**Navigating Through Poverty and Pandemic: Case Study on A Destitute Religious Institution in Bangladesh**

**Abstract**

In a pandemic situation every social system suffers, and weak institutions become shattered. Like many other institutions religious ones have also suffered in last couple of years of COVID-19 pandemic. A rural Bangladeshi religious unit, Nawdabash Madrasa and Orphanage was already impoverished in pre pandemic period which is a madrasa constituting of 120 students and also an orphanage that shelters 84 orphans. It suffered, and struggled to fulfill its basic needs even before the crisis. But the institution, which was facing permanent closure at the start of COVID-19 period and which certainly would have become totally shattered during last couple of years of disruption without financial help, did not actually perish. Rather, it could make progress in achieving fulfillment of basic needs for its orphans and run the madrasa for its students. It could also strive towards making the achievements sustainable. This paper investigates their struggle towards better days and how it was successfully done which was no less than a miracle. How institutional and systematic financing of everyday needs can improve situation for a destitute organization is demonstrated in this study. This paper also emphasizes on the fact that when people become aware of social needs and start contributing to causes regularly and systematically, fulfilling social responsibility becomes easier. Through this small case study, the paper establishes another significant fact that Islamic institutions effectively institutionalize Islamic charity (obligatory and non-obligatory charity from Muslims) and thus contribute to very important poverty reduction process in a country. More such studies can in future establish it as an effective way for government in policy making of poverty alleviation programs.

*Keywords: Basic Needs; Covid-19; Community; Madrasah, Orphanage; Sustainability.*

**Introduction**

Background of the Study:

Covid-19 crisis wreaked havoc worldwide for last couple of years and still is lurking around the corner. As a developing country, Bangladesh has managed the crisis quite well, given the reservation about the fact that data is never complete about the country as it is a densely populated one. Nevertheless, the death and infection rate could have been much higher for the country which is at high risk of contraction in case of any pandemic. The poorest parts of the country endured the effects of the pandemic more than the affluent parts.Unsurprisingly the children of the country too encountered the effect of poverty, of shortage in fulfillment of basic needs severely. For example, schools in cities conducted online classes; middle class and rich children could attend them via zoom and google classroom. But vast majority of children who attend primary schools in semi urban and rural Bangladesh did not have access to online classes. As a result, these children could not receive any education for over two years.[[1]](#endnote-1) This stark difference in provision of basic needs for children is an unfortunate inadequacy that is seen even in 21st century of modern era.[[2]](#endnote-2)

However, at one of the poorest villages of the country, Nawdabash (in Kurigram district under Rangpur division), the orphans of the locality have not experienced the full brunt of the pandemic to the extent it was anticipated. Given the fact that Kurigram is the poorest district of Bangladesh, they got a lucky escape. According to Bangladesh Poverty Map published by the World Bank, 63.7% population of Kurigram lives under poverty measured by headcount ratio, 44.3% lives in extreme poverty and 83.5% of people in Kurigram belongs to bottom 40%.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This orphanage cum madrasah is the only one that provides free religious education for orphans and poor children of the locality. The orphanage is home to 84 orphans. In addition, there are 36 non-resident students who come from poor families of the locality to receive free religious education given that the families cannot provide for their education expenses at school. Most adults of the village work as day laborers and earn not more than BDT 300 daily, which is roughly CAD 4.10. These rural people of Bangladesh are God fearing Muslims who prefer their children to receive some form of education which is low cost and of religious value.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Problem Statement:

Current paper investigates the financing of basic need (food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical care) fulfilment for the children of this madrasah-orphanage over two time periods: pre and at the start of Covid-19, during and post Covid-19. It highlights the resilience of the madrasah committee which has enabled them to achieve financial support from local plus foreign donors and has also enabled them to taking small steps towards providing better nutrition, better education and ultimately a better sustainable future for its children.

There have been studies as shown in literature review in the next section, in post covid period on madrasa, children and orphans in different countries of the world. But the gap remains in the field of research where depiction of the effect of covid and poverty simultaneously has been investigated to focus on these children or institutions concentrating on basic need fulfillment. This paper tries to fulfill that gap as well as tries to enlighten on the type of systematic communal help that can be very helpful for such destitute religious institutions. For that purpose, the paper has conducted a case study on an impoverished religious institution of Bangladesh. Such studies can help researchers shed light on the economic and social condition of these institutions that need elaborate attention specially right after a disastrous pandemic.

**Role of Islamic institutions in poverty reduction**

Islam has mandated charity; the Quran clearly states that the people who believe in God are the people who give the poor people from own wealth:

*“And in their wealth, there is a rightful share ‘fulfilled’ for the beggar and the poor.” (Quran 51:19)*

Hence, poverty is not only a social or economic problem for Muslims, but they also consider it as a religious problem which entails a religious obligation (*zakah)* on every Muslim who has means to provide financial help to the poor in the society. Islam also encourages voluntary charity. Thus, islamic institutions like mosque, madrasa, orphanage etc that are often operated by *zakah (obligatory charity)* and *waqf* (endowment) have always been significant in helping financially weaker people in society. Also, they have always inspired people to contribute more to the society by means of charity.

Research shows, if all zakah were calculated in Muslim countries, between a third and half of them could reduce poverty in their countries significantly and move out their poor from poverty. (Ahmed, 2004).[[5]](#endnote-5)

In case of specific countries, other research shows how Islamic institutions serve in poverty reduction. For example, Sumai (2019) showed that institutional and systematic zakah distribution helped in poverty alleviation in Indonesia.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Gul & Ahmed (2017) tested the case for Pakistan and suggested that zakat can efficiently be used by government to execute social safety instruments.[[7]](#endnote-7)

All this research suggests that Islamic institutions using Islamic charity funds are successful and intriguing sources of institutionalizing poverty reduction. Now a days Muslim Aid, Islamic Aid, Islamic Relief, Muslim Food Bank, Muslims Against Hunger, The Zakat Foundation, Takaful For Child Welfare are renowned Islamic organizations who run credible charity based poverty reduction programs worldwide. Bangladesh has branches of these institutions in the country, as well there are organizations like Islamic Foundation, Ahsania Mission, Anjuman Mufidul Islam, SAWAB which run various programs that help in poverty reduction effort in the country.

Muslim education institutions like Madrasa and Madrasa-orphanages help in poverty reduction by way of taking in poor students with little or no fee, in many of them the students are residents of the institutions. In Bangladesh, millions of students who otherwise would have no access to institutionalized education get it free of cost in such madrasa and madrasa-orphanages. In madrasa-orphanages the students are mostly residents. These children would have no place to live had they been not sheltered by these religious institutions. Country wide there are at least 15000 qawmi madrasas in Bangladesh which have 1.4 million children studying in them. (Hussain, 2018).[[8]](#endnote-8) Apart from that there are 10450 *Alia (Exalted)* madrasas[[9]](#endnote-9), with 3.4 million students (Roy, 2020)[[10]](#endnote-10). There are also independent charity-based madrasas which play vital role in educating marginalized children.

**Literature Review**

***Orphans***

Priyadarshini & Rathnasabapathy (2021) defines orphans using UNICEF’s definition that an orphan is a child “*who has lost one or both parents due to death*”. Single orphan is a child who has lost one parent, and double orphan is the one who has lost both parents. Paternal orphan is a child whose father has died; maternal orphan is the one whose mother has died. But 80% of orphans around the world has a living parent. Such children come to orphanages due to inability of poor families to take proper care of children or fulfill responsibilities towards them. For example, in case of this paper’s study, most of the orphans are of this type. Nevertheless, many such children are ignored by living parents; these children who are neglected by their parents are called social orphans.

