

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

Ammena Tarannum¹

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, the madrasa having 120 students and the orphanage sheltering 84 orphans. It was already impoverished in pre pandemic period suffering and struggling to fulfill its basic needs. It was fearing being totally shattered and permanently closed down at the start of COVID-19. However, it did not actually perish. Rather, it made 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.

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Introduction

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. However, educational institutions were under great trouble. Like those of other countries of the world, onsite classes were closed for an indefinite time. 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 (Emon, Alif, & Islam, 2020). What is more, many poorly funded private educational institutions were closed down as a consequence of the financial crisis caused by COVID-19 (Priyadarshini D & Rathnasabapathy, M. , 2021).

¹ Finance Manager. Email: ammenna.tarannum@hotmail.com

The condition of the madrasahs cum orphanage was even worse, as these madrasahs are mainly funded by people of the community who were in great financial crisis caused by the pandemic. In Bangladesh, most madrasahs cum orphanage are *qawmi* based. *Qawmi* comes from the Arabic word *qawm* meaning people. These madrasahs are run with the donation of the people of the community. They have their own curriculum, education board and are not affiliated with government, rather take community support for expense maintenance (Hussain, 2018). Moreover, these are not considered private institutions as they are mostly free and provide residential facility. Hence, these madrasahs 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 (Hussain, 2018). In spite of all these, a madrasah cum orphanage in one of the poorest villages of the country, Nawdabash (in Kurigram district under Rangpur division), has survived the crisis posed by the pandemic.

Studies mainly focus on the vulnerability of the children in Covid 19 (Hillis et al, 2021) (Punaks & Lama, S., 2021) and the difficulties faced by the orphans (Unwin, 2022) (Wang et al, 2020) Priyadarshini and Rathnasabapathy, 2021). The problem of distant or residential learning in orphanages and madrasahs during COVID period have been addressed in recent research (Pudjiati, Harmayanthi, V. Y., Mawarni, V., & Fitria, T. N., 2022). But how the orphanages or madrasahs coped with the COVID-19 has not been discussed elaborately. This study investigates how a madrasah cum orphanage in one of the poorest villages of the country, Nawdabash (in Kurigram district under Rangpur division), has survived the crisis posed by the pandemic. It particularly 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.

Conceptual Framework

Financing of destitute institutions come from different sources in a society. For Bangladesh such financing can be categorized in following types:

1. Government help through various projects.
2. Help from NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) like BRAC, Proshika, ASA.
3. Financing from Banks, Non-Profit and other Organisations. Flexible credit facilities provided by such organisations, especially from specialised banks like Bangladesh Krishi Bank, Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank, microfinancing institution like Grameen Bank and from fulfilment of Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) by other financial institutions can uplift the lives of millions of poor people in the country. Such help can lead to sustainability in income generating livelihoods for these people.
4. Help from religious, especially Islamic institutions given the fact that most of the people in the country are Muslims.

- Sponsorship and funding from socially responsible upper class and well-of people of the society. This is the category of which the case study of this paper is an example of.

The visual narrative of the conceptual framework is as follows:

