school became a high school in 1931 (Sonia Nishat Amin, 1996, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1939*, E. J. Brill, pp. 156-7).

While this was the first stable beginning of modern education among Muslim girls in this region, there were other and even earlier efforts in various parts of Bengal and in certain parts of India to make modern education accessible to girls. Thus, for instance, a primary school for girls from strictly purdah observing families were founded in 1873 in Comilla by another pioneering Bengali woman, Nawab Faizunnesa Chaudhurani who herself had received a good education at home in Urdu, Bengali, Sanskrit, and Persian. This school became a Junior High School (till the 8th grade) in 1889 and a regular High School in 1931. It operates today as Nawab Faizunnesa High School for Girls (Arnin 1996: 149-50). In 1897, on the request of Nawab Shamsi Jahan Firdaus Mahal of Murshidabad, Lady Mckenzie, the wife of the governor of Calcutta, Muslim Girls' Madrasa was inaugurated at Calcutta. Begum Firdaus Mahal funded the construction of the building. She also provided a monthly grant

of Rs. 150 while Nawab Ahsanullah of Dhaka contributed Rs. 1000. In 1898, 46 girls enrolled at the Madrasa (Amin 1996: 147). However, not much is known about the exact contents of the Madrasa curriculum. The first formal school for girls in Dhaka, Eden Female School, was established in June 1878. This was the first government secondary school for girls in the region and remained thus for many years. A college section was introduced in 1926, making the Eden Girls' School and College the first institute for higher secondary education for women in Eastern Bengal (Amin 1996: 151-3).

However, there was no effort in the area of Bengal to create opportunities for women to obtain higher RELIGIOUS education. Women traditionally received some basic Islamic education at home. In certain ashraf or upper aristocratic families, the quality of Islamic education that girls received at home could be quite remarkable and as high as the quality of the education received by the boys in those families. In many middle and upper class families, a girl would be introduced to the Qur'an at the age of 5 through a lesson in Arabic letters taught by female tutors from modest backgrounds called 'ustadnis.' These female tutors would also teach some Persian, Urdu, some basic accounting skills, a little sewing and embroidery, and later Bengali and English as well (Amin 1996: 136). Once women began to attend non-religious public schools, they began to be instructed in subjects such as mathematics, history, and geography, but some basic religious instruction continues to this present day in the form of the course "Islamiyat," which is a compulsory course for Muslims in state schools in Bangladesh. However, a Muslim woman did not have any opportunity to become an Alim (religious scholar) through education at an elite Madrasa (a religious seminary with 16 years of coursework and training).

Only during the last 2-3 decades did the Ulama finally open the doors of formal, elite Madrasas to women. Separate women's Madrasas, both of the Kamil/Alia variety (that is the Madrasas which follow the govt. approved course curriculum of a few modern subjects and a revised form of the Dars Nizami syllabus) and the

Kaumi variety (which follow the Deoband and most traditional/standard Dars Nizami) have been established. However, as far as traditional Islamic courses are concerned, the courses are essentially the same in both the Kamil/ Alia and Kaumi systems of religious education. The Kawmi Madrasas are private. They do not receive any financial support from the government and are supported by religious endowments or by zakat and sadaqa. While most of the Alia Madrasas, except the five fully state controlled major Ali Madrasas, are privately owned and administered, the Government of Bangladesh pays 80 percent of the salaries of their teachers and administrators. To varying extents, Madrasa education, by virtue of its charitable spirit and affordability, has made possible some degree of social mobility for thousands of lower and lower middle class people throughout modern South Asia (Mumtaz Ahmad, 2004, "Madrasa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh" in Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia).

The number of Madrasas for girls which followed Alia courses (in 2005) is as follows:

Level	Course duration	Number of students
Dakhil	10 years	952
Alim	12 years	77
Fazil	14 years	22
Kamil	16 years	5

(Source: Dr. Muhammad Abdus Satter, senior official of Madrasah Education Board and author of *Bangladesh Madrasah Shikkha* (Madrasah Education in Bangladesh), published by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh).

There are several Kawmi Madrasas for girls. In Dhaka, there are 2 such Madrasas which award the Dawra (briefly explain/describe 'dawra') degree to girls.