***Orphans in Covid-19***

Various studies have been conducted on institutional, educational, and psychological issues involving orphans during COVID-19 in last couple of years:

Deaths related to Coronavirus occurred mostly among adults, not children. Hence, attention has been mostly given to the difficulties adult faced during this period. But the fact that adults faced the brunt more than children is the cause of another fact that high number of children have lost caregivers or parents in this pandemic. According to a Lancet report by Unwin et al. (2021), death of a caregiver and orphanhood increased fast during the pandemic. In a period of 20 months of the pandemic, from March 1, 2020 - Oct 31, 2021, the death number doubled in last 6 months (May 01 – October 31) than in first 14 months (March 1, 2020–April 30, 2021). More children were orphaned in the pandemic than the reported number of deaths, 5.2 million compared to 5 million.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Wang et el. (2020) worries about COVID-19 spread among institutionalized orphans. Living in close proximity, unavoidable contact and limited health awareness among children can lead to serious health issues related to COVID-19 such as pneumonia, damage to vital organs, Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS) with cardiovascular manifestations. They proposed guidance for general measures, protection, and prevention measures for orphans and personnel in orphanages.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In United States of America, it has been found that from April 2020-June 2021 over 140,000 children was orphaned for death of a parent or grandparent. The risk of this loss was higher among children of racial and ethnic minority groups such as black, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native population compared to non-Hispanic White children by 1.1 to 4.5 times. The research concluded that these children needed urgent childcare, parenting and economic support. (Hillis 2021)[[13]](#endnote-13)

Punaks and Lama (2021) shows the harm caused to children in Nepal during the pandemic in form of orphanage trafficking (children are recruited into orphanages to be exploited to make profit from illegal activities such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, begging, illegal adoption, servitude, selling organs), but also partakes information about innovation and integration in orphan protection efforts.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Virtual learning became mandatory during the pandemic to prevent spreading of the virus which was applicable to orphanages as well. This learning process has affected the orphans living at the orphanages. Pudjiati et al. (2022) did research on a community partnership program that was conducted as online assistance for grade X senior high school students in learning English. The partner was an orphanage in Jakarta, Indonesia. Fourteen students were participants. Students were eager learner and enthusiastic about completing tasks. But the internet connection was poor, some students were in quarantine as well. The study concluded that the online learning was not being effective for the orphans.[[15]](#endnote-15) On the other hand, Dewanti & Saridewi (2021) found that it was opposite in case of another organization. An NGO (Non-governmental Organization), the Dharma Laksana Orphanage successfully utilized educational technologies to optimize the digital learning process of students and teachers during the COVID-19 period with the help of a community service. At the end of virtual training both students and teachers were found to have been benefited in awareness of digital learning. Also, the competence of teachers in creating interactive learning media, by using a variety of educational platforms was found to be enhanced.[[16]](#endnote-16)

According to many other studies Covid-19 has affected millions of orphans’ lives adversely, the effects varying from being psychological, emotional, social, and cultural (Priyadarshini & Rathnasabapathy, 2021). Research have shown that psychological impacts such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, mood disorders, isolation and behavioral disorders have increased among orphans. Drug abuse, and suicidal thoughts have also been reported in children of orphanages. Such psychological impacts have been caused by factors like - lack of caretaker, lack of fund and support, close down of orphanages and halt in new admissions to orphanages. Many local governments decided to send children back to families during pandemic. For example, in Bangladesh, many orphanages closed overnight.[[17]](#endnote-17)

***Madrasah***

Madrasah is an Arabic word that means school whether secular or religious. It is derived from the Arabic word *dars* meaning ‘to study’. So, it is the place to study (Akhtar, 2021).[[18]](#endnote-18) In contemporary world, Arabic-speaking countries refer to madrasa as an institution of education, especially primary or secondary education. ( Moosa, Ebrahim, 2015).[[19]](#endnote-19) Alam (2011) also defines it primarily as an educational institute, not a religious center. Anzar (2003) on the other hand defines it as an in-depth religious institution with boarding and lodging facilities which are mostly free of charge. It was first established in 11th century Baghdad for *Sunni* Muslims (the major Muslim sect).[[20]](#endnote-20) For *Shia* Muslims (the minor Muslim sect) it was first established in the same century by the Egyptian Fatimid caliphs.[[21]](#endnote-21) According to Britannica.com, in Islamic tradition it was primarily established to facilitate religious lectures in mosques. Wealthy people and princes made *sadaqah* and *waqf* (in English donation and endowment) to erect buildings to lodge the students and lecturers. Soon they became popular in Islamic world. Arabic grammar, literature, mathematics, logic, natural science along with Islamic theology and law were studied in these institutions.[[22]](#endnote-22) As for its foundation in Bangladesh, it was established around 9th century which was a place of learning for Muslims of different regions of Southeast Bangladesh, a part of Greater India at that period (Karim 2018).[[23]](#endnote-23)

In Bangladesh, at present most madrasas are not public or private, rather *qawmi* based. *Qawmi* comes from the Arabic word *qawm* meaning people. These madrasas evolved in Indian subcontinent to protest British education policy. They have their own curriculum, education board and are not affiliated with government, rather taking community support for expense maintenance. Moreover, these are not considered private institutions as they are mostly free and provide residential facility. Hence, these madrasas have great appeal to poor people in educating their children free of cost, also here lies the reason why large number of their students are orphans and physically challenged children (Abdullah, 2018). [[24]](#endnote-24)

***Madrasas in Covid 19***

The conditions of various poor madrasas have been despairing for students during the pandemic in India and Bangladesh. In a study conducted by BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), in Bangladesh 17% of total madrasa students that were interviewed were found to be in more fear, panic and anxiety than other children regarding the pandemic. This work covered private and public madrasa students along with Bangla medium school students. The students of madrasas (5%) were the victims of abuse in covid restriction at higher degree, compared to other students. Distant classes arranged by government run TV to continue the teaching and learning during the lockdown was for the students of class 6-10 from March 29, 2020 and gradually for the students of 1-5 and madrasas. This program or online classes had limited appeal among the madrasa students. Most of them (68%) were non-participants in distant learning. This ensued mostly due to logistical constraints like lack of electricity, tv, internet, cable-tv connection. 52% of the 44% students who reported of not getting any education from their institutions were from madrasa. Shortage of food at home which is an indicator of poverty was a significant issue for 22% children, that too was reported mostly by madrasa students which naturally led them to discontinuation of education (55%).[[25]](#endnote-25)

In Bangladesh, Daria and Islam (2022) found out from an online media-reports-based study for the time period April 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021 that 151 students committed suicide during that time. Among them 29 were madrasa students. Number of students committing suicide before the pandemic for same length of period was far less than that number, 56, i.e., there was a threefold increase in that number during the pandemic. Long closure of educational institutions increased stress in daily lives of students. Playing and spending time with friends were off limit. Prolonged stay at home made them vulnerable to violent and abusive behavior of family members. Many lost their income sources like private tuitions during the COVID restriction. Hence, frustration over uncertain future and financial crisis led them to mental health issues and suicidal behavior which ultimately resulted in committing suicide. Adequate family support, awareness campaign, counselling, vaccination, internet-based interventions were suggested by the study.[[26]](#endnote-26)