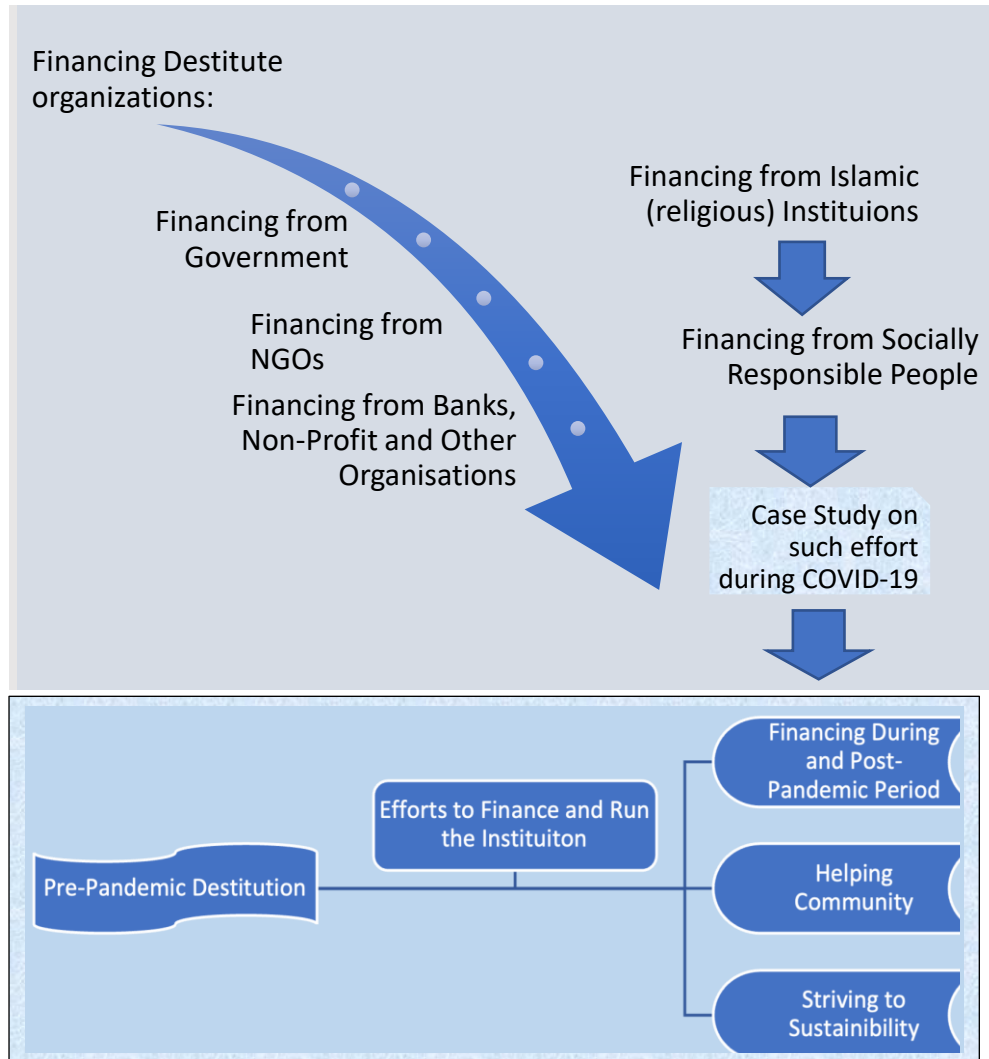


Figure: Conceptual Framework

The Madrasah cum Orphanage

The madrasah cum orphanage is the only one that provides free religious education for orphans and poor children of the locality in Kurigram, which is the poorest district of Bangladesh. 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% (World Bank, 2016). 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 (Asadullah, Chakrabarti, & Chaudhury, 2015).

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 (Sakib & Rahman, 2020) (Unicef, n.d.). 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 the 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 a 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 questionnaires were also used.
3. President and chief patron were interviewed several times while others were interviewed once. Some documents were received from the 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 a list of students (both resident and non-residents), teachers and donors. Also, he provided the author with a progress report on the children to use for the 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 (Government of Bangladesh, 1972).

We have calculated the average monthly cost incurred for fulfilment 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 the 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 to setting up the stage where the little children would talk freely. Considerable effort had to be employed to make them understand the questions too.

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 food for 17-18 days.
2. DC office also provided 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 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 non-payment 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 passers-by 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) (Forgotten Ummah, 2022). 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.

Fulfilment 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 shoots 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 stationeries. 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:

- a) Purchasing individual mattresses for all children
- b) Provide blankets to the children
- c) Jute carpets for the rooms to protect the children from cold in winter
- d) Benches for classrooms
- e) Utensils for the kitchen
- f) Plates, spoon, bowls for the children
- g) 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.

Awareness 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 11 a.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 staff. 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. When food is not on the table, people do not think about any other basic need in general, this finding reminds us of that painful fact. It also reminds the society of its responsibility to feed the hungry destitute people.

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 the increase in 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 (Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), 2020).

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 non-resident 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 (Unicef Bangladesh, 2020). 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 (Khatun, 2022). During COVID-19 it got worst (Haque, 2022). 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 (British Red Cross, n.d.).

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 (Tribune Desk, 2019). Also construction cost is very high as well, which will hinder expansion of the facilities (Chakma, 2021).
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 (Qaradawi) 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 (Chowdhury, 2007), to uplift the life of Muslims (Ederer, 2020), to pay salary of Muslims working in an organization and are not being paid regular salary because of a crisis (Fatwa Committee, 2020). However, this is not a regular paradigm, it is not always usable as a rule, and it must be a case-by-case verdict (Qadhi, 2021). 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 (Khan, 2020). 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.

6. 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.
7. 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.

Limitation of the Study

1. The interview that was conducted to avail data 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.

Conclusion

The study 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.

The small madrasah-orphanage, a small religious unit of a small village 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.

The further improvements of the madrasa orphanage will come from improving and prioritizing future accomplishments in few areas as mentioned in Observation section above. In a nut shell, they will require easy and efficient low to medium cost projects to reduce dependency on donors which will ensure financial sustainability, to focus on providing balanced diet (lack of protein is the main concern at present), and better education (advancement of STEM education is badly needed for the children to compete in modern world) for the children, will require ensuring safety for taking in orphan girls as a future important venture, donors to have proper understanding of religious verdicts so as to be able to contribute *zakah* money without hesitation for extension of madrasa facilities, and also they will require improvement in local close supervision.

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 and country.

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