The course syllabi used in girls/boys Madrasahs in both Alia and Kawmi systems are the same. There is a shortage of female teachers. However, the problem is not a serious one since male teachers in many cases teach in these Madrasahs. Male and female Alims tend to be equal in knowledge and abilities. In fact, a senior Alim, Maulana

Abul Kalam Azad informed me that the girls tend to perform better as students than the boys since the former appear to take their school duties more seriously. In my view, women Alims can be deployed, as in Turkey, as Muftis wherever their services are required. However, it must be stated that as things stand currently, in order to be compatible with present socioeconomic demands, the Madrasa curriculum requires significant improvement and diversification in coursework, while sustaining a focus on the core religious courses. A serious inclusion of modern disciplines would not only help bridge increasing gaps between Madrasa-educated and lay-educated Muslims but would also help produce Muslims who are religious scholars, able to effectively administer the increasingly diversifying and specialized public and private sectors, and able to establish needed dialogues both within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims of different faiths and persuasions. A Muslim, educated in this manner, would truly embody the Islamic ideal of a comprehensive person and system where any separation of one area of life (such as 'religion') from another (such as 'politics' or 'economy' or 'society' or 'culture' or 'education') is not recognized. Every dimension exists as a part of a whole just as every organ and part of a human body operates as an integral part of a whole.

### **Madrasa Education in Bangladesh**

Let me briefly discuss the development of Madrasa education in the Bangladesh region over the last 200 years. Warren Hastings, the Governor General of British India, on the request made by the Muslims in 1780, asked Maulana Majduddin, an accomplished scholar of the traditional Islamic Sciences to prepare a course curriculum and to launch a Madrasa. The Madrasa took off in 1780 according to a variant of the Dars Nizamia curriculum. This curriculum, which historically served as a model for many Madrasas throughout the world, was developed in its original form for the Nizamia Madrasa in Baghdad, founded by the eleventh century Seljuq Vizier Nizam-ul Mulk Hasan ibn 'Ali during the Abbasid period. The 1780 Madrasa in Bengal was launched in a rented building in Kolkata (Calcutta). The original Nizamia syllabus

had represented a blend of naqli 'uloom (revealed sciences), including the Quran, the hadith, fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and tafsir(Quranic commentary), on the one hand, and the aqli 'ulum (rational sciences), including Arabic language, grammar, logic, rhetoric, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, physics and mathematics, on the other. However, the Nizami syllabus, as adopted in colonial South Asia and as shaped by cultural and political forces, came to distinguish between "religious" and "worldly" knowledge and to stress the "deenie" sphere of knowledge to the neglect and virtual exclusion (until very recent decades) of areas of modern "duniyavi" knowledge (Sikand 2004). Thus the first Madrasa in Bengal followed traditional courses in Arabic grammar, Arabic language, philosophy, logic, Fiqh, usul-al-fiqh, theology (kalam), Tafsir; and Hadith, all largely based on classical texts. This was the beginning of the Alia Madrasa system (Dr. Muhammad Abdus Satter, 2004, Bangladesh Madrasa Shikkha [Madrasa Education in Bangladesh], Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1st edition, pp. 120-129).

Many commissions and committees have been formed since then to deal with the various aspects of public education and Madrasa education, but the courses basically remained the same and the Madrasa text books in Fiqh, Usul-al-Fiqh, Tafsir and Hadith have all remained essentially the same. Virtually no significant changes have been effected with the passage of time and significant shifts in socio-political and economic conditions both locally and globally. Contemporary texts and disciplines have not been included in any significant way in the Madrasa curriculum although the subjects of English, Science, Bangla, History, Geography, and Mathematics have been included in the lower stages of Madrasa education (Dr. AKM Azharul Islam and Professor Shah Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Bangladesh School and Madrasa Shikkhaniti o Karjokrom [Curriculum and Education Policy of Schools and Madrasas of Bangladesh], The Islamic Academy, Cambridge, UK, Chapter 4). Thus, for instance, texts used for the core religious subjects date back to the seventeenth century at the latest and the eleventh century at the earliest. However, this Alia system of Madrasa education in



Bangladesh is quite unique in its five distinct sub-divisions: ibtedai (elementary), dakhil (secondary), alim (higher secondary), fazil (B.A.), and kamil (M.A.) (Mumtaz Ahmad, 2004, "Madrasa Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh" in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*).