According to an investigative report of India Today, some madrasas in India have been hiding children to not send them home. Madrasa authorities have sometimes hidden headcount from police as well.The social distancing and sanitizations were not possible in these cramped madrasas where children had to stay indoor during lockdown.[[27]](#endnote-27) According to a report of Dhaka Tribune, *qawmi* madrasas have remained open for most of the covid period while school-colleges were shut. Students remained in these residential madrasas and were restricted to not go out. Government put restrictions on madrasas about sanitization, social distancing which were practiced very loosely across the country. Hence, children have been in constant risk of infecting the disease.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Fayek (2022) observes that madrasas and schools alike could not provide full scale education to children due to pandemic, and that this problem was acute in case of developing and poor countries. The study was conducted on madrasah students of the capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka and found that they did not attain expected terminal competencies (expected skill to be attained by students after finishing school/madrasa). Learning loss due to the pandemic was significantly higher than the pre pandemic period. Also, distance learning became an impediment to children’s learning process during this time. Madrasah students learn ethical and social values from direct face to face interaction with *ustads* (religious teachers) which are important terminal competencies in madrasa system. This was hugely affected during covid. Also, parents’ financial incapability was a factor contributing to learning loss of the children as poor parents were unable to provide the facilities required for distant learning.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Distance learning policy in madrasas where madrasas were kept shut over the covid period like in Indonesia has been studied by researchers in last couple of years. Muzayanah et el. (2021) points out that there were obstacles in online learning and that achievement in online curriculum targets was less than that of offline regular curriculum in Indonesia. Most madrasas practiced online learning, but some carried out offline education by letting students come to madrasas on weekly cycles. This was done due to various considerations such as device shortage, unavailability of network, lack of IT mastery especially for people in rural areas. Most parents and students wanted face-to-face learning to return soon.[[30]](#endnote-30) One case-study by Hidayati (2021) found out that 78% students could achieve minimum completeness criteria although the process of learning was not user-friendly and the evaluation process by teachers was ineffective. Collaboration between madrasah, parents, teachers, and students was also lacking.[[31]](#endnote-31) Zaini et el. (2021) also found that teachers and students had difficulties in conducting classes, especially arithmetic classes. Achievement and grades of students declined during the period.[[32]](#endnote-32) In addition, Hadi et el. (2022) states that the use of digital media in unrestricted e-learning can affect children adversely. Therefore, a child-friendly learning platform must be selected for students omitting irrelevant features from digital learning process. Besides, innovative use of the platform by teachers and proper monitoring facility by parents of the madrasa students must be included in same platform.[[33]](#endnote-33)

***Basic Needs***

The term basic need was first coined by Psychologist Abraham Maslow in his motivational theory of human needs in 1943.[[34]](#endnote-34) It was afterwards discussed by other development writers and later enthroned by ILO (International Labor Organization).[[35]](#endnote-35) At ILO it was first recognized by Michael Hopkins with the idea that employment was not an end in itself but it is an avenue to attain basic needs. The Dag Hammarskjöld Report (1975) *‘What Now? Another Development’*, submitted to the UN General Assembly furthered the concept in development paradigm. The Basic Needs Strategy to ensure a minimum standard of living for everyone was launched at World Employment Conference in 1976.[[36]](#endnote-36) According to ILO, basic needs include *“personal consumption, access to communal services, and to adequately productive and fairly remunerated employment.”*[[37]](#endnote-37) It also states that basic personal consumption entails sufficient food, good housing, clothing, and some other household necessities. Basic services are education, safe water, sanitation, and medicine. Basic needs centered development means to view growth in terms of meeting human needs. According to Doyal & Gough (1991) these are the needs people must attain to *“avoid sustained and serious harm”* (p. 50).[[38]](#endnote-38)

**Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework of the paper will be based on:

1. the problem statement mentioned in introduction. Focusing on day-to-day problems in fulfilling the basic needs of a small madrasa this paper sets an example to research on financing of such institutions. Specially in context of the turmoil period in and after a pandemic.
2. the history of Islamic institutions contributing to poverty reduction which reconfirms the fact that such institutions are beneficial and can be an effective way to reduce poverty in a poor country like Bangladesh.
3. literature review on current state of research on covid and post covid situation in different madrasa and orphanage.

Based on the literature review section above, it can be identified that the problem of distant or residential learning in orphanages and madrasas during COVID period have been addressed in recent research. But how the orphanages or madrasas coped with the COVID-19 was not brought elaborately into the discussion. The question that raises one’s curiosity after this literature review is that:

How did destitute orphanages and Madrasas do financially in last couple of years of COVID-19? How did they manage basic needs fulfillment of the children residing in these institutions during this time of financial hardship for most people? How was the flow of donations? How did children pass their time during the period of lockdown in orphanages? Overall, the key question can be summarized as:

How these institutions managed to pass through this difficult economic situation for last couple of years and how these Islamic institutions by raising orphans have managed to contribute to reducing poverty in the country during COVID?

The answer to the questions that were raised in this section can be investigated for one orphanage cum madrasa and its orphans and students. It can also be investigated for number of orphanage-madrasas of a particular area or country on a broader scale. This paper in next sections will try to concentrate on answering this question through the case study of one institution.

The visual narrative of the framework can be as follows:

**Methodology**

This paper portrays how a religious and social unit which is a madrasa-orphanage has been fighting Covid-19 pandemic. There have been many efforts in local levels that are praiseworthy in fighting this crisis.[[39]](#endnote-39) [[40]](#endnote-40) This research focuses on one such efforts and analysis of that unit’s efforts to improve lives of some orphans and its initiatives to help the people of the locality during this crisis. To do so both qualitative and quantitative data were used. It was solely based on primary data:

1. Target group of the study was young students of a madrasa from Nawdabash, in Kurigram district under Rangpur division whose age range was 5-16 and who were all male children. Online interviews were conducted over WhatsApp audio calls with individual respondents. Only one teacher of the madrasa uses internet on his mobile phone. As he uses WhatsApp for virtual communication, WhatsApp calls were used. Three teachers, one administrative assistant (cum teacher), and all 120 students, both residential and non-residential, were interviewed.
2. The interviews were based on structured questionnaire for both teachers and students. Also, unstructured questionnaires were used for the President of the committee and chief patron of the orphanage to know their involvement on the madrasah- orphanage and about the overall community. However, to create an easygoing environment where the little children could communicate freely, semi-structured and unstructured questionnaire were also used.
3. President and chief patron were interviewed several times while others were interviewed once. Some documents were received from chief patron that has helped the author understand about the income and expenses and the modus operandi of the institute. The chief patron supplied the author with list of students (both resident and non-residents), teachers and donors. Also, he provided the author with progress report on the children to use for current paper.

Basic need has been defined by the article-15 of the constitution of Bangladesh, according to which the fulfilment of basic necessities for human being is the provision of food, clothing, shelter (housing), education and medical care.[[41]](#endnote-41)

We have calculated the average monthly cost incurred for fulfillment of basic needs at the orphanage in last 20 months since it has been taken over by some donors from Dhaka and abroad. We have compared it with the cost incurred in 20 months prior to it. These two periods are as follows:

* From February 2019 to September 2020.
* From October 2020 to May 2022.

Policy recommendation regarding zakah fund is based on religious ruling of *Sunni* School of Law, as vast majority of the Muslim population in Bangladesh follows the Sunni doctrine for their belief and law.

Ethical considerations in collecting data:

1. Considering risk of physical interaction as Covid-19 virus is still lurking in the country face to face interviews were avoided.
2. Children were interviewed by audio and not video calls so that they do not feel intimidated or uncomfortable talking about their impoverished condition at the orphanage while looking at the interviewer.
3. Much effort and time had to be given in setting the stage where the little children would talk freely. Considerable effort had to be employed to make them understand the questions too.

Limitation of the Study:

1. The interview could not be face to face which is a better way of communication. Specially in case of children of the respondents’ age group, it is better to be among them and interact with them directly. Observation method along with interview could have been a better approach. For COVID restriction such interaction is missing from the study, which is unfortunate.
2. It is a case study on one small madrasa. If the scope of the study was bigger, including more madrasas and orphanages, it could have reflected more diversified, more realistic and better conclusion.

**The Orphanage in pre Covid-period**

Nawdabash Madrasah and Orphanage was established in 2017. A village elder donated the land, another donor from the capital city Dhaka contributed for the construction of the building and other facilities. A 25-member committee was formed to oversee the everyday running of the orphanage. The committee would collect donations for covering operating expenses. There were no regular donors; local people, shop keepers and grocers from the local bazar (marketplace) were helping whenever they could, without any weekly or monthly pledge. These were all one-time donations, sporadic and irregular in nature. Some government officials used to help occasionally by donating nominal amounts (50-100 taka). The then District Commissioner of Kurigram made a great difference when he allowed the orphanage to receive rice and lentils at a subsidised rate of 10 and 30 taka per kg respectively. This is a facility the orphanage still enjoys, though the item prices have increased substantially.

The committee was having a hard time raising the required money to provide even the most minimum standard of life for the 84 orphans. They were reaching out to people of their locality, but the locality itself is an impoverished one. The miserable condition of the orphanage can be seen from the roughly estimated monthly expense data given below:

**Table 1**

*Orphanage Expenses in Pre Covid-Period*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Food | Education | Clothing | Medical | Housing |
| 27,000 | 3,500 | 3,000 | No coverage | 2,500 |

The destituteness of the situation can be understood from the per meal cost that they were able to spend. Considering three meals per day in thirty days of a month, there should be 7,560 meals every month. At 27,000-taka monthly expense on food, each meal would cost them 3.5 taka only, which is 0.047 CAD. The children and the administrative assistant, who looks after the shopping and meals preparation, described the situation like this:

*We had rice for one meal with vegetable or lentils. Still there were days when rice or vegetable or lentils would fall short to fill all 84 plates. For another meal we had puffed rice or one or two biscuits. For the other we had to wait for some kind person to show up with some kind of food; most of the days we went hungry for that meal. On very rare occasions someone would show up with some meat and we would have a feast. Some days we had to eat only puffed rice or biscuits for all three meals.*

Children did not have proper clothes. In three years from 2017-2020, they received only one set of Panjabi and Lungi (traditional Bangladeshi upper and lower garment) once, from two random donors. Some children received few Panjabis and Lungis from their relatives. The total cost, in three years for clothing, if rounded up for monthly cost would be no more than 1,500 BDT.

The treatment coverage for children was precarious as well. Fortunately, not many children fell sick in that period. Whenever a child would fall sick with minor issues like fever, cold or diarrhea, they would be sent back to their guardians for receiving treatment. They would return to the orphanage only after recovering from the illness. Sometimes some kind local physicians would treat the children for free, but that was on most rare occasions.

There were two teachers to teach Quran to the children, one of them doubled as the administrative assistant and would look after the meals and grocery shopping. He used to get a salary of BDT 1,500. The other teacher got a salary of BDT 2000. These people had some provision of rice and vegetables from their own land. So, the meager salary that they would receive would hardly make their ends meet. Some months they did not get any salary at all. Other times they received only a fraction of it. Children did not receive any stationery for their studies. Some children came to the institute with their own Mushafs (printed Quran), other brought Qayda (preliminary Arabic letter teaching book) and Sifara (book to learn small chapters of the last part of Quran) with them, which were provided to them by their relatives. They used to read and learn from those books and share with other children.

The committee had no money to spend on housing. There were only 6 low powered old fashioned electricity bulbs to light the two rooms at night. This would generate a monthly electricity bill of BDT 200-250. Even this paltry sum would have to be paid with great difficulty; most of the times they were not paid at all. The cooking utensils were almost broken. There were only a handful of utensils for cooking rice, lentils, and vegetables. These were lent to the orphanage by a kind neighbor. The kitchen had an earthen stove. They didn’t even have a regular supply of firewood. They would collect logs from the villagers and from local sawmills that process woods and logs. Sometimes they bought them from nearby market too when they had the money to spend on them. The cook would work without salary and would receive just food in exchange of the service. Total housing cost was no more than BDT 2,500 per month.

In short, the situation of the children in the orphanage was a grim one. Nevertheless, even in this pitiful situation, the madrasah-orphanage committee did not lose hope. They continued to run the institute to the best of their ability, and they were always looking for alternatives. They kept looking for donors without being disheartened. As the president of the committee reminisces:

*“We left no stones unturned in collecting donations for the sake of these hungry children.”*

The teachers, president and members of the committee used to preserve the phone numbers of any donators they would ever come across. Even the person who had ever donated BDT 50, which is 0.68 CAD, would be called from time to time and requested for more donations. They were begging shop to shop, door to door. They used social media tools as well. They used WhatsApp, SMS, Facebook, Emo, any means they had their hands on. The messages were elaborate and vivid in describing the condition of the poor institute and the hungry children.

**COVID-19 Period**

**Early Covid days**

In Bangladesh strict COVID-19 social distancing measures, closure of educational institutes and factories, long public holidays etc. started to come into effect from March 2020. But it was not until April-May, did COVID and the restrictions hit the village and the orphanage. With the enforced restrictions, the small donors of the bazar were in economic crisis themselves. There were restrictions on bazar time, on transportation, on movement and visits. Some shops and businesses closed when further restrictions, such as evening curfew, were imposed by the government. People were afraid, economic hardship made them spend less on donations. The already hungry children were getting hungrier than ever before.

Police came to the orphanage to impose COVID restrictions. They took off water taps from bathroom so as to prevent gatherings of children and teachers while doing ablution which is mandatory for Muslim prayers (Muslims pray 5 times a day). Thus, there was extra pressure on the only tube-well in the orphanage, a que was always there to use its water. They asked children and teachers to stay inside and never to go out. They also asked to practice hygienic guidelines of pandemic; for example, they instructed that groceries must enter the orphanage only after proper sanitization, to wash hands and faces frequently and to not sleep in cramped rooms. But to supply hygienic products like soap in an impoverished orphanage for 84 children and their groceries was not possible for the committee. Also, for that many children to fit in couple of small rooms and to be distant from each other was an impossible task.

Helps at that disastrous moment came from some organizations, both government and non-government. There were some individual donations too:

1. The District Commissioner (DC) of Kurigram made a substantial donation consisting of 450 kilograms of rice and 50 kilograms of lentils. This donation provided the orphanage with foods for 17-18 days.
2. DC office also provided with subsidized rice at BDT 10 per kg.
3. Some NGOs distributed relief at the Union Parishad (UP, smallest local government unit in Bangladesh) office. They provided with 150 kgs of rice, 50 kgs of lentil and also some packages of cooking oil and salt.

When winter came, around October, situation came to its worst. As one of the coldest regions of the country, winters are dreadful in Kurigram. The hungry children were now suffering from bitter winter cold as well. As a desperate move the president of the committee, who works as a local correspondent of some news outlets, wrote a piece in a newspaper, “Shamprotik Deshkaal”. This appeal attracted the attention of some readers who donated blankets, and money. All in all, the orphanage received BDT 46,000 from these donors. This enabled them to buy rice for two months (at the subsidized rate of BDT 10 taka per kg).

On top of all these, electricity bill was unpaid for few months and the electricity supply was cut off for nonpayment of bills. As a result, at night the kids and caretakers had to use hurricane lamps and candles for light. At times, even that light was not available. Naturally children were scared at night in those days. A shop in the local bazar continued to supply rice and lentils on credit. The orphanage owed the shop BDT 10,000 by mid-October. The desperate committee president started calling the donors from the list he preserved with him. He called everyone, no matter how meager the previous donation was or however long ago that happened.