Until recent decades, we find Madasa education in Bangladesh and possibly in South Asia to be characterized by the following features:

1. The method of instruction was Urdu.
2. No reference whatsoever is made to female education.
3. Strict dependence on extremely dated and classical texts.
4. Initially separate books were prescribed in Fiqh, Usul al Fiqh and Kalam for Sunni.

and Shia students even though these students used to study in the same Madrasa (Dr. Muhammad Abdus Satter, *ibid*, pages 172-199.). However, as I said before, the Ulama in the course of the last 20-25 years have become aware of the need of higher religious education for women. Below, I note some of the figures related to the female student community following the Alia system of religious education:

Year	Course	Number of Male student	Number of female student
2000	Dakhil	101,414	50,835
2000	Alim	51,127	14743
2000	Fazil	20,732	3,256
2000	Kamil	13,158	833

Now I turn to the Islamic Studies Department in colleges and universities. This degree is open to both men and women. The course curriculum has been patterned on the key elements of the syllabus followed at the Dars Nizami Madrasas, where the subjects taught include Arabic, Fiqh, Usul al Fiqh and Hadith, history, and Islamic Philosophy. However, the course coverage of the Islamic traditional sciences is less here than in the Kamil or Dawrah Madrasa courses. A serious student can develop into an Alim if he or she undertakes advanced personal study. However, my conversations with scholars revealed that completion of the Islamic

Studies course currently prevalent in the universities can hardly be said to transform one into an Alim (This is the opinion of Prof. Mustafizur Rahman of Dhaka university, Arabic Department, a former Vice-Chancellor of Islamic University, Kushtia, and Nasima Hasan, an M.S. in Islamic Studies from Dhaka University, now a teacher at the International Islamic University, Chittagong, Dhaka Campus).

Let me add that in recent times, some women are taking part in television programs in Bangladesh. These women are largely university educated and trained in general subjects, but have pursued the informal study of Islam on a personal level. A few hold degrees in Islamic Studies or Arabic. The emergence of modern, self-styled religious thinkers or scholars, who secure religious knowledge through informal and personal or Islamic organizational study of Islam, is evident throughout Muslim communities today notably in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. This culture of self-styled religious authority is particularly evident in the sphere of electronic communication. This phenomenon speaks to the gaps in traditional religious education and to the inability of many traditional religious experts to respond satisfactorily to the issues increasingly central to the experiences and needs of younger generations of non-Madrassa educated Muslims in the present-day world.

In conclusion, I will say that Islamic education among women is increasing and diversifying both at informal and formal levels even though the standard of religious education in most of these cases leaves much to be desired. Most female students of religious scholarship today are becoming traditional Alims, as deficient as male Alims in responding to the needs of the rapidly growing numbers of Muslim recipients of modern/non-religious mass higher education, those ranks of Muslims from which the leaders of contemporary Muslim societies and states continue to emerge. Voices for reforming the Madrassa system grow stronger every year and these voices are diverse, but the pace of any real reform has been painfully slow for a number of reasons that scholars have

discussed (see, for instance, Yogi Sikand in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia*, 2004).

The atmosphere of distrust created by the US-led war against "terrorism" is certainly not helping the cause of Madrasa reform since many orthodox ulama, who have always resisted reform, now feel more certain than ever that under the guise of liberalizing and modernizing Islamic education, the West and its secular allies are bent on gradually eradicating the force of Islam altogether from the educational and cultural spheres. However, I feel that despite various difficulties and legitimate doubts and concerns, Muslims must move beyond a RE-ACTIVE politics which is often unproductive and harms Muslim interests in the end. While one must learn from history and study it carefully, one should not be determined by it. Muslims and the Ulama in particular, must become PRO-ACTIVE instead and take whatever initiatives necessary to sustain, improve, and enhance Islamic education such that it impacts life positively all over the world, not only in Muslim majority societies. The Qur'an, after all, was revealed as guidance not only for Muslims, but for "humankind." We should not allow our fear of the uncertainties of the future and the formidable strength and ploys of our adversaries to prevent us from determining, with clarity, the priorities of the Muslim ummah, however diversely constituted. We allowed colonialism to paralyze our advancement for many precious decades. It is no secret, for example, that nineteenth and twentieth century nationalist efforts to define Indian women strictly in terms of the domestic sphere were in large part a reaction to the colonial project of domination and imposed transformation in the Indian subcontinent. Today, we must not allow the current age of imperialism or neo-colonialism to freeze our progress as Muslims for the next hundred years. If Madrasa reforms are undertaken effectively, substantially, and thoughtfully, with an emphasis on the OVERALL kind of Muslim person, scholar, scientist, and leader we want to produce for the twenty-first century and beyond, then it is my belief that both men and women of this generation and the generations to come would benefit from these reforms immensely.