**Takeover by current group of donors**

In mid-October of 2020, the president called the present Chief Patron, whose cellphone number was on their donor list. The patron, after knowing the precarious situation of the children contacted his friends and colleagues. Immediately he could secure eight donors, who pledged monthly donations of BDT 40,000. They all resolved that the children will not go hungry at any meal ever again. The chief patron describes his side of the story like this:

*When COVID wreaked havoc in Dhaka, due to the lockdown, the day laborers, the rickshaw pullers were the hardest hit. On the other hand, I suddenly experienced a surge in my disposable income as I was working from home. So, my wife and I started to give food daily to random rickshaw pullers or passersby who were seeking help on the streets below our home. We were looking for opportunities to take this initiative to a higher level. As a religious couple we were aware how highly our religion regarded the feeding of the hungry. On that fateful day, when we received that distress call from Kurigram, we could not believe what we were being told. 27,000 takas on monthly food expense for 84 souls was a math that we could not comprehend. Our small family of 4 had a larger expenditure on food. The decision was easy: we must do something. We were very lucky that we had likeminded friends who readily stood by us and who were ready to donate their charity (sadaqah) and zakah to the institution. With their help, we started the endeavor of changing lives. Little by little the donations increased, and we have now reached a strong foothold by the will and grace of God.*

The chief patron now looks after the daily operation of the orphanage with the help of the committee president. As he lives in the capital Dhaka, he had to devise an elaborate mechanism to monitor the activities on ground and ensure that the money is not being misspent or embezzled by the local committee. In the process that he devised, very little money goes to the committee or the president. He pays the sellers directly. The president sends him videos over WhatsApp. These videos cover daily shopping, cooking, and children’s meals. He even gets video of 84 plates with food being served on them to the children. When the president receives any money from chief patron, he must provide all the receipts and videos of where the money was being spent. Sometimes when the small retailers cannot provide money receipts, they must acknowledge the receipt of money over videos, which are then sent to the chief patron.

The madrasa-orphanage currently has 57 donors, all of whom sends their donations to the chief patron. Of these donors, 28 are regular donors with monthly pledge. It is now affiliated with a UK registered charity organization named Forgotten *Ummah* (Forgotten People).[[42]](#endnote-42) They use crowd funding platform like LaunchGood (launchgood.com) to raise fund for the orphanage. Apart from that their website has payment gateway integration. In addition to taking regular donations, they seek yearly sponsorships for the orphans. They also reach out to potential donors over WhatsApp and other social media platforms. According to the Chief Patron of the organization,

*“In twenty months since we took over, the organization has received BDT 2.5 million from UK donors and another BDT 5.5 million from individual donors at home and abroad. We have donors from across the world, for example, we have three donors from Canada, one from USA, one from Saudi Arabia.”*

**Fulfillment of basic needs**

The upgradation of the madrasa-orphanage can also be realized from the roughly estimated monthly expense table below:

**Table 2**

*Orphanage Expenses During and Post Covid Period*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Food | Education | Clothing | Treatment | Housing |
| 128,000 | 22,000 | 13,500 | At actual | 29,190 |

Total monthly expenses at present are roughly BDT 175,000 (CAD 2,407.37), excluding medical expenses and other one-time costs like paving the yard of the orphanage or purchase of mattresses for the children to sleep on. If the one-time costs are included, the monthly expense shots up to BDT 192,690 (CAD 2,650.26). Regular monthly pledge to the orphanage is BDT 144,000. Rest of the expenses is covered from occasional donations, Ramadan donations (month of fasting for Muslims what they believe to be the most blessed month of the year, therefore, people donate to charity more in this month) and zakah (obligatory charity on affluent Muslims) from regular and occasional donors.

***Food***

There is still a long way to go to ensure a balanced meal for the children of the orphanage. Yet what have been achieved in the post take over period is extraordinary. The meager BDT 3.5 per meal cost now stands at a respectable BDT 16.93 taka (CAD 0.23). The orphanage currently offers two types of meals to the children: regular and special:

***Regular Meals***

On regular days children receive 3 meals of rice, vegetables, and lentils. On Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays they get an egg curry in their lunch. On Fridays, which is a special day for the Muslims as it is considered a weekly day of celebration, children get chicken or fish or beef for lunch along with rice and lentils. Expense that is mentioned above covers the cost of these regular meals only.

***Special Meals***

Sometimes the orphanage gets special donations for improved meals. On special occasions like birthdays, death anniversaries etc. Muslims feed the poor and hungry seeking special rewards from God. As the orphanage currently has a long list of donors who are affluent, these special meals are more frequent than ever before. Some donors ask the children what they want to eat and provide meals as per their liking. Donating a goat for preparing a lunch or dinner is a very common form of donation. Expenses of these meals are not included in the food expenditure that is mentioned above.

***Education***

Teachers’ salary and cost of stationeries (books, note-books, pencils, pens etc.) for children have been included in the educational expenses. The non-resident children purchase their own stationaries. There are three teachers in the madrasah now. Their cumulative monthly salary is BDT 21,000. On an average BDT 1,000 worth of stationery is needed every month.

***Clothing***

Children have received Panjabi, Lungi and winter clothes worth BDT 270,000 till now. All the 120 children, both residents and non-residents, received two sets of hoodies in the winter of 2020. To arrive at monthly cost, the average of this sum is taken.

***Medical Expenses***

Nowadays when a child falls ill, his total medical expense is covered by the orphanage. They are taken to local physicians and to the Kurigram Sadar Hospital when hospitalization is required. Some children have had symptoms of Covid-19. They were isolated and given treatments as prescribed by the doctors. A few months ago, some children had fever. They too were given proper medical treatment. The fasting month of Ramadan has fallen in a very hot and humid month this year. While fasting, a child had fainted because of dehydration and the excessive hot weather. He was rushed to the Kurigram Sadar Hospital which is a government hospital and is the largest medical facility in the district. He received proper treatment as well.

***Housing***

A large sum has been invested to improve the housing facilities of the orphanage. The madrasah that did not have adequate lighting and was unable to pay off their electricity bills, currently has adequate lights for the classrooms, fans, and Instant Power Supply (IPS) for ensuring electricity when the regular supply is interrupted (popularly known as load shedding). Each month the orphanage currently pays electricity bills of BDT 2,500-3,500. In the past twenty months, the following initiatives have been taken to improve the housing:

1. Purchasing individual mattresses for all children
2. Provide blankets to the children
3. Jute carpets for the rooms to protect the children from cold in winter
4. Benches for classrooms
5. Utensils for the kitchen
6. Plates, spoon, bowls for the children
7. Paving of the orphanage yard

There are two cooks who prepare the everyday meals. One cook works in exchange of food, the other one receives a monthly salary of BDT 3,000. The salary of the administrative assistant is BDT 3,000. For cooking special meals, a local chef is hired, whose remuneration is covered by the donors. For the sake of simplicity, all these costs have been averaged out and recorded as monthly expenses. Contingencies have not been included in this outflow. There are other expenses that are not included here, for example, children are given Vaseline, cold cream, and mustard oil in winter (in Bangladeshi villages mustard oil is used as a skincare product, especially during winter season). Other expenses that are excluded are the unpaid electricity bill and dues to two local shops that were paid by the donors immediately after taking over.

**A*wareness and restrictions during covid***

Three teachers and one teacher cum administrative assistant were employed during this period to take care of the children and to teach them the basic education and Quran. All the teachers reside in the orphanage, except for one:

**Table 3**

*Teaching Stuff of the Madrasah-Orphanage*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Designation | Job description |
| Hifz Teacher | Teaches memorization of the Quran |
| Noorani and Nazera Teacher | Teaches Noorani (memorizing last section of Quran), Nazera (practice of recitation of Quran) and basics of the religion. |
| Teacher of non-religious subjects | Teaches Bengali, English and Mathematics. |
| Teacher cum Administrative Assistant | Looks after the madrasah and orphanage, helps with Hifz and Noorani at times. |

The donors were eager to get the orphans enrolled into primary school to be taught in national curriculum along with Islamic education at the madrasah, but the schools were closed due to covid-19 restrictions. Therefore, the children were learning Bangla, English Mathematics at the orphanage during the lockdown.

Children were well taken care of during this period. They did not leave the orphanage premises as restrictions were fully implemented by the teachers. Soap and water were always kept at the entrance of the building to wash hands. Teachers and children used face masks during classes. None of the children had Covid-19; neither did any of their family members. Nonresident students who were staying at their homes did not come to madrasa during this period, they did not contract the infection either. Their other family members were immune as well. But seven resident children had fever. They were taken to a doctor and were given Montelukast and Paracetamol. They were quarantined for five days. One of the teachers, who teaches Hifz had been infected by the virus. He describes his ordeals as follows,

*Not going out was painful; my home is 10 K.M away from madrasah. Rickshaw or Autorickshaw was not available for commute due to restrictions, so, I could not go home for two months. When I had fever and cold for five days, I went to hospital and tested positive. I bought the prescribed medicines, then went home to quarantine myself. It was my first visit to my home in two months!*

The portrayal of the sufferings and concerns at home and madrasah during the period by the teachers can be summarized as follows-

1. Wearing mask was painful. Buying groceries and going to market was difficult as the shops were kept open for a small window only, from 11a.m to 4 p.m. Also, price of commodities was skyrocketing. People could not go out or meet friends, visit neighbors, or pray at mosque.
2. Keeping children at home was a challenging task. They naturally wanted to go out, would cry to play out in the open.
3. Children at the institution did not go out as well. They would go out in the yard at times, especially in the afternoons. They used to fight amongst themselves a lot, as they were bored. Maintaining physical distance and continuing education at the same time took a great deal of efforts from the teaching stuff. Teachers tried their best to keep them calm. It was a challenging task to manage and restrict so many children in a small place.

***Preparation of progress report on children***

The Forgotten *Ummah* has donors who are unlikely to visit the madrasah ever as they all live abroad. That is why they asked for progress reports of the children to be communicated to the sponsors twice a year, once at the beginning of the academic calendar and once in the middle of the calendar. The objective is to provide the donors with the report card so that they can understand the development of the children with time. It has been submitted once till now, it will be submitted half yearly in future.

How the youngsters have been doing in their studies, in character building at a particular period of year is to be measured by the questionnaire-based report sheet. The process is completed in two steps:

1. Teachers agree upon a number to grade the progress of the children from a scale of 1 to 10 in case of character-building criteria such as punctuality, attentiveness, politeness, friendliness, orderliness, and cleanliness.
2. Questions are asked to the teachers of the respective student about their study progress. For example, Hifz teacher grades his students on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being lowest and 10 highest). The teacher grades the student for quality of Arabic accent (Tajweed), quality of recitation of Quran, and for overall quality of memorization of the child; all grades are given in the 10-point scale. Same is done about Nazera and Noorani students: the grading is done by the Nazera and Noorani teacher. The children who go to school are asked about their progress in Bangla (separately for reading, writing), English (reading, writing) and Mathematics from the respective teacher.

This interview is conducted by the chief patron over WhatsApp call and is done by holding a structured question-answer session.

Following is a summary of student’s progress on various parameters that has been reported in the first progress report that was prepared in April-May 2022:

**Table 4**

*Academic Assessment*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Subject | Number of students | Grades | | | |
| Needs improvement (%) | Good (%) | Very Good (%) | Excellent (%) |
| Hifz | 22 | 05 | 55 | 27 | 14 |
| Nazera | 04 | 00 | 75 | 25 | 00 |
| Noorani | 94 | 12 | 64 | 20 | 04 |
| Bangla\* | 40 | 15 | 30 | 48 | 08 |
| English\* | 40 | 30 | 45 | 20 | 05 |
| Mathematics\* | 40 | 20 | 30 | 33 | 18 |

**Table 5**

*Assessment of Character Traits*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Traits | Number of students | Grades | | | |
| Needs improvement (%) | Good (%) | Very Good (%) | Excellent (%) |
| Politeness and friendliness | 120 | 04 | 54 | 29 | 13 |
| Discipline | 120 | 08 | 51 | 29 | 12 |
| Attentiveness | 120 | 10 | 49 | 32 | 09 |
| Punctuality | 120 | 10 | 53 | 28 | 10 |
| Cleanliness | 120 | 08 | 44 | 34 | 14 |

:

\*Bangla, English, Mathematics are common subjects that are taught in the madrasah to all non-resident and resident children. Although all the students are taught these subjects by the resident teacher, only the school going children have been assessed for progress in these subjects in the first report. Forty of the resident children go to the school at present. They are also taught either Hifz, Nazera or Noorani at the madrasah. The chief patron plans to send all the children to primary school in near future.

**Recreation and festivities in the orphanage**

The orphanage resolved financial destitution in covid years so well that they could concentrate on some recreation and festivities for the children. The orphanage now observes various cultural and religious festivals as the limited means allow. Sports equipment have been purchased for the students to play games like cricket, football, and badminton. They now play regularly in the afternoon.

There were two pitha utshab (traditional Bangladeshi cake festival) for the youngsters in winters of 2021, 2022. Women from neighboring houses came to the orphanage and helped in making various pitha (cakes and sweets) that are loved by the children. Children enjoyed a lot. One of the teachers described the festival enjoyment of the children as,

*“Many children have had pithas for the first time in many moons; they were elated”*.

Summer is the season of fruits and fruit festivals in Bangladesh. It’s the season of mango, lychee, jackfruit, and blackberries. In last two summers, the orphanage has observed fruits festivals. Children loved these fruits which many of them have never tasted before in their life. The costs are covered from the regular donations that are received. Sometimes donors specifically donate for covering the cost of such extraordinary occasions.

Ramadan is both a month of spirituality and festivity. Though the children aren’t religiously obligated to fast, most of them do of their own accord. Throughout Ramadan special meals are provided for in each meal. In Ramadan children gets protein in all their meals. Apart from these meals, iftaar (meal to break the fast) is served with traditional local delicacies. Ramadan ends with the day of Eid-ul-Fitr (earlier of the two major yearly festivals celebrated in Islam) which is observed with festivity and feast. Children are given the materials to decorate their home as they like, namely with balloons, stars, ribbons. They take this task very seriously and enjoy themselves a lot. Children get new clothes on that day which is a Muslim tradition across the subcontinent. Morning starts with sweets and a special Eid prayer. All three meals served on the day of Eid are special meals and are prepared as per the demands of the kids. Fund comes from the increased donation that the orphanage receives in Ramadan. Sometimes meals are specifically sponsored by donors as well.

Eid-al-Adha, feast of sacrifice, is the second religious festival of the year for Muslims. The primary ritual of this Eid is the animal sacrifice that is incumbent upon the affluent Muslims. In 2021, this Eid fell during a spike period of the pandemic. Three cows and one goat have been sacrificed at the orphanage, which were donated by various donors. The chief patron reaches out to regular donors and others, requesting them to sacrifice an animal in the orphanage. The sacrificial meat is a very important source of protein for the orphans. 340 kilograms of meat was preserved in the freezer which was bought before the Eid. This meat provided 34 meals for the children. The freezer was an important investment by the organization to store meat especially from Eid-al-Adha sacrifices. Given the fact that the children are still in short supply of protein which is a crucial element for their physical and mental development, this storage of meat during Eid festival was a timely and wise decision. It also was important considering that red meat is hard to buy for the orphanage due to the price hike of red meat during corona years. This was the first time anything was sacrificed on Eid day at the institute. The festival special meals also were the first time for the youngsters.

Here is the cost that the institute incurred to observe these festivals:

**Table 6**

*Festival Expenses*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Occasion | Expenses (BDT) |
| Pitha Utshab (2) | 20,000 |
| Fruits Festival (2) | 25,000 |
| Eid-al-Fitr (2) | 120,000 |
| Eid-al-Adha (1) | 275,000 |

Given the fact that price is increasing continuously for most essential commodities, especially for food due to war in Ukraine and long-term effect of Covid-19 pandemic, the chief patron is making meticulous efforts to arrange for animal sacrifices at the organization in coming Eid-ul-Adha, scheduled in first week of July. This can ensure protein intake for the orphans for another 30-40 meals in this time of global price hikes. Till now six cows have been pledged by donors at the expense of BDT 5,25,000.

**Interview with Children, Teachers**

Interview over WhatsApp has been conducted with all 120 students of the madrasah. 4 teachers were interviewed as well. Teachers are all males and students are all boys. The average age of the children was found to be 10.4; 5 is the lowest age and 16 is the highest. Most of the children are 9-12 years old.

**Question about Food**

All the resident children mentioned that food is better now, except for one child who said it was good before and it is good now too. Another 9-year-old said it was ok before, he can’t remember well.

Half of the children did not comment on why the food was bad before. The other 50% mentioned various reasons like: insufficient meals (one meal and one snack), curry was bad, quantity was insufficient, etc.

A significant number of children seemed to be not complaining about the insufficient or bad quality food they had before. This is a possibility since 12% children mentioned that food was ok or good even when they did not have sufficient food in their plates (It was ok, is better now: 4%, It was good, is better now: 8%) and 50% children did not talk about food quality before 2020. It probably indicates that these orphans are less complaining of their misfortunes.

**Question about Happiness**

Were you happy before or are you happy after 2020, this question got responses as follows:

80% replied as being unhappy before and the reason they mentioned is food insufficiency and quality of food. Interestingly, 15% said they were happy even then, and they are happier now. 5% said they are happy now and were happy then as well. Again, it shows that some children are patient and expects very little from life. Happiness is a relative term; this too we can derive from these responses.

None of the residential children mentioned education quality or number of teachers being the reason of their unhappiness. All of them mentioned food.

Nonresident children naturally mentioned number of teachers and study quality for their reason of unhappiness. All the 36 non-resident children mentioned the same reason. They said they are happy with number of teachers and improved quality of education at present.

**Questions about Covid-19**

In response to the question, what do you know about Covid-19, 68% resident children and 89% nonresident children said they do not know anything. Residents know more than non-resident children about the Covid-19 pandemic. Staying in an institute, among other children gives them more opportunities to learn from people and to be open to learning more than children staying at home. On the contrary, most non- residents know nothing about the biggest disaster of their lifetime.

Among the children who know about the virus, 5% knows about it being infectious. This is the highest knowledge in the group. Others know about requirement of face mask, washing hands, staying at home, 3 feet distance, 14 days quarantine, and restriction on visiting people. Teachers and parents have taught the children about 3 feet distancing, not 6 feet. This comes from the fact that as a densely populated small country, Bangladesh has always practiced 3 feet social distancing during corona crisis, not the 6 feet practiced in other countries.[[43]](#endnote-43)

91% children said life was dull and monotonous during corona restriction as they had to stay inside in the afternoon. This was the response of both residents and nonresidents alike: 90% residents and 92% nonresidents said they were bored. It must have been hard for the kids given that almost all of them love to play some sort of game, cricket, football, badminton, or others. Cricket was favored by 51%, 43% chose football as their favorite sports and 2% mentioned badminton. Others love to play multiple games in combination, like football and cricket or badminton and cricket etc. Only 3% of the 120 kids did not love any kind of sports. But even these kids wanted to walk and roam around the village. So, sitting idly in the afternoon, which is their sports time otherwise, was a depressing experience for the kids.

Residents had more difficulty in passing time in the afternoon than the nonresident ones. On top of not being able to go out and play, 30% resident kids just studied at that time. 13% sat idly or studied, 7% sat idly. 6% lied down or studied, 5% studied or slept, others mentioned sleeping and talking and lying down. All the orphans said they used to sit at the madrasah in their rooms or at the yard in the afternoon. Only one orphan mentioned playing ludo. It must have been an isolated incident as none of the other children had mentioned it.

From the interviews, it is evident that the children had gone through disappointing afternoons during Covid lockdowns. However, a few of the resident kids passed their restriction time by engaging themselves in creative activities. Few wrote and sang ghazals (a form of poem or song, originally found in Arabic language but popular in Urdu and Hindi languages too). Two resident children mentioned of reading books outside of prescribed textbooks.

As for the nonresident kids who live amongst their families, 19% said they just sat idly, 11%, studied, 11% sat idly or studied. But they seem to have had more to do in the afternoons than resident ones. One of the kids was different than all others; he spent time looking after his birds. He in fact does not play at all on regular days as well as his pastime is solely dedicated to his birds. He has got birds like myna and dove. One child mentioned that as he was with his parents, he was not bored. 17 kids, who are 47% of total, mentioned playing with family members during the lockdown. So, their life was less monotonous than the life of children in the orphanage as they had company of parents and siblings.

But extra curriculum activities were observed more among resident kids. 9 kids, i.e., 11% of residents wrote and sang ghazal. But only one non-resident kid mentioned of writing and singing the ghazal. It appears that having diverse interests and hobbies made these 10 kids able to cope with covid days better. It is only rational that those who only love to play in the afternoon found it more difficult as they had fewer options to pass the time with.

Only two resident children read non-textbooks at the restriction period, none of the nonresident ones read any. Some residents mentioned books would have been great source of pastime for them during the lockdown. The author felt that it would be great if the orphanage had a library where they would be able to read books of stories and poems. One teacher who teaches Bangla, English and Mathematics read stories to them after his regular classes which the children mentioned during interview. They enjoyed his company and the stories he told them.

# **Helping the Community During Pandemic**

# **Food and Winter Clothes Distribution**

It was difficult for poor people to earn livelihood in last couple of years during the pandemic.[[44]](#endnote-44) The country was on the verge of facing a recession. In regular times, prior to Ramadan prices of food stuff skyrockets, given that the country has a notorious history of price hike.[[45]](#endnote-45) During covid-19 it got worst.[[46]](#endnote-46) Celebration of Eid was impractical for hundreds of thousands of people. Eid shopping was absent, returning home in the villages from cities was difficult and many people did not leave the cities due to lockdown. But many did return after losing their jobs. Especially poor, low and lower middle-income people were adversely affected by the acute price increase. They were supported with medical, food pack, financial assistance by local, national, and international organizations[[47]](#endnote-47).

In Nawdabash the orphanage helped the poor people of the village during Ramadan, Eid festivals and in winter season of 2021 and 2022. In two Ramadan and three Eid they helped the poor with food packs and sacrificial meat. In winter they distributed 135 blankets and 225 pieces of shawls among the villagers. Forgotten *Ummah* sponsored the distribution of winter clothes. The summary of the assistance to the villagers was as follows:

**Table 7**

*Supporting the Neighborhood Community*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Occasion | Type of assistance | Expense (BDT) |
| Ramadan 2021, 2022 | Food pack | 400,000 |
| Eid-al-Fitr 2021 | Food pack | 50,000 |
| Eid-al-Adha 2021 | Sacrificial meat | 225,000 |
| Winter 2022 | Blanket, shawl | 100,000 |

**Eye Surgery for the President of the Committee**

The president of the madrasah committee needed financial assistance for treatment of his long-lasting eye ailment. He had insect sting in his right eye that caused blinding corneal disease. The madrasah came forward to his support and sent him to Sankara Nethralaya in Chennai, India, which is one of the best Eye Hospitals in the region. His left eye needed therapeutic penetrating keratoplasty plus extra capsular cataract extraction plus anterior vitrectomy. His cornea and lens both needed replacement in one eye which was a costly operation. In February 2022 he had 1st operation, which was successful; the madrasah donated BDT 250,000 for this cause. He will need a second surgery shortly, for which the chief patron has raised the required BDT 500,000. The poor person with a big heart has been taking care of the orphans by establishing the institute. It was a good gesture from the sponsors to stand by him at his time of need.

**Tree Plantation**

The children have been taught to be aware of environmental harms that are being caused by deforestation. In 2021, they have planted 100 trees across the village. The trees included various local fruit trees like mango, lychee, and jackfruit, medicinal trees like Neem, and tropical hardwood timber tree, mahogany. The chief patron hopes to continue such tree plantation activity in the village every year.

**Striving Towards Sustainability**

Various plans are being made to generate sustainable projects for the madrasah. The ongoing efforts are mentioned below:

1. A new classroom is being built at the expense of BDT 250,000. This classroom is planned to be utilized for Quran and Bangla/English/Mathematics classes in shifts. This will be an addition to existing classrooms for which two new teachers will also be appointed, one Hafiz (a person who has memorized the Quran) for teaching Quran and another teacher for teaching secular subjects.
2. For expansion of the facilities 12 decimals of land has been acquired with BDT 4,00,000. The extended facility will be used for building a proper school and hostel building for the madrasah-orphanage. This will enable it to accommodate more resident and nonresident students.
3. The madrasah plans to buy more land in near future for growing rice and vegetables. Their intention is to convert this into a self-sustaining institute. They also plan to have some poultry and dairy production. All these projects require purchase of more lands and may take a long time to come into effect. However, these projects can be a permanent source of nutrition for the children and a source of income for the madrasah.
4. The chief patron is in contact with a rising national cricketer who is a keen social activist. His involvement with the madrasah, if materialized, can enhance the effort to make the organization financially sustainable.

**Observations**

1. The madrasah-orphanage might encounter financial difficulties if number of donors and donations decrease in near future. With the inflation and decreased purchasing capacity, the chief patron says that he is sensing difficult times ahead. They need sustainable projects for reducing dependency on donors. But to start any project like farming, raising poultry, growing vegetables, or extending madrasah premises (for children do not have enough space to live and receive quality education), the primary task will be to acquire lands. But it is one of the difficulties that they will be facing in this regard due to the facts that there is shortage of suitable lands around the orphanage and that land price is high in the country as it is a small and overpopulated one.[[48]](#endnote-48) Also construction cost is very high as well, which will hinder expansion of the facilities.[[49]](#endnote-49)
2. Quality of food needs to improve. Protein is still severely lacking in the menu.
3. Education is very much lacking. Some teachers and committee members are reluctant to send kids to primary school. In their opinion kids should stick to the traditional madrasah education only. But the organization must include STEM (Science, Technology, English, and Mathematics) in schooling to prepare the children for a better future for themselves. Therefore, sending kids to primary school is a cheaper alternative than establishing a school as the government primary schools provide free education which the children can benefit from. Additionally, the madrasah needs more and better-quality teachers. More teachers can look after smaller groups of students well and can provide quality education.
4. It is very hard to accommodate girls in the current orphanage. The facilities that are needed for their safety and security are not yet there. So, currently it is only considering taking in girl students for the madrasah. But the donors have plan for a full-fledged madrasah and orphanage for both girls and boys in the future.
5. Zakah is obligatory upon affluent Muslims and is the main source of fund for the organization. But the chief patron is hesitant to use the zakah fund for extending the facilities due to some widespread understanding of Islamic Fiqh (religious rulings). Popular understanding amongst the jurists is that zakah cannot be used for building a residence for orphans.

But research on various positions of Islamic jurists in modern time and of past[[50]](#endnote-50) by the author shows a way out. The author has found opinions by respected Muslim jurists that zakah is usable for building an orphanage if there is no other source of money to build it. zakah can be given to Islamic dawah (Call to Islam) organizations[[51]](#endnote-51), to uplift the life of Muslims[[52]](#endnote-52), to pay salary of Muslims working in an organization and are not being paid regular salary because of a crisis[[53]](#endnote-53). However, this is not a regular paradigm, it is not always usable as a rule, and it must be a case-by-case verdict.[[54]](#endnote-54) If the orphanage has no fund other than this zakah fund, then it should be used to improve the facilities for the eighty-four poor orphans living there at present. It is clearly an effort to uplift the life of Muslim poor in the society.

This can also be done in a different way using a different opinion. The donors can give their zakah to a poor orphan who is clearly mentioned in Quran (Quran-9:60) as a category of recipient of zakah, namely, the poor and the needy.[[55]](#endnote-55) The orphan then consequently can donate that money to the organization to use it for the purpose of extension. This gifting system can also be used which can clearly serve the purpose without going into religious arguments with donors who are not willing to accept flexible or broad ruling in this regard.

Therefore, according to such analysis and understanding of Fiqh, constructing a building of an orphanage can be endowed with zakah fund, under specific conditions. In this crisis period of war and post covid market complications, it is important that the orphanage use available funds for sustainable expansion activities such as constructing a building or purchasing lands.

1. Children should have better alternative to use their leisure time instead of sitting idly or lying down during the lockdown. A library full of books appropriate for the children will be a welcome addition in this regard particularly when some children have already mentioned their love for books.
2. An honest and well-educated person needs to oversee the madrasah who will live around the organization. It is a poverty-stricken area and people are not willing to move there from financially sound areas of the country. Even people of that locality want to migrate to other areas or to the capital city if they are good at their work. Thus, obtaining service of good teachers and administrators for the orphanage is a huge challenge for the organizers.

# **Summary of the findings**

There has been a complete shift in the way the orphanage is run since new donors have taken over in October 2020. All aspects of the children’s life have seen substantial improvement. The orphanage is now spending significantly more on food (increase of 474%), education (increase of 629%), clothing (450%), and an astonishing 1168% on housing. The increase in total expenditure is 535%. Thus, the improvements in living condition in last two years have truly been magical for the orphans. Although there are various aspects that need massive improvement, the better and systematic financing and management of the madrasa-orphanage have been in right track in achieving sustainability for the institution. This shows that the upliftment of the lives of poor people in a locality can be managed by community effort and religious charity which certainly reduces poverty in the given locality.

# **Conclusion**

The small madrasah-orphanage, a small religious unit of a small village of the most impoverished district of the country have coped very well with the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. In fact, within the covid years they have totally transformed their institute, which is a really remarkable achievement. Their handling of the crises of poverty and COVID-19 simultaneously shows that calamities can be handled by a community or organisation if there is sufficient and stable financial support and a dedicated team to put time and effort for the cause.

There are some future research scopes based on this paper. For example, during the interviews it appeared that the residents are less willing to speak or participate in conversation than the nonresident ones. Nonresident children in general, seemed more easy-going and enthusiastic in conversation. Though it is hard to know from WhatsApp audio conversations and from a short conversation with the children, it can be a future interest of any researcher: are orphans less expressive or less communicative than parented children?

There can also be an interesting future study on children of different orphanages focusing on their patience and less complaining nature compared to parented children living in families. This has been learnt from interviews with children from their contentment over food quality and being reluctant to talk about their misfortune prior to the October 2020 takeover. A study on more students of different institutions can be conducted to arrive at definite conclusions.

Another research can be conducted on different orphanages or madrasahs across the country to study how they have been coping with the pandemic and the subsequent economic turmoil.